Stuck on the Puzzle

by thespectaclesofthor

Summary

Once, back in Kirkwall, Cullen had an arrangement with a member of the city guard that satisfied his needs. But time changed all things, and he despaired of ever finding a similar arrangement again - that was, until he met The Iron Bull. Problem being that Bull seemed to care far more about sorting out the nitty-gritty of such an arrangement than Cullen ever has.

Notes

I've been thinking about this idea for a while, not really doing anything about it until I saw that folks were doing an awesome Bull/Cullen prompt week over at Tumblr. So this fulfills day one's prompt: 'Kink Negotiation.'

I'm tempted to write more than one chapter of this if anyone's interested. But otherwise I'm also content to leave this as a standalone. :)
ETA: Obviously this turned into a MUCH LONGER STORY and I'm so glad it did.

(Title taken from Alex Turner's 'Stuck on the Puzzle')
The idea had been percolating in his mind ever since he’d gotten wind of some of the Iron Bull’s proclivities.

Before the Inquisition, before Haven, after Kinloch and after Kirkwall, in the years he’d tried to find something like stability in the chaotic world around him; selfishly as much for his own peace of mind as for anyone else’s…after that, he’d had something of an arrangement with a member of the city guard – Damhian Searidge – who was an official disciplinarian for those who had committed light to moderate offenses.

It hadn’t been much really. A cat o’ nine tails was the only thing of any high regard between the two of them. Cullen had come to believe the man had enjoyed it, quite outside of it being his job, and Cullen had needed it to stay focused.

An unfortunate side effect of Kinloch. Pain could be destructive or instructive. It could be focusing or distracting. Cullen used whatever tools were at his disposal to make sure he could be as competent as possible. It turned out that lash marks riddling his shoulders and upper back kept him grounded, even if he had to be very careful with the elfroot salve to make sure that they didn’t infect. It wasn’t like Searidge tore him apart. It was that helping to rebuild the Gallows and spending one’s days going about in heavy clothing created the kind of sticky, sweaty humidity that was terrible for healing wounds.

Besides, Searidge wouldn’t hit him if any of the lashes had broken skin and infected. He’d work over a bruised back, but wounds like that…

‘Take the sodding elfroot potion,’ Searidge had snapped at him once, thrusting it into his palms. ‘You make me feel like a monster.’

‘It’s not my intention,’ Cullen had said, feeling agitated and unsettled, knowing that Searidge wouldn’t touch him now. Not tonight. ‘I need the reminder for more than twelve hours. It’s not like I can see you every evening. Suspicions are something we can do with less of.’

But after that, Searidge had looked at him for too long sometimes, something troubled on his face. He found excuses to not be available the nights when Cullen needed to see him, even if those evenings had been arranged days or even weeks in advance. By the time Cassandra Pentaghast came to Kirkwall, Cullen was several orders of ready to be well shot of the place and all the memories that followed him. Naively, he hoped the withdrawals wouldn’t dog him so badly if he took on more responsibility, and more, and more.
Perspective had made him realise that he’d probably put Searidge in an awkward position. A person of some authority asking for something like that, requiring utmost confidentiality, who confused the cleanness of the arrangement by not taking care of himself properly afterwards.

Now, at Skyhold, they’d acquired all manner of items from merchants and tradesfolk and more. A crate of disciplinary tools had come in one of the many consignments, and Cullen had been one of the first to go through them, publically claiming that he didn’t think the Inquisitor would want to see much by the way of corporal punishment. He was right about that, too.

It meant that he could steal several of the items to the loft that served as his room and hold the unused cat o’ nine tails in his hands and stare down at it when the withdrawals became more than just a niggling thought, but a feeling that the very sky was reversing its position. When the vertigo was so bad that standing straight took every ounce of effort, feeling as hard as it had sometimes to survive the worst of Kinloch. His lungs would tighten, his breathing wheezed, and he’d hold the leather in his palms so tightly that he’d etch marks into his calloused hands.

Still, he didn’t approach the Iron Bull for some time. Not least because of the words 'Ben-Hassrath' that blared through his mind whenever he thought of giving that side of himself to someone else again. He certainly wasn’t stupid enough to do it with someone who could inform the upper Qunari echelons that the Inquisitor’s Commander had a penchant for being beaten.

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He didn’t approach the Iron Bull after he became Tal-Vashoth either. At first because it seemed an insensitive thing to do and he wasn’t quite sure if Bull's disposition would change. Then, because there was a constant influx of people into Skyhold, and it meant decision-making, it meant a greater increase of lyrium within the walls, it meant that even risking a visit to the tavern could mean watching some ale-guzzling Templar talk speculatively about what the red stuff would be like, if the blue stuff was already so good.

The Inquisitor had it in her head that he was a strong man. He was both horrified that she couldn’t see through his attempts to make himself appear that way, and absurdly grateful that she bought the performance.

It made him even more convinced that the Inquisitor needed advisers like Leliana and Josephine, because Maker knew she wasn’t going to see through lies and deceptions solely on her own. The Mark made her many things, but discerning wasn’t one of them.

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It turned out he didn’t need to approach the Iron Bull at all.

A late evening, and Cullen page-flicking by candlelight, desperately trying to find the name of an old Knight-Commander he couldn’t recall. He’d wanted to make a passing reference in some correspondence to Knight-Captain Rylen. It bothered him that he couldn’t just remember. Hadn’t it been drummed into him as part of his early studies? And hadn’t he applied himself so zealously, precisely so he wouldn’t forget?

His breathing came rough and ragged, the pangs in his body far louder than usual. It was a griping in his gut that wouldn’t ease with food. It was a narrowing of his vision and a feeling as though he was lessened, somehow. That where other people boldly walked around assuming they were still people, he knew he was a shell of something and lived in an imposter’s syndrome of terror that they’d find him out.
He just needed to find the blasted name, that was all. If he couldn’t remember it…

A knock at the door, and Cullen clipped off a sharp ‘come in’ and wondered if the night-watch had spotted something.

The Iron Bull’s presence loomed big in his office. Cullen stayed bent over the book for several more seconds, his fingers already holding a handful of pages, ready to keep flipping through. He straightened and forced himself to make a steady eye contact.

‘Can I help you?’

There, that’s what real people sounded like, wasn’t it? Certainly what Commanders sounded like.

The Iron Bull shrugged, came closer, had an easy expression on his face.

‘That new lot of Templars that defected, they asked if they could spar with the Chargers to learn some new ways of scrapping. Not such a bad idea. Thought I’d check with you first.’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said, hoping the words weren’t waspish as they felt. ‘I’m not their keeper.’

The Iron Bull raised his eyebrows at the response.

Cullen knew that everything the Iron Bull did was a choice. If he was surprised by Cullen’s tone, he didn’t have to show that to Cullen himself.

‘You doing all right?’ Bull said. ‘It’s late.’

Is it? I never would have guessed.

But Cullen couldn’t stop thinking about the cat o’ nine tails he had just up the ladder. And he couldn’t help but think about one of those thick arms wielding it. Maker’s breath, it would be perfect. The Iron Bull’s eyebrows crept higher, and Cullen flushed and looked down at his book again, thinking that he might have been staring at Bull like he stared at the tails.

Ask him.

‘I’ve heard rumours about you,’ Cullen said, looking up again. ‘About the things you enjoy doing.’

The Iron Bull’s expression shifted, became easy once more, even lewd.

‘Yeah?’ he said, ‘You want to ride the-’

‘No,’ Cullen said.

Bull laughed like he’d expected the response, and Cullen wondered if he’d just been baited.

‘I want you to hit me,’ Cullen said, driving the words out before he could swallow them and be poisoned by longing.

Bull’s expression didn’t change, exactly. But it stilled. He was examining Cullen more openly now, and Cullen was aware that underneath his clothing, he was covered in a fine layer of cold sweat. That had no doubt started hours ago. He was lucky to not be horizontal and shivering on his bed. But he was practiced at forcing himself through the episodes, and sometimes just making himself work was enough to keep the worst of it at bay.

‘Sure thing,’ Bull said. ‘You strap on some armour, get that sword of yours, and we’ll-’
‘Don’t do that,’ Cullen said, swallowing. ‘Don’t be obtuse on purpose.’

‘Then you’ll need to be clearer,’ Bull said, his voice a soft rumble. It was even inviting. Perhaps Cullen was just imagining that. Maker, how had he done this with Searidge again? He couldn’t even remember.

‘I have a cat o’ nine upstairs,’ Cullen said. ‘And I used to have an arrangement with someone before…the Inquisition. I’m not looking for sex. It would only take a few minutes of your time on a semi-frequent basis, once a month maybe. You can strike me on the shoulders and back.’

‘I’m not sure what you’ve heard about me,’ Bull said slowly, ‘but that’s not what I think of, when I think of having a good time.’

It was the lyrium, the lack of. It made Cullen stupid. It made him say things he was doing a perfectly fine job of not saying the rest of the time. His fingers crumpled the pages in his grip and then he forced himself to slowly close the book and take several deep breaths. He wasn’t sure what to say. He couldn’t take it back. He couldn’t claim it was some kind of ploy.

‘Whatever you’re using it for,’ Bull said, interrupting Cullen’s thoughts, ‘is it the only thing you have to help you?’

Cullen looked up then, startled. Or at least he tried to, the sudden movement made his vision sway, and he clutched the table and breathed through his nose until the room righted. Bull looked concerned now, but perhaps that was Cullen’s imagination.

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘I’ve not had it to help me at all since the Inquisition began. I don’t need it.’

Lies.

‘You want to come down to the tavern, talk about this over a beer? My shout.’

‘No, thank you,’ Cullen said. ‘Perhaps you could forget this happened.’

‘That wasn’t an all or nothing offer,’ Bull said. ‘It’s not like this conversation stops just because you don’t want to have it there. We can have it here.’

‘I don’t want to have a conversation about it,’ Cullen said. ‘How hard is it to wield the tails twenty, thirty times and then walk away?’

‘For me?’ Bull said, shrugging. ‘Seems pretty hard.’

‘It’s designed to work in your favour,’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘All you have to do is keep my confidence, I manage every other part of the transaction.’

‘Transaction,’ Bull said quietly. ‘Right.’

‘Maker’s breath, I’m not trying to offend you. It just seems to be a byproduct of me opening my mouth after three in the morning. If you—’

‘How about you stop talking, and I’ll talk a bit instead,’ Bull said. Cullen closed his mouth and didn’t want to open it again. ‘I assume that’s how it happened last time? You found someone who would whip you a bit, then walk away?’

Cullen nodded without speaking. The Bull nodded as well, but less in agreement, and more like someone who was staring at a particularly finicky operation on the War Table.
‘You ever have a watchword for it?’ Bull said.

Cullen shook his head. Then couldn’t help the reply. ‘To be fair to him, Bull, I never needed it.’

‘But he didn’t think to give you one?’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘He was- Criminals and the disorderly don’t get one before stepping up to the cross, do you understand?’

‘Right,’ Bull said again. ‘I don’t work without one. Or play. Giant guy like me, it’s all too easy to do damage to someone like you.’

It wasn’t helping; Cullen realised. Bull emphasising their height and size difference like that. It wasn’t helping Cullen to want this less. He wished he could sit down, but he felt like that would be showing too much weakness at a time like this. He locked his knees and still couldn’t really believe this was happening.

‘Being the good Samaritan that I am, I could do this,’ Bull said, like someone who still wasn’t entirely sure they should. ‘I have some conditions.’

Cullen gestured that Bull should continue.

‘The first is that you pick a watchword, and-’

‘Phylactery,’ Cullen said.

Bull laughed.

‘Not that one. Something one or two syllables only. Believe it or not, sometimes a mind can forget to wrap itself around words like that. And I didn’t ask you to name it now. You know, you’re interrupting me a lot. I don’t mind that out in the field. But you can treat me with some more respect now, can’t you?’

Cullen’s cheeks flamed, even his neck burned. He felt chastened, shamed. He nodded again. Had he really been interrupting Bull so much? It was likely his way of trying to get control over a situation that felt so vastly beyond it. He rubbed at the back of his neck, and then looked up quickly when Bull stepped forwards.

But he was only holding up a hand, something troubled on his face.

‘We’re still talking about it because I think we need to, not because I’m trying to drag it out before ultimately saying no. Understand?’

Cullen cleared his throat. He nodded. He wasn’t sure if he believed it.

‘So, conditions. Yeah, a watchword. Something one or two syllables. We can use my go-to, if you’d prefer. Katoh. The other is that I decide how much is enough and how much you can take. I’m not interested in bloodying you up before you suit up in armour. Elfroot can help, sure, but what happens if you come to me and then thirty minutes later you’re jostling on horseback waiting for the potion to kick in? With how things happen here, that’s a possibility. I wouldn’t mind it so much with someone else, but you’re the Commander so…that matters.’

Cullen took it in. It made sense, of course. He wasn’t going to disagree, though he was probably going to avoid taking as much elfroot as Bull thought he should take. But that was easy enough to do when Bull wasn’t watching.
‘Aftercare,’ Bull said, watching him like a hawk now. ‘I stick around afterwards. Take care of you.’

Cullen couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes, even though his eyes hurt in their sockets. The Bull laughed quietly.

‘Yeah, thought that’s what you’d do.’

‘I don’t need it,’ Cullen said. ‘That’s not the point of it.’

‘You want the pain to last, I get that. I’m not saying I’d help you heal it all away immediately after. You want to carry those bruises you earn from me? You have a right to.’

Cullen frowned, surprised at what Bull was saying. He remembered Searidge saying that Cullen made him feel like a monster sometimes. Wondered if he was dreaming this entire conversation. With the kinds of dreams he had sometimes, he wouldn’t be surprised.

‘I’d keep an eye on you. Get you some water, some food, salve any places where the skin was open. Make sure we’re square.’

‘I don’t need it,’ Cullen said again.

‘Hey, I don’t care,’ Bull said, smiling. ‘It’s a condition I have. You don’t have to accept the condition, we don’t have to do this.’

‘Are there any other conditions?’

‘Not at the moment,’ Bull said. ‘Oh, wait, one more. I want to use my own tools. They’re looked after and broken in. That cat o’ nine tails you have, is it broken in?’

Cullen shook his head, sighing quietly. That condition was easy enough to accept. Stiff leather was unpredictable at best.

‘So,’ Cullen said. ‘A watchword – katoh is fine. I stop interrupting you. Aftercare. Your own tools. Am I missing anything?’

‘Nicely done,’ Bull said to Cullen’s summary, and Cullen ignored the faint warmth at the praise. They’d seen how eager he was to win praise in Kinloch. They’d seen. And they’d used it to try and break him. ‘You’re missing one thing.’

‘I am?’ Cullen said, confused.

‘Your conditions.’

‘I…yes,’ Cullen said. ‘Of course. Confidentiality. You tell no one. Not the Inquisitor, not your Chargers, not the Qunari. No one.’

‘Sure,’ Bull said easily. ‘I can do that. But if I think you’re gonna hurt yourself badly, or someone else – I’ll tell the Inquisitor that. Not what we do, but what I’ve learned if I think you’re at risk.’

Cullen thought of the arrangement he had with the Seeker, and nodded an acceptance of that. It was only fair.

‘Anything else?’ Bull said.

‘No sex,’ Cullen said again, taking a slow breath. It wasn’t that the thought of sex with Bull was
terrible. It wasn’t. It...was curious, enticing even. It was that Cullen didn’t really let himself think about sex and temptation anymore. He hadn’t for a long time. He didn’t want to confuse what this was supposed to be with sexual intimacy.

‘Got it,’ Bull said. ‘What about gentling?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Cullen said, starting to lose his patience again. It wasn’t like he was being asked to be *babied*.

‘If you get overwhelmed, really distressed. You know, a hand on the side of your arm, on the back of your head. Just something to ground you.’

‘You won’t have to worry about it. Are you making it a condition?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said, but Cullen stared at him hard for another moment, not sure that meant he wouldn’t try. It was bad enough that Bull wanted to stay afterwards and *feed* him.

‘I still think you’re making this more complicated than it needs to be,’ Cullen said, and Bull shrugged again. Oddly, the motion made Cullen feel like Bull thought he wasn’t making things complicated enough. A ridiculous notion.

*I can’t believe I’m doing this.*

A tiny part of him – a very tiny part – felt almost proud that he’d managed it - to ask, to see the conversation through. But the rest of him was a morass of responses. Denial that he even benefitted from this. Horror that he’d broached it with Bull and made the idea a possible reality. Shame that Bull was seeing this side of him, and a persistent fear that by this time tomorrow night, he and the Chargers would all be laughing over their drinks at such a broken, desperate Commander. In amongst all that, the bright hungry yearning that pulsed in him like a second heartbeat. Not for the lash – even though he wanted that – but for lyrium.

He was not going to sleep that night, no matter how much he tried. At least when he resigned himself to it, he could get some work done instead of tossing and turning in his bed.

‘Where do you want this to happen?’ Bull said quietly, his voice at odds with his presence in the office.

Cullen hesitated. Should he reveal how much he’d thought about it? How much he’d mentally scouted out locations when they’d pored through Skyhold?

‘There’s a room in the tower near the stables. We use it for storage. It’s...sound-proofed. Not many people go there, it being so far from Herald’s Rest.’

‘It’s also a dump,’ Bull said, good-naturedly.

Cullen nodded, smiled a little. ‘That too. It’s doing better now, but it’s obvious that it’s been repaired with storage in mind, not habitable spaces. That being said, it’s an easy enough walk back to my room afterwards. I can clear the night-watch from that specific region for a couple of hours.’

‘Yeah,’ the Bull said, rubbing at his chin and then nodding. ‘Okay. You tell me when suits you, if you still want to go through with it – and we’ll sort something out. You’re good about us sparring with those Templars?’

Cullen blinked at the shift in conversation. As though this really was just a casual matter, not some terrifying, clandestine secret.
‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘Of course. I did mean it before, I’m not their keeper. If they come to you and they think it’s a good idea, they could stand to learn some different types of combat. Drills and sparring only take you so far.’

‘That’s what I said,’ Bull said. ‘But with less words.’

Cullen laughed softly, the sound shocking him. When was the last time he’d laughed like that? Something not wry and laced through with complete cynicism?

It was then he realised that – as clichéd as it sounded – a small weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Not entirely gone, no, and the maelstrom of unpleasantness inside of him was still whirling. But…he’d had an idea, and he’d spoken it, and it had not turned into a disaster. Not yet. Bull was still here.

‘I’m…grateful,’ Cullen said, stilted.

‘We all have something we're dealing with,’ Bull said easily.

‘I’m not the only one awake past three in the morning, after all,’ Cullen observed, wondering for the first time that evening if Bull was okay.

‘Yep,’ Bull said, smiling broadly. ‘I’ll leave you to it. No hard feelings if you decide you’re not interested. Life’s too short for hard feelings between friends.’

With that, Bull turned and walked through the door he’d come, and Cullen finally sank down into his chair and realised that he was shaking and that Maker, Bull would have seen it.

Were they friends? Was that…possible? Perhaps by Bull’s flexible use of the term, it was possible. They hardly knew each other. And yet in a single evening, Cullen had felt something of simpatico that he’d been lacking in this particular area of his life for too long.

He leaned back against the chair and sucked down breaths through the pangs of pain in his body, and thought of how much strength it had taken him not to beg Bull to whip him where he stood.

No, for this to work, he’d have to be careful about it.

And he needed it to work.
He usually thought he was quite adept at not thinking about the things he shouldn’t be thinking about. Even to the point where sometimes he couldn’t list the things he shouldn’t be thinking about anymore, because he’d shoved them so far out of sight that he wasn’t sure he could recall them again. He ached for there to be a day where he could shove the lyrium that far, shove the body-memories down and stomp on them until he couldn’t even remember the word, lyrium.

Cullen didn’t really live in a world where that was possible, and he knew that, he just also couldn’t help but think that he was so accomplished at Not Thinking About Things, eventually it would just happen.

So it confounded him that he couldn’t stop thinking about the upcoming meeting with Bull. He very specifically called it that in his mind. ‘The meeting.’ He had countless numbers of meetings with many people every day, and the word could mean many things from mind-numbing boredom while listening to Dennet talking about how the ratio of clover to alfalfa was poor and something about how the sacks of barley were useless because the grains hadn’t been cracked first, to discussing training techniques with Cassandra and the both of them escalating into a good-natured debate. A meeting could be anything at all.

That way, he could put it out of mind until the day in question. Compartmentalisation, a most valuable tool.

Except it kept slipping from his grasp. He remembered this with Searidge too. If he knew a meeting was coming up, there’d be a growing tension in his skin, a feeling of breathlessness. He’d once listened to Mia talk about how courting made her feel, and it always came to mind before times like this, and then he always dismissed it with something very close to contempt. Not for Mia or her courting, but certainly for the comparison.

He’d picked the time – two in the morning, a Thursday. Perhaps a braver person would have done it face to face, but Cullen penned it off as he did all his other missives in the morning two days after Bull had come to his office. That way he could pretend it was one more task he needed to complete. He’d tried not to seem too eager, set the meeting for two weeks from his encounter with Bull, then worried at the inside of his lip until he tasted copper under his teeth for being stupid enough to make the meeting half a month away.

Bull replied with a missive of his own. This one delivered by one of the Herald’s Rest tavern girls, a buxom young woman with a frizz of hair and sparkling black eyes, staring around his office in utter disdain and leaving with the parting shot:

‘There’s a hole in your roof, y’know.’

Bull’s message had simply said:

I’ll be there.
Cullen didn’t know if that made things better or worse.

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On Tuesday evening, two days before he was supposed to have his meeting with Bull, he walked along the battlements into the storage room with an oil lamp, and then shone it around the space with some confusion. It was tidier than he remembered. Excess bales of straw and sacks of feed that wouldn’t fit into the stables were kept up here. There was a warm, homely smell of barley, the sweet smell of straw, and a mustiness that lingered from when there’d been too much damp clinging to the stones.

But it had been cleaned. The floor had even been swept.

For a few minutes, Cullen stared with a furrowed brow and thought maybe he’d have to call things off after all. Perhaps some of the refugees were using it and he’d not realised. Perhaps he’d-

He was beyond gasping in shock when a door opened suddenly behind him, but his whole body stiffened. He turned quickly and silently, and then saw Bull pausing at the open door, a sack of… something over his shoulder.

Tension melded seamlessly into a shame that blazed through him. Made him lower the lamp so that it wouldn’t give as much light to his face. Excuses came, one after the other, and instead he just stepped back to give Bull more space to enter.

‘I don’t like working in a space I don’t know,’ Bull said as he passed into the room, and thankfully it meant that Cullen could bypass the ugly question of, ‘what are you doing here?’ or the equally embarrassing lie, ‘I was just in here to check on the storage.’

‘I see,’ Cullen said.

His voice was crisper than he’d intended, even reproving. But Bull didn’t behave like a soldier that had disappointed a commander. He simply put the sack of equipment down on the floor, placed his hands on his waist and leaned back, looking around appraisingly. Cullen felt like he was intruding, even though – juvenile as it was to think it – he’d been there first.

‘Well, I hope it’s up to par,’ Cullen said, trying for an easier tone, still not managing to lose that stiffness in his voice.

‘It’s not bad,’ Bull said, shrugging.

‘You swept the floor,’ Cullen said.

Trying to imagine the Bull with a broom, or a dustpan and brush, set off an odd tickling in his chest. He couldn’t decide whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, and then the sensation went away and he found he missed it.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, looking over and smiling at him. ‘You ever had a splinter of straw in your foot? Hurts like hell. Just figure I don’t want there to be anything going on in here that I don’t want to be going on.’

The tickling sensation came back, but it was broader, rougher, crept up the back of his throat until he coughed and covered his mouth with his hand. This was not getting easier to manage with time. There was small voice in the back of his head plaintively asking, ‘why not now? Why not just ask for it now?’ The rest of him was still caught several minutes back, stuck in the moment he’d been caught out, Bull blocking the doorway in a way that Cullen couldn’t hope to match even while
fully kitted out in armour.

‘You’re pretty skittish, you know that?’ Bull said, walking over to a heavy work bench and leaning against it. The wood creaked.

‘Skittish,’ Cullen said, his voice dry. ‘That’s a word I hear associated with me often.’

‘I bet,’ Bull said, smiling again. ‘Just like I hear about how refined I am from all pompous asses from Val Royeaux.’

The smile felt odd on his face, but it felt real too. And Bull’s own smile widened a fraction, before he looked around the room again. Cullen held onto a thread of the warmth, but he was appalled at how Bull had needed to make an obvious attempt to break the tension, even as he was thankful that it had worked.

‘Does it bother you?’ Cullen said. ‘That I’m wary?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said, walking over to the sack he’d brought with him and sliding out his own lamp, lighting it quietly and quickly. His fingers were deft. Cullen didn’t find it surprising anymore. He’d spent most of his life around large warriors with bulky muscles, who never looked like they should be able to move as quickly as they did. Sure, some of them were clumsy. But most were quick and nimble, even when missing fingers or limbs. Still, Cullen appreciated the movement, even savoured it.

‘You don’t want to know why I’m here?’ Cullen said, eyes narrowing.

‘Oh, I know why,’ Bull said, setting the oil lamp on the table. ‘You’ve been on the battlefield too many times to want to go into a situation blind. If you can scout out a location, you will.’

‘Did you know I’d be here?’

‘Not tonight, specifically,’ Bull said. ‘Thought there was a chance, though.’

That was…unsettling.

‘And now?’ Cullen said. ‘What happens now?’

‘Well, seeing as I don’t have any of my tools with me, and you’ve scoped out the place, I’m pretty sure your job is to go back to your office, Commander. Leave me to my work.’

The look Bull gave him wasn’t quite friendly then. It was…it was an order, Cullen realised. And there was a part of him that kicked back in response to it. That wanted to push and assert authority and make sure that Bull understood who was in charge of all of this. Damn it, all he wanted was for someone to hurt him until he was struggling to catch his breath. That was all. The knowledge that Bull expected him to just walk back to his rooms and not even help, or participate…

Bull was still watching him. Waiting for his response. Cullen thought that once upon a time, he’d considered himself quite good at compartmentalisation. It seemed laughable now.

‘You don’t need any assistance?’ Cullen said finally.

‘Nop,‘ Bull said, and Cullen thought that if he saw that look from someone on the battlefield, he’d put his hand on the hilt of his sword and oh, yes, of course – his hand was on the hilt of his sword. Well, at least he wasn’t drawing it. ‘I like doing this part on my own. Quiets my mind. Makes me sure of what I’m going to be doing to you later.’
‘Which,’ Cullen said slowly, firmly, ‘as we both understand it, is literally just me taking off my shirt, you whipping my back, and then giving me an apple or perhaps a pear, and then me going back to my rooms. The whole thing not lasting longer than…twenty minutes?’

‘Yep,’ Bull said, grinning at him. ‘That’s it.’

It wasn’t annoying, exactly. But it was close.

‘It annoys you, doesn’t it?’ Bull said. ‘That I’m actually taking an active interest in this?’

‘I’m not annoyed,’ Cullen said. Because he wasn’t. He was close to being annoyed. It wasn’t the same thing. He was…lightly irritated. On the spectrum of feeling aggravated, it didn’t even warrant acknowledgement. ‘I’m just- I honestly don’t think this is- Maker’s breath, I think you’re making this into much more than it needs to be. It’s unnecessary.’

‘I’m starting to think that’s a mantra of yours,’ Bull said, walking over to a sack of barley and picking it up one-handed, like it weighed nothing at all. Bull stacked it over in the opposite corner, shifting it until he seemed satisfied. ‘A lot of soldiers have them – mantras. Some good, some not so much. Whatever gets you through the day, right, Commander?’

‘This should be easier,’ Cullen muttered.

‘Hey, this is easy for me,’ Bull said. ‘I enjoy this part. You’re not so comfortable, are you?’

‘I think you know that,’ Cullen said, wishing he could fold his arms. But he was still holding the lamp, the handle slippery in his sweaty palm.

‘Then go get some sleep, or whatever it is that you do at night. I’m fine here. Gives me a chance to stretch out without the risk of having to deal with some fucking demons. And I’ll see you in two nights from now, okay?’

Bull’s tone was friendly, but firm. It was definitely a dismissal. Cullen thought he’d grown out of the urge to pull rank. Had hoped he’d abandoned such arrogance a long time ago. But apparently it still persisted inside of him. And he had the oddest notion that Bull was baiting him for it. Wanted it.

Cullen took a slow breath, gripped the oil lamp tighter – because it would do no one any good for it to slip and cause a fire in a storage space of flammable fodder.

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘I wish you a good evening.’

‘And you,’ Bull said, looking past the next sack of barley he was holding and nodding his head, one tip of a horn brushing lightly through a bale of straw.

Cullen closed the door behind him and walked back to his office unsure of what was happening in his chest, only that he couldn’t quite take a deep breath, and he had the strangest feeling that he just wanted Bull to be sure that he didn’t have to put in any extra effort. That it wasn’t necessary.

Is that my mantra?

Cullen sighed when he got back to his office, leaned against his closed door and took several slow, paced breaths. Whatever it was, he hadn’t expected to be called out on it so boldly. He was starting to think this wouldn’t be like his arrangement with Searidge at all.
In which Bull probably feels like talking to Cullen is like having teeth pulled, and Cullen feels like having to talk to Bull is a little like having teeth pulled. But hey, they’re getting there! And Cullen gets a flogging out of it, at least.

Also thanks again for all your comments! c:

ETA: This chapter now has fanart by the amazing nottrashland (WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH MY LIFE) you can see the gloriousness of it here.

Cullen thought, initially, that he’d want to back out from nerves the closer Thursday evening approached. But as it rang past midnight – two hours before he was due to meet Bull – he found that although the nerves still percolated within, he now feared that Bull simply wouldn’t show up. He paced quietly in his office, wearing a simple shirt, simple pants, his heart pounding, because how many times towards the end had he arranged meetings with Searidge and then -

He could hardly blame the fellow, but when Cullen hadn’t gotten the message the first time Searidge had been absent, nor the third, nor the fourth, it turned out he’d developed something of an anxiety over it. Now, he knew without a doubt that he needed this to happen, and he kept trying to talk down the voice inside of him that said over and over that Bull simply wouldn’t turn up. That Bull would gently reprimand Cullen by simply not being there. A quiet reproval. A clear message. Because he knew it was perverse and he knew it was wrong. Even Bull hadn’t wanted to do exactly what Cullen had requested. He’d been clear it wasn’t his idea of a good time. Whatever proclivities Bull had, just whipping someone for the sake of it was not what he was looking for. Perhaps he was acceding because Cullen was his Commander. Perhaps he was-

Cullen shook his head in frustration to clear the thoughts. They weren’t helpful. Bull was his own leader, he had his own men and women, he’d made conditions, he’d shown an interest in the space where it was to happen, surely that meant…surely…

In the end, Cullen forced himself to sit down and dug his nails into the desk, forcing himself to breathe slowly and as easily as his tight chest could manage. His back felt naked and unmarked. Which wasn’t exactly the case. Maker knew he had enough scars. But there was something very clean and odd about knowing that if all went to plan, in a few hours, he’d not have this feeling for days, perhaps a couple of weeks if he let the bruises linger and was stingy with the elfroot. He craved it. And then whenever the need for lyrium got the best of him, he’d be able to flex his shoulders and remember.

If Bull didn’t turn up, Cullen was beginning to think he wasn’t past picking up the untested cat o’ nine tails in his room and just flogging himself. A combination of shame and the knowledge that he wouldn’t do it well enough had stopped him in the past, but everyone had their breaking point.

He told himself he certainly wasn’t going to show up early, and was still telling himself that when he donned his coat and began walking across the cleared battlements ten minutes early. He looked across to the faint outline of the mountains, thought again of how odd it was that they trusted him
with the defence of Skyhold and its people, when he was still – still – trying to parse that he’d managed to become a Templar at all; later than the rest. And then managed to become Knight-Commander. He was still held back somewhere in the past, being told that he was to go to Kinloch Hold, that his good work could begin.

It was frustrating. He knew he’d earned some of the respect he had from peers. Sometimes, when he was in the moment, he felt every bit of what he’d trained to become; dangerous, powerful, authoritative. Working for some greater good.

But that was only sometimes, and he always felt like he presumed too much when he lost sight of those moments. The rest of the time, he felt like he was trying to pay penance, do the best he could, and hope that Cassandra or the Inquisitor or someone would miraculously find a better replacement. Then he could gratefully and graciously step back into some lesser position and perhaps feel less like they’d put a child in charge.

He’d not always felt like that. He’d once felt like he was as good as – if not better than – all the other recruits training alongside him. But, well, things changed.

He took one steadying breath before opening the door, only hesitated for a second when he saw that Bull was already there. He wondered, does he want me on the back foot? Is that why he’s early? Then relief flooded through him that Bull was actually there.

He closed the door quickly behind him and locked it. The latch was simple enough, but it would serve.

The lamp-lit storage room had become spacious. The extra feed had been stacked meticulously against one wall. The floor was clean. The worktable had two sturdy chairs at its long side, Bull sitting relaxed on one of them, facing a blank space of wall against which Cullen could already imagine bracing himself. On the table were several floggers, a cat o’ nine, a few other implements he recognised the purpose of even if he didn’t know their names. By the side of the table, a bag that still looked to contain a few items.

‘I- If I don’t think to say it afterwards, I appreciate that you’ve made the time to do this,’ Cullen said, even as Bull opened his mouth to speak.

Cullen hoped that didn’t count as interrupting.

Bull’s face was smooth and easy. It was open. It was probably far more carefully constructed than Cullen knew, but he didn’t want to second guess or third guess himself. Not now, when his heart was racing. If he’d been with Searidge – one of the times he’d actually shown – Cullen would already have his shirt off by now. Everything they’d done was swift, economical.

‘I get the feeling that you’re not the sentimental sort and want to get down to business,’ Bull said, smiling. ‘So, fair enough. You remember the watchword?’

‘Katoh,’ Cullen said. He thought Bull was being over-cautious, but that was his prerogative. If it meant he was more likely to turn up, or even better, consider doing this again, Cullen would go along.

‘So how’d it work?’ Bull said. ‘With you and him?’

Cullen opened his mouth and Bull held up a finger. And Cullen found his mouth closing, just like that.

‘Show me,’ he said.
It wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be, taking off his coat and folding it carefully over the back of the chair that was pushed into the table. Nor was it particularly hard to pull off his shirt. He’d spent far too many years around the company of soldiers who weren’t precious about who saw what, especially when injuries or ablutions were occurring. It wasn’t like Bull was precious about hiding his own skin. And it was easy to bare his scars, knowing Bull had enough of his own.

It was harder to walk over to the wall. But he wanted this over and done with, and anything that managed to expedite the situation and avoid more conversation was something that he was in full support of.

So he walked to the wall and after a few seconds braced his forearms against it and leaned forwards.

‘Easy, I like it,’ Bull said. ‘No restraints?’

‘They’re unnecessary,’ Cullen said, and then wondered if he was supposed to be talking.

‘All right.’

Bull stood, walked over, and Cullen frowned because he hadn’t heard Bull pick up anything from the table. Then he felt fingers resting at the tops of his shoulders and he didn’t flinch, not exactly, but he couldn’t stop himself from tensing.

‘Just checking things over,’ Bull said quietly. ‘I’ve seen you in the sparring arena. You go hard.’

Indeed, the fingers that touched him were almost clinical in the way they pressed along his shoulder blades. Dug carefully into muscle and searched out tender spots. Cullen’s back was tense enough, but he wasn’t injured, and so there was no reason for him to hide any injuries as those fingers mapped the musculature of his back.

Cullen decided he was grateful that there was nothing really sensual about the touch. Bull’s hands were warm, and his fingertips were rough. Cullen tried to remember the last time someone had touched him like this and he hadn’t just been in the thick of brutal battle and needed medical attention.

He breathed out in relief when Bull stepped back. Bull grunted in something like approval, and then walked back to the table. Cullen had worried that Bull wouldn’t listen to his condition of no sex. The worst part being that if Bull pushed for it while Cullen was in a certain state of mind, he was quite sure he’d ignore himself and follow and needlessly complicate something that was complicated enough.

‘Do you like the pain to sting?’ Bull said. ‘Or do you want it to be hard, move all the way through you? I figure the cat o’ nine was because it was what was on hand, right? But they only really give you a lot of sting, especially the disciplinary ones. You ever have the choice to use something else?’

Cullen hadn’t, and he stared at the stone bricks in front of him and felt his fingers scrape down the wall.

‘I…don’t know,’ Cullen said. ‘Use whatever you want.’

‘This would go a lot better for the both of us if you gave me a hint of what you like about this.’

A sharp shaft of anger moved through him and he bowed his head slightly and grit his teeth. He just wanted Bull to hit him. They could almost have been done by now.
‘Hey,’ Bull said, drawing his attention. ‘Maybe you don’t know. Maybe you just want to find out?’

‘I think that would be best,’ Cullen said, sounding authoritarian without really intending to. It was a side effect of trying to stomp down the frustration. Because he was here, they were both here, if he could just be patient, then-

‘All right,’ Bull said, and Cullen heard the slide of leather on the table and felt gooseflesh crawl across his skin, a rush of exhilaration that made him wonder when the last time he drank any water was, because his mouth and throat were dry. ‘I’m not going to start with the cat. You have any problems, you say the word. Don’t turn around and try to-’

‘It’s like you think I’ve honestly never done this before,’ Cullen heard himself say. The words just appeared, laden with sarcasm. ‘I’m not going to turn around and put my hands in front of the tails. I’m not going to risk another part of my body being hit that I don’t want being hit. I’m certainly not green enough to ask for something that I’m going to regret two strikes later.’

Bull chuckled.

‘That whole ‘you interrupting me thing,’ I’m pretty sure I asked you to stop that.’

Then hit me already.

‘I was saving you some time,’ Cullen said, staring again at the stone and thinking…they’d made this a condition, hadn’t they? Cullen still wasn’t sure what would happen if the conditions were broken. Was that one serious enough to merit Bull walking out? ‘But I apologise.’

‘I’m starting to think you just can’t help yourself.’

The dig at his self-control had Cullen wanting to spit some kind of retort, which was…which would only illustrate Bull’s point further. So he stayed still and didn’t react. Bull’s tone was friendly and light, and something about the entire situation had Cullen on edge. Perhaps Bull was trying to see if Cullen really wanted this. Perhaps something else was going on that he couldn’t discern, his strength was not in the kind of politicking that Josephine and Leliana and probably an ex-Ben-Hassrath were masters at.

‘I’m gonna start with five strikes,’ Bull said. ‘Then check in.’

Cullen nodded, thought that five wouldn’t be enough, pressed his forearms harder to the wall and flattened his palms. He didn’t let his forehead rest against the stone. He tried to forcibly slow his breathing, tried to will his body into being more receptive to the kind of sensation he would normally try and get away from in combat.

The sound of heavy tails cutting through the air, once and then twice, neither time hitting him. Bull just getting a feel for whatever he’d picked up. It didn’t have the high whistle of the cat. It was a lower hum, and Maker, it did sound promising.

The first blow across the top of his shoulders pressed him forwards into the wall. Multiple tails of leather hit his back, a dull thud of sensation seared him. Then the pain burned across his skin and throbbed deep in his shoulders. He inhaled through flared nostrils and then held his breath when the second blow hit only seconds later.

Each blow was fast, delivered like Bull had been striking people like this all his life. One after the other, each across the back of his shoulders, layering sensation into him until he had his forehead grinding against the stone and his mouth was open.
After the fifth stroke the pain was still building like a bruise. Climbing behind the backs of his eyes. Wriggling down his spine and ending in the oddest places, like where he was scraping his fingertips too hard against the wall.

It was different to the cat. It covered a broader expanse of skin and the pain *radiated*. Even after five strokes. It had been so long since he’d experienced this and he was unused to it, unconditioned, and still trying not to be embarrassed by the sudden, heavy sound of his breathing in the room, which sounded impossibly loud.

His skin felt like it was burning, it felt red, and the pain of it – already throbbing in his chest – felt both awful and amazing.

‘The thing is,’ Bull said conversationally, ‘I can hit you a *lot* with something like this. Before it even starts to risk breaking your skin. Just thought you might want to see what it’s like to go further. All I’ve gathered from what you’ve done in the past is that your partner had no real idea what he was meant to be doing, and neither did you.’

‘It sufficed,’ Cullen said, his voice breathless.

He wanted it until he couldn’t think anymore. Until the pain was so intense that he needed it to stop. Searidge had never pushed him so far. The cat he’d had – the one for punishing the city guard – it was designed to discipline as quickly as possible. It broke the skin open too fast. It did too much damage.

‘We never…’ Cullen said, and then paused and focused on his breathing. The pain was still rising. *Still.* ‘Never went so far. Can’t, I think, with a cat.’

‘Figured,’ Bull said. ‘Have to say, Cullen, you look pretty good like this.’

He almost laughed, but breathing properly seemed more important. He tried to imagine it, the pain building more. After all, this had been dragged out enough, might as well make the most of it.

Other details were filtering in past the dizzy anticipation and the buzz of pain. Bull hit harder than Searidge, and yet Cullen could tell he wasn’t using anywhere near his full strength. He’d managed to layer every strike over the same place. There was a workmanlike quality to the blows, and they had been *blows*. Not thin pieces of leather zinging across his skin, but heavy and thick and flat. He was colder than before. A thin layer of sweat covered his body.

He wanted to ask for more. If it was Searidge, he would have demanded it.

‘How’re you doing?’ Bull said from behind him.

‘Yes, good,’ Cullen said.

‘More?’

‘Please,’ he said.

What would it be like to be restrained by him? Cullen wanted to prove he could handle this without it, but a part of him was curious. What would it be like to not have to care so much about keeping his body where it was meant to be?

His thoughts scattered at the next blow, and then the next. Bull didn’t pace them out, didn’t turn it into a sensual game. He aimed primarily for the meat of Cullen’s upper back, and Cullen found a rhythm in it and learned how to breathe with it. A strike would force the air from his lungs, and
he’d wait until the second strike fell – holding his breath – and then suck in oxygen. Bull worked fast and he worked hard, and Cullen lost count after ten blows and wished he had something to hold onto that wasn’t a flat surface.

The pain was staggered and inexorable. It rose and flooded him, became the red behind his eyelids and the sensation of his teeth dragging too hard over his bottom lip, and his fingers hurting and his foot feeling like it was going to cramp and his back burning like it was on fire. When Bull stopped again, the pain was cresting and the lack of blows was almost worse somehow. He made a raw sound before he could stop himself, pressed the side of his face to cool stone, flushed through.

At least when the blows had been there, been rhythmic, it was meditative. Without the rise and fall to guide him, the pain of it clawed through him.

But Bull was likely done now, and that was fine. This would serve Cullen well, very well. And besides, he-

‘More?’ Bull said. His voice darker now. Lower. ‘Or do you need to say the word?’

Cullen took a few seconds to actually figure out what Bull had just said to him.

There could be more.

If he said yes, he’d be heading towards something he’d not experienced before. Further than Searidge was ever willing to go. Already, Cullen had no idea how much time had passed, or how many times he’d been lashed with the flogger.

‘Take a few deep breaths,’ Bull said slowly, ‘and then give me an answer. Or I’m going to make the call myself.’

‘More,’ Cullen said, the word spilling from his mouth.

‘You seem like the kind of person that would say ‘more’ on principle, and while I’m still feeling this out, I think-’

‘Maker, please, do you want me to beg?’ Cullen said, twisting his head to try and catch Bull’s eye and then gritting his teeth together because his skin was inflamed and the movement had hurt.

He wasn’t being fair. This wasn’t fair. He’d done this to Searidge. Pushed for more. It wasn’t fair. And if he pushed too hard for what he wanted, Bull would just pull out. He’d walk away. That would be it.

There would be no one else he could ask.

‘All right,’ Cullen said, turning back to face the wall and hating that he was still out of breath and how it wrenched him to have to pull things back like this. But if he didn’t take care of the situation, he’d lose it. ‘All right! Stop then. If you must.’

Bull was stepping closer, and Cullen couldn’t help but tense. And then Bull was standing behind him, and rested the tails of the flogger softly against Cullen’s back.

‘Hey,’ Bull said quietly. ‘You didn’t take those deep breaths I asked you to.’

So Cullen tried to do that, and thought that the tails felt like a caress, but that Bull wasn’t technically touching him anywhere. Despite that, it was calming. And slowing his breathing down, it helped. And he could walk away after putting his shirt back on, and he knew he’d have bruises
the next day, and…and perhaps it could happen again.

‘Good. That’s really good,’ Bull said, and Cullen turned his face the other way, because that…that was dangerous. Because his body was already heated through, because the way those kinds of words made him feel was just dangerous.

‘You can stop,’ Cullen said. ‘If you want. I understand.’

‘Do you?’ Bull said. ‘What do you understand?’

Bull was standing behind him and Cullen could feel his voice coming from above him. So even though he couldn’t see the height difference, he felt it. The new rush of gooseflesh across his back ached, and he opened his mouth and focused on deep breathing for a few more beats.

‘I understand that it might be too much for you,’ Cullen said. ‘If you need to stop, then stop.’

‘Ah,’ Bull said, like Cullen had just explained some strategy he wanted to employ at the War Table. ‘That’s kind of you.’

‘I mean it,’ Cullen said, his voice a bit surer.

The tails at his back were like an anchor. They were also warm. They felt softer than he thought they would, considering how hard they felt when they thudded into his back.

‘You’d never guess that I’m usually the one giving orders in the bedroom, would you?’ Bull said speculatively.

‘We’re in storage,’ Cullen said, without thinking.

The laugh Bull gave at that was full-bodied and loud and genuine, and Cullen smiled against the wall and thought that even if it was only ever this, he’d treasure it.

‘Guess that changes everything,’ Bull said. ‘So you’re worried about me, huh? Even after I’ve just laid into you like that.’

‘You said there could be more,’ Cullen said quietly. He was leaving whatever dazed place he’d found, and he didn’t really want to. He missed the rhythm, how it rocked him. ‘But I wouldn’t want you to think you were obligated.’

‘I don’t,’ Bull said. ‘I like seeing you like this. You take it well. Real well.’

How Bull managed to make that sound as lewd as he did, Cullen didn’t know.

The handle of the flogger pushed harder into Cullen’s back, to the left of his spine, and Cullen’s breathing hitched.

‘You want more of the same? Or you want something sharper?’

‘This,’ Cullen said quickly. This dull, thudding rhythm. Exactly as it had been. ‘Or…whatever you think is best.’

‘Oh, very nice,’ Bull said, and it took Cullen a moment to realise he’d been praised for letting Bull make the decision. For…giving him control? Or…trusting him? Cullen’s brow furrowed. ‘More of this’d be great. Right then, you might want to brace yourself.’
Bull stepped back, Cullen exhaled in relief, and then grunted with the flogger hit him again because Maker it did hurt. His skin was sensitive, felt covered in friction burns, the sensitive areas around some of his scars were roaring at him.

Bull didn’t space out the blows this time either. The rhythm was the same as before, and Cullen tried to embrace it while remembering how to breathe. It was harder now. His breath caught more often. His voice forced out of him. Sometimes he’d forget to inhale only to have half a breath forced right back out of his lungs again. At some point he’d shifted his arms so that his hands were clenched into fists on either side of his head, his face pointing down.

The pain rose and then plateaued, then rose again. Cullen realised he was beginning to hit a point where words like ‘I can’t’ were floating around in his head. And then a blow came that was harder than the rest and he cried out and couldn’t feel embarrassed because the sensations in his body were too large to contain, there was no room for him to feel anything like that anymore. There was just the pain, the rhythm, and soon he lost other things too.

The intricacies of thought and higher emotion began to fall away. For the first time in too long, the guilt simply vanished. One moment there, the next gone. And some deep, instinctive part of his mind craved that so much that he dove for the space it left behind. A space of nothing but sensation that was both painful and everything he’d wanted, where it was rhythm, where he was no longer on the boat looking at the Forbidden Sea and envying it for its quiet infinite rise and fall, but somehow in the middle of it.

He let go of himself, and it was perfect.

At some point, Bull stopped striking him.

The rhythm of pain continued in Cullen’s body. A drumbeat tattooed into his skin. Rising and falling.

Then he sensed Bull near him. Standing next to him by his side. Cullen could hear his own wet breathing, feel the racing of his heart that seemed completely at odds with the slow numb rocking in his mind.

‘Look at you,’ Bull said, but he made it sound like a compliment, and Cullen couldn’t parse it into anything other than tone. And the tone didn’t seem disapproving. So Cullen felt himself leaning towards it.

‘Just like that,’ Bull said softly, and Cullen knew he was imagining the hint of wonder, because with the pain he was in, he was certain he could hallucinate anything at this point. ‘Just like that.’

Cullen turned his head towards that voice, which was deep and slow and soothing. Thick fingers touched the side of his upper arm lightly, and Cullen sighed and didn’t bother opening his eyes. And then those fingers crept to the bruising on his back, the places his skin was grazed raw from friction, and he made a slight, hitching noise. A protest. He never thought he’d hit a point where it was too much, where it could be too much for him, but that touch- That was somehow closer than he’d ever been.

‘Easy now,’ Bull said, moving his fingers back to Cullen’s upper arm.

‘S fine,’ Cullen said, his voice ragged.

‘Sure it is,’ Bull agreed. ‘You took that like a champion. You’re doing great.’

‘Don’t…condescend,’ Cullen said, feeling blurry. That was a good word for it. Blurry. He thought
he might be drunk on it, on the pain. Swallowed weakly.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it,’ Bull said. And for all the words seemed like they should be delivered with sarcasm, they seemed sincere. So Cullen fell silent and listened to the sound of his own breathing, which rose and fell as steady as the sea. He thought vaguely of coming across to a new life, the boat moving along the Forbidden Sea and how the waves had always been there, soothing and endless, somehow everything and nothing all at once. He’d not been able to sleep under the deck, really he’d not been able to sleep much at all. He’d stood above deck and listened to the waves and pretended sometimes that the waves were sleeping for him. Exhales and inhales, smelling of the salt of tears and yet always so steady.

Somehow, he ended up sitting on one of the chairs. The chair’s back against his arm, so that his own back didn’t have to touch it. Bull had him facing the table, leaning with his head against the wood, and he made a faint sound when he tried to stretch his arms up to rest on either side of his head. His back was on fire, roaring at him. The pain was tumbling him. For a second, he thought he was going to be shipwrecked, then realised that made no sense at all.

‘Easy there,’ Bull said, and Cullen had the strangest sense that Bull had been talking the entire time – because really, when did he stop? – and that Cullen just hadn’t been catching the words. ‘Let’s get the edge off a bit.’

Cullen made a sound of acknowledgement and then a minute later his foot kicked out in spasmodic protest when he felt the salve press across tender skin.

‘No elfroot,’ he said reflexively.

‘You’re still going to bruise nicely,’ Bull said, speaking to Cullen patiently, and normally Cullen would find that irritating, but now it settled him. ‘You’re still going to be feeling it. I promise. Relax. You don’t have to worry about this part.’

That seemed not quite right, but Cullen was too dazed to fight back against it, and so he made occasional, faint noises of discomfort as Bull slicked the salve across the worst of it. The elfroot was astringent, smelled of years and years of being on and near the battlefield. He rested his head on his forearm and thought he could sleep, right here, if Bull would let him.

‘Look at that,’ Bull said in admiration, and then Cullen gasped when fingers pressed into a particularly sore spot. He tensed, unable to help himself. Bull hummed like he was pleased, and then a hand not sticky with salve carefully touched the back of his head, fingers feathering through his sweat-spiked hair.

Cullen pressed back into the touch without thinking, and Bull hushed him and kept doing it. All too soon the hand at his scalp went away, and Cullen wasn’t sure how to ask for it to come back.

Then Bull’s other hand went away, and there was a scrape of a chair’s legs on the floor, and the sound of fabric being moved around. Bull getting something out of his bag. Cullen kept his eyes closed and mentally replayed two things: the ghost of that touch at the back of his hair, and the rhythmic thud of the flogger.

Cullen wasn’t sure how much time had passed when he heard the crunch of Bull biting into something. A fruity scent in the air, fresh and a little starchy; an apple. A weak laugh shuddered out of him, because he vaguely recalled making a derisive comment about Bull feeding him one, and thought that it surely wasn’t a coincidence, and that Bull had a mischievous streak.

‘You coming back?’ Bull said easily. ‘Or you still drifting?’
Cullen made a sound into his arm, then cleared his throat and tried to sit straighter. He winced and reached around tentatively to touch fingertips to the salve on his back.

‘Maker,’ he said, only then realising how strained his voice was. ‘Am I bleeding?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘But there’s a few raw spots which might scab a little. Elfroot will see to that.’

Cullen didn’t want it to, but he decided it wasn’t worth bringing up. He blinked up at Bull, and Bull casually cut out a thin slice of apple with a pocket knife and held it out to him. When Cullen shook his head, Bull only held the piece of apple out with more emphasis.

Cullen took it with a sigh.

‘It goes in your mouth,’ Bull said.

‘I hadn’t guessed.’

Cullen bit into it, savoured the richness of flavour even though he still resented the whole idea of Bull not just sending him back to his office. The apple was fresh, not powdery or mealy. Cullen wondered who he’d bribed for it.

‘I want you to tell me if you think I took it too far,’ Bull said, holding out a second, slightly thicker piece of apple. Cullen took it without complaint. He tried not to wince at every movement, tried to savour the pain as much as the apple. But he tried to hide that he was savouring it, because he wasn’t sure he should make it clear that he was enjoying this part. It was terribly indulgent.

‘No,’ Cullen said, between mouthfuls. ‘No, I don’t think that.’

‘Tell me tomorrow,’ Bull said. ‘Not now. Not sure you can give me a straight answer, now.’

Cullen wanted to shrug, but he knew not to risk it. Not when the pain he was feeling was still fresh. And on the tip of his tongue were words he didn’t know how to loosen. Sentences like, ‘you’re marvellous at that,’ and ‘how soon can we do it again?’

When Bull handed him a flask of water, Cullen sighed and took that too, shaking his head. Bull only chuckled, kept crunching down wedges of apple himself. Cullen thought it must be thirsty work, to wield a flogger like that. Then he realised that the rest of the equipment Bull had brought was still out on the table, and he reached out tentatively and touched one of the handles. Everything was finely made. This wasn’t equipment pilfered from disciplinary officers, but made specially for these purposes.

‘We can try other things some time,’ Bull said. ‘If you like.’

Cullen stopped himself from looking at Bull in surprise. Instead he took sips of water only to realise how thirsty he was, and the next thing he knew he was finishing the flask and apologising sheepishly as he handed it back. Bull shrugged like he’d expected it.

‘Did you make these yourself?’ Cullen said, somehow wanting to prolong the moment, even though he also wanted to leave and prove that he didn’t need it either. This…companionship, whatever it was, it was pleasant. But it was unnecessary.

Maker, it really is my mantra.

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘I can, but I’d prefer to commission the people who do it for a living. They have the best leather for the job.’
Cullen opened his mouth to reply but he couldn’t think of what to say.

A part of him was unhappy that he’d lost that floating, empty space so quickly. He frowned and Bull leaned towards him, and Cullen felt exposed, knowing that Bull was seeing things and reacting to them faster than Cullen could think to mask them.

But when he risked looking over, Bull was just watching him.

‘It’s rude to stare,’ Cullen said finally.

Bull only smiled and shrugged again, and Cullen squinted at him, then looked back at the floggers and other items on the table. For a while, he forgot his train of thought, the pain taking over again. It was heavy and thick, sat upon him like an animal. Despite exhaustion, he wasn’t sure if it would let him sleep.

Then he tried to imagine having to put on armour due to an emergency and found himself briefly praying that any emergencies would be kind enough to wait.

Then he was imagining nothing at all and drifting loose once more. It was good, better than he knew it could be. He’d had glimpses of this, back with Searidge. But it was always afterwards, when he’d gone back to his room and was lying on his belly on his bed. And it never lasted nor felt as deep.

Later, when he was coming back to himself and feeling a mix of tired and alert, Bull cleared his throat.

‘So with this other person, this other arrangement – you were in charge of the whole thing?’

‘Essentially,’ Cullen said, his voice slurred enough that he cleared his throat again, sat straighter, ignoring the scratchy pain of shifting. ‘Yes.’

‘No offense, but I kinda think the person being beaten isn’t the one who should be in charge of what’s going on,’ Bull said. ‘Pain makes a person think and do stupid things. Besides, it’s common sense.’

Before Cullen could reply, Bull said:

‘This other person, did they enjoy it?’

‘Yes and no,’ Cullen said honestly. ‘He liked it to a point. I liked it past that point. Eventually-eventually it was too much for him and he – quite understandably – pulled out.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Okay. I’d like you to try and give more control of the situation over to me.’

‘I’m quite sure I did,’ Cullen said defensively, opening his eyes and thinking how bright the room was even though the lamp was as dim as ever. ‘Tonight?’

‘Tonight was great,’ Bull said enthusiastically. ‘You were obviously giving ground where you weren’t used to giving it. I’d just like you to know that you could give more, and it would be fine. The right thing to do. It’s for your own safety, something you should care a bit more about, if you ask me. You don’t have to worry that I’m not into it. I think the point you like to get to is a point I’d like to take you to again.’

Cullen’s gut flushed with warmth, he felt his cheeks heat, and he had to look away. Maybe Bull was just used to making everything sound like a come on, but Cullen wasn’t used to feeling the
results of them in such a bodily way. It took him longer to get hard than it used to, and he was quite certain that was the only reason his cock was still quiescent.

‘What about you?’ Bull said. ‘You like it? Get what you needed?’

Cullen was glad he was looking away when he heard the question. He took another slow breath – was beginning to think he’d always be trying to control the way his body reacted around Bull – and then nodded. He didn’t want to be too desperate or seem like he needed it too much. But he didn’t want to seem ungrateful either.

‘You’re good at it,’ Cullen said, his voice rougher than before. ‘It was better than I’d expected.’

‘Good,’ Bull said, and Cullen felt like this was some kind of debrief after a successful manoeuvre had been executed in the field.

‘So, is this- Have we met the condition of you fussing afterwards?’ Cullen said.

Bull laughed. ‘Sure. Had enough, have you? If that’s the case, I’d like to walk you back to your office.’

Cullen shook his head automatically, pressing his hand to his face and wincing at the way his skin pulled.

‘We can’t be seen on the battlements together without raising suspicion,’ Cullen said. ‘Not like this.’

Bull said nothing, and Cullen risked looking at him. Unsurprisingly, Bull looked displeased. But he wasn’t looking at Cullen, he was looking off to the side, and Cullen had the oddest feeling that Bull was displeased with himself. Bull took a breath and looked back to Cullen, face sober, serious.

‘Then I’d like this to happen next time in a room where there’s a bed.’

Cullen almost flipped back a snippy ‘why?’, but he realised it had nothing to do with sex. Bull wanted to fuss. Wanted to fuss more.

‘I honestly don’t see how it’s possible,’ Cullen said. ‘Your room’s in the tavern, and mine isn’t sound-proofed.’

‘If you got that hole in your roof fixed, added a decent trapdoor to the floor entrance, it’d be pretty close.’

‘Yes, well,’ Cullen said. ‘And if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.’

Bull laughed, shook his head, leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms. ‘Like you couldn’t throw your weight around and get it done as soon as you wanted.’

Cullen subsided into silence. There was no point answering that. There were enough refugees and warriors and even mages who all needed decent housing. Who had far less than a spacious room, a large bed, or an office all to themselves. He didn’t want to debate the point, because bringing it up would only remind him of everything he’d have to start dealing with once more when the sun rose.

Cullen bowed his head towards the table. Bull shifted suddenly, and Cullen’s head started to snap up before he froze, only just managed to swallow the high sound that wanted to escape his throat when Bull placed his hand firmly between Cullen’s shoulder-blades.
‘What in-’

‘You should be lying down,’ Bull said firmly. ‘So you’ve got a great pain threshold. Bully for you. But this needs more care than you want to give it, and if you won’t, someone else has to.’

Cullen was a mess of outrage and soreness and some treacherous part of him that wanted Bull to curl his fingers and scrape down across the worst of the inflammation. Words choked in his throat, his fingers dug into the table and the unexpected pain in his knuckles made him groan.

‘Can I trouble you for some more of that salve?’ Cullen said, forcing his fingers flat on the table and staring at the reddened joints in dismay. He needed to be able to work tomorrow. To hold quills, to write missives, to spar or train.

‘You could take elfroot potion,’ Bull said, then smirked when Cullen shook his head. ‘Yeah, thought so, but it’ll clear this right up. You know the salve isn’t as good. I expect that’s the point. Also, if you don’t want this to happen again – with your hands – I can go lighter. Or I can restrain you. Believe it or not, it’s harder to ruin your hands against the wall if you can’t actually touch it.’

But Bull removed his hand from Cullen’s back – a relief and a frustration. He picked up the jar of salve and unscrewed it, then held out his palm, clearly wanting Cullen to give over his hands.

Cullen tried to level him with a look, and Bull did the same thing in return. Except he looked cheerfully implacable, and Cullen just didn’t have the energy for it anymore. His back felt scalded where Bull had placed his palm. Like he’d been tattooed with an imprint that would never leave. Cullen held out both his hands, and Bull took them easily.

The salve was lukewarm. Bull paused at every one of Cullen’s joints, checking them, bending them gently, and then muttering something in Qunlat under his breath. But after a quick glance at Cullen, he simply went back to massaging in the salve, finishing off by pressing deep, sore circles into Cullen’s palm, loosening the tension until Cullen sighed and felt his head tilt as Bull moved onto his other hand.

‘You know,’ Cullen said, head resting on his shoulder as he watched. ‘With all that mother henning, you’d make a great babysitter.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Bull said, with utter sincerity, ignoring the wry tone of Cullen’s voice. ‘I can give kids rides and everything. Plus the big deep voice makes ‘em listen. But you know, this isn’t me mother henning you, no matter what you think. This is me just holding up my side of the deal. You think I’m mother henning you?’ Bull laughed. ‘You have no idea.’

After a few more minutes, Bull let go of Cullen’s hands and put the salve back in the bag on the ground.

Cullen made himself stand, keeping one of his now-sticky hands against the edge of the table. Dizziness swooped through him, the cool air on his back made him wonder just how much fun a shirt was going to be. But, well, it wouldn’t be the first time.

He looked for his shirt, and paused when Bull placed a hand at his side. Without speaking, Cullen knew that Bull wanted him to be still and wait. So it was Bull who fetched Cullen’s shirt, turned it the right way. But when he stepped forward, looking like he wanted to help Cullen into it, Cullen shook his head and took it off him, putting it on and stepping away at the same time.

Never mind the steady stream of curses that let loose in his mind at the roar of pain that flared in his back. The elfroot salve was helping, but Maker, pain crept in at the edges of his eyes every time
he blinked. Still, it seemed very little time had passed before he picked up his coat from the table – Bull must have moved it when he’d helped Cullen into the chair – and placed that over his shoulders too.

‘I’ll take my leave,’ Cullen said, proud of how his voice didn’t even shake or betray strain.

‘Send me a message tomorrow,’ Bull said. ‘Let me know how you’re doing.’

‘I’ll be fine, but I’ll send the message,’ Cullen said. Wasn’t he supposed to say whether he thought it was too much? Bull didn’t want the answer immediately, and Cullen knew he’d still be sure this was what he’d wanted the day after. He walked towards the door, feeling exhaustion in the stiffness of his limbs.

‘I’m starting to see how you survived everything you did,’ Bull said, and Cullen turned, a flare of pain in the movement. Bull’s smile was warm. ‘You just never learned how to stop fighting back, did you?’

Cullen felt like the uneasiness, Bull’s constant prodding, the fact that there was so much conversation around everything that was happening; it was just the price he had to pay for wanting what he wanted. So he said nothing at all, because he wasn’t sure he liked Bull thinking about everything Cullen had gone through in the past. Even if he could only ever work on assumptions and rumours and very little fact.

‘Y’know,’ Bull said, ‘if you ever want to learn how to stop fighting for a little while, when it’s safe, with someone who’s got your back…I could help you.’

Cullen turned back to the door, and hesitated. He didn’t even have words for how he felt about the offer. All he knew was that they were in dangerous territory again. What would Bull say, if Cullen ever used the watchword for something like this, instead of being beaten? So Cullen swallowed the word down and turned the handle. There were some things he wasn’t supposed to want.

‘Thank you for your time,’ he said as politely as he could, closing the door behind him and not turning once. His ears were tense for the sounds of Bull following him, but they didn’t come. Cullen made his way down the battlements alone, and in looking up at the stars, realised that a significant chunk of time had passed. Perhaps more than two hours.

How was that even possible?

In his office, he looked at the ladder with a critical gaze. He walked towards it and stretched his arms up to the rung he typically reached for first and groaned in pain before he could stop himself. For a few seconds he just slumped against the ladder, glad Bull wasn’t seeing this.

But he pulled himself together and began the ascent.

Once he’d made the climb to his room he was shaking. But he felt triumphant, too. Not because he’d made the climb – he’d achieved far more in far worse circumstances – but because it had all worked. Bull hadn’t pulled out. Cullen had discovered there was more to the whole experience than he knew was possible. It looked like it could happen again. It didn’t seem like Bull secretly hated it all. It was…it was better than he’d known to hope for.

He gingerly took off his coat, his shirt, and then went over to the mirror in the corner – the one he used to assess all the blows he took after battle; sometimes it was only possible to tell internal bleeding from the blackness of a spreading bruise, the mirror helped. He turned his back to the mirror, looked over his shoulder and bit the inside of his lower lip at the redness of his upper back.
Already, sections of his skin were mottling the kind of deep violet that would be black and opaque by morning.

He’d never had anything like this with Searidge, and it was alarming and pleasing all at once.

A wave of tiredness moved through him and he walked over to his bed, collapsing in slow-motion, belly down, head turned to the side. His fingers curled; already moving easier thanks to the elfroot salve.

He’d worried he wouldn’t be able to sleep, but that quiet, cradling sea he’d found with Bull was still there. Not as intense, but soothing. His breathing matched the waves he felt. The pain was like it had always been there, as though he’d been born with it, and he made it a part of himself. For once he didn’t have to think about lyrium, or the past, or the future, or even what tomorrow would bring.

He found sleep between the fall of one wave, and the rise of the next.
Cullen woke, feeling as though he’d only just closed his eyes. He took a deep, slow breath and for a few seconds was confused. His chest ached. Either he was recovering from a bad respiratory infection, or he’d gotten absolutely hammered on the field. The bed felt too comfortable for it to be a healer’s tent so…

He shifted his arm to rub at his eyes and then groaned sharply at the pain that flared jagged and sharp, and following on its heels, memories of the night before. The flogger, Bull wielding it, Bull telling him that he took it ‘real well.’

‘Maker,’ Cullen whispered, holding still for a few seconds.

This was nothing like what Searidge had done. With him, the bruising had been localised in small areas. The skin tears were the biggest issue, because stretching and moving through drills could open them. But this was as though the entire plane of his upper back had been thickly layered with bruising, and from what he remembered, that was probably the truth. To think that he’d wanted more before the night was over. That he’d wanted Bull to scrape his fingers down his back, to use his nails.

The smart thing to do would be to take two sips of elfroot potion and speed the healing along. But Cullen felt determined not to do that. Firstly, because he desperately wanted to know if he could meet the challenge of getting through the day like this. And secondly, because he would find purpose through pain. It was harder for the withdrawals to take over, harder for the past to claw into him. He didn’t understand why it worked that way, only that he’d learned that it did work that way in Kirkwall, and he’d held onto it as tightly as he could. Thirdly, because he had a sneaking suspicion that Bull would want him to take some elfroot, and Cullen had decided it was the principle of the thing. He didn’t need it.

He sensed it was early. Years of having a body clock trained into him meant that even through injury and sickness, he still roused. So, despite knowing he could fall asleep again in seconds if he let himself, he slowly shifted onto his side and then used the momentum of his hips to swing his legs over the bed, moving his back as little as possible. He pressed fingers to the skin, felt the faint stickiness of the elfroot salve.

His fingers were still stiff, though not so painful that he couldn’t bend them. The skin of his back was heated, but he couldn’t feel torn patches, and despite a sensitivity that took his breath away, touching it wasn’t impossible.

Carefully, slowly, he rolled his shoulders. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his lips together, breathed through it. Five rolls in one direction, five in the other. It hurt, but it would flush blood
through the muscle, allow better ease of movement throughout the day. And, when he needed it, he could repeat the exercises and get the dual benefit of reliving the pain and helping his body out at the same time.

This part of it was private. He’d never wanted Searidge to see him so satisfied afterwards. Didn’t want Bull to see it either. Didn’t want them to see him struggle to contain his reactions to the pain. The way his forearms would clench as he promised himself that he only had to endure one more shoulder roll and that would be it; a trick he’d listen to before repeating the promise again, and again. Didn’t want them to see that sometimes between breaths, a faint smile would find his face. He couldn’t be sure if it was pleasure, truly, but it didn’t matter. This part was his and his alone.

Before dressing for the day, he looked at the bruising on his back for long minutes. It looked nasty, but he’d taken worse on the field. The bruises were thick, broad strokes, not splotches here and there.

Most people would see something like that and be horrified. But he wasn’t. So even though it was sometimes hard to breathe through dressing, and definitely difficult to climb down the ladder again – he started trembling before his feet touched the floor – he felt as prepared for the day as he ever did.

*  

As the day wound towards late afternoon, Cullen managed to keep up with all of his tasks except for any personal sparring, which he felt could wait until the day after. If he broke out into a sweat sometimes while struggling with it, well, how many months of practice had he had, hiding the worst of the withdrawals?

In a stack of early evening messages, he received a simple folded up piece of paper with a chicken scratch scrawl on it:

I had two questions I needed answering today. Trust me, it’s necessary.

~ The Iron Bull

Cullen flushed and the paper stuck to the sweat on the palm of his hand. The message was bland enough that no one could deduce what had happened between them. But the little poke at what Bull had referred to as Cullen’s mantra made him begin to shake his head and then think the better of it as it pulled at the muscles of his shoulders.

He sat and penned a response:

All is well. Things may remain as they are.

Well, if someone intercepted that, he might have to deal with some odd questions. But Cullen could fend off a conspiracy theory far easier than he could fend off people finding out what had actually occurred. He sent the message off with Betsan, a young runner who was fleet of foot and always looked longingly at the books in Cullen’s shelves.

Sometimes he thought about asking her what she thought of them, or if she’d like to read any, and then remember that with the kind of position he held, he wasn’t supposed to do that kind of thing. And then he’d remember that the careful distance he took with the people around him was likely conditioned into him during his Templar training and experiences – don’t engage, observe and be watchful without being unfriendly. By the time he’d think to fight back against that and actually say something, she’d already be gone, and he’d be back to wondering if he’d somehow be misusing
his position as Commander by just talking to her.

It was moments like that — when his thoughts began to run far and fast ahead of him — that he rolled his shoulders just once, and slowly. He winced. His mind cleared just enough.

Cullen turned back to his desk and very carefully left an inch between his shoulders and the back of the chair. Then, he picked up some forms and got back to work, making a mental note to ask Darragh why he constantly felt the need to over order greaves, and consistently forget armour rivets. Honestly. It had been months.

*

A week passed uneventfully.

The Inquisitor was away with her primary team, as was the norm these days. Darragh, a young officious lad — who reminded Cullen a little of himself when he was younger — had experienced some unspoken trauma regarding missing greaves and admitted shamefaced that he was a ‘tad overzealous’ in the matter. Regarding the rivets, he’d simply sworn and pressed the heel of his palm to his head and said, ‘what, again?’

Cullen looked forward to the next order form that would once again need to be checked for too many greaves and not enough rivets, Darragh seemed something of a scattershot lad.

The bruises on Cullen’s back healed slowly. After two days he’d learned how to move with and around the worst of the stiffness. They didn’t cure any of the things in his mind that vexed him most. They just added an extra buffer between himself and the worst of it.

Sometimes though, his thoughts dragged him to strange places. He found himself wondering if Bull really did enjoy it, and if Cullen would actually be able to tell. Perhaps Bull was acceding because he wanted something, or just wanted the opportunity to pull a favour if he needed one. Maybe he enjoyed seeing the Commander of the Inquisition put in his place.

The worst part really, was that Cullen wouldn’t begrudge him that.

*

Another week passed, and Cullen walked to the kitchens at about one in the morning, as he often did when he was feeling peckish. The grounds he had to cross were usually deserted, or at the very least quiet. He could hear the snuffles and heavy sighs of draft animals in the stables. In the kitchens nearby, he’d find something for supper and stock up on snacks for the day following. He had people who would bring him meals, but sometimes he liked the change of scenery. At times, his life consisted too heavily of drills, the practice ring, his office, and the War Room.

When he opened the heavy wooden door, he paused and raised his eyebrows.

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘This is ridiculous.’

‘You wouldn’t be willing to believe some kind of ‘right place, right time’ bullshit?’ Bull said.

‘You added on the word ‘bullshit’ yourself, all without my help,’ Cullen said, closing the door behind him.

Bull was eating some kind of bun filled with meat that smelled spicy and delicious. His horns looked newly waxed, which made Cullen think about the technicalities of horn care for the first time in his life, and made him realise he knew almost nothing about it. Cullen was acutely aware of
the bruises on his back, which were fading a great deal more now, the pain worn thin and fraying away like old, dusty fabric.

‘You know my movements,’ Cullen said.

‘Yep,’ Bull said.

‘Did you know them before I made that arrangement with you?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Well, kinda. It was my job, you know.’

‘Yes, the whole you being a spy while telling everyone you were a spy, thus actually lulling most people into a sense of false security.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, smiling around a mouthful of bread. Then the smile stiffened, and his gaze went distant. ‘Not so much now though.’

‘I imagine old habits die hard,’ Cullen said, not without sympathy. But a part of his mind, the part that never stopped assessing a situation, told him in no uncertain terms that Bull had chosen to share that. Chosen to display a moment of vulnerability in a calculated manner. Surely.

Cullen walked over to a wicker basket of stale bread rolls that were left out to be redistributed into stuffing or bread pudding. He picked one and walked to the opposite side of the kitchen, finding a small knife and splitting the bread, crust crackling and flaking everywhere.

‘So you’re here on purpose.’

‘I’m here ‘cuz I’m hungry,’ Bull said. ‘And because I wanted to see how you were doing.’

‘Well, as you can see I’m also hungry and doing fine. If there were something serious going on, I would have told you.’

Cullen swore he thought of the word ‘liar’ even as Bull looked at him like he was one. But that didn’t stop Cullen from feeling irritated about it. Especially because there wasn’t anything serious going on. The week had been about as chaotically nondescript as every other week in Skyhold. Generally he knew to expect that things would go wrong, and that some of those things could be fixed.

One slab of salt beef and some mustard seeds later, and Cullen bit into the roll he’d made for himself, scratching his gums on the dryness of the crust. Then he paused and stared down at what he was eating. It was a standard snack he’d been making for himself since Haven, since mustard seeds and salt beef were often on hand, and stale rolls were a fact of life. It always hurt him to eat them. Not much. And gums healed quickly. But standing there with his back still showing yellowing bruises, he couldn’t help but be aware that it was just one more thing he did to hurt himself.

He took another bite of the roll to hide his thoughts.

‘I don’t know all your movements,’ Bull admitted into the silence. ‘You don’t keep to a regular schedule. That deliberate?’

‘Old habit,’ Cullen said.

It hadn’t always been the way of things. There was a time when his days were regimented so exactly, that he could almost always tell when half an hour or an hour was up, without looking at
the sun or waiting to hear the bells.

Meredith had encouraged her confidantes to keep chaotic schedules to make it easier to deter assassination attempts and coups. Cullen had been resistant, initially, but she’d worn at them until he’d swung the opposite way and decided to become as good at it as he could possibly be, unable to stop himself from wanting to impress her. He’d missed the fixed schedule, but nowadays a small part of him vindictively liked that they didn’t always know where he’d be.

The only thing that remained with any consistence was when he woke.

‘That’s not a Templar habit,’ Bull said, with his mouth full.

‘It’s not,’ Cullen said, frowning at him and not wanting to elaborate. So he kept eating. Began to think how quickly he could leave without giving insult.

Bull had finished whatever it was he was eating. He wiped the crumbs off his hands and pants with rough strokes, and as he did that, Cullen focused on his roll. He didn’t need to grab some snacks now, he could get them later. He didn’t understand how he’d feel companionable, almost relaxed one moment, and then conflicted or outright off balance the next. He wanted to say ‘you’re doing this,’ to Bull, but he wasn’t sure Bull was doing all of it.

‘I want to see your back,’ Bull said, as Cullen finished up and was wiping his hands on a cloth.

The bite of annoyance was sharp, and he couldn’t stop the rush of words that followed.

‘When I suggested that we do this, this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. I don’t expect it. I’m not asking for it. I’m not sure I even want you checking in on me.’

‘Not sure?’ Bull said, leaning forwards a little.

Cullen glared at him.

‘Are you always going to be like this about it?’

‘Like what, Cullen?’ Bull said, and there was something stern in his voice that made Cullen feel like he was being pulled up by one of his superiors. ‘I haven’t seen you beyond the occasional glance for two weeks. So how am I being?’

Cullen’s teeth ground together and he folded his arms. Bull leaned back in his chair and tried to get something out of his teeth with his tongue. After a few seconds he’d either gotten it, or given up. He tilted his head, and Cullen thought about the strength in those neck muscles, constantly bracing against small movements with all that extra weight from his horns.

‘Come here and show me your back,’ Bull said.

There was a weight of command there, and Cullen took a step forward before he could stop himself. Damnation, but would it always be like this? Was it so obvious to others that after scratching the surface, a Commander wasn’t what remained?

‘Come here,’ Bull said again. ‘Indulge my mother henning or some shit.’

That had the worst of the tension fading enough that Cullen walked across the kitchen. He stood and Bull gestured that he turn, and Cullen did. The tightness in his chest that wasn’t just annoyance anymore, but an odd breathlessness. And then Bull was standing behind him and grunting when the tip of his horn brushed the low rafters where they hung charcuterie and herbs.
‘Shit,’ Bull said again. ‘One day I’m gonna walk out of here with half a salami stuck on my horns. At least the Chargers’ll be happy.’

Cullen smiled at the image, and then went still when he felt fingers at the sides of his arms, shifting the thick material of his coat.

‘Coat’s in the way,’ Bull said.

‘What a shame,’ Cullen said lightly, side-stepping, ‘I suppose you’ll just have to-’

‘Ah ah,’ Bull said, laughing, despite his reproving tone. A large hand slid around his waist like it was easy and pulled him back into place. Cullen was still smiling, despite the sensation that he couldn’t quite draw full breaths. It wasn’t fear exactly. Then his eyes widened when he realised it was anticipation. ‘Come on, take it off.’

Cullen reached up to undo the clasps, then shrugged it off his shoulders – that movement only twinged a little now – and Bull was behind him, helping him. Taking the coat and letting it drape over a stool.

Fingers at the base of his shirt and tugging the material up, and then it was all bunched around the top of his neck and Cullen felt like a puppy being inspected by a potential buyer. At least, he did until the backs of Bull’s knuckles dragged over his shoulders.

‘You didn’t take any more elfroot, did you?’ Bull said, but there was a smile in his voice, like he already knew the answer and didn’t mind. ‘You must have been sore.’

Cullen swallowed and resisted the urge to brace himself against the table with his hands. Something about the way Bull had said that…

‘It was manageable,’ Cullen said.

Bull only grunted again, then let the shirt drop. Cullen thought that would be it, went to move away again, but a hand caught him once more at his waist, and then both of Bull’s hands were pressing into his shoulders once more, as clinically as he had in the storage room two weeks ago, though he pressed a little deeper now. It wasn’t quite a massage, he was definitely checking for something.

‘Blood clots?’ Cullen said, realising.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Should’ve checked sooner, but figured you’d run away like a virginal maiden shrieking something like, ‘oh! Bull! It’s not necessary!’’

Cullen’s cheeks burned, but hearing the ridiculous parody of his own voice made his chest tickle again and he shook his head. ‘That’s exactly how it would have gone,’ he said dryly.

‘Believe me, I know,’ Bull said, but there was the hint of a laugh in his voice. ‘I’d like to do this again. Once you’re all healed up. When it suits you.’

Cullen hadn’t expected that. He wasn’t sure how to respond. Then, because apparently his mouth decided that the silence needed to be filled, he said:

‘Are you sure?’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ Bull said. Before Cullen could summon a response, Bull continued. ‘I’m not that guy you saw from before. And that’s not the worst I’ve flogged someone. Not by a mile. You
liking what you like, needing what you need? You’re not the only one in the world who enjoys that kind of thing.’

Cullen slipped sideways and picked up the coat on the stool as he went, pulling it on. He looked at Bull warily as he did up the clasp. He wanted Bull’s fingers on his back again, even just as a medical assessment. He wanted to be back in that storage room, pressed up against the wall – no, rocking into it with each blow, having to catch himself a little each time and wondering how much longer his legs would hold out for. And now Bull was watching him, friendly and calculating all at once.

He thought of their first conversation about it. About Bull calling him ‘skittish.’ He wondered just how often Bull thought the word when they interacted. If he was thinking it now.

‘All right,’ Cullen made himself say. ‘I’d like to do it again too.’

The smile broadened, and Cullen felt like he’d done the right thing. Which was absurdly relieving. He sighed and looked around the kitchen, maybe he would grab some more things to eat after all, taking one of the small delivery baskets and finding some of the older pieces of fruit. Some of the rolls. It didn’t have to be much.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, sitting down again as Cullen scrounged bits and pieces that he didn’t think would be missed. ‘You ever track my movements?’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said, looking at him sidelong.

‘How?’

‘That would be telling,’ Cullen said, and smiled when Bull broke into a laugh.

‘You still think I’d go back to them, don’t you?’

‘It’s not that, necessarily,’ Cullen said, putting down the basket and frowning. There was something sharp in Bull’s gaze that he didn’t like, but he wasn’t sure how to smooth it out and was surprised he even wanted to. ‘It’s sensible to be cautious with information, in my position. Even if you never went back to them – and as I understand it, you can’t, at least not easily – it’s more that I know you to be astute and intelligent, and it’s no longer possible for me to tell where someone’s loyalties will lie in six months or twelve.’

‘What about someone like the Seeker, then?’

‘Well,’ Cullen said slowly. ‘I know her quite a bit better than I do you.’

‘You’re an odd man,’ Bull said, stretching his arms so that both his hands rested on the back of his neck. A flush raced up Cullen’s neck. Maker, but Bull was doing it on purpose. Flexing, right in front of him. ‘Given I know you a bit better than a lot of other people. Don’t you worry? You’ve already given me an awful lot to fuck around with.’

‘As I said, you’re an astute and intelligent man,’ Cullen said, scowling at him.

‘Don’t say that to Krem,’ Bull said, grinning. ‘Or, y’know, if you ever want to know what it’s like to hear him laugh for ten minutes straight, give it a shot whenever you want the boost.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ Cullen said.

They both shared a smile, and Cullen went back to filling the basket he had slung over his forearm.
The silence after that was companionable, and Cullen felt like the worst edges inside of himself had been sanded back. He wasn’t sure how or when that had happened, given being around Bull sometimes made him worse, certainly more tense. He risked a glance, and Bull was watching him – but calmly now, with none of that sharpness of before.

‘Astute and intelligent,’ Bull mused, as though he was savouring the words. ‘Most people just call me hot, and huge. If you catch my-’

‘Yes, Bull, everyone on Thedas catches your drift,’ Cullen said, shaking his head.

‘Yeah, but not everyone blushes as pretty.’

‘I know that’s untrue,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes even as his cheeks burned. He walked towards the exit leading to the stairs, placing his hand on the door handle. ‘Well, now that you know I’m fine, we’re all fine, I think I’ll take my leave.’

‘You still interrupt me,’ Bull said. ‘Not as much, but-’

‘Goodnight, Bull,’ Cullen said, smiling over his shoulder and closing the kitchen door firmly behind him, before heading down the stairs.

He couldn’t shake the warmth he felt, even in the frigid mountain air. Couldn’t shake the hint of a smile on his face even as he eventually got back up to his office and noticed that his hands were shaking. It happened often enough that he didn’t always notice when it started anymore, unless he had to trust his fingers for writing.

He placed the basket of food down on a small side table, then sat at his desk, leaning back into it. His hands were becoming chilled. More than usual. The episodes had never stopped, but now he couldn’t roll his shoulders and use pain to try and head them off. He looked at his fingers, the shaking, and wondered if Bull had seen it. Surely he had. What would he think? Nerves?

Cullen wondered how long he could wait without seeming desperate, before issuing an invitation to Bull.
Cullen could have made the next meeting a week after his bruises faded. Which was only a week after he’d seen Bull in the kitchens.

But he told himself that would seem too desperate.

Another week passed, and the Iron Bull and the Chargers were sent out on a mission for the Inquisitor, and Cullen told himself that was fine, because he’d gone without for a long time, and he could go without again.

In the evenings, the tightness in his chest was a constant companion. His hands were cold, they tremored, and it was as though all the symptoms he tried to hold back through the day came crashing down upon him in slow motion. First his sight would go intermittently blurry, making it hard to get paperwork done past about ten in the evening. Then his hands would begin to go cold, making whatever task he’d assign himself – oiling leathers, burnishing armour, hauling dirty sheets and blankets down to the washing rooms and bringing up new ones on his own and beating the servants to it – something he’d have to abandon.

Then, not feeling anywhere near tired, he had a round of exercises for himself. Push ups, sit ups, things he could do in his room or office that wouldn’t require dexterity or sharp vision. That would last as long as it would take for the ceiling to feel like it was inverting.

He’d been taught exercises to calm and focus his mind. He used them so often they came to him without thought. If his breathing ran away from him, he’d calm it. If his thoughts began to spiral, he’d narrow his mind to a point. When that failed, he ached for his lyrium kit. Any lyrium kit. It would be as easy as finding one of the Templars and explaining he’d broken some of his equipment. As easy as walking down the stairs and-

The composed face he could present to people during the day abandoned him those evenings. He’d listen to the shakiness of his breath in his ever-tight chest and wish for all manner of things. From feeling like the ceiling was the ceiling again, to wondering if his hands would ever feel warm when he wasn’t forcing them through drills, to dreaming of a lash or flogger against his back until he couldn’t breathe for a different reason. Until his mind was forced to focus, and the flogger achieved what all the exercises the Chantry and the Templars had given him could not.

It was three weeks before the Iron Bull and the Chargers returned, and by then, Cullen had
experienced a crest of feeling miserable and then adjusted. That was his life before Bull, he could handle it again. He told himself he didn’t really miss the companionship. There were plenty of ways to cope with what he was coping with. If all else failed, he could go to Cassandra and she would find a replacement if it came down to it.

He had days where he didn’t want to use anything the Templars had taught him. It was a subtle rebellion. There were chants he deliberately shied away from. Phrases and sayings he tried to discard from his mind. It was all ultimately a dangerous path to a dangerous outcome, and he knew other Templars did good work — incredible work, so he struggled not to show his loyalty to them in every moment that the Inquisitor would ask for his opinion. They’d been his whole life, and the skills he possessed that the Inquisition depended on now, he only had them because of what the Templars had given to him.

But there was a part of him that eschewed it, that rejected, that grieved when he pushed it away and grieved when he pulled it back, because either way, it was gone.

On a Sunday evening, he walked into the storage room at three in the morning and couldn’t feel his hands properly. He gripped the lamp so hard that there was a groove in his fingers from the ring of the handle, and only lit it once inside the room. He sat not on the chair the Bull had occupied, but on the chair he already thought of as his. He looked down at a table empty of tools of flagellation, and he lowered his forehead to it, placed his hands palm down and listened to his breathing reflect back to him as it bounced off the wood.

The month of Cloudreach approached, Drakonis nearly over. Already he was being asked about Summerday, about impromptu coming-of-age ceremonies and whether he could participate in them, seeing as he was a warrior and a Commander and had once been a Knight-Commander and apparently that meant Mother Giselle thought he might be suited to overseeing young boys and girls who wanted to be warriors, going through the rituals that prepared them for such.

He found Mother Giselle intimidating in her own way, so he’d hedged and given no clear answer. But he didn’t want to be a role model for anyone. Didn’t think they should look up to him. Was quite certain if they knew some of the things he’d done or watched other people do…

He stayed in the storage room and told himself that his feet were made of stone and that was why he couldn’t walk down the stairs and find a Templar, and say, ‘we have more kits coming with the next batch of consignment, but until then…’

So his feet were made of stone and he couldn’t move. He stayed until dawn, when he made himself use the chants and sayings he wanted to reject, to give himself the strength to get back to work.

*  

Cassandra stood in front of the table. She did that. Stood right in front of his desk. Most people stood about midway into his office. Two or three paces from an exit. Cassandra walked right up to the table until her thighs brushed it.

‘Has Mother Giselle approached you about Summerday?’

Cullen gave her a look, and Cassandra returned it. Then sighed.

‘She thinks it is good for the younger of the refugees to have a coming-of-age ceremony. She’s asked me too. I said I would think about it. She seemed two steps away from saying the words, ‘it’s your duty as Seeker.’”
‘Then I imagine she’ll use that next time,’ Cullen said, leaning back in his chair and putting the quill down, raising an eyebrow. ‘Are you here to get me to talk you into it? Or give you an excuse to get out of it?’

‘If you do it with me, then I think—’

‘I’m not going to talk you into it,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m not interested in the Summerday celebrations.’

‘Was your coming-of-age with the Templars? Or before?’

‘I wasn’t that old when I joined the Templars,’ Cullen said. ‘Older, but not that old.’

Cassandra said nothing, only looked down with interest at what Cullen had on his desk. Which meant that she wanted to keep talking, but probably didn’t know what to talk about. Between them both, they’d had plenty of conversations which involved a great deal more silence than perhaps what other people were used to.

‘She’s going to come to me again, Cullen,’ Cassandra said with a sigh. ‘Then I will come here to you. Eventually you’ll say yes.’

‘Oh, Maker,’ Cullen groaned. ‘You’re here to talk me into it, aren’t you? You don’t want me to talk you out of it, you want to—’

‘Say yes now, and I’ll leave you alone.’

‘You have to leave me alone anyway, you have work to be getting on with. Don’t you have a dummy to hit with a sword?’

‘Don’t you?’ Cassandra said, arching a brow. Then she laughed. ‘Cullen, it will be one night. I will get Josie to find something we can drink afterwards. We’ll earn favour with Mother Giselle.’

‘I’m not sure I need it,’ Cullen said primly.

‘You need mine,’ she said.

‘I already have that,’ Cullen said, and felt like they were in some staring competition where she was mentally trying to will him into saying yes. The worst part was he could already feel it working. Like a willow branch being bent slowly into place. ‘No, Cassandra. It’s not my idea of a good night. It’s not—’

‘It’s no one’s idea of a good night!’ she exclaimed. ‘The children will be nervous. The adults will be wanting it to be over. We all know it’s meant to be late spring but it will probably snow. I’m not sure anyone really enjoys Summerday. That is what…’ Cassandra waved her hand, ‘the frivolities of Satinalia or even Wintersend are for. You were Knight-Commander, it would have been your duty to oversee the Templars during their coming-of-age, yes?’

‘I am not a Knight-Commander,’ Cullen said calmly. ‘But you are still a Seeker. Frankly, I’m not sure you or Mother Giselle truly want someone who may get struck down by a wave of vertigo right at the moment when I’m meant to be looking my best.’

His tone had turned scathing at the end, and he’d meant to come across as only conversational, to put it forth as light-hearted self-deprecation. But the more he spoke, the more he realised how true it was. Evening after evening adding up. There was no signs the symptoms would disappear any time soon. The cold often made it worse.
Cassandra’s expression turned troubled. She looked at him not mutinously – as he’d expected – but with concern.

‘It’s fine,’ he said quickly. ‘I’d come to you if I thought the Inquisition’s forces were at risk. You know that. I’m just not sure I’m ready to be held up as the paragon of a warrior or, Maker forbid, a hero.’

‘Maker forbid,’ Cassandra said, rolling her eyes. ‘Because there’s no reason anyone would ever think that about you.’

‘You can take your sarcasm and go inflict it on someone else,’ Cullen said.

Cassandra smiled. ‘I like inflicting it on you.’

She turned towards the exit leading towards the library. Then she paused and said:

‘We are going to talk about this again. I do not want to stand in front those teenagers on my own.’

‘You won’t be alone, you’ll have Mother Giselle. Who is likely trying to rope the Inquisitor into it as well, and Vivienne, and goodness knows who else.’

‘Yes, because standing in front of all those teenagers with Vivienne by my side is what will make that night go smoothly. It’s not that I don’t appreciate her presence, but I would like some solidarity.’

‘And that’s me, is it?’ Cullen said.

‘Trust me, I’m as dismayed about that as you are,’ she delivered, droll as ever, before walking away and leaving him to his work once more.

*

Cullen wasn’t sure how to approach Bull about another meeting.

Sending a note asking to arrange a time might be problematic. He was reluctant to visit the Herald’s Rest. It didn’t feel like his place. If anything, he felt like the soldiers he put through their paces deserved a break, and that it was intrusive if he tried to be one of them while they were unwinding and likely venting about all their superior officers. Even though he delegated most of the direct day-to-day supervision to others since they’d arrived at Skyhold, many of them still remembered him as the one throwing down orders to pull them together to work harder and better as a unit.

He was a little disgusted that after years of looking at maps and figuring out manoeuvres – not to mention coming up with last minute adjustments in the field – he couldn’t actually come up with something ideal in this situation.

Did he just wait in the Main Hall around interminable people, and hope that Bull might have to go in there for some reason, even though he, too, seemed to avoid that place?

Did he go to the practice ring more often? Lean over the wooden railings and watch others spar and pretend that he was absorbed with what was going on? Watch as warriors and soldiers and others faltered or rallied because their Commander was standing right there?

That held some appeal, but there had to be an easier way, surely.
Embarrassingly, the easier way was Bull simply walking into his office, closing the door behind him and saying:

‘You’re gonna start playing chess with me.’

Cullen was quite good at not startling, not betraying the buzz of warmth that found him when he heard the rumble of Bull’s voice. Good at ignoring the prickle of gooseflesh across his back like he was already in the damned storage room. So instead he just looked up with the pretence of calm and raised his eyebrows.

‘Am I?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘I like it. I know you play. The ‘Vint says you’re mercenary, but we’ll see about that.’

‘Dorian cheats,’ Cullen said, smiling. ‘He’d think a child was mercenary if they knew how to play without sneaking pieces off the board and hiding them in their sleeve.’

‘He swore you didn’t know about that.’

‘Mage he may be, sleight of hand magician he is not.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, with a warm smile. ‘Thing is, you want this thing to happen more often. I want it to happen more often. It’s not gonna magically fall into place unless our schedules shift. Not much. Maybe a game once every two weeks.’

The boards were in the Chantry gardens, and though they were frequently busy, folks usually left the people playing chess alone. He knew that Bull played from time to time, usually when he was invited. As far as ruses went, it wasn’t a bad one.

It was one more area where Bull had quietly taken charge of an issue, and Cullen almost wanted to say ‘no’ reflexively. Wait until he found a better solution himself.

But that was ungracious, not to mention impractical. Yet, he couldn’t help but feel like something was being unravelled. As though Bull held him like a spool of thread, and pulled just a little bit each time.

‘All right,’ Cullen said.

‘You wanna sort anything out until then? I’m here now.’

And that was how they sorted out the time for the next meeting. It seemed so easy that Cullen almost resented Bull taking so long to visit. Almost, except that just as much of the responsibility fell with him, and he’d done absolutely nothing.

*  

At eleven on that Sunday, they both met in the storage room once more.

‘Did you give any more thought to my suggestion?’ Bull said, sitting in the chair that Cullen already thought of as belonging to him. He lounged in it. His body language was so open as to almost be vulgar.

‘Which suggestion?’ Cullen said, frowning.

‘That’s a no,’ Bull said, and then laughed. ‘You giving more control over to me, remember?’
‘I’m not sure how,’ Cullen said, and then realised how defensive he sounded. He’d also not given it too much thought. He felt like he’d already given plenty, didn’t want Bull to erode his control over the situation until he didn’t have anything left. If he’d kept more control with Searidge, maybe he wouldn’t have driven him away. His entire ability to function was predicated on self-control.

He didn’t want to be seen as lacking.

‘I’m not sure how,’ Cullen began again, avoiding that calculating look. ‘I let you do the things that you wanted to do. Food. Water. The salve. You were the one wielding the flogger, if you’ll recall.’

‘I sure do,’ Bull said, and Cullen thought that it was a good thing he wasn’t keeping a running tally of how much he flushed around Bull when he said things like that.

‘What more do you want?’ Cullen said, feeling testy. What more was there to give?

‘Restraints are probably the most obvious choice,’ Bull said, and he looked around the room. ‘Though this isn’t well set up for it, especially for flogging. You either need to have your wrists attached to something, or tied in front of your chest. But I’m creative. There’s things like gags. Blindfolds.’ Bull took in Cullen’s expression and laughed. ‘Y’know there are people who look at me with excitement when I start talking about this stuff.’

‘Excitement,’ Cullen said, voice flat.

There was a part of him that was curious. But his heart was hammering. The curious part of him shoved aside in favour of a suspicion so broad that he couldn’t see past it.

‘Hey, I’m not going to hurt you in ways that you don’t want,’ Bull said, expression shifting, becoming concerned.

‘This was supposed to be simple,’ Cullen said, pointing to the wall. ‘Simple. Are you changing the conditions? Is it mandatory that I cede more control to you?’

‘If you need it to be like that, then yeah,’ Bull said, and Cullen had the sense that he was pushing up against a bulwark. ‘You’re shit at taking care of yourself.’

‘I’ve managed quite well up until this point, thank you,’ Cullen said, and Bull grinned at him, throwing him off track, leaving him left of centre as he so often did.

‘I know,’ Bull said. ‘In terms of just getting to this point, you’ve done amazing. But knowing how to survive isn’t knowing how to take care of yourself.’

Cullen wondered if Bull was in a mood. He felt the word ‘katoh’ in his mouth. Because even though Bull was pretending this was a casual conversation, there was no way he truly believed it was. And Cullen had just wanted the flogger, to not have to think about anything. Absently, he turned and looked at the door he’d come through. He could just leave. He wouldn’t even need to say the word at this point.

‘Here, look,’ Bull said, reaching down into his bag and pulling out a black strip of cloth. Cullen opened his mouth and then closed it abruptly when Bull lengthened it out and then tied it around his own face, blocking off the vision of his remaining eye and deftly knotting it at the back of his head. ‘See? Easy.’

‘Can you see through it?’ Cullen said, forgetting about the door.

How had he done that and made it look like it was nothing at all?
‘A little,’ Bull admitted. ‘Shapes. That’s it.’

Cullen took a step towards him, staring. His fingers itched, and he took another step, until he was looking down at him. Bull tilted his head up, a half-smile on his lips.

He’d never really gotten a chance to just *look* at Bull before. Everything was covert, or sidelong, or he was assessing without really taking anything in beyond ‘threat/not-threat.’ Even when he made eye contact, he tended to focus on eyes or lips, to the point where he lost other facial details. Now, he could look at the scars, the blemishes, the smooth stretches of skin and the cragged, rougher skin that became the place where his horns grew. Cullen’s fingers ached, and they curled into loose fists by his sides.

‘It opens your other senses a little more,’ Bull said.

If Bull put a blindfold on Cullen, it also meant Bull could look as freely as he wanted. Notice every imperfection. Stare without consequence.

Cullen realised that Bull did that *anyway*, and the stubborn, suspicious ball inside of him shrunk in on itself, fell away.

‘Can I…?’ Cullen said, one of his hands lifting. ‘Can I touch you?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, and Cullen envied how trusting he seemed to be.

He reached up and touched fingertips to Bull’s forehead, feeling the way it wrinkled. He avoided the mess of scar tissue around Bull’s missing eye, not because he didn’t want to touch it, but because he didn’t want to make Bull uncomfortable. He touched the skin just under the blindfold. Trailed fingertips down his cheek. The curve of his jaw. Bull didn’t do anything else except lean his head and expose more of his skin. Cullen held his fingertips just in front of Bull’s lips and felt the race of his own heart. A curiosity that warred with the condition he’d laid down.

*No sex.*

He wanted it though. Not here. Not in this room. But that didn’t mean that he hadn’t thought about it. And it seemed his body was thinking about it more often than he did, now that he was standing there and aware of his own reaction. The thrill of heat in his spine that had nothing to do with the idea of being whipped.

Carefully, he drew his fingers away without touching. Wondered if Bull could tell where his hand was. Probably.

‘I’ll try it,’ Cullen said. ‘The blindfold.’

Bull smiled, reached behind his head and undid the cloth. His gaze seemed proud. Then he looked around the room again and stood, seeming to take up far more space than he actually did.

‘I don’t want you against the wall this time.’

‘What?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘Then how do you want this to work?’

‘I want you to sit,’ Bull said. ‘I’ll show you. It’ll introduce a level of…challenge, but you’re not one to back down from one of those, are you?’

Cullen only tipped his head back slightly and raised an eyebrow and didn’t exactly *miss* how simple things had been with Searidge – because it wasn’t like Searidge had ever given him that
complete floating sensation that Bull had after one session, or those bruises – but he thought there was something to be said for being efficient.

‘What kind of challenge?’

‘I want you to keep your hands flat against the table, once we get you in the right position. If I see them curling, or digging in, I’m going to stop and wait until they’re flat before starting again.’

Cullen’s hands curled automatically, and he looked over at the table. Would he be lying on it? Or sitting before it? Or…bending over it?

Maker, how was he meant to keep his hands flat?

‘That, or you take three sips of elfroot potion once we’re done,’ Bull said amiably.

Well then.

‘Looks like we’ll be seeing if I can keep my hands flat,’ Cullen said. ‘So how is this meant to work?’

‘Here, you take your coat and shirt off, I’ll get things set up.’

Cullen took a few steps to the side and took off his coat, folding it carefully as he watched Bull take the second chair – Cullen’s chair – and turn it so that its back was pressing into the edge of the table. The seat facing outwards. Cullen was folding his shirt when Bull simply pointed to it and said:

‘Straddle the chair, face the table and put your forearms and palms flat on it. I’ll take those.’

Bull plucked the coat and shirt from Cullen’s grip and laid them out over a piece of hessian sack covering one of the lower stacks of hay. Cullen meanwhile straddled the chair awkwardly, as this was not the kind of thing he was used to doing. It spread his legs wide, and despite having the back of the chair bracing his chest, he still felt exposed. Still, he raised his arms and lay them on the table the way Bull had asked. Like this, he couldn’t brace his forehead against anything without bowing his back. He tried that, shifting, and blunt fingers stopped him.

‘Not like that,’ Bull said, and then his hands slid down to Cullen’s lower back and pushed. ‘Keep this arched. I don’t want to see the top of your spine.’

Bull kept pushing until Cullen’s chest was flat against the back of the chair. Until he couldn’t brace his head against anything at all. His fingers started to curl into the wood and he bit the inside of his lip and made himself stop.

‘I’d prefer the wall,’ Cullen said, and swallowed when those fingers trailed up his back again to his shoulders. That was…was more of a caress than it needed to be. But seconds later, Bull was only checking his back again. Thumbs poking along the ridges of his shoulder blades.

‘I know,’ Bull said, and his voice was gentle. ‘I like it too. But it’s murder on your hands.’

Cullen wanted to say that it was fine, and it had been fine. Except that they had ached more than usual the next day. In ways that were sometimes hard to ignore. The withdrawals leched his hands and fingers of warmth so often that a tight, scratchy pain had sunk into the joints – so constant that he sometimes forgot that he’d ever lived without it. He wasn’t ready to call it arthritis. He wasn’t ready to name it at all.
'Okay,' Bull said, and Cullen saw in his peripheral vision the strip of black cloth and tensed. ‘I’m gonna make this easy. You want that off, you can say. You can say you want it off, or ‘stop,’ or ‘katoh,’ or you can reach up and pull it off yourself if I’m giving you a break. Got it?’

Cullen nodded. ‘Yes. I understand.’

‘Great.’ Seconds later the strip of cloth rested over his eyes and Cullen’s nostrils flared, he didn’t exactly jerk away from it, but his head twitched. Bull moved his fingers so that they were bracing Cullen’s head, stopping him from shifting. Then the strip of cloth over his eyes, fitting snug behind his ears and being tied. He could see the dimness of the light still, and would probably see Bull’s shape silhouetted by the lamp, but otherwise it was dark.

Bull placed a hand on Cullen’s back, between his shoulder blades. It was familiar and grounding all at once. For a few long moments the hand just stayed there. Flat, warm, calloused. Then fingertips shifted, curled against his skin.

‘You good?’ Bull said.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, though his voice was a little more strained than he wanted it to be. He fought the urge to rip the blindfold off. Every other time he’d been blindfolded, he hadn’t been given that courtesy, and that alone reminded him that this was different. Very different. And Bull had worn the blindfold first. Had sat there and let Cullen touch his face. ‘I’m good.’

Keeping his eyes open felt useless, so he closed them. He was aware of the arch in his back, the stretch in his hips that was similar to riding a horse and yet nothing like it at the same time. Bull’s hand stayed at his back, and Cullen wondered if there would ever be a time when he would let someone touch him like that outside of something like this. He wanted to be the kind of person who found it easy. In that moment, he wanted to swear that he’d try harder, do better.

He frowned and focused on his breathing. Wanting to please people – it was fine to try and do a good job, to try and do the right things for the right reasons. But wanting to please people didn’t lead to that. He’d learned.

In the dark, everything sharpened. The sound of Bull pulling tools out of his chest. The scent of leather. Cullen could feel his heart beating in his ears. Seconds later his cock gave a half-hearted twitch and he shifted minutely. This was not the most ideal position for arousal. It wasn’t really the most ideal position for anything except what Bull wanted to do to him...what Cullen wanted him to do.

‘Gonna start off a bit lighter and slower today. Be patient for me.’

Cullen nodded and had no idea if Bull had seen his response.

The sound of a striking implement being swung through the air a few times. Nothing touching his back.

Then, the first blow, lighter than last time but still a flogger. A skimming sharpness of multiple tails across the top of his back that stung, so that he inhaled on a hiss. But he kept his hands flat, felt minutely proud that he’d remembered.

The second blow was just as sharp, and Cullen’s eyes opened and he tried to concentrate on not moving. Another few seconds later - Bull still striking him more slowly than last time - that sharp sensation again and it was a kind of fire. Not slow and throbbing, but high and tight and brittle.
'Cullen,' Bull said, and didn't hit him again.

That was when Cullen realised he'd clawed the table. Even his back had shifted. A flush of shame and embarrassment stained his cheeks as his back warmed. He could feel it wasn't bruising like last time. Ached for that heavier sensation. He opened his mouth to reprimand, to reprove, and then remembered Bull asking him for his patience.

So Cullen forced his hands flat and swallowed the apology and shifted until his posture was what Bull wanted it to be.

'Good,' Bull said, 'very good.'

A flush of warmth then that had nothing to do with the pain in his back. Then Bull’s stance shifted. Cullen blinked into darkness and tried to prepare himself for it, holding his breath and-

The next strike came and then the next, about ten seconds between them. Just enough time for Cullen to try and keep his breathing under control and dread that high sting and feel his hands shaking with strain as he tried to keep his fingers unmoving.

More of that building pain and Cullen dropped into it, even as it forced gasps from his throat.

Bull stopped again.

One of his hands was dragging down the wood so hard that his fingertips were burning. He stopped as soon as he realised. Didn’t flatten his hand down straight away.

'I want to stand against the wall,' Cullen said, and hated that he didn't sound commanding, but plaintive.

'I know. We can, if you want.'

Cullen started to stand and the end of the flogger touched his sore shoulder. He stilled.

'We can,' Bull said again, 'but only if you promise to take the elfroot after. Just a few sips.'

Cullen grimaced.

'I know what you're doing,' Cullen said. 'You're trying to trick me into-

'No tricks,' Bull said quietly. 'I can get you where you need to go just like this, though it'll take a bit longer. Either way, your hands don't take as much abuse as they did last time. That's win-win for both of us.'

Uneasily, Cullen settled back into the chair. What would he have done once standing, anyway? Walked to the wall while blindfolded? Fallen over his own feet? He placed his forearms back on the table, his palms flat, felt jittery.

‘You good?’ Bull asked calmly.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, mouth thinning as he tried to focus not on the pain that was coming, not on the pain that was already in his shoulders and back, but on his hands. Just his hands. Flat on the table.
The next strikes he bore well enough, though the sting was harder to take on increasingly abraded skin. He stopped trying to control his breathing. Stopped trying to bear the pain, but that somehow made it worse. Harder.

Three more times Bull stopped, and three more times Cullen had to force himself back into position. He wanted that emptiness that Bull had given him last time. Was thrumming with the kind of anger that had him wanting to grab the tails as they sung through the air, yank the stupid flogger out of Bull’s hand and throw it to the ground. Which he would never do, not to someone else’s equipment. But it was the same feeling he got with novices sometimes. When there had been too many bad days in a row. When he saw them handle their swords with disrespect and he wanted nothing more than to snatch the weapon away from them and tell them that they weren’t doing it right.

He managed to get closer, the next time. The burning in his back, the quivering in his arms from tension, he could almost feel it – that sea waiting just out of reach. Could feel the rocking of the waves and felt the edges of a meditative calm soothe the worst of his anger.

Bull stopped.

‘Cullen,’ he said.

With a growl of frustration Cullen fisted his hand – his own traitorous fingers – raised it and slammed it down into the table-

Except that Bull was there, had caught his wrist in his hand, was holding him still. Cullen tried jerking his arm free and couldn't. He was trapped in the dark. He almost bared his teeth, except with the way Bull stood, he worried Bull would see it.

'No,' Bull said calmly.

'I can't do this,' Cullen said. There, it was out in the open now. He could blame Bull’s flogger. He could blame the exposed position. He could blame everything else but ultimately, he couldn’t keep his hands flat. A simple thing designed for his benefit. All that supposed, vaunted self-control, and where was it?

'You can,' Bull said. 'There's no shame if you need to stop. Need a break. But you've done great so far, really great. Unclench your fist.'

Cullen did, almost without thinking. He turned his head towards Bull's voice, wanting to be closer to it, the inside of his knees gripping the chair he straddled.

'You believe I can do this?' Cullen said.

'Yeah,' Bull said, voice warm and sounding like it had a smile in it. 'I really do. You need a break?'

'The pain's different,' Cullen said, like that explained everything. To him, it did.

'Yeah,' Bull agreed, letting go of his wrist. 'Harder to take, right?'

Cullen went back to staring ahead, because he felt chastened somehow. As though Bull was pointing something out to him. As though he was saying, ‘see, you can’t do this the way you think you can.’ Perhaps he was trying to prove that Cullen didn’t really have a high pain threshold. Perhaps he-
'Hey,' Bull said, ‘talk to me. You need a break?’

‘I need something,’ Cullen spat in frustration, and then lifted his hands clear off the table when his fingers curled into fists. Did he really do it that often? His arms were still shaking, so he lowered them back to the table again.

Bull shifted to Cullen’s other side. A scrape of the other chair on the ground that was abrasive and just one more irritating thing. Then, a hand that fell broad and flat on his shoulder and Cullen hissed and went still. But it commanded his attention, he turned his head towards Bull. After a beat, Bull’s hand moved to the back of Cullen’s unmarked neck and teased gently at his hairline.

‘You were really close,’ Bull said. ‘I could hear it in your breathing. This particular flogger though. It’s a mean one. I didn’t realise when I got it at the time. I was new to buying floggers and didn’t really know what to look for. I thought if it had knots tied in the end, it was hardcore. And that if it was huge and black and terrifying looking, it was hardcore. And there was this red thing with thin leather straps and I was like, ‘oh, that looks perfect.’ Turns out I was wrong!’

He sounded cheerful, and Cullen clung to every word in the story. It was hard to imagine Bull ever needing to start out in this particular…enthusiasm of his. Easier to think that he’d just automatically known, from the very beginning.

‘It doesn’t break the skin really,’ Bull said. A few seconds later the tails were draped lightly over Cullen’s back. Gently. Bull had leaned in towards him. ‘Not unless I put my back into it. Doesn’t even bruise that well.’

Then why in the name of the Maker are you using it?

‘Cullen, do you want to take the blindfold off?’

Cullen shook his head. Frowned. Shook his head again. Bull had nicknames for everyone. Yet he used Cullen’s name so specifically. It was like hearing a bell being rung. He couldn’t help but focus when he heard it.

A broad thumb was rubbing up and down the back of his neck. It was steadying. Cullen’s eyes had closed again, he wanted to sag down and press his forehead to the back of the chair. Truthfully, all he really wanted to do – even more than stand and face that wall with the right flogger – was please Bull. It was a wash of bile-flavoured hatred inside of him, and it was only directed at himself. But he still wanted it. Bull said he thought Cullen could do it, maybe all Cullen had to do was be patient; as asked.

But what if he couldn’t?

Too many bad weeks. That was the problem. Too many bad weeks in a row. He swallowed and pushed back into Bull’s touch without really examining the urge too closely. Bull’s sound of approval made Cullen aware that his legs were still spread, made his face feel warm.

‘I like it,’ Bull said, his voice lower than before. ‘Seeing you hold up to that kind of pain, keeping your hands flat in longer stretches. Putting all that fight into something focused. It sure is something.’

Is it? Cullen thought. His lips thinned. Was it just what Bull thought he wanted to hear? If it was, he’d done a good job. Already, something felt like it was unwinding in Cullen’s chest.

‘My hands were fine,’ Cullen said, his voice strained. ‘Last time, they were-’
‘That’s shit and I want to say you know it’s shit too. But I’m not sure you do. So, I’m here to tell you – it’s shit.’

‘I think I get the picture,’ Cullen said, feeling weary. The pain was thrumming through him. He realised there was an odd sleepiness in the back of his mind, as though the very edge of that calming sea was there waiting for him. Maybe Bull had been right. Maybe he was closer to it than he thought.

‘I want to try again,’ Cullen said. ‘Like this.’

Cullen wanted to ask what happened if it didn’t work, if trying again failed – then realised how greedy it was. One session of finding that empty guilt-free space with Bull, and now he was acting like he was entitled to it? It wasn’t like he often felt anywhere near so calm with Searidge. No. He wanted the flogging so he’d have the physical pain in the days to come. And it was obvious that even if this didn’t give him the thick black bruises he wanted, it would still give him a tool to use against the inexorable march of days facing him.

When Bull stood behind him again – the hand still on his neck and gentle for a long time, like Cullen was someone to be careful with – Cullen shifted his posture so that it was correct. After years of being shown how to stand, how to turn his feet out or in, how to hold weapons or shields or axes or whatever they wanted him to use – Bull only needed to show him how to sit once before Cullen knew exactly how to fall back into place.

He heard Bull shifting his own stance, and Cullen closed his eyes and thought not of that sea he yearned for, but of something different.

His feet were made of stone. Encased in the stuff.

His hands too. They were soldered to the table. It wasn’t that he shouldn’t move them, it was that he couldn’t move them. So that even if he wanted to walk down the stairs to trick someone out of their lyrium kit, he couldn’t. He was fixed in place. It wasn’t about slowing down his breathing. It wasn’t about concentrating on not moving. He just couldn’t. He was stone.

The flogger fell and Cullen made a sound, because normally he’d tense or curl his fingers or toes, but as he bent his mind towards what he was imagining, he didn’t have the faculties left to remind himself not to make noises.

Again and again the flogger fell, spaces between the rhythm that felt too long, but even then – even with the pain so sharp he was gasping through it – he didn’t move. It was as though something had clicked into place in his mind. He wasn’t doing this to reach for that sea. It would be nice to have that guilt-free space, very nice, but he wasn’t sure he deserved it, and it wasn’t why he’d asked for this in the first place. In which case, he didn’t need to be frustrated with Bull or himself for not finding it. It wasn’t really about him at all. He was just there, Bull could have been practicing on an inanimate object, because he could not move.

The flogger kept falling. Cullen’s eyes were shut and his chest heaving because the pain was sharp and stinging and tight, his back felt swollen, but he didn’t move. His hands felt heavy.

The strokes began to speed up, and Cullen heard himself cry out, felt self-censure begin to move through him and then that fell away as well. The stinging was awful, his eyes burned behind the blindfold, but it wasn’t like Bull could see, and the fabric wicked away any tears he shed, so the worry he had about that disappeared. It was as though every stroke of the flogger stripped away a layer of concern.
It hurt desperately. He wanted to move away from it. If anyone ever asked him in the future if he liked pain that thudded into him or stinging pain, he knew what to say to them.

Eventually, the concern he had about the pain was stripped away as well. Then between one stroke and the next, it was as though he lifted into nothingness. It wasn’t meditative, exactly. He just gave himself over to what Bull was doing, he gave himself over to the desk and chair and floor that were supporting him. There was no guilt because he’d forgotten how to feel it.

This wasn’t like a gently rocking ocean at all. He had no words for it. He was reduced to noticing textures and the sensation that he was being gripped tightly in a fist. Instead of falling, instead of floating, he was just…held. But it wasn’t a calm or sweet thing. It was like being encased in stone, it carried a permanence to it that had him feeling safe enough to not think anymore.

The pain eased and Cullen hardly noticed.

His breathing was ragged. He was afraid to tune back into his body, afraid because the pain was there hanging over him like a threat. But he wanted other things too. Other things that would mean he’d have to come back to himself.

‘…Cullen? Hey there, come on now, you can move your hands. Okay, Cullen, I know you’re in deep right now, I just need you to let me know you can hear me.’

Cullen couldn’t move. He was made of stone. Didn’t Bull know that?

A shaky exhale as a hand started stroking his forearm. All the way from the inner elbow to the tips of his fingers. A faint sound before he inhaled again, and the next breath out still trembled. Bull was close to him. And warm. And steady. Cullen wanted to turn into him but he didn’t quite remember how to move. His whole body felt stuck.

‘You did so fucking well,’ Bull said, his tone almost reverent. ‘So well. Cullen, can you move your fingers for me? Just a bit. Hardly anything at all. I’m right here.’

Cullen wondered vaguely if this was the stream of talk that Bull had used last time, when Cullen had missed almost all of it. Contemplated that in a detached kind of way before he remembered that he was supposed to do something.

Move his fingers.

He made a faint sound of protest. He couldn’t.

‘I know,’ Bull said, like he understood it was the hardest task in the world, and a hand was in his hair and by the Maker did he yearn. His breath caught in his throat and he was turning his hand to meet Bull’s palm and blindly shifting in the chair – except he couldn’t move his legs properly, and he was half-groaning, half-growling at the pain in his back and seeking all at once. Either Bull moved to meet him, or he was already that close. Cullen twisted sideways and slumped clumsily against Bull’s meagre clothing, against overheated skin. Though nothing burned quite as hot as his shoulders.

‘Okay,’ Bull said. ‘That’s good.’

For a while it was nothing but his hoarse breathing, and his sweaty hand in Bull’s sweaty hand, and the awkward angle at which he leaned against Bull that felt so good he wasn’t willing to move away. There was a hand in his hair. Smoothing it. Ruffling it. Tracing the places where it met his ears.
The pain returned slowly, but all too soon it reached a point where it began hammering at him. He groaned, tried to shift to accommodate it, but nothing worked.

‘*Shit,*’ he murmured, his voice breaking.

‘I’ve got some elfroot for that,’ Bull said calmly. ‘Potion might be better, but let me guess, you want the salve.’

Cullen nodded, dazed, and then made a pathetic noise when the gesture pulled at his back. He pushed his forehead into Bull’s chest and thought that this wasn’t quite right. This wasn’t how he normally behaved…but it felt incredible.

And then Bull was pulling away and Cullen felt like his world was being rocked – and not in a good way. He froze, and then Bull was back and humming, like he was thinking about something.

‘Just getting the salve,’ Bull said. ‘I’m right here.’

Cullen felt like he was hanging off a precipice when the contact disappeared completely, and then Bull was back and at his side, and a hand sticky with salve pressed in carefully at the outer edges of that seething mass of pain on his back. He flinched and then frowned, because…he didn’t normally do that either.

He pushed his face back into Bull’s skin, searching for it. Why – when he seemed to wear hardly anything on his chest at all – was it now impossible to find a stretch of skin to rest against? Then Bull’s hand skated slick over his shoulders and he made a fractious sound and shifted to get even closer. His face was pushing against Bull’s arm now.

‘Ah, Cullen,’ Bull said, sounding sad. Another thing that made no sense.

Eventually, Cullen’s back was salved and the edge of the pain was steadily dropping away. It was blending into a different kind of heat and he felt dazed as he shifted again, one hand bracing on Bull’s knee while his face tipped up and he tried to find Bull’s mouth with his own. He found the curve of a jaw, tried to stretch up higher and Bull’s lips were right where he wanted them to be.

The kiss itself lacked grace – entirely his end, his body uncoordinated – but it was warm and sweet, and then it was over too soon and he tried to follow Bull’s mouth only to feel a bracing hand on his shoulder.

‘Ah ah,’ Bull said warmly, ‘not now. We gotta talk about that later. You just take it easy. I’ll stay right here. I got no better place to be. Unless, y’know, we take this to a room with a bed. Still think you should be lying down for this part.’

Cullen made a noise of agreement, because it seemed like the right point in the conversation to agree. Then he realised that he technically didn’t agree with what Bull said at all, but couldn’t bring himself to care very much.

Proper awareness came back slowly. He shifted in increments, then moved away from Bull and rested his forehead on the back of the chair. He felt tired. Queasy. He knew he’d kissed Bull and knew that if Bull had decided to fuck him at that point, Cullen would have not only gone along, but been enthusiastic, even eager. His cheeks were hot.

‘Looks like…I got there in the end,’ Cullen said, his voice rough.

‘You sure did,’ Bull said, laughing.
'Maker, I don’t know how I’m going to get back to my room,’ Cullen said.

The sentence was absently said – sincerely meant, but it wasn’t the kind of thing he’d normally say if he had a chance to think it through. And the silence that followed was telling. Cullen opened his eyes and realised he still had the stupid blindfold on. He pulled it up and off his face, wincing at the movement. He blinked rapidly, adjusting to the light. The blindfold was damp in his fingers. He looked over at Bull and thought that he really should think through what he said before he said it.

‘Neither do I,’ Bull said, staring at him. ‘You’re not gonna let me help you, are you? You don’t think you could come up with some reason? You don’t trust me to?’

‘They’ll think I’m sleeping with you,’ Cullen said, feeling like this reintroduction into reality was too brutal, that he wasn’t ready for it. He clung to the blindfold. Wished Bull didn’t feel so far away even though he was within reaching distance. ‘I can’t be shown to be giving that kind of favour to other people.’

‘Why?’ Bull said, blinking at him. ‘No offense, but the Inquisitor doesn’t give a rat’s ass about who she sleeps with. The other advisors don’t give a shit. As for the others, they—’

‘-Are not the Commander of the Inquisition,’ Cullen grit out, and then flinched before Bull could say anything. ‘Sorry. I know I shouldn’t interrupt. I shouldn’t. But I…’

He felt unmoored. He looked away from Bull and then realised that he’d had enough of this sitting position. He didn’t need it. Without really thinking it through, he pushed backwards and then stood up. One of his knees refused to lock under him and he buckled. Bull was there, muttering something under his breath, a hand around his elbow, the other at his side.

‘Sit down,’ Bull said, and Cullen blinked at the force of the order and sat so that his side could lean into the chair’s back and his legs could lean closer together. He was facing Bull now, his head drooping. ‘I’m in a bit of a rock and a hard place with you. I could just whip you lightly, let you go back to your room all frustrated, and that’s that. But I know you want more, and I can give you that too. That’s what we both want, right? But you know what? I think this doesn’t happen again in this place until you let me walk you to your office, or you find a place for this to happen that has a bed. And I don’t mean installing some shitty cot in here, I mean a good, comfortable bed.’

Bull was angry with him. Cullen had stupidly thought he’d be pleased, because Cullen had managed to give himself up to the pain like that. He felt some part of himself shrinking inwards. Coiling in on himself. And he was mad that he was feeling that at all, because this wasn’t about someone else’s approval.

‘All right,’ Cullen said, his voice muted. ‘You can walk me back to my office.’

There was a long pause before Bull spoke.

‘What are you going to tell anyone, on the off chance we’re seen together?’

‘Maker, I don’t know,’ Cullen said.

‘You tell them that we’re both poor sleepers – people won’t ask why, it’s not like there’s not fucked up war stories from here to the other end of Skyhold. You tell them that we play chess in there, late at night, and then you bring over a chess board and set it up on this table and leave it here. Because what’s the point in playing chess in the Chantry garden past midnight, when everyone’s is sleeping and I’m telling bawdy stories?’
Cullen nodded without really thinking about it. A cover story. That was good, wasn’t it?

‘I don’t feel well,’ Cullen said, blinking in some surprise at his own words.

‘You want to stay here a bit longer? Or go back to your room and lie down?’

Cullen thought about the ladder in his office and shook his head. Then said: ‘The first one.’

Bull picked up the bag and dumped it on the table. He took out a flask of water and handed it to Cullen, then kept his fingers on the back of Cullen’s hand when it was clear that his ability to hold the flask on his own was compromised.

Cullen drank slowly, not as thirsty as last time. After that, Bull moved his chair closer. Until his leg was sliding alongside Cullen’s, until they were side by side.

‘Come here,’ Bull said softly. ‘Come on. Lean in. Is it the pain? Or is it your head?’

‘The second,’ Cullen said, trying to lean casually against Bull’s side and wanting to grab onto him and cling. Bull rested a hand against his lower back and it was steadying. It helped. ‘I’ll do it better next time.’

‘Hey, none of that,’ Bull said, and then seemed to shake his head. ‘I mean, this happens. You did just take a beating. Your body responds to that like it’s a beating, even if you actually like it or get something out of it. Sometimes these things don’t always go the way we think they will. It’s normal. It ever happen before?’

‘Yes, but…’ Cullen frowned. ‘I would often be alone at that point. And the next day the bruises would serve their purpose.’

‘Yep,’ Bull said.

‘I won’t fail the challenge next time,’ Cullen continued. ‘I swear. I know the trick of it now.’

‘You didn’t fail the challenge,’ Bull said, smoothing a circle into Cullen’s lower back. ‘Why do you think you failed?’

‘I took so long,’ Cullen said, closing his eyes, ‘to listen to you.’

‘That’s not a thing,’ Bull said slowly. ‘I could just as easily say I’d failed ‘cuz I took too long to get you there. It took longer. That’s all. You didn’t fail anything in this room tonight. You can argue with me all you like, but it’s just gonna make you more tired and it’s not gonna make you more right. I know you feel shitty right now, see if you can give yourself some of the patience you gave me.’

Cullen was as much a dead weight against Bull’s body as he could be, given his body was still supported by a chair. Bull’s words had helped, sanded back the more jagged edges in his mind. His breathing steadied and then slowed, and Bull was stroking his back and flanks, avoiding the area of his back that felt so red he wondered stupidly if it was glowing.

Much later, Cullen emerging from a half-doze, he wondered if Bull had made the meeting so much earlier than last time to give him more time to recover before the dawn came. He felt like he’d somehow slept for hours, even though he knew it wasn’t the case. He shifted restlessly against Bull’s body and then slowly pulled back, meeting Bull’s eyes hesitantly.

‘How you doing?’ Bull said.
I kissed you. I liked it. I think I’m in trouble here.

‘All right,’ Cullen said, and then chuckled. ‘Better, at least. Tired.’

‘And your hands?’

‘As good as they ever are,’ Cullen said, flexing his fingers. His hands felt cool and about as stiff as they always did at this time of night.

Cullen’s skin blanched later, when he finally got his shirt on. The coat followed and he shook his head, because he knew the pain wasn’t actually as bad as last time. Not at all. Something about what had occurred had stripped his nerves raw. He couldn’t keep his responses in check as easily as he usually did.

Walking across the battlements back to his office was quiet. Bull stayed by his side, but didn’t try and reach out and support him. Cullen got the sense that if he mis-stepped just once, Bull wouldn’t care about the rumours and just scoop him up and bridal carry him into the office. So Cullen focused on putting one foot in front of the other, the frigid night air clearing his head.

Bull kindly didn’t say anything when Cullen dragged himself up the ladder, and didn’t criticise when Cullen sat down heavily on his bed and focused on his breathing. Instead, Bull looked up at the ceiling and smiled at it.

‘You must really miss camping if you need to see this many constellations at once.’

Cullen glared at him, but couldn’t maintain it for long.

‘I know,’ Cullen said finally. ‘Everyone thinks it’s just the one hole in the ceiling, but…’ he tilted his head backwards to indicate the rest and Bull laughed.

‘Right?’ he said. ‘Vashedan, what do you do when it rains?’

‘Enjoy the abundance of fresh water immediately at my disposal,’ Cullen said, rolling onto his stomach without taking his clothing off. He smirked as Bull kept laughing.

‘Resourceful, I like it,’ Bull said. The mattress dipped as Bull sat on the bed, the bedframe creaked. Not as much as Cullen expected. But then, his bed was a sturdy Ferelden design. Cullen sighed, warming when he felt a hand resting over the back of his neck. ‘I’m gonna come check in on you tomorrow. We got some things to talk about.’

‘What things?’ Cullen said, pulling a corner of the blanket towards him and giving up when he realised he couldn’t get underneath it properly because he was lying on top of it. The sleep that beckoned him felt rich and deep and layered with rest.

‘Nothing major, just some of the conditions that we put in place. Nothing bad. Can I take your boots off?’

‘Mm,’ Cullen managed, nodding sluggishly, thinking that whatever was going to happen tomorrow could wait until tomorrow.

He fell asleep before Bull got his second boot off.
Like Friends

Chapter Notes

Going back to what we started with. More kink negotiation!

And ahhhh you folks are seriously the greatest. I hope your respective holiday seasons (if you're celebrating them) are kind to you!

It scared him. Thinking back over how he’d acted. How he’d wanted to behave. The things he’d said.

The next morning he scrutinised his bruises – some dark, opaque splotches here and there, and everything else looked like more standard pale bruising that made him feel like something was missing, even though it would serve its purpose just fine. As he touched the heat on his back, he stared at himself in the mirror and didn’t like the expression he saw there. Someone too vulnerable.

It mattered that Bull had been careful with it all. Cullen knew that was important. But he also knew that it wasn’t such a good thing, to be in a place where one trusted another more than they trusted themselves.

At least he’d woken up alone. His boots lined up neatly by one corner of his bed, his mind swimming while putting all the previous moments of the night together.

He flexed his hands slowly, and aside from residual stiffness that felt as normal as it usually did at this time in the morning, they were fine. He pressed his thumb deep into his other palm to feel the ache of it and turned away from the mirror. He didn’t want to look at himself anymore. Then, he looked up at his ceiling and thought of what others would think if he asked for it to be fixed. If he requested wood and workers, instead of tarps that always blew away during the worst of the storms.

I kissed him.

He blinked at the thought, not at the memory. Because the memory – hazy and warm – was pleasant. But the thought itself was blunt, sat inside of him cold and immovable like a stone.

He pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead and stared at his rumpled blankets and tried to think about what he was supposed to do. A smart person would pull out now. He’d coped throughout Haven, throughout Skyhold, without what he was asking of Bull. He’d cope without it again.

Yanking the blankets into place as he made the bed was a raw pain over the top of his back, and he bit the inside of his lip and let it calm him, focus him. It was a Sunday. He didn’t have to rush to be anywhere in particular, though there was always a backlog of tasks, a mountain of responsibilities to be tended to in the quieter moments.

The morning was spent with the sense memory of that horrible stinging flogger across his back, and the sweet, slow movement of Bull’s lips against his, followed by that bracing hand at his shoulder, stopping him from seeking more.
Cullen spent most of the morning chasing up the kind of mundane tasks that didn’t command too much of his attention. He requested water be brought up to his room for bathing and ablutions, instead of attending the more communal washrooms, because, well, some bruises it was easy to explain away as battle injuries or accidents, but a flogging looked like a flogging, and that was that.

It was a surprisingly quiet day. Cullen entered an almost peaceful place where he learned how to move around the pain in his shoulders again. He could sit down, but not yet lean back against the chair – unless he needed the pain for something specific. He could reach for things at shoulder height, but anything higher and he’d have to hold back a gasp. It wasn’t just the bruising, but the strain and tension of having held himself still for that flogger. Bull was right, it was a mean piece of work, especially for the lack of real thick bruising Cullen had to show for it the next day.

In the early afternoon, Cullen heard the knock and before he had a chance to say ‘come in,’ Bull entered. In his hands, two plates of food covered with upside down bowls. The smell of rich stew followed. Cutlery was held in the crook of his arm. He beamed at Cullen when he saw him, the smile so broad and real that Cullen found himself smiling back.

‘This a bad time?’ Bull said.

‘No,’ Cullen said, clearing a space on his desk and biting the inside of his lower lip as he forced himself to move faster and more easily than he normally would the day after a flogging. He knew as he did it that he was trying to prove something. Felt a prickling of shame that stole his thoughts for a few seconds, before he tried to focus on what he was doing.

Bull set down Cullen’s bowl of stew along with a spoon, then pulled up one of the crates that had found its way into Cullen’s office. The sturdy ones they used for shipping heavy equipment. He started eating before Cullen had even lifted the second bowl protecting the food.

‘I’m gonna cut to the chase,’ Bull said, around a mouthful of food. ‘The conditions we set up. Specifically the ‘no sex’ one. What does that mean to you?’

Cullen stared at the spoonful of stewed mystery meat and thought that Bull’s direct methods of communicating were both admirable, and rather bracing. He started eating to buy himself some time to think, and Bull filled the silence with words instead.

‘Cuz I’m just thinking, y’know, it means different things to different people. And I like to be clear. Stops fuck ups in the future.’

Cullen nodded, swallowed, set his spoon down and in the process of using his knuckles to make sure his lips were clear of sauce, realised he could probably do with a shave.

‘I didn’t mean to kiss you,’ Cullen said. ‘I apologise for the slip, it won’t happen again.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, scooping food up into his mouth like it wasn’t an impediment to conversation at all. ‘That’s not what I said though. And it’s not what I’m asking for. You want it to happen? It can happen. So where’s the line for you? What is the thing you don’t want?’

‘It can’t be that easy,’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘I’m not interested in just taking from you.’

‘Me either,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘And you’re not. So…what does ‘no sex’ mean? Does it mean that I should stop you from kissing me outright next time? Does it mean no cocks in holes? Does it mean not blowing your load? There’s a line there. I’d like you to give me a sense of where it is. And if you don’t know, I’d like to get a sense of at least what it looks like.’

Cullen was blushing. Knew he was blushing. His stew was getting cold. But it wouldn’t be the first
time he’d left his food for too long and then forced down a cold plate to not seem ungrateful. Truthfully, he didn’t appreciate food like he used to. The lyrium had altered his tastebuds, and the withdrawals had altered them again. Food that smelled delectable often didn’t give him the fulsome tastes he remembered from his childhood.

‘I don’t know how to talk about this,’ Cullen said after a beat.

‘Yeah?’ Bull said. ‘You? Never would’ve guessed. You want me to throw some questions at you, and you give me some honest answers? Would that be easier?’

‘Please,’ Cullen said, wincing.

His life had certainly gotten interesting since he’d lost a part of his sanity and blurted out what he wanted to Bull.

‘Honest answers,’ Bull said, staring at him hard.

‘Yes, yes,’ Cullen said, waving a hand and pushing the stew around. ‘I understand.’

‘You okay with kissing, during those scenes?’

Cullen mushed a piece of carrot with the spoon and felt shivery warm, then nodded. Then he realised that might not be enough of an answer.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘Just not- Not with expectation that it has to go somewhere.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said.

‘Don’t misunderstand me, I’m not entirely averse to the idea of…’ Cullen paused, staring hard at his inkpot. ‘I’m not against it. The idea of…’

‘Fucking,’ Bull said, his voice deeper and more compelling than it had any right to be.

‘That, yes,’ Cullen said, his own voice breaking. ‘I have the oddest conversations with you.’

‘You mean the best conversations,’ Bull said, waggling his eyebrow.

A breath of laughter escaped, taking him by surprise. He nodded, ate some stew without really thinking, and tried to figure out what he was trying to say.

‘I’m not looking for- I need what happens in that room to be about the whipping,’ Cullen said, having to clear his throat twice. ‘Only that. Everything else is ancillary. To me. I know- I know I seem open to…I know that if you pushed for it, I’d-’

‘Open up like a flower?’ Bull said slyly.

Cullen choked and put his spoon down, then started laughing, because Bull was doing it too, and the conversation was utterly ridiculous. His cheeks were burning for more than one reason, and he shook his head, trying to collect his thoughts together.

‘You’ve been reading too much of Varric’s excuse for literature.’

‘I just like watching you squirm,’ Bull said, grinning wickedly.

That was its own source of heat, and Cullen thought that the room was beginning to feel warmer than usual. Even his hands tingled. He swallowed and Bull was still looking at him with that heat
that seemed friendly and predatory all at once. Then Bull went back to eating, like nothing at all had transpired.

‘So no fucking,’ Bull said around his food again. ‘No penetration, blowing your load, all of that?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, cheeks flaming. ‘Not in that room.’

‘Ah,’ Bull said, and Cullen would have been annoyed that Bull had jumped on that so fast, except he was sort of hoping…Bull might. ‘Let’s leave that for a bit. So, kissing for now, during those sessions is okay. If it comes up. The petting and touching I’ve been doing? The light stuff? That good too?’

Cullen nodded quickly, because it was embarrassing to admit how much he wanted that. How hard it was to find it at any other point in his life. It seemed like a relic of his childhood, to have people touch him with tenderness. One of those wistful, golden-edged dreams that no one told him he’d have to give up until it was gone.

‘And if you push for more, like rubbing up against me to try and get off, all that kind of stuff, I’ll just redirect.’

‘I’d appreciate that,’ Cullen said, ‘very much.’

‘So that’s easy then. Good. And one of my conditions changed too. I’d like to make it clear. You give as much control over to me as you safely and reasonably can. Even when it’s hard.’

Cullen just nodded again, tensing. Hadn’t he been thinking a few hours ago that he was going to end this? That he was just going to pull out? His chest felt tight, and he carefully put the other bowl back over the stew, because he couldn’t eat. After fiddling with that for a few seconds, he met Bull’s gaze, which was far more serious than it was before.

‘I know it’s hard,’ Bull said.

That just made things worse. Cullen resisted the urge to fold his arms. Bull had the ability to put him on the back foot in seconds. And he knew it was Bull’s choice. He made the previous stretch of conversation easier, offered humour, light-heartedness. Made this serious and uncomfortable. Cullen wasn’t nearly so adept at conversation that he could make it light-hearted himself. It was like being caught in a current he wasn’t sure how to navigate away from. It was the same with Meredith.

*No, not the same.*

What would Bull say if Cullen just called him out on it? Just said, ‘you’re doing this on purpose.’ But knowing Bull, he’d just admit it and keep doing it. It bothered him that Bull was so dead set on Cullen giving up more control. It didn’t seem an appropriate thing to ask of a Commander.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, like Cullen had been speaking the entire time. He even nodded, and then put his empty bowl down beside him. He leaned forwards, casual, forearms slung over his knees. ‘You interested in taking this further? Outside of that room? No sex during whipping. What about outside of it?’

‘Like…a relationship?’

‘Fuck no,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘Like friends who get together and fuck sometimes. Like, I dunno, release, or relief, or getting a chance to unwind a bit. Could be fun.’
Could it? Cullen had heard talk of casual fucking around him all his life. Relationships between Templars and mages were discouraged. Relationships between Templars and Templars were discouraged. Whatever evolved, tended to evolve in secrecy amongst mutual friends who knew they couldn’t really take it much further than furtive fumblings in the dark. Whatever he’d seen or heard gossip about, he tried to ignore. Well, except those few times when he’d reported his fellow colleagues, thinking he was doing the right thing.

Cullen could do it too, couldn’t he? Just because he was prone to infatuation – that wasn’t likely to happen in this case. They were two colleagues fighting a war. Bull had a reputation for engaging in casual rutting on a regular basis. Just because Cullen had daydreams about retiring after battle or war or conflict with someone he loved, didn’t mean he needed that now. They were daydreams. This was practical.

‘Can I think about it?’ Cullen said.

‘I hope you do,’ Bull said. ‘Better than saying what you think I want to hear.’

Cullen nodded slowly. Now that it was out in the open, his mouth was dry, his mind kept throwing him half-formed images of things he’d never done before, or things he’d only ever managed to do clumsily. But even those murky flashes were enough to send anticipation winding through him. But…what would it do to his reputation if it got out? How quickly could his image be shattered? He was sure it wouldn’t take much. Would that harm the Inquisition?

But he was already doing something that risked his reputation. He felt selfish and greedy for wanting more. It was bemusing, sometimes. Cassandra saw him as someone who lived an almost ascetic life. Whereas Cullen knew how grasping he could be for pain and touch and praise and lyrium. Somehow, he’d managed to convince her of a lie, pretending to be a person that didn’t exist. While almost every evening, he tried to convince himself he wouldn’t sell a limb for one more vial of blue.

‘You got a busy few weeks coming up?’ Bull said casually.

‘Yes and no,’ Cullen said. ‘I don’t imagine it will be any different to how it always is. The occasional catastrophe, everyone preparing for Corypheus.’

‘You miss going out with the troops?’ Bull said. ‘I get to go out with the Chargers a bit, blow off some steam. It’s better than the practice ring.’

‘It is,’ Cullen said. ‘I’ve been contemplating asking the Inquisitor if I might… Well, it may not come to anything at all.’

He was surprised to hear himself even bring it up. He’d been carefully avoiding thoughts of Samson for so long now, resenting the thick and poisonous tendrils that unfurled whenever he came close to the subject. Even brushing up against it made his hand curl over the hilt of his sword. Quickly, he hurried to think of a change of subject.

‘There’s also chance I’ll be roped into the Summerday event as a sponsor,’ Cullen said.

‘That’s something of an honour, from what I know?’

‘That’s one word for it.’

‘What word would you choose?’

‘None I’d say in polite company,’ Cullen said, and then smiled hesitantly when Bull laughed. Then
Cullen realised why he’d brought it up. There was a time when he knew exactly what he was going to say before he said it. But around Bull, it was getting harder to predict what his mind would do. Now that he knew, he was somewhat horrified. But not enough to stop himself from asking.

‘The thing is— Maker, I… Look, if you’re busy with the Chargers or anything else, I’ll understand. There’s a chance I’ll be able to pull out, I haven’t even said yes yet, but I know what Cassandra’s like when she wants to convince someone of something, and – I’m fully aware of how ridiculous this sounds – but it might be useful if I could…see you afterwards. If you’re amenable. I’ll understand if you’re not.’

‘That’s a lot of disclaimers,’ Bull said, lips quirking. ‘I dunno what I’ll have on then. But outside of any last minute missions or reconnaissance, I can actually – you know – keep a night free if you want. That’s not gonna do me any harm.’

‘I’m only saying that if something more interesting comes along, or you’re in the tavern and you forget because you’ve been drinking, or you—’

‘A lot of disclaimers,’ Bull said. ‘How much of a chore do you think this is for me? You think I don’t go back to my room after and beat off to it?’

‘I-I…’ Cullen stared.

‘Do you?’

‘Well yeah,’ Bull said, like Cullen wasn’t seeing something very obvious. ‘Hey, I don’t expect you to want that and I’m not interested in dumping that on you. But you look fucking hot making yourself take that.’

Cullen thought it was probably quite obvious he was reeling, and yet he couldn’t stop himself from just staring at Bull. It hadn’t occurred to him- He’d just thought Bull had gone back to his rooms and forgotten all about it. Or that he’d been faintly annoyed that he had to supply all the equipment, and the food, and the water, and the aftercare, and everything else, and spent the time afterwards glad to have his time back to himself.

It was also disarmingly arousing, because it just hadn’t occurred to him and his body was taken by surprise. He leaned back in his chair and then hissed, because it was too soon for that. Far too soon. He’d need at least another two days before that would be comfortable. He lurched forwards and looked down at his table.

‘I’d say I just overshared,’ Bull said, laughing, ‘but given how everything went last night… That last guy. He didn’t like it?’

‘No, he did,’ Cullen said, clearing his throat even as his shoulders were still freshly burning. He wrung his hands underneath the table. ‘He- He would have enjoyed it more I think, were it not for my position at the time.’

‘Yeah, well, not only Knight-Commander, but also actually trying to be in charge of every fucking thing. Doesn’t make it easy.’

‘No…’ Cullen said, frowning. The memory of it twisted hard and unpleasantly inside of him. Searidge could have been a good friend, if he’d not ruined it. Cullen didn’t even know if he was still in Kirkwall. ‘I didn’t want it to be about sex. I don’t think he did either. It was a long time ago.’

It wasn’t that long ago. But Kirkwall, like Kinloch, seemed to exist in its own timeframe, its own realm. They were different lifetimes. There was pre-Kinloch, then Kinloch, then…a messy time he
hardly remembered, then Kirkwall, and now he was living post-Kirkwall. He somewhat hoped it would be the last interminable lifetime he’d have to live through.

‘The first time,’ Bull said abruptly. ‘What happened? After he hit you with the cat? He try and look after you?’

‘What?’ Cullen said, looking up in confusion. ‘No.’

‘Because you’d told him not to?’ Bull said, his eyes narrowing.

‘No,’ Cullen said, frowning. ‘I- I believe he said ‘you’re done,’ and I went back to my room. He didn’t start… It was later- Later in the arrangement. He didn’t like inflicting the degree of pain that I wanted. I wasn’t always healed when I saw him again. He didn’t like it.’

‘Soldiers are meant to be unmarked and healed before they present to City Guard for discipline, right?’ Bull said.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said.

‘So he didn’t really want to make sure you were okay afterwards. He just didn’t want to see actual signs of what he’d done.’

‘No,’ Cullen said, shaking his head in irritation. ‘It’s not that simple.’

‘I’m not saying it was simple,’ Bull said, staring at him. ‘But as far as first experiences go with this sort of thing, it could’ve gone better.’

‘You are, of course, correct,’ Cullen said, resisting the urge to grind his teeth together. ‘I could have simply not been the kind of person to want something so perverse, and not forced someone else into an arrangement that didn’t suit him.’

‘So you wear like…pretty much one hundred percent of why that didn’t go so great?’ Bull said, and then pursed his lips. ‘Interesting.’

‘I don’t need you to be patronising to make a point,’ Cullen snapped. ‘If you want to make a point, then make it.’

‘I think you know what point I’m making. You just don’t wanna hear it.’

‘I didn’t want it,’ Cullen said. ‘If he’d offered, I would have shot him down. I did. Just because you have a way of doing things, doesn’t mean it’s everyone’s way, or that everyone else’s way is wrong.’

‘That’s a fair statement,’ Bull said, nodding in agreement. ‘I just don’t think it’s completely on you. Which is another fair statement. I dunno if you know this, but it’s possible to y’know, take some responsibility while not taking on all of it. It’s like sharing a really shitty pie. You can actually cut it up and give some of the slices to other people.’

Cullen was trying to wrap his head around that analogy, when Bull continued.

‘You think we got a chance against Corypheus?’

The complete turnabout had Cullen needing a moment to mentally adjust. Then he opened his mouth in the process of sharing the same generic support he shared with everyone. Then he closed it again.
‘Yeah,’ Bull grumbled. ‘Me too. I mean I think we got a chance.’

‘Stranger things have happened,’ Cullen said quietly. ‘In the meantime we’ll keep trying to chip away at his support structure, see if we can’t stop the flow of red lyrium to him and his Templars.’

‘Must burn, to know he’s gotten so many of them.’

‘It turns out we’re rather susceptible to corruption,’ Cullen said blackly, staring at the inkpot again, ‘with or without red lyrium.’

A few more seconds passed and then Cullen heard the sentence he’d said played back to him in his mind. His throat felt dry. Of all the things to have actually said aloud. He couldn’t even blame it on being foggy with pain and whatever state had overcome him the night before. He risked a glance at Bull, who was making that steady, constant eye contact. It reminded him of predators, and he thought it would frighten him. Instead, there was just that constant background wariness, and an anticipation he didn’t really understand.

‘What I’m really looking forward to,’ Bull said, ‘is just getting to kick so much ass. Feels like it’s actually doing something which – believe me – not how it felt on Seheron.’

‘I can’t imagine,’ Cullen said, frowning as he thought about it. He’d heard accounts of Seheron, many times. All he knew was that staying too long on the island tended to do terrible things to those who were battling there. Bull had never brought it up in his company before, and Cullen wanted to pry him open, wanted to dig his fingers in and see what was beneath. He knew from the Inquisitor that Bull hadn’t escaped unscathed either.

But Bull was far better at playing the truth close to the chest than Cullen was. And Cullen knew his attempts would only be clumsy, and perhaps not well-received. But…it might not be impossible one day. If they played chess, if they had more opportunities to chat.

‘You gonna finish that stew?’ Bull said, lips quirking.

‘Yes, eventually,’ Cullen said, looking over at it. He placed his hand on the upturned bowl protecting the food, and felt almost none of the warmth from before. ‘I think I’m used to it cold now.’

‘Should get some bread buns for it then, dig a hole out with your fingers, put the stew inside. Tastes incredible.’

‘Similar to what you were eating in the kitchens?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, eye gleaming. ‘Though nothing here really matches. For a start, you don’t have the qalaba, and you don’t have the fire pits needed to slowly roast the stuff in its own juices. Or the right spices to add. The bread’s…well that comes closer at least. Even though it’s not the same, it’s still good.’

‘I don’t imagine it comes close, from the way you’re making it sound. How do you make them here?’

‘Ah, I don’t really, I just buttered up one of the kitchen staff and she and I talk food sometimes. She gets in spices for me, I bring back bits and pieces from her when I go out with the boss or the Chargers.’

Bull smiled wistfully. Cullen returned the smile without really thinking about it, and then had a moment of pause as Bull kept talking about the spices that couldn’t be found outside of his
homeland. It was nice, talking like this. It felt like friendship, which was something Bull said they had together.

But was this friendship? Or aftercare? Was it calculated to put Cullen at ease? Or was it real?

It couldn’t be both?

It was too tiring to monitor. Not with the Bull’s eye gleaming with enthusiasm. Or the way his hands started to move as he described how they’d all help herd the qalaba into the right paddocks for communal feasts. Cullen wanted to be a part of it, wanted to feel like he was in the room instead of stuck in his mind. He subtly flexed his shoulders to try and ground himself with that bruising ache of pain and ground himself down in his office, feeling the chair beneath his weight, the cool clamminess of his hands, the bass rumble of Bull’s voice as he talked and then the staccato chop of laughter that followed.

It was good. Far more nourishing than any stew. It wasn’t long before he forgot about the jagged edges in his own mind, and joined in with stories of Ferelden delicacies from his own childhood.
The Best Way to Learn

Chapter Notes

There’s a reference at the beginning of this chapter to *moments of party dialogue between Solas and Bull* if you have them in your party. It’s clear the Qun are familiar with chess from this exchange, and I started thinking about how Qun rules might be different than standardised chess rules. I found that fascinating, and have spent quite a few weeks thinking about what Qun rules might look like on a chessboard.

Also I wrote three different versions of these two playing chess, lol, and I’m still not sure I picked the right one. (I hope you all have a good holiday period!)

Cullen had attempted to embrace something that looked like open-mindedness when he’d joined the Inquisition. Maker knew he’d been trying it ever since he’d realised that rebuilding Kirkwall would mean more than rebuilding the city, but also reworking the annals of his own mind.

To that end, he’d gained a vague idea of how chess was played under the Qun through observation and hearing others talk, and when he and Bull sat down together to play their first chess game, he watched to see how Bull might play. Qun rules? Or Trade?

When it became clear that Bull was moving the pieces in accordance with the rules of the Qun, Cullen mentally adjusted as best as he could and tried to do the same. Bull’s forehead had furrowed, and then he’d leaned forwards on Cullen’s fourth move, and then he’d caught the expression on Cullen’s face and his eye widened just a little and he started laughing.

*There*, Cullen thought, *that’s what it looks like when he’s surprised. At least, that’s how it looks right now.*

‘Solas tell you?’ Bull said, still laughing.

‘Solas?’ Cullen said, confused. ‘These are the rules of the Qun, aren’t they? They’re the rules you’re playing by?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, grinning at him. ‘You want to do it properly?’

‘You played chess with Solas?’ Cullen said, trying to imagine it.

‘I play when I’m invited. Solas suggested it in the field. I said sure. I think he was sussing me out. Him winning made him feel a lot better about whatever he was trying to figure out for himself. Or that’s how he made it seem anyway. He’s a crafty little shit, that one.’

Cullen resisted the urge to squint at Bull in turn. Solas wasn’t the only ‘crafty little shit’ within Skyhold’s walls, though he was one of the more enigmatic ones.

‘So how do we play properly?’ Cullen asked. ‘I was given to understand that one endeavours to lose as few pieces as possible, even at the cost of losing the King or Queen? That every piece has the same value, so there’s no…check or checkmate?’
‘Sort of,’ Bull said, picking up the large thirty minute hourglass left on the stone sill of the low wall next to them and hefting it thoughtfully. ‘Here, it won’t take long. The best way to learn a game is to play and fuck up as you go.’

It turned out that Cullen wasn’t that far off. Chess under the Qun meant playing to a timer. The person at the end with the most pieces left – whether high-ranking or not – was the winner. There was an odd rule where a player had to have sacrificed at least one piece in order to qualify as winner and when Cullen queried it, Bull nodded and pointed to their board.

‘See, if you tell people that they have to save as many of their countryfolk as possible, they play a game where both people are passive defenders. But chess is a game of war, something has to be lost, there needs be something worth fighting for. If you have all your players on the field, but hide the entire time like a coward, then you’ve won shit. You’ve not stood your ground. And the enemy is going to think you don’t know how to make a stand. So you preserve as much of the team as you can, but you have to lose someone.’

It made sense, because Cullen’s first strategy had been to try and make as few moves as possible, until Bull pointed out that he’d have to lose someone. That was when Cullen also realised that he could avoid trying to take one of Bull’s pieces, to make him lose within the timeframe, and when Bull noticed he was doing that, his eye had lit up with something that could have been pride.

‘It won’t work,’ Bull said, neatly taking one of Cullen’s pawns. ‘I think every imekari who learns chess tries it in the beginning though.’

‘Oh, so it’s a child’s gambit,’ Cullen said, shaking his head. ‘Here I thought I’d been doing well.’

‘You are,’ Bull said, looking up at him, something earnest on his face despite the smile. Cullen’s heart quickened its pace. ‘You gotta make the mistakes to get past them. You know how many other people here see that I have a different way of playing, and just ignore it? They just think I’m some stupid oxman, which – let’s face it – I don’t give a shit about that. But none of them have realised that if I’m playing by a different set of rules, they can learn them.’

‘I wonder, can you play by our rules?’ Cullen said, smirking.

‘I dunno,’ Bull said, winking at him – which looked absurd and endearing all at once. ‘How ‘bout after this round, we find out?’

Bull won the first round handily. Cullen appreciated that Bull not only explained where Cullen’s flaws in judgement were – mostly that he still invested too much status into his King and unconsciously tried to protect him more than was necessary – but quietly and comprehensively explained the reasoning behind all of his movements. It was the first time Cullen had heard him discuss war strategy so clearly, even if it was through the language of the game. Bull gave him a glimpse into the person he’d once been on Seheron; a clever and ruthless strategist who would go to any lengths to preserve as much of his team as possible.

But it was during their second game that Cullen found himself holding his breath at times, more challenged than he’d been in months. Most people were poor players against him, and he gave away games more often than not to ensure they’d keep playing with him – given it was one of his few options for genuine relaxation. Against Bull, he had at first played with the intention of leaving some obvious openings to give Bull a chance, and then realised that he should have been playing his best from the beginning.

Cullen won, but Bull made him work for it, and in the end they’d both abandoned small talk and focused on the game until its end.
‘You gotta know the enemy’s strategies too,’ Bull said simply at the end, picking up the tower piece and spinning it in his fingers. The piece looked tiny in his hand. ‘It’s not like they’re gonna play by your rules, after all.’

A merchant walked past them both, barely giving them a glance. Cullen tensed a little, but overall, he wasn’t too worried. Cullen played chess with many, and no one had assumed – at least not yet – that he was doing anything untoward with them in his spare time.

It made him think about Bull’s offer. That they get together sometimes and experience other forms of intimacy. Cullen was glad he’d bought time to think about it. His first response was to reject the offer out of hand. He’d do nothing at all if it meant risking those flogging sessions. To him, preserving that was paramount, and anything else was curious, interesting; but not crucial.

With time to think about it, he couldn’t help but want more. Still, it was embarrassing to think of how little experience he’d had in contrast with Bull’s vast well of it. He’d not had many opportunities to see what the big deal about sex was, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t want to know more. He wanted to see what it might be like to know Bull like that, and at least he could trust Bull not to overcomplicate matters like he always did.

When Cullen focused again on Bull, he frowned. Bull was looking at the tower in his fingers, the corners of his mouth taut, his forehead furrowed. He studied it like it meant something, and Cullen had seen that expression on soldier’s faces before.

‘It reminds you of something?’ Cullen said.

Bull put the piece down and the smile he gave was crooked.

‘Ah, well, just thinking about how you can never really go home again once you’ve left it. A piece of shit cliché, but still true.’

‘You- you learned to play as a… as an imekari? Yes? You miss it?’

There was a moment where Cullen thought Bull was going to respond, going to share something meaningful. Then, Bull’s expression shuttered and Cullen felt a sting of self-reproach. He couldn’t do it the way Bull could. Couldn’t lure people into talking about personal matters. It had always been that way. But, reluctant to let it go, Cullen looked down at the chessboard and bit the inside of his lower lip.

‘I’m not sure how I’d feel,’ Cullen volunteered, ‘living amongst people, none of whom knew the rules I play by, or who seemed inclined to learn.’

He refused to look up. Because he didn’t want to see that expression that would mean ‘drop it.’ If Bull was silent, if he changed the subject, Cullen would just let that happen. But he wasn’t sure he could stomach the look that would tell him to cut it out, when Bull rifled through him like he was a stack of loose papers.

The silence went on long enough that Cullen thought he’d have to look up anyway. Prepared himself to smile and say ‘good game’ and see whether Bull might play chess with him again.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said finally. ‘Well, Krem knows. Though he’s not what you’d call a chess aficionado.’ Bull laughed, and Cullen risked looking up. Bull wasn’t even looking at him, staring into the herb garden instead. ‘And you’re learning.’

‘It’s not the same,’ Cullen said, staring at him.
‘Nope,’ Bull said, turning back to him. ‘Asit tal-eb, right?’

Cullen wanted to ask him how much of it was a ruse. Wanted to ask if Bull was making himself seem more vulnerable on purpose. He wanted to ask what it felt like to say those words and be Tal-Vashoth. What it might be like to know your kin had turned against you so abruptly, which made Cullen feel like they weren’t really kin at all, if they could cast him out like that. For saving people he cared for.

Bull’s lips eventually lifted in a half-smile, his head tilted. He was studying Cullen as openly as Cullen was studying him, and at that realisation he flushed and blinked down to look at the chessboard again.

‘You can ask me stuff,’ Bull said. ‘Whatever you like. I’m an open book, hasn’t the Boss told you that?’

Cullen huffed a laugh. ‘Obviously. But an open book with invisible ink written between the lines, I think.’

‘Come on,’ Bull said, grinning. ‘I’m not that smart.’

‘Oh please,’ Cullen said, and then saw a light in Bull’s eye and realised that Bull knew. He knew that Cullen was trying to read between those lines. He knew and though he was trying to redirect, it was in jest.

‘You can ask me stuff,’ Bull said again. ‘No law against questions, is there?’

Cullen opened his mouth for the easy reply that never came. Instead old words echoed in his mind. Lines that he’d been made to memorise, that he repeated to himself like a mantra.

*The Maker knows that you must not delve deeper, though you may wish to show compassion and care. Question only to understand your charges and seek misdeeds. Questioning for pleasure or to reinforce bonds is the first sign the Templar is losing their way. Remember, a forged bond is not only dangerous for the Templar and the Mage, but it is a cruel thing to inflict upon a charge.*

‘I’m not famous for my tact,’ Cullen said, trying to shake the words free.

‘Sure,’ Bull said. ‘I bet it makes Josephine shake just to think about dragging you to where the la-di-da people are. I don’t give a shit about that.’

‘I don’t wish to offend,’ Cullen said.

‘I don’t offend easy,’ Bull said, shrugging. ‘You might not get the answer you want, but hey, I’m pretty sure you do that to me too. Have you seen the size of me? A handful of questions aren’t gonna knock me over.’

Cullen shook his head and felt easier about the situation and put on the spot at the same time. Bull had a gift, when it came to that.

‘You wanna play again?’ Bull said. ‘Trade or Qun?’

‘Your way,’ Cullen said, watching as Bull reached for the hourglass. ‘It’s different, and I think it might just come in handy when I’m playing against others.’

‘Sneaky, I like it,’ Bull said, and turned the hourglass, making the first move only seconds later. With that, another game was in play, and Bull led them towards small-talk instead. Cullen was
grateful. He was glad to be boldly told that his clumsy forays into getting to know Bull better weren’t unwelcome, but he wasn’t sure what else he wanted to ask, the words of the Templar Order rattling around inside his head.

*Cullen didn’t have a chance to see Bull for one of their ‘sessions’ before Summerday. Mother Giselle and Cassandra together had worn him down – cornering him in his office – and Cassandra had stayed behind to remind him that if he wasn’t going to remove the Templar insignia from his armour and clothing, then he’d best get used to being the stand-in Knight-Commander when they needed one.

‘Replacement armour isn’t cheap,’ Cullen had said, staring at her.

‘Don’t give me that,’ Cassandra had said in response, rolling her eyes. ‘Do you think it would not be prioritised in an instant, if you put in a request with the Inquisitor and Harriott? You don’t get it both ways, Cullen, I am sorry. You cannot wear the mark of the Templar Order and refuse it at the same time. At least, not for Summerday. The initiates on the Warrior path will expect you.’

‘I believe I said I’d do it, didn’t I?’ Cullen said, scowling. ‘I’m not going to become happy about it, just because you’ve decided to bring the Templar Order into it.’

Cassandra looked displeased then, opened her mouth and then seemed to think the better of whatever she’d been about to say. Finally, she walked over to one of the dummies and removed one of the knives, studying the blade. She looked at him sidelong.

‘I wish you wouldn’t hate it so much,’ she said. ‘Being a Templar. You did good work in the Gallows. When I found you—’

‘No,’ Cullen said, staring at her. ‘Not that again.’

‘It will always be a part of you,’ she said.

‘I’m aware,’ Cullen said sharply.

How could he not be? How could he not be aware when he saw the lyrium kits? When he still had his own stupid kit – empty of a lyrium vial but otherwise intact – in his very office, not less than two feet away from him? When some of the new Templars called him Knight-Commander instead of Commander? When the words he turned to again and again to get him through the worst evenings, were sometimes the very words that had damned him in the first place?

‘No order is without its complications,’ Cassandra said. ‘Without its corruptions. That doesn’t mean it is…it is not an evil thing, Cullen.’

‘I am not a child for you to remonstrate with,’ Cullen said, colder than normal. Cassandra grimaced, but they’d never seen eye to eye on this issue, even if she was at least sensitive over matters relating to lyrium. ‘I am glad, Cassandra, that you still find something meaningful in being a Seeker. But I’d thank you not to convince me that my place is with the Templar Order.’

‘You are right,’ Cassandra conceded. ‘I only wish that you would not be so grieved about Summerday. It’s a sacred day no one really enjoys, but it’s still a holy day. It still means something.’

But even as she spoke, she slid the knife back into the dummy where she’d removed it. She sighed. Cullen knew that she meant well, she – more than most – meant well. But she was like that, so
untouched by corruption. Never one to follow for the sake of following. Never one to just blindly accept a leader’s words because the leader had been kind to them or promoted them or praised them. She couldn’t understand, because she would never be touched by the same character flaws that riddled Cullen’s being.

‘I’ll stay for a couple of drinks afterwards,’ Cullen said, as something of a peace offering. ‘You can tell me how many wanted to walk the path of the Seeker.’

‘Certainly, all two of them, I’m sure,’ Cassandra said, rolling her eyes. But her expression softened and she nodded her head to Cullen, and Cullen returned the gesture, before she turned and walked out of his office.

*

The sponsors of Summerday were not a part of the earlier procession of those who were in the process of being initiated into adulthood. Instead, he, along with Vivienne, Cassandra and others, each occupied their own small white tent scattered throughout the herb garden. Small votive candles lit each path – to the Warrior-Templar, the Seeker, the Circle Mage, the Merchant and so on – and the whole of Skyhold had seemed to need the ceremony of it, many going out of their way to create decorations; flower and paper garlands, newly made candles carved with charms of good fortune. Bonfires contained in rings of stone had been lit, dried herbs tossed upon them to create a purifying smoke that smelled of elfroot and a musty sweetness.

In the late hours of the evening – past midnight – the initiates were educated as to their responsibilities of duty and self-care as adults, and then asked to find their paths in life. They would walk, surrounded by tiny glowing lights, until they reached the relevant white tent, and there be blessed and sent along to Mother Giselle to see the ritual to completion.

Cullen had seen three youths so far. Three boys, two of them the right age, and one too old, a quiet lad who had been sundered from his village twice before he could have a proper Summerday. Cullen had gone through the motions, knowing the words he was supposed to say, trying to stay divorced from the meaning of it. His hands were cold. He wore winter gear – Cassandra was right, despite it being early summer, it was cold – and armour, kept his hands buried in his cloak and thought that if he was a proper Templar, he would have taken an extra dose of lyrium on this day to make sure that his sense of connection to the Maker was more profound than usual.

About half an hour passed in relative silence. He could hear the wind soughing through the leaves of the tree branches. Could smell the astringent aromas of crushed elfroot and other herbs. Thought of the chessboard that he and Bull had sat at – only a few metres away.

Then he heard quiet, hesitant footsteps nearby and withdrew his hands from his cloak. Surely the night wouldn’t drag on that much longer? There weren’t that many young refugees within the bounds of Skyhold, and many of them would be seeking to become merchants and farmers. Mother Giselle had told him to expect four or five initiates at most.

The flap of the white tent opened and Cullen blinked when he saw Betsan, the runner and messenger he often thought about talking to. She didn’t make eye contact, staring at his boots instead. For a few seconds, he forgot the words he was supposed to say. The same words that he’d been saying to every initiate that had found him.

But then she looked up at him, eyes flashing in appeal.

‘I- Are you ready to step onto the path of the Maker,’ Cullen said, ‘discarding your childhood and assuming the mantle of adulthood?’
'I am,’ she said. Her voice was firm. It was the first time she’d ever dropped a formal address when talking to him.

Surely she was too old. But then there were quite a few in the group who were really too old for a Summerday. Either they wanted a second one, or the war had been so bad for so long, they’d really just had no chance at all.

‘Which mantle do you wish to wear?’

‘The Warrior’s,’ she said formally. Then she looked askance. ‘The Templar’s.’

It was far colder in the tent than it needed to be, even with the small bonfires everywhere. Like the lad before, she was too old, though it wasn’t enough of a reason to turn her away, but the idea of seeing her in the Templar insignia that he was wearing was an airless panic in his lungs.

He could tell her no. If this was an official Summerday celebration in a small village, he’d understand all the children well enough and be given the opportunity to tell them to choose a different path. Here, he only knew her by her excellent skills as a messenger and the way she stared at his books. If he’d ever thought to actually talk to her, perhaps he’d know what she wanted the books for, perhaps he could suggest that she change her path, become a scholar.

‘You can be a warrior without being a Templar,’ he said.

What in the name of Andraste are you doing?

‘Do you think I can’t?’ she said, her voice hard. ‘I can.’

His mind was racing, touching different memories, but returning constantly to the first time he’d been given the lyrium. That profound connection to the world around him that he’d never had before except in those seconds of seeing a perfect sunset, or feeling a spring breeze on his skin during the weight of summer. And lyrium had delivered that sensation and loaded it tenfold into the seconds and minutes that followed. With it, a purity and strength, a single-minded focus. Maker, he missed it.

She, like every other Templar, would love it. Would find purpose. At least for a while.

He clenched his jaw, forced himself to get it together. Shifted his shoulders even though there was no pain to ground him. This wasn’t about him. He had one role, one function. He could make all the appeals he wanted to her later.

Besides, she was looking at him with such a naked desperation in her brown eyes. Her thin, ragged black hair had been combed and styled, but it was obvious that even with holding a decent position within Skyhold that paid a stipend, she needed something more. He knew that expression, saw it every time she looked at his books.

‘State your three reasons for choosing the Warrior’s path,’ he made himself say. ‘So it may choose you in turn.’

He couldn’t remember the three reasons he’d given. For years he’d hung onto them, repeated them to himself to stay focused, carried them with him for sentimental reasons. Then one day the lyrium had simply slipped the reasons away, and no one could recall them, as he’d only shared them with his sponsor and no others.

He barely heard the three reasons she gave. But they were earnest, and they sounded true. He only had one job, and this was a farce of a Summerday anyway. None of them knew the children well
enough to be administering as sponsors.

‘I accept your reasons,’ Cullen said formally, ‘and in the name of the Maker, bless you, that you may go forward on your Warrior’s path from this day hence.’

He waited for her to bow, waited for her to leave, but she stood in front of him, twisting her hands with their bitten fingernails together.

‘You really think I can’t do it?’ she said.

‘Betsan,’ Cullen said, ‘you’re accepted onto your path, isn’t that what you wanted?’

‘Do you think I can’t do it?’ she said, and then he saw a telltale quiver in her bottom lip and found himself flushing in embarrassment on her behalf.

‘N-no,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘It’s not that, Betsan. I wish you’d brought it up in my office, I had not expected to see you this evening.’

*I wish you’d brought it up so I could have talked you out of it.*

‘But you’re a very hard worker, and we’ll be sorry to lose you as a messenger.’

‘I want to fight for the Inquisition,’ she said, eyes gleaming.

He couldn’t tell her that she was too young; because he’d been younger. He couldn’t tell her that it was best she stay within the walls, when he ached to be beyond them with his sword in hand and fighting in the frontlines instead of always moving soldiers around like pieces on a chessboard. He couldn’t tell her that lyrium would poison her mind, because not every Templar ended up on the path he did.

‘And so you will,’ he said, smiling at her, knowing he was wearing the expression of the confident Commander. The one he’d cultivated years ago. The one that promised that everything would work out, if one showed the determination and will to make it so. ‘Go on now.’

She bowed deeply, offered him a wary smile, and walked eagerly out of the tent. No more hesitation in her steps.

He waited several minutes and then blew out a hard breath, his chest aching so badly that he pushed a fist to the breastplate he wore. He mastered himself as best as he could, but his thoughts were fraying, and his concentration was withering away. The symptoms were getting worse and the stress wasn’t helping matters. But what could he do? He’d committed to it now.

He remembered a Summerday spent in Kirkwall. Meredith had gone down in her role as Knight-Commander, and the Templars had treated it as something like a very short holiday. Samson had been his roommate at the time and had filched a bottle of brandy. The alcohol had been so strong Cullen only remembered tasting the flavour of elderberries when he’d vomited it up again six hours later, Samson thumping his back and telling him to ‘man up’ and swearing up a slurred drunken storm complaining – as he so often did – that the Templars weren’t ever given enough lyrium for the job they needed to do.

And now Samson was out there somewhere, farming red lyrium and working for Corypheus, and Cullen was a broken Knight-Commander in charge of a parody of a Summerday for refugees.

He pressed cold fingers to his forehead. He needed to keep it together. Just for another couple of hours. It wouldn’t do to become maudlin before he shared drinks with Cassandra.
No other initiate visited him for the rest of the evening, and instead he worked through old breathing exercises, and tried not to think about how the tent managed to remind him of a cage. Not much, just enough.

*

Cassandra didn’t show up with brandy, thankfully, but wine. Finer stuff than was warranted, given he couldn’t really taste the nuances of the flavour. He knew enough to pretend to savour it, and to admire the label.

She didn’t seem particularly happy either, but she wasn’t forthcoming as to why, and together they sat at his table in his office and drank quietly as the sun rose around Skyhold and newly-blessed adults celebrated in the gardens.

They shared some private, unspoken misery – and it wasn’t the first time. Cullen wasn’t sure why, nor exactly when it had started. He suspected that he was the person she came to when she had doubts. When she lost her way and wasn’t yet in the position where she’d pray to Andraste, but was past the point of convincing herself it would be fine.

In amongst the tumult of thoughts and dizziness, he wondered what Bull was doing. He’d asked Bull to set aside the night following, but he wanted to visit him now. It frustrated him, because they’d only spent time with each other less than a handful of times and he was already so needful, already embarrassing himself. Bull could pretend it was fine, but Cullen knew it wasn’t. It had set him on a dangerous path in the past.

But it didn’t stop him from wanting it.

Cassandra broke the silence, clearing her throat. ‘I shudder to think what this Inquisition would look like, without you here. Not only leading our soldiers, but…personally. It matters that you’re here. Most drinking companions want to talk.’

‘To silent drinking companions,’ Cullen said, raising the goblet, hating that it shook a little, even now.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ she said.

They clinked the metal together, and sipped.

‘And you know the Inquisition would be fine, Cassandra,’ Cullen said, setting the goblet down and pressing his hands to the underside of his table, feeling them quiver even braced against the wood. ‘You would have found someone else. You have a good eye for what the Inquisition needs. You’re a Seeker in more ways than one.’

‘No, don’t do that,’ Cassandra said, pulling a face at him. ‘Don’t let this become both of us talking about how the Inquisition wouldn’t work without the other.’

‘You started it.’

‘Maker preserve us, I did,’ she said, laughing softly. ‘You know better than to continue it.’

‘I’m afraid that’s not true at all,’ Cullen said, holding back a smile.

‘So much for silent drinking companions,’ she said, topping up her goblet and his too, even though he’d not drunk much at all. ‘I’m just glad Summerday’s over. Duty’s a curse at times.’
‘I’ll toast to that too,’ Cullen said, picking up his goblet and knocking it against hers. ‘Truer words and all.’

‘Indeed,’ she said, taking a longer drink than before, closing her eyes as they slipped back into silence once more.
Cullen's first instinct was to blame feeling so terribly out of sorts on his sessions with Bull, since he’d not had nearly enough to drink with Cassandra to warrant a hangover that felt like this. Besides, those sessions were the most significant thing that had changed in his life. So when he woke the morning after Summerday, he was tempted to send a messenger to Bull calling off the evening.

He sat with his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees, and had enough time to realise he was going to throw up, but not nearly enough time to get down his ladder and out of his tower fast enough. He had a bucket in the room specifically for these moments, but he felt like he’d always lost some personal battle when he had to use it.

With the taste of bile thick in his mouth, he continued to dry retch until he thought his stomach would turn inside out and fall out of his throat just as the floor seemed to slip right out from beneath him.

But his nightmares hadn’t been about Bull or the sessions. They’d been about Kinloch, and then they’d been about Samson.

It wasn’t the first time he’d had the dream and likely wouldn’t be the last, either. He’d stood upon the small jetty on the lake, his lake. The one he hadn’t seen since he’d left to become a Templar. There, he listened to the gently lapping water, watched the lily pads and the undulating rise and fall of the fog. Slowly, he realised the water was changing colour. Instead of its steel grey-blue, it reddened, at first giving the appearance of blood swirling beneath the waves, and then it turned brighter, almost crystalline.

‘Cullen!’ Samson shouted. Cullen looked up, saw Samson standing up to his waist in the scarlet water and looking so joyful it was contagious. Cullen smiled. Samson scooped water into his hands and then poured it over his face, fingers cupped. ‘The water’s fine! Don’t just stand there like a slack-jawed lout! Come in! Come in! The water’s fucking lovely.’
Cullen took a step towards the water, thinking he should be more disturbed about the blood, except that he knew it wasn’t blood. He could hear it singing to him, melodic and rich. It called to him, as though he was the harmony it needed to complete its song. It lulled him, made him realise that perfection was just a few steps away.

He hesitated. Looked down at what he was wearing.

‘I can’t,’ Cullen called back, hating that he couldn’t. ‘I’ll drown.’

He gestured to himself, at his outsized armour and his cloak and his clothing weighing far more than it should – and it was heavy enough as it was. Samson scooped up more of the water and tiny glittering red stars fell out of his hands. No, not stars – crystals. A cold shiver bolted down Cullen’s back. The sun disappeared behind clouds. The world tilted. Cullen stared at the lake as the shadows lengthened and whispered.

‘Come on then!’ Samson called. ‘Take it off! You don’t need it! What’s that costume ever done for you anyway? Look at this bleedin’ stuff, isn’t it beautiful?’

Long red crystals growing out of the lake, singing louder, chiming like incessant bells. Samson seemed not to notice when they grew from his palms and split his shoulders, when they crept along his flesh. The lily pads turned into disks of crimson. Cullen’s stomach turned, but the singing itself promised a pure peace, so he took a step, another step. Just one more small step and he’d be off the jetty, falling into it. A surrender so profound. It wasn’t even about the power it promised anymore. He wanted to feel so connected to something that he didn’t have to think about himself ever again. He could erase every memory in a moment, fall into bliss.

‘That’s it,’ Samson said, walking closer, his eyes glowing like a monster’s. ‘You won’t drown. Stop being so scared of your own fucking shadow all the time and just embrace it. It’s all around you anyway, you think you can escape?’

His tone went from cajoling to sinister in seconds. The jetty cracked and split, riddled and rotted through with red lyrium.

No time to cry for help, to get himself away from the danger. Cullen fell, shouting, plunged into the red. Then woke with a start, his heart racing so hard he thought it might split his chest.

Now, he pushed the bucket away and was glad someone would be up to clean it around noon. At least they were discreet. It was the fourth or fifth time he’d had the dream. It hardly changed. Ever since they’d discovered Samson was leading the Red Templars, his mind had given him that.

His schedule wasn’t fixed to a strict routine, so no one came to find him by ten bells or eleven bells. No war table meetings today, and only two short meetings scheduled for the afternoon, because he’d suspected that Summerday might trigger an episode. At least he could stay curled up on his bed, chastising himself for not getting up and getting a start on the day’s tasks, shivering so hard that his joints and muscles ached.

The urge to cancel seeing Bull dissipated. If anything, he wanted it more. Trying to blame his current state on those sessions was useless. But he couldn’t imagine being fit enough to be flogged to heavy bruising by the evening. Still, he’d make himself weather it. It would be worth it. Even if the idea of pain on top of what he was already experiencing was – at least today – something that made him cringe, he would…he’d get to see Bull, he’d have some moments to disappear into something that wasn’t lyrium. Even if he couldn’t trust it, even if his need to give himself away to something greater was dangerous, he could…he could…
Another wave of tremors, these more violent than the last, and he burrowed deeper into his blankets and felt the chill more acutely than usual. His hands felt like ice. When he bent his fingers, he couldn’t feel them beyond a stiff, rusty pain.

The first time this had happened to him, he’d thought he was dying. It was supposed to scare him, and instead he hadn’t even looked for assistance. He’d balled up on his bed and waited for the shivering dizziness and the shortness of breath to simply take him. The next day, when he woke feeling like his organs were bruised, like his brain was only tenuously secured in his skull, he’d been relieved it was over, and disappointed it wasn’t over.

Now he knew that once an episode clawed its way into him like this, there was little more he could do than wait for the worst to pass. Cassandra knew. Leliana knew. The Inquisitor, well…she’d seen signs, she knew enough. There may have been others who knew of the episodes, but most would put them down to stress or migraines or even battle sickness, and their thoughts thankfully didn’t go to lyrium and how wanting it clawed at him, how not having it crushed his will. Sometimes he wondered if it was a little of the battle sickness as well. But it wasn’t as though he had many other Templars who were quitting lyrium to compare himself to. Most that stopped, were forced because they were ejected from the Order, and like as not, illegal lyrium was possible to find.

His gut heaved again, but there was nothing to bring up except sour saliva, which he absently swallowed back down. He was covered in a cold sweat. He knew enough to know that if he tried to force himself to work through this, he’d be sick for days. But if he gave himself a few hours now to be pathetic and miserable, he’d get through the episode faster.

At least he was too weak to go down to the Templars and beg for lyrium, because that was almost certainly what he’d be doing otherwise.

He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his face into the damp sheets, waiting it out, reciting broken pieces of prayer when he had the will to do so.

*  

‘You look like shit,’ Bull said that evening, sitting in his chair by the table in the storage room, a sack of equipment by his feet. ‘You up to this?’

Cullen felt Bull’s assessment of how he looked was probably accurate. Even with bathing and ablutions, even with tentatively eating some bread and salt beef, he still looked gaunt. His nerves felt rubbed raw. He was no more able to bear pain now than hours earlier. Today was not the kind of day where he’d ground himself by rolling bruised shoulders. But Bull didn’t need to know that.

‘I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t,’ Cullen said. Which wasn’t a lie, because he was definitely up to this. Under the list of difficult things he’d weathered over the past few years, this wasn’t even in the top hundred. But letting his thoughts stray down those kinds of paths was a dangerous thing to do, so instead he just faced Bull with his shoulders squared, and dared him to make an issue out of it.

Cullen might not have been in the mood for pain, but he wasn’t in the mood to be sent away, and he felt fractious enough to kick back if Bull so much as tried. There were a few moments where Bull looked like he wanted to, where Cullen dug his toes down into his boots and held back from gritting his jaw because his head was too sensitive, his brain still felt like it was floating around in its skull.
‘Yeah, okay,’ Bull said finally, lips quirking oddly. ‘You know the drill better than I do, right? Take your shirt off. Face the wall.’

Cullen made himself remove the shirt quicker than he really wanted to. But he was proving something to himself, to Bull, and given that his days were made of proving himself, he knew how to breathe through the sudden ratchet of pain inside of him. He knew how to move so that it didn’t look like he was favouring sore joints, an aching back. After all, a warrior that telegraphed injuries as soon as the going got tough wasn’t going to live a very long life.

He went to fold the shirt, but Bull stood and held his hand out for it, and after a fleeting hesitation, Cullen handed it over. Then Cullen walked to the wall of the storage room where he’d stood before, glad that he wasn’t being asked to sit in that chair and put his hands on the table – what a nightmare that had been, even if it had eventually gotten him to where he needed to get to – and placed his palms flat against the stone. His fingers felt like they were creaking. The tips were the kind of red that came from a hard chill, and on days like today, it didn’t matter how long he shoved them in front of a fireplace for, or wore gloves and vambraces; they’d still look like that.

‘I’m walking you back to your office after,’ Bull said firmly. ‘Remember? It was that or a bed.’

‘Fine,’ Cullen said.

No small talk. Cullen suddenly had the strangest feeling that he wasn’t the only one acting a little out of sorts. Bull was normally a bit warmer by now, wasn’t he? Or had that been Cullen’s imagination before? Was this one of those situations where being obviously unwell made Bull feel like he was being placed in a difficult position? Was this a Searidge situation? Was it-

‘I had a headache,’ Cullen said quickly. ‘This morning. It’s gone now. Truly, I’m fine.’

‘Uh huh,’ Bull said slowly. ‘And you want to get beaten after a headache that makes you look like that?’

No, Cullen thought, frowning. ‘Of course.’

That wasn’t exactly a lie either. He wanted the things that came attendant with the beating. He wanted to see Bull. He was sure the pain would come in handy the following days even if he didn’t want it today. He still desperately wanted to somehow be outside of himself, to not have to think. The more he had those dreams about Samson, the more he realised that a confrontation was coming; after all, he’d asked the Inquisitor to look into it, and she produced results. He had no idea what that confrontation would look like, only that he’d need to be there, and he dreaded it even as it made his fingers curl for the hilt of his sword.

Bull walked over and stood behind him without picking anything up. Cullen felt fingers press carefully along the undersides of his shoulder-blades, then along the top of his shoulders. After that, Bull started checking his back and shoulders like before. The touch was clinical, and far more thorough than the last two times. There were sections where Bull pressed an area of muscle before coming back and pressing it again, and then again. At one point, Bull’s exhale was audible, and didn’t sound exasperated exactly, but there was something in it that Cullen couldn’t place.

Bull’s fingers lingered around one of the worst scars that stretched from his flank to his back, and Cullen deliberately slowed his breathing through the sensation of nerves flaring, a skittering sort of agitation under his skin.

Bull placed his right hand flat against Cullen’s right shoulder-blade, pushing him lightly towards the wall. It wasn’t forceful, but Cullen still had to tense his arms to stop his chest from touching
Then, sharp needling lines of fire dragged down his skin. Bull had dug his nails in, scraping over muscles that were still too tender. Cullen made a choked sound before he could stop himself, he hadn’t even known to brace for it. Instead, an older, deeper instinct rose up inside of him and he lurched sideways, away, the sensation too much to bear.

Bull grabbed his upper arm easily, stopping him from getting much further, and Cullen was gasping, embarrassed and his cheeks flamed because he should have known.

‘Tell me again you want to get beaten tonight, Cullen,’ Bull said quietly.

‘I can take it,’ Cullen snapped, angry that Bull had tricked him like that. Bull’s hand tightened on his arm, and Cullen shifted, scowled at him.

‘Yeah, you sure can,’ Bull said, lips quirking in that odd smile again. ‘That’s not what I asked you, is it? I thought you Templars were meant to be good at following orders.’

‘Ex-Templar,’ Cullen said, not wanting to deal with this again so close to Summerday.

‘Let’s try this again,’ Bull said. ‘I’m gonna put emphasis on the right words, and then I want an honest fucking answer. Do you want to be beaten tonight, Cullen?’

Bull was using his name in that specific way he did sometimes. It needled at him. Made him feel like he was being addressed by a commanding officer. Except they’d usually use his last name. It made a part of him resentful. It made another part of him want to lean forwards into that strength and not have to think anymore. He could still feel the scratches that Bull had given him, burning on his back. His head was pounding dully. Bull’s hand around his upper arm made him feel like a child being restrained. He tried to shake it away and Bull didn’t let go. Cullen grimaced.

‘What I want, is to not have to think tonight. Do you think you can at least do something about that? It’s not up to you to decide-

‘Say the word,’ Bull said, ‘or stop bossing me around. And you still haven’t answered the question. So you either say ‘katoh,’ or you answer my question.’

Silence then, except for the sound of Cullen’s breathing, which wasn’t nearly as controlled as he wanted it to be. He knew one thing, he didn’t want to say that damned word. And he didn’t want to be sent away. But if he was honest, then surely he’d be sent away anyway?

Feeling defeated, he shook his head and refused to make eye contact.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m not sure that I wish to be hit tonight. I don’t know.’

‘Good,’ Bull said quietly, slowly, and Cullen grit his teeth together then and didn’t care how much it hurt, even if it made his head ache. He felt goaded, and when he went to jerk his arm away with more force, he fully expected Bull to let him go.

Bull didn’t. His hand tightened to the point where Cullen’s arm was hurting.

‘Thanks for telling me the truth,’ Bull said.

‘So are we done now?’ Cullen said, tasting sourness in the back of his throat. ‘Because if you want me to go you’ll actually have to let me go.’
‘Y’know,’ Bull said casually, as though he wasn’t having to hold Cullen in place, ‘sometimes I wonder what kind of conversations are going on in that head of yours. When did I say I wanted you to go? Because I know I can be forgetful, but geez.’

‘Well, we’re not going to have sex,’ Cullen said, because no, he didn’t want that either. Not tonight. ‘And I don’t particularly feel like making small talk. So…’

*So what else is there?*

‘I bet you make the soldier’s lives a living nightmare when you’re in a bad mood. Actually, I kinda know you do, enough of them come into the Herald’s Rest,’ Bull said, and his tone seemed genuinely light now. When Cullen glanced at him, the tension on his face from before had gone. ‘That must’ve been some headache. You get hit with them often? Oh, right, you didn’t come here for small talk. Come on then, back up against the wall you go.’

Bull reached around Cullen’s back and took his other arm, his height and breadth giving him the reach to do it easily. Then with a strength that Cullen was more used to feeling in Bull’s tightly controlled flogging, Bull simply moved him back to the position he’d been in before, right down to taking his wrists and pulling his hands up, and then pressing his palms flat to the stone. Cullen stared at the wall in confusion.

‘So,’ Bull said. ‘This is gonna be one of those times you’re gonna give control up to me, okay? It might not be easy, but that’s what’s gonna happen. Say it.’

‘I’m not saying it, I think we both know that I’ve already agreed to-’

‘Say it,’ Bull said amicably. ‘I’m not the one trying to boot you out of here. But I’ll do it if you don’t drop the attitude. You’re not the only one who gets to say the watchword.’

Cullen blinked at the wall, shocked. He opened his mouth to say what Bull wanted him to, but the words wouldn’t come. He tried to think of easier ways to say it, ways that would make it obvious that he was complying and thought having to say it was ridiculous at the same time, ways that might cover his nervousness.

Eventually, more than a couple minutes had passed and Cullen was just standing there with his palms on the wall and Bull looming over him, before he managed to say a rather sullen:

‘You have control.’

His mouth tensed after saying it. His fingers curled into the stone and he was glad he could hardly feel them. But his knuckles still sent that scratchy pain through him.

‘Thanks,’ Bull said. ‘I know that was hard for you.’

Cullen turned away from the wall, because that was too condescending, far too much to be borne. ‘Do you honestly think that I-’

‘The wall, Cullen,’ Bull said, his voice lower than before. ‘You can lie to yourself all you like, I don’t give a shit about that. But in this room, right now, I saw that it was hard for you, and I’m pleased you said that I have control, and you don’t need to come up with some defensive bullshit about it. I’m not asking for that. I’m asking you to face the wall.’

A shiver that could have been fear, but may have been something else. Cullen stilled, then turned back to the wall and placed his palms against it, feeling shaken. People weren’t supposed to talk to him like that. He didn’t quite flinch when Bull placed his hand on Cullen’s back, but it was a close
‘Easy,’ Bull said, his voice still low. ‘I think I can help you out, Cullen, but you have to fucking give me a chance.’

‘Not going to go back to your room and find…and find relief after this, are you?’ Cullen said, feeling like maybe he should have just called the entire night off. And why did it matter whether Bull was going to do back to his room and do that or not? That was none of his business.

Except that he couldn’t imagine that Bull was getting a single thing out of this, and that was the only sign he’d been given so far that Bull tolerated these meetings. That he wasn’t going to call it all off. Though perhaps they’d still be able to play chess. Bull seemed to enjoy that.

‘The night’s still young,’ Bull said, and Cullen could practically hear the grin in his voice. If anything, it only sharpened his sense that he was getting everything wrong. If there were ways to ruin the situation, he was going to find every single one this evening, he could tell.

‘Maker,’ Cullen said. ‘I don’t know why I’m being like this. Forgive me. You deserve-’

‘Nope,’ Bull said, his hand still on Cullen’s back. ‘You got anything against being gagged?’

Cullen turned to look over his shoulder, incredulous, only to have Bull’s other hand shift his head forwards again.

‘The wall,’ Bull reminded him. ‘This? You facing it? Palms flat? I haven’t asked you to do anything else. Except answer another question. You got anything against being gagged?’

‘I…I’m not sure.’

‘Okay,’ Bull said, ‘you just stay put. It’ll be like the blindfold, okay? You don’t like it, you can reach up and pull it off whenever. I’m giving you permission.’

_I don’t need your permission_, Cullen thought with venom, even as Bull’s words simultaneously filled him with a mixture of dread and anticipation.

He listened to the sound of Bull rummaging around in his sack. Then, Bull was standing behind him. So close that the straps of his harness brushed Cullen’s back, the warmth of his skin welcome. There was the sound of something being uncorked, then the aromatic astringency of elfroot, and before Cullen could work out why that had anything to do with being gagged, he felt the lip of a potion bottle being pressed against his mouth.

Cullen jerked backwards, but Bull was standing too close for him to get anywhere at all, especially with the arm reaching around him like that.

‘Hands back on the wall,’ Bull said. ‘You’re drinking some of this.’

Cullen put his hands back on the wall without really thinking about it, but he kept his head turned to the side, away from the potion bottle, staring at the door.

‘What happens if I don’t?’ Cullen said.

‘Then I put this away, and you go back to your office or your draughty little room, and we try this another night when you’re not feeling so testy because of exhaustion.’

It was very tempting to simply leave. He didn’t want to take the elfroot, even though he knew it
would help. He didn't like thinking about where that came from, or why he was so against it now. At the same time, Bull had asked him to do things he hadn't really wanted to do in the past. When he’d done them, he hadn’t ended up regretting the choice to comply.

‘How much elfroot?’ Cullen said, he pretended his voice was perfectly even. Because people didn’t have problems with things like a healing potion. Even he knew that was absurd and irrational.

‘As much as I want you to have,’ Bull said.

The reminder that he’d ceded control to Bull twisted at him. Then he felt the cold rim of the glass again and he pressed his lips together, even though Bull couldn’t see it. About a minute passed, Cullen wrestling with himself, his fingers digging into the stone of the walls. Bull must have known his mouth was closed, because as soon as Cullen opened it, the potion bottle tipped slowly. Just enough that a small sip of the bitter stuff washed into Cullen’s mouth.

He swallowed, thinking the bottle would be taken away, but it wasn’t. Another long moment, and then Bull was giving him more, and Cullen’s nostrils were flaring and he thought if he ever got a chance to spar with Bull, he’d probably like to punch him. Just the once. Because Bull knew he didn’t like this. It wasn’t like Cullen had been subtle about it in the past.

Cullen must have had at least a quarter of a full bottle before Bull finally drew it away and Cullen exhaled and tasted that chlorophyll dense bitterness in his mouth. He expected Bull to walk away, and instead Bull placed the potion on the ground and then stood close behind him again.

A strip of fabric pressed against his mouth and Cullen grit his teeth together again. The elfroot potion was already working. The pounding of his head receding. The tension in his muscles less at the forefront of his mind. The gag bumped against his closed mouth several times, and then Bull chuckled.

‘Open your mouth,’ Bull said calmly. ‘You tell me you’ve got a problem with it, or open your mouth. Or, if you don’t open your mouth in the next five seconds and you don’t tell me you’ve got a problem with it, I’ll just force your mouth open. Works for me.’

Some deep, forbidden heat then, at those words. At the thought of fingers at his mouth and making him. But acknowledging that was more frightening than just opening his mouth and knowing he could pull it away if he needed to. So he opened his mouth and kept his tongue flat when the fabric pushed in. The strip was long enough that Bull could loop it around Cullen’s head twice, and then he tied a simple knot in the back of it. Cullen tentatively pressed his teeth into the material. Felt like cotton, or linen, tasted like a faint hint of soap. There was too much saliva in his mouth. The taste of elfroot did that to everyone, but he flushed at how awkward it would be to swallow.

More footsteps behind him. The elfroot potion being placed back in the sack. Cullen stared at the wall ahead of him, at his reddened fingertips. The elfroot was helping a great deal with remnants of the headache and muscle aches, it never removed the cold.

The next time Bull stepped up behind him, Cullen wanted to bury himself in relief. Wanted to borrow from Bull’s strength.

Then he saw the strip of black fabric coming over his eyes and he balked, a sound of muffled protest pushing through the gag.

‘Hands on the wall, Cullen,’ Bull said gently. ‘You can take this off if you need to. Remember?’
Cullen shook his head, but placed his hands back on the wall. Shook his head again. The black strip of fabric didn’t move, and Cullen knew Bull was waiting him out. Words rested unspoken on Cullen’s tongue. That he didn’t want the blindfold. That he didn’t want it to be hard. He hadn’t wanted it to be this hard. The sound he made after that was less protest, more despair.

‘You can do this,’ Bull said. ‘I’m gonna help you, and then you’re gonna go back to your room and sleep, and tomorrow’s going to be better. Okay?’

The blindfold slipped over his eyes. For some reason he’d already forgotten that it wasn’t entirely opaque, not that it mattered, it wasn’t like he could see much facing the wall anyway. When Bull finished tying it in place, he brought both hands down to Cullen’s shoulders and rubbed them. His hands were warm, and Cullen thought that maybe Bull ran hotter than most. Maybe all Qunari did. Lying next to him in a bed would probably mean he’d never feel as cold as he usually did.

He blinked at the darkness. That was a strange place for his mind to go, but Bull’s hands did actually feel soothing. His back no longer prickled with the oversensitivity of before, and the roughness of his palms felt good.

Cullen wanted to press his head against the wall, but – as he swallowed down saliva and knew it was starting to soak through the fabric of the gag – it occurred to him Bull might not want that.

‘Right,’ Bull said, as though talking to himself, even though Cullen was right there. ‘If you can’t bring yourself to remove the gag, you can smack your hand against the wall three times. That’ll mean ‘katoh.’ Otherwise, you’re just going to be quiet for a little while.’

At first Cullen felt chastened, but in truth, the inability to talk was a small weight off his shoulders. He didn’t have to think of the right thing to say, or agonise over ten different sentences – all sounding worse than the one before it – because he couldn’t speak. He could only make noises. All he really had to focus on was trying not to drool, because he really didn’t want to do that.

Even though he felt exposed – not being able to talk, not being able to see – he liked Bull’s hands on his back.

Thumbs dug into a point on either side of his spine, where his shoulders flowed up into his neck. They pressed, shifted, pressed again, and then Cullen’s voice hitched on an abrupt wash of pain. Bull grunted and then pressed harder.

‘Easy,’ Bull said again as Cullen’s arms bent, trying to move away. ‘It’s going to help. I picked some of this up from the tamassrans on Seheron.’

Bull kept his fingers in place, and even though nothing was touching the back of his head, he felt like like someone was trying to remove his skull from his neck. He pushed his head against the wall and closed his eyes, biting down into the gag.

‘It hurts a bit, but muscles do this weird thing where they don’t always know how to relax if they spend too long knotting up. And to get them to relax, you gotta push them around a little. Remind them what they’re meant to be doing. And you’re fucking tight, Cullen. And really, the only time I wanna be saying that to someone is when I’m pushing into them.’

Cullen gave an amused, pained exhale out of his nose, because there wasn’t much more he could do. Bull’s thumbs were now moving outward, following lines of muscle, the pain transforming from a deep, pounding ache into something malleable, almost like the burn after being struck.

That easier to bear pain lasted until Bull found the next place to dig his thumbs into. This time just
behind his armpits, and Cullen had no idea the muscles there hurt so much. But he stayed still, and he remained quiet, swallowing saliva back when he remembered to and glad to have something to bite down on.

As Bull kept working, the pain peaked and then released, before peaking again. Bull moved down Cullen’s back very slowly, was still midway at his shoulders after at least fifteen minutes had passed. Already Cullen’s shoulders were feeling looser. And aside from the hitches in his breathing whenever Bull found a new, pained spot, he was finding it easier to breathe. Slow and deep. He felt like he was using the last third of his lungs for the first time in months. Even the Chantry breathing exercises hadn’t allowed him to take breaths this deep.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said conversationally. ‘Y’know, I’ve seen grown-ass Qunari try and push tamassran’s hands away and complain about the pain of this. Not me, of course! But that pain threshold of yours. Can be an amazing thing to have out in the battlefield. But can fuck you over in a second as well. What if I’d been someone else? And see here’s why you don’t need to be talking right now. Because I know what you’d say. Like, some version of – it’s fine, you can take it, it’s not a problem. But if there was ever a time you would’ve thrown a clot from being hit at a time when your body just couldn’t fucking take it, it would’ve been tonight.’

Cullen swallowed, had his eyes open again, staring into the darkness of the fabric. This was all rather unfair. Bull lecturing him while he was unable to talk. He also felt disinclined to talk. Either because finding words through the pain would have been impossible, or because once Bull smoothed out the muscle fibres, Cullen wanted to drift on the low, pleasant burning that remained.

Once Bull hit his lower back, Cullen’s hands slipped on the wall. It was hard to keep his arms up. A hesitation from behind him, and then Bull reached up and grasped him by the wrists – chest pressing against the top of his back – and lowered his arms until they were hanging by his side. Cullen was only braced by his feet and his head against the wall. He was sure his forehead was red, little gritty marks all over it. He didn’t really care.

‘That’s it,’ Bull rumbled from behind him.

Suddenly, all Cullen wanted to do was sleep. For the first time since he’d woken up in the morning, he knew he’d be able to actually rest. Maybe he wouldn’t even have the run of nightmares that he normally did. He’d get more distance between himself and that dream of Samson and the red lyrium. The singing he heard in his mind whenever he thought about it, so much louder than the blue lyrium, and it wasn’t like that had ever truly been quiet.

Bull hit a section of his lower back, just above his tailbone, that sent a shrieking pain through him. Enough that his breath stuttered and his hands came up to press against the wall again, slapping hard the stone. Bull hushed him, murmured something in Qunlat, then said:

‘Your hips are a mess. I think I’m gonna leave them alone tonight.’

Cullen only nodded and kept focusing on his breathing because it felt like Bull had pierced his skin and was just thrusting his thumbs through muscle. One of his inhales had a high wheeze at the top of it and Bull hushed him again. It was true that his hips hurt, a consequence no doubt of a mostly sedentary lifestyle followed by brutal sparring and practice in the ring. That and he never slept very well. Also his mattress wasn’t great. And then there was waking up tense from the nightmares and the cold. Curling up like he had today probably hadn’t helped.

He groaned softly and dropped his arms again. Clenching his fists by his sides. The list of reasons he had to be tense was probably longer than he knew.
‘I picked up bits and pieces,’ Bull continued, filling the space with his ability to provide easy conversation. ‘In Seheron, you needed to. Sleeping on hard surfaces, feeling like you always needed one fucking eye open – not something I’d be able to manage now – and then spates of battle followed by creeping around followed by… I don’t know, it was a shit show. From beginning to – well, no end to Seheron. If you didn’t learn how to deal with your muscles in the quiet times, you’d get felled by a cramp just as much as a blow to the head from some fucker’s axe.’

Cullen nodded to indicate he was listening. Also because he did know. Wearing plate armour tended to cause more problems than solutions sometimes, and he’d known fellows who had experienced their calves locking up, who had planted a foot while swinging a sword, only for the arch to seize brutally. He knew it himself. They were all practiced at fighting through it, but forcing a muscle to stretch when it was locking down on itself could tear it, and he didn’t know many Templars who - once involved in active battle – weren’t familiar with downing an entire elfroot potion to deal with damage their bodies had inflicted upon themselves.

Even with the elfroot helping, and Bull’s hands finding and diffusing tension, he was too world weary to force himself to bear up under a flogger this evening. It felt like another failure. One in a very long line.

These days, whenever he prayed before the statue of Andraste, he said a line that used to soothe him years and years ago. Now, he mocked himself with it, knowing that others would think himself as devout as he’d always been.

_Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter._

How many Templars had spoken that line? With fervency? With hope and belief in their hearts? And how many more said it while trying desperately to hang onto the belief that they’d never faltered? But sometimes he saw a Templar with some haunted expression in his or her eyes, heard rumours of other Templars trying to step back from the Order and failing, and he wondered how many others said the line like he did. Or if they just swore off it, knowing that they were no longer blessed. At least, not for that.

Bull’s fingers distracted him from his thoughts, trailing back up to the large scar on his flank and tracing the outline of it. Cullen grunted, and then tried to twitch away. Bull’s other hand settled high on his hip, holding him still.

The sound Cullen made after that was very close to a growl.

‘You have a lot of scars,’ Bull said, pressing the pad of his thumb flat to it. ‘But this one healed real badly, didn’t it?’

Cullen thought about saying katoh, then thought about slapping the wall three times, and then finally grit his teeth into the soaked gag and kicked back as hard as he could, catching Bull’s shin – through the edge of the brace and his pants – with the heel of his boot.

Bull moved his thumb away, but he hadn’t even grunted in pain. He didn’t even move. Cullen was breathing hard, trying to grind his teeth through the cotton. Because it was underhanded, doing that while Cullen was gagged. Cullen wanted to ask what his fascination was, after all, didn’t he have enough of his own? He was quite certain that if he reached up and removed the eye patch and tried to do the same to Bull’s ‘badly healed’ scar, it wouldn’t be a welcome gesture.

‘Okay, okay,’ Bull said. ‘Message received. Loud and clear, little lion. Y’know that might even bruise.’ When Cullen grunted a syllable that was meant to be a concerted ‘good,’ Bull started laughing. ‘Ah, Cullen. Do me a favour, don’t ever lose that fight of yours, yeah? World’d be far
The laughter and the words were both a surprise, and Cullen felt himself breathing out a huff of amusement himself. The fact was he hadn’t always been like this. Not at all. There was a time when he’d been so very eager to please, so naturally obedient. Even his siblings teased him for it – the worst thing he ever did with them was try and act too parental, or disappear to his lake. He wasn’t a child reprimanded for naughtiness, but ostentatiousness.

‘But let me see if I’ve got this right,’ Bull said, resting his hands on Cullen’s shoulders again. ‘You’ll kick up a fuss if I touch a scar, but you wouldn’t have kicked up a fuss at all if I’d taken a flogger to your back while you felt shitty? Huh.’

Maybe, if Cullen got to spar with Bull any time soon, he’d land two punches. Just thinking about it felt vindicating. Cullen’s nostrils flared, but he forced himself to stay still. And then seconds later, Bull started rubbing his shoulders in smooth, long strokes that felt like a reward somehow. Which didn’t make any sense. A reward for what?

Cullen closed his eyes. The stroking of his back continued for some time, Bull’s large hands covering a large expanse of skin when both of them rested there together. It warmed him to think of what else those hands might be able to do. But otherwise he just focused on staying put, breathing carefully, trying to make the most of how miserable he didn’t actually feel.

When Bull dragged his nails down Cullen’s back like he’d done at the beginning, it didn’t feel like a bad fire this time, but like delicious friction. Cullen pushed back into the touch. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it woke his nerves and left the skin tingling afterwards.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said quietly. ‘That’s more like it. Right then. I’m still not gonna flog you tonight. But we can do something with this. Might not be exactly what you want, but let’s face it, Cullen – what you want is pretty hard on your body, and you shouldn’t be putting yourself through that on nights like this.’

Before Cullen could come up with some kind of mental reply, Bull began scratching him. Not short, sharp motions, but long, slow ones. Not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough that his skin was probably blanching under the heavier touch. He rocked with the movements. Pushing forwards when Bull leaned his hands in, then moving back when Bull withdrew and found a new spot.

The movements were from his shoulders and neck down to his lower back at first, and Cullen hardly had to brace against the pain at all. It was sleepy, as relaxed as he felt. And the more Bull did it, the more Cullen just wanted to go lax. He shifted, spread his legs a little wider so he could lock his knees. After that, all he really focused on was making sure to swallow when he needed to, and staying upright.

It was amazing. It warmed his whole body. Made him feel like his blood was actually flowing again. There was just enough discomfort to edge outright into pain sometimes that he still felt like he was weathering something. Enough pleasure that it wasn’t taxing at all.

His breathing slowed further, as Bull began horizontal scratches that moved across all the marks he’d made before. Some of them stung like carpet burn, but those moments were faint and then swamped by the warmth that followed. Eventually, his back arched and his chest pressed against the wall. His eyes stayed closed, his feet shifted, seeking a greater stability so that he could relax into it further.

‘That’s right,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear that Bull’s breathing was slow too. Rhythmic and more boring.’
even. ‘Feeling tired?’

Cullen made a faint sound of acknowledgement. Then stopped thinking about much at all. It wasn’t the perfect, floating state of mind he found at other times with Bull – it was like pre-sleep, when he’d found a comfortable position and knew that darkness would enfold him and that it wouldn’t be frightening for once.

A few minutes later, his knees buckled and his eyes flew open, even as an arm hooked around his chest and held him upright. Bull was chuckling behind him, the sound rumbling directly into Cullen’s stinging back. Cullen blinked, dazed, but wouldn’t fully come back to wakefulness. His knees felt weak.

‘I think you’re done for the night,’ Bull said, a smile in his voice. ‘Come on. I’ve got you.’

Cullen knew that he found his way back to the chair. He didn’t even bother taking off the gag, and closed his eyes again as he slumped against the table. Fingers picked at the knots at the back of his head, removed the gag first. Cullen felt the places where the edges of his lips were raw, even though the gag hadn’t been that tight. It felt strange to be able to press his teeth together.

He didn’t bother protesting when Bull rubbed a thin layer of salve into his back, he could feel that there were certain areas where the skin had been grazed open, and he’d heal fast from that anyway. He probably wouldn’t have a single bruise or mark to show for it the following morning, and he couldn’t bring himself to mind.

Bull then slid his hand beneath Cullen’s head, lifting it and pressing a mug of water to his lips. Cullen made a vaguely disgruntled sound and took the cup for himself, then drained it, drinking another half cup before he was done. Bull put the water bladder away, and Cullen wondered what exactly was in that sack as he rested his head on the desk again.

He must have dozed, though it couldn’t have been for too long. He roused to Bull running fingers through his hair against the grain. When he turned his head to look at Bull through lidded eyes, he felt his lips mirroring the smile on Bull’s face. As the silence stretched on, he felt he needed to say just one thing.

‘You talk too much,’ Cullen said, clearing his throat.

‘Mm, I like it when you’re gagged,’ Bull said, grinning at him. ‘Less mouthy. And something told me you were going to be a little shit tonight. Not that gagging you stopped that. Can feel my shin bruising right now.’

‘Such a shame,’ Cullen said.

‘You think you can get back to your office?’

‘Just watch me,’ Cullen said. It probably didn’t help that his voice was deeper and scratchier from tiredness, or that the words weren’t as concise as he wanted them. Bull huffed out a laugh.

Still, he did manage the walk back to his office with Bull at his side, the battlements clear of soldiers that might question. The climb up his ladder was easier this time, and he entered his room without really thinking about much except getting on his bed as soon as possible.

Bull, however, paused once he stood in Cullen’s room properly. His nostrils flared, and he frowned. Cullen hesitated at his bed, a cloud of uncertainty impinging on the empty tiredness he’d found.
‘Have the sheets been changed?’ Bull said. ‘It’s not good to sleep on a bed you’ve cold-sweated through.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said. He could smell that? Cullen’s lips thinned, that was…disconcerting. Did his room really smell that bad? He looked around and tried covertly sniffing himself.

‘It’s a Qunari thing,’ Bull said. He walked over to the bed and pressed his palms down on it. ‘Though I think someone’s come in and changed them.’

‘They know to,’ Cullen said absently, trying to kick off his boots before realising that they weren’t the kind he could kick off, and bending down to undo the straps.

‘So this happens a bit then,’ Bull said. ‘For how long?’

‘Long enough that I’m used to it,’ Cullen said, getting his boots off and then tipping slightly, surprised to find Bull’s hand right there steadying him. For someone who was huge, he certainly had a way of moving about a room when he wanted to.

Together, they managed to get Cullen undressed and into a thin sleep tunic that would do very little against the cold. He lay on his side on fresh sheets, facing Bull, who sat at the corner of his bed, facing him.

‘Why do you do this?’ Cullen said, looking at him. ‘I can’t imagine what you get out of this.’

‘I know,’ Bull said. ‘But I do get something out of it, and one day you’ll trust that. Or you won’t. I get the sense you have some trust issues.’

Cullen laughed under his breath and his fingers curled beneath the blankets. Still cold. Even the warmth generated by all that scratching hadn’t warmed his hands. He’d just have to wait the worst of that out.

‘Perhaps a few,’ Cullen said.

‘Don’t overstate it or anything,’ Bull said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Didn’t figure you for hyperbole.’

‘You know you’re not as funny as you think you are.’

‘I’m not the one who just laughed at that,’ Bull said. ‘You were always one of those kids who liked to talk as soon as the candles or the lamps were blown out, weren’t you?’

‘Perhaps,’ Cullen said, thinking back to sharing a room with his brother and all the times they’d talked in whispers at night, Mia often coming to join them, until they woke their – not entirely happy – parents and had to go to sleep ‘properly.’ He hadn’t thought of that in such a long time.

‘You got anything you want to talk about now?’

Cullen thought about the heat in his back, thought that he was glad that he hadn’t called it off. That it was a miracle that Bull put up with him. Because he wouldn’t. If a recruit talked back to him the way Cullen talked to Bull, he’d…well, he certainly wouldn’t be able to display the same degree of patience.

‘Would you ever draw blood?’ Cullen said. ‘In regards to what we do? I imagine- You said that you’ve had sessions with people who’ve wanted more extreme things. I know you said you didn’t want to, initially, with me. But would you? Not every time, however…’
Bull’s expression was sober. He shifted on the bed and the frame creaked.

‘I could,’ Bull said slowly. ‘But I’d like to know why you want that.’

‘I don’t, most of the time,’ Cullen said, stifling a yawn. ‘I thought I did. And then after our first session I thought I wouldn’t need it again. But sometimes… There’s nothing else really like it. It’s not about the blood, really. I know this sounds perverse, I do know that. Maker, if the others could hear me…’

He trailed off, cheeks heating.

‘They’re not here,’ Bull said. ‘And you know I don’t have a problem with it. But you need to talk to me about it.’

‘Yes, well,’ Cullen said, wondering at how much easier it was to talk like this. It shouldn’t have been easy at all. ‘I liked it, with Searidge. When my skin would split. It would almost be too much. Or it would be too much. But after- It helps me focus. That’s important to me.’

Bull was still studying him, and then he shrugged.

‘Normally I’d be like ‘fuck yeah,’ because I like being able to go those places with someone. And I think I’d really fucking like it with you. Shit yeah. So how ‘bout we do a thing where if you want that specifically, you ask me on the night, and we figure it out then. Sometimes I’m gonna say no.’

Cullen sighed. It was better than what he’d had with Searidge. Getting cut every time in those shorter sessions before Searidge pulled out entirely. His cheeks were also heating. Bull would do it with others, but not with him? And he wanted to be affronted at that, but he couldn’t make himself. Only embarrassed that Bull couldn’t trust him entirely, and Cullen wasn’t sure he should.

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘That sounds reasonable.’

‘Well, now I know you’re ready to be put to pasture. Thinking I sound reasonable? Shit. I’m gonna leave you to sleep. Chess in a few days?’

‘You don’t feed me anymore,’ Cullen observed sleepily. ‘And yes, chess in a few days. I’ll line it up.’

‘Make sure it’s before Thursday, I think the boss wants us traipsing around the land of trees. Er, the Emerald Graves. You want me to feed you?’

‘I’m too tired to eat,’ Cullen said.

‘And that’s why I didn’t get you to eat tonight,’ Bull said, smiling at him. ‘Because you’d probably choke on it.’

Bull stood, and Cullen wanted to thank him, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, his brow furrowed as he realised something.

‘The Emerald Graves… Why? Have you been told?’

‘Something to do with hunting down some letters looking for that right hand dick that serves Corypheus, and then whatever else comes up while we’re there, because you know the boss.’

The Inquisitor was looking for ways to track down Samson. Cullen felt his attention try to catch on it, knew his mind wanted to rouse and sink teeth into it. But Cullen took a slow breath and
deliberately tried to let it go. He was too tired. The fuzzy warmth was something he wanted to hang onto until he forgot about his cold hands.

‘You good?’ Bull said, hesitating.

‘Yes, thank you,’ Cullen said. When Bull turned to leave, Cullen felt the words spill anyway. ‘I mean it. I am grateful.’

‘Hey,’ Bull said, smiling back over his shoulder. ‘Anytime. Don’t expect me to go easy on you when we play chess though.’

‘It will just make winning a lot sweeter,’ Cullen said sleepily.

Bull was still laughing as he descended the ladder.

Cullen settled down to sleep. Three things drifting in his mind, bumping together like paper boats on a lake. The first – that the Inquisitor was looking for Samson. The second – that he was going to get his roof fixed, because it was cold in here, and while he’d convinced himself it was fine, he loathed it after the sessions with Bull. The third – Bull had called him ‘little lion.’ He was quite sure that hadn’t been his imagination.

After about a minute of reflection, he was also quite sure he didn’t mind it. His breathing turned slow and deep once more, his last thoughts of the ice cold of his fingers and the warmth radiating through his back.
It turned out that patching his roof was not something that could be done as quickly and quietly as he wanted it done.

‘What do you mean you need to replace the roof?’

Talbot didn’t quite shift on his feet, but there was a stubborn set to his jaw, and he folded his arms and his bottom lip jutted out.

‘With all respect, Commander, we’ve had a bit of a problem with borer beetles in the older sections of roofing. We can’t just patch it. If we got men up onto that roofing, they’d just as like fall through. It needs to be replaced. But after that it’ll be good as new, fully weatherproofed.’

Cullen squinted at him. ‘I take it leaving it as is, is not an option?’

‘Sorry, Commander. Unless you want to wake up with some eaves on your chest one morning.’

‘Right,’ Cullen said, exhaling slowly.

Bull was away with the Inquisitor. Their last chess game had been one of intense concentration and very little chatter on both sides. Bull played fiercely and Cullen didn’t end up winning every game as he’d expected to. When they had talked, it had been about strategy and manoeuvres, both on the board, and in real life.

‘Commander,’ Talbot said slowly, ‘we had that roof slated to be replaced when we first moved into Skyhold. Do you know what happened to the order forms for it?’

Cullen shook his head. ‘Not at all.’

Except he did know. He’d removed them, not wanting to have his space invaded, not wanting
strangers knowing the ins and outs of his living space. Not only that, but he hadn’t exactly wanted the room fixed. There was something about living in that frigid, decrepit room that reminded him of his purpose. He wasn’t there for luxury. He was there to get a job done.

‘Fair enough,’ Talbot said sceptically. ‘Well. Take your valuables out of there, and we’ll get started as soon as. You can still use your office, though there’ll be the sounds of woodwork and such for some time.’

‘Can you arrange a trapdoor or something similar, to help block the sounds out?’ Cullen said, thinking back to Bull telling him that a patched roof and a trapdoor would go some way to soundproofing his room fully.

‘Of course, Commander,’ Talbot said. ‘We would’ve done summat like that anyway. You deserve some privacy, should’ve had it within the first few weeks, but with an order going missing like that…’

‘Well, then,’ Cullen said shortly. ‘That can’t be helped. I don’t have a great deal to shift. I’ll speak to Josephine about some alternative accommodation in the meantime. How long do you expect this will take?’

‘We’re re-roofing the tower,’ Talbot said slowly. And then, at Cullen’s blank expression, he said: ‘As soon as we can, Commander.’

‘Good,’ Cullen said.

After hauling down most of his personal belongings – glad for the fact that he wasn’t dealing with intense bruises from his last session with Bull – he walked as calmly as possible to the main hall, quietly surveying those around him in the grounds. He saw the Templars and the warriors, the new recruits who would likely piss or shit themselves the first time they saw real battle, the wounded nearby – at least their tents were far sturdier and more expansive than they were when they’d first arrived.

Still, a pang of guilt found him. That he had two rooms to himself, while there were so many living in tents. They may have been extremely well-crafted tents, designed to be more home-like than those used out in the field, but they were still tents.

‘But of course we can find the Commander of the Inquisition somewhere suitable to stay,’ Josephine said, as soon as he presented his dilemma to her. ‘There are some spare rooms that we keep for guests just off the main hall. We’ll use one of those, and it will give you a chance to talk more often with those visitors who wish to know how our military is faring. Many will be happy to see your face more frequently, Cullen.’

Cullen blinked at her, his hand on the hilt of his sword, thinking with sudden horror that if he slept in the main hall, he’d have to pass those blowhards every day. Multiple times a day.

‘I- Thank you,’ Cullen said.

‘It’s my pleasure,’ Josephine said, smiling at him in that way that suggested she knew just how uncomfortable he’d be. ‘Quite a coup for us. Perhaps you’d like to stay for some time?’

‘Maker, I think I’ll be using the back entrances for a while.’

‘We can’t have that,’ Josephine said reprovingly. ‘People will hear that you’re staying here, and they’ll watch for you.’
‘Wonderful,’ Cullen said. ‘Personally I’d prefer it if Corypheus turned up.’

‘Oh, Cullen,’ Josephine said, laughing warmly, ‘you do have such a flair for melodrama.’

Cullen resisted grumbling something about how he was entirely sincere, and let Josephine show him to a room of such opulence that he just stood there for several moments, staring in disgust.

‘Of course, this isn’t as well-appointed as it could be,’ she said quietly. ‘You understand of course. We’ve had priorities, and—’

‘How much more well-appointed could it be?’ he said, staring at it. ‘Should the floor be made out of gold?’

‘I suppose for a Templar, it must seem lavish,’ she said softly. ‘There’s always a few spare rooms in the Herald’s Rest, but for the sake of its purpose, I’m not sure some of the patrons would be… receptive to you staying there. Especially for so long.’

‘No, no, I quite understand,’ Cullen said. ‘I hadn’t even considered it an option.’

‘It’s not that they don’t like you, only that everyone needs a place of respite. And even Leliana and I are aware that there are some places we’d best leave alone. Places of ease for the others.’

‘I suppose I’d best get used to it for a little while,’ Cullen said, looking around. ‘I hope your guests don’t expect me to be interested in playing the damned Game.’

‘I’m sure they’ll play it with you, whether you’re interested or not,’ Josephine said, with a sweet smile.

Cullen sighed. That’s what he’d thought.

*

The first few days were as nightmarish as he thought they’d be. He was accosted far more often than usual, and those that had managed to get him to stop for a handful of words once were far pushier about getting him to stop a second time. Vivienne had – with a gentle tone and sharp words – flayed his sense of fashion and his dependence on ‘that coat of yours, is it that you need to feel like an actual lion, darling?’ And he’d thought he’d be able to get away by pleading that Varric wanted a word, only to remember that Varric was out in the Emerald Graves with Bull, Cassandra and the Inquisitor.

Another week and he felt himself fraying at the edges. Whatever calm he’d managed to find with Bull had evaporated. Not only that, but he was looking at potentially weeks or months of trying to deal with this shift in his situation, knowing that he couldn’t have Bull visit him in the main hall. Bull wouldn’t walk him back to this room. Which meant…what? He wouldn’t be able to see Bull for a session for months?

Working in an office penetrated by the sound of thudding, knocking, hammering, sawing, drilling and more, was its own latent headache that he was quite practiced at ignoring. They left him alone as much as they could, but there was no denying the fact that they had to be up and down his ladder all day with bits of lumber, equipment, food for breaks, and more. All of them would nod to him or say a quiet ‘Commander’ or ‘ser’ in greeting, and he felt remiss if he didn’t acknowledge them in return. Consequently, even when they were trying not to interrupt him, he was still being interrupted.

He threw himself with fervency into researching General Samson and what he was up to. If they
could remove him from Corypheus’ side, they could strike a real blow at Corypheus’ forces. He sought and pursued rumours, studied dwarven artefacts, read written accounts of encounters with the Red Templars. He could feel the obsession growing, picking away at him, but he needed something to hold his focus even as he regretted getting the stupid roof fixed. Bull could say what he liked, but this was all completely unnecessary. And had the inadvertent side effect of making him more irritable and miserable than usual.

On the second day of the month of Justinian, he snuck out of his new room past midnight, hating the feather-down mattress and the overly soft sheets and blankets and the fact that he had to walk twenty steps to get from one side of the room to the other. He carried a pack over his shoulder and took the back entrance, walking through the quiet kitchens – filching some food as he went – and crossing the grounds.

He paused at the stables, taking some time to stand with the horses. There was one still awake, and Cullen recognised her as Knight-Captain Briony’s steed. A restless, dun-coloured creature with lively eyes, watching him closely. When Cullen walked towards the mare, her ears pricked forwards.

‘Hello there,’ he said quietly, holding his hand out, palm flat and thumb tucked under.

The mare sniffed eagerly at his palm, sighed deeply, and then lipped at his fingers. Cullen smiled, unbidden, and then swallowed to think of how much he missed having animal companions. It had been years. Maybe one day – if he survived this wretched mess – he could have a dog again. A fine hound, the kind that was a true friend.

He let himself linger by Briony’s mare long after the mare had settled and was beginning to fall asleep, no longer paying any attention to him. After that, he climbed the stairs to the battlements. They weren’t clear this evening, and one of the new recruits – Bearnard – nodded at him. One of the old guard, Hensley, had been one of the survivors from Haven. One of the men who had quietly taken him aside and told Cullen that he’d managed the Haven situation well. Cullen hadn’t laughed in his face, but he’d laughed about that later.

‘Everything all right, Commander?’ Hensley said, in that gruff, sleepy tone he had.

‘Fine,’ Cullen said, pausing. ‘Just wanting to sleep away from the main hall.’

‘I don’t know how you manage those high and mighty prissy wankers,’ Hensley said. ‘Just looking at them makes me want to boak.’

‘It’s not really an environment I flourish in, I find,’ Cullen said, the corners of his lips turning up into a reluctant smile. He couldn’t officially endorse Hensley’s perspective, but unofficially? He completely agreed.

Cullen entered the storage room – clean, floor swept, hay bales stacked along one side of the wall. He closed and locked the door behind him, then lowered the bag to the floor and looked around, his heart thumping hard. Apparently even when Bull wasn’t here, his body remembered everything that had happened in this room. His back automatically felt tight, his gut warmed, even his cock twitched.

There was also a downside to his plan that he hadn’t considered. As soon as he lay upon the cold stone with his blanket, he froze and felt a cold lump congeal in his throat.

A rush of images. All of Kinloch. He scrambled upright and stared at the floor as though it was poison. His heart raced, the pleasure he associated with the room forgotten.
He blinked and tried to remember the last time he’d had to sleep on a stone floor, and realised that although he’d slept on forest floors and soil, though he’d slept on uneven cobblestones and tarps laid over grass, he’d not slept on a proper stone floor since Kinloch. Since…

He rubbed his face with cold hands to try and jar himself back to reality. He felt like he was half awake, half asleep, and he knew where this could lead and didn’t want to find himself in the middle of an episode in this damned storage room. He listened to his ragged breathing, finally pressed his hands against the table and then slouched down into his chair and looked over to where Bull usually sat.

In the end, he spent half an hour shifting some hay bales until they made something of a makeshift bed. He moved the thick, canvas cloth they were covered in, then lay atop the compacted hay, scratching idly at where hay fibres and canvas together conspired to make his skin itchy. But it was better than the floor.

Still, he slept uneasily that night.

*

Bull returned, and Cullen resisted the urge to seek him out immediately, because no. Instead, he met with the Inquisitor, looked over the information they had on Samson, realised a journey to Emprise du Lion was in order and knew he’d have to do everything in his power to make sure they had as much information as they could on General Samson and the Red Templars. But it was harder than ever to concentrate as he wanted, and in the weeks that had passed, he’d learned the misery of one of his episodes in the storage room.

The night of the episode, when he’d had the awareness and ability to move, he’d limped back to the room in the main hall for some softness and hadn’t left for hours afterwards, not even when Josephine had found him shivering and feverish and so close to just grasping her hand and asking her if she might trouble herself to find him some lyrium.

It burdened him to know how much better he’d be if he just took it. That he’d feel better. That he’d work harder. That he’d give them more of himself and feel powerful while doing it.

But once the episode passed, he went back to that storage room, preferring the quiet and the scratchy hay bales over dealing with people who talked in circles and tried to entrap him with words. And though Josephine seemed to think it was a good thing – his awkwardness around those people – he was fully aware he could blunder and risk the reputation of the Inquisition; something he desperately didn’t want to do. He could cry a rallying speech to a crowd on the occasion, but that didn’t translate to being adept at the Game.

When he wasn’t trying to pin down Samson’s activities, he began sparring more often in the practice ring, putting himself through his paces. A part of him knew he’d need it, if he was to have the confrontation with Samson that he wanted. A part of him just wanted to be exhausted at the end of the day.

The work on the new roof progressed slowly – though he was assured it was faster than they’d usually work. The wood was riddled with borer grubs, and so the lumber itself couldn’t be saved. A bonfire was built for it all, and Cullen thought of all those white larval creatures, fat on wood, twisting away in their burrows and burning to death. There was a time when he would have considered such thoughts macabre. But after Kinloch, he knew that the horrors his mind produced of its own volition was nothing compared to what the minds of others could dream up.

It was a Friday evening when he woke in the storage room with a start – a figure looming over
him. His throat worked on a silent cry, and he scrambled backwards until his back hit the wall. He saw the horns and thought *demon* with panic clawing into him, until he saw by the glow of a newly lit candle that it was Bull.

‘Maker’s breath,’ Cullen said, anger quickly eclipsing the fear. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘That’s my line,’ Bull said, hands on his hips. ‘What are *you* doing here?’

‘Sleeping,’ Cullen snapped. ‘At least I was.’

He didn’t know how Bull managed to do this to him. When Bull was away in the Emerald Graves, Cullen secretly hoped he’d return soon and reprimanded himself for it. When Bull had returned, Cullen kept trying to think of ways to machinate a meeting that wasn’t simply him directing the Chargers to another assignment. Now that Bull was here, it wasn’t relief that found him, but annoyance that he’d been caught out somehow.

‘I made the somewhat catastrophic error of getting my roof fixed,’ Cullen said, sliding his legs off the side of the hay bale and checking that his hair wasn’t sticking up in stupid directions.

Bull watched him, then simply pulled out the chair that he usually sat in and slouched in it. Like he’d been invited.

‘I need to work tomorrow,’ Cullen said. He felt mortified to have been found like this. His cheeks were flushed, and he hoped Bull thought it was from anger alone.

‘Uh huh,’ Bull said, stretching his legs out even further, crossing one ankle over the other. ‘You gonna ask me how my trip was?’

‘What are you doing here?’ Cullen said, his voice sharp.

‘We had a good little jaunt,’ Bull continued, his voice amiable. ‘I got a lot of blood on my axe, and Varric complained non-stop about the tree roots but I guess he is kinda little and can’t just jump over all of them. I mean, I couldn’t jump over all of them.’

Cullen stared at him. The anger was starting to fritter away into something else. For a moment he thought of saying how difficult things had been. Then he thought of needling at him, saying that he was perfectly happy with his roof until Bull had looked at it the way he had. Like Cullen was somehow worth *more*.

‘I did see they’re redoing the roof,’ Bull said quietly. ‘Not surprised they had to strip it. Didn’t realise you were going to do it so soon. Surprised to find you here, though.’

‘If you must know,’ Cullen said, as patiently as he could manage, ‘staying in the main hall with that nonsense is enough to drive a man to insanity.’

‘Shit, Josephine put you in the main hall?’ Bull said.

‘Where else?’ Cullen muttered. ‘Something about appearances and the Game… This place is as good as any other. Stresses are high, which renders the Herald’s Rest even more necessary for soldiers to escape to – there’s no escape for them if I’m staying there. It’s probably a little too late for me to work on some friendly rapport when the world could end at any point.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, closing his eye briefly. ‘Yeah, okay. Doesn’t sound like it’s been much fun.’

‘How perceptive of you,’ Cullen said, and then bit his tongue hard enough that he nearly winced.
What was wrong with him? He forced himself to take a deep breath, another. He felt out of sorts, and he shifted and made himself lean back into the cold wall, in the hopes that if he convinced his body it was relaxed, it would relax. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I was looking for you,’ Bull said. ‘Couldn’t sleep.’

Cullen’s brow furrowed and he looked at Bull closely. Bull looked about as well as he ever did, except that there was something tense about the corners of his mouth.

‘Are you…all right?’

‘About as much as I always am,’ Bull said. ‘Don’t really wanna talk about it. Would you ever spar again?’

Cullen nodded slowly.

‘I’m better than I was,’ Bull said, grinning at him. ‘You can’t just go low into my blind side and cut up anymore. I learned.’

‘Good,’ Cullen said.

That was good. It meant he was more likely to survive out in the field. It also meant that others would take advantage of a blind spot that was more thoroughly defended than it had been before. The first time Cullen had sparred with Bull, he’d agreed to go up against any of the Chargers that wanted to go against him. He’d fought against Bull last, and realised that Bull was an efficient, brutal fighter, and that he left himself way too open. Telegraphed his blind spot in a way that indicated the loss of his eye wasn’t something that had happened in his youth.

‘I don’t see you out there as much,’ Bull said. ‘Why’s that? Oh, wait, cuz you actually have an army now instead of like…fifty soldiers, right?’

‘That’s about the sum of it,’ Cullen said. ‘Though I’ve been finding more reasons lately. I’d like to be ready for what’s coming. Not only in terms of strategy, but physically. I might not be able to fight as I used to, but there’s still room for improvement.’

He stared ahead when he realised what he’d just said. ‘I might not be able to fight as I used to.’

Bull didn’t know about the lyrium, so perhaps Cullen could just brush that off as being in his office too often. But that was a slip, and one he knew better than to make.

‘You ever wrestle?’ Bull said.

‘Hand to hand?’ Cullen said, raising his eyebrows. ‘Yes, actually. Samson, of all people, taught me. He was – as he likes to tell it – quite the scrapper back in the day. Before then my hand to hand was basic blocking and fist work and so on.’

‘And now?’

‘Well, I don’t know how it is now, but for some time I think I had a taste for it. And I—’

Cullen stared at the door leading into the storage room, and then his skin crawled, his spine felt cold. He tensed and stared at Bull.

‘Did they see you come in here?’ Cullen said, his voice thinner than before. ‘Hensley and Bearnard?’
Bull shrugged. ‘I was looking for you. They told me where you were.’

Cullen felt numbed. What would they think? Were they talking to each other now, keeping each other company during the night-watch? Speculating? Would rumours spread? Soldiers talked.

‘See,’ Bull said, picking up the pack he’d brought with him – different to the larger sack he usually had, ‘I told them we played chess sometimes, if one of us couldn’t sleep. Then the older bloke said he understood, and that he had a similar exchange with a friend. And then I actually brought the chessboard with me, cuz I figured if you weren’t here, I could at least set it up and make it look like people come here sometimes to play chess.’

Bull put the chessboard down on the table and then tilted his head.

‘But you’re still freaking out, aren’t you?’

Cullen thought that was a rather succinct and accurate way of putting it, because he was, indeed, freaking out. He nodded before he thought to pretend nonchalance.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, ‘even though you and I aren’t doing it, people fuck. You know. Josie does. Nightingale does. They all do. Even Solas, though he probably has to remove the stick from his ass first. And I’m not counting Cole for obvious reasons. The only person who thinks they have to be a eunuch is you. Your time is your own time. Shit, Cullen, I think some of those people out there would be a little relieved to know you were human.’

Cullen’s lips thinned, he couldn’t help but smile bitterly at that. He looked away from Bull, and the door, and stared at the expanse of wall that he usually stood against during sessions with Bull. The blanket beneath him was itchy. He had a mild rash on his thighs. His hands were cold. He thought of Hensley and Bearnard outside on the battlements, wondering if chess was a good enough reason for the Iron Bull to seek out the Commander of the Inquisition at Maker only knew what time in the morning.

‘I do not believe that you truly wish to see how human I can be,’ Cullen said carefully. ‘Nor do I think those people out there truly wish to see a Commander confuse the hierarchy by-’

‘What hierarchy?’ Bull said. ‘I’m not your subordinate. I work for the Inquisition and specifically, I work for the Inquisitor. You direct me on her orders, and if you say something she doesn’t agree with, she trumps your word. I didn’t pledge myself to your army and neither did my Chargers. Fuck, Cullen, at least use the reason that I’m Qunari. That I could get. People from Ferelden still have issues with that. A lot of people do.’

‘You’re in a bad mood tonight,’ Cullen said, realising that this was not going to be the kind of evening where he could try and escalate a fight with Bull, and Bull would calm him down. This would be the kind of evening where if he wanted a fight – a real one – he’d get one. And suddenly he was too tired. It wasn’t as though Bull looked like he really wanted one either. He was still slouching back in the chair looking annoyed, but also troubled.

‘Guess I am,’ Bull said finally.

‘But you don’t want to talk about it,’ Cullen said, looking at him.

‘Nope,’ Bull said.

‘Chess?’ Cullen said, keeping his position against the wall and trying to work out what was going on. This wasn’t…anything like what had happened before. And people didn’t come to him for emotional support. Except for Cassandra, which was baffling. The only other people who ever
really tried that were recruits who somehow thought he’d be a good source of sympathy. They were almost always wrong.

‘Nah,’ Bull said.

‘Oh, let me guess,’ Cullen said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. ‘Wrestling?’

A corner of Bull’s lip quirked up, and Cullen shook his head.

‘Do you even know what time it is?’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Why do you think I’m here instead of asking Krem to hit me? If I wake Krem now, he will hit me, but he’ll do it while I’m sleeping. I’m not a fan.’

‘You woke me,’ Cullen said, beginning to laugh.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said nodding. ‘But you’re not gonna come into the tavern and hit me while I sleep.’

‘I suppose that’s fair,’ Cullen said. Bull himself seemed to be perking up a little more, but now that Cullen was looking at him more closely, he noticed that there was a shadow beneath his eye, that there was a sadness to his mouth even when he was smiling. He looked world weary, and Cullen hadn’t heard of anything in the Emerald Graves that might have caused it, but he knew enough to know that the past had a way of speaking through the years when it wanted to. ‘I’ve just realised that you want to do this now, don’t you?’

‘It can keep,’ Bull said, tilting his head back until his horns just brushed the wall.

Could it? Cullen thought it through quickly. He could wrestle quietly. The wind on the battlements tended to scour sounds away or mute them. He’d likely lose and take a few bruises, but the experience wouldn’t hurt. It would take, what, a couple of minutes? Bull would be able to get something out of his system, and Cullen knew he’d do a better job at that, than he would talking it out.

‘All right,’ Cullen said, standing and rubbing his hand against the back of his neck, looking around the room. He walked over to the door and pushed the bolt through, locking it. ‘Come on then.’

‘Now?’ Bull said. But though his tone was surprised, there was an eagerness on his face.

‘Don’t think I want to make a habit of this,’ Cullen said. ‘I do have work tomorrow.’

‘You have work every damned day,’ Bull muttered. ‘You’re the kind of guy that only takes a day off when he’s too sick to move, and then thinks that’s a holiday.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Cullen said, glad that he’d had enough experience with lying to others about his health and wellbeing, that it didn’t sound sarcastic so much as sincere.

‘Uh huh,’ Bull said, standing up and pushing his arms out in front of him, linking his hands together and bending them backwards until knuckles cracked. ‘Doesn’t seem like a fair fight.’

‘You knew that,’ Cullen said, almost laughing. ‘You still chose to come here.’

‘Thought you’d be all smart and shit about it, and say something like ‘tomorrow.’”

Cullen looked down at his loose pants, his socks, his thin shirt. Not exactly sparring clothing but then, this wasn’t really a sparring ground. He mentally prepared himself to take some knocks on the stone and then felt his stance shift and change as Bull circled halfway across the room, gazing
at Cullen in calculation.

‘Rules?’ Bull said, eye gleaming.

‘Make it simple. First one to be pinned to the count of three loses. Nothing to the groin, neck or face.’

‘Y’know, this is way more fun when both parties are naked and there’s jelly or mud or like… slippery shit.’

Cullen dropped his arms and was in the middle of rolling his eyes when Bull rushed him. Cullen only just managed to get out of the way, gasping in both shock and something almost like laughter, making sure to cut a wide berth away from him.

‘You did that on purpose,’ Cullen said, thinking that this was absurd and…and fun.

‘On the list of your weaknesses, it should say something like: ‘flushes like a virginal handmaiden on her wedding night,’ when told about some of the better things in life.’

‘Well, then,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes and staying light on his feet, his arms up protecting his chest and face. ‘If that’s how you really feel about it.’

‘But I know how crude some of your soldiers are. So it’s a little bit me, isn’t it? Come on, admit it. I get to you.’

‘Oh, for Maker’s sake,’ Cullen said, dodging out of the way of a clumsy grab. Bull wasn’t making any serious moves yet. He was playing it safe. As Cullen had with their first chess match.

Cullen remembered some of the advice he’d been given over the years. He wasn’t some novice when it came to hand to hand combat, and Samson had been an enthusiast in the sport. Samson was proud of what he could achieve with only his body, without a weapon in his hands. And some of that advice – tips and tricks he’d never thought he’d use – was going to come in handy now.

‘Remember, friend, they got bone in those horns. They look like weapons, but they’re still sensitive. And they never expect you to go for ‘em.’

Bull ducked low, pressing forwards. Cullen didn’t back up as he was supposed to, but instead stepped in and reached out. He grabbed the jut of horn on the right hand side and pulled down sharply. Bull grunted, his body bowing to the side, his arms flashed out, but Cullen finished the move, chopping down on the other side of the horn where it met craggy skin. The shock of it jarred through the heel of his hand, and he moved back as quickly as he could.

Surprisingly, Bull did the same. He stood up, got his horns out of reach. Stared at Cullen with a wide eye.

For a few seconds, fear gripped Cullen. What if he’d done something that truly hurt? But even as he opened his mouth to apologise, something hungry and pleased skated over Bull’s face. His mouth pulled into a toothy grin, and his eye narrowed.

‘Where the fuck did you learn that?’ Bull said, his voice lower, darker than before.

‘Can’t say I recall,’ Cullen said, keeping his arms in front of his body, because this was about to become a lot more than a light-hearted wrestling session.

‘Fuck,’ Bull breathed, his grin widening. ‘C’mere.’
It sounded friendly, but with the way Bull stepped towards him, Cullen knew that things were definitely about to become a lot more serious. Cullen’s heart began to pound a lot harder. Warmth shot along his spine. This was an old, familiar feeling. Even before he pledged himself to the lyrium, the certainty of battle, the fire of the fight – it lit him from the inside. He found himself mirroring Bull’s expression – a tighter, restrained version; but a reflection all the same.

The next time Bull grabbed him, he was careful of his horns. Instead of using them to pin and intimidate, he’d alternate between swinging them out of the way or shifting to protect his neck. Cullen knew it was tempting to think of Bull as slow because he was so large, but he knew the opposite was true. Bull could move and when he wanted to, the bulk of his weight only added to that velocity. There was only so much Cullen could manage before he found himself being gripped hard – one hand on his upper arm and the other just holding his flank and pressing bruises into his skin – and hauled towards the ground.

But Cullen had learned how to fall, he knew how to hit the ground and get up quickly. And he knew that everyone had weak points. So when he got up the second time, he managed to get Bull down to his knees in the process. Their breathing was hard, and Cullen was relieved that it hadn’t all been over in ten seconds. That would have been embarrassing. This was something else entirely.

Bull’s eye sparkled with a kind of determination that Cullen had seen on him before – in the practice ring, or when sparring with his Chargers. It wasn’t buoyant or joyful. It was hungry, even desperate. Cullen was suddenly sure that the longer he could make this last, the more Bull would get out of it.

So he didn’t hold back when he saw an opening, kicked towards Bull’s weaker knee. Not the shin this time, he’d learned his lesson. But the flesh above, where it wasn’t protected by the brace and the tendons would be overworked, compensating for a damaged joint.

‘Shit, you fight dirty,’ Bull grumbled, not looking at all mad.

But he did look dangerous.

Cullen huffed out a breath and tried not to think about how ridiculous this was. He wasn’t even dressed for it.

‘Guess you didn’t just make Commander ’cuz you’re pretty,’ Bull drawled.

Cullen blinked at him, shocked, and was seconds too late to block Bull from launching up off the floor into his gut, using that momentum to drive him so quickly off his feet that his back hit the stone and then kept skidding backwards. Cullen rolled with it, tried to get away despite the breath that had been smacked right out of his lungs. Bull grabbed his thigh, dragged him forwards, and Cullen twisted both his legs around Bull’s arm, a crushing force loosening Bull’s grip. Cullen managed to get away, backing up, giving himself space.

‘Shit,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘I thought this was gonna be easy.’

Cullen couldn’t help but see the parallel. Had Bull thought this was going to go down the same way that Cullen had thought their chess games would? That he’d throw a few bouts so that he could get what he wanted in the future?

Then he had no time to think at all. Bull rushed him again, and Cullen found himself in a grappling match a hair too close to the side of too serious and too brutal. Fingers dug bruises wherever they touched him. At one point, finding himself nearly trapped and being borne towards the ground, he shifted and bit hard into whatever bit of skin he could reach. Bull’s forearm, it turned out. Bull
grunted, and Cullen almost got his legs under him before he was slammed down into the floor, his arms underneath his back and his hands grazing on the stone.

He realised a few things at once. Bull’s hand was already under Cullen’s head, stopping it from bouncing on the stone. The considerate nature of it was startling. Bull was straddling him, and both of them breathed roughly. Bull’s body temperature was like a furnace against him as they stared at each other. Cullen felt some answering heat in his own body. If he’d had any ability to lean up, he would have moved, would have stolen the kiss that he suddenly wanted.

Instead he lay there, a hand pinning him at his chest, and Bull’s other hand sliding out from beneath his head and then moving – slowly – to Cullen’s neck. Large fingers slid around the tense muscles, palm resting hot against Cullen’s throat.

Maker.

‘I think you yield,’ Bull said, fingers twitching around Cullen’s throat, eye blazing.

‘If you like,’ Cullen said weakly.

‘If you like,’ he says,’ Bull said, his head lowering until Cullen could feel Bull’s breath against his face. ‘Say it, Cullen. Say it for me.’

Cullen had to bite the inside of his lip to stop himself from swearing, then. The storage room had never been quite this warm, had it? He squirmed and then went very still when he realised that Bull was hard against him, and that his own cock felt rather…imprisoned by the pants he’d taken to wearing while lying upon the canvas sheeting and the hay.

Bull’s head lowered more, he shifted around Cullen’s thighs until his chest met Cullen’s chest, his hand slipping out from between them and cupping the side of Cullen’s face. Cullen swallowed hard, and he knew Bull could feel it, shuddered when he heard the chuckle that followed.

‘Say it, Cullen. Yield.’

‘And what if I don’t?’ Cullen asked, feeling Bull’s heart beating through the walls of his own chest. He’d never had much cause to think about a Qunari’s heart being larger than his own, but it felt larger. He could barely keep track of his own racing heart now.

Lips brushed against his, surprisingly gentle, like the hand at his neck. Though Bull’s fingers still shifted restlessly on his skin, as though they wanted to move and squeeze. Then a tongue licked possessively over his mouth, and Cullen’s mouth opened, his breath shaking. But Bull didn’t accept the invitation, only stayed breathing against Cullen’s cheek.

‘Say it,’ Bull said, his voice as quiet as before, but commanding now.

‘I…’ Cullen hated the thrill it sent through him. Hated that when he went to turn his head to the side, Bull’s hand tightened and Cullen went still not out of fear, but out of hunger and the need to do the right thing. ‘I yield.’

‘Mmm,’ Bull hummed happily, nipping at Cullen’s bottom lip.

And Cullen could feel himself in some kind of whirlpool that he wanted to fall into. It didn’t matter that his hands were grazed, or that he was bruised – if anything, it helped. He pushed his head up, opened his eyes to make sure that he didn’t miss Bull’s lips and then-

-The blurred outline of horns by candlelight, and the cold stone floor beneath his back and the
knowledge that he was trapped and a voice laughing in the background promising everything he had ever wanted if only he would just give in, if only he would just- If only- He could be like the others. Find some kind of release, even if it was death.

His body, usually so quick to forget, lit up like a beacon of sensory feedback. The scent of blood and rot and the sweeter musk of unnaturally halted decay in his nose. The shimmering burnt carbon scent of a magic barrier that never ended, and the hum of it against his skin that made him feel like he was vibrating every second of every day. Pangs of hunger and that cold angry sensation of his own stomach turning against him, too much acid, too much bile, not enough food to digest. His gut felt leaden, magically sustained, it had taken so long for his intestinal tract to remember what it was supposed to do. The sour taste of his mouth, laughter pressing in all around him, and then the illusions that would crest and take over, that would take him away from the prison for a while, and he would want, so badly, to just give in-

‘Stop!’ Cullen choked. ‘Katoh, please, I-’

The prison was gone and he pushed himself backwards on raw palms until he could stand up against hay bales, listening to the rasp and heave of his own breathing and staring in horror at the room itself, hating how his own mind had betrayed him this time. And not even because of the damned lyrium.

‘Maker,’ Cullen breathed, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead even as he knew Bull was standing on the other side of the room, watching him. His body felt like it was humming. His mouth tasted sour. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t- Not the floor. Just not the floor.’

Bull was never meant to see this. No one was. He stood there gathering his breathing back to himself, but it was like trying to form shattered glass into a whole once more. He couldn’t fix it, even when he began mentally reciting one of the chants in his head. Behind the lurking terror of a time that he should have been able to let go of by now, an anger that it had thwarted this exact moment where he’d wanted. That he already gave Bull so little, and Bull seemed to want this, and Cullen wanted it too, and then this.

‘It wasn’t you,’ Cullen said, hating how his voice shook. In that moment, if he could have struck out at the entire world with his sword and smashed it down before him, he would have done it and regretted not being able to do it a second time. ‘I swear it.’

‘You don’t need to swear anything,’ Bull said quietly. ‘Take a moment.’

‘It wasn’t…’

What Cullen really wanted to say was that it hadn’t been the words they’d exchanged. It hadn’t been that whispered ‘I yield’ and the frightful but exciting thud of his pulse in response to that. Because this had never happened before, and he had yielded far more to Bull in the past, in both words and actions.

He dropped his hands and looked at his palms. The skin was badly grazed on one of his hands, and not so badly on the other. Elfroot salve would heal it up. Or maybe he’d keep them as a reminder of how he constantly failed.

‘I crossed a line anyway,’ Bull said after a minute.

‘No,’ Cullen said, looking up at him and willing him to understand. ‘I wanted- I know it sounds absurd, but it truly was the floor.’ And maybe those horns. ‘This happened a few days…no weeks…ago. It’s why I’m sleeping on the hay. Even though it’s giving me the most frustrating
There, his breathing was starting to fall into place now. His lungs working the way they were supposed to. He took a huge breath and forced it out in a slow exhale, then slumped back against the hay. Even now, it poked into his back.

‘There’s an upshot to all of this,’ Bull said, his expression shifting from troubled to bright. Cullen just stared at him, and Bull shrugged. ‘I know you’ll actually say the watchword if you need to. ‘Cuz I’ve gotta tell you, I was starting to think you just wouldn’t on principle.’

Cullen laughed weakly, beginning to rub the back of his neck before his palm protested the movement.

‘Yes, well. Maybe I’m not the person you should be coming to if you’re having a bad day.’

‘I dunno about that,’ Bull said, stepping forwards cautiously, and then holding a hand out to Cullen. After studying it for a few seconds, Cullen carefully offered his own hand, only for Bull to take it and turn it palm up and look at the grazing. Bull’s thumb smoothed over an unmarked section of skin, and Cullen’s heartbeat went from ‘thundering with terror’ to something far less nauseating.

He looked up at Bull’s horns and knew that they wouldn’t be a problem most of the time. Had never been a problem until he’d had certain memories triggered in this room, and he sighed. Because he’d only wanted positive memories associated with this space. The sisters of the Chantry at Greenfell – between Kinloch and Kirkwall – had taught him about safe spaces. He hadn’t the heart to tell them that a safe space was an illusion, as dangerous as anything Uldred had ever shown him.

‘Maker,’ Cullen breathed again, looking at his hands, both now cradled in Bull’s fingers.

‘You got many things like that?’ Bull said, his voice that same steady quiet that it had been since Cullen had cried the watchword. ‘That set you off like that?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Cullen said. ‘I did…once. I thought they were gone, erased. It was in my best interests to make sure. I suppose…’

‘Okay,’ Bull said. ‘Come sit down for a bit. You think you can do that?’

Cullen gave the most withering glare he could muster. He might have just embarrassed himself, but he wasn’t useless. Bull’s lips only quirked into a half-smile, and he led Cullen over to the table, not letting go of his hands, and looking like he wanted to sling an arm around him. But Cullen was already feeling steadier. Frustrated and embarrassed and even mortified, but steadier.

‘I’m gonna ask you some questions,’ Bull said. ‘You up for that?’

‘I’m not a child,’ Cullen said. ‘You don’t need to constantly check in.’

‘Remember when you said I was like…made for mother henning or some shit? How about you just indulge me. Call it a favour.’

Cullen sighed. That helped. And he nodded and subsided, still feeling like his skin was crawling. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say the barrier had just been removed and he was still jittering from it.

‘You were having the bad day,’ Cullen said, laughing ruefully.
‘Yeah, slamming you into the floor helped a ton though,’ Bull said, rubbing his thumb over the inside of Cullen’s wrist, and then stroking the skin when Cullen didn’t protest. ‘So, I want to be sure. It wasn’t my hand on your throat?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, his cheeks flushing. ‘Not…definitely not that.’

Bull made an appreciative sound, and Cullen thought that really, another person would just make eye contact. Would just see what expression came along with that pleased hum. But Cullen was torn between wanting the ground to open up and swallow him, and still castigating himself for ruining what was shaping up to be a very interesting and distracting evening.

‘Wasn’t me on top of you?’

Cullen hesitated, and he heard Bull’s intake of breath and shook his head quickly.

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘It... When you woke me before, I saw the horns and came to the wrong conclusion. Then when I opened my eyes this time, my- I believe the same thing happened again. It’s never happened before. I have no reason to think it would be a problem in the future, under different circumstances.’

‘Not on a stone floor you mean?’ Bull said.

‘That,’ Cullen said in agreement. He wanted to place a hand over his face.

‘Cullen, have you been thinking about it? You never gave me an answer. You want to take this further or not? Not tonight, obviously.’

‘Obviously,’ Cullen echoed.

Then the silence stretched and Cullen realised that Bull was waiting for an answer. Cullen wasn’t sure he had one to give.

‘It’s complicated,’ Cullen said finally, heavily.

But as he spoke, he felt chastened. Bull was famous – notorious even – for how much he enjoyed the act of sex. And Cullen was getting so much out of the flogging sessions, that he felt like he was short-changing him somehow. It wasn’t that Cullen didn’t want more. He could at the very least be accommodating, couldn’t he?

‘Ideally,’ Cullen said, knowing that nothing good would come of him not thinking this through, ‘I don’t want to risk those sessions.’

‘We don’t have to,’ Bull said. ‘They’re two different things. If we fuck and it doesn’t work out, we can still play chess. The sessions are like that, right?’

‘Right,’ Cullen said. ‘You make it sound awfully easy.’

‘I’m not saying it’ll always be easy,’ Bull said, shrugging. ‘Just saying it doesn’t always have to be hard, either.’

‘I do want... I am curious,’ Cullen said, and then he laughed at himself. ‘I’m also out of practice, you might say. Or flat out inexperienced, depending on the term you’d prefer. And physically there are some...issues.’

‘Sure,’ Bull said, like Cullen was reeling off a list of requisitions. Cullen had to look at him then,
surprised to see that open, warm expression. Not scepticism, not dislike or disdain.

‘You can’t be fine with all of that,’ Cullen said.

‘You’re a shit mind-reader,’ Bull said, smiling. ‘Pretty good at wrestling though. You went for my rack. Haven’t had someone do that in a while. Was pretty common on Seheron, ’cuz they learned. But Ferelden?’

‘I didn’t hurt you too much, did I?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘Threw me off a bit, wasn’t expecting it. It fucking jars. All the way through the skull and down the spine. But you’ve done it once, won’t let you do it again.’

‘I don’t imagine that will be a problem, given all the other ways you leave yourself far too open.’

Bull chuckled, shook his head. And Cullen thought that Bull had been holding his hands for far too long. There was a time limit for that sort of thing, wasn’t there? Especially when Bull wasn’t actually applying any salve. Cullen carefully slipped his hands free and rested them palm up on his knees.

Bull leaned back in his own chair like he wasn’t bothered. He looked around the room, then sighed, scratching at the underside of a horn.

‘It’s the dark for me,’ Bull said. ‘Not specifically the dark. But people sneaking up behind me in the dark, like a cave. It has to be a specific kind of dark. I don’t enjoy it. Neither does the other person. Once nearly brained the boss for doing it. No one’s done it since while I’ve been here. Y’know, you still haven’t given me a yes or no answer about taking things further? You learn that evasiveness from the other advisors? Or you pick that up earlier? Y’know how many of my questions you don’t answer?’

Cullen hesitated. Now that the feeling of the magic barrier was leaving him, he was feeling other things instead – the imprint of large, hot fingers on his neck. The palm against his trachea. How small Bull had made him feel in that moment and how it hadn’t…hadn’t been a problem at all.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Cullen said.

‘Sure.’

‘Do you expect- Do you wish me to give up control there, too? In the bedroom? I’ve heard…rumours.’

‘Ha! I’ll bet. And yeah, I do. Maybe not all the time, but at first? Maybe I think about that sometimes. But if you don’t want that, you just have to say. Anyway, keep thinking about it. I’m gonna head off, leave my chessboard and pieces here, and tell those guys on the battlement that you’re a sore loser.’

‘I am not a-’ and the Cullen took a deep breath and couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

‘Yeah, this definitely helped,’ Bull said, giving him that ridiculous one-eyed wink again.

‘Has anyone ever told you that it’s just very concerted blinking when you don’t have another eye to keep open?’

‘Low blow,’ Bull drawled, but there was a spark in his eye as he heaped the chess pieces on the table, and he was smiling. ‘But that’s okay. I’ll get you back. You wait. You’re not the one holding
the whip in this arrangement.’

Bull ‘winked’ at him again, and then just before he left – his hand on the bolt – he looked over his shoulder and barely missed scraping his horn against the wood.

‘Get some salve on those grazes.’

‘I don’t think I take my orders from you,’ Cullen said, but he smirked all the same. Bull grinned and slid the bolt free.

When the door was finally closed and Cullen was on his own once more – Bull heading out into the night across the battlements – Cullen touched his fingers to his throat as he’d been aching to do. If he’d not had the past intrude the way it had, the night could have gone a completely different direction. Cullen wanted it. Without the flogging to interfere, he knew he wanted it.

But he couldn’t be sure if he just desired a distraction from what other people were affectionately calling the ‘end-times.’ He still wasn’t certain if it was worth the risk, but as he touched his neck – the places where Bull’s fingers had rested – he had a feeling that he was about to make a very stupid decision, and couldn’t quite bring himself to regret it.
Cullen’s renovated room was familiar and completely different all at once. He stood there, taking it in, glad that Talbot had left him in peace so that Cullen could just stare.

The roof was of solid construction, not simply beams placed horizontally across the stone, but fortified with more than one layer of panelling, ensuring better insulation. Cullen realised he couldn’t hear the wind at all anymore and the room felt emptier for it. So instead, Cullen walked to one of the stained glass windows that faced the courtyards and slid it open on rusty hinges that squeaked and stuck, before he forced them with a push. He’d never had need to open them before. After all, he wasn’t a Bowman, he had no use for arbalestina, and clearly whomever had been here before him had felt the same when they hired a glazier.

But it was more than just the roof that they’d repaired. They’d given him new stairs overnight – he hadn’t seen them while working in his office the day before – sturdier construction with wider steps, not just the simple upright work ladder he’d found. The trapdoor they’d given him was spring loaded and weighted to open easily, which was good, because it wasn’t small. It, too, had reinforced layers of wood and could be locked from Cullen’s side, affording him personal privacy in a living space for the first time in his life.

He stared at the bolt mechanism on the trapdoor, then pushed it through. He didn’t feel trapped, exactly, but it was odd. As a child, he’d had no need for locks on doors. As a Templar recruit, he wasn’t permitted them. As a Templar, he needed to be accessible at all times. Even in the time spent at the Greenfell Chantry between Kinloch and Kirkwall, he’d been given privacy through the absence of others, not mechanisms upon doors.

‘Well,’ Cullen said quietly.

The floors had been scrubbed. New rugs of rustic Ferelden design – woven in ochre, brown and gold – had been placed upon the floor to replace the old, red worn things he’d found and hoped would provide some warmth. His simple chest that he’d left empty had another next to it, and an empty bookshelf nearby. Surprisingly, a second wooden rack for his armour, even though he had another with the rest of the Inquisition’s heavy armour stores.
There was even a small, flued hearth with a grate and rack for wood. The stonework was new, and hardly intrusive, but still. A _fireplace_?

In retrospect, Cullen suspected that Talbot had left so quickly so that he didn’t have to account for _all_ the changes.

‘By the Maker,’ Cullen said under his breath. ‘Not a new bed too.’

But there it was. Simple, sturdy Ferelden make, larger than his old one. A solid footboard and headboard, a mattress that felt surprisingly firm under the touch. Was this what they would have given him, back in the beginning? When he’d vanished the work order under a stack of paperwork and then quietly burned it one evening? Or was this some result of Josephine’s machinations, after his reaction to that gaudy monstrosity that she’d tried to get him to use in the main hall?

Cullen pressed down on the mattress again. But his eyes were drawn to an expanse of wall between the chests and the bed. A blank expanse – all ivy now removed – and all Cullen could think was that Bull always seemed to imply he could do so much more in a room with a bed. This would satisfy Bull’s need for that, wouldn’t it? Cullen felt his shoulders tense and relax at the idea of that first flogger – the heavy, thudding one – being used on him again.

It wouldn’t even look so suspicious. Most people tended to use his office as a thoroughfare, and anyone curious might just assume they were both playing chess again in the storage room – especially if he kept that section of battlements clear. He rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. He was reaching. He knew he was reaching.

He sat on the corner of the bed, feeling like he was intruding on someone else’s space. Between the reports he was getting from Emprise du Lion, and the knowledge that a confrontation with Samson – and Corypheus – loomed ever closer, he knew he was seeking distraction. Praying to Andraste and training weren’t helping as much as seeing Bull. Even their chess games helped.

Cullen also knew that he owed Bull _something_, and was fairly certain he knew what that something was. Cullen wanted the flogging more than he wanted the sex. He was sure that Bull wanted the sex more than he wanted the flogging. Cullen knew very well how to compromise, even though he worried over what Bull might think of his lack of experience.

The lyrium had bleached his tastebuds until flavours were no longer so fulsome. It had scourched at his nose until scents were always tinged with something elusive. Stopping the lyrium had even touched his nerve endings, rendering his hands colder than most, sometimes too cold to function. Jacking off after taking the lyrium had been harder – but after Kinloch, it became sometimes impossible to hold the thread of arousal for the length of time he’d needed to spill. He’d spend his time frustrated with his body and its responses, losing access to one of those few things that soldiers did to relieve frustration and tension quickly. If it wasn’t _quick_, he no longer saw the point in it. Far too indulgent, now longer than just a couple of minutes of stress relief. After a while, he just stopped thinking about himself as capable of any sexual pleasure at all.

And while it wasn’t true, it also meant that he’d gone a long time untouched by himself. Even longer untouched by another.

But there were other things he could do, that he could offer, that weren’t contingent on his own arousal. Things he knew of, had seen in darkened corridors, had heard rolling off the filthy tongues of his peers. And they seemed like the kind of things that Bull might like.

There was nothing else for it, he’d have to invite Bull to his room. He just hoped that Bull wouldn’t look at it and think him spoiled. But then, that’s precisely what he was, with a room like
this. He sighed and lay back on the mattress, staring up at the new ceiling, missing his view to the sky.

He hadn’t realised until it was gone – but he’d liked being able to see out of the tower. Still, there was a brisk little breeze coming in through the small window, and that was enough to remind him that this was nothing like Kinloch. That, and the mattress beneath his back.

* 

At eleven in the evening on a Saturday, Bull stood in Cullen’s new room and whistled under his breath, looking pleased. Cullen stood there, aware that he was standing awkwardly, with a hand on his sword hilt in an attempt to make himself look casual. The sack of equipment that Bull often brought with him was here now, and Cullen was tempted to change tack and just ask to be flogged. Because Maker knew he was stressed enough and that would help ease the tension he felt just standing here thinking of doing something different.

‘They went a bit overboard,’ Cullen said, as Bull took in the fireplace, then crouched and ran his hand over the trapdoor. Bull closed the trapdoor and slid the bolt home, and Cullen swallowed. His dry throat clicked.

‘I, uh,’ Cullen said, thinking that there really should have been a way he could have pre-empted this. With a conversation. With something. Because Bull was here expecting one thing, and Cullen was about to suggest something else. But – hopefully – something that would make Cullen feel like there was less of a rising debt between them. ‘I was wondering if we may- I would like to- I don’t want tonight to be about flogging.’

*I don’t want tonight to be about me.*

Bull had already straightened, and when he faced Cullen, that calculating expression was on his face again.

‘So you thought about it,’ Bull said. ‘Us burning off some steam in other ways.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, glad that his voice – at least in that moment – sounded steady. Bull’s expression shifted from calculated to…not pleased exactly, but mischievous. Cullen’s cheeks flamed hot and he cursed his pale Ferelden skin because it telegraphed his nerves for anyone to see. ‘I’d like for us to do…whatever it is that-’

Bull’s expression gained a matching grin to partner it.

‘Personally,’ Bull said, putting his hands on his hips and leaning backwards in a stretch. ‘It helps if you can say what you wanna do. Like, you want me to eat you out?’

‘I-’ Cullen stared at him, thinking that it would be lovely if the ground opened up and swallowed him whole, except that would just mean he’d fall to the office floor instead. Even that might be preferable.

‘You know what that is?’ Bull said, waggling his eyebrow. ‘It’s when I spread you open, and with my tongue, I-’

‘I’ve been around soldiers!’ Cullen squawked, trying not to imagine it and hating that his voice had jumped at least half an octave. ‘I know!’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said lasciviously, ‘I bet. What about you suck me, and then I blow my load on your face? You’ll have to ask though, I think I’d like to see that tongue of yours wrap around the words
first – you gotta know how to handle big words if you wanna handle me.’

‘Oh, for the love of the Maker,’ Cullen muttered.

Cullen raised a hand to his face before he could stop himself, turned half away, some awful combination of shame and humiliation roiling through him. He wanted to try, but he wasn’t—People just didn’t say things like that.

‘Ooo!’ Bull said, more excited by the second it sounded like, ‘how about we-

Cullen made a faint, low sound of muffled embarrassment and Bull started laughing. A full belly laugh. But when Cullen risked looking at him, Bull’s expression was gentle, even if the light in his eye was dancing. He looked insufferably pleased with himself. He’d done it all on purpose, the wretch. Cullen couldn’t stop his own lips from quirking, even as his own inexperience flapped like a flag between them.

‘Well, you did say you liked to see me squirm,’ Cullen said, quite certain that his cheeks had never been so hot. His cold fingers on his face were actually a relief.

‘It should be a national sport, if you ask me,’ Bull said, still laughing.

‘You’re ruthless,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, eye gleaming. ‘Yeah, when I need to be.’

‘And you need to be now?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, tilting his head. ‘You’re skittish remember?’

‘Ah, right, well…’ Cullen rubbed at the back of his neck. It was flaming, he could feel the heat of it against his own palm. ‘That’s an interesting way of dealing with it. Look, I swear I had more of an intention to just…’ he waved his other hand vaguely. ‘This was supposed to be easier.’

‘What do you want?’ Bull said.

‘What do you want?’ Cullen said, staring at him in entreaty.

Bull watched him with that calculating stare that made Cullen feel like he wasn’t just assessing Cullen’s expression, but the very thoughts that were tumbling in his mind. It didn’t help when Bull nodded to himself, as though Cullen had said far more than those four words. Cullen didn’t want to say things like ‘I don’t know what I’m doing,’ because Bull already knew that. What was ceding control here even supposed to look like? Cullen just wanted to square a debt away. It wasn’t as though it was a burdensome thought, but he wasn’t sure what he’d want until he knew more of what was on offer. He didn’t know he’d love that first flogger Bull used, until he’d used it.

‘Hmm,’ Bull said, looking around the room curiously, and then looking down at the sack by his feet. ‘I think I wanna lie down for a bit. And I think, for now, it’s dealer’s choice.’

That didn’t make much sense. Bull reached into the sack and drew out a thin strip of black fabric and bit into it to keep it in place while he unbuckled his harness. He lowered that carefully to the floor and then walked over to the bed, shifting the pillows and easing onto the mattress like someone long-practiced at using furniture not designed for his frame. But the bed was sturdy, it didn’t even creak. Bull propped his head up on a stack of pillows, and the tips of his horns braced against the wood without scratching it.
Then, as Cullen stared speechless, Bull shifted and tied the strip of fabric over his eye.

‘Like the first time we did this,’ Bull said. ‘You can touch me, if you want. Do whatever. Well… within reason. Don’t stab me or anything. And I get to say ‘katoh’ too.’

‘I…’ Cullen cleared his throat. ‘How- You said I was supposed to give up control here too.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, smiling in his direction. ‘Sometimes that’s easier if someone else does it first. Remember?’

Cullen did remember. His hands twitched. The memory of Bull’s breath against his fingertips returned with force, even though that had been weeks and weeks ago now. When he’d stood by Bull and been allowed to touch his face, when he’d wondered what his lips might feel like.

‘All right,’ Cullen said quietly, unbuckling the belt and his attendant sword and sheath. Normally he had them by his bed, but now he decided to lean them by the mostly empty bookshelf, before bending down to unbuckle his boots.

‘You had a good day?’ Bull said, and Cullen blinked down at the rug on the floor.

‘Of a sort,’ Cullen said. ‘You?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said warmly. ‘I think Krem’s getting the hang of a blocking move I’ve been trying to show him. And Stitches is raving about some of the herbs he’s got access to now, and is talking about distilling some shit and…macerating some- I dunno, something about hydrosols? I dunno. But it was nice to see him excited.’

‘I see,’ Cullen said, smiling at the image. He slid his boots and socks off, lined them up neatly and looked over at Bull who was so comfortable that Cullen could believe he blindfolded himself all the time. ‘Krem’s quite something in the field. Do you have much more you want to teach him?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, as Cullen padded over to the bed. He didn’t feel remotely aroused, but he wasn’t entirely sure he was supposed to. Cullen sat on the side of his own mattress, and then moved his legs onto the bed properly. Even though the bed was large, Bull made it seem far smaller. Cullen looked up at his horns, at how much space they took up.

‘Like what?’ Cullen said, looking over Bull’s body and lifting his right hand, before hesitating. ‘My fingers are cold.’

‘I know,’ Bull said. ‘It bother you?’

‘Does it bother you?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said, smiling. ‘Also, Krem just… He’s not been trained to it. There’s so much basic stuff he just doesn’t have. Like, he’s picked up bits and pieces, he’s eager, but short of just making him do drills nonstop – which is no life for a Charger – it’s just…finding the biggest holes and patching them.’

‘You might ask Briony if she can get Gerrid to give Krem an assessment.’

‘Yeah, Gerrid,’ Bull said and then went quiet when Cullen placed a hand on his flank. Palm flat. Feeling the skin there, how warm he was. Cullen swallowed again, curled his fingers lightly. Perhaps a more confident person would simply slide their hand between Bull’s legs. They’d just take him in a firm grip and know everything. Was that what Bull was used to?
Cullen just wanted to touch him.

‘Anyway,’ Bull said, as Cullen started following the contours of muscle up towards Bull’s shoulder, not down. ‘Gerrid’s taken a look. He’s picked up the same things I have mostly. That Krem doesn’t block for shit. Krem spent too long in Tevinter, with that offensive fucking fighting style.’

‘Pun intended?’ Cullen said drily.

‘Yeah, both kinds of offensive. I mean you’ve seen the ‘Vint, right? Those mages just throw themselves in front of danger and well- It works, because we’re still fighting them for Seheron. But that’s only really great if you have a long stick and fire or ice at the end of it. Krem doesn’t have that. He’s picked up battle techniques from mages and just kind of throws himself into it and it’s effective, for now, but…’

‘You don’t want him hurt,’ Cullen said. He pressed his thumb to the underside of Bull’s jaw, felt the pulse there, heavy and warm, pumping all that blood through his body. Then Cullen reached up with his other hand and curled his fingers around the base of one of Bull’s horns.

At that, Bull stilled. Cullen waited, but Bull said nothing at all, so Cullen ran his thumb along the keratinous corrugations. The horn was warm. When Cullen gripped it harder and dragged his palm along it, creating resistance for himself, Bull sighed and lost some of his tension.

It wasn’t until Cullen repeated the motion a third time, that he realised he was…well…doing something rather suggestive to Bull’s horn and he couldn’t help laugh under his breath at the ridiculousness of it, even though he liked it. When he dragged blunt nails over the horn towards the tip, Bull tipped his head towards Cullen, then his whole body shifted towards him.

‘What’s it like?’ Cullen said.

‘Nice,’ Bull said. ‘Hey, you mentioned you had issues with this kind of stuff. What kind of issues? With me? Something else?’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, his other hand stilling on ribs. He watched as Bull’s hands came up and grasped his hand. Fingers encircling his wrist, and then a thumb finding the centre of his palm and digging in hard enough that Cullen’s breath caught. His fingers twitched in response, and Bull’s other hand tightened even harder around his wrist, a shackle that felt bruising. ‘I…’

‘Tell me,’ Bull said.

‘Not with you,’ Cullen said, realising that he wasn’t really doing anything to Bull’s horn now except hanging on. ‘It’s…’

He wasn’t going to bring up the lyrium, and he frowned, thinking of how best to phrase it. Then he thought of Bull being crude before, and decided being direct was likely the best way through this.

‘It takes me longer than it used to. I can have problems staying hard sometimes. Or getting hard. But it’s not as though I’ve had a great deal of active experience to know just how bad those issues are. I just thought- Well, just because you don’t get the physical reaction you want, doesn’t mean that I’m not enjoying myself.’

‘But you’re saying you don’t actually know either way, for sure? You’re guessing?’

‘It’s an educated guess,’ Cullen said blandly.
He released Bull’s horn and shifted, losing patience with the conversation. He bowed over Bull’s body and pressed his mouth to Bull’s skin and muscle where it stretched over his ribs. Tasted salt and something bitter, nostrils flaring as he licked a stripe towards the centre of Bull’s sternum. There was so much of him. And even here, there were scars. He felt the slight dip and ridge of them underneath his lips and tongue.

‘You Templars, you’re allowed to fuck around, but it must be hard when you’re often as caged up in a Circle as mages are.’

The hand around Cullen’s wrist squeezed, and Cullen blinked, thinking that somewhere the control had slipped, and he wasn’t even sure how.

‘So you fancy you know all about it, do you?’ Cullen said, looking up from Bull’s chest and thinking that this was very dangerous ground.

‘Didn’t say that,’ Bull said, but he dug the tip of his thumb even harder into Cullen’s palm, and Cullen winced. His nostrils flared. Perhaps another person would have tried to get away from it. The top-note of sharp pain underlyng a steady, constant ache. But Cullen liked the way it trailed up his arm, liked that he could even feel it in the tension of his shoulder.

He bent down and pressed his open mouth to Bull’s chest once more. He breathed for a few beats, because the pain was relentless and he wondered if Bull was testing him, seeing what he would take. Or if this was something else. But it was bearable and he flicked his tongue at Bull’s skin once more. It wasn’t as rough as he thought it might be, given that it was weathered from years of wearing a leather harness and being exposed to the elements.

Bull’s nipple was already peaked when he reached it, the skin nubby and textured beneath his tongue. When Cullen sucked at it, Bull rumbled some deep sound that was nothing like laughter, and Cullen gripped Bull’s shoulder with his other hand and felt a brief wash of heat flow through him. He wanted to create more of those noises. Wanted these signs that he was doing well.

‘Too much clothing,’ Bull said, letting go of Cullen’s wrist and grasping a handful of his shirt. ‘Strip.’

‘I thought I was the one who had control,’ Cullen said against Bull’s skin.

‘Yeah, but things change,’ Bull said philosophically. ‘Gotta roll with life’s punches and-’

‘All right, I understand,’ Cullen said, and he went to lean back to take off his shirt, when the hand at his shoulder tightened and Cullen hissed. The fingertips were digging deep enough to bruise.

‘You do like interrupting me, don’t you?’ Bull said, that mischievous smile back at his mouth again. ‘Even when I asked you not to.’

‘I like interrupting nonsense when I hear it,’ Cullen said, jerking his shoulder away and then working at his shirt.

‘Y’know, when I was hired, people warned me about you. I did hear you were the ‘no nonsense’ sort. No one told me you were a sassy asshole though.’

Cullen shook his head, but there was an odd warmth in his chest and in his mouth – the echo of Bull’s skin. The taste lingered too, and as he pulled his shirt over his head, he licked at the roof of his mouth. After that, he bent forwards and halted when a palm pressed into his chest.

‘All of it,’ Bull said.
‘It’s not like you can see,’ Cullen said, his hands drifting down to the hem of his pants and lingering.

‘I can feel though,’ Bull said slowly. ‘And I want you stripped. Your room’s warm enough. You can command to your heart’s content later, Cullen. C’mon now.’

Cullen was tempted to mutter something under his breath, but Bull’s hearing would pick it up anyway, and so Cullen just slid off the bed and made quick work of his pants and his smalls. He’d thought about leaving them, but he wanted to taste Bull’s skin again. His wrist throbbed. He looked down at the skin.

‘Uh,’ Cullen said, clearing his throat. ‘Bull, will this bruise? My wrist?’

‘Yep.’

‘I think-’

‘There’s this amazing thing called elfroot,’ Bull said, grinning toothily. ‘Heard of it?’

‘You do it on purpose, I swear,’ Cullen muttered, getting back onto the bed and placing a bracing hand on Bull’s chest, just as Bull slung a long arm around his back and jerked him forwards. Cullen fell awkwardly, both of their chests pressing together, and Cullen thought that Bull was just…too much of one person, and that there was no way he liked it, especially when Bull was being so aggravating.

But then that hand at his back trailed up and cupped the back of his neck, and then fingers smoothed into his hair and Cullen’s head bowed and he bit the inside of his lip. His thoughts scattered. There was something else that he was supposed to be doing…but he couldn’t for a moment think of what that was.

Bull’s hand in his hair became pressure at the side of his head, gentle nudges that had Cullen turning to look in the direction that Bull was pushing.

*Oh.*

‘Down,’ Bull said.

With that, the sense that Cullen had any control at all began to evaporate – even if Bull was the one wearing the blindfold. And Cullen shifted with Bull’s touch, because he had truly come here to give something to Bull, to do what he wanted; and if Bull wanted that then, well, he’d done it before while plastered. Though there was a part of him that wished he could imbibe more spirits for this too.

When Cullen found himself effectively pushed down to Bull’s crotch, he supported himself with one hand on Bull’s thigh, the other by his hip. Bull’s pants were colourful, and beneath them he could see the faint outline of a semi-hard cock. He shifted the hand on Bull’s thigh up to the hem of his pants and then left his fingers there, thinking that he was already making a fool of himself.

‘I can hear you thinking from here,’ Bull said.

‘I, on the other hand, can’t hear any thoughts coming from you at all,’ Cullen said absently.

‘Ouch.’

Cullen skimmed his fingertips along the elastic of Bull’s pants. This was supposed to be *easier.*
But then, Bull was also half hard so, perhaps he was into inexperience?

*Maker, no, that might be worse.*

He felt his own soft cock between his legs like damning evidence that he wasn’t giving enough back somehow. He owed more. Much more. A voice in his head began clamouring that he just needed to push down Bull’s pants and grasp him and get to work. Was shouting battlefield metaphors and analogies. Cullen’s joints locked up, and when he felt fingers in his hair, it wasn’t enough to make him *move*.

‘You’re gonna take your left hand, and slide it into my pants,’ Bull said. ‘Nice and easy.’

Bull’s voice was thicker than before, and Cullen watched his hand move as though it didn’t belong to him anymore. Didn’t the cold fingers *bother* him? Cullen risked looking at Bull’s face even as he slipped his fingers beneath that elastic hem into a much sharper heat. But it was hard to make out his expression without eye contact. That small, cryptic smile could have meant anything.

Beneath his fingers and palm he felt the coarse thickness of pubic hair, a dense thatch of the stuff. He looked down again, but couldn’t see anything except the outline of his fingers through the cloth. His mouth opened a little, ghosting down into a thicker, humid heat and his thumb brushed against a firming ridge of skin, and his heart was racing not just with fear or nerves or awkwardness now, but something else entirely.

Still, he hesitated, because this was different to simply standing or sitting and taking a flogging. With every move he could somehow damn himself. He couldn’t-

‘Go on, Cullen. It’s not a sword. It’s not gonna cut you if you pick it up wrong.’

‘I’m not sure it helps,’ Cullen said, scowling, ‘that you keep bringing up how much I don’t know what I’m doing.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, chuckling. ‘Maybe I’m not doing it to help you.’

Cullen cleared his throat, curled his fingers around the base of Bull’s cock and then squeezed lightly.

‘Reckless, isn’t it? I could really hurt you.’

‘I know you could, little lion,’ Bull said, like he absolutely believed it. ‘But how about you just be nice to me, instead? Yeah? Pull me out. And stop talking for a bit. Find something to do with your mouth.’

It should have been offensive, someone talking to him like that. He was flushing all over again, aware of his nakedness, biting the inside of his mouth when his cock twitched between his legs in response to those *words*.

Cullen ran his hand down Bull’s length, trying not to think too much about the size, trying not to think things like ‘how will it fit.’ Instead, he noticed the change in skin texture, softer than he’d thought, veins beneath his palm, and his callouses catching lightly, dragging loose skin with him before it moved back into place. When he reached the bulbous tip peeking from foreskin, he cupped his hand over it, trailed fingertips around the rim of the head and listened to the way Bull’s breathing changed. Not much, just slower inhales, longer exhales.

He knelt properly so he could use his other hand to lift the hem of Bull’s pants and slide Bull out. There was still a hand in his hair – fingers curling over the side of his head – and Cullen’s nerves
were fraying away under the heat he held in his hand.

So he bent down without any urging, placing his lips on the side of Bull’s cock, his hand squeezing and relaxing reflexively, thinking of what he used to like doing with himself. Here, now, he could synthesise so many different things he’d hear amongst raucous, ribald Templars and warriors who would discuss sex to take their minds off battle.

He knew not to use teeth. He knew to use his tongue. He knew that the underside of a cock was more sensitive for most people than the top. He’d learned more from overhearing conversations over the years, than he had those times he’d been too drunk to remember much more than the feeling of being overwhelmed and how good it had felt to be on his knees, and how he could never share that with anyone.

Still, he’d never handled anyone this large, and when he licked over the tip – the rasp of tongue making Bull’s breathing hitch – Cullen didn’t feel powerful or like he was doing a good job, he felt intimidated again. His saliva was already drying along Bull’s shaft, even as Cullen jacked him slowly, Bull almost fully hard in his grip now.

How in the Void did he manage to sleep with so many people, when he was this big?

And then Bull was sitting up, and Cullen felt a swoop of nausea move through him at the idea that he was about to be pushed away. He could imagine Bull saying any number of things: ‘I’ll do it, if you can’t,’ or ‘I suppose this really isn’t like you and swords, because you have no idea what you’re doing, do you?’ His breathing sped up, and then he blinked when he felt fingers at his mouth, running across the thinned lines of his lips.

‘Open up,’ Bull said from above him.

Cullen opened his mouth, grateful to have something to do. And then an index finger slid possessively into his mouth, and Cullen’s breathing stuttered, his cock beginning to fill with blood. Bull’s finger was invasive, sliding between his lips and his teeth, pushing between his cheek and molars, dipping underneath his tongue and pressing down before pulling his finger out, a string of saliva following. Cullen swallowed, went to close his mouth, and Bull grunted.

‘No,’ he said, ‘keep it open.’

Cullen exhaled hard, and then that finger was back with his own cooled saliva on it, sliding over his tongue and pushing deeper, and Cullen was gripping Bull’s cock too hard and Bull wasn’t even complaining.

A blunt finger brushed the back of his throat, and Cullen jerked, choked. But Bull kept his finger there, where it was sensitive and ticklish and threatening, and Cullen struggled to keep his mouth open, even as it rapidly filled with saliva, even as he wanted to close his mouth and swallow. But he didn’t move back, didn’t shift, listened to the hand at the back of his head which held him in place. Listened to that rising ache in his cock, even as his nostrils flared.

‘You’re gonna push up with the back of your tongue, keep your mouth open, and swallow,’ Bull rumbled to him, the words thick.

So Cullen did just that, nearly triggering his gag reflex. Pushing his tongue up meant he didn’t have to close his mouth to swallow, and he managed to keep the saliva in his mouth from overflowing.

‘Again,’ Bull said.
So Cullen swallowed again, and Bull pushed his finger further with the motion of Cullen’s throat. Cullen’s eyes flew open, he rasped for breath and then pulled back sharply, coughing, even as Bull’s hand dropped towards the death grip that Cullen had on his cock, and stroked his fingers until he loosened them.

‘Fuck yeah,’ Bull breathed, and Cullen made a low, helpless sound, his hips wanting to push against something. ‘Open your mouth again. Wider. Let me get myself in there.’

Even Cullen’s ears were burning, though he opened his mouth, stretching his jaw even further when Bull’s fingers hooked over his lower teeth and pulled hard. His mouth was aching even before Bull fisted himself and pushed the head of his cock between Cullen’s lips. And Cullen had a hard grip on Bull’s thigh now, rucking up the fabric of his pants, trying to keep his teeth clear and realising that putting his tongue over his bottom teeth made things a lot easier.

Fingers raked over the back of his head, and Cullen sank lower, sucking automatically, thinking that until this moment, he wasn’t aware that a line had been crossed. Not until right now, when he suddenly pictured Bull sitting in the Herald’s Rest with a tankard of ale in his hand talking about how the Commander liked to suck Qunari cock.

‘That’s perfect,’ Bull whispered from above him, sounding reverent, sincere, and not at all like someone who was going to jeer at him later. Cullen felt something in his shoulders go loose. He could be good at this, couldn’t he? Or if not…good, then certainly serviceable. He made a small, cut off noise in the back of his throat, forcing himself down further, and Bull’s fingers hesitated in his hair, and then reached down and traced his stretched lips.

Cullen grunted, his hips jerked downwards without any input from him, though in the position they were in, his own cock met nothing but air. Bull’s pants were getting damp with sweat already, where he clutched the fabric too hard.

‘Lift up a sec,’ Bull said, and Cullen didn’t want to, resisted the fingers that slipped underneath his chin and lifted him, and then didn’t look up when Bull’s cock slid free and bobbed stiffly in the air. ‘What?’ Bull said, sounding amused, ‘you’re gonna fight me for it?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘But if you’d give me more than thirty seconds, I’m sure-’

‘I’m gonna give you a lot more than thirty fucking seconds,’ Bull growled. ‘But you’re in the wrong position for this. Straddle my leg.’

Bull splayed his own legs, sitting up properly now, and Cullen shifted and swung a leg over and tried not to think about how this would give him something to grind down against, because it wasn’t supposed to be about him. He looked askance, trying to get his thoughts together. This wasn’t…this wasn’t him trying to please for his own needs, he was trying to give something. Could he not even do that right? He just needed more time. But when he moved forwards, bent low again, a hand at his chest stopped him.

‘What now?’ Cullen said, exasperated.

Bull laughed, the sound starting low in his belly and shaking through him. He hooked a hand underneath Cullen’s armpit and dragged him up, dipping his head and missing Cullen’s lips with his own. Then Bull’s mouth was on his, tongue pushing in slow and deep, a pleased rumble vibrating into Cullen’s mouth. Bull’s saliva tasted harsher than he’d expected, and savoury, and still good, and Cullen’s knees splayed on either side of Bull’s thigh as he rocked forward, one of his hands curling into Bull’s belly, and the other flexing on his pants.
A minute passed, then another, and Bull showed no signs of slowing down. He licked coyly at Cullen’s bottom lip, and then when Cullen opened his mouth further, Bull bit instead, that small flash of pain dizzying and welcome. Soon, Cullen was panting, and trying to follow Bull’s lead. He’d not had much experience at kissing, and Bull didn’t seem to care that Cullen couldn’t keep up, or that he was the one messing up their timing. And when their movements did synchronise, Cullen forgot to breathe evenly, losing himself in heat and lust.

When Bull finally tipped his head back, Cullen leaned forwards against the hand under his arm, wanting more.

For a few seconds, all Cullen felt was the frustration of being held back, and the rasp of his own breathing in his throat.

‘So kissing works,’ Bull said, like he was talking to himself, but he was smiling, and Cullen could have sworn that he could see right through the blindfold – Cullen could feel that stare. ‘Now, if your mouth is full, you can’t say katoh, can you? So-’

‘Why would I need to say the watchword when doing something like this?’ Cullen said impatiently.

He winced and gasped when the fingers at his arm dug in hard. He was shaken quickly, his eyes flying wide.

‘Stop interrupting me,’ Bull growled.

And that wasn’t playful or friendly. That was an order given by someone sick of giving the order, and Cullen went still, even as he felt his cock get harder, even as he thought that shouldn’t ever be something that someone liked.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, his voice thin. ‘All right.’

‘I like that you like to fight,’ Bull said slowly, ‘but I don’t like that you fight me trying to look after you. And you do it by trying to take control back. And you’re rude about it. You can push me, Cullen, but I will fucking push back. And that’s why you have the watchword in the first place, right?’

‘Right,’ Cullen said, staring at him, unable to look away. He felt like Bull had somehow created a bubble of space in his room. A moment where he was nothing more than half-hanging there in Bull’s grip and still hard and feeling like the things that Bull said mattered far too much. And deep down, a sullen, resentful anger that Bull called him out on it like this. That he put words to Cullen’s actions. That he thought those actions mattered.

‘You need to say it?’ Bull said.

‘No,’ Cullen said.

‘Good,’ Bull said, his tone lightening. The grip underneath Cullen’s arm became less fierce, and then Cullen blinked as a forehead pressed against his. It was surprisingly intimate, and he shifted the hand that had been at Bull’s belly, up to his shoulder, hanging on. ‘Okay, where was I? The watchword. In the future, if we ever do stuff and you can’t talk for whatever reason, that signal I told you about in the storage room, the one where you slap the wall three times, that’s the signal you’re gonna use, okay? Except instead of a wall, I want you to slap me or the bed. Three times.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘I understand.’
‘Very good,’ Bull said warmly, and Cullen squeezed his eyes shut at the praise – how warm and
good it made him feel – and hated himself. He was glad that Bull couldn’t see his expression. One
day Bull might find out what happened if he offered too much praise, it was the only thing Cullen
could actually imagine using the watchword for.

Bull’s lips pressed against his again, gentler this time, but still persuasive, compelling. The sharper
edges of Cullen’s thoughts fell away, and absently he shifted his hand until it was on Bull’s flank,
and then trailing down so that his thumb could run along the underside of Bull’s cock and feel the
thick vein there, the hardness of him. Bull sighed into his mouth, a pleased sound, and Cullen
curled his hand around Bull’s cock and began moving it up and down.

A smile against his lips. ‘You know what I want?’

Cullen shook his head, knowing that Bull would feel the motion of it, their faces so close together.

‘I want you to get back down there, open your mouth, and I want to find out how much of myself I
can fit inside you.’

Any thought Cullen had in his mind disappeared then, but his hips rocked into Bull’s leg, and he
nodded, shifted, even as Bull’s hand – still underneath his arm – directed him down. He licked his
lips as he went, decided hesitation was pointless. So he opened his mouth, felt the stretch of his jaw
even as his mouth was filled.

One of Bull’s hands rested on the back of Cullen’s neck, not quite pushing down, but offering up
pressure. The other was rubbing the side of Cullen’s arm where he had it stretched out to brace
himself. Cullen’s wrist still throbbed. His shoulder was bruised. The underside of his arm where
Bull had gripped him ached. The pain in his jaw as he sank down further was another thing in the
tapestry of sensations keeping him overwhelmed.

It was messy and difficult. Swallowing saliva by pressing his tongue towards the roof of his mouth
meant squeezing the head of Bull’s cock, which was met with a thick groan of approval. But he had
no idea how people coordinated breathing and suction and moving their head up and down and in
the end he grasped the base of Bull’s cock with his other hand and jacked Bull quickly, to try and
make up for his lack of coordination with his mouth. Not that Bull seemed to mind.

He tasted a stronger, muskier bitterness now, and an occasional spill of salt – precome – on his
tongue. His knuckles brushed against Bull’s pubic hair with every downstroke. And he was only
vaguely aware of rocking against Bull’s leg. Slow, steady, enough to keep him hard, even though a
sharper arousal eluded him. This was still more than he’d felt for some time outside of the worst
kinds of dreams, and it scattered through him, left him swirling and distracted.

Bull’s hips started undulating upwards, in increments at first, then more and more. Until Cullen
pulled back absently and blinked as the pressure against his neck increased, kept him in place.

‘You’re gonna let me,’ Bull said warmly. ‘Yeah? You know what to do if you can’t. Or need a
break.’

Cullen’s hips operated independently then, grinding down harder, and his cheeks flamed even as
Bull pushed deeper into his mouth and Cullen had to head off the dull panic that came from not
knowing if he could handle it. The words ‘too much’ floating through his head, even as he proved
by the second that it wasn’t.

‘Yeah,’ Bull whispered. ‘See, I had a feeling about you.’ Bull’s hand pushing even harder, so that
Cullen slipped down more until his lips hit the top of his hand, until his back arched and he made a
shocked, choking noise. ‘Push your hips down. Harder.’

Bull’s leg rose between Cullen’s thighs, and Cullen would have gasped, but his mouth was too full, so he only managed a stifled, thin sound instead.

He thought, absurdly, of the rhythms of horse riding. But that thought disappeared beneath the weight of texture and taste, the hand pushing into the back of his neck and the other now tracing around his mouth again, making him aware that saliva had spilled and he hadn’t wanted it to, except that Bull didn’t seem to care how messy it was. The hand Cullen that anchored to Bull’s cock managed to keep it from bumping into the back of his throat, until Bull wrapped his own hand around Cullen’s. Bull shifted Cullen’s hand, directing it down, giving himself more of Cullen’s mouth to thrust into.

There wasn’t exactly room, and Cullen’s eyes were watering when Bull hit the back of his throat. He pushed up, off, quickly. He was gasping cold mouthfuls of air, feeling shaken, chest tight, feeling bizarrely like he’d sometimes felt while bracing himself against a wall for Searidge’s cat o’ nine, or Bull’s flogger. He was drowning, and he wasn’t even the one with a mouth on his cock.

Bull was encouraging him down again, ruffling fingers through Cullen’s hair affectionately before pushing. Cullen hadn’t properly caught his breath when he lowered again.

He had a sense this would be the last stretch. Knew that it was important to match the rhythm of Bull’s hips, which was faster and firmer than before. He forgot about himself, throwing his attention wholeheartedly into what he was doing. It was a series of mental checks and balances. He could suck on the downstroke and the upstroke, he could block that need to choke whenever Bull brushed against the back of his throat as much as possible, and when he couldn’t, he could suffer through it, because the noises Bull made whenever that happened were more than worth it. The rawness in his throat, in his swollen lips, it sung through him, made him want more of this, made him wonder if he would have liked it even more all that time ago if he hadn’t been drunk in the first place.

Bull curled over him, was blowing out harder breaths, and then hooked his other arm over Cullen’s back and held him in place. And Cullen, anchored and alarmed, managed to get his hand up on Bull’s cock so that when that hard, final thrust finally came, it didn’t push as deep into his throat as Bull probably wanted. Any thought Cullen had of stopping it from overwhelming his senses and reflexes vanished when Bull spilled copiously into his mouth, down his throat, Cullen swallowing and not managing it fast enough, feeling the heat of it spill down his chin as he blinked rapidly, thinking that if there was a way to do this gracefully, he’d not found it.

It didn’t seem to matter.

‘Fuck,’ Bull said above him, his breath gusting across the thin layer of sweat on Cullen’s back.

Cullen stayed in place, because Bull seemed to want him to stay there. So Cullen swallowed what he could, kept sucking tentatively, wanted to wipe at his face, felt like he had no place in his mind to put the intensity of the experience. He wasn’t sure where it was meant to go. How did people do this casually? How did Bull do this so often, without a care in the world? Cullen felt like he’d shattered something inside of himself, still hard and pressed snug against Bull’s leg, hanging on like he was falling down a cliff.

When the arm on his back and the hand at the back of his head eased up, Cullen pushed away and tried to get a hand to his mouth to clean up the mess, only to find himself dragged upwards again. A tongue licked greedily across his mouth, and Cullen gasped wetly as Bull manhandled him into position, not just kissing him, but practically licking him clean.
It was filthy, and Cullen stared wide-eyed at the blindfold that hid Bull’s eye, still catching his breath.

The hand between his legs caught him by surprise, and he grunted, placing a bracing hand on Bull’s chest, slipping on sweat.

‘You don’t have to,’ Cullen said. Because it hardly mattered. He’d done what he came to do, hadn’t he?

‘Mm,’ Bull said against his mouth. And then Cullen jerked when that hand squeezed him – cock and balls in the same large grip – just edging towards the wrong side of painful.

‘Maker.’ Cullen’s voice raw, his throat hurting, not knowing if he should push into it or move away.

That hand became fingers circling his balls and pulling down too hard, enough that Cullen squirmed and then placed a tentative hand on Bull’s wrist. But he didn’t push Bull’s hand away, only breathed roughly and thought that this was dangerous, and that there was no reason it should make his cock throb with want. No reason at all. It ached all the way through his lower spine, especially when Bull tugged again.

‘Please,’ Cullen whispered.

‘Please what?’ Bull said, smiling against Cullen’s cheek. ‘What do you want, Cullen?’

‘I don’t…’ Cullen ducked his head down to Bull’s shoulder and then his whole back pulled into a deep arch when Bull pulled hard enough that Cullen couldn’t stop the pained noise from escaping. ‘Shit. Please, you- You shouldn’t do-’

‘Cuz it seems to me like you’re harder than before,’ Bull said, hand grasping Cullen’s cock and squeezing the base of him before lazily moving his hand up and down. ‘Maybe you just didn’t treat yourself right.’

The hand at his cock sped up, and Cullen blinked at the shaft of sensation that clutched at him, that echoed through the pain in his balls. And he leaned forwards, his breathing speeding up, and then realised that this wasn’t – this wasn’t how it was supposed to go. This wasn’t the point.

‘Wait,’ Cullen said, grasping Bull’s wrist and forcing him to halt. He pulled back. ‘Wait. I didn’t invite you here for this.’

‘What did you invite me here for?’ Bull said.

‘I didn’t invite you here for me,’ Cullen rasped, and then realised he’d misspoken when Bull went still. Then Bull tugged the blindfold off, and Cullen stared at some point on his own bed – his new bed that still didn’t feel like it was his.

Cullen couldn’t look up. Couldn’t make himself. Because he knew he’d said the wrong thing. He already knew this wasn’t the kind of debt he could pay by making the debt obvious. So he looked down until a hand on his chin forced his gaze upwards. Bull looked at him, eye narrowed.

‘I just wanted…’ Cullen couldn’t think about how to complete the sentence.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘I get it. I do. But you don’t know dick about what I want.’

‘I asked you,’ Cullen said, wondering if he’d somehow gotten it all wrong and just hadn’t realised.
Before panic could truly set in, Cullen was gripped hard – at the upper arm and the flank – and Bull turned him like he weighed nothing at all. Cullen’s back hit the bed, and Bull loomed over him, staring down.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, lowering his head and tipping it forwards so that Bull’s horns bracketed Cullen’s head. ‘And that’s why I’m showing you.’

‘You can’t keep doing this,’ Cullen said, staring at him.

‘What?’ Bull said, licking his lips as he took Cullen’s cock in his grasp again. ‘What am I doing, aside from enjoying myself?’

‘You know exactly what I mean,’ Cullen said. ‘Don’t…don’t be obtuse.’

‘You got a problem with me liking what I like?’

Cullen opened his mouth and Bull’s head dropped down, lips crashed into his. Cullen’s voice muffled and then disappeared, his hips jerking up into Bull’s grip, his heels pushing down into the mattress. Bull shoved his other arm between them, and then fingers encircled his balls again and tugged hard enough that Cullen tore his mouth away and sucked in a mouthful of air to deal with the sudden dizziness that rocked through him. His cock twitched in Bull’s hand, even as he blinked stars away.

‘It’s a bit like a punch to the guts, isn’t it?’ Bull said, his voice far too light for what he was doing. And then Bull did it all over again and laughed. ‘Stop squirming, Cullen.’

‘Then stop doing whatever it is that you’re- Then stop…’

‘How about you tell me exactly what you want me to stop doing, with the right words, and I’ll think about it. And until then, I’m just gonna keep it up. It hurts, you know, coming like this.’

‘You just…’ It was getting harder to talk. The hand on his cock was moving faster now, and there wasn’t nearly enough wetness for it to be easy. It was coarse, uncomfortable. And that hand around his balls, even when it wasn’t pulling down, it was there – threatening, leaving him far too vulnerable.

Half the things that normally swum through his head when he was jacking himself off had vanished. The pain swamped most of it, and the pleasure edged out the rest until he stopped trying to think of words to string together and just focused on riding out the ridge of pain.


Cullen felt a flash of annoyance that Bull was taunting him, and then that disappeared too. Bull pushed his balls up towards the underside of his crotch, hard enough that it mimicked the sensation of orgasm, and then he pulled down slowly, squeezing harder than before, and Cullen’s eyes slammed shut, his head arching back into a pile of pillows, his mouth opening on a soundless shout. Even if he couldn’t come, even if he’d forgotten how…

His cock felt like it was burning, his balls throbbed, and his spine continued to arch. Pressure welled deep, and he couldn’t tell if it was his own body, or Bull’s fingers being too cruel.

‘Breathe, Cullen,’ Bull said, voice low and hard.

Teeth grazed across his collarbone and then bit down hard, and Cullen groaned and absently tried to push Bull away, and then he hung on when he realised that it hurt, but it wasn’t bad. He tried to
breathe, chasing inhale after inhale. The pressure welled, twisted like a hook in his gut. Bull was saying something to him, but it was too low to pick up amongst the cacophony of sensation. All he could hear was the urging of it, telling him to do something, telling him to-

Cullen’s mouth slammed shut, his teeth grinding hard as the pressure snapped and then welled again, his release finding him in hard pulses, come spilling in waves over his pelvis and Bull’s hands. Bull wasn’t easing off, his hands wringing sensation out of him, and Cullen twisted sideways, the edge of pleasure and pain inside of him tipping too far.

‘A bit more,’ Bull said, and Cullen shook his head and breathed hard through clenched teeth. ‘Come on, Cullen, it’s about what I want, right?’

Bull didn’t stop until Cullen’s knees were digging hard into Bull’s sides, until his eyes were burning. And then Bull finally eased off and only then did Cullen get enough breath to moan a short, broken sound, becoming aware of how much he was shaking. Big hands rubbed soothingly over his chest, and Bull was hushing him, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice.

‘That’s what I wanted,’ Bull said, sounding pleased. ‘Keep breathing. Nice and easy. You’re fine.’

Cullen tried to steady himself. Bull wasn’t wrong, it did feel like he’d taken a few low punches to the gut and he kept his eyes closed as he tried to swim back to something that looked like coherence.

It wasn’t the same as how Cullen felt after being flogged by Bull, but it was closer than he’d expected. He opened his eyes and blinked dazed up at his own roof, exhausted. His throat felt even rawer than before, and he realised it was from all the gasping.

Slowly, he turned his gaze to Bull’s.

Once, he’d been too close to a fire mine that had gone off while wearing full plate armour. So he’d been protected, but he’d also been blown backwards and slammed into the ground, the metal pinning down his shocked flesh.

He felt like that now.

‘You with me?’ Bull said, one of the hands at his chest reaching up and cupping the side of his head.

It took Cullen a few tries to manage, ‘Where else would I be?’

Bull raised an eyebrow and Cullen looked away, because he knew what Bull meant and he wasn’t sure he had an answer. That was…that was nothing more than a blowjob and a handjob. That was all it was. There was no reason he should be feeling wrecked now. Even the pain wasn’t the worst he’d borne. Bull had done far more with a flogger.

But Cullen didn’t know what it meant that he liked the pain so much. Didn’t know how he felt about someone else knowing his own body better than he did.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, and Cullen blinked at the thumb that brushed over his forehead.

A thread of shame as Cullen closed his eyes and turned his face into Bull’s hand, half wanting to disappear and half wanting to cling, and not knowing what to do with either impulse. Bull said nothing then, didn’t taunt or tease, but lowered himself until his body was pressing against Cullen’s – spill and sweat sticky between them. The hand at the side of his head was warm, Bull’s thumb stroking across the hairline at his forehead.
‘You know I shouldn’t like the things that I like,’ Cullen said finally.

‘I know that you think that,’ Bull said. A bit more of Bull’s weight rested solidly against his chest, and Cullen took a deep breath, feeling Bull’s skin against his and thinking that it was impossible to crave more of something when he was already getting it. ‘What I don’t know is where you picked up thinking like this. And you don’t have to tell me or anything. Maybe you don’t know. Going into the past…sometimes that shit isn’t helpful.’

‘Speaking from experience?’ Cullen said, his eyes still closed, his breathing settling, the pain receding into something less intense, the aftershocks of pleasure making him feel warmer than he had in months.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘But y’know, sometimes it does help. Going into it.’

‘Then by all means, lead by example.’

Bull chuckled, pressed his lips to Cullen’s cheek.

‘So how long can I stay?’ Bull said. ‘You kicking me out?’

‘I…no. Not yet.’

Bull slipped sideways so that his body wasn’t completely covering Cullen’s, and then he shifted the pillows behind Cullen’s head so that he could steal some of them. Cullen could feel one side of Bull’s horns digging into the mattress, but it didn’t seem to be a problem. Bull kept one arm draped possessively across Cullen’s chest, his breathing slowing down. Their legs had tangled, Cullen rolling his eyes behind closed lids when he realised that Bull had never taken his pants off.

Cullen didn’t want to let himself sleep, reluctant to have nightmares find him while Bull was by his side. So instead his mind drifted into a quiet darkness, resting without sleeping. After some time, he realised that Bull must have been doing the same when he felt fingers tracing patterns into his flank.

‘Can’t sleep?’ Cullen said quietly.

‘I don’t sleep much,’ Bull said.

Cullen thought back to Bull agreeing to meet him for those flogging sessions at times others would consider too late. He thought of the time he’d found him in the kitchens when most of Skyhold was sleeping. Even the first time Bull had come to visit him – it had been past midnight and Bull seemed as wide awake as ever.

‘It could help you,’ Cullen said slowly, ‘to talk about it.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice. ‘But I’m waiting for you to lead by example.’

‘I said it first,’ Cullen said, smirking. ‘That’s cheating.’

‘Y’know,’ Bull said, his voice pushing across Cullen’s shoulder. ‘I used to think how lucky we were that we couldn’t have nightmares in the way everyone talks about them. That we didn’t connect with the Fade when we slept. Like, shit yeah, that’s badass. Like sure, we were missing out on good dreams, and when you’re an imekari and hear about dreams I think that’s what you want, y’know? Those dreams you hear of. People flying and shit. But then as you get older, you hear about the nightmares, demons, the rest of it… But no one really tells you that nightmares
don’t just belong to the Fade. You can have them at any time. And Qunari? We have them while we’re awake.’

‘Anyone would think you’d try and sleep more, to escape that,’ Cullen said slowly.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said fervently. ‘That’s what you try to do.’

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, turning towards Bull and feeling the hand on his chest squeeze lightly. Cullen curled his fingers around Bull’s forearm and squeezed in response, hoping to offer some reassurance.

‘I got out of the habit of sleeping properly on Seheron.’

‘I wonder what it’s like,’ Cullen said, ‘for those people who think nightmares only fall under the purview of sleep.’

‘Nicer,’ Bull said. ‘I think it’s a lot fucking nicer for them.’

‘You almost sound bitter,’ Cullen said, and Bull laughed, the sound muffled in the pillows. And then he sighed, the sound heavy.

‘You think I can’t be bitter?’

‘I think you do a remarkably good job of hiding it from others, with your generally cavalier, laidback attitude towards life.’

‘Yeah okay,’ Bull said. ‘Good.’

Bull didn’t seem inclined to keep talking after that. He only pulled Cullen closer – not that there was much ‘closer’ that Cullen could achieve at this point. Then Bull’s fingers went back to tracing patterns into Cullen’s skin again, and when Cullen realised it was no alphabet he could make out, he wondered if it was vitaar. It was too rhythmic and precise to be random. And though the touch was light, it felt good, not ticklish.

Perhaps if they were different people, Bull would stay the night, and Cullen would be fine with people knowing about it the next morning. But they weren’t different people, and Cullen was torn between quiet relief and an odd regret when Bull got up a few hours later and exited quietly, offering a crooked smile as he disappeared down the trapdoor, closing it behind him.
Don't Look So Surprised

Chapter Notes

Major kinkshaming in this chapter (not from Bull). There are some terrible communication choices made later in the chapter. Cullen goes to some pretty dark places mentally, and we’re heading to a crisis point with him that will last more than two chapters, so…I guess this is the vague warning for that?

(Also your comments are giving me life oh my god)

It wasn’t until the morning after, when he was dressing, that he realised the bruising on his wrist would be well hidden by his vambraces. So he took no elfroot and he used no salve, and kept the bite mark on his collarbone and the impressions of fingers on the underside of his arm where Bull had shaken him and growled.

He stared at himself in the mirror, wishing that by looking at himself, he could discern what was frightening him and how to go about fixing it.

In the end, he realised what he and Bull were doing was highlighting a fundamental character flaw within himself – that he was indulging it. Even if Bull wasn’t constantly praising him, Cullen had the urge to go limp around orders shouted, to rally and do the best he could to simply serve. Under Bull’s direction, Cullen had let go of higher thought and found an intensity of pleasure – and pain, his balls still ached – that he wanted to selfishly clutch to himself and use as a weapon against the darker days.

But hadn’t he learned? Hadn’t he learned that his desire to please, his desire for approval was only ever a temporary stay? That it could throw him down into darker days even as he thought it would help him?

He released a shaky exhale.

That wasn’t fucking around for fun. He didn’t care what Bull called it. There was nothing casual about it. And Cullen fixed his hair and thought if that was what Bull found casual…what on Thedas did something serious look like?

*

At his desk in his office, Cullen looked at the list of names of the new people spilling into the Skyhold walls. A large contingent had arrived and Josephine had passed the list to him – as she always did.

Mentally, he made notes of how much plate armour they’d need made or altered for the warriors and the Templars. He was surprised at how many of the names he recognised. There was a significant number from Kirkwall, they must have travelled on the same ship together. But there were just as many names that he didn’t know in the Templar category. Many Templars from Meredith’s time had died, or disappeared, or been murdered. Kirkwall had never been a particularly
kind place, citizens that walked past the Gallows by the docks held no love for the authorities that had done terrible things to its captives.

His fingers clenched the page – knuckles aching with a rusty pain – when he saw it:


He blinked, a prickling sensation skittering up his spine and tickling like insect tarsus into the back of his skull, until he read the list from the beginning and made sure that he wasn’t imagining things. Made sure it wasn’t a new symptom.

But no, that name again.

Cullen carefully put the piece of paper down and couldn’t quantify what he was feeling. He stood and walked around his desk and stared blankly at the door leading towards the main hall. If it was who he thought it was…

It would be a good time to apologise, perhaps. To make amends. To put it behind him. To pretend that he’d certainly not asked someone else to hurt him. To pretend he was the kind of Commander that wouldn’t ever…

He placed his index finger and his thumb carefully on his temples and made himself take a deep breath. The past and the present weren’t supposed to intersect like this. Kinloch was its own world with its own start and finish. It was contained in an hourglass, and Kirkwall was the same. Fixed in place. Never to return.

Except that he’d spent half the night with Bull, having pain wrung from his body until his nerves sung and found pleasure in it. Except that he wore bruises from the flogger with personal, private pride.

Damhian hadn’t brought the past with him – Cullen had dragged it all the way to Skyhold and pretended he hadn’t. Pretended he was clean.

* 

Cullen found him milling around near the vendors and merchants. Dark brown hair greyer than it had been when Cullen had seen him last, but his chin was still strong, his bright blue eyes creased with more lines now. Cullen wondered if they were lines of laughter. He hoped so.

Perhaps they’d passed each other before now, Cullen tuning out his face as he tuned out so many faces.

When Damhian turned to look at him, there was a flash of recognition, and Cullen didn’t falter in his steps – he never did that, far too well-trained – but his throat spasmed and his expression felt fixed. But then just as Cullen opened his mouth to hail him, to greet him not so much like an old friend, but as a colleague, Damhian’s face shadowed and he turned away.

Then, as though he had no idea who Cullen was, he began walking towards another merchant.

Cullen got closer, brow furrowing.

‘Searidge? Is that you?’

And – it had to be him, Cullen wasn’t imagining things – Searidge stiffened, his shoulders squared, and he turned around and looked at Cullen with something hard in his eyes. Cullen hadn’t been
expecting laughter or friendship, but this was odd. Too odd to talk about while surrounded by
people who might eavesdrop on a conversation simply because he was the Commander of the
Inquisition and gossip was almost as hot an item in the merchant's courtyard as new bolts of fabric
from Orlais.

‘I thought it was you,’ Cullen said, infusing some strength into his tone. ‘Come with me, please.’

He turned and walked towards the stables, knew Searidge was following him. It took energy to not
clench his fists. He didn’t even let his palm stray to the hilt of his sword. His thoughts raced, but he
couldn’t make them out. So instead he felt as though he were in the centre of a whirlwind – he
knew it was chaos in his mind, but he didn’t know why.

And there, by one of the quieter corners of the stables where people stayed away from the
dracolisks, Cullen came to a halt. He turned, opened his mouth once more, and Searidge glared at
him and said:

‘If you’ve come to ask me to pay heed to your perversion again, I’m not interested. I don’t care if
you’re the Knight-Commander of the Inquisition. Send me away if you have to.’

‘Commander, not Knight-Commander,’ Cullen said, his voice thinner than before. ‘Peace,
Searidge, I’m not here to ask you anything. I… I only wanted to say- I wished to greet you, to see
how you have been. That’s all. And to- and to apologise. I hadn’t realised…’

Something ugly and cold was sending thick, sticky tendrils through him. Like a vine, or felandaris
spreading out its grotesque new shoots. He swallowed, trying to process what Searidge had said to
him, even as Searidge stared at him with a distant sort of disdain.

‘I hadn’t realised my requests had so sorely offended you,’ Cullen said finally, aware of all those
people in his peripheral vision who could never ever know. ‘Have you- You haven’t told anyone?’

‘That this grand old Inquisition’s army is being led by someone like you?’

Not just disdain, but revulsion. Cullen hadn’t remembered this. His throat was dry.

‘Searidge, truly, I’m-’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Searidge said dismissively. ‘I did like it, back then. But I’ve had time to think about
it since.’

‘I made you,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m aware of it. I’ve had time to think on it too. I shouldn’t have made-’

‘What?’ Searidge said, squinting at him like Cullen was being a particularly annoying child. That
also wasn’t what Cullen remembered, and in his chest he felt a twitch of annoyance. People didn’t
talk to him this way. Like he was a child. He hadn’t gone through everything he’d experienced to
be condescended to.

‘Searidge, I- Damhian, I just want you to know-’

‘You didn’t sodding make me,’ Searidge said, scowling. ‘I tried it for a bit. But I’m not like you. I
tried something that wasn’t for me. Your perversion is something else entirely. And I didn’t want
to become someone like you, so I let it go. And I hope for your sake you’ve done the same.’

‘People…’ Cullen’s mind scrambled to cling to something when all of his thoughts were quickly
evaporating. He found words that Bull had given him and reshaped them. ‘I am not the only person
in the world who has enjoyed-’
‘Maybe it was Uldred that did it to you. Who changed you, made you want something that the
demon-touched would want,’ Searidge said dismissively, and Cullen blinked once, feeling like
he’d just been hit very hard in the chest. ‘I heard rumours about you, after you left.’

‘Rumours?’ Cullen said, his voice harsher than before, lacking air. ‘You – I should think the head
of the City Guard would know better than to pay heed to rumours.’

‘Oh, verily,’ Searidge drawled, ‘until a Templar spilled upon my doorstep and asked me to whip
him like a dog.’

‘You cannot talk to me that way,’ Cullen snapped.

Searidge’s smirk was ugly, and it was also dismissive. It was fear, then, that clutched hard at the
inside of Cullen’s ribs. Because this was not someone who would innately treat him with respect.
How could this be the same person that he’d shared drinks with? Laughed with? And guilt
drenched him like cold water, but the fear was louder.

‘You cannot even think of telling anyone about-’

‘Who’s to say I haven’t already?’ Searidge said lightly. At that, Cullen felt as though he’d turned to
stone. ‘I signed no contracts. Your problem’s not my problem. You don’t think they should know
about this? I know I don’t want to fight for someone who-’

‘Enough,’ Cullen said coldly. ‘Do not make an enemy of me, Damhian. Please. What happened to
you? We were- If I have caused you to be this way, damaged you somehow, then I-’

‘You think that highly of yourself?’ Searidge said, sighing. ‘You would though, wouldn’t you?
And as for what happened to me, well, I think it was like a little bit of reason, or logic shining
through. I heard some of the things you did for Meredith. Like a good little mabari dog, right? And
then coming to me like a cowed hound, months after all that rubbish. Wanting what you wanted.
You’re not well, Cullen. You don’t even see it. I don’t hate you, I’m just… Y’know, there were
City Guard who did it sometimes. Two or three. They liked the pain, and they acted up to get it.
And you know how they acted up to get it? They sodding broke the law. Now who does that? Who
goes and does something like that? Just to get hit? I’m meant to be giving out discipline, not
helping people get their rocks off after they’ve just stolen from some family.’

‘You conflate me with-’

‘Not really,’ Damhian said. ‘But I do know I don’t want to do it anymore. And you can’t make
me.’

‘I don’t do it anymore!’ Cullen said, his voice rising before he could stop it. He sensed people
nearby stopping, looking over. Cullen’s breath was rough in his chest. And oh, the irony, because
all he wanted now was to go straight to Bull and tell him to flog him senseless. To cut into him
until there was nothing. ‘I wanted to apologise to you.’

‘I…’ Damhian squinted at him for a long time, and then sighed again, shaking his head. ‘Sorry,
then. I saw you and made an assumption.’

No, really?

Except that it wasn’t wrong. Cullen stored all of the sentences Searidge had given to him, and he
could already feel the thorns in them, already knew they were cutting the inside of him, even as he
refused to reflect on the words.
‘I left it behind,’ Cullen said, continuing the lie and not knowing what he hated more about himself – his lack of integrity in that moment, or the fact that he was hiding something worse.

**What rumours did you hear about me?**

The worst part, that even though almost all the rumours were false, there were some – *some* – that he’d heard reflected back to him that were true. An echo of a time when he would slavishly do whatever Meredith wanted. When he’d thought that was…when he’d thought that was sanity.

‘Fuck,’ Searidge said, looking down at his feet. ‘S’pose you think I’m a right dick.’

‘Perhaps a little presumptuous,’ Cullen said, grateful that years and years of pretending everything was fine allowed him to infuse his voice with that wry humour that he could fall back upon. And when Searidge looked at him in a combination of suspicion and wary relief, Cullen could only think how abrasive it had been to hear the world ‘Uldred’ in Searidge’s mouth. It was the first time he’d ever said it. And Cullen hadn’t ever said it in his presence. Someone else had put that word there, which likely meant that the rumours had grown in size and strength and scope since Cullen had left.

He’d have to talk to Josephine or Leliana about it, because he *should* have heard about those kinds of rumours if things were so bad.

‘So you’ve told people,’ Cullen said as casually as he could.

‘A few, back in Kirkwall,’ Searidge said, shrugging.

**Maker’s breath. Please let that be another rumour that few pay any heed.**

‘No harm done,’ Cullen said, smiling ruefully, perfecting the act of someone who was disappointed but amused, a Commander who was above these petty things, who would lead regardless of what drifted about amongst the rougher folk.

‘Really? Because before, it sounded like…’

‘Yes, well, of course I don’t wish everyone to know about the less savoury parts of my history. But I made you sign no contract, and of course I forced something awful upon you.’

**Look, now you’re both conspirators, turning your eyes to the past with mutual disdain. This is a proud moment for you.**

‘You didn’t make me,’ Searidge said, shrugging. ‘But yeah, whips are for beating the wrongdoers and no one else. The perverted that seek it out, they can go, well- Void damn them all, as far as I care.’

Abruptly, Cullen wanted the conversation over, but instead he took a deep, silent breath and said:

‘So, you’re here now – at Skyhold, what brings you to the Inquisition?’

‘Right,’ Searidge said, brightening. ‘I sell silk and shit now, can you believe it?’

And Cullen listened with only half his awareness as Searidge launched into an apparently long tale of what brought him all the way from Kirkwall. And Cullen commiserated at the right places, laughed when cued, and thought that this was exactly like their old camaraderie. Which made him wonder if it had ever existed, or if he’d just imagined it. It made him wonder what he might be imagining now, with Bull.
There was hardly any time to compose himself properly – to mentally put everything in its right place that had been viciously shaken free – as he was summoned to a meeting at the War Table. And that meeting – a consolidation of his investigations into Maddox and lines of communication between Samson and his suppliers of red lyrium – left him operating on autopilot, everything focused on the matter at hand, even as he couldn’t quite keep track of what he was saying as he was saying it.

Finally, he could let the Inquisitor know about the information that patrols had brought back with them. As he talked, he thought of his recurring dream about Samson, about the red lyrium. He could hear its song, feel its pull.

He felt dizzy. By the end of the meeting, walking back to his office, he felt shaken. He nodded to soldiers he passed. Gave no sign that a steel pick was jamming its way into his right eye.

It wasn’t until he actually reached his office that he pressed knuckles to the ridge of his eyebrow and dug in, hissing sharp breaths. There was nothing for it. This could even be an episode, and there was no time.

He allowed himself one short groan of frustration, drank a quarter gallon of water and stared at the piece of paper on his desk. The one that still had the name Damhian Searidge upon it. He stared at the penned words until his vision went blurry.

When the door at his left opened, he didn’t look up, pretended he was lost in work. Focused. Concentrating. He’d convinced many that he was deep in thought when in reality, he was marshalling every shred of energy to not show any sign of how miserable he felt.

‘C-Commander?’

Cullen looked up too quickly, and a shaft of pain dug all the way through his brain into the back of his skull. For a few seconds he could only blink at Betsan, thinking that this was the time he needed to go to Cassandra. Now. Within the hour. He would make her see reason.

‘Betsan,’ Cullen said, staring at her. ‘What can I do for you?’

He’d missed her as a messenger, she was a fast runner and discreet, and always so polite. Though his new runners were much the same. But he missed the way she’d stare wistfully at his books, as she was doing now.

‘Is there a particular title you wish to look at?’ Cullen said, turning and looking over to the bookshelves themselves.

‘Oh,’ she said, clapping her hands behind her back and looking back at him. ‘No, Commander. I can’t read. I’ve been told it won’t be a hindrance to my training to be a warrior!’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘Not at all.’

‘I mean I can read a little,’ Betsan said hastily. ‘Enough. I never delivered your messages to the wrong people. I know names a bit. A friend helps me.’

‘Betsan,’ Cullen said, ‘you were a fine runner. And it’s not necessary for training. You’re not alone.’

‘Oh I know,’ Betsan said, a half-smile on her face. ‘A warrior’s the thing to be if you can’t read.
Well, and if you don’t like cooking and cleaning, and don’t fancy working with herbs… Can’t be a scholar if you can’t read!’

Cullen felt like he was piecing the sentences together retroactively. The words came to him as jagged noise, and he reassembled them into coherency and played them back, over and over, until he could see sense in them.

He looked over to his bookshelves, brow furrowing even as his head throbbed. When he turned back to her, he felt like he wasn’t the person who should be noticing this. Someone else should have noticed by now.

‘You wanted to be a scholar,’ Cullen said heavily.

‘I want to fight for the Inquisition,’ Betsan said. ‘I’m going to be of use’

But it rang false. It wasn’t bravado, she absolutely meant it, but Cullen had spent far too long now hearing the odd echoes in his own words to know when he heard them in someone else’s.

‘Betsan,’ he said firmly. ‘Do you want to be a scholar?’

‘I can’t read. But that doesn’t mean I’m stupid.’

‘Really?’ Cullen said, too tired for this. ‘Because you’re doing a remarkably good impression of it. Answer the question, do you want to be a scholar or not?’

‘It’s a dream,’ Betsan said, looking over at the books. ‘That’s all. I’m not a child. I’m realistic.’

She was a child. That was exactly what she was.

‘I thought I could learn a bit more in time for…’ she added, shifting from foot to foot now. ‘I like the training anyway. I’m good at it. I just didn’t learn what I wanted to learn in time.’

‘In time for what? Summerday? There’s no test, Betsan. There’s no examination on reading comprehension. They would teach you.’

He wasn’t made for watching faces crumple. He wasn’t made to sit there while a child turned sideways and tried to master her expression. He certainly wasn’t made to bear it while his head felt like it was going to implode.

‘This is ridiculous,’ he said. ‘N-not you,’ he added, when she looked at him in horror, eyes sheened. ‘Whoever told you that it’s too late for you to learn to read, to go into research and academia, they were wrong. They will teach you. I can put the case forward for you, if you like, so you need not broach it yourself if you’re worried they’ll turn you down outright.’

‘But I can do something now,’ she said. ‘It will take me ages to learn how to…how to get- how to be- to get to the right levels. I know there’s levels. But I can learn to hold a sword in less time and I can go out there’

‘-And die,’ Cullen said, gritting his teeth together.

‘If I go out there and die then you’re not training us very well,’ Betsan said, looking incensed.

Perhaps it was just a day for everyone to talk back to him. She used to be terrified of him. When had that changed?

‘This isn’t up for discussion,’ Cullen said, staring at her. ‘You can keep training as a recruit under
probation until I can clear a tutor for you.’

Betsan took a step backwards. ‘I said it’s a dream. I didn’t… You’re the Commander.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, ‘and I’ve given you a clear order. Now, what did you come here for?’

The fear in her eyes transformed to a naked relief that was so raw he felt embarrassed for her. Was that what he’d looked like back then? When he’d practically begged the Templars who came to the Chantry to teach him something, anything, so that he might become the protective hero he imagined himself having the potential to be?

Betsan fished a message out of her pocket and handed it over, stepping back once Cullen had grasped it.

‘Knight-Captain Briony still thinks of me as a messenger,’ she said.

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, nausea pounding through his gut. ‘I’ll have a word.’

‘No, if you please, Commander, I… I like it. I like her. She’s so good with a sword. She’s amazing.’

That young, pure hero worship. Cullen smiled to hear it, even as he thought about how easily it could be corrupted. Not by someone like Briony, no – she was good at heart and not someone to turn hero worship into something horrific – but still…

He read the message in silence and glad it was nothing that required him urgently. So instead he looked at Betsan and raised his eyebrows.

‘You’ve delivered your message, I think you should be on your way.’

‘Of course, Commander,’ she said, nodding her head at him in acknowledgment. But she hedged at the door, and Cullen took a moment to remember why she might pause.

‘I’ll contact you by week’s end, Betsan,’ Cullen said. ‘To let you know one way or another. Are we clear?’

‘Yes, I mean- I just wanted to say- I… Thank you, Commander.’

She closed the door behind her, and Cullen had a minute of rough breathing and then the gag clawed its way out of his throat and he had a hand over his mouth, swallowing back saliva. The headache was taking root, not just in his skull, but in his neck, down through his sinuses, wrapping a taproot around his spine and feeding from him.

He forced himself to drink more water, then half-stumbled up the stairs and was glad to be able to lock the trapdoor behind him. So no, he’d be in no state to see Cassandra in an hour.

After. See her after. Make her understand. Make her.

The words ‘make her’ swam rattling through the corners of his head until all he heard was the word Maker. It was his most basic, simple prayer, and it fell from his lips with no strength of voice behind it – words that could only form on puffs of air, because even the sound of his own voice humming through his skull was too wretched a thing to be borne.

* 

Two hours later, he realised that he wasn’t slipping into an episode after all. This was just one of the post-lyrium headaches he had to weather sometimes, and he forced himself upright and
splashed water on his face, and then climbed back down the stairs, staring at the room. He wasn’t exactly seeing double, there was only a slight halo around objects, a shimmering haze of half an image shifted precisely half a foot to the left. He blinked, and the halo remained, but he could tell the original objects easily enough, so it wouldn’t be a problem.

He refused to think about what Searidge had said to him. He decided not to see Cassandra. And if he spent longer than usual shakily pacing the edges of his office, he couldn’t have rightly explained what he was thinking about and why his thoughts were more occupied than usual. It was as though a section of his mind had split off from his awareness and was working busily away in the background. So he paced, and he requested an apple in the afternoon that was mealy and bruised but still eased the hard cold of acid in his stomach.

They were fighting a war. No wonder he was more distressed than usual. It was normal.

It was normal.

*

The urge to have Bull cut him with one of his floggers or whips grew in strength until Cullen became sure that it was an original thought, one he’d come to all on his own without any stimulus behind it.

He’d mentioned it to Bull a while ago, after all.

It was a firm decision that gripped him. He would make it happen. So he approached his decision as a strategist, thinking of it as a chess game; one of careful, decisive movement.

He couldn’t ask Bull too soon after they’d spent half the night together, because then Bull might suspect that there could be a connection between the two events. He might say no outright, thinking Cullen was somehow punishing himself for something that had occurred during the evening.

So he’d have to stalk what he wanted. He’d have to be careful and present himself as someone who didn’t need it, but only desired it. Someone who would be perfectly fine if Bull said no.

Even as he knew he wouldn’t be.

At their next chess game, he didn’t bring it up. He wasn’t even any twitchier than usual. Searidge seemed to spend his days near the merchants, and that was far from the Chantry courtyard with its herbs and ornamental trees with their lissom, swaying branches. He made light conversation, he was friendly, they talked about different chess strategies and Cullen thought he’d even be enjoying himself, if he wasn’t so determined to get what he wanted.

It reminded him profoundly of those times when he’d go from meetings with Meredith to the mages under his care and pretend everything was fine. The practice he’d had in reassuring the vulnerable, when – especially towards the end – her rants had become outright malicious and malevolent. Because how vicious did she have to become for it to eclipse even his issues with mages? It wasn’t worth thinking about.

And after those meetings, well, he used to think he didn’t have the disposition to be a good liar, but it was trained into him. Templars had to present certain facades at all times. They must always appear to be calm and understanding but also distant and aloof when necessary. They must always seem above attachment, and must create a sense of safety in those around them; if not in disposition, then in action.
So his actions were designed to reassure. A chess game where nothing untoward was brought up, and Cullen smiled and played fiercely and watched himself in a detached manner. Because he knew Bull was watching him. Watching to see what the reaction might be after that night they’d spent together. Making his own deductions.

Perhaps another person would have brought up Searidge. Bull knew about him after all, even knew his name – his last name, anyway. But Cullen couldn’t think why he’d bring it up, or what Bull would get out of the knowledge. After all, Bull’s perspective on everything that had happened between Cullen and Searidge was irrevocably flawed. And Cullen had no interest in passing on Searidge’s words. That kind of poison was not the kind that should be spread.

*  

Bull turned up in his office three days later, as Cullen was giving out a ream of orders to two Scouts. They were getting unbelievably close to Samson’s core of operations now, and as soon as the Inquisitor gave the go ahead – whenever she was back – he’d be out in the field again. It had been a remarkably successful day overall. He’d managed to find two tutors for Betsan – a young lady named Maribeta and a geriatric scholar who had come to study Skyhold itself, Evhelti – and while talking to Briony about transitioning Betsan into new quarters near the main library, Briony had expressed an interest in still helping Betsan learn self-defence. In the end, Cullen didn’t need to be the one to volunteer the news, and had left it to his second to handle. But he’d left feeling like he’d accomplished something important, even if it wouldn’t be something he’d ever bring up at the War Table.

Bull waited for Cullen to finish speaking to the Scouts, walking over to the bookshelf and pulling out different titles and flipping slowly through the pages, and even though Cullen felt twitchy to have Bull in the same room with him while other people were around, he realised there was no reason for anyone to think anything was amiss.

The Scouts left and Cullen took a deep breath and let it out silently. The last time he’d set about getting something in such a manner, he’d been mentally preparing to overthrow Meredith. But when he saw Bull’s face, that clutching, grasping hand around his chest relaxed. Bull was smiling at him.

‘You haven’t hit me up about a flogging session or anything, lately. Was wondering if you might want to get on that?’

Cullen didn’t look around his office as though he was worried people were eavesdropping. He didn’t indulge the sudden panic that Searidge was there, listening at the door. Instead, he felt some strange energy come over him, as though he were above himself and operating a puppet. But it wasn’t an alien sensation. He’d experienced this before. Too many times to be counted.

‘Ah, yes,’ Cullen said. ‘I’ve been thinking on it. But…’ Here he knew he had to be careful. Appear reluctant but not too desperate, appear nervous but not too afraid of being rejected. ‘You said- You said I could ask you, if I wanted to- If I wanted to have my skin broken.’

Bull nodded, his eye didn’t even narrow suspiciously. It actually looked like he was giving it real consideration. Cullen watched him, and then – grimacing – placed the words between them that he knew might push Bull in his direction.

‘I’ll understand if you don’t wish to,’ Cullen said. ‘You did say- From the beginning, in fact. But with everything that’s been happening…’
'I’d want you to take elfroot beforehand,’ Bull said. ‘And some after. The morning after. Not enough to make it all go away, but enough that your gear won’t damage you more.’

Here, he had to pretend the idea was distasteful, but not impossible. So he nodded and looked aside and thought that it was all a game. Was this how Bull played him, most of the time?

The ache in his throat was caused by the pile of words that wanted to spill. He refused to let them forth. Some part of himself was shaking him from the inside, promising him that he was doing the wrong thing. It was harder to trust that voice these days. That voice used to tell him that disobeying Meredith was the wrong thing.

His instincts were only reliable in the middle of battle. Only there, and nowhere else.

‘I suppose,’ Cullen said slowly, ‘I- Yes, all right, I understand. I don’t think it’s necessary, but I understand. And I’ll keep some on hand- Just in case.’

‘You have been thinking about it,’ Bull said, and now he tilted his head, and Cullen waited to see what the verdict might be. ‘Everything all right?’

‘Well,’ Cullen said, hedging. Another tightrope, but he was no stranger to the knife’s edge. ‘I’d be lying if I said everything was fine. But I’ve gone through much of my time since Kirkwall without it – without any of what you give to me – so while I’d like to know what it’s like again, at your hand, I can manage without just as well.’

That small voice inside of him was shouting at him. Shaking him harder. But Cullen didn’t have the patience for it. Even that small voice wanted this to happen, it just didn’t want it to happen like this. But why did it matter? Bull was only a friend, and this was only what anyone else would call casual. It was bad enough that he wanted it at all.

‘Huh,’ Bull said, his eye narrowing.

Panic clawed up Cullen’s chest, but all he did was frown and return Bull’s gaze, as though he was impatient with Bull’s prevarication.

He told himself this was nothing, nothing like lying to Meredith, pretending to be as faithful as he’d always been – ‘Like a good little mabari dog, right?’ – all the way up to that final betrayal, learning just how deceitful he could truly be. This was harmless. If Bull said yes, Cullen would get something that would help him cope and he’d offer something in return later. If Bull said no, Cullen would manage on his own, and still likely get a flogging out of it anyway. It harmed no one.

‘Okay, yeah,’ Bull said then, and Cullen’s eyes widened. Bull laughed. ‘Don’t look so surprised. I said I’d say no sometimes, not that I was just gonna always refuse you. I’d like to see how you hold up to a heavier session anyway. You got a time in mind? Weekend’s coming up. I have the time if you do.’

Cullen nodded, all the words locked up in his closed mouth.

‘You weren’t expecting me to say yes, huh?’ Bull said, shaking his head.

‘No,’ Cullen said, ‘not exactly.’

Their conversation continued, and Cullen watched it happen somewhat dazed. He was excited and unhappy, anticipation warring with disappointment. But he had never responded to things the way he was supposed to, and as Bull turned the subject to different recipes for good armour oil, Cullen realised he’d ultimately gotten what he’d wanted, and that was all that mattered.
That evening, he opened all the windows of his bedroom. He stood with his hands behind his back and stared out at the courtyard, unable to put a finger on why Searidge’s words had bothered him so much.

All he knew was that he’d failed some test.

If he had really made some progress, really begun to evolve into a better, stronger person, the lies he’d told Searidge would have been the truth. And the things he needed from Bull, he’d not need at all.

He felt almost meditative about the failure. After all, his propensity for it didn’t surprise him anymore. It was never shocking, to fail. He supposed that was why he didn’t immediately try to reverse the failure. Why he didn’t even attempt to push Bull away, to refuse that tenuous connection – whatever it was, whatever it meant.

He looked down to the small fires still being tended as the night crept on, and wondered if Bull was awake too – what nightmares he was living while his eye was wide open. And even though he couldn’t see it properly because of the angle of his tower, his gaze turned towards the Herald’s Rest.

You are unworthy of him.

Cullen frowned and clasped his forearms behind his back in an angry grip.

‘I’ll do it after,’ Cullen said to into the empty room, his voice rough. ‘I’ll tell him later. After.’

But Bull had never made honesty a condition between them, and Cullen had learned to live very well without it.
Cullen wasn’t nervous because he hardly felt anything at all. Instead there was only a vague worry that he was so far outside of himself he wouldn’t actually get anything out of his encounter with Bull. Even that didn’t bother him as much as it normally would.

In the past, he’d come to associate this feeling with the lyrium. It was one of the many reasons he chose not to take it anymore. To feel it without the lyrium coursing through his veins was a distant concern, because it suggested that this lack of feeling was some flaw in him.

So when Bull came up through the trapdoor with his sack of equipment, quietly locking them both into Cullen’s room, Cullen felt little by the way of anticipation or anxiety. He didn’t want to waste this because he was sure that Bull wouldn’t do it to him often at all. Maybe, after tonight, he wouldn’t ever do it again.

‘How’s things?’ Bull said lightly, and Cullen watched him put the sack down from where he stood by his bookshelf. Would he even feel the pain properly?

‘We’re getting closer to finding Samson,’ Cullen said. ‘Any day now.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, laughing, ‘you ever notice that those answers you give me never actually tell me a thing about how you’re doing?’

Cullen took a slow breath and sighed it out, did both things quietly. A faint agitation was stirring. If this had been the past, he would already be stripped and being flogged by now. His skin sometimes splitting under the force of the blows, his nails sometimes breaking on the wall, and Searidge behind him, never checking in or making sure Cullen was okay. Once, the lashes had curled badly around his flank, cut all along the sensitive side of his ribs, and he’d lurched sideways before he could stop himself.

Searidge had sworn at him, shifted to where Cullen had moved, and started again.

It was an odd thing to be thinking of now. And that had still been simpler.

‘We gotta have a chat first,’ Bull said, pulling a bottle of elfroot potion from his sack. Did he have
an unlimited supply of it? Did he make his own?

He recalled that Bull had mentioned Stitches talking about hydrosols and more, and realised that the Chargers probably did make their own potions.

‘A chat,’ Cullen said.

Bull turned and sat on the corner of Cullen’s bed and looked up at him. ‘Yep. Because this isn’t simple.’

‘Nothing is simple with you,’ Cullen said, agitation percolating upwards. But his voice wasn’t marked with anger. Not yet.

‘Then let’s have the chat so we can get to the part that you want, yeah? I know you don’t like this part, Cullen. Come here, sit down for a bit.’

Cullen walked over, sat on the side of his bed. He hoped that the distance he felt would make it look like he wasn’t as desperate. Yet he couldn’t really feel that desperation either. He only knew that it was there somewhere, and when he finally came back to himself, he’d be upset if he hadn’t committed to receiving this, as he’d certainly earned it.

‘Storage room conditions tonight,’ Bull said firmly. ‘Not that I think you’ll feel like it – but no sex. No you blowing your load. And if you try and push me for things like that, I’m gonna redirect. But kissing, light touching, that’s still okay?’

Cullen nodded, and Bull tilted his head at him and his lips thinned.

‘Gonna need actual answers tonight,’ Bull said.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said automatically. ‘It’s still fine.’

‘And the watchword?’

‘Katoh,’ Cullen said.

‘Now, I know you’ve only ever stripped and shown your back, but to draw blood for a first time, I prefer the upper thighs and the ass. That good with you?’

Cullen blinked at him. He supposed he could see where Bull was coming from. His shoulders had very little fat on them, it was muscle and bone. But the buttocks and upper thighs offered more fat, more cushioning.

‘As long as the ‘no sex’ - I don’t want it made sexual,’ Cullen said, feeling like a part of him was creeping closer into the room, starting to pay real attention to what was happening.

‘Got it,’ Bull said. ‘Me either.’

‘Then it’s fine,’ Cullen said, shrugging.

Bull stood up then, and walked over to the sack. He left the elfroot potion bottle on the bed, where it had tipped over onto its side. Cullen stared at it. Then, after a few seconds – thinking it might be the right thing to do – he reached for it and took it up in his hands. The glass was cold, even colder than his fingers. He stared at the bottle.

It was true that he wanted this. It was true that he wanted to know what it was like at Bull’s hands. But he felt uneasy, and he wondered if he’d feel uneasy about this anyway. Bull always seemed to
do things differently, and Cullen was coming to realise that he couldn’t always expect things to go the way he wanted them to go.

When he looked up, he felt his face still at the sight of the long, pale cane in Bull’s hand. That was a cane that meant business, and Cullen’s heart hiccupped, then started to beat faster.

In Bull’s other hand, he held the black flogger. The one he’d used during the first session. The one that made Cullen shiver with want just to look at it.

Bull walked over and placed both down on the bed. Cullen stared at the cane again, because he’d never experienced a caning, nor seen one administered. He’d only heard stories from those that hailed from countries that still used caning for discipline. It was widely regarded as cruel.

‘I’ve had this baby soaking,’ Bull said, touching his fingers to the cane reverently. ‘So she’s ready, for whatever.’

Then, Bull touched his fingers to the tails of the flogger and looked up, his gaze sharp. ‘Tonight I’m gonna give you a choice. We can spend all night with this flogger. The one you like. And we can see where that takes you. But your skin’s not gonna be broken.’ Bull then pointed to the cane, his face serious. ‘Or, we can spend some time with this cane. And it won’t take all that long to open the skin – though probably longer than you’re thinking – but it might not get you into the space in your head the flogger can.’

‘If you hit me long enough and hard enough with that flogger, you’d draw blood,’ Cullen said, still not quite able to look away from the cane. Why did Bull have a cane? When he said that he knew people who could take more, who he’d done worse to, was that what he meant? Did he have more extreme things in that sack of his? Cullen was torn between the urge to prove himself, and wanting the quiet peace the flogger would give him, the promise of that lulling ocean.

‘Sure would,’ Bull agreed easily, in that way that meant that he wasn’t going to cave on the two options, ‘but that’s not what’s on the table. I said I’d do it. But you don’t get to choose how.’

Cullen swallowed, stared between them both. That first session, that first flogger, he ached to know it again. Still, he couldn’t stop his eyes from being dragged back to the cane.

‘Here,’ Bull said, pushing it towards him. ‘Touch it. See what you think.’

So Cullen put down the bottle of elfroot and reached out and picked it up. It was heavier than he thought, and long enough to not be a light, whippy thing. He could feel the moisture soaked into the wood, which was smooth.

‘The dampness prevents splintering?’ Cullen said, looking up. Touching it made his chest feel tight. He had absolutely no point of reference to know what it would feel like, and there was a part of him that wanted to know:

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, smiling. ‘Keeps it flexible, too. But – and I’m not fucking around here – it hurts like a bitch.’

That wasn’t quite as off-putting as Bull likely wanted it to be. Because suddenly the idea of having that strike him, wanting to learn the sound of it, to know if he could measure himself against it and come out on the other side stronger for having faced it... He wanted that. And though he didn’t feel the want as acutely as he normally would, it was still loud enough to move through the fog surrounding him, loud enough that he looked at the flogger with regret for a long time, trying to convince himself that all he needed was that floating sea.
Instead, he picked up the cane carefully, swallowing, and handed it to Bull.

‘That,’ Cullen said, nodding towards it. ‘I want to know.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, taking the cane and running his palm along it. ‘Wondered. You don’t like the easy road, do you? Okay then, let me get a few more things set up. You just sit tight.’

Bull took up the flogger and walked back to the sack and started drawing out other items. He moved quickly, decisively, and Cullen realised that Bull knew exactly how he was going to do this. When Bull walked back to the bed, he had two leather cuffs in his hands, strips of rope, and two rolls of what looked like waxed, thin leather. Bull didn’t look at him as he laid down one at the bottom of Cullen’s bed – unrolled, it was the square tarp of a blanket – and then the other underneath the bedframe itself. Then he put everything else on the leather that lay upon the blankets. Including the cane.

‘Three sips of that elfroot,’ Bull said, nodding to the bottle.

‘It won’t do anything,’ Cullen said, frowning. ‘Elfroot doesn’t–’

‘I don’t have to explain everything to you,’ Bull said, folding his arms, ‘but I’m gonna humour you today, so the next time you do this, I can just tell you to cut it out. It’s not a prophylactic. It’s because you run yourself ragged, and I bet there’s something going on in that body of yours – right now – that’d probably respond to elfroot. And even if there wasn’t? I want you to take it. It’s not gonna do you any harm. So go on, three sips.’

Cullen uncorked the bottle, his fingers tightened around the neck and bulb of the glass. This would never be easy. But it would be better if he got it over and done with. The urge to argue was thankfully dulled. So he took three sips of the potion, winced at the instant flood of saliva in his mouth in response to that sharp astringency, and then corked the bottle and placed it in Bull’s open hand.

‘Good,’ Bull said, his voice warmer again. ‘Thanks.’

A faint headache that Cullen hadn’t even been aware of was disappearing – evaporating and leaving his head feeling lighter than it had for days. Something in his lower back loosened, like a coil having the tension drained out of it. He didn’t want to give Bull the satisfaction of letting him know it was working.

‘Go on then,’ Bull said, grinning at him. ‘It’s about time you stripped, isn’t it?’

Cullen stood, stripped down efficiently, thinking that it wasn’t nearly as nerve-wracking doing it on nights like these, than it had been when he’d ended up with Bull’s cock in his mouth. He folded his clothing carefully and laid it on one of the two chests. Bull pointed to where he wanted him to be, and Cullen walked over to stand at the base of his bed – standing on one of the leather mats – facing his headboard. That was when Cullen realised that the roll of leather was a drop-cloth of sorts, and his skin prickled with gooseflesh.

This was actually happening. And though he still couldn’t find himself fully in the room, he felt his body go on a higher alert. He stared at the cane again, his mouth dry. Then startled when Bull crouched and secured a leather cuff with a coarse metal d-ring to his ankle. He’d thought they were going on his wrists.

He looked down just in time to see Bull scrape one side of his horns against the wooden baseboard of Cullen’s bed. Bull swore quietly, glanced up, and they both just looked at each other. Unbidden,
Cullen felt himself wanting to tell Bull everything. About Searidge. About Samson, even. About the dreams he’d been having about the red lyrium. He even wanted to tell him about the lyrium itself. Cullen had no idea where the urge came from, and it disappeared just as quickly. It left an emptiness behind it, and self-reproach. The last thing Bull needed was for Cullen to share his burdens. Wasn’t this enough? Wasn’t he already asking enough from him?

‘I know something’s going on,’ Bull said, even as he bent down again and looped rope through the d-ring – knotting it securely before tying it around the strut at the corner of Cullen’s bed. It forced Cullen’s foot sideways a few inches, and the rope was strong. When Bull attached the other cuff, Cullen only watched, quite unable to think of what to say.

‘So I guess I’m kinda hoping that you’re right about wanting this,’ Bull said, and Cullen grunted when the other bit of rope forced his feet a bit further than shoulder-width apart. It wasn’t entirely comfortable. He felt exposed, and though his hands were free, he didn’t like that he couldn’t settle his stance. His knees and shins pressed against the baseboard and he shifted again, trying out the ropes, seeing how far they’d let him move.

Not far at all.

Bull walked away without – apparently – needing any response from Cullen. And Cullen tried twisting around to see what was happening, and then stared in confusion as Bull picked up the full length mirror on its stand and moved it until it was at the head of Cullen’s bed. Bull adjusted the angle of the mirror until Cullen was staring at his reflection. Bull met Cullen’s eyes in the mirror, smiling.

‘I’m gonna be seeing your face today,’ Bull said. ‘All those pretty reactions.’

Cullen looked at his own expression – far more vulnerable than he felt. His eyes were a little wider than usual. His mouth tight at the corners. He realised that his hands were curled into loose fists and forced them to relax. Then he met Bull’s eye again and thought that at some point his heart would just have to settle down, stop drumming out that nauseating beat.

‘No blindfold or gag tonight,’ Bull said, turning to look at him properly. ‘I need you mouthy, little lion.’

‘But no interrupting,’ Cullen said drily.

‘It seems he can be taught after all!’ Bull said, grinning at him.

‘This was never so complicated with Searidge,’ Cullen said, feeling something ugly crawl through him in saying that name. Knowing that somewhere – within walking distance – Searidge was out there, right now.

Bull scrutinised him, and then his lips tightened into a small frown.

‘Yeah. Not so sure that was a good thing, actually.’

Cullen didn’t have anything to say in response to that.

When Bull came to stand behind him, Cullenconcertedly avoided the mirror and looked down at his own bed. He stared at the hem of the frayed leather tarp. He wondered how many times Bull had used this, whether he waxed it himself or had purchased it that way. He could almost see his blood forming into little beads on it already.

Bull’s hands on his back, clinical as always. Cullen’s eyes drifted shut, and he wished he wasn’t so
numb, because he liked this part. Even if Bull’s touch was detached, even if it was nothing more than warm fingers checking for problem spots – he liked it. And there was nothing sexual about those fingers on his ass after all, nor his upper thighs. Cullen was relieved at that.

He couldn’t help but be aware of the cane across his bed. It striped across his mind, carved into his thoughts, and it hadn’t even touched him.

He knew he wanted it. That was the one thing he clung to. Not just punishment, but the pain of it – that it could wipe his thoughts away properly; not leave him with this horrid fog that made him clumsier. That it would scour him clean even if only for a few minutes.

_You’re not well, Cullen. You don’t even see it._

Searidge’s voice in the room with him was jarring, and when Bull placed a steadying hand on Cullen’s shoulder while reaching for the cane with his other, Cullen leaned back into him without really thinking about it.

‘Hey there,’ Bull said, squeezing Cullen’s shoulder tighter. ‘You want to pull out?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, and his gaze crossed the mirror as he went to look at the cane again. Bull was watching him closely. Very closely. He’d see everything. Every expression that Cullen didn’t usually have to master because he was facing a wall. Every time he’d bite at his lips to stop a sound from coming free.

He’d see it all.

‘I suppose you’re rather attached to having the mirror there,’ Cullen said, and Bull chuckled.

The hand at his shoulder became a palm flat between his shoulder-blades, pushing him down towards the bed. And Cullen went, until his own arms caught him and he was bent over his own bed, staring up at his headboard, his pillows, thinking that maybe he’d not be able to look at his bed for a while without thinking of this. He couldn’t decide if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

‘Feel that,’ Bull said appreciatively. ‘Your heart is going.’

Cullen kept his face down and wondered what Bull meant when he said it ‘hurt like a bitch.’

Cullen flinched hard when he felt the damp wood of the cane touch his back. Bull placed a steadying hand on his flank, and then simply rubbed the length of it over him. It moved in slow circles, almost sensual. Cullen blinked down at the bed, his fingers flexed and shifted. With the flogger, Bull had always gone straight for hitting him – and not lightly, either. This was…different. Odd.

But there had to be a reason for it, and Cullen was still preoccupied with worrying whether he’d really be able to experience what was happening. It still felt different. Even his skin felt more numb than usual.

Eventually, the rubbing resolved into light taps over his skin. They didn’t hurt at all, even though they were firm. And Cullen started to lose some of his tension, lips thinning as anticipation dwindled beneath those taps. Even when the taps started to get hard enough to sting, Cullen realised that this would probably not be what he wanted it to be, what he needed it to be. His awareness was too separate from his body, his mind seemed to be out in the grounds somewhere, searching for Searidge.

Bull stepped back. A loud swish, a loud _thwack!_ before Cullen could brace for it. It landed hard at
the crease where his thighs met his ass, and Cullen blinked as his breath was forced out of him. And there was no pain at all—Which was ridiculous, surely he wasn’t so far gone that there would be nothing.

And then swish-thwack came again, over the exact same spot, and suddenly Cullen’s breath stuttered on a huge gasp as the pain dug deep into his very bones, burning so hot he thought he’d been branded. His ankles jerked at the restraints and he was standing, his hands already reaching around himself because surely that had cut him open too deep. Far too deep. The pain was building and he was trembling and he was in the room and hyperventilating and—

Bull’s chest pressed to his back, and Bull’s chin rested on the top of his head. A band of muscle slid around him, holding him close.

‘Shhh,’ Bull said, and Cullen was looking at his shaking hands and seeing no blood at all, even as he could feel the welt, which was sore.

Cullen found Bull’s face in the mirror and stared at him, a mix of feelings tumbling through him. One of them, strangely, betrayal. Bull shouldn’t have been able to do that. Yank him back into the room like that. And Cullen saw his own chest heaving but couldn’t look away from Bull, who was staring right back at him.

‘Told you it hurt like a bitch,’ Bull said, as Cullen briefly squeezed his eyes shut because the pain was throbbing through him, radiating back and forth. Out to the surface of his skin and then down into his bones again, making him feel like the bones of his hips had been branded.

Being back in the room meant being close to his terror again, his disgust with himself, his fear of Searidge and the power he held to ruin Cullen’s reputation, his constant concern that Bull could hurt him, really hurt him—not with a cane, but with words, with judgement.

‘You still want this?’ Bull said, his arm squeezing Cullen’s chest.

Cullen was torn. His nostrils flared and he realised he was hanging onto Bull’s forearm. His ankles shifted again as he tried to close his legs together. The rope around the legs of the bed creaked and his forehead furrowed. Even moving hurt. He hissed out an exhale, thinking it through.

He wasn’t one to back down from a challenge, and he liked to prove himself against pain. That was definitely something he’d learned in Kinloch. He just wasn’t sure he could prove himself against this. It was unlike anything he’d ever known.

But it had brought him back into himself. He wasn’t sure if he truly wanted that, but it was better than the nothingness of the fog that had surrounded him. Wasn’t it?

‘Maker help me,’ Cullen said shakily, ‘but yes.’

He thought Bull might call a stop to it anyway, but instead Bull’s eye seemed to gleam, his own smile not crooked, but hungry. The proof that Bull enjoyed this as much as Cullen needed it was more reassuring than the arm around his chest.

Bull pressed his lips briefly to the top of Cullen’s head again, then pushed him down once more. Cullen winced as the skin on his thighs stretched. Even that hurt. No wonder Bull wanted him to take elfroot afterwards. Cullen was—for once—more than willing. Even as he was excited to see how this might keep him focused in the days to come.

Another wave of pain throbbed through him and he shifted his arms, got a grip of the leather.
Bull rubbed the cane over his skin again, and Cullen forced himself to take slow breaths. When the tapping started, Cullen’s shoulders tightened, but he knew what to brace himself for now. Even if he wasn’t sure he could.

The next blow landed against his ass, and again that nauseating swoop of no sensation at all before pain juddered into him, hard and merciless. Again, into his bone, making him wonder if this was what branding felt like. He knew the cane wasn’t burning, he’d felt it himself – it was even slightly cool – but it was fire that flamed in response. He hissed a sharp, whistling breath and locked his body against it, even as the second strike came not an inch beneath it.

Bull didn’t work slowly. And not more than six strokes later Cullen felt something in his mind snap beneath trying to hold out against the pain. He wanted to scream, but instead he was standing again, his hands moving behind himself once more, involuntarily trying to shield him from the blows.

‘Ah ah,’ Bull said, his voice firmer than before. ‘None of that.’

The heel of a palm pressing into his lower back, and Cullen stared at one of his hands sure there would be blood. There was none at all. What would it even feel like when it broke the skin?

‘You gotta stay down for me. No more trying to put your hands in the way of the cane. It can break your fingers. Don’t give me a reason to restrain your arms.’

Cullen folded his arms underneath his chest and then leaned down on them, gripping his own arms tight. His breathing was an uneven rasp.

The hand at his lower back became a fist knuckling in, and weak counterbalance to the pain that was swimming through him. It was wriggling down his legs, spearing fingers up his spine. His whole lower body felt like a mass of red.

A strange, weak nervousness spread through him. He felt unsure. What if others could handle this without a sound? What if their breathing stayed even? What if he had no pain threshold at all? Bull had struck him less than ten times, and Cullen felt like Bull was striking into the very walls and barriers he kept erected inside himself. It didn’t help matters when Bull said:

‘It’ll be easier if you express it. Y’know, scream, shout, whatever. Swear at me. I don’t care. I left you ungagged for a reason.’

‘I feel like you’ve never met me,’ Cullen said, about as witheringly as he could manage, given that his voice was strained.

‘I feel like you’ve never met this fucking cane before,’ Bull quipped back, petting Cullen’s back lightly before stepping away. ‘Right, here we go again. Take a deep breath for me.’

Cullen did that, though he wasn’t sure it helped anything at all. His skin felt swollen to three times its normal size, though he was sure it wasn’t. The welts burned. The pain pulsed so constantly that he began to forget about the concerns that he’d been carrying with him. Even the reason for the session drifted away. All he was left with was the fear of that cane, the determination to withstand it, a pervasive anxiety that he couldn’t.

Now, when the cane started rubbing over his skin again, it sometimes rubbed over the welts that Bull had raised. Cullen buried his head against his arms and opened his mouth, forced himself to breathe. Perhaps he was just more sensitive to pain than usual. Maybe that was it. He just needed to focus, he just-
Bull began striking him again. This time, Cullen bit down into his arm and found that it didn’t matter if he wanted to make noise or not – the noises came anyway. Harsh grunts driven out of him, a broken whimper when the pain blew up seconds later. By the time the agony of one strike was peaking, Bull would strike him again. It was relentless.

The pain drowned out everything, Cullen’s ankles shifted absently, trying to get away from it. His arms jerked occasionally with the need to drag himself away. He stopped biting into his forearm and slammed his teeth together instead, keening through a strike that landed just at the top of his thighs, where the pain blasted into his mind and up the back of his neck and felt like it was eviscerating him.

It was during the next strike that a flight response kicked in. He was rearing up, panting loudly, his ankles tugging hard against the rope, his hands rucking the leather as he tried to crawl up the bed and away.

‘No,’ Bull said, so close that it felt like Bull was pressing against the pain just through his presence. And then a hand actually touched one of the globes of his ass and covered the welts there with skin and sweat and callouses and Cullen was swearing, squirming to get away. ‘No, Cullen.’

‘Fuck,’ Cullen cried, his voice breaking. ‘Just-‘

‘Stop fighting me. I’m not done with you yet.’

Cullen’s arms twisted back and with one hand he tried to push Bull away, with the other, he scratched furrows into Bull’s arm, trying to get him to move his palm where it touched him. The pain was still swelling. Stealing his breath. The strikes echoed long after they’d been made. Bull held firm, and the warm reassurance of before was gone. His presence now intimidating, not reassuring.

‘Cullen, you’re not going to win this one.’

Cullen growled in frustration, kept trying to knock Bull’s hand away and failing. If he had the leverage, he’d be kicking, and he jerked at the ropes and keened again. It was only when he opened his eyes that he caught his reflection in the mirror, saw the way Bull was looking at him.

He fell as still as he could, even though his body was still straining hard against the baseboard. He couldn’t seem to control it.

‘Shhh,’ Bull said, looking at him, face unreadable. ‘We’re not done.’

A long pause then. Cullen just stared at him. He didn’t want to look at his own face, even though he could see it. His lips red from where he’d bitten into them without realising. His cheeks flushed. His eyes sheened – he hadn’t realised that was happening. Bull squeezed the welts on Cullen’s ass and Cullen’s head snapped back and bumped into Bull’s collarbone.

‘Stop it,’ Cullen said, his voice hard.

‘You have an out here,’ Bull’s voice a gentle counterpoint to his own. ‘You can say ‘katoh’ and we’ll be done for the night. You can ask for a break and I might give you one if I think you need it. Otherwise I’m gonna give you as much of this as I want. And you’re going to fucking let me. So stop fighting me.’

At that, Cullen’s whole body went limp, and Bull had an arm around his chest again, holding him up. The whimper came from Cullen’s throat before he could stop himself.
'Didn’t think there’d be a kind of pain you didn’t like,’ Bull said. ‘But I want to stripe you up, and you want blood. That’s a win-win.’

‘Maker, please- I can’t.’

That was a weakness he hated admitting to. Even now, the burning throb of pain felt like it was stealing his breath from him, making his voice weaker.

‘Cullen, listen to me, do you need to say katoh?’

‘Just- Why can’t you use the cat? It’s serviceable.’

Bull’s thumb rubbed against Cullen’s sternum in small, firm circles.

‘Because I don’t want this to be easy,’ Bull said, rubbing his palm over the welts again as Cullen grit his teeth together because even that was too intense. ‘Because you wanting yourself cut open is something you should take very seriously, not something that’s an accident that happens here and there. And because I like it.’

Cullen frowned. ‘I… You- You like hurting me so much?’

‘In a way,’ Bull said, and his voice sounded warm. ‘I like watching you bear it for me. I like it when you can’t keep yourself together anymore. I like your ass turning red. And remember Cullen, the thing you told me you liked specifically about this, is that sometimes it would be hard to bear, or unbearable. So here’s the thing. From here on in you can struggle, and you can keep fighting me, you can yell at me, but I will push you back down again and keep on going until I’m satisfied. The only word that will make me stop is what?’

‘Katoh.’

‘Good,’ Bull said. ‘We’re on the same page now. Of a sort.’

‘It wasn’t meant to be this hard,’ Cullen said, his voice muted.

‘It should’ve always been hard,’ Bull said. ‘Well, not for everyone. But for you. You already find it far too easy to disrespect your body, that’s second-nature to you. Someone else disrespecting it is par for the course. But this isn’t me disrespecting you. You asked for something, I answered. And it’s actually pretty fucking good to realise you have an instinct to get away from something that hurts, ‘cuz you need that, Cullen.’

‘But you’re not done,’ Cullen said, looking at him in the mirror.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, lips quirking into a half-smile. ‘You wanted me to cut you open, and I will. It won’t be long now. One more thing. I’m gonna ask you something, and I want an honest answer. I can tie your wrists so you can’t get your hands in the way anymore. It might make you feel trapped. But it also might make you feel better to have something to struggle against. But it’s up to you. You telegraph when you’re gonna reach back, so I don’t need to do it. But you might want the freedom to fight as hard and rough as you want. Your call.’

Just as Cullen opened his mouth to respond, Bull reached down and dragged his blunt fingertips over the welts on his upper thigh, and a noise was shocked out of Cullen’s throat. He stared at Bull in outrage, and Bull winked at him.

‘Go on,’ Bull said, grinning slowly, ‘tell me it’s just ‘blinking’ now.’
Cullen blew out a breath of laughter, his chest feeling tight with something other than tension or pain for the first time in days. And even though he felt those fingers threatening, he just couldn’t stop himself.

‘If you only have one eye, it’s blinking,’ Cullen said, staring at him.

Then he lurched when Bull ran his fingers more roughly over the welts he’d raised. Cullen was up on his tiptoes, a wash of pain drenching him like cold water, but there was steely, pleased mirth deep down.

‘You’re a little shit,’ Bull breathed.

Cullen managed the beginning of a quick, fierce grin when pain radiated through his thigh and back again and he growled, trying to squirm away. Bull laughed low, the sound stirring heat of a different kind, and after a couple of seconds, Cullen went still again, feeling weak.

‘So you want me to tie you properly? Or you want your arms free?’

Cullen took several quick breaths, thinking it over. Then he flexed his fingers and shook his head. He wasn’t ready. Not for that. Even having his ankles tied edged panic into his mind.

‘May I- May I keep them free?’

‘Yep,’ Bull said. ‘Since you asked so nicely. Now, you want a break?’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘Didn’t I just have one?’

‘Yeah, you kinda did. You want some water?’

‘No, thank you,’ Cullen said.

‘Then back down you go,’ Bull said, pushing him firmly back towards the bed. ‘Hang on there, this is one of those things that doesn’t get easier the longer you leave it.’

Bull hummed happily when Cullen pressed his forehead into the leather, when he gripped the blankets and knew he was about to clench his fingers hard. It still wasn’t as hard on his hands as the stone wall in the storage room, at least.

‘I like this,’ Bull said with gusto. It had Cullen wanting to see what else he could do to earn that tone of voice. ‘Can’t do this to many people, y’know. It’s been a while. Now you just hold on tight. Try and stay down until the end. We’re nearly done. Can you do that for me?’

Cullen opened his mouth, then nodded silently. Suddenly that was all he wanted to do. Bear it well until it was over. Not stand up again and interrupt what Bull was doing. He nodded again, trying to calm his tensing body. His mind was determined, but his flesh knew what was coming and balked.

The rubbing, when it came, wasn’t soothing anymore. The cane stroked over welts, promised new ones, and Cullen shuddered and felt one of his thighs tremor briefly. Then the tapping, and Cullen shifted his position so that he could interlink his fingers over his head, pressing down hard with sweaty palms, digging fingertips into the back of each hand.

He was exhausted. He tried to sink deeper into the bed, let it prop him up.

The first strike was lighter than the others, but still hard enough to press that pain deep into muscle. After a few seconds – as though Bull was gauging him for his response – there was another strike,
this one harder than the rest and at an angle, crossing other welts. Cullen wheezed and then cried out, and then his arms shook as he kept himself down, squeezed his eyes shut.

It was his undoing, forcing himself to withstand the strikes that kept coming after that. The sense that Bull wasn’t just caning him, but attacking some reservoir of strength he kept bolstered inside himself at all times, it undid each one of his defences. Pain took away his ability to care that his eyes burned hot and then leaked, that his gasps came to resemble sobs. It built and swelled and plateaued, then built again, and when Bull focused on the tops of his thighs – three strikes in a row – Cullen let out some long, rough sound that he had no name for, only barely muffled by his own bed, reverberating back into his head like the pain did through his whole body.

At some point, his skin must have split beneath that pressure, because he felt it in the itching trickle of wetness down one leg. Then that awareness disappeared and the pain was scraping him out of himself, obliterating every concern and anxiety that had brought him here. But it left an odd distress in him that he couldn’t allay, a sobbing sort of pain that was half catharsis, half fear that it would go on too long, leave nothing but wreckage behind.

When Bull stopped, Cullen was still caught up in the storm of it. He was clawing at the backs of his hands and jerking against the ropes with one leg and making noises with every exhale that would have humiliated him if he’d had any ability to feel shame.

Hands at his ankles, and then one of his feet was free and he was kicking back, trying to pull himself out of the second cuff through force of will. A hand held him firm, stopped his struggling and then he heard Bull’s voice penetrate whatever hysterical haze had found him.

‘Hey, hey now,’ Bull said quickly, gripping his ankle hard. ‘I’m gonna get you out of this as fast as I can. You got this, just another minute.’

A sound of protest squeezed out of the back of Cullen’s throat, but he forced himself still even as his heart knocked like it wanted to get free of his chest. It couldn’t have been long before Bull was clambering onto his bed and dragging him forwards by the shoulders, but it felt interminable.

Cullen couldn’t get control of himself, even as Bull pulled him across his bent leg – his own legs crossed – and was making hushing sounds and easing Cullen’s shaking hands free where they were locked against the back of his head.

Bull then slid a hand beneath Cullen’s chest and lifted him like he weighed hardly anything, and pressed the lip of the bottle of elfroot against his mouth. And Cullen grasped for the bottle himself with hands that were too slick to get a good grip, and drunk as much as Bull gave him, reaching for it when Bull took the bottle away.

‘Ah, no,’ Bull said. ‘Let that work first. Come on, give it thirty seconds, you’ll thank me for it later.’

Cullen slumped back down against Bull’s leg and shook in waves that reflected the rise and fall of pain through him. Maker, but when he’d asked if Bull would cut him open, he should have known that Bull would find a way to make it new. That had knocked him down, found something in him and shaken it apart. He felt raw and open. Felt like no one should be able to see him like this, soul flayed bare.

He hated that Bull wasn’t the first to see it, hated knowing that he could be reduced to this and then people would use it. Use it for their own ends.

So when Bull’s fingers combed through his hair, when Bull kept hushing him, promising the
elfroot would start to take the edge off soon, Cullen felt even more unmanned than before. That someone could strip him down to this and then treat him like what they’d found in the core of him wasn’t reprehensible, wasn’t vile. It was worse, somehow, and he was moving his hands until he clung to Bull’s thigh, gripping too hard, unable to stop himself.

And those hands didn’t stop moving in his hair, tracing his hairline, thumbs smoothing in the wetness beneath his eyes, or cupping the back of his neck, or even rubbing his shoulders so firmly his body rocked.

‘I’ve got you,’ Bull was saying. ‘I’ve got you. I’m right here.’

That litany continued, then eased away, Bull communicating by touch instead. Still, it was a long time before Cullen’s breathing wasn’t only wet gasping, forceful exhales. A long time before his uneven breathing started to ease into anything steady. And by then he realised that the worst of the pain – the fire of it – had been soothed by the elfroot.

The waves of trembling lessened and Cullen slumped – a dead weight – not even caring that he wasn’t comfortable. Bull was back to combing his fingers through Cullen’s hair, and Cullen realised it was drenched, and that he must have been dripping sweat and unaware of it.

Then, silence between them, except for the sound of Cullen’s rough breathing.

Eventually, he reached behind him with a weak arm and carefully touched his hip, then edged sideways until he felt one of the welts. He jolted a little, but it wasn’t quite as bad as he was expecting.

‘It’s not as bad as it probably feels,’ Bull said, bending over him and grounding him, two hands pressed flat to his back. ‘But there’s some parts that are still a little open. You’ll need to take some elfroot in the morning to close it all up properly. Not much. Unless you want to get rid of all of it, then you’ll need a full dose.’

‘Maker,’ Cullen whispered, his fingers tentatively touching his skin, surprised at the bumps and how they burned. He was too scared to risk touching the tops of his thighs. Hadn’t realised the skin there was quite so sensitive. And Bull hadn’t exactly avoided it either. When he took his hand away, he tiredly turned his head and saw a faint smear of blood across his fingertips.

It really wasn’t as much as he was expecting. Had Bull even done that much to him, after all?

And with the raw state hanging over him, Cullen had the horrible sense that he’d done a bad job of it all. He flinched at nothing, rubbed his thumb over his fingertips, staring at the blood. He’d expected so much more.

‘You must think- You must think I’m a coward,’ Cullen said, his voice rough.

Bull seemed to hold his breath then. His fingers pressed harder into Cullen’s skin.

‘Yeah, that’s really not what- Fuck, Cullen, why would I think that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said, confused over what he was feeling, what he was thinking.

‘You took that really well,’ Bull said, his voice as firm as the hands pressing down into his back. ‘You were a champion. It wasn’t supposed to be easy.’

‘It wasn’t,’ Cullen echoed.
He closed his eyes and let his hand drop, wiped out and feeling like the inside of his soul was sore. Bull said nothing else, but Cullen could sense that Bull wasn’t feeling as happy or hungry or warm as before. Cullen wanted to apologise, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, he just focused on the feeling of his breathing slowing down, the way his chest rose and fell over Bull’s lap, how much he didn’t want to leave this. Ever. He painstakingly tried to fix this moment in his mind, to pin it down in visceral textures so that he could remember it for as long as possible.

Half an hour must have passed before guilt started to sneak back in and remind him how he’d gone about securing this session, before he heard Searidge’s voice echoing inside of him, disdain and contempt reverberating. Cullen absently pressed his head harder to Bull’s thigh, wanting to disappear into him, knowing it was impossible, ridiculous.

‘Y’know,’ Bull said, voice contemplative, ‘I used to think you weren’t such a hard nut to crack. I knew you had your secrets, but I figured you’d give them up easy enough, given half a chance. Because that’s what almost everyone wants.’

‘I’m not secretive,’ Cullen said, voice faintly slurred.

Bull laughed and then petted Cullen’s shoulder. And then he started easing away, and Cullen felt his whole body go cold and he reached out, eyes flying wide. Was it punishment? Was it-

‘Hey, hey,’ Bull said, coming back straight away. ‘I’m just going to get some towels and shit. Not good for you to stay clammy like this. Got it?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen murmured, that sharp anxiety disappearing just as quickly as it had come. He shifted slightly as Bull walked across the room. Watched him with lidded eyes, frowning.

‘Am I really so secretive?’ Cullen said.

Bull muttered something in Qunlat and then lifted his gaze to Cullen’s.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, his voice stern, ‘what the fuck do you think?’

‘I think…there’s enough information out there about me, if anyone cares to look.’

_There’s easily a bevy of rumours in Kirkwall, more if you search farther afield._

‘One day,’ Bull said, ‘you’re gonna give me straight answers, and nugs will fly. Even that – what you just said to me – that’s a load of crap. You haven’t even told me why you wanted to do this. Tonight. Because I know it’s horseshit, Cullen. ‘Things haven’t been easy lately,’ means exactly sweet fuck all to me.’

‘Then why?’ Cullen said quietly, before his eyes sank shut completely. A towel rubbed across his back and it was blissful. A balance against that swollen pain in his skin and muscles. He groaned softly, and Bull rewarded him by dragging the towel up and down his spine several times. It took a few moments for Cullen to remember he was trying to ask something. ‘Why did you agree to it?’

Bull sat beside him. Cullen reached out absentely and touched his fingers to Bull’s knee. Then rubbed about as much as he could manage, with how weak he felt.

‘Why didn’t you say no?’ Cullen said.

‘Here’s something I know,’ Bull said, sighing and placing his palm over Cullen’s hand, holding him in place. ‘Sometimes someone wants something for the wrong reasons. Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t. What I know is that sometimes, the reasons aren’t what matters most. What matters
most is what I create in this room with you, what we create. And with the watchword, and you
knowing what’s coming, and me being able to watch you and see how you react, I can decide
whether I think those wrong reasons have come into the moment or not. That’s my responsibility. I
made a call.’

Cullen lifted his eyebrows, because that was interesting, and if he’d been anything close to alert,
he’d do something with those words.

He felt like he’d been course corrected. Some part of him running out of control, hauled back into
place through pain and Bull’s presence. And he reflected blurrily on the evening, thought that
something about it had returned some strength to him, even as he felt far weaker than usual.

‘I see,’ Cullen said. ‘Well. For what it’s worth, I think you made the right call.’

‘I think you’re playing a dangerous game,’ Bull said, his voice low. ‘And I think-’

When Bull didn’t complete the sentence, Cullen thought the silence that followed was odd. He
pushed himself up to see Bull’s face. Bull was looking out into the room, looking out past the
room. He seemed troubled.

Cullen rubbed at Bull’s knee again, frowning. When Bull looked at him, the smile he gave was
stiffer than usual. But as they kept looking at each other, the smile loosened, lost its tension, and
Cullen found himself echoing it. He felt a bit foolish, but didn’t really care.

‘Promise me you’ll take three or four sips of elfroot tomorrow morning,’ Bull said eventually.
‘Swear it.’

‘I swear,’ Cullen said.

Bull looked relieved, then said: ‘I’m going to check. Tomorrow.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘All right.’

Bull’s sigh was heartfelt, and then he was coming closer and gathering Cullen up again. Bull
draped Cullen carefully across his lap and left an arm across his back, holding him in place.

‘Thank you,’ Cullen said, wishing he could express something that he didn’t really have words for.

The rest of their time together was quietly spent. Bull wanted him close, and Cullen wanted to be
close, and there was a bubble of peace around them. Cullen occasionally lazily stroked at Bull’s
shin or calf through his trousers. And there was almost always a hand in his hair or on his back.

The pain was lessening, but it was still there. He’d have bruises in the morning. He was almost
looking forward to taking more elfroot. It turned out that there was something that would make
him want it, and he knew that it would likely be a long time before he asked to be caned again. A
long time.

That was probably what Bull intended. Cullen grimaced and then yawned, stretching out properly
on Bull’s lap and drifting. He was almost asleep when Bull withdrew and eased Cullen into his bed
– on his stomach. He didn’t want blankets touching his thighs or buttocks, but Bull insisted on it.
Aside from some disgruntled murmuring, Cullen left it. The elfroot had taken the edge off, and it
was bearable. He could certainly sleep through it.

And so he did.
Cullen!

A loud banging startling him awake, and he forgot where he was. The last time he’d had a door to be banged on, he’d been in Haven, and before that – Kirkwall. He began launching out of bed without really thinking about it, then slapped a hand over his mouth to cover the wretched groan that found him as deep bruising throbbed through him.

‘Hang on!’ he called, before gasping a breath. By the Maker. ‘What is it?’

He was at Skyhold, the pounding coming through the trapdoor. He walked over as quickly as he could and then opened it – realising it was unbolted. Cassandra stared at him, looking no-nonsense and concerned all at once. Cullen felt a thread of panic. Had he overslept? He never overslept. Never.

‘What is it?’ Cullen said again, his voice harder than before.

Cassandra noticed he was nude, but aside from a slight widening of her eyes, she didn’t look away.

‘Is it Corypheus?’ Cullen said, his voice firming.

‘No,’ Cassandra said. ‘But I’m not sure it’s much better. We’re moving out today – General Samson – one of your Scouts almost ruined her horse to pass us a message, she’s just arrived. The Inquisitor feels it’s best we go now. How soon can you be in your armour?’

Cullen stared at her, a thorny mix of emotions prickling through him. Samson. What had the Scout said?

‘Soon,’ Cullen said abruptly. ‘Saddle up the horses, and we’ll-’

‘Done,’ Cassandra said. ‘We’re waiting on you, The Iron Bull and Varric. Normally we’d have a few hours, but here, see for yourself.’

She handed him a piece of paper, and Cullen unrolled it and read through the message quickly, eyes narrowing at what he saw.

‘Right,’ Cullen said grimly. With lives already lost, it was time to deal with this and hopefully put it behind him. Cullen wanted his sword and shield when it came time to face Samson again. Wanted to look him in the eyes and see for himself the man he’d once considered a friend. And in the bubbling of his rage, he remembered the song of the red lyrium and his hand crumpled the message. ‘Right. I won’t be long.’

Cassandra nodded at him, looked like she wanted to say more, then climbed back down the stairs.

Cullen stood, swallowing at the pain. He walked across the room and looked quickly at the welts, bruising and even scabs in the mirror. On his bedside table, next to his lamp, a bottle of elfroot.

He walked over to it, picking it up and reaching behind him with the other hand to touch his overheated flesh.

He uncorked the bottle and raised it to his mouth, then hesitated.

He could use this pain. If there was ever a time he needed it…

You made a promise.
Cullen lowered the elfroot potion and took a shaky breath.

This was exactly the sort of situation where he needed pain to focus, to concentrate. Three sips of elfroot – it wasn’t a full dose, but it would remove the sharpness of what he had now. It wouldn’t be those welts, keeping him painfully present with every jolt of a gallop. And it would be hard to bear, but he knew it worked. He knew how to put pain to a purpose now. Learned from the Templars, learned again with Uldred.

If there was a time he needed that, it was now, when facing up against Samson and the remnants of his ruined past and that blasted red lyrium.

He stoppered up the bottle and hid it beneath layers of clothing in one of his chests, shaking his head grimly, because Bull would understand. He’d make Bull understand. After.

You made a promise. You swore it.

Cullen rubbed himself down quickly with a cloth, rinsing it in yesterday’s bucket of water – today’s not yet newly replenished. He scrubbed the sweat out of his hair that had dried it into spikes. Dressed in the underclothes that would protect him from the harshness of his armour.

‘I swore I wouldn’t let any harm come to them either,’ Cullen said to that insistent voice inside of him. ‘The mages, my Templar brethren, does it mean anything? This is a war.’

His words were met with nothing but sullen silence. Cullen felt queasy.

Using the chants and the mantras he needed to get himself in the necessary state of mind also made him feel more righteous about his decision. It was about priorities. Not interpersonal promises. This was a war that could end Thedas as they knew it, after all.

But the feeling of wanting to blurt the truth at a time that would damn them all vanished. There was a mission at hand, one that he’d been personally driving for some time. He needed the pain to focus. He needed Bull to understand that there were priorities, and faltering or failing because he didn’t have something to distract him from the red lyrium, from the fact that Samson had betrayed them all – it wasn’t an option.

He hauled himself up onto his horse and didn’t even grunt as he seated himself into his saddle. It hurt, yes. That was the point.
He’d made the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

(You just keep telling yourself that Cullen. I’m sure this definitely won’t blow up in your face later.)
No new tags, but a new warning now for Graphic Depictions of Violence (all which I feel are canon typical if you’ve played the game – and see, I have to say ‘if’, because I myself didn’t start playing the game until I’d been reading DA:I fanfiction for like 6 months…), and I’ve added the tag impact play just to be a bit more comprehensive.

(This is not all 100% canon adherent, however there are a few lines here and there pulled directly from Dragon Age for this scene.)

(Also omg those comments I just fklsafjsa it’s ridiculous saying this but that’s pretty much a big part of the fast turnaround with this chapter thank you)

The few sips of elfroot that Bull had gotten Cullen to drink down immediately after the caning had sped up the healing process. In the days of travelling that followed, Cullen didn’t get to keep the welts, or even the worst of the bruising for as long as he wanted. But there were still some parts of his skin that stayed open. He suspected the elfroot he’d taken while draped in Bull’s lap would have eased that too, but every controlled bounce on the horse – the position of those wounds – meant that they never stood a chance.

He was kept busy, as he knew he would be. A small squadron of soldiers travelled with them to the Shrine of Dumat, healers as well, with all of them knowing that they would be going up against Red Templars, and reports of behemoths waiting for them. Between the soldiers and the Inquisitor, he wasn’t given much time to think about whether they stood any chance against not just Samson, but Samson’s armour.

The pain did what it was supposed to – it helped him stay focused. But he knew he’d made a miscalculation along the line, because as the days wore on and he sweated into his wounds – small as they were – it also became distracting. There were times he had to ask a soldier to repeat themselves, times when it would take him a few seconds longer to process what the Inquisitor had said. Normally, he associated those sorts of distractions with craving lyrium. This time it was an aching, gritty pain – particularly at his upper thighs – that clutched at him. Made him feel like he was still hanging onto Bull’s forearm, dragged back into his room, staring at his own raw face in the mirror wondering how anyone could find that bare part of himself so much faster than he could hide it.

* 

He didn’t acknowledge the feeling of infection for what it was, when he first felt it. It was nothing more than the vague sense that one patch of his skin was far more heated than the rest of him. He’d known this so often, for so long, that it was easy to tune out.

For a time in Kinloch, they’d kept him alive despite infection, magically sustained on mana and Maker knew what else. He’d come to think that heat and faint itchiness and the sense that his body was sinking in upon itself was normal.

Abruptly, he felt the shadow of Bull’s fingers on the scar that crept around his flank and back.
Remembered him saying, ‘…this one healed real badly, didn’t it?’

Cullen shuddered, his skin crawled, and the cut in the crease between his right buttock and thigh flashed a random spike of pain through him.

He’d made a mistake. But there were stocks of elfroot potion around him, and once they’d captured Samson, he could use some for himself and claim some kind of injury. It would be fine. Bull would never know that he’d broken a promise and Cullen would never do something so stupid again.

His lips thinned as he shifted in the saddle. He could hear Bull behind him, chatting with Varric, and he could feel the way that patch on his upper thigh burned with sickening promise. That wasn’t the fresh new pain from the cane itself, but something caused by sweat and humidity and thinking he knew better.

But it was still pain he could use, and he had at least a few days before his need for elfroot would become dire, and until then the wound might resolve spontaneously.

Maybe it wasn’t even infected.

Cullen sighed, rubbed the side of his horse’s neck, tried not to think about it.

*

The Shrine of Dumat, sacked and burning and reeking of smoke, burnt leather and even flesh.

‘Maker, tell me he hasn’t fled,’ Cullen said.

Varric shifted uncomfortably. ‘Sorry, Curly, looks like someone tipped off Samson you were coming.’

If Cullen ever discovered who had informed Samson that they were approaching…he couldn’t even think of what he’d do. He’d liked Samson as a friend back in Kirkwall, but back then, Samson hadn’t ever shown this propensity to be such an efficient, merciless strategist. How many informants did Samson have?

Samson was meant to be the frustrating, soft-hearted Templar who broke with duty to pass on lovelorn messages for Maddox, for Maker’s sake. He should never have been capable of this. Never.

Cullen stared at the slowly twisting spires of smoke and his jaw set. ‘The place isn’t yet burned to the ground, let’s see what we can find.’

He took in the growths of red lyrium crystals at a glance, even as Varric cursed to see them. Already, he had the numbers of Red Templars in his head, had an idea of the ones he could approach on his own. With the Inquisitor at his side, they stepped within the walls to take down those that remained.

*

Fighting and killing the horrors that were the Red Templars filled Cullen with a scathing bitterness that burned far hotter than the blood that spattered him. Perhaps it wasn’t the mages that needed those to watch over them as much as the Templars did these days. No one left to be trusted, and the holy Order desecrated to become this.
Everywhere he turned, he could see glimmers of that sickly sweet red in the periphery – when it wasn’t right in front of him, encrusted on an enemy’s arm or riddling their entire body. The song infested him, slunk into his pores and shimmered within. He was amazed that – with how loudly he was shouting the Cantos in his head – none of them were spilling from his mouth. But his teeth were clenched far too hard for that.

Though pain burned through him, he’d fought through far worse wounds.

Sparks flew, his sword smashed against a weapon that looked far too sophisticated for the now-sacked shrine, wielded by someone who Cullen knew was in constant pain due to the red lyrium. Cullen shouldered into it, growling, cutting his shield into flesh that wasn’t riddled with red crystals and trying not to see the remnants of a man he recognised. That he’d known in Kirkwall. Tried not to think of how Maddox had likely made the weapon.

There was no recognition in the gaze that met his – or if it was recognition, it was one shot through with hatred. Cullen matched it with his own, not needing the red lyrium to fuel his disgust with everything the Order had become. Sometimes he didn’t know if he was a tool of the Templars, or a tool to be used against them.

Two of Varric’s bolts found the Red Templar’s ribs, and Cullen finished him off with a gristly crunch of the head of his shield into the man’s – no, creature’s – neck. Arterial blood spurted violently, and Cullen could taste it in his open mouth, copper and salt and a song.

Panic wrenched him and he spat violently to the side, wiping off his mouth with a vambrace and realising that his vambraces weren’t nearly clean enough for that. He roared in frustration and stepped into the path of the next monstrosity hurtling towards him, thinking that he’d dealt with abominations all his trained life – that he’d been the poor bastard assigned with hunting them down – and it was still nothing like this.

He had a tense few minutes of refusing to swallow any of the saliva building in his mouth, and then had the savage satisfaction of spitting the rest of the lyrium tainted stuff into the next creature’s face, before cutting whatever Templar the beast had once been down into the dust.

* * *

Lending assistance to the Inquisitor’s team wasn’t as tough as he’d imagined it would be. His fighting style was nothing like Bull’s, but all he needed to do there was keep out of the way and offer a shield when needed. More often than not, he and Cassandra paired up, having sparred so often that each other’s fighting styles were now familiar. Together they would work back to back, their shields protecting themselves and each other.

But they were up against a ferocious enemy, and they could only do so much. Too many times he would turn and see someone downsing a full dose of an elfroot potion in the corners of his eyes. The Red Templars were stronger, faster, relentless, and Cullen shouted orders in clipped tones, commanding them to fall back as needed, reminding them to lean on their mage and Bowman when needed. Though even the Inquisitor and Varric weren’t unscathed.

Outcrops of red lyrium crystals – twice as tall as he – sung dizzying melodies in his head. Invited him to become a part of its song. Even those creatures that Samson was working with, was harvesting, even their growths and tumours of red stone sang. Each one he shattered weakened the song for only seconds before it rallied around him, as though it knew when it was being harmed.

There were distractions aplenty, not least that his eyes kept tracking to Bull fighting with a brutality that was breathtaking. There was such a difference between that channelled, contained energy that
Bull gave him in their sessions, the illusion of force. Right now, he could see the reality of it. And Cullen forced himself to look away more than once, because it was doing strange things to his chest, making it harder to draw a full breath.

Not seconds later, his whole attention was taken when a behemoth of a Red Templar – almost entirely made of lyrium – fell upon them both with a speed that landed Cullen hard on his back. He shouted at a split of pain that moved through his upper thigh, snarled, forced himself up. Cassandra was already downing a bottle of elfroot potion with a shaking arm, and Cullen couldn’t tell where all the blood on her torso was coming from, only that she was rallying and they were up on their feet and facing it together.

‘Getting low on elfroot, Boss!’ Bull shouted in the distance.

Cullen could feel whatever had happened to that bruised, infected opening in his thigh seeping fluid into his underclothes.

Then he had no time to care what was happening, because the behemoth was moving too fast, because his instincts took over and there was nothing but the fight.

*  
The situation was no better when they walked within the shrine itself, the smell of smoke thicker, causing some mild coughing – nothing bad enough to demand evacuation. Cullen’s eyes greedily roved over papers and books and bits of equipment that would all hopefully come in handy in the future. Items he could pass to Dagna, study himself, pass onto researchers.

The song of the red lyrium was louder, loud enough that even with the pain in his body and the focus he was hanging onto and the chants he was rhythmically saying in his own head, he fumbled his sword twice. It cost him a hard blow against his shoulder armour that would have caved his head in, even with a helm.

Bloodlust was trying to sing its own song inside of him, but he clamped down on that too. It wouldn’t be useful, he was responsible for too many, and so he dug deep into his resources of bitterness and fury and used that instead.

Time sped up and slowed down all at once. He became aware of minute details – a glint of light off a tiny red lyrium crystal growing out of a little finger, a ripped Templar Order insignia, a hint of blue eyes and dirty blonde eyebrows that reminded him of a young lad he’d exchanged words with at Kirkwall – Hedley – before blood washed any recognition away and made him just another monster. Amongst the details he picked up – honed, sharp instincts had him moving without needing to calculate in plodding steps. This was no chess match, and in the moment, he almost felt as powerful as he once did on the lyrium.

Almost.

He caught the tail end of Bull viciously taking a Red Templar apart with his axe. Bull’s shoulders heaved, the pattern of his vitaar almost lost underneath heavy blood splatter. The Red Templar collapsed, and Bull stood over him, staring at him. Only a second seemed to pass before Bull looked up, looked around the room for something, and then stopped once he found Cullen.

The weight of that gaze was a blow that Cullen didn’t know how to brace for. He forgot how to think, felt only some huge wrenching pull in Bull’s direction, a visceral need to walk over there and touch him, be close, stand by his side.
Cullen did none of those things, and then he forcibly blinked his gaze away. As he shifted his weight, he became aware of the sticky wetness at the back of his thigh and nausea swooped through him.

But there was no time for it. He could always get some elfroot potion later. Whatever was happening at the back of his upper thigh was not a life or death situation. Whatever the Red Templars had left to throw at them? That very well could be.

* 

At the end of their journey into the shrine, he hadn’t expected to find Maddox. Not slumped there on the floor staring up at them peacefully. The sun brand on his forehead made Cullen wonder if he could have ever realised how wrong he was, how wrong they all were, before Maddox had the essence of who he was sundered from him for daring to fall in love while imprisoned.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Cullen said. ‘I’ll send for the healers.’

But he didn’t send for the healers. He could hardly concentrate. Here, the red lyrium was festering and raw and its song pierced him through. Maddox was speaking, he mentioned blightcap essence, and Cullen managed to look like he was paying attention to everything the Inquisitor and Maddox was saying. Paid attention enough to know that Maddox and the Red Templars were left behind as a smokescreen, expected to die.


But Cullen knew why, even as he didn’t want to know. Samson had shown Maddox compassion a long time ago, even as Cullen had cautioned him against it and Meredith had given him a formal warning. Samson, the one talking to him about how Meredith was a bully even as Cullen would meet those then-outrageous statements with rants that would sometimes have Samson leaving the room, only coming back later – drunk – to sleep in his cot and stare reprovingly at Cullen without a word, before falling asleep.

And so many of the Tranquil were abandoned. Still, the idea that Samson would on the one hand poison the Templars with red lyrium, and then with the other rescue Maddox? Cullen had no room for that in his mind, even if the song of the crystals weren’t thrumming through him, pulling his very cells into harmony, promising relief.

Cullen had read the letters, he knew what the red lyrium promised him was a lie.

It wasn’t until Maddox had breathed his last breath and the Inquisitor had walked away to look for evidence at Cullen’s absent indication that they should, that he realised Bull hadn’t moved. He was standing there, watching Cullen silently.

No, Cullen thought. Don’t do this here.

‘You knew him well?’ Bull said, and Cullen blinked at him.

All he could think was that there was a cut on his upper thigh that was infected and had likely been infected for days. He needed elfroot potion. All he needed was a full dose and he could pretend he’d never made the stupid decision to go without it. What had seemed like the necessary option at the time was now something that left him steeped in guilt.

‘Well enough,’ Cullen said. ‘He was the reason Samson was thrown out of the Order.’

‘That sounds like a story,’ Bull said, raising his brow.
'It is,' Cullen said, then paused, turning towards one of the huge outcrops of red crystal and thinking of that stupid recurring dream and that song. His forehead furrowed, the skin stretching on dried blood. ‘It’s…’

The song might have been a lie, but it was beautiful all the same. Louder than that of the lyrium he used to take, saccharine, its melancholy edged with a dark hunger.

‘Cullen?’

‘It is a story,’ Cullen said, gritting his teeth together and forcing his eyes away from the red lyrium. When he looked at Bull again, Bull wasn’t looking at him, but at the crystals. His gaze was considering. ‘Maddox was in love with someone and it wasn’t meant to be, Samson broke with duty to smuggle love letters to Maddox’s sweetheart. Meredith found out. Maddox was made Tranquil, Samson ejected from the Order.’

Cullen walked away before Bull could respond, because this room, Maddox dead, the red lyrium, he couldn’t stay for much longer.

‘That’s a sad fucking story,’ Bull said behind him.

Cullen managed a short, bitter laugh.

Beneath that, his heart was pounding a beat that Cullen couldn’t quite distinguish from the throb of what was certainly infection. He remembered this feeling, didn’t he?

He wasn’t sure how Bull could not look at him and see the lies. See the broken promise. But Cullen could feel a bridge between them rotting through, could smell the decay of it. They both might still be standing upon it, but at some point it would splinter and fall away, just as the jetty had in his dream. He’d be left plunging into an emptiness of his own making.

In the end, he focused his hatred outward, and Samson was a convenient target. So he lambasted him for licking lyrium bottles clean, let his disdain ooze through him, hardly knowing who it was for anymore.

*

Varric was one the most vocal in refusing to make camp within the shrine, going on about red lyrium so much that Cullen was almost dizzy with gratitude that he didn’t have to be the one to make the argument himself, beyond simply concurring. So they made camp outside the walls, and Cullen still thought it wasn’t far enough from the red lyrium, but it would have to do.

He spent most of the evening checking in with soldiers and Templars, discussing anything he’d made note of while observing them – he always observed them, even when he didn’t know he was doing it. Then he talked with the Inquisitor over what, perhaps, might be done next to track down Samson.

He told himself he wasn’t avoiding Bull. He wouldn’t naturally have much cause to chat with Bull anyway, so he was acting naturally, and there was nothing amiss with his behaviour. Bull didn’t seem to be aware that anything was awry. But Cullen knew that he might not be able to tell what Bull was aware of, because he was trying not to meet Bull’s eye again, lest he feel that odd sensation he felt before. That magnetism he didn’t really have a word for.

When the others were retiring to bed, Cullen made himself sit next to Cassandra on one of the logs they’d rolled to the campfire. She gave him a grim smile, and Cullen nodded back, thinking that it was a good thing everything reeked of blood and sweat and refuse and decay, because it was a
good cover for his own injury.

‘I am sorry, Cullen,’ Cassandra said softly. ‘About Maddox. General Samson being gone. I know
this wasn’t what you hoped for.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ Cullen said, looking into the fire and thinking about the dull burning in his
own body. ‘Might I…trouble you for a moment?’

‘Of course,’ Cassandra said. ‘What is it?’

‘You don’t happen to know of any spare stores of elfroot potion, do you? It’s only that I took an
injury during battle. Not urgent enough to require it at the time, but I’d like to get on top of it now
if I might.’

‘Cullen,’ Cassandra said, her eyes widening, ‘you should have told me. We used it all afterwards,
you should have said something to the healers.’

‘I didn’t want to take what another might need more than I,’ Cullen said, his voice an undertone,
even though most wouldn’t be awake to hear them, or close enough, for that matter. ‘You
understand.’

‘I do,’ Cassandra said heavily. ‘I do understand, but there is none left. You’re a fool.’

‘It will hold,’ Cullen said. ‘I’ll take some at Skyhold.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m not sure what other options you think I have,’ he said drily.

‘Fair,’ Cassandra said, smiling. ‘But we can barter, there were a few villages we passed by on the
way. We’ll pass them on the way back.’

‘Maybe we’ll find Samson’s informant,’ Cullen said, shifting on his hips until he could lean on his
left side and take pressure off the right.

‘I do not like any of this,’ Cassandra said. Then she lowered her voice until it was almost air. ‘The
red lyrium hums in my very bones, I cannot imagine what it might be like for you.’

‘Yet you’ll not consider replacing me?’ he replied.

‘That’s not helpful,’ she said, sighing. ‘You know that’s not what I mean. You’ll notice you’re not
dead.’

‘I didn’t realise that was the only requirement for being Commander,’ Cullen said brightly –
though quietly. ‘I have a whole bevy of people I can recommend to you if that’s the case.’

Cassandra just glared at him, and Cullen couldn’t help but smile weakly.

‘You are courageous and determined,’ Cassandra said, her voice firm even as it was quiet. ‘You
are brave and learned from both books and experience, and you’ll notice that none of your soldiers
died today. In no small part thanks to you.’

‘Don’t- Not this,’ Cullen said, sitting squarely on both hips to feel that infection damn the praise
she’d just spoken, knowing that Bull was a short distance away, knowing that Cullen could say the
words ‘I swear’ and have them mean nothing at all. ‘Here, let me do it for you in turn, and see how
you like it. I hear they’re looking for a new Divine, and I believe I know just the-’
Cassandra dug the knuckle of her index finger underneath his arm, where his pauldrons didn’t protect tender flesh. He jerked away, almost laughed, except he knew that people needed their sleep.

But when he turned back to her, she didn’t look amused and angry, she looked concerned. He swallowed and eased back into position, frowning at her.

‘Cassandra?’

‘They’re serious, I think,’ Cassandra said. ‘I think. Vivienne wants it, I do not think she will be good in the position. There are others they’re considering. But I have been informed that it’s… I cannot think of what it might mean if they choose me, Cullen. I want a restored Chantry in a world that doesn’t know if it wants a Chantry at all. I dislike that I’m thinking about it, considering it seriously, when I keep reminding myself that humility is a far preferable quality.’

‘Well,’ Cullen said, stirring the fire with one of the long sticks left by the log just for that purpose. ‘Who will be my silent drinking companion then?’

‘Me,’ Cassandra said fervently, ‘because I will need one, should anything like that come to pass.’

Cullen gently nudged Cassandra to keep talking about it, because he wanted something else to focus on, and because it was one of the few things he offered the friendship. She seemed to enjoy talking to him about matters of faith and duty, and he supposed he understood aspects of that better than some of the others she kept company with.

His upper thigh pulsed sickeningly as the night progressed and he tuned it out. It would hold until Skyhold. That was all that mattered.

*

The next day he woke with a dry, cottony mouth and a headache. He shifted uncomfortably and then sat up within the tent, feeling hungover. His forehead felt like it was radiating heat, and when he pressed his hand to it, he spent a couple of minutes just sitting there and trying to mentally calculate how fast infection could advance, how long he’d left it, and how bad it might be after the wound had worsened when he was thrown onto his back.

That morning, when he was saddling up, Bull approached him as casually as he did everyone, and Cullen told himself that everything was fine, even as his fingers slipped on the girth.

‘Hey,’ Bull said.

‘Good morning,’ Cullen said, making sure his fingers were working as well as they possibly could, given that they felt rubbery and numb.

‘You’re looking a bit paler than normal. Everything good?’

‘Good,’ Cullen said, meeting his eyes and feeling his heart pulse in a lurch that could have been fear or sickness. ‘I just wish to get back to Skyhold. We may have struck a blow to Corypheus, but ridding him of General Samson was the ideal outcome.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, watching him. ‘You got one of those headaches? You know, like the one you mentioned last time?’

The last time Cullen had mentioned a headache to Bull, was when Bull had massaged him and then scratched his back in those long, luxuriant strokes. Cullen’s shoulders tightened with a shiver of
pleasure just to think of it. Then he nodded, because Bull had given him an excuse he could use. The guilt he felt now wasn’t even vague or distant. It was right there, squatting inside of him.

He felt ill.

Cullen tightened the girth and buckled it in, then scratched idly at a twitching muscle on his horse’s flank.

‘It’s fine,’ Cullen said, and Bull was frowning at him when he looked up again. ‘We’ll be back at Skyhold soon enough.’

‘They’ll hold up for you, y’know. Just say the word.’

‘I’ve just said what’s happening,’ Cullen said. ‘We’re returning to Skyhold.’

Bull’s eye narrowed, and he frowned, but he said nothing else. After another moment, he walked away, and Cullen’s stomach rolled with queasiness that was more than anxiety.

Instead, he mounted his horse and forced himself to ignore the sense that half his body was on fire, while the other half was icy cold.

*

Cullen was holding the reins loosely when it felt like the sky was tipping. At first he thought it was an episode finding him in broad daylight – which was rare. He waited for the sky to right itself, but instead he seemed to be tipping with it.

One of his feet slid out of the stirrups as he collapsed, but the other caught in the metal and he fell – his horse too well trained to shy away – even as his ankle twisted badly.

Commotion around him. Light and shadow passing over his eyes, all of it blurry. Cassandra by his side calling for the healers:

‘He’s wounded! He was hoping to get back to Skyhold, but he needs treatment now.’ Followed by: ‘No, I have no idea what it is.’

He was aware enough to gasp when they unhooked his foot from the remaining stirrup, but not enough to pick out Varric’s voice and turn the syllables into words. The last thing he saw as he stared up at the sky, was Cassandra’s face over his own as a hand lowered to his forehead, and then the silhouette of horns against the sun.

*

His head was still muzzy. He woke slowly, stomach down on a healer’s cot – canvas stretched over a low frame. He knew this all too well. So he stayed down, regulated his breathing, tried to remember what had happened. His ankle hurt.

‘Cullen?’

That was Cassandra, and he made a faint sound in the back of his throat.

He was covered with a light sheet. He could feel something wet and cool on his thigh. A poultice? He was shivering, but it didn’t seem to bother him that much.

‘Cullen, we found a potion for you, the village healer herself delivered it. You need to take it.’
'Yes,’ Cullen croaked. But he didn’t move. ‘Where’s…our healer? Melith?’

‘We were working in shifts and it so happens to be mine. Lift up for me and drink this, Melith tested it and said it’s perfectly fine.’

So Cullen moved on stiff limbs and took the potion bottle and drank it down without really thinking about it. It wasn’t until he tipped his head back to finish it off that he saw Bull standing by the tent flap, staring at him, lips pulled into a frown and his arms folded, even as his knees were bent so his horns wouldn’t brush the top of the tent.

Cullen stared back, and the blurred nonchalance evaporated and left him with an awareness that woke him up even faster than the potion.

Bull knew.

Cullen didn’t know how he knew, how he’d figured it out, how he’d come to the conclusion that it wasn’t a wound that Cullen had taken in battle but something he’d not chosen to heal despite swearing he would. Bull knew. And the longer Cullen stared at him, the more he was sure of it. He sensed that bridge between them rupturing. Perhaps it was already broken and he was the last one to know.

He sensed Cassandra looking between them, confused, and Cullen made himself look down. His eyes were still wide.

After about a minute of tension that even Cassandra was reluctant to break, Bull walked out of the tent without a word. Cullen looked up once he was gone and stared at the unsecured tent flap moving slightly in the wind.

‘He is upset with you,’ Cassandra said, sounding confused. ‘I wasn’t aware you were friends.’

‘I’m not sure we are anymore,’ Cullen said, chest wrenching with a gritty ache that the elfroot couldn’t touch.

‘Cullen, you- Melith said the infection you had was days old. Maybe longer? I said that could not be, you would never ride into battle like that. But…was it a sparring wound you stopped thinking about?’

Cullen closed his eyes, surrendered the empty elfroot bottle when she plucked it out of his fingers. At least it hadn’t been obvious that he’d been caned. At least that small amount of elfroot Bull had gotten him to take afterwards meant that he wasn’t exposed for the perversion that he was.

‘There was almost no time between you waking me and us riding out,’ Cullen said, his eyes still closed, still seeing the way Bull had glared at him. He might not have said anything, but anger and hurt had been stamped all over his face. ‘I didn’t think of it. Was he here long? Bull?’

‘Yes,’ Cassandra said, sighing. ‘He said he realised something was wrong yesterday.’

‘Yesterday,’ Cullen said, frowning. ‘How long have I been- How long?’

‘It’s late afternoon, the day after your collapse. Longer than we would have liked. We were just starting to decide whether we needed to force the potion down your throat and accept the choking risk, but Melith talked us out of it. The poultice seems to have helped.’

‘We need to get back to Skyhold.’
‘As soon as you’re cleared, we will. Cullen, you know I’m not the best at these things, and that Varric would likely see far more than I – and I intend no offense in asking, because I am sure I’m wrong, but Bull was very worried about you. He said you played chess together? Is that a euphemism I’m not aware of?’

Cullen laughed weakly as he turned his head back to the pillow, and then he pushed himself up onto his elbows and let his head hang down. What an idiot he’d been.

‘We play chess,’ Cullen said, his voice scratchy. ‘Discuss strategy. We ended up having more in common than I was aware of.’ Then, because he hated lying to Cassandra, he offered something that looked a little more like the complete truth. ‘I think he’s angry that I didn’t do anything about this yesterday. He called me out on it.’

Cassandra sighed and squeezed Cullen’s shoulder before standing. ‘We have all of us made decisions like this in the moment that haven’t turned out to be correct. And that’s the only reason I’m not angrier with you myself.’

‘I appreciate it,’ Cullen said.

‘In the meantime, stay resting until Melith returns. I’m glad you’re hale.’

They shared a brief smile, and then Cassandra exited, finally securing the tent flap properly.

Cullen slumped down into the cot and his fingernails cut into his own palms. He’d made a mistake. He couldn’t even stomach thinking about what it might mean, what he might lose. Not now.

*

Two hours later they were on the road once more, and Cullen stared at Bull’s back, feeling like he should say something. He encouraged his horse to draw level with Bull, and for a little while they rode side by side. They were both bringing up the rear now – Bull hadn’t seemed inclined to talk to anyone. Cullen hated that even now he was worried about what the others might think to see them riding alongside each other like this.

Minutes passed. Cullen kept expecting Bull to bring it up, to say it was over, to say something. But aside from glancing at him once, Bull said nothing at all. Even his posture was relaxed and easy.

Apprehension crawled through Cullen until it was sticking in his throat, until it was burrs coating him with tension.

‘Bull…’ Cullen said.

Bull didn’t tense, but when he looked over at Cullen again, his jaw was tight. A long moment, and then all Bull said was:

‘Skyhold.’

That tone of voice, that expression on his face, and Cullen knew that whatever encounter they were going to have about this, it wouldn’t be here. He was being ordered to wait. And Cullen wanted to clean the anxiety out of him now, he just wanted to know it was over, wanted those words so he could decide how he was going to move on from something that should never have mattered this much to him.

Bull shook his head, looked off towards the horizon, then turned back to him again.
‘This?’ Bull said, his voice low and strained. ‘This is something we do need to talk about. But not here.’

Bull pulled ahead, leaving Cullen alone at the rear of the party, fingers gripping the reins too hard.

It was going to be a long journey back.
Bull’s pissed. Cullen’s scrambling for solid ground. That always leads to good things, right? (There were so many different versions of these scenes, so many - also we are heading into possibly the worst heatwave in Perth ever so...yay for hiding in stories where it's cold and not 45C/115F).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cullen arrived back at Skyhold, his thoughts a mess. He’d had entirely too long to stew in reflection when it came to the events around trying to find Samson. The full dose of elfroot had given him all the energy he needed in order to both ache for the lyrium afresh, and seethe and self-remonstrate over the decision to not take the potion he’d sworn to take for Bull in the first place. Beneath that was a defensive anger that he didn’t want to look at. He’d come too close to risking everything – exposure, his team, and who knew if he even had any kind of arrangement with Bull to look forward to now.

So he walked back to his office after dismounting, talking with those he needed to talk to, bathing and cleaning up – mentally arranging himself to deal with the hole that would be left behind when Bull understandably told him that he’d had enough.

A stack of papers waited for him on his desk and Cullen’s head throbbed in response. He looked through everything quickly. Wrote messages out for those things that could be dealt with in writing. Rubbed his forehead at some of the other matters. Frowned when he saw that bandits and highwaymen had been blocking supplies of crucial materials into Skyhold – including lyrium – taking advantage of the Commander’s absence to step up their assaults.

‘Damn,’ Cullen said under his breath.

He’d wanted to wait for Bull, hoping to not be left twisting for much longer. But Skyhold did not rest just because he wished it, and Bull likely had his own things he was dealing with. The rest of Cullen’s day was taken up travelling all around the stronghold, sorting new teams to deal with the assaults on the road, addressing requisitions issues – Darragh overzealous again with greaves and under-ordering rivets and certainly it had been amusing at first, but now he had to assign the order forms to someone else and be unflinching when Darragh looked at him like Cullen had killed his puppy as a result.

By the end of the day, the sun having set below the mountains and the last light fading, Cullen sat at his desk in his office staring at a flickering candlelight. He needed to replace the candle.

A knock at the door on his left, the side leading to the Herald’s Rest. It was quiet. But Cullen knew who it was. Had been waiting for this all day.

He stood and walked over, opening it, looking up at Bull with trepidation.

‘You got some time?’ Bull said, his face unreadable.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, stepping back and watching Bull enter the office. The room seemed to shrink in
size, and Cullen closed the door behind him and thought about bolting it, because he wanted privacy. Hated that even now he worried about who might judge this, who might see it and come to conclusions that concerned him. In the end, he left it unbolted.

Bull was silent. He turned and faced Cullen, one hand on his waist and the other lax, and his body language not quite easy, though Cullen still felt like he was facing a Knight-Commander back when he’d been nothing more than a recruit.

The silence was unbearable.

‘I know I did the wrong thing,’ Cullen said.

In response, Bull took a long breath through his nose, one that Cullen actually heard. Then, after a few beats, he said in a clipped tone:

‘Yep.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Cullen continued, opening his mouth and then falling silent when Bull fixed him with a stare that was forbidding despite the lack of fury on his face.

‘You haven’t tried to help me understand. So yeah, that’s true.’

Cullen bit his teeth together and turned away, a part of him quailing under that look, under those words.

‘I wanna know something,’ Bull said, ‘even if I don’t know what to believe anymore. But when you swore to me you’d take the elfroot, did you know at the time it was bullshit?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, still not facing him. He looked at his desk and shook his head. ‘No, at the time I- The next morning...’

Silence, then. Cullen smiled, a hard, bitter thing that he was glad Bull couldn’t see.

‘But it doesn’t matter, does it?’ Cullen said.

‘Not as much as I’d like.’

‘You may as well make this a clean break. I’ll understand.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, sounding tired. ‘I figured you would. But I want to talk about this. I’m in a difficult position here, Cullen. Really fucking difficult. You don’t like giving up control, but you don’t wanna take care of yourself. The thing is, Iould’ve chosen not to trust you. I could’ve chosen that. I saw a choice, and I thought y’know what – maybe I’ll try something different. And a few years ago I would’ve made you take that elfroot in front of me and not given you an option, not let you do what you did. Put yourself in danger. Put the team in danger.’

‘The team was never in danger,’ Cullen said, chest wrenching. He pressed thumb and forefinger to his temples, thinking that it wasn’t right to get angry. It wasn’t right. He had no reason to be frustrated. He was the one in the wrong. He was the one who had lied, not the one who had been lied to.

Bull took another breath, another one that Cullen could hear. His mind struggled to make sense of it, because Bull was supposed to be the one who meticulously calculated every reaction he gave. Who let Cullen see vulnerability when it was suitable, who let him see strength when it was appropriate. Not someone who sounded like they were having to use breathing exercises to stay in
control.

All at once, he felt cornered, his heart pounded faster, adrenaline caused gooseflesh to crawl across his flesh. His jaw was still tight. His head hurt.

‘You lied to me, Cullen,’ Bull said. ‘And not in a small way. In a big fucking way.’

The agitation flooded him until he turned back and met Bull’s gaze, damning himself for the words that were going to spill from his mouth before he even spoke them.

‘I’m not sure why it matters so much to you, given your background.’

‘Don’t,’ Bull said, low and dangerous. ‘Don’t do that. Face up to your screw ups like a warrior. Don’t hide behind my fucking shadow and point it out to me. I know the shit I’ve done and I try and own it.’

‘Right,’ Cullen said, unable to stop the ugly expression from crossing his face. ‘I, of course, take responsibility for nothing.’

‘Cullen,’ Bull said slowly, his hands clenching into fists, ‘you’re not gonna want to hear this, but here it is. You punish yourself for shit and you don’t need to punish yourself at all. You punish yourself for hurting people, and the methods you use hurt people. Not just you, Cullen.’

Bull was right, Cullen didn’t want to hear it. Beneath the panic, beneath the distress and the hammering heartbeat and the echoes in his head of the words ‘wrong’ and ‘bad’ and the rest that he hated hearing, was something else. Something far more vicious, that he wished he could silence forever.

‘I didn’t ask for all of this,’ Cullen said, his voice coming from that place that he hated. ‘I wanted only to be hit with a cat o’ nine, on a rare basis, and for you to have nothing to do with the rest of it.’

‘That’s madness,’ Bull said flatly.

‘You wouldn’t be so hurt now, would you?’ Cullen exclaimed.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, staring at him, ‘people assuming that I’m gonna fucking hurt them and then walk away without a care in the world hurt me.’

He was shocked into silence. It wasn’t that the last line took the foundations of his argument away, it was that he’d not had any foundations in the first place, and it had caught up with him. Now, the upset continued to clamour, and he thought that this was the kind of mistake he would never have made if he’d just kept taking the stupid lyrium.

A hissing sound through his clenched teeth and he turned away once more, digging fingers into the back of his neck.

Bull, surprisingly, was silent. And Cullen walked halfway towards his desk and then realised that he was going to put the table between himself and Bull, which was absurd. He stopped, forced himself to turn around again. Hated the expression on Bull’s face. Because it would have been easier if it was plain rage. And then, at whatever Bull saw on Cullen’s face, his expression softened, and that was harder to take than any of it. That Bull would allow him some kind of mercy, when Cullen deserved none. Unbidden, words spilled again.

‘I apologise, Bull. I am sorry. I betrayed our t…’
But the sentence wouldn’t finish itself. *Our trust.* The words got stuck in his throat and he realised that he wasn’t sure how much he’d trusted Bull to do much more than hurt him. The care was- It wasn’t- It wasn’t what he’d *needed.* He hadn’t trusted that Bull knew better than him in that, not once.

‘You betrayed *my* trust in you,’ Bull said, staring at him. ‘I have an idea of how much trust you’ve had in me. Right? So let’s make it clear between us, since you don’t like things to be *obtuse.* You betrayed *my* trust.’

Cullen swallowed and felt worse. He hadn’t been thinking- It hadn’t occurred to him that Bull might have had-

‘Why does it matter?’ Cullen said, his voice louder than before, feeling backed up against a wall. Hearing his own defensiveness was grating, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. ‘I didn’t let anyone down. I didn’t fail in the field where it mattered, and I didn’t—’

‘You let me down,’ Bull said, his voice a soft counterpoint to Cullen’s. ‘And one day you’ll realise you let yourself down too.’

Cullen already knew he’d let himself down, that he’d let Bull down. That much was blisteringly obvious. The adrenaline kept racing in his body and he couldn’t quell it, couldn’t force himself to feel calm when nothing felt settled or right. Even the voice telling him that Bull being angry at him was the way it had to be, couldn’t convince him that any of this was right.

But he couldn’t leave Bull’s words unacknowledged, either.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, a finality to the word. He closed his eyes. ‘So what now?’

‘That’s the thing,’ Bull said. ‘I don’t know. You block me all the time, and aside from those few raw moments where I see a more open you, you keep me locked out. I suggested you talk about your burdens more, and you tell me to do it instead. So I try that, and you still give me nothing. The give and take that’s meant to be here, isn’t here. Or if it is, it’s not enough if you’re gonna lie to me like that.’

Cullen tried to sort through the mess of it all in his head. Two things stood out, and he jumped to the first, needing something to say.

‘I wasn’t…punishing myself,’ Cullen said, his voice low and his fingers wringing together. ‘Before. I know why you’d think that, and for the most part, you’d not be wrong. But you said I was punishing myself. But I didn’t keep the pain because I- I kept it because I didn’t think I’d make it otherwise. I needed something- The situation with Samson was complicated, and I needed—’

‘You could’ve told me. You could have come to me,’ Bull said quietly.

‘How was I supposed to know that was an option?’ Cullen said, frustration peaking.

Bull’s eye widened. For a minute, Cullen thought he was freshly angry all over again, but as the seconds passed and Bull’s expression didn’t shift, Cullen had to look away, because he didn’t know what that expression meant.

‘Anyway,’ Cullen said, staring at a fixed point on the wall. ‘I was wrong to have lied to you as I did. I put my…desires ahead of the respect I have for you, and I’m ashamed of it. It was unworthy of me, and of you.’
‘You knew that all along though,’ Bull said, sounding weary. ‘I don’t want to spend my time being treated like that. I need more than an apology about something that’s happened. I need to know what you’re going to do about it in the future.’

‘Honesty was never a condition,’ Cullen said, and the silence after that stretched for so long that he had to look up. Bull’s face was unreadable, and then his lips twitched into a frown.

‘Try again,’ Bull said. ‘Try and tell me again how you treating me with basic decency and respect wasn’t a condition. I mean, do you want me to walk away from this? Because I will.’

‘You don’t want me to be honest with you,’ Cullen said, his voice edging towards a snarl. ‘People believe they want that, but no one truly wants that.’

‘Cullen, look at me.’ Cullen did, hated the eye contact. Because Bull was staring him down, even though he didn’t seem to be doing much at all. It was a gaze that dared Cullen to look away. ‘Look me in the eye and tell me that I don’t want you to be honest with me.’

The silence then was almost too much. Cullen’s hands twitched. For a moment, he thought he’d be the one to walk away, not Bull.

Tendrils of despair crept through him. If failure was something he was so used to, then why did it feel so awful now? Though even now, it wasn’t surprising. Never surprising. How he had gone from a recruit that passed so many of his tests with flying colours, to whatever he was now, he’d never understand.

‘I need some time,’ Bull said.

At that, fear washed away the cynicism, the sense that it would just be better if it was over.

‘Time,’ Cullen echoed blankly.

‘I think you do as well,’ Bull said. ‘About a week. Maybe two.’

‘But-’

‘Nope,’ Bull said, holding up a hand. ‘Maybe you don’t need that. But I do.’

‘If you’re just going to quit, then just quit. Don’t leave it hanging like S-’

Cullen wrenched himself away from that name, that subject, that person. It took him another few seconds to realise that his breath was rough, uneven. He hadn’t realised the fear had gripped him so tightly, so obviously.

Maker, you have dealt without all of this for a long time, you do not need it! Can’t you just let him have what he needs without fussing about it like some overgrown child?

His lips thinned, and he forced himself to gather something that looked like self-control back to himself.

‘All right. Time,’ Cullen said. ‘I understand.’

‘I’m gonna ask you something. I need you to try and think of some ways to meet me if not halfway, then…some of the way. If you can’t think of anything, tell me, and maybe we can brainstorm some stuff together. But use the week. And think about how honest you wanna be with me. ‘Cuz if it’s this level of honesty, that’s not gonna work for me.’
'I mean no disrespect,' Cullen said slowly, ‘but I don’t fancy coming to you with whatever I might have to offer – for you to tell me that you’re done. It’s not like I can make up for what’s just happened, is it?’

‘Look,’ Bull said. ‘I’m not the kind of person to hold off telling you something’s done if I think it’s done. I wouldn’t make a suggestion if I thought it was stupid, or thought it wouldn’t help. But I’m tired. And you have me on the back foot here. I don’t extend trust all that much, and when I do, I don’t expect to have it broken about as completely as you broke it.’

Cullen knew self-blame when he heard it. Knew the moment Bull was saying more than what he was saying and making it clear that he wasn’t only angry with Cullen, but angry at himself. That was worse, and Cullen wanted to do anything he could to fix it, to make it better. He wanted to make promises, wanted to throw himself at Bull’s feet and deal with whatever Bull might have to dish out. He wanted to allay and reassure, and he quashed all of that and tried to concentrate.

Despite it all, despite the mess of it all, Bull had been clear.

‘Time then,’ Cullen said, not allowing himself to feel anything like hope, and telling himself that if he went to Bull with offerings of something more and was rejected, well, he deserved that and no better. ‘Time. And…of course, I’ll try and be…more. I mean- I’ll try and offer more.’

Bull’s eye squeezed shut, and he shook his head, before opening it again.

‘Was that not right?’ Cullen said.

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘You got it. I’m on your side, Cullen. Well, the side that doesn’t want to fuck himself up six ways from Sunday.’

Bull’s lips quirked into something that wasn’t quite a smile, and Cullen echoed the expression with about as much humour as Bull seemed to be feeling.

Then, Bull tipped his head in the kind of acknowledgement that almost every soldier and warrior gave him, and he left the office through the door he’d entered by. Cullen waited another full minute before he pressed his fist to his chest, unable to decide if that had gone better or worse than he’d expected.

*

That night, he lay on his mattress and stared up at the roof beams and wondered at what point he’d decided he needed the stars more than he needed a roof over his head.

In the end, he got up and dressed warmly, then walked out onto the battlements. The guards that were about ignored him, and he leaned into a sturdy crenellation and gazed up at the constellations, trying not to feel like it was all hopeless. It was a war he was fighting with himself; one he was accustomed to losing.

Eventually he sighed and looked at the mountains, instead. They could hardly be made out, and they were easier to see by the absence of the stars. Jagged black teeth cutting up into the sky.

Even as he was convinced that his friendship with Bull was done, even as he was certain that thinking of it in any practical way was the wrong thing to do, he made himself think about it. He resented that he wanted so badly to do the right thing, that he wanted to please Bull, he wanted to make amends. But that was what people often wanted to do, wasn’t it? If they’d wronged someone?
How many people have you wronged now?

Bull saying that Cullen didn’t need to punish himself at all was a sign of just how far off the mark Bull truly was. But as to the rest of it… Cullen shivered as a cold breeze snuck into the seams of his clothing, because summer did not touch its fingers to the night, which was left to the cold mountain winds and the nightmares and the Fade.

He decided, ultimately, he’d have to approach the situation as a Commander looking at something hopeless before him – some siege, some lost cause – and still trying to make something of it. A final stand, perhaps. He could do that. He’d attempted that before.

And you still lost Haven, didn’t you?

After another hour, he quietly walked back into his tower and felt the rattling in his skin, an ache for lyrium, the knowledge that he’d be so much better with it flowing in his body. Perhaps he’d be the ‘better’ that Bull needed him to be. Someone who wouldn’t make a decision so foolish. He’d known it was foolish.

Every decision after that first one had been progressively worse, as his thoughts were likely blurred with the delirium of infection and the knowledge that he’d already made a mistake, and needing it all to just wait until he’d returned to Skyhold.

Back in his room, he unearthed the bottle of elfroot from his chest and turned the cool glass in his cool fingers.

You still want the lyrium. You still want the lash. You still want him. Addiction after addiction, isn’t it?

There were times when he hated listening to himself. Hated the thoughts that ran rampant through his own head. Hated the clutching desperation of the feelings inside of him, despair competing with hope competing with resolve competing with apathy. Knowing that he was thinking dangerous things wasn’t enough to stop him from thinking them.

He sat upon his bed and stared at the elfroot potion, then closed his eyes.

It would be easier to let it all go. To dismiss whatever had grown between himself and Bull and absorb the pain of that into everything else. He hated that it mattered to him so much, because he now suspected he knew what that hook of a feeling had been when he’d made eye contact with Bull at the Shrine of Dumat. He had no idea what to do with that knowledge, and in the end he fell asleep fully dressed, still holding the potion in his cold fingers.

*

On the second day he woke in a dreary mood, more convinced than ever that the right thing to do would be to just call it off. He even penned a note and was about to fold it up and send it off with a messenger when he realised that Bull was probably sick to death of his cowardice.

So he pocketed the letter and burnt it in his fireplace that evening, pacing back and forth until the ache for lyrium was so strong that he went down to his knees.

He spent the rest of the evening in the storage room, pressing his hands flat to the table, his feet flat to the ground, convincing himself he was made of stone. But it didn’t work as well as it had the time before. He saw the chess board and the bag of pieces in his periphery. He felt the blank space of wall behind him calling to him. Felt some dismal cry through him that he’d likely never know that floating, empty sea again.
The voice that reverberated through him, telling him he didn’t deserve it anyway – it was so
tempting to give in. To let it have full reign.

He clenched his teeth together and dug his forehead into the table and fought himself, fought
against the lure of the lyrium, thought that whatever he did to himself in the practice ring never
came close to the battles he fought with himself late at night, when most of Skyhold was asleep.

* 

It was a trap. A clever trap, but still a trap.

Cullen knew how it worked. He kept his secrets, and eventually people found him intolerable
regardless, either due to the things he’d done, the things he would do, or the pacts of trust he’d
break.

If he shared those secrets, then what? He would find that intolerable. There were events in his life
he didn’t talk about, didn’t give words to, not even to Cassandra when she’d realised how bad his
nightmares could be and offered him a compassion so pure that it almost had him spilling every
rotten, decaying thing he carried inside him.

But then, Bull hadn’t asked him to be honest about everything. But how much of Cullen’s
behaviour counted as breaking trust? Lies of omission? Lies to protect himself? Those that might
keep his reputation intact?

What reputation?

Cullen swore when the ink blotted badly over some paperwork and touched a rag to it straight
away. He’d pressed too hard with his fountain pen, and this was something that already had the
words of Josephine and Leliana upon it, so he couldn’t simply start over with a fresh piece of
paper.

‘Or you could concentrate,’ Cullen muttered to himself. ‘That would be a novelty.’

He was beginning to have an idea of what he might offer up to Bull, what he couldn’t. But the
abstraction of it infuriated him. Cullen wanted to laugh at how difficult he found the concept of
honesty. It was simple, wasn’t it? But the honest child he’d been was washed away with careful
training, then learning how to hide absolutely anything he could from Uldred – and failing, failing,
determined to get better at it – so that by the time he came to Meredith and her Circle, obfuscation,
denial and lying were all traits he willingly cultivated.

It had come in handy in the end, when it had been necessary to turn against her, when he’d had an
about-face and realised how much wreckage he’d dragged with him from Kinloch – perhaps even
into Kinloch – all the way to the Gallows.

Another two days passed and Cullen was counting down the week, even though he knew Bull had
said two.

Cullen was going to give him two weeks. It didn’t matter how much he wished to speak with him
again, to look at him again. Cullen deserved the absence, and Bull could use the break.

A harsh scratch and the fountain pen broke through the parchment.

In a flash of frustration, Cullen picked up one of the knives that rested in a heavy metal tankard on
his desk and flung it with all his strength at the padded dummy that rested against the wall to his
left. His aim was true, it thocked dully into a fabric chest, hilt touching another.
There was nothing for it, he’d have to do this again and apologise to Josephine and Leliana for wasting their time.

And he was going to speak to Cassandra.

*  

‘No,’ Cassandra said flatly.

‘I put the team at the Shrine of Dumat in danger,’ Cullen said, unable to stop his lips twisting at the way he was using Bull’s words. ‘Your bias in this friendship is starting to get ridiculous now, Cassandra.’

‘No,’ Cassandra said, eyes sparking. ‘There is no one better.’

‘Knight-Captain Briony – you know she’s a worthy second with the sword – along with the assistance of those who understand large scale strategy, like The Iron Bull and others. Knight-Captain Rylen could be fetched back from Griffon-Wing Keep – he’s my second, and he’s gained a vast understanding of—’

‘Knight-Captain Briony may be your second in the sword, but fighting a duel is not strategy-work with militaries. As for Knight-Captain Rylen, we need him at Griffon-Wing Keep. His knowledge is better used there.’ Cassandra folded her arms and leaned back in her chair.

‘I will take this to the Inquisitor,’ Cullen said, nostrils flaring. ‘Will you not see sense? I am not a leader of war, and I can understand that you wanted to give me another chance after Haven, but we are not so desperate and lacking in good leaders that I am the only option.’

‘Take it to the Inquisitor,’ Cassandra said, voice hard. ‘I don’t think she’ll agree with you. One thing you refuse to see is how often we don’t lose people under your command. No lives were lost at the Shrine of Dumat, even if I did think of strangling you when I realised how wounded you’d been.’

‘That’s down to their training,’ Cullen said dismissively. ‘Training and good camaraderie and nothing more.’

‘Who is in charge of their training?’ Cassandra said, standing, her chair scraping back on stone.

‘Knight-Captain Briony,’ Cullen said. ‘There’s Davred, let’s see, Knight-Captain Dothan, there’s—’

‘And who are they answering to? Who gave them the templates by which they now train others?’

‘Then I have also given them the templates to lead, I do not see how this—’

‘You gave control of this to me, put your trust in me, Cullen. I’m sorry, but you must see that even if you don’t agree with me now, I do not agree with you. You will remain Commander of the Inquisition. Think about what hope they will lose if their Commander steps down now, after what we’ve achieved.’

‘What we’ve achieved,’ Cullen said, staring at her. ‘Skyhold is a fair stronghold, but let’s not forget Haven.’

‘You think I’ve forgotten Haven?’ Cassandra said, eyebrows twisting together. ‘You think I could? Don’t insult me to make a point. Those people out there, many of them look to you as the one who got us to Skyhold. There are survivors of Haven who understand that through your orders and the
Inquisitor’s actions, they live. There are mages out there, right now, who had much cause to hate you – and after the mess of Haven, some of them don’t. For good or ill, Cullen, you – like the Inquisitor, like myself, Josephine, Leliana and the rest – we’re figureheads that represent more than the flawed beings that we are. You cannot come to me with your flaws and tell me that makes you less of a figurehead.’

Cullen could feel the shakiness of the air in his lungs. He forced himself to draw a deep breath and then heard Cassandra do the same. He knew that she hated these arguments. They both did. Cassandra was as unwavering as stone. He felt like waves smashing against a mountain. She might budge one day, but it would likely be in several hundred years.

‘We could work to build up another figurehead,’ Cullen said weakly.

‘Now?’ Cassandra snapped. ‘Really? When Corypheus and his dark forces could fall upon us at any moment? We can do that after. And you know – Cullen – I have agreed to help you do that. Should we live, we can find another then. Take the time necessary to transition them into the role. Who knows what will even become of the Inquisition by then? If you find it so difficult, will you not consider talking to anyone? Confiding in them? The Inquisitor is not unkind, and-’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘Thank you, Cassandra, but no.’

‘I cannot help but think the healers could help you more if you were honest with them about your…condition. They might be able to send letters out, see what others out there have used to help them cope. They would keep your confidence. They are obligated to – they will swear it.’

Cullen closed his eyes. ‘You have odd ideas of what it is to be a figurehead.’

‘Perhaps,’ Cassandra said. ‘Perhaps I do. But yours are no better. You are allowed to be human.’

‘Says the one who is on track to becoming the next Divine.’

Cassandra sighed. Cullen thought of apologising, but it was true enough.

‘Cullen, it is my…experience, that people like it when those in positions of power seem human. I do not always understand why. But I’ll give you an example that I think you’ll appreciate. Did Andraste have a dog?’

‘She had a dog,’ Cullen said, looking up, smiling in spite of himself. ‘Every good Ferelden knows-’

‘But why would she need one?’ Cassandra said. ‘Who needs that kind of companion? Why do they sing that awful song about Andraste scratching a mabari’s flea-ridden ears?’

‘Andraste’s dog would not have had fleas,’ Cullen said calmly. ‘We’re quite sure. A missing verse in the song, perhaps… But it’s discussed in taverns throughout Ferelden, trust me.’

‘You’re missing my point on purpose,’ Cassandra said, her smile fond. ‘We – so many of us – pray to Andraste, yet we crave signs of her humanity. There are some out there who swear by her knickers and underclothes. The Fereldens sing a song about her dog. And if she’d decided to quit something that was ruining her mind, there would be songs about her bravery, not her weakness. If she’d made mistakes in the field and then her entire party had survived regardless, there would be-’

Cullen started laughing, couldn’t make himself stop. He pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead and stared at her. ‘You’re comparing me to Andraste.’

‘I compare everyone to her,’ Cassandra said. ‘Everyone. We are all a part of us connected to the
Divine. Even if I’m not always certain what that means, or if we manifest that rightly, or we are on the right path. You’re not unique, Cullen. I would do the same for anyone.’

‘Even Solas?’

‘Well, I admit I do not know his gods well enough to compare him to them. So, yes. Though don’t tell him. I feel he’d not appreciate it. It’s not that I do it to be disrespectful, it’s that I cannot help but see these things in the people around me. My point remains true, Cullen. And whether it was true or not, my decision stands. You are functioning – even if you feel you are not. You are seeing this through – even if you feel yourself falter.’

‘I mean no offense when I say this, but you’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met, and that is not the good quality I can tell you think it is.’

The smile Cassandra gave him was sweet, deliberately aggravating. But she stepped towards him and reached out, squeezing his shoulder – naked today of the large pauldrons he often wore when in the field.

‘I mean no offense, Cullen, but I’m quite certain a Commander’s work is never done.’

‘Maker,’ Cullen said, shaking his head and stepping away, rolling his eyes. ‘You are merciless.’

‘Sometimes,’ Cassandra said after him, as he walked to her door. ‘But Cullen?’

He paused and turned back.

‘I mean it, please consider confiding in someone. I would keep your confidences. There are others here who would, I’m certain. My door is always open for you, and you know that, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, sighing. ‘I know.’

‘Good.’

Cullen closed her door behind him and after a minute the good feeling in his chest disappeared. Damn and blast, but that had gone about as poorly as it ever did. He took a breath and walked back to his office, looking down at the grounds as he did so – the people milling – unable to stop his eyes from looking for Searidge, hating how edgy he felt when he couldn’t find him amongst the throng.

* 

On Monday, he was surprised to find a small piece of ripped off parchment in his stack of well-presented notes and the chicken scratch of those who reported to him who couldn’t be bothered making their writing very readable. At least Scout Harding knew that he valued legibility. If he had to hunt down another person one more time to bring them up on their handwriting, he was going to shout at them about it. Again.

He withdrew the folded piece of parchment, thinking perhaps it was a note from Bull. When he unfolded it, he squinted at it, frowning in confusion. For there, in very poor handwriting – though still readable – was the following picked out with painstaking shakiness:

*Thank You*

B.
Then he realised exactly who the note was from, and he felt like he hadn’t smiled properly in days.

It was possibly the truth.

He quickly wrote a response and then – before he could really justify it – began walking to the main library. This was a message he could deliver himself.

*

He found Betsan leaning over a table, a quill in her hand. She wasn’t writing on paper, but practicing the letters on the wood – the feather in her hand not holding any ink. Cullen remembered when he was a child, not being allowed access to ink or parchment when learning lettering, except on very special occasions. Parchment was too expensive. There was a sand-tray he was allowed to trace the letters into with a quill, but he knew many were taught to just trace the shapes of the letters onto the wood.

She didn’t even look up when he approached, perhaps used to the coming and goings of everyone in the library now. So, quietly, he dropped his own folded up bit of parchment onto the table.

A pause, then she looked up. Her mouth dropped open. Cullen realised that her hair always seemed to be a bit of a bird’s nest. He wondered if she was the kind of person to climb trees in her spare time.

‘C-Commander!’ she said. ‘Do you need something?’

She started to push her chair back, but he held up his hand. Nodded down to the parchment.

‘I got your note,’ he said.

‘Oh, ah- Did you mind? It’s- I was allowed to practice properly, and Mistress Maribeta said I could.’

‘Believe me when I say it was a welcome break from the stack of orders, complaints and catastrophes that regularly beset the Inquisition.’

Betsan didn’t reply. Instead, she picked up the folded parchment on the desk, holding it delicately in both hands. She unfolded it and Cullen saw her mouth moving as she worked out the words.

‘You’re welcome,’ she said quickly, looking up with a flash of a smile. ‘I know that. And…and- This is…ah- ‘It… It was- Ah- Sorry, I’m still-’

‘Take your time,’ Cullen said. ‘Do you want me to tell you?’

‘No!’ she said, staring at him, vexed. ‘I have to sound things out.’ Then she went back to staring hard at the paper and her face brightened all at once. ‘‘It was…my- my…pleasure!’ That’s, oh- You didn’t have to come down here. You’re very busy. I remember. All those letters. The only person who got more was Lady Montilyet.’

‘Not Leliana?’ Cullen said, raising his eyebrows.

‘The Nightingale would never let me handle her letters,’ Betsan said, shaking her head firmly. ‘Enchanter Vivienne had the second most, after you and Lady Montilyet. This is so very sweet, thank you. Mistress Maribeta says I’m bright, learning fast.’

‘It seems you’re bright at whatever you turn your mind to,’ Cullen said, smiling. Betsan flushed
and shrugged, looking up past his head, the hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth. He thought she might be trying to mask it, and that was so familiar it was a pang in his gut. ‘I should leave you to it.’

‘Can I- If it’s not an imposition, may I send you letters again in the future? You don’t have to reply to them!’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said, nodding decisively. ‘I apologise for interrupting your studies.’

Betsan looked faintly incredulous, but she returned his nod of farewell. As he climbed the stairs back to the battlements that would lead to his own office, he wondered if that’s what it was actually like, to be a sponsor for Summerday. To understand how much influence he could have over someone’s life. The idea of her taking lyrium now, pledging herself to the Order, he didn’t have the heart to consider it.

And yet he would have let her if they’d never had that encounter in his office.

He sighed when he sat back at his desk. He had another week to wait. And then – what would he do? See whether Bull would contact him? Hang around in his office on tenterhooks? Would Bull appreciate some…overture of trust? What would that even look like?

‘Maker, I have no idea what I’m doing,’ he muttered to himself.

Instead, he made himself focus on Knight-Captain Dothan’s training regimen, making corrections and suggestions here and there, trying to remember what it was to feel competent.

*  

It was the next Tuesday – in the late afternoon, the sun bathing Skyhold with a golden glow that was surprisingly warm given the crispness of the breeze. Whenever the wind died down, the castle seemed fortified with summer’s warmth.

Cullen was steeled with resolve, or at least – he told himself he was. He went looking for Bull, knowing the one place he was most likely to be when not on assignment was in the Herald’s Rest. The anxiety he had over wondering what people would think – what conclusions they might draw – he fought back against it as best as he was able. Cullen talked to Bull and worked with the Chargers. He played chess with Bull. He could defend any conclusions people came to that might be damaging. And Bull was observant. He’d notice if Cullen approached him in the tavern. He’d… maybe he would understand that Cullen did genuinely want to try, even if Cullen didn’t know exactly what that was supposed to look like, or if he had enough to bring to the table. What could he give that would make up for what he’d taken? Was there anything?

It wasn’t as though he’d never been in the Herald’s Rest, but he still felt like a stranger whenever he entered its walls. He could feel the stares following him as he walked, people no doubt dreading an assignment, a call to arms, or perhaps eager for a distraction. He knew that Bull and the Chargers had their own section and he crossed towards it, feeling as though a shaft of sunlight were lighting him and no one else. It was absurd, except for the fact that he could see them turn their heads. His presence meant something, they noticed.

Figurehead indeed.

‘Well, well, well, if it isn’t Knight-Commander Cullen. Sorry, that’s Commander now, isn’t it?’

Cullen wanted to close his eyes, wanted to pretend he hadn’t heard. Instead he turned and offered a
quick smile to Searidge, who sat on a stool at an empty trestle table near enough to a post that he could lean against it. He was clean shaven, his fingers gripping his tankard a little too tightly. Cullen had the sudden impression that he’d not managed to allay Searidge’s assumptions at all. But then, Searidge had often been quite surly, and his tone didn’t necessarily mean anything, except that Cullen now had the urge to leave the Herald’s Rest as quickly as possible and pretend that he’d never been there.

‘How’s the silk business going?’ Cullen said.

Searidge smiled at him lazily, somehow drifting between drunkenness and disdain at the same time.

‘It’s going,’ Searidge said. ‘I quite like this tavern though. I’ll have to be careful, or I’ll spend all my bleedin’ coin here, and there’ll be nothing left to keep up the turnover. You here for a drink? I could shout you.’

But Cullen wasn’t sure Searidge truly wanted that, and he wasn’t sure what game was afoot. Was Searidge just trying to keep a connection that he thought might be useful or strategic? Was he in a dour mood and Cullen was just misinterpreting it or taking it personally?

‘Maybe some other time,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m here on business.’

‘I remember that,’ Searidge said, eyebrows lifting. ‘I remember what ‘business’ meant.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ Cullen said, thinking that he’d not felt this threatened while staring up at a Red Templar behemoth, and not understanding why. ‘But things change.’

‘So you say,’ Searidge drawled.

‘Maker,’ Cullen said, drawing upon a cold rage he didn’t actually feel. ‘One would think you protested too much and were looking for an excuse, with how you go on and on about it.’

Searidge’s expression creased into ugliness, and Cullen saw the foam in his half-full tankard slosh the sides at a jerky movement of his wrist. But then Searidge only sighed, leaned harder into his post and smiled again.

‘You were never very good at reading people,’ Searidge said. ‘Always off the mark. Anyway, don’t let me keep you or nothin’. Hate to get in the way of your ‘important work.’’

Cullen turned, feeling summarily dismissed. If he walked out, perhaps that would look even more suspicious. The Chargers had a reputation, Bull too – there was nothing wrong with Cullen walking over and asking to speak with him. Nothing at all.

But Cullen’s chest was oozing with a thick, gluey coldness by the time he reached Bull. He tried to school his face into passivity and when Bull’s eye widened in surprise, Cullen thought maybe this was all wrong. Maybe it was unwelcome. Maybe – as with Searidge – instead of waiting two weeks, Cullen should have waited for as long as it took for him to get the message that it was over.

His body thrummed with the need to resort to childish gestures. He wanted to twist his fingers together. He wanted to shift on his feet. He wanted to look askance and hide his gaze. But in here, he was the Commander of the Inquisition, and he didn’t do any of those things.

‘I was wondering if we might talk?’ Cullen said.

‘It’s good to see you,’ Bull said, looking like he might actually mean it. But Cullen wasn’t good at
reading people, and he’d always known that. ‘You want to talk here?’

‘I… I’d prefer not,’ Cullen said. ‘My office?’

‘Works for me,’ Bull said, pushing himself up. Cullen thought that if they left through the main entrance, they’d have to walk past Searidge. And if they walked up the stairs, well, that was where Bull’s room was, and that wasn’t tenable either. ‘Lead the way, Commander.’

So Cullen turned and walked out of the Herald’s Rest, passing Searidge as he went and feeling that blue gaze boring into his back. He realised, as he walked to the stone stairs, that his fingers were shaking, his wrists and forearms too. The feeling didn’t calm once he was in his office.

He turned and looked at Bull warily as he watched Bull close the door behind them.

‘It’s just occurred to me,’ Cullen said, ‘that perhaps when you said you needed two weeks, the right thing to have done would have been to leave the ball in your court, so to speak. So if that’s- If I’ve missed some kind of-’

‘Nothing like that,’ Bull said. ‘I would’ve given it another day before coming to find you. Just wanted to give it a decent amount of time. Let the dust settle. You wanna talk here, or upstairs?’

Cullen didn’t know. He looked up as though he could see through the trapdoor that he now customarily kept closed. Then he looked over at his desk. Then to the door that led to the storage room. He didn’t know where this was supposed to happen, what he was meant to do. He felt as though he’d left himself back in the tavern, standing by Searidge’s post.

Having Bull in the same room with him wasn’t helping. He couldn’t focus, his thoughts and resolve scattering. Still, he had to make a decision.

‘Upstairs, perhaps,’ Cullen said, frowning. ‘Whatever you think is best.’

Bull didn’t respond, and when Cullen looked at him – only realising then that he’d finally indulged his need to look away – Bull was watching him, eye narrowing. But after a beat, he only said:

‘After you.’

Cullen entered his room first, noting that everything was in its proper place. His bed made, the room clean, and the elfroot bottle on his bedside table, because he’d stared at it every evening while trying to think of how he could do things differently, be better for Bull. But now it looked like Cullen had never touched it at all, like it had been in the exact same place Bull had left it before they went to find Samson.

Cullen took a step towards it, then realised he’d never be able to move it in time. So instead he stood by his bookshelf, thinking that if Searidge followed them…

But why would he do that?

Cullen walked over to the windows facing the battlements and opened them, needing air. He stood there for longer than he probably should have, while Bull closed the trapdoor behind him. He could feel Bull standing there, a prickling resonance between them. And then he thought he should probably say something.

He walked over to his bedside table and picked up the bottle of elfroot, and then walked over to Bull and handed it to him.
‘I don’t trust myself to know when to take it,’ Cullen said, looking at it. ‘Depending on what you…think, or agree to, I think you should have control of this. It’s clear to me that I’d rather keep my wounds or bruises through circumstances where it would be best if I didn’t have them, or at least…not to the severity I’d prefer to keep them. I don’t know if you know best in this, but I do know that if I’d listened to you, I’d not have delayed us returning to Skyhold.’

Bull sighed, walked over to the bed and sat down on the corner of it, which seemed to be his place in Cullen’s room.

Cullen wasn’t sure where his place was yet.

‘It’s not that you delayed us,’ Bull said. ‘It’s not that you threw a wedge in our travel plans. You know that, yeah? You know that it’s about the fact that you collapsed, could’ve died from infection? Preventable infection?’

‘I- Yes,’ Cullen said, not really seeing it. He made a face and then gestured towards the elfroot bottle. ‘I’ve just said that I don’t trust myself in this, what else do you want?’

‘Shit, Cullen, if you could see how cornered you look,’ Bull said, putting the potion bottle on the bed and not looking at it again. ‘If you don’t want to do this now… See, I appreciate that you came into the tavern, I do, but—’

‘Searidge is here,’ Cullen blurted, and then he felt himself go still. At the same time, he was aware that Bull had gone just as still. Both of them, hardly moving. Except Cullen’s hands, which were still shaking. He fisted them, and then turned and walked towards the closed windows that looked out into the courtyard. He didn’t want them open. He stared at the yellow and white pattern of glass diamonds, thought the solder looked crooked.

‘He came with a recent wave of newcomers,’ Cullen continued, his throat tight. It made his voice sound strained. ‘He’s here. At Skyhold. I know I’m meant to be…telling you the things I can offer but the truth is—’ Cullen laughed, the sound brittle. ‘Not that you’d have any reason to believe me, yes? Right. He was in the tavern just now. I didn’t know. I should have—He always did like to drink.’

Bull stood, but didn’t come any closer, and Cullen thought that this was definitely not how things were supposed to go. What was meant to happen: Cullen would hand Bull the elfroot, apologise more eloquently and sincerely than he had before, offer what pieces of himself might be valuable and let the chips fall where they may.

‘When did he get here?’ Bull said slowly.

‘Well, about two weeks before I asked you to cut me open,’ Cullen said, turning his back to the stained glass and leaning against the wall.

‘Did you and Searidge have a conversation? Have you seen him?’

Cullen nodded.

‘What did he say to you?’ Bull said.

The smile that stretched Cullen’s lips was bitter. ‘Nothing that bears repeating.’

‘Y’know, that whole ‘you trying to be more honest’ thing. This might be a good place to start. Because I kind of figure that whatever was said between you, meant you ended up wanting me to hurt you more than usual.’
Cullen nodded again. But after that, his thoughts seemed to peter out. After a couple of minutes of staring blankly at the floor, he realised that he wasn’t really doing anything that looked like participating in a conversation.

‘It wasn’t supposed to go quite like this,’ Cullen said, gesturing between them. ‘I had- I have thought matters through. I hadn’t expected to see him. Just now. If you want to talk about- It must seem as though I’m trying to avoid it.’

‘That’s not what it seems like,’ Bull said, his voice even quieter than before. ‘But you don’t look happy. You want to come over here?’

‘No,’ Cullen clipped off, meeting Bull’s eye briefly, and then turning back to face the stained glass.

‘What’d he say?’ Bull said again.

‘I saw his name,’ Cullen said, ‘on a sheet- I thought I’d apologise to him. Make amends. Make it right. Maker knows just about everything that happened in Kirkwall was the opposite of…’

Cullen closed his eyes and thought that if he started down that road, he’d end up back on the lyrium within an hour, and possibly drown himself in it until there was nothing of his mind left. An oblivion that promised that bittersweet song, an endless melody he could disappear into.

‘He’s not fond of people who like…what I like,’ Cullen said finally, turning back yet again. He couldn’t seem to settle. ‘Though he was quick to say it wasn’t just me, it was the lot of us. He’s not been keeping it a secret. In Kirkwall. One of yet another of the rumours spreading around there. I shan’t be jumping to return to that place. Not that anyone really does.’

Bull’s expression was – as it so often was – unreadable. But this time, Cullen thought it was deliberately masked. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what Bull felt like he needed to hide, and then seconds later, Cullen found himself laughing quietly.

‘You’ll not be surprised that I lied to him,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah?’ Bull said, an invitation to keep on talking. Cullen leaned his head back into the stone and wished his shoulders were bruised from a flogger, a cat, anything. The shaking wasn’t showing any signs of abating. He hoped it wasn’t an impending episode.

‘It does seem to be a pattern,’ Cullen said.

‘What’d you lie about?’ Bull said.

‘He assumed- He assumed I wanted…the same arrangement. I said I was interested in no such thing. That I wished to apologise. He wouldn’t listen. In the end, I told him I didn’t do it anymore. Any of it. Not that I should want to. I mean, he’s not wrong.’

‘Wrong about what, Cullen?’

‘You see,’ Cullen said, staring down at his hands. ‘I would never describe myself as an honest man. Once, yes. But now I- You see I don’t trust myself. I can’t trust what promises I’ll keep or break. Do you know what it is, to be an oathbreaker among Templars?’

‘What wasn’t he wrong about?’ Bull said, his voice soft, persistent. ‘What wasn’t Searidge wrong about?’
'I know you won’t like it if I say you deserve better,’ Cullen said, staring at him and thinking that he’d thought he’d feel trapped when he had this conversation, but he never thought he’d feel like this. ‘So I won’t say that. I’m too selfish to drive you away- Which you’re also aware of, given how I hurt you for my own needs, so that matter’s covered.’

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, taking a step towards him.

Cullen turned away and looked at the stained glass again. He wanted to throw the stupid window open, but the idea that he might do that and see Searidge down there in the courtyard made his fingers curl roughly into the windowsill instead.

‘Do you think you could pretend this never happened,’ Cullen said, ‘and you can come and find me tomorrow? With luck I’ll not make such a fool of myself.’

Cullen couldn’t stop himself from flinching when hands rested on his shoulders. He squeezed his eyes shut and had no idea what was happening, because there was no reason for this panic, and he couldn’t even summon the anger to flay it back down into the darkness of himself. Bull’s fingers were so light. So gentle.

‘Easy,’ Bull said. ‘Is this okay?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said.

‘You want me to step back?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said, and couldn’t tell if that presence and height behind him was reassuring, or terrifying. He couldn’t decide. Bull probably wanted a clear answer, but Cullen couldn’t find a clear thought.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, his fingers resting a bit more firmly on Cullen’s shoulders. And Cullen wanted that, suddenly knew exactly what he wanted, and he wrenched himself sideways away from it, his teeth slamming together so hard that his mouth ached.

‘This is giving you nothing,’ he snarled. ‘Nothing at all. You talk to me of give and take and here I am just- You cannot let me…’

Bull was approaching him again, and Cullen’s knees were locked because the shaking was spreading, and he didn’t know if this was fear or panic or battle sickness or an episode. And Bull’s arms were up, his palms facing outward, and Cullen shook his head and then shook it again, because this was so far from what he’d wanted to achieve. There was no reason to hate Searidge as viciously as he did in that moment, the man was likely just bitter and tired, there was a war, and he’d been exploited by a Templar once. A Templar in a position of power…

So who could blame him?

Fingers rested on his upper arms and Cullen opened his eyes and couldn’t make himself look up to see Bull’s face.

‘Skittish,’ Bull said, his voice somehow friendly despite everything. ‘Be easy, Cullen. You didn’t take anything just now that I didn’t offer. We’re gonna have a talk, but we’re just gonna stand here for a bit first, yeah? And then you can tell me all the stuff you were gonna tell me before you saw him in the tavern, okay? That’s the plan. Sound good?’

Cullen nodded, his neck too stiff for easy movement.
Bull’s touch firmed once more, this time rubbing up and down his arms, as though warming him from some chill. Cullen leaned forwards without thinking, and then Bull’s chest was there, his heat radiating, and Cullen wouldn’t let himself rest his weight against him, but he couldn’t make himself move away a second time, either.

Maker knew he wasn’t that strong.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to end this chapter where I did, because I think it will mark a shift in tonality that’s necessary and hopefully, ideally, less fraught. I mean, that makes it sound like I know what I’m talking about right? :D
Minutes of silence. At first Cullen was able to do nothing more than stand there, leaning as lightly as he could, enough for the touch of it, not enough to sag against Bull like he had against the wall.

Bull wasn’t a wall, after all. And Cullen couldn’t help but examine his actions, thinking that even if he was allowed to take this, he had taken a great deal more without apology. Even if Bull wasn’t upset with him in the moment, he had a right to be. Cullen wasn’t sure what to do with that. A part of him wanted to run as hard and as fast as possible and never try something like this again. First Searidge, now this. Though this was going…well? Cullen thought it might be going better. He hoped it was.

The other part of him wanted to fix the situation, and he’d been alive long enough to know that some things couldn’t be fixed by wanting it. Even if one really wanted it.

Then, more silence went by and Cullen tried to focus instead on the hands that curved around his arms. His wish that he could simply undo this entire moment and begin it again the next day hadn’t disappeared, but at least there had been some progress between them. Cullen still wasn’t sure whether he’d call it forwards or backwards progress.

Eventually, Cullen felt like he had to say something.

‘If you’re waiting for my arms to stop shaking, it might not happen,’ Cullen said. At least his breathing had slowed down. ‘My hands… It doesn’t seem to be a battlefield issue yet, at least.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull rumbled, his voice as much a vibration through Cullen’s chest as it was a sound. ‘I’m not waiting for that. I’m good like this.’

‘It’s because I’m not talking anymore, isn’t it?’

Bull’s chest moved in amusement, not enough to become laughter, but it was there. The hands on his arms tightened, slid around to his back. And then, just like that, Bull was embracing him, and Cullen reached up with his own hands and placed them carefully at Bull’s waist. Bull had said he didn’t mind Cullen’s hands being cold, Cullen hoped it was true now.

‘You know,’ Bull said pensively, ‘if you raise your hands a little, you’ll get some of the better muscles. I know you like them.’

Cullen blinked, because feeling anything like amusement – genuine amusement – now, was jarring. His fingers tightened automatically on skin, and Bull’s chest was moving again, and Cullen
slid his hands up Bull’s back and felt his lips tighten when Bull’s laughter became less breath and
more voice.

‘See?’ Bull said. ‘Great, isn’t it?’

‘How can you think of this now?’ Cullen said, somewhat plaintive. It was envy, he realised. How
did people feel these things – good things – during these moments? Why was Bull not furious or
disappointed or embarrassed on behalf of Cullen’s shameful outburst?

‘I’m doing it for you,’ Bull said, all faux innocence, which didn’t suit him at all. ‘I thought you
needed it.’

‘Your musculature.’

‘That’s pretty much why the Inquisition hired me, after all.’

Cullen took a slow breath and wondered why those words bothered him. Bull didn’t sound upset or
even serious, and Cullen felt the heat of Bull’s skin beneath his hands and thought that this was
very far away from what Cullen had expected this night to be. So far, exactly nothing was going to
plan.

Though this part was...not bad, he realised.

‘You do it on purpose,’ Cullen said, realising that this was a pattern he’d seen before, more than
once now.

‘What’s that?’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice.

‘But why?’ Cullen said. ‘Why now? Is it not in your best interests for me to feel- Why are you
lightening the mood?’

‘You really think it’s in my best interests for you to feel like shit?’ Bull said. ‘First, you’re gonna
feel like that anyway. Second, I don’t know about you, but I think the mood is still plenty fucking
serious.’

‘Sorry,’ Cullen said reflexively. That would be him. The serious one. Or dour, depending on who
in Skyhold you spoke to. Or repressively antisocial. Really, the list of descriptors he had pinning
down his personality were vast, and had started all the way back in his childhood. When he was
younger, he’d wished to be more light-hearted, like his brother, or more playful, like his sisters.
Later, he’d wished to be like those fellows he trained with who somehow managed to have all the
stories, all the tales of adventure and fun.

‘That wasn’t a dig at you,’ Bull said quietly, ‘that’s just what me and the Chargers like to call
shitty circumstances. So, you want to sit down on the bed? Go somewhere else?’

Cullen thought he should know. Then he thought he should at least present the pretence of
knowing. But he didn’t want to make the situation worse.

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said. He shook his head in apology. ‘I seem to be saying that a lot.’

‘I like it,’ Bull said, and Cullen looked up at him, confused. Bull was looking down at him,
perhaps he’d been looking down the entire time. ‘You don’t like not having an answer for people,
but it’s honest. You remember, back during that first session, I asked you if you liked stingy pain
or pain that thudded through you, and I could tell you didn’t know – you were so angry that I’d
exposed that. That you couldn’t give me the ‘right’ answer.’
‘I know now,’ Cullen said, thinking how odd it was, to have Bull be transparent about the fact that he could be calculating. Or, not calculating, maybe just *observant*. Cullen had tried so often to imagine what Bull might be seeing in him, and now he realised that he had no idea what he’d given away. He tried not to tense.

‘Sort of,’ Bull said. ‘We’re both finding that out, yeah? Lots of different types of pain in the world.’

*You can say that again,* Cullen thought with some despair, and looked down once more.

‘Come on,’ Bull said, ‘over to the bed with you. Let’s sit down for a bit.’

Bull’s arms shifted so that Cullen was being steered towards his own bed, Bull’s hand at his lower back, as though he thought Cullen might not be steady on his legs. They ended up sitting side by side on the edge of the bed, Cullen folding his hands in his lap, looking down at them.

‘So how do you want to do this?’ Bull said. ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘I…’ Cullen closed his eyes. ‘I don’t know how to do this. I thought it would somehow be easier – a friendship, no strings attached. Of course, I failed to take into account that I hardly know how to be a friend… Let alone a good one. Cassandra is remarkably tolerant with me. So I don’t know exactly what you need or want. Aside from what seems obvious now.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear and feel him nod, even if he couldn’t see it. ‘I want to know that when you make a promise, you’re gonna keep it. And, that if you don’t know if you *can* keep it, you tell me that – as soon as you know. What did you think I’d do if you owned up to it when we were on the road? I would’ve given you some of my elfroot, told you to take three or four sips, and then we would’ve chatted a bit more about it later. I might’ve been unhappy, you might’ve been unhappy, but those things don’t mean the end of the world.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ Cullen said, looking sidelong up at Bull. ‘That’s not what I’d imagined. I know – I’m a terrible mind-reader. I thought it was over. I was sure it would be once you found out. I still- I still think that.’

‘People make mistakes,’ Bull said slowly. ‘That was a big one, sure. That was a fuck up. But mistakes happen. I’m gonna make them. You’re gonna make them.’

‘I broke a *promise.*’

‘That thing you said, about being an oathbreaker among Templars. What did that mean?’

Cullen looked away again, rubbed at his neck. Maker, he’d not meant to say that. He shouldn’t have- But it was out in the open now, and he wished his chest didn’t feel so tight. He wished Bull didn’t feel all the way across the room when they were sitting side by side. If it were five minutes earlier, he’d be leaning against Bull, hardly speaking. He wanted that again.

‘With Meredith,’ Cullen said abortively. ‘I…’

*That wasn’t even a complete sentence.*

‘Wait,’ Bull said. ‘You *saved* a lot of people’s lives. Well, I mean I know the situation was shitty and complicated, but intel made it clear that it needed to happen. That after a long time of a lot of not-right things happening, that was a right thing to do.’

‘No,’ Cullen breathed, ‘Maker, I wish it were that simple. I know it looks that simple to everyone
else. Of course it does. What we were doing was monstrous. I can’t even- I wish- I wish it had all…happened differently. All of it. I can’t-’

Cullen realised he was digging his feet into his boots, pressing the balls of his feet down hard into the stone. He tried to think about how to explain it, decided for a stab in the dark, because Maker knew he’d already said enough stupid things in such a small space of time.

‘With the Qun- Is there a code? Against speaking out against those in certain positions of power?’

‘Not exactly,’ Bull said. ‘But I know about codes. But they make you swear oaths about it?’

‘I’m not supposed to talk about this,’ Cullen said, shaking his head.

‘Yeah, Templars and how it really works behind the scenes, all very hush hush. Works nicely for the Chantry, doesn’t it?’

‘To cut a very long story short,’ Cullen said, ignoring that, ‘yes, we swear oaths. It is not that the Knight-Commander is infallible, it is only that there is a very specific series of events that’s meant to occur if you suspect them of corruption. And public accusation is considered… It’s not done. I should have followed a chain of command. I should have spoken to or confronted the Grand Cleric, a Revered Mother – there were letters, there was a procedure. It would have been investigated. And if I’d done that-’

‘If you’d done that, Mages would’ve died. A lot of them. All of them, right?’

‘I had my suspicions before Meredith announced she wanted to enact the Right of Annulment,’ Cullen said slowly. ‘Long before. I had my opportunities. I didn’t take them. Whatever problems people have with the Templar Order… No, that’s not quite what I’m- I spent so long doubting- I stopped trusting my instincts a long, long time ago. Before Kirkwall.’

‘But the Templar Order still seems to think of you with regard,’ Bull said.

‘Some,’ Cullen said, ‘but if the Grand Cleric visited Skyhold, it may be a different story. And, I suspect, the Templar Order is trying to keep it quiet that a Knight-Captain didn’t go through the correct channels, even though everyone knows. I think their lack of overt condemnation gives other people – other Templars – a reason to pretend it’s not there. But it’s there, nonetheless. My no longer calling myself a Templar – officially – helps them, assists them in not having to make a public declaration that I am persona non grata for doing the right thing in the wrong way.’

‘This is the most you’ve ever said to me,’ Bull said, ‘about any fucking thing. I just think it’s worth noting that I’m a fan. Big fan.’

‘Ha,’ Cullen said, and then rolled his eyes. ‘That’s a first.’

‘That’s because you’ve never done it before,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘I bet. With anyone.’

‘Oh, be quiet,’ Cullen muttered. ‘I talk enough.’

‘Y’know, that whole ‘obtuse’ thing you like bringing up over and over again, that’s what fancy people call projection. You do it more than I do.’

‘Now, I’m not one for making bets, but that is something I’d be willing to put money on.’

‘Hey,’ Bull said in mock affront. ‘Okay. Maybe. Maybe we don’t put money on that one, might be a draw.’
Cullen smiled, felt his chest scratch at him with the compulsion to laugh, though he didn’t follow it through. Instead, he stared down at the stone floor and frowned.

‘Whatever you’re doing,’ Cullen said, ‘it’s not nearly as damaging though. So depending on the constraints of the bet, you’d win handily.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, sighing. Cullen blinked when he felt a hand rest on his back, right between his shoulder-blades. Exactly how Bull had touched him during the first session, his palm hot and welcome. ‘So what’d you think of? These last two weeks? Want to share?’

‘No,’ Cullen said frankly. ‘But…it doesn’t mean I won’t. There, honest enough?’

‘Oh, I like that,’ Bull said. ‘You gonna fight me with the truth? You think it’s gonna drive me away? I’m not an all or nothing guy. I have my lines. You know them now. We see what happens from here on in. If I’m ever going to call this off, I’m going to tell you first.’

Unlike Searidge, Cullen thought. He hated that even now, he was still trying to bait Bull. It did nothing for either of them, and yet he couldn’t stop himself. He felt ill.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, his fingers curling into Cullen’s back, ‘we really don’t have to do this now.’

‘I’m not going to suddenly want to do this,’ Cullen bit out, ‘just because you want me to. It doesn’t work that way. I respect where you’re coming from and I understand it’s the correct pattern of behaviour, but if you’re waiting for me to look forward to this with good will, we won’t be doing this for a very long time.’

‘Got it,’ Bull said. ‘This matters to you a lot, huh?’

Cullen almost got up and walked out, except it was his room. A flash of fury, and then one of a bottomless fear he couldn’t begin to fathom, and Bull’s fingers were slowly scratching his skin through his clothing, and Cullen needed a moment. Perhaps the only thing that kept him in the room, was that it seemed to matter a lot to Bull as well. He was here, wasn’t he? He hadn’t walked away yet, as was his right.

‘I know that I don’t want to hurt you the way that I did, again,’ Cullen said quietly. ‘Even if I don’t want to speak about it, can that not be enough? Enough to convince you that I know I need to talk about this, even if I don’t wish to?’

Bull was quiet, and Cullen thought with sudden, mind-shattering certainty that Bull would tell him it wasn’t enough. He almost missed Bull speaking, hearing a vacuum in his head that nearly drowned out Bull’s words.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, low and quiet. ‘Cullen, yeah that’s… That’s a good thing.’

Cullen stiffened at being praised now, now of all times, and forced himself to gather his thoughts together. This didn’t feel any less of a mess than it did just after he’d seen Searidge in the tavern. He dragged fingers through his hair, digging his fingers into his scalp. He had to focus.

‘I wanted to say, before, I have an arrangement with Cassandra,’ Cullen said, and then quickly followed that with: ‘Not that kind of arrangement. But- Well, you know about the headaches, and…there are other symptoms. We came to an agreement – if she thought I was failing the Inquisition, the choice to find another Commander would rest in her hands. Of course, now it means that she never listens to me when I tell her to find someone else; but for the most part, I don’t think it was a bad arrangement and it seems to be working; she’d think so… And I- Do you understand what I’m trying to say? Is that something you can use?’
He wasn’t used to hearing this much of his own voice outside of training or talking business with colleagues. He cleared his throat, thought that he hadn’t felt like his room had been this cold since he’d not had most of a roof covering it.

‘There are things I can’t talk about,’ Cullen said, finally, the words feeling like they were choking him even as he spoke them. ‘I don’t know which of them are things that- I don’t know what honesty means to you, what you require.’

‘Okay,’ Bull said, and Cullen stiffened when a hand slid over his shoulder, across his back, pulling him closer. ‘You need me to cut this out, tell me. But I want you closer for this conversation.’

‘So I can’t run?’ Cullen said, laughing weakly.

‘You came into the Herald’s Rest and faced me, when you’d been rattled. You came up here and didn’t tell me to wait until later. You’re doing what you committed to doing. I know there’s parts of it you don’t want to deal with, but right now it doesn’t seem like you’re running to me. I just want you closer.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said, realising that Bull wasn’t going to stop tugging him closer until Cullen actually leaned his full weight into him. Now he was leaning into Bull and he felt somewhat ridiculous. He needed more ale to deal with this.

‘You telling me that Searidge is here is a really good thing,’ Bull said firmly. ‘A really, really good thing.’

Cullen didn’t mean to stiffen once more, he didn’t, but he’d not been able to prepare himself for it happening again and hearing anything like praise when he felt the way he did, it winnowed past whatever calm he’d managed to find and then he was shaking again, now almost as badly as before. His jaw tensed, he felt his muscles twitching.

‘Is this because I said his name?’ Bull said slowly, ‘or is it because I told you that you did a good thing?’

Cullen held his breath, then shook his head, watching his fingers curl. He hadn’t realised that he’d grazed them on the windowsill before, but he could feel it now.

Cullen couldn’t say a word, his jaw locked too tight. He was worried his teeth might chatter and that would be humiliating. The strange thing was, it was Uldred who had been the worst about it, but it was only until after Meredith that he realised he had a problem with it. A delay of years, and then one day his body reacted like he was back in Kinloch all over again.

‘I’m gonna guess,’ Bull said, ‘because I’ve seen bits of this before. Who ruined it for you? Who made praise a hard thing? You being told that you’re good, or that you’ve done something good? It was smart, whoever it was. An overachieving Templar like you, and someone who thrives on it.’

‘No,’ Cullen blurted, the denial sounding false not because his voice was weak, but because he put too much force into it. ‘Wait, I’m- I wasn’t expecting you to say those words. What you said.’

‘That you did a really good thing,’ Bull said, and Cullen’s next breath hissed, because he had the faintest impression that Bull was doing this on purpose. ‘You know what else you’ve done that’s good?’

‘Please don’t,’ Cullen said quietly. ‘Please.’

‘Okay,’ Bull said, ‘there it is. Is it better if I avoid the word good?’
Cullen nodded, hated nodding, because the truth was that sometimes he liked it, he wanted it more than anything, wanted to hold the words and clutch at them and the idea that Bull would never say the word again because he’d agreed to it felt like damning himself. And yet the idea that Bull would praise him in that way, right now, was unbearable.

‘Lemme see if I can’t… yeah, okay then, you telling me about Searidge is what I wanted. That better?’

‘Much,’ Cullen said, throat dry.

‘If we’re going into a big session – which with you is pretty much any of them – and I ask you why you might want it, you can tell me why. I want you to.’

‘You would have said no,’ Cullen said, frowning.

‘You’re not a mind reader. But more importantly, that’s my call, to say no to something like that. When I ask you to try and give me more control, and you say you will – you finding ways to get underneath that or take it away from me again – that would be a problem even if you weren’t making dumb decisions, but it’s definitely more of a problem when you are.’

‘I’m not certain I know how to stop,’ Cullen said, and he tried to pull away from Bull, thinking that somehow this part of the conversation would disappoint him too much. But Bull’s arm tightened, and after a few moments of tension between them – Bull hardly exerting any strength, and Cullen waiting for Bull to just let him go – Cullen sagged back again. ‘You- Months ago now, you said I- There was a comment you made. You said that I’d never learned how to stop fighting back.’

‘Yeah, I remember,’ Bull said. ‘At the time, I also remember saying I could help you learn how to stop fighting as much.’

‘The first part of what you said – you said I survived because of it. That I’d never learned how to stop fighting back. Then you come along and say you can get me to stop doing that, and it is tempting. Do you not realise how-? I do understand you mean within a certain context, certain situations, but…’

Bull was silent, and Cullen tried to think of what he was trying to say, what he wasn’t ready to say. Words that he couldn’t shape: I expect you to hurt me when I’m like that. Even when I forget to expect it, which is the worst thing I could do.

Cullen knotted his hands together, sore knuckles bumping against sore knuckles.

‘I’m quite certain I don’t have enough to bring to this arrangement that makes me think it could ever be fair to you.’

‘Hmm,’ Bull said. ‘This? This now? This helps.’

‘Yes, well, if I do this every day, I think I’m going to walk off the battlements,’ Cullen laughed. But Bull went still, and Cullen’s eyes widened when he realised what he’d said. ‘I’m not- Maker, Bull, I didn’t-’

‘Shhh,’ Bull said, then cleared his throat. ‘I don’t need you to do this every day. No one could. I fucking wouldn’t. You ask me to speak about Seheron for a week, maybe I’d think about doing the same. Sometimes it just hits me that there’s things in this that I keep thinking I’ve explained well, or that someone else has taught you over the years. Things you’d maybe pick up in friendships, or elsewhere, and there’s these gaps… I’m not saying that to offend you. When I say ‘this helps’ I don’t mean I want it to happen all the fucking time, because it’s hard for you, and it sucks, I get it.
What I mean is, this goes a long way in showing me that you want to try, and that this isn’t just you using me as a weapon to hurt yourself until you’re dead or done.’

‘Because of course that’s how it looked,’ Cullen said heavily.

‘Kinda.’

‘Right,’ Cullen said, and then absently tried to push away from Bull and was surprised when Bull simply didn’t let him. ‘Really?’

‘You can watchword out of it, but otherwise I want you right here,’ Bull said, sounding insufferably pleased with himself.

Cullen sagged back into place and Bull made a grunting sound that seemed even happier, and Cullen shook his head, because after everything- He didn’t even know why he was trying to figure it all out.

‘So,’ Bull said, sounding far calmer than Cullen thought he had any right to feel. ‘So far, you’ve told me that you want me to handle the elfroot side of things, which helps me. You’ve opened up a bit, which was what I wanted. The Cassandra thing…I want to go away and think about that. But that’s helpful. Really helpful. Anything else?’

All Cullen could hear, was all the places where Bull might be saying the word ‘good’ but for the fact that Cullen had told him he couldn’t handle it. He squeezed his fingers together even harder for that jolt of scratchy pain, angry at himself for a reason he was too tired to fossick out.

‘It doesn’t sound like much when you frame it like that,’ Cullen said. ‘I can’t promise you I won’t break a promise again, so perhaps- If something comes along where you might ask me to swear something, can we… Is there another way of doing that?’

‘Yep,’ Bull said. ‘I’ve been thinking about that on my side of things. I have some things I need to change too, here. Not just you. But you’re not gonna like some of it. I want to check in more. The morning after a session. And then maybe a few days later after that depending on how hard it went. And I might push a little harder to get you to talk to me, if you’re gonna brush me off with an ‘I’m fine.’ And I’m still gonna push even when you actually feel fine, until I’m satisfied I know the difference. So…I’ve asked for it before, but I want you to try and be patient with that.’

‘That seems more than reasonable,’ Cullen said, even as he wanted to say that it wasn’t necessary, even as his ‘mantra’ was quietly picking up speed behind the scenes, becoming louder and louder.

‘I want a break from anything that involves drawing blood, but I still want you to tell me when you want it, so we can work something else out. Whatever drives you to that point, you shouldn’t be handling that on your own.’

‘Wait,’ Cullen said, blinking. ‘A break? Not ‘never again’?’

‘I dunno,’ Bull said. ‘But if you never tell me you want it – so we can at least think of some alternatives – then it might be a ‘never again.’ I’m a lot closer to that than I am to saying I’d do it again.’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said. ‘The same with…the rest of it?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘I dunno if that’s the exact right call – I reserve the right to change my mind there -but I’m pretty strongly sure that those earlier sessions did actually help you out, and I got a lot out of them, and they didn’t lead to massive shit shows in the field. Look, I know I said I’d put it off
until after, but I kinda think it’s really a part of all of this now – things were doing okay before Searidge turned up in Skyhold, yeah? As okay as they ever go?’

Cullen hesitated a long time before nodding. He wanted to say it was still fine, still okay. But of course, it was too late for that. There were some things he couldn’t stuff back into the chest once he’d pulled them out. Bull’s arm tightened around him, and Cullen felt briefly pathetic because of how much he wanted the closeness.

‘You said you were friends,’ Bull said. ‘But Cullen, you don’t react like he’s a friend.’

‘He was a friend,’ Cullen said. ‘Possibly.’

‘Possibly? You don’t know?’

‘I don’t…’ Cullen hated this. He hated prodding at it. He hated that he wasn’t simply fine and keeping it under control. Because now, like this, he was aware that he’d let it run amok over his life and if it wasn’t for Bull’s good will, his tolerance, Cullen could have lost a great deal because of it. What person reacted like that to two brief conversations? ‘I’m not sure I’m remembering it all rightly.’

‘When you apologised to him, what’d he say?’

‘He was surprised,’ Cullen said, laughing, the sound a broken thing that seemed to occupy too large a place in his room. ‘He said I’d not made him. He seemed annoyed that I’d even- It wasn’t what I expected.’

‘You said he hasn’t been keeping it a secret?’ Bull said. ‘That seems like poor form.’

‘I didn’t… As he said, I made him sign no contract. He doesn’t owe that to me.’

‘That’s what he said,’ Bull said, his voice flat. ‘That you didn’t make him sign a contract?’

Cullen nodded, and Bull shifted, then took a slow breath.

‘You think he doesn’t owe you that?’ Bull said. ‘Respect?’

‘After what I did to-’

‘What did you do to him?’ Bull said. ‘I wanna know what you did, that’s so bad. That you can’t tell me. When you were willing enough to throw yourself under the wagon when you told me that it all went wrong because of you in the first place.’

‘With what I wanted…’ Cullen said. It was obvious, wasn’t it? Why was Bull being so dense about it? ‘Don’t- I’m not interested in you making this more difficult than it needs to be. Just because you like what you like, doesn’t mean it’s not- That what I like isn’t…’

When Cullen felt that tension snap, he pushed away from Bull, needed to be away, and he didn’t think to be surprised that Bull let him go this time until he was across the bed with his back to the headboard, staring at him. Bull’s expression was grave.

‘He doesn’t owe it to me,’ Cullen said again.

‘Like you didn’t owe me the truth?’ Bull said. ‘Because I know you know that’s bullshit. You wouldn’t have walked into that fucking tavern if you didn’t think you owed me some more respect. Right?’
‘That’s different,’ Cullen said, and then grit his teeth together and dragged a hand through his hair again. His hand ended up resting at the back of his neck, fingers digging into taut muscle.

‘He told you, didn’t he?’ Bull said, lips thinning. ‘Told you that it was wrong. Did he do that back then, too?’

‘Does it matter?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘He was doing what I ordered! Of course he thought it was wrong.’

‘You told me he liked it,’ Bull said. ‘Before. That he liked it up to a point.’

‘Well, he’s definitely changed his mind,’ Cullen said, scratching the back of his neck and then forcing his hand away.

As you no doubt will.

Cullen stared at a fixed point on the bed, willing that voice to disappear.

‘And he’s told people in Kirkwall,’ Bull said.

‘There’s enough rumours about me there that it hardly matters,’ Cullen said.

‘Does it matter to you?’

‘I fail to see how that’s relevant,’ Cullen said. ‘I didn’t make him sign any-’

‘Nope,’ Bull said. ‘Nope. Hang on. Just hang on a minute. It’s a yes or no question now, Cullen. That’s all it is. Does it matter to you?’

Cullen glared at him, but Bull’s gaze was just as fierce, he was leaning forwards now, and Cullen felt all the words dry up in his throat. A yes or no question.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said.

Bull looked relieved for only seconds, before his expression sobered again. ‘Yep. Bear with me, just for a bit. Yes or no questions, okay? Simple. You got this.’

Cullen normally would have said something scathing at that, but he kept his mouth shut, thinking that this was not the way things were supposed to have gone at all.

‘Do you think he could tell people here?’ Bull said.

Cullen’s nostrils flared, he looked ahead, not wanting to close his eyes, but unable to answer the question. But that seemed to be answer enough, because only seconds later, Bull was swearing and Cullen shook his head, because it wasn’t simple, it wasn’t.

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said. ‘I don’t know. Right now, he thinks I don’t do it anymore, that I also think anyone who- that I think anyone like me is…wrong. If he continues to think I’ve changed, perhaps he won’t. He hasn’t yet. It’s been weeks. He knows I don’t want him to. He knows I’m trying to-,’ Cullen laughed. ‘He knows I’m trying to put it behind me.’

‘He knew then,’ Bull said. ‘He knew then, that you didn’t want him to tell anyone.’

‘Well I know what I’m not going to do,’ Cullen said, the words coming from some deep place inside of him, ‘I’m not going to be pre-emptively warning people that this could come up. He can try and spread the rumours here, who would believe him? Josephine can get him discredited in an
instant, and it is not the first time the Inquisition has needed to quash rumours, or been able to redirect them. And I have no interest in being honest with him, and if you tell me that you think I should—'

‘Whoa,’ Bull said, holding up his hands, ‘not asking for that. Around people like that? You gotta protect yourself.’

‘People like what?’ Cullen said. ‘He was caught up in something, you can’t blame him for coming out the other side and seeing it differently.’

‘Can,’ Bull said. ‘Pretty sure I can do that. He’s being a dick. Sometimes people come out the other side of something more of an asshole, and I kinda think he may have been a little bit of one back then, for all you try to be on his side. I know you don’t agree with me. I know. But nothing you’re saying is changing my mind. And that’s not because you’re saying it wrong, it’s because he’s treated you like shit.’

Silence then, and Cullen pressed his shoulders back harder into the headboard and was glad for the sturdiness of the wood. He didn’t like this conversation, though he’d known he wasn’t going to like any of it, he hadn’t planned for there to be an argument over Searidge in the midst of it all.

‘Okay. Another yes or no question,’ Bull said, taking a breath through his nose. ‘Do you think Searidge owes you respect?’

Cullen desperately wanted to lie, but he knew he couldn’t pull it off in a single syllable. He knew, also, that there was no point. Bull already knew the truth. Cullen was certain he was only asking to make sure that they were both on the same page.

‘No,’ Cullen said, ‘I don’t.’

‘You know that’s a problem,’ Bull said, gaze fixed on him. ‘You know that, right?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen admitted. ‘As the Commander, he must show me the respect a Commander is due. For the sake of the Inquisition. I told him that he couldn’t talk to me the way he was talking to me. I did- It’s not like I just stood there and took it.’

‘I don’t think you’d ever really do that,’ Bull said slowly. ‘But there’s a big thing here and I don’t think you know how big it is. You’re not supposed to think that you’re wrong for liking what you like, because there is nothing wrong with it. And I know that’s not just me spouting shit, and it’s not just a qunari thing, and it’s not just a ‘people like me’ thing. So here’s you,’ Bull said, stretching his arm out and pointing with his index finger. ‘And here’s everyone else.’ He stretched out his other arm and pointed in the opposite direction.

‘Don’t forget Searidge,’ Cullen said, humour falling flat.

‘Yeah, fuck Searidge,’ Bull said. ‘I know you can’t help it. I’m not telling you to stop doing it. I know you’ve had problems with it from the beginning, I can work with that. But I do wanna know, when you went to Searidge and asked him for it, did you think it was wrong then? Was it something you learned from him? Or did you learn it earlier?’

Earlier. Years and years earlier. A glimpse of it, once, during his training. When they worked on endurance and tolerance of pain, and Cullen excelled at it and they talked about his high pain threshold when the reality was that he’d come to savour it. He’d come to savour what he was proving to himself and almost looked forward to those lessons while the others looked on with dread. But then, back then, he was praised for it. How good he was. He didn’t know it would mean
he’d be – by their standards – an excellent candidate for hunting down Mages who became abominations. All he knew then was that he could withstand high levels of pain, he wouldn’t run from the threat of torture. He was even proud.

But that had only been a glimpse, and back then, it had meant nothing at all.

Then…Kinloch…

Maybe it was Uldred that did it to you. Who changed you, made you want something that the demon-touched would want.

Cullen shivered to hear Searidge’s voice. His gorge rose when his mind supplied him the echo of another, older voice he hated hearing.

‘I have your character transcript right here. So they send you to hunt us because you can handle pain? How fascinating. And here I thought you’d be as boring as the rest of them, and now I think there’s something to this, you being so good at this, when all your fellows are dying, one by one. Let’s see…’

‘I don’t want to talk about this,’ Cullen said, swallowing.

‘You don’t have to tell me when it happened,’ Bull said. ‘But did you learn it from him?’

‘I’m not talking about this,’ Cullen said, his voice strained.

‘This is really important, and I-’

‘Katoh,’ Cullen said, closing his eyes.

Uldred’s voice was taking too long to disappear, and Cullen bowed his head and pressed the back of his hand to his forehead and didn’t have the presence of mind to care how it looked. These things had stopped haunting him like this, had stopped a long time ago. He thought he’d had a handle on it, and now he’d done this twice in front of Bull, and it unmanned him.

Bull was silent as Cullen tried to remind himself he was in his tower, in Skyhold, in the Inquisition. He was a Commander. He was far, far from that period of time, and he didn’t have to think about it. It was in the past. It could stay there. Kinloch was Kinloch. Kirkwall was Kirkwall. That was that.

Eventually, Cullen realised that he’d said the watchword for this. He hesitated before looking up, unhappy with himself, unhappy with what he’d done.

‘Is that…a line?’ Cullen said, thinking that it didn’t matter that his voice was shaking because Maker knew Bull had already seen enough of that today. ‘Is that a line with you? That I’ve crossed? Not speaking about it?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘It’s not. I pushed too hard. It’s important, but it can hold. I kind of want you back over here again though.’

Bull gestured at his own body, and Cullen wanted it. Wanted to drape himself against Bull’s side and absorb that warmth until his hands weren’t so cold. Until his stomach didn’t feel like an atrophying organ, rotting from too long without use. He’d only eaten a short while ago. Even his body couldn’t remember that he was in Skyhold.

‘I’m sorry,’ Cullen said. ‘For saying it. The word.’
‘You don’t need to be,’ Bull said. ‘I want you to. You did the right thing, like I said, I pushed too hard. I pushed way too hard. I’m sorry, I got caught up in the moment and you tried to tell me you couldn’t go there. That’s not the way I wanted to push when I said I was gonna do that before. So you saying katoh – I really want you to do that whenever you feel that way. I really like that you can do that. Okay?’

He wants me to, Cullen thought. That’s when he’d say it was a good thing. It was a good thing.

But Cullen couldn’t bear to hear that word from Bull’s mouth, and he was glad that – at least for now – he didn’t have to. He was exhausted, felt like he’d run a marathon when he’d done no such thing.

‘Maker,’ Cullen said, feeling breathless, his lungs hurting. ‘I’ve made a mess of this, haven’t I? Has it even helped?’

‘Come here,’ Bull said gently. ‘If you want. I’d like it. Feels weird to be on a bed and not be close to you.’

So Cullen was moving across the bed again, joints stiff and hands colder and wondering if he’d slip into an episode tonight because the lyrium would help. Would help all of this. And then Bull was moving onto the bed properly and practically dragging Cullen into his lap, and Cullen was too tired to pretend he minded.

‘The situation is a mess,’ Bull said. ‘Talking about it is messy. But you haven’t made a mess of it any more than I have right now. And you’ve helped. A lot.’

Cullen felt his breathing begin to slow, his lungs still aching from all that tension they’d been carrying. He’d helped, at least. It mattered. His muscles continued to unwind, he was slumping against Bull now. If Bull was so proud of all of that musculature, he could use it, because Cullen didn’t want to move.

‘Searidge bothers me,’ Bull said, stroking Cullen’s back. ‘Because he knows – I think – exactly what to say to harm you. And that’s different to someone just spouting off insults. I don’t know why, but he knows the sore spots. Normally I’d offer to talk to him, but...’

‘That’s not happening,’ Cullen said, forehead resting against Bull’s chest.

‘It also doesn’t help anyone for me to draw attention to it. Maybe things’ll change in the future. But whatever it is, we don’t have to worry about finding the answers today.’

‘You mean I don’t,’ Cullen said.

‘We,’ Bull said, emphatically.

‘This is my responsibility.’

‘You dragged it smack bang into the arrangement we have. It’s our responsibility. That’s what you giving more control to me looks like. Letting me help you with stuff that hurts you in the ways you don’t want. So I can safely hurt you in the way you do.’

‘I’m so tired,’ Cullen said. Bull’s arms tightened around him, and Cullen didn’t resist. Didn’t want to. He still couldn’t quite believe that he’d said the watchword. He always knew it would be more likely to happen when they talked but he hadn’t realised... He was embarrassed, and yet he knew there was no way he could have kept talking about that subject.
‘You’ve had a big day,’ Bull said.

Cullen laughed then. ‘I wouldn’t say that.’

‘I fucking would,’ Bull said, firm.

‘And you?’ Cullen said. ‘How- How are you? With this? In general?’

‘With this, better than I was when I woke up this morning. In general? I dunno. I’ve been… questioning some things. The whole Tal Va-fucking-shoth thing. Not sure I want to talk about it. Maybe one day though.’

‘You could,’ Cullen said, shifting, getting more comfortable – which mostly involved moving closer and pressing more of his body to Bull’s. Granted, he was covered in layers of clothing, but it wasn’t like he still couldn’t feel the warmth of him. ‘You could talk to me about it, one day.’

‘Been thinking about that too,’ Bull said, and he didn’t make it sound like a bad thing. ‘Shit. It feels like it should be later.’

Cullen nodded. It really did. The last of the afternoon light hadn’t faded, and technically, Cullen wasn’t done with the workday. Yet he felt as ready to sleep as he ever did after one of their sessions, and he sensed that Bull didn’t have any particular urge to move either. Then again, Bull had looked relaxed in the Herald’s Rest, so maybe he’d been done for the day.

‘I have a suggestion,’ Bull said. Cullen made a sound to indicate he was listening. ‘We stay here a bit. Then go get something to eat from the kitchens later. When it’s quiet. I got nothing on for the rest of the day. You?’

‘I…’ Cullen shook his head. ‘Nothing urgent.’

‘I have another suggestion.’

Cullen made the same noise. He was still surprised he’d used the watchword. That Bull had listened. That it wasn’t all a complete disaster. It should have been, shouldn’t it? He just wanted to stay in this world a little longer. The one where nothing made sense in this pleasant way.

‘Come up here,’ Bull said, shifting his arms. ‘I’ll show you.’

Unfolding his limbs was a sluggish undertaking, and instead, Bull’s hands on his flanks drew him upwards and Cullen blinked owlishly and then closed his eyes when he felt lips press against his. Kissing. Yet another thing that didn’t make any sense right now. In a haze, he leaned forwards and braced his hands – one on Bull’s shoulder, the other curling around the muscles of his neck. He thought of earlier, of Bull telling him where the better muscles were. Surely he knew they were all better? Every part of his body appealed.

‘It’s a good suggestion, yeah?’ Bull said against his mouth, as Cullen tried to capture Bull’s lips between his own.

‘I wish you’d made this one about an hour ago,’ Cullen said. ‘Would have saved us both a lot of grief.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Slow on the uptake that way.’

But he was chuckling when he licked gently over Cullen’s lips, and he was still smiling when he scraped his teeth over sensitive skin before pecking the corner of Cullen’s mouth. Cullen became
aware of that hook of a feeling in his gut again, what he’d felt at the Shrine of Dumat, what he’d been scared of feeling again. Now, it seemed like it was meant to be present, entwined in this moment – making it richer than Cullen ever really knew it could be – and Cullen thought that was something he was going to worry about later, but not now.

Chapter End Notes

Also this story just hit 100k and I think I’m at the halfway point so I hope you all don’t mind a long haul. Eep.
The Pink Iron Bull

Chapter Notes

I needed this chapter. Or specifically, the content in this chapter. And omg, your comments are still giving me life ldkfjsdfsaf

It was the rise and fall that reminded him of the sea. He could almost be back there again, with Cassandra somewhere below decks, and Cullen standing above board feeling the endless rocking, watching the waves furl and unfurl. It was like his lake back in Honnleath, and yet so unlike it. The ocean breathed as though it were alive and always calm, and though storms came, they always passed. It was one of the few things that had kept him...stable, during that period. What Knight-Commander Gregoir would have called ‘even.’ He couldn’t go down into the dark, it made him feel too trapped, even with lanterns at full strength.

He stayed where he could see the sea, and he dozed in snatches.

Cullen blinked himself awake and realised that he was sprawled across Bull’s chest, that they were both still fully clothed. He rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his palm and felt Bull’s heart thumping beneath him. When he rose up a little, he had to pause when he saw Bull lax on his bed, horns brushing pillows that he hadn’t used to support his head. One arm was sprawled outwards, the other heavy on Cullen’s lower back.

When had they fallen asleep? He knew he’d been complaining about tiredness, but still...

Evidently in his desire to see just how much he could slump his whole body weight against Bull, this had happened.

One of his legs was between Bull’s, and he was aware – against his thigh – that Bull was half-hard. And then he became aware that he was half-hard and a part of him wanted to shift away, and a part of him wanted to stay like this. To fall asleep again. For this to be some natural thing that happened in his life that he could have without fear of reprisal.

It was dark outside, and possibly late. Cullen realised he’d never seen Bull like this. Not up close. His face fully relaxed, the way his fingers curled just slightly inwards. And it must have been uncomfortable, he was still wearing his harness, his brace, but Cullen had slept in full plate armour before, and he knew that when one was tired enough, one simply slept and grumbled about the creases etched into skin in the morning.

Bull looked vulnerable like this, even if he still wore his power about him constantly. Cullen reached up with an arm that felt leaden from his post-sleep haze and carefully ghosted his fingers over Bull’s face, not quite touching.

A strange regret kindled, because he knew now that it wasn’t just feelings of fondness he had for Bull, or affection, or friendship, or camaraderie. Perhaps all those things. But lurking behind it, well, he knew what infatuation felt like, knew what it was to experience yearning for things and people he couldn’t have. This time, at least, he could have something. He didn’t know if that was better or worse, but it was at least different, so he’d steal from it what he could until it went away.
Cullen’s fingertips touched Bull’s cheek, beneath his closed eye. He brushed his thumb over that rise of flesh, watched as Bull’s eye flickered open. His pupil dilated, contracted, and then Bull met his eyes. The arm at his lower back shifted, palm pressing down just above the rise of his ass, as though Cullen was in danger of moving away.

‘We slept,’ Cullen said, his voice still scratchy.

‘Mm,’ Bull said, taking a deep breath and his eye lidding with tiredness again. ‘You went first. Then I lay down. Then I guess… Your mattress is really fucking comfortable.’

‘I can talk to Talbot for you,’ Cullen said, and Bull’s eye closed, his lips lifted in a smile. Cullen’s fingers drifted down, he stroked the pad of his thumb along Bull’s bottom lip, but moved away when that mouth opened, threatened to bite lightly. Instead, Cullen focused on his chin, his jaw. Stubble prickled, and Cullen wanted to run his tongue over it, feel it scraping, but that would involve moving his whole body forwards and he wanted this too.

‘I don’t need you to talk to Talbot,’ Bull said, his eye still closed. ‘This is good.’

‘You were tired?’ Cullen said.

‘Always a bit,’ Bull said, his throat shifting on a swallow. Cullen’s hand moved lower, fingers moving over Bull’s Adam’s apple. At that, the palm at his lower back dug in, fingers pressing over his spine, and Cullen’s next breath was heavier, and the breath after that.

It felt illicit, that they were doing this. After the broken promise. After two weeks of being certain of what he was losing. After seeing Searidge. After that entire conversation. Now, it seemed like this was what they could have always had, and it did that twisty, fluttering feeling in his chest no favours at all.

‘I didn’t imagine the day going like this.’

‘Well shit, that’s a good thing, because according to you this is all done and dusted. Also I got a nice little nap out of it.’

Cullen opened his mouth to protest, and closed it again. What would he be protesting? That was exactly what he’d thought. Bull seemed to be watching him for a response, and when Cullen didn’t give any, Bull smirked.

Cullen’s fingers drifted to the underside of Bull’s chin, the skin there that was softer, even the stubble less coarse. Then he felt Bull’s pulse, that arterial blood flowing strong but not fast, and how Bull seemed genuinely calm. Cullen liked that.

When he traced the edge of Bull’s left ear, Bull’s head twitched, and he exhaled sharply, a gust of laughter following.

‘Ticklish?’ Cullen said, surprised. And then, because he couldn’t help himself, he did it again, and Bull dug his fingers into Cullen’s back and mock-growled at him.

Cullen’s cock twitched between his legs, but he left Bull’s ear alone and went back down to the strong line of his jaw.

‘Not always,’ Bull said. ‘You could lick ‘em, and it’d be fine. Unless you breathed all over them, then I’d probably gore you. It’d be accidental though.’

‘Ah, that makes all the difference,’ Cullen deadpanned. ‘Death by accidental goring. The
Inquisitor will understand.’

‘They’re really ticklish,’ Bull said, grinning.

‘Were they always?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said fervently. ‘Them and my feet, and there’s a patch just behind my balls where if you get me in the right spot, it’ll either be hot or I’ll bust out laughing.’

Cullen blinked at him, and Bull blinked back, looking for all the world like he was unaware that he’d said anything odd at all. But then some devilish light entered his eye and Bull said:

‘I could show you, I mean – I could bend over and you could try it.’

‘That’s…I’m good, for now,’ Cullen said, feeling his cheeks burn. ‘I can’t even tell if you’re telling the truth, or lying to get a reaction.’

‘I’m telling the truth to get a reaction,’ Bull said. ‘And now you’re probably gonna think about it every time you see the back of my balls.’

Cullen dropped his head back down to Bull’s chest and shook his head, because this was going to be the death of him.

‘Every time?’ Cullen said, his voice a bit higher than before. ‘You plan that on happening a lot, then?’

‘I mean if you’re just going to do it to make me laugh, might be a bit of a turn off. Eventually. I dunno. Maybe not though.’

‘Maker,’ Cullen said. He wasn’t laughing, like Bull, but he was close. And when Bull’s other hand came up and ghosted through his hair, coming back to tousle it friendlily, Cullen thought this was too good. This moment was too good. Had he ever felt like this? He swallowed, chest shy, and breathed deep, trying to wedge this into his senses, to make it one of the things he could find again one day when he needed it.

‘So, I wanna get to know you better. I figure we can take turns. And look at that, I don’t mean serious stuff, Cullen, you don’t need to go getting all tense on me.’

‘It’s all been rather serious today,’ Cullen said, all attempts to fix this moment in time abandoned. ‘Forgive me if I assumed…’

‘Just…stuff. I dunno, like…what’s your favourite metal for armour? For yourself? If you had the choice? Money and smithing no object.’

Cullen smiled in spite of himself and as he ruffled the hairs that curved underneath Bull’s jaw, he thought about it.

‘Many of the Knight-Commanders wore silverite, and I’m partial to it. Strong, yet not as heavy as others. But I think- If I ever commissioned a new set of plates, perhaps stormheart. If there was enough. There never would be, of course. I’m also not sure it would suit, I’d have to replace everything else. But it would get me away from the colours of the Templar Order, and I think…that would have to wait until after the Inquisition. Should we survive Corypheus.’

‘Okay,’ Bull said, petting Cullen’s back lightly. ‘Okay. Somehow that became the story of how you like this ore but we’re all gonna die.’
‘I said ‘should,’’ Cullen said primly, ‘I didn’t say ‘it’s an inevitability.’’

‘Maybe you need to work on your delivery,’ Bull said, laughing a little.

‘Well, what’s yours then?’

‘Dawnstone,’ Bull said, grinning.

Cullen blinked at him, then tilted his head. ‘You mean tinted dawnstone?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘Where’s the fun in that?’

‘But it’s...pink.’

‘You got a problem with pink?’ Bull said, but he grinned in that way that meant he knew Cullen would. ‘Personally, I think the giant axe and the giant muscles will make people think ‘wow, that dude in the pink armour is way scarier than anyone else around here. Look at that rack.’ Or something. Pink’s a great colour. It has teeth if you want it to. Look at nugs.’

Cullen couldn’t help laughing then, ducking his head and pressing his forehead to Bull’s collarbone, his body shaking silently.

‘Then again,’ Bull said philosophically, ‘the pink ones never bite. So that’s a bad example. There’s not enough pink in the world, if you ask me.’

‘I’m sure you’d make it work,’ Cullen said, into Bull’s chest. ‘Soon everyone will want it.’

‘Shit no,’ Bull said. ‘I want people to stand there in a smithy and look at it and instead of saying ‘well, fuck me, that’s expensive,’ they’ll say, ‘well, fuck me, I’m no warrior like The Iron Bull, I can’t pull that off. Gotta be one of the best Reavers in the world for that.’ And then I’d be like- The Pink Iron Bull. No, ah shit, that just makes me sound like I’ve got a real bad case of sunburn.’

Bull was laughing too, by the end of it, and Cullen shook his head against Bull’s skin and felt even warmer than he did when he’d woken up.

‘Maybe I can just start calling you The Pink Iron Bull,’ Cullen said, looking up, ‘pre-emptively, I’d practically be doing you a favour.’

‘Appreciate the offer, but I’ll pass, thanks,’ Bull said. ‘What about you? You like being called the Lion of Honnleath? Or Ferelden? Both?’

Cullen flushed and then shrugged. ‘Titles are meaningless, really.’

‘Hoo boy,’ Bull said, ‘here we go. That’s not an answer. Do you like it? Like, when someone calls it out, say in Orlais where everyone likes to disappear up their own asses, do you still have that little rush of like: ‘yeah, yeah, I’m the fucking Lion of Ferelden, that’s me.’’

Cullen cleared his throat, shrugged again, and thought of Bull calling him ‘little lion’ and realising that he liked both equally, for different reasons. But one didn’t go about admitting they liked titles, or being compared to lions, because that was unseemly.

‘You fucking love it,’ Bull said. Cullen could hear the smile on his face.

‘I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you’d bring this up, given you’re The Iron Bull.’

‘Hey, titles are power. They’re not meaningless. They tell you something and misdirect at the same
time. People see the title, they don’t see the person. It’s fantastic. People know what they’re getting with me, a beast that’ll kill anyone and anything you put in front of it. They knew what they were getting with Hisssrad, too. Maybe one day I’ll be The Dragon of…fucking…something. The Inquisition maybe. You could get that started. Instead of The Pink Iron Bull, you could work on that for me? I’ll get the Boss in on it. Soon everyone’ll be calling me that. Dragon of the Inquisition.’

‘What about after the Inquisition?’ Cullen said. He decided he’d put the dehumanisation thing aside, it wasn’t the first time he’d heard of it, but that bothered him too.

‘According to you, we’re all dead.’

Cullen poked him with two fingers, and Bull grunted even though it hadn’t hurt him at all. For a few seconds, they just looked at each other. Bull was somehow still laughing, even though he wasn’t making a sound, even though his breathing was steady. Cullen could see it in his eyes.

‘Why d’you have so many books in your office? I mean, why isn’t the library good enough?’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, clearing his throat. ‘I like to have information on hand.’

‘That’s a lot of information, I mean – there’s having your favourites on hand in a pinch but it’s still a lot to have right by you. And are they yours?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, thinking there wasn’t really anything unusual with that, was there? ‘A great deal were salvaged from Kirkwall. I brought them with me. Cassandra was upset about the freight cost, initially, but I was able to cover it with what I’d saved. There was a library in the Circle. Well, in most Circles. I went there sometimes to…learn, or to forget. Now I worry that I’ll lose important facts when I need them most. So I keep them around me.’

_The lyrium makes people forget important things, at times. The books help._

Bull’s gaze was serious, and after a while he just nodded. Cullen wondered if this was the right thing to be doing. He was being honest, yes, but he’d also just made the conversation less light, less buoyant. He always did that. After a few seconds, he frowned, and Bull’s other hand came up and touched the corner of Cullen’s mouth, fleetingly.

‘Memories? Something else?’

‘Something else,’ Cullen said, shaking his head. ‘I seem to always be the one bringing the conversation down. I’m not sure how to stop it.’

‘You don’t have to stop it,’ Bull said. ‘I’m good.’

‘Yes, but-’

The finger that had touched the side of his mouth pressed against Cullen’s open mouth. The move wasn’t sensual, but Cullen still felt his breath hitch in response to it. He went silent, and Bull watched him steadily, and then moved his finger away – though he dragged it slowly, a caress, before touching Cullen’s jawbone the way Cullen was touching his.

‘This is why I get to interrupt you,’ Bull said, his voice lower and more serious than before. ‘You don’t have to believe me, but you can’t argue away how I feel to reveal some truth you think is really there. I’m good about it. You don’t have to stop. I like talking to you. About all sorts of shit. I knew you were a serious guy when I met you, so it’s not like I’m expecting you to become a comedian or some shit now. But if you want, we can go back to talking about my balls again.’
‘I’m…somehow not sure that will be entirely useful at this juncture.’

Bull shrugged a shoulder, which made the blanket beneath him rumple, and then his thumb was tracing the outside curve of Cullen’s ear. And that wasn’t ticklish, only sensitive, and Cullen kept trying to make eye contact, but it was difficult. So instead he looked down at Bull’s lips, and that wasn’t helpful either. He wanted more, but he didn’t want it now. Somehow, the idea of doing anything more than savouring the moment, seemed like it would ruin something they’d found. He wondered if Bull was thinking that he wanted more, and his forehead furrowed.

‘Do you want… Ah, that is to say, if you wish for this to become more sexual, we can—’

‘I’m good,’ Bull said again. ‘Just like this. So long as you are. S’been a long day. Don’t really think that’s where things should finish up tonight. You good with that?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, feeling relieved. ‘So this is…what, then?’

‘Touching,’ Bull said, and a shadow passed over his face at Cullen’s question. But then it vanished, and Bull smiled at him. ‘Just touching. Not used to it?’

‘No,’ Cullen said. But he used to think about it sometimes. When he daydreamed in the Circles – when he wasn’t supposed to – and then even earlier, when Mia would talk of all the things she wanted. Breakfast in bed, reading to her lover, imagining the soft moments she and her imagined someone might spend together.

More minutes passed, of small touches with weight behind them, and Cullen still feeling sleepy but not groggy. His fingers were still cold, but Bull truly never seemed to mind, and Cullen thought the sleep may have actually headed off the episode he was afraid had been building before.

‘You still pray, don’t you?’ Bull said. And at Cullen’s bewildered look he reached up and scratched at the place his horn joined into skin. ‘Lemme backtrack. You have these problems with the Templars, and you don’t call yourself a Templar anymore, and it’s obviously complicated. But you still pray to Andraste, ‘cuz I’ve seen you do it. Kneeling before that statue.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said slowly, not sure what Bull was aiming at.

‘Is it hard? Does it… I do have a point to this, but does it ever just feel wrong?’

Cullen pushed himself up a little, propping himself up on his forearms and looking at Bull in some confusion. After a moment he looked away into the darkness of his room, taking a breath. What was Bull getting at?

‘Sometimes,’ Cullen said finally. ‘There are certain phrases and prayers that are tainted. Or I kneel before Andraste, or present myself to the Maker, and feel that they would no sooner see me than any stone beneath their feet, because of how I have separated myself from them. But then the Maker teaches us that there is always the light, no matter how much darkness we have faced. Still—Why do you ask?’

‘I can’t do it anymore,’ Bull said. ‘At all. The Cantos, none of it. Some nights I go to, and then it just goes to shit. I get as far as asit tal-eb and then anything else – it vanishes. Y’know?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Cullen said. ‘The Templar Order isn’t like the Qun.’

Bull frowned. ‘Not sure it’s not so different.’
‘Why do you think you can’t do it anymore?’ Cullen said.

Bull took a long slow breath, clearly in thought, and Cullen tried to make his face look like he wasn’t dumbstruck that Bull was talking to him about this, when he could choose to confide in anyone else about it.

‘You know when the body poisons itself?’

‘As in gangrene?’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah, so, that’s me,’ Bull said. ‘I had to be cut away for the safety of the greater being. Even if I’m not…fully gangrenous, I’m- Like, I had to be cut out. So using the sayings now, I feel like a bit of flesh trying to weasel my way back in. And that’s what poison does. Weasels its way in. So it seems…wrong. And then my night feels doubly shit.’

‘Are you barred from saying the Cantos, when you’re Tal Vashoth?’

‘Nah, not officially or anything,’ Bull said. ‘But I can’t weasel my way back in. I don’t even know if I want to.’

‘The Cantos – the rest of it – provided you comfort?’ Cullen said, wondering how he’d ever be able to cope with his lyrium addiction if he didn’t have prayer to fall back on.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘But not anymore. It’s wrong, I think. I’m either in it, or I’m not in it. I don’t get to pick from both sides.’

Cullen opened his mouth and then closed it again, thinking whatever kneejerk response he was going to say to that was probably not the right thing to say. But he’d not considered that being Tal Vashoth would have this kind of impact, and Cullen knew it was because he didn’t fully understand.

‘You look like you wanna disagree,’ Bull said, with something of a rueful smile.

‘Well…’ Cullen said, sighing. ‘Perhaps. But- Something I learned after Kirkwall, or – after Meredith – was that there was a great deal of the world I didn’t know about. And I can have my feelings about the Qun, or about how you look at this – but I really know very little about it, and I can see that the Qun achieves great things, even as it may be…even as there may be issues. So I don’t wish to disagree with you until I understand it better. Perhaps what I would say is this: I can see thinking the way you’re thinking hurts you. I’m not sure if that’s helpful, even if there’s a very good reason behind it.’

Bull stared at him for a long time, and then he blinked slowly, just once. And Cullen felt awkward with the silence that just kept on stretching, feeling like a band that was going to snap back, sting unpleasantly.

‘I’m one to make the most of a shit situation,’ Bull said. ‘That’s easy enough. Had practice, after all. Just didn’t expect to lose that part.’

‘Perhaps you haven’t,’ Cullen said, looking away, hoping that wasn’t overstepping his bounds. ‘Perhaps it’s just something you don’t have now. But from what I understand, everything relating to that matter is all very fresh.’

Cullen’s lips quirked on a memory.

‘There have been times when I’ve not been able to do it at all. Now, yes. There was a time – earlier
in my life – when anything relating to the Maker or Andraste – even day to day sayings – were an anathema. I couldn’t have said why at the time. I thought it might be that way forever. And it may be that way for you. But I hope not. Not if it brought you comfort.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said.

‘You want it back,’ Cullen said, trying out the statement, meeting Bull’s gaze.

‘Kinda,’ Bull said.

‘You seem like the kind of person with the quality of character to make something happen, if you had enough time with it.’ Then, because he couldn’t quite help himself, he said. ‘And I could always lend you some prayer books for Andraste in the meantime, so that—’

‘Shit no,’ Bull said, vehemently. Then, at whatever expression was on Cullen’s face, he started laughing.

‘The offer’s always there,’ Cullen said wryly. ‘The Revered Mother Giselle would be delighted to help you out.’

‘Oh, shit no,’ Bull said. ‘Thanks but no thanks.’

Cullen wondered if any of it had been the right thing to say, or if there even was a right thing to say. He hoped that Bull at least talked to someone else about it, for more balanced advice.

As he turned it over in his head, Bull sat up abruptly. Cullen grunted and shifted, only for two large hands to cup his face. A wet, loud kiss was placed on his lips before he knew it was going to happen, and then Bull slid off the bed and walked towards the windows facing the Courtyard.

‘Feels late,’ Bull said, and Cullen thought: I suppose that conversation’s over then. ‘I’m starving. You want to raid the kitchens?’

Cullen got up and mentally scanned the stiffness in his bones. Despite feeling more relaxed than usual, he was sore, and he was weary. But he could definitely eat. He walked towards the windows facing the battlements and opened them, looking out at the stars to check the time. Goodness, but it had gotten late. The kitchens would likely be empty, and people weren’t likely to see them. Anyone who did, well, it wasn’t so unusual for some of the others to occasionally take themselves to the kitchens to see what was on offer. Cullen knew even Cassandra did it, on sleepless nights.

He thought of how he might react if Searidge saw them, and though it sent gooseflesh across his skin, it was somehow an easier image to handle than the idea of facing Searidge on his own.

They were two military strategists, conversations happened.

Cullen rubbed at the back of his neck, then closed the window.

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘It’s about three in the morning. If that’s not a problem?’

‘Not for me,’ Bull said, looking faintly surprised at how long they’d slept. ‘Except- Ah, fuck. Aidhe comes in at about this time to proof the sourdough properly for the morning wave of cooking. She’s never there very long. We could wait, if you want. Or…you wanna risk it? She won’t care.’

Cullen knew Cook Aidhe very well, and he hesitated for a long moment. But then he decided that there was no true harm in it. They were going there to eat, and possibly to talk. That was all. Bull
had said himself that he didn’t want anything else. Even though Cullen suspected it wasn’t wise to trust him, he didn’t think Bull would betray his confidence.

*You’ve thought that before.*

‘It’s fine,’ Cullen said.

‘You sure?’ Bull said. ‘For the record, we do this and she suspects anything, I can redirect that easy. I know one of your conditions is confidentiality, and unlike certain assholes, I actually give a shit about that.’

‘So far you’ve been the one coming up with most of the cover stories,’ Cullen said, laughing weakly. ‘So, lead the way.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, ‘but first, you might wanna just…I dunno, do whatever you do with your hair. Because I sorta messed it up. Not on purpose or anything.’

Cullen tentatively touched his fingers to his hair and then sighed deeply.

‘Not on purpose?’ Cullen said, staring at him.

‘I may have started when you fell asleep,’ Bull said, grinning at him.

‘Right,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m going to need a few minutes.’

Bull laughed.

*

When they arrived – no one of note seeing them on their walk over – the kitchens were quiet, empty. The embers in the fireplace low. The light was dim, and the burnt orange glow on the wood and the copper and metals of the pots and pans felt both vaguely threatening and homely at once.

Bull pulled a stool out for him from the central table, and gestured for Cullen to sit.

‘You make yourself comfortable. I’m getting us some shit.’

‘That sounds tasty,’ Cullen remarked, but he sat down, and watched the way Bull handled the kitchen like he’d always been in one. Which couldn’t have been the case, but he knew how and when to move his horns, so they didn’t get in the way of everything that hung from the racks above.

Bull stoked the fire a bit more, he pulled out chopping boards and even checked the sharpness of the blade he wanted to use when he took a knife from the block. He reached over Cullen’s head to grab the butt of a salami. As he did, Cullen’s inhaled were filled with the scent of him, and as Bull walked back over to one of the benches, Cullen’s fingers touched the underside of the table and he thought of how he liked that. It was a thick, strong scent. Not at all subtle. He’d been in smiths on hot summer days, smelled that roiling mix of sweat and musk and metal and fire, and it reminded him of that.

Bull started filling the silence with talk soon after, and Cullen could tell he was deliberately picking safe subjects – weaponry, armour, military strategies, how to approach the enemy on high ground versus low.

When Aidhe entered, not more than fifteen minutes later, Cullen was heavily invested in trying to
debate the best way to save troops in a no hope situation.

‘I really don’t think cavalry is the answer here,’ Cullen said, when the door opened, ‘I think—’

‘The Iron Bull,’ Aidhe said sternly, after giving them both a disgusted once over with her crinkly eyes, ‘it’s bad enough that you never sleep, you don’t need to drag this one down with you.’

‘Hey,’ Bull said, ‘unfair. He doesn’t sleep either.’

‘Castle of bleedin’ insomniacs, the lot of you. All right then, get out of my way. Now, what was that you were saying about the cavalry? What’s this then?’

Cullen groaned softly, the stiffness that had found him when she’d entered vanishing. And he said nothing at all as Bull rehashed the problem they were discussing, and both scenarios they’d come up with. Bull stayed out of her way, taking his crusty bread and thinly sliced salami and pickles and other things Cullen didn’t recognise and setting it out on the central bench.

Aidhe slid two large bowls of dough from the proofing cupboard, meaty arms holding one each, despite how heavy they must have been.

‘Oh no, can’t be doing with that,’ she said, sprinkling flour liberally onto clean bench space and kneading one batch of dough with the single-minded viciousness of someone who could have easily been imagining her worst enemy. ‘You need a cavalry.’

‘Ha,’ Bull said. ‘Told you.’

‘Is that right?’ Cullen said, to the both of them. Not this again. ‘Aidhe, maybe you should focus on what you’re good at.’

Bull laughed loudly. ‘Oh-ho-ho! That’s why you don’t get the good shit. Right there. Don’t like anyone else weighing on military strategy, do you?’

‘No- It’s not that, it’s just—’

‘-It’s just I’ve bleedin’ thrown down with him before,’ Cook Aidhe said. ‘Isn’t that right, Commander Rutherford? And he just doesn’t like that I’ve been right. He doesn’t get the good apples ’cuz he never asks for them.’

‘I didn’t know there were nice apples to ask for!’ Cullen said, staring at her.

‘Well, he knew to ask for ‘em!’

‘I know how to rort a system good and proper,’ Bull said, winking at her. She giggled in response, and Cullen stared between the two of them, thinking that this was some alternative dimension, and he’d rather try his luck with some Fade demons. Though it was better than Aidhe leering at them, or asking loaded questions.

‘That one wouldn’t take them anyway, would you, Commander?’

‘I still think a cavalry would be a hindrance! I feel like neither of you has ever seen what damage a single horse can do when it goes down with an arrow in its neck. We’ve already established the other side has archers.’

‘S’true, I’ve never seen what damage an ‘orse can do,’ Aidhe said.

‘I have,’ Bull said. ‘Hooves kill people. But I still think it’d work with a cavalry. Take out the
horses. Put in nuggalopes. They can take like fifteen arrows before they go down.’

‘Smell bad though,’ Aidhe said.

‘That’s something we can agree on,’ Cullen said, and Aidhe shot him a look over her shoulder, and then grinned – quick as a flash – before going back and beating the dough so hard that Cullen thought the bench might detach from the wall. ‘It’s possible to over-knead dough, isn’t it?”

‘Course,’ Aidhe said. ‘And if you want to come over here and tell me that’s what I’m doing to my face, I’ll show you exactly where all the sharp things are in my kitchen.’

‘She knows where all of them are,’ Bull said sagely. ‘So you two have done this before then? Talked strategy?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, when Aidhe wasn’t forthcoming. ‘Every now and then. Usually questions come in the form of ‘so how would you do that thing you just did better next time.’ It’s my favourite subject.’ But after a few seconds, he smiled grimly. ‘Actually quite helpful, though it’s not as though I don’t do quite similar debriefs in the War Room, and with others.’

‘Hey,’ Bull said. ‘She asks me the same thing. You know, Aidhe, if you’re not happy being a Cook, Cullen or I could like – talk to some people.’

‘I’m happy being a Cook,’ Aidhe said, shoving the dough aside so she could work on the second batch. She turned and shrugged in Bull’s direction. ‘Just think it’s interesting. Except when you badger me for good versions of stuff to eat.’

‘Wait,’ Cullen said. ‘Wait a minute. What else is there good versions of that I don’t know to ask for? Aside from apples?’

Aidhe shrugged, failed to look innocent despite clearly trying, and then turned back to the dough she was kneading.

‘Good versions of lots of things,’ Bull said. ‘That’s how the big castle kitchens work. Then it’s all favours and shit. And buying your way in by promising them the good spices. You should see how Varric eats.’

‘Like a King,’ Aidhe muttered.

‘Like a fucking King,’ Bull said, grinning ear to ear. ‘But I don’t eat so bad, do I, Aidhe?’

‘Shush, you.’

‘What, are you bringing them back spices?’ Cullen said.

‘Some,’ Cook Aidhe said, as Bull opened his mouth. ‘But The Iron Bull did us a favour when he first arrived.’

‘I half-killed a guy,’ Bull said, stretching happily.

‘That’s not why you eat well,’ Aidhe said, turning to stare at him. ‘It’s not that you half-killed him, it’s why. No one gives our crew troubles no more. That story spread.’

‘Wait, what story?’ Cullen said. ‘Why haven’t I heard about this story?’

‘Because it didn’t need an army,’ Aidhe said to him, rolling her eyes.
'Because Josie thought the matter was sorted and didn’t need to come to the Boss’s attention,’ Bull added.

‘Because if we wanted it dealt with by swords and rousing speeches, we’d’ve woken you,’ Aidhe said, pointing towards Cullen’s chest.

‘And because it all kinda happened pretty quickly. I saw a guy acting like a piece of shit to someone who couldn’t fight back. I acted. It all got swept under the rug because y’know, certain shit isn’t supposed to happen in the Inquisition.’

Cullen looked between them both, and suddenly realised what Bull had likely intervened in, and why they’d probably kept it a secret from the Inquisitor.

‘Ah,’ Cullen said. ‘Right. Good, then. No wonder you get the good apples.’

‘I’d get them anyway ‘cuz of my winning personality.’

Cook Aidhe snorted and said nothing else, and Cullen and Bull went silent as she started sectioning the dough off and placing it onto trays. She worked quickly, and within minutes, it was all placed away in the oven to proof a second time until the early morning.

She dusted off her hands, cleaned up promptly, and then turned to Bull just before she left. ‘There’s some fresh carrots and a new jar of honey. If you’re sparing, have some.’

‘You’re my hero, Aidhe,’ Bull said warmly.

‘Don’t you start,’ she muttered, and then closed the door firmly behind her.

Bull grinned at Cullen, got up and seemed to know where the fresh carrots would be, and the honey, and Cullen wondered if he’d just…ferreted through the entire kitchen at some point. And if that was his Ben-Hassrath training, or if that was just his nature. To observe, to want to know, to dig deeper. Bull knew where everything was. Cullen was happy enough knowing where the apples and the bread rolls and the saltbeef were. The idea of poking around in a kitchen that wasn’t his for anything more seemed odd.

‘You seem to know what you’re doing,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Where there’s food, there’s generally me wanting to know about it. Plus, gives me something to do late at night.’

‘What other things do you do when you can’t sleep?’ Cullen said.

‘Wander,’ Bull said absently. ‘Talk to people who can’t sleep in the first aid tents, y’know, the ones who’re in too much pain or might be dying. It’s not fun, but they often appreciate the chat and I guess I do too. Come here. Read sometimes, though it’s never boring enough to make me sleep, just boring enough to make me bored. Madame Vivienne’s another poor sleeper so sometimes she’s around. But she usually goes to the library, and that’s not my scene most of the time.’

Cullen frowned in thought, wondering how long it had been going on for.

‘Madame Vivienne?’ Cullen said, as Bull drizzled a small amount of honey over thinly sliced carrot.

‘She’s a keeper, that one,’ Bull said. ‘I dunno, ‘the game’ is not my thing. I can make it my thing, but it’s not something that makes me happy like it does her. But she’s canny as fuck, and she
knows some great stories. I could listen to her talk for days.’

Cullen was more familiar with Vivienne in the context of her mocking his choice in clothing, or lack of choice in clothing, or his ‘stunningly severe outlook on socialising.’

Cullen was still trying to think of what to say to that, when Bull came back with several plates of food that were clearly designed to be shared. There were rolls cut open and already thickly buttered, with different accompaniments. The carrots and honey had been sprinkled with spices that Cullen wasn’t familiar with, and sesame seeds. Cullen looked at it all in amazement.

Then, as Bull reached out and started eating, Cullen knew the moment he was going to attach a word to this moment that he should never, ever entertain.

*It’s like a date.*

Bull caught the look on Cullen’s face and gestured to the food. ‘You don’t have to eat it if you don’t like any of it.’

Cullen nodded, tried shove the word aside. Because no, because no. He couldn’t stop thinking of Bull laughing and saying ‘fuck no,’ when he’d tentatively asked if what they were doing was like a relationship. That laughter, Bull’s vehemence, it was plain that this was something very different for Bull.

Determined to distract himself, Cullen decided to try the carrot with honey and spices, and then was onto his third piece of sticky orange goodness before he was quite aware of it. His stomach had roared to life. He hadn’t been eating properly for days. And the spices were piquant to his dulled senses, the honey rich and flowery.

‘You’ve gone all quiet,’ Bull said.

‘You bring me this, and want me to talk?’ Cullen said, shoving his other thoughts even further away, and that hook-like yank in his chest whenever he looked at Bull for too long.

‘Y’know, you don’t come across that way, but you sure know how to flatter a guy.’

Cullen didn’t have a response to that, so he kept eating.

‘Speaking of,’ Bull said, ‘with everything at the Shrine, didn’t get a chance to tell you. You’re badass out in the field.’

Cullen swallowed a larger piece of food than he intended, grateful he didn’t start coughing. After a moment, he gestured weakly to Bull.

‘That’s quite something, coming from you.’

An appreciative laugh, a leer, and then – ‘Liked it, did you? Get you hot?’

At that, Cullen ducked his head and busied himself with a pickled egg, ignoring how hot his cheeks were, and attempting to ignore the laughter that soon followed.

‘What’d you like?’ Bull said. ‘Be specific. Y’know, with how uppity you are, you could itemise it. That’d be good. Item number one – how thick and grand The Dragon of the Inquisition’s mighty arms were, bulging all…nicely and shit. And so on.’

‘Oh, Maker,’ Cullen groaned. ‘No.’
Bull made a pleased sound, kept eating, but then silence crested over them again. When Cullen looked at him, Bull seemed troubled. He stared ahead, gaze somewhat fixed, mouth pulled downwards with a tension that seemed to thread all the way through him. Cullen couldn’t help think it was about what he’d done. Or what he’d failed to do. The promise he’d broken. Did he say something? Was he supposed to point out that he was aware that he’d failed? How long would he need to keep doing that for?

*Perhaps that’s just something you’ll always have to do.*

‘Is everything…all right?’ Cullen said.

‘Hm?’ Bull looked at him, and Cullen realised he’d not even been in the room. ‘Yeah. Sure.’

‘What do your waking nightmares look like?’ Cullen said slowly.

Bull’s lips slanted in a grim half-smile, and he rolled his shoulders, then picked up some bread and dipped it into a thick, yellow sauce and kept eating. ‘A bit like what just happened. Don’t want to talk about it.’

‘That’s fine,’ Cullen said. Was it selfish to feel relieved? Cullen didn’t know how he was supposed to handle this. But he did know that Bull seemed happy to talk about things sometimes – he’d talked about being Tal Vashoth in a way that Cullen knew he’d be thinking of in the days and weeks to come – so he knew that when Bull said he didn’t want to talk about it, he could leave it alone. ‘Is there anything I should do? Does anything help?’

‘Mm, nah,’ Bull said. ‘They don’t last long. Just have ‘em a bit more around this time. Haven’t had as many tonight though, asshole things that they are. Just, if you ever check in and I don’t respond, wait a couple of minutes and try again. And probably don’t touch me. They don’t really happen around others much anyway, some kind of defence mechanism, but who fucking knows.’

Cullen nodded, filing all the information away. Bull seemed agitated, but the more he ate, the better it seemed to go. He thought of Bull’s insistence to bring food after a session; not that he’d brought any after that first one, but Cullen pursed his lips and wondered if it might not be worth having something on hand in his room. Hardtack wasn’t appealing to just about anyone, but it would keep, and maybe that could help too.

At some point their eating in silence became companionable again, not tense. Cullen ate until he had to rest a hand on his belly, and Bull easily polished off the rest. Cullen stacked the plates, took them over to one of the large basins and rinsed them, and Bull was already standing when he turned around.

They left quietly, Cullen feeling like he might actually be able to get some more sleep, and Bull looking quite awake – perhaps he really didn’t get much more sleep than what he’d managed to snatch on Cullen’s bed.

It wasn’t until they were in Cullen’s office, that he turned and decided to say what he’d been putting off saying.

‘Do you think we should have talked more?’ Cullen said finally. ‘About all of it? The earlier stuff?’

‘Nope,’ Bull said. ‘There comes a point where if you keep going on about it – not you specifically, like, anyone – it’ll just do the opposite of help. We can talk about stuff again later. And the whole point of us hanging out isn’t to feel miserable, is it? I mean that happens, because shit’s miserable,
but I’m pretty sure this didn’t start out of the both of us wanting to feel miserable, and it’s not always like that, and it shouldn’t have to be like that all the time in the future. That’s just a kind of pain we’re both not into. Speaking of pain, you want to make the time for the next session now?’

Cullen could feel his own eyes widen, could feel his heartrate pick up. Excitement, but also fear now, a deep-seated wariness.

‘Are- Are you certain?’

‘Yeah. Like, if I’m not saying no – which I’m not – then we make a time and keep figuring this out as we go.’

Cullen nodded in response. It made sense. But it seemed too soon, somehow. It wasn’t that he didn’t want it. But he’d stopped letting himself think about it as a possibility, and he’d struck it from his mind as best as possible. With a few words, Bull had pulled that door back open again, and Cullen wasn’t aware that he’d shoved some other things behind it too.

He would have to do so many things differently, wouldn’t he? Not fight as much. Take the elfroot. Pretend that he didn’t mind taking the elfroot because he’d given that trust to Bull and he intended to make good on it, and it felt like showing his reluctance over the matter would be some kind of second betrayal.

Bull was watching him, waiting for a response, and Cullen lifted a hand in a sort of shrug.

‘I…don’t want to get it wrong,’ Cullen said. He didn’t quite wince at his own words, but he wished he’d phrased it better.

Bull tilted his head, sighed. ‘It’s not a test. I want to help you. So we both don’t get it wrong.’

‘You’re not the one at fault here,’ Cullen said flatly. ‘At all.’

‘Actually…that’s kinda not entirely- That’s complicated.’

Cullen stared at him, and then felt his toes stubbornly dig down in his own boots.

‘I lied to you. Broke your trust, remember? I betrayed your trust. Surely you-’

‘Cullen, yep, that’s all true. That’s true. But there were red flags you were gonna do something like that all the way through. It’s just complicated.’

The face that Cullen made could have been called sceptical at best, but all Bull did in response was shrug. Cullen supposed this was going to be one of those matters where he could have argued his case and Bull wasn’t going to budge. How odd then, that Cullen had been defending himself in some stubborn act of futility only two weeks ago.

‘That…person you talked about, the one you half-killed someone for. Are they all right now?’ Cullen said, knowing that he hadn’t said yes or no to a session yet, and stalling.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Well. Sorta. Young lad couldn’t work in the kitchen again after that. Sucks. Wish I’d gotten there sooner.’

Cullen started to say, but you didn’t know, then realised that was useless. How many times had he wished he had done something sooner, even when he couldn’t have known to arrive or act sooner? It was a reassurance that would always fall flat.
‘So, that session,’ Bull said. ‘We can always just…decide how it goes on the day. Y’know, if you don’t want to. Or want to do something else. That’s the whole point of this. Yeah?’

It was tempting to believe that was wholly the case, but Cullen could mentally see the scales tipped against him, and how much he might have to do to make them close to even again. Not that they’d ever been close to even. Still, Cullen nodded in response and together they made a time for the next session – Bull pulling from his memory – knowing which days he had free – and Cullen able to check his calendar and schedule it properly – and it meant in two weeks…

Cullen was nervous already.
Moar negotiation! But there needs to be, because we’re heading into a punishment dynamic for this particular session. So, er, new tags: punishment. Also, a warning for a very small amount of (unspoken) jealousy right at the end.

Another chapter over 10,000 words, but I just really didn’t want to cut corners with this scene, and well, they talk a lot.

The morning after, Cullen woke wondering if the entire afternoon and evening had been some surreal dream. A strange kind of mortification followed on the heels of that. He’d stopped work early. He’d fallen asleep on top of Bull. He’d embarrassed himself. And then those moments in the kitchens, something almost like peace amongst the dread that was his own feelings intersecting with the knowledge that this was all it would ever be.

He wasn’t even really at the stage of hoping for more, but he knew the potential was there, living inside of him.

Instead of a day of brooding, however, he had a day of more and more people pouring in through the Skyhold portcullis. A surprising amount of Templars, and Cullen wasn’t sure if he was happy about that, or concerned that they’d waited until Samson had fled before officially choosing a side.

Days crept on, and Cullen’s nervousness had given way to a total preoccupation in his work. He barely had time to leave his office except to consult with others or meet at the War Table. All signs were pointing to Corypheus mobilising again, glimpses of General Samson in the Arbor Wilds. He wasn’t well versed in fighting in thick forest terrain, so he spent a few hours every evening training with Knight-Captain Asherin, and in turn, the two of them formulated new modules to be posted out and worked upon.

Balancing the training of the more advanced members of the military alongside the newcomers was no small feat, accompanied as it was by small acts of mutiny amongst those who wanted the sanctuary of Skyhold but were still in two minds about fighting for Skyhold, and what it represented for the rest of Thedas. Wanting to survive in a bolthole wasn’t the same as wanting to defend Thedas, and more disciplinary action and weeding the unwilling from the crews happened in the following days than he could ever remember happening.

There were three cases of lyrium theft. One violent – a Templar beating several others for their lyrium before she was finally detained, the other two non-violent. The Templars closed ranks, even when Cullen investigated the matters further, but it was clear that some of them had become accustomed to receiving more than they’d been rationed when they’d worked in Circles, and that there were some who – while not at the point of stealing it from others – were close enough to warrant surveillance.

Every night Cullen went to bed tired, sore, curling his cold fingers beneath the sheet and blankets, and thinking of how easily it could have been him. How it could still easily be him. How it would
only take one bad night, perhaps another. He would whisper words of prayer to himself, and now he did it while thinking of Bull in the Herald's Rest, unable to whisper those words of consolation for himself.

He knew why he kept it all secret from the Inquisitor. *Old habits die hard.* What happened in the Order stayed in the Order. So one or two Templars lost their way from time to time, a matter dealt with and forgotten about – the majority fine and hale and ready to fight, loyal to Andraste, the Maker, their purpose.

Somehow, he found a small amount of time to write notes to a messenger entailing foods that he wanted brought up to his room. Hardtack, dried fruit, boiled sweets that would stay fresh in jars. He put it all away in his second chest and didn’t think much of it. He wasn’t even sure it would help, nor was he sure Bull would ever have one of those waking nightmares in front of him again. But Bull had seemed soothed by food, and Cullen thought it didn’t hurt to have something in his room, just in case.

Once, on a Monday evening, he saw Bull with Krem and some of the other Chargers, working with them. Cullen was distracted enough that Knight-Captain Asherin landed a hit and he was laughing at himself in despair even before his back hit the fence that girded the training ground.

‘Oi!’ Asherin shouted. ‘Get your fucking head in it!’

It wasn’t the first hit she’d landed – but it was the first she’d landed because he was staring off at someone feeling his cheeks warm, instead of fumbling a sword because his hands were cold. He shook his head rapidly to focus, liked the blaze of pain across his shoulder and down his back. He could tell nothing was damaged – he was just bruised – and it put a bite back into his grip, a fire back into his gut.

‘You’re lucky I’m not Seeker Cassandra,’ Asherin said, rolling her dark eyes at him. But she used the moment to tuck a flyaway bit of crimped, black hair back into place, before her brown hand gripped her sword with intent. ‘She would’ve half-killed you.’

‘Don’t sell yourself short,’ Cullen said, finding his stance and resolutely not looking at Bull or the Chargers again. ‘I’ve trained with her too. You both pack the same clout.’

‘Flattery’s not gonna save you,’ Asherin said, grinning.

When training was done, both of them clapping each other on the back – having earned yet more bruises – agreeing to meet the following evening for much of the same, Cullen looked over to the dummies only to see that Bull was gone.

That night, Cullen rolled stiff shoulders, stretched out taut hip muscles. He was sore. He’d been sore every day, he and Asherin not pulling any punches with each other. And then there were moments when he and Cassandra sparred as stress relief. Then there was showing manoeuvres to others, and the hazard of practicing drills with those still learning them from scratch – that was when the hardest hits could come; usually accidents.

After a long hour of pacing his room, he found the bottle of elfroot that Bull had left in his room and took four sips to ease the worst of the bruising.

He stood there afterwards for a long time. His heart racing. He hated taking the elfroot whenever it wasn’t an emergency. Hated it. His fingers were splayed, still cold, and he tried to remind himself where he was. Skyhold, not Kinloch. Magic could only do so much, after all, and with the wounds he’d gained, the blood they were spilling for all their magic, about the only thing he’d had to live
on was that astringent, green taste that clouded at the back of his nostrils and made his stomach feel like it was churning.

*Skyhold, not Kinloch.*

Taking the elfroot was the right thing to do, wasn’t it?

A good thing.

_Not that you’re ever going to hear him say that again._

Maker, he was going to have to talk to Bull about that stupid word.

That night he lay in bed and missed the bruising. Some of it was still there, but it was vastly faded – and fading – and he wanted his back to blaze with pain again. He wanted to feel a flogger against his skin. Wanted those strong arms wielding it.

He pressed cold fingertips into his eyes and took several deep breaths. His life had felt out of control for a long time – but now he couldn’t tell _why_. The lyrium? Bull? Skyhold? Searidge? The situation with Samson?

In the end, his body needed rest more than his mind needed to race endlessly, and he slipped into sleep.

*

Tuesday morning he woke with the shadows of Kinloch hanging heavily over him, and the knowledge that he’d done that to himself by taking the elfroot. His breath hissed in frustration through his nose. He’d not had a reaction that overt to taking elfroot when Bull gave it to him, but on his own?

Perhaps that was the kind of thing he was supposed to tell Bull. But displaying his weaknesses after he had just spent their last two or three conversations doing just that was nauseating. Where was the line? Bull said they couldn’t talk like that every time they met. So did Cullen wait? Did he never bring it up? Bull knew he hated talking elfroot anyway, so it wasn’t like he’d be sharing anything new, exactly.

He was never entirely glad of work, but he was certainly glad to have the distraction of it. And it was easy to remind himself of the ‘Skyhold, not Kinloch’ mantra, for Skyhold was so unlike any place he’d ever been, and visually arresting in ways that were pleasing to the eye.

Searidge didn’t cross his path, something Cullen was grateful for. But then, Cullen had changed some of his routes, not getting down to the merchant tents as often as he used to. Awareness that Searidge existed within the walls of Skyhold – that tether to Kirkwall and a great deal more besides – pinged infrequently in Cullen’s conscious like a discordant bell. He’d go hours without thinking of it, and then all at once he’d remember that Searidge – in that very moment – was reachable, within walking distance.

Maker only knew what kinds of stories he was sharing with those he met.

*

Clearing his schedule for Saturday evening wasn’t as easy as it had been in the past. He was working right up to ten bells, and then only had about half an hour to get his thoughts in order. That period of time was interrupted twice by knocks on the door that he thought might be Bull arriving
early. Each time, it wasn’t. That he could be interrupted that evening by someone needing him to help wrestle down another lyrium-addled Templar was a slight – though still real – possibility.

He knew that the potential for interruption always existed, but it made it harder to compartmentalise the two things. The sessions for him were contained in their own world. Separate from Skyhold, from his past, from the mundanity of work – even as he used the pain to assist him with it.

Yet when Bull arrived, it was as though his very presence created some kind of barrier around them both. Everything else seemed extraneous.

When Bull locked the trapdoor behind him, stopping anyone else from being able to enter Cullen’s room, it felt even more like that space they had for themselves belonged only to them.

‘You still in the mood for this?’ Bull said.

Cullen’s thoughts were muddled, but this was one thing he knew: even if he didn’t deserve this, even if he was nervous, he still wanted to see if it was possible for this to work.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, adding some weight to it. ‘If you are?’

He walked casually across the room, fingers itching to just strip off his shirt, his cloak already abandoned downstairs.

‘I’m good,’ Bull said. ‘You seem a little edgier than usual.’

‘Really,’ Cullen said, shooting him a withering glance, and then looking away and thinking that it probably wasn’t helpful to lie that baldly. So instead, he lifted a hand in a sort of shrug, and shook his head, and that was as close as he could get to admitting that he was filled with an agitation worse than usual.

‘Yeah, okay. Me too, a little.’ Bull said. ‘That thing you told me, about the set up you have with Cassandra. I’ve thought of something.’

Cullen tensed, met Bull’s eye warily. It seemed terrifying now, that Cullen had even suggested it in the first place. Even when he’d suggested that Cassandra make the decision for him – in case he couldn’t see straight due to the lyrium addiction and the withdrawals – it had scared him to place that in someone else’s hands.

‘Oh?’ Cullen said, eventually.

‘Yeah,’ Bull continued, tilting his head. ‘This is something we get to negotiate, y’know. S’not like I’m going to lay something down and you have to follow it. You get to choose.’

‘I know that,’ Cullen said dismissively, and Bull just smiled at him, in that way that indicated he saw through the words, the tone of it. And Cullen stopped himself from rubbing the back of his neck nervously, because in the past, he had the feeling that Bull would have pretended he didn’t see through it. They would have been participating in Cullen’s lie together.

That Bull wasn’t doing that anymore was disconcerting.

‘Okay, here it is, if Searidge seeks you out again for a chat, or if you seek him out, whatever, I want you to come to me or send me a note within an hour of that happening. I don’t care how fine you feel. I don’t care if it went great. I don’t care if he comes back to you and tells you he was a shithead for saying all that other stuff. That’s what I want. As a rule.’
Cullen had felt himself still, felt his face go impassive in that way it did when his thoughts were racing. All the protests Cullen had – that he would likely feel fine, that the meetings weren’t that much of a bother – withered away as Bull kept talking, but it made him feel unexpectedly cornered.

‘What if you’re not here?’ Cullen said finally, unable to think of anything else to say.

‘Then I’m not here. And you come find me or send me a note within an hour of you knowing I’ve returned.’

Cullen’s lips thinned, and he felt the wave of protests rise inside of him. And he could tell by the expression on Bull’s face, the way his head was tilted, that Bull was just waiting for it. Expecting it even.

‘Why?’ Cullen said, folding his arms. ‘Why that?’

‘Because he fucks with you,’ Bull said. ‘That’s why. If you’re fine, you’re fine, I’ll see it for myself, and that’ll be that – if not, we can figure something else out.’

‘It can’t interfere with my work,’ Cullen said. ‘I can’t afford to drop everything, spend hours with something that’s better left forgotten.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, nodding. ‘I don’t want to interfere with your work. But, Cullen – Searidge? He interferes with it. I work too, y’know. It’s not like I’m asking you to give me days and days of your time. I’m asking you to let me know. And if you agree to that, I think it’s best if you have a code of some kind, because I don’t know if you’ll think of one in the moment. Something like – you send me a note asking me about whether I think Krem needs to see Gerrid again. Something simple.’

‘You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?’ Cullen said, wishing he didn’t sound quite so scathing. He wasn’t supposed to be doing this anymore. He could even – as much as he didn’t wish to – see the merits of what Bull was saying. He wasn’t stupid. He knew that his last meltdown had been caused almost entirely by that first chat with Searidge. It made sense.

‘That’s my job, if you give me that level of responsibility,’ Bull said gravely. ‘You still want to do that?’

_I’m not sure I ever wanted to do it._

Cullen’s scraped his teeth over his bottom lip. That itchy, agitated feeling flowed strongly now. Maker, but the flogging couldn’t come soon enough after a conversation like this one.

He worked it through in his head as quickly as he could, and his rushing thoughts cobbled together clumsily. If he didn’t tell Bull, and a chat with Searidge affected him, and he made another stupid decision, he really could lose all of this. Not just the flogging, but the friendship, the chance to sit in the kitchens late at night, or play chess. Oh, he was certain Bull would still be friendly, but there was only so many ways Cullen could make mistakes of the calibre he’d made, until everything would fall apart again.

A bridge could only be repaired so many times before people would just decide to look for a less destructive stretch of river to cross.

‘All right,’ Cullen said. He met Bull’s eye and nodded again. ‘All right. I can try and do that.’

‘Yeah?’ Bull said, looking not quite sceptical, something on his face brightening. Cullen thought he might agree to a lot of things, to see Bull’s expression shifting like that more often. He ended up
rubbing at the back of his neck.

‘It seems reasonable,’ Cullen said.

‘Great. Okay, come over here, I want to see about trying something tonight. Come sit.’

Bull took the sack with him and sat down at the corner of Cullen’s bed, gesturing for Cullen to join him.

So Cullen nodded, walked over, sat down. He looked at the sack that kept its secrets, all the items hidden within thanks to the drawstring.

Then, Bull opened it a little, drew out a pair of what looked like thick, black leather mittens. They didn’t look new, and their design was clunky, even ugly. They weren’t designed for comfort – that was something Cullen could tell immediately.

‘What are those?’ Cullen thought he had a suspicion, and swallowed uneasily.

‘Arvaarad sometimes use them on their Saarebas, especially early on.’

Cullen stared at them for a long time. The way the Qun controlled their mages, it scared him now to think about it. Partly because it seemed so inhumane. Partly because he wasn’t sure some of the Circles were better, and he knew some of them were far worse.

‘They stop you from being able to bend or wriggle your fingers effectively. The mittens are stiff, so it’s a job just to bend your hands. You won’t be able to curl your fingers.’

Something cold, like a heavy stone, settled in Cullen’s gut. His fingers twitched.

‘I can’t,’ Cullen said without thinking.

After everything else, this was the thing he balked at? He couldn’t tear his gaze away from them. There was a kind of metal mesh inlaid into the thick leather, they looked like they’d be effective. It was clear Bull only wanted to protect his hands. But the idea of wearing them, he couldn’t think, the space behind his eyes was beginning to ache.

He’d always assumed that if Bull ever did something he hated, that made him say the word during a session, it would be something that reminded him of Kinloch.

‘Hey,’ Bull said quietly, ‘how ‘bout you look up at me, instead of these?’

Bull whisked the gloves behind his back and Cullen blinked like he was coming out of a trance. He looked up at Bull uncertainly.

‘I apologise,’ Cullen said carefully. ‘I know you mean well.’

‘I’m glad,’ Bull said, ‘but we don’t have to use them.’

‘You’re not going to make me say the word?’

Bull laughed quietly. ‘The word is good for when you’re panicking, or when something you thought would be great isn’t great, or if you just don’t feel right all of a sudden and you’re not in a position to tell me it’s horrible. Right now we’re not playing the game where you can scream no and I’m not gonna listen. That’s not the game right now, is it?’

The relief was slow to come, because Cullen kept thinking that he should at least want to try them,
shouldn’t he? He didn’t know if it would be a bad experience. He was just…assuming. But Bull had gotten them with his welfare in mind. Cullen already caused enough difficulties, didn’t he? Already rejected enough suggestions out of hand. That was practically his pattern at this point. He felt like he’d let Bull down somehow. He’d seen recruits who had refused to train in new weapons because they’d gotten used to older ones. Rejecting new techniques in favour of others. Was that what he was doing now? If that was the case, he knew the right thing to do was try them, even if it didn’t feel like the right thing to do.

‘We can use them,’ Cullen said.

Bull’s eye narrowed. After a few seconds he reached behind him and drew them forth again, placing them on his knee.

This time, Cullen carefully didn’t look at them. He already knew from where he sat that they would feel heavy. That they’d make his hands sweat even if they were cold.

Did they make the mages wear them all the time? They’d be trapped, unable to defend themselves.

A hazy swoop around him, like the floor had tilted. The ceiling flipped on itself and he felt the impossibility of cold slabs of stone around him even though he hadn’t fallen. The faint sound of laughter in the background. Even when it was genuine, it was sinister. There was no trusting it anymore. Sometimes he wondered if it was Uldred, or a pride demon, or something else, even an illusion. It was never a good thing to hear, and he-

Cullen stood and walked away – even though he wasn’t sure if he was walking on the roof or the floor – and faced the other direction, thinking that the only reason his breathing sounded like it was under control was because he’d had so much practice.

‘Yeah, that’s a no,’ Bull said, standing up himself. Cullen tensed, afraid that Bull was going to comfort him, touch him, and Cullen’s skin was crawling too much to bear it. But instead he just heard the sound of shuffling, and then the sack shifting, and Cullen belatedly realised that Bull was putting the damned things away. He closed his eyes, feeling a tendril of relief unfurl inside of him. Then he waited for Bull to ask him about it. Then, after a few minutes, he made himself turn around.

Bull was sitting on the bed again, watching him with something like concern on his face.

‘What do you need?’ Bull said.

‘My hands… I know you want me to- I want you to whip me and not worry about them. Like the first time. Especially now. I said I’d take elfroot. I said-’

Bull had held up a hand, and Cullen’s voice dried, vanished in the depth of his throat.

‘It wasn’t only for that,’ Bull said. ‘I wanted to see how you’d go with the restraints. You’ve handled the blindfold and a gag really well, and rope around your ankles. Just wanting to see where I can go – and that’s a no go zone with these gloves. That’s fine. Like you said, you’ll be taking elfroot afterwards.’

‘I don’t understand why you bother with this,’ Cullen said, still unable to shake the dregs of the dizziness. ‘When you have so many other people- So many other options to choose from, that likely aren’t so…trying.’

‘I know you don’t understand,’ Bull said, standing up, walking towards Cullen and looking down at him. ‘Also, it’s not like there’s a ton of people out there who take what you take, who like it. It’s
not like there was that other guy I was gonna flog heavily if you bailed on me tonight.’

‘Still…’ Cullen said, and wondered why he was prolonging this. Wondered why he hadn’t just removed his shirt and walked to the wall yet.

It was only that he was nervous. And he’d not expected to get these sessions back. That was all. Perhaps also that he wasn’t sure he deserved them now. It was something that helped him so much, and he was taking it from someone he’d hurt badly. Could he do that? Was that the kind of person he was?

‘I don’t understand how you’re all right with this,’ Cullen said, the words coming slowly to him, like he had to drag them from molasses. ‘After everything. How can you be?’

‘That’s easy for me,’ Bull said, ‘but not so much for you, huh?’

Bull winced, his lips thinned, and then he looked at Cullen as though he were deep in thought, and Cullen waited for the other shoe to drop.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, in a decisive manner. ‘I’ve been in two minds about this, but I’m gonna put something on the table and you can tell me what you think. And I’m gonna tell you what I think about it.’

‘I have never talked so much about anything not relating to Circles or the military until I met you,’ Cullen remarked, as they walked over to Cullen’s bed, sitting side by side. Cullen thought it might be time to bring up a small table, two chairs. Perhaps even a chess set.

‘That explains a lot,’ Bull said, laughing.

‘That’s not what I meant,’ Cullen muttered.

Cullen’s heart was still doing odd, arrhythmic things in his chest, even once they were sitting. He was facing Bull, his hands in his lap, an absurd amount of energy going towards making sure he didn’t fidget.

‘You’ve never made it clear before that this is about punishment,’ Bull said, catching Cullen’s gaze even as he was turning his head to look away. ‘I’m pretty sure for you it’s not really only about that, or even mostly about that. I know you like the pain, and I know you get something out of the pain later. You never came to me asking to be punished. And even though that probably plays into it sometimes, I’ve never gone about this with an intention of punishment. I do that for some people. I didn’t think it’d work for you. I still don’t really think most of the time, that’d work for you. But…for this thing. This thing you can’t let go of and move on from, maybe it would.’

Oh, Cullen thought, even as the majority of his thoughts vanished and he was left with a supremely unhelpful hollow noise, as though standing by a cliff that was sucking down air.

‘You want to punish me?’ Cullen said eventually.

*That…would make sense.*

‘It’s more like – this thing, you not taking the elfroot until it was almost too late – that’s a closed door for me. You told me you were gonna think about it, and you did. You came to me with some things you’re gonna try, and you are. It’s done. Whatever goes wrong in the future, that will be a new thing we address when it happens. But maybe you feel like you haven’t paid enough of a price yet. Or maybe you feel like I need to take more of a pound of flesh before you feel like you can start to close the door too. That’s what I’m putting out on the table. Do you think it’d help if I took
a part of tonight, and made it about you bearing pain for me, as a kind of penance?’

Cullen swallowed thickly and ducked his head because his cheeks had just flamed hot, and he wasn’t sure how to categorise the rush of unsteady feelings that thundered through him.

Penance.

‘But you have to tell me,’ Bull said. ‘You have to tell me you think it would help, and you have to tell me you want that. And it might be harder than you expect.’

‘Why… Uh- That is to say- Why do you think that wouldn’t work for me normally?’ Cullen said.

‘It’s like a pact between two people,’ Bull said, his voice moderated to be soothing. Cullen could tell he was treading carefully, and Cullen didn’t have the heart to indicate how excited he was, because who got excited about that? About punishment? And didn’t that defeat the purpose – if he was excited about it? ‘The pact is that I administer punishment for something, and the other person gives that thing up to me – once the punishment is over, they try not to feel guilty about it anymore, or they try and move on. That works great for some people. Some people really need someone else to give them permission to let stuff go. I think you could be like that one day, but I don’t really think that’s where you’re at now. I don’t think I’m wrong about this, I just think there’s a lot of stuff that I could punish you for, and then you’d go away and keep punishing yourself for it. And then I’m just…a weapon again, that you use to hurt yourself, among all the other shitty weapons you use to do that.’

‘And this?’

‘This is something- I did say I was in two minds about it,’ Bull said, chuckling, ‘but this is something I think you want to let go of. To at least try. Maybe it won’t work. But if you want to try, I’d be willing – for this thing. For other things? Right now, too much room for fucking it up, or you turning it into something I don’t want it to be. You come here and want to be punished, okay. But it’s important for me that you know that it’s not why I come here. So even if we did this tonight, it’s not going to be the whole focus of tonight. Just some of it. I’ll tell you when it starts, when it finishes, and you’ll know when it’s done. Whatever we do after that, we do because you like that quality of pain, and what it gives you.’

It was a lot to take in, though Cullen already knew that he’d say yes. Instead, he took time to make it seem as though he was pondering it heavily. The simple fact was, he took it all very seriously, he just also knew that he couldn’t stop tripping over it.

If there was a chance it could be removed…

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘I’ll try that. I think- I think that could help.’

‘You have to want it to help,’ Bull said insistently.

‘Believe it or not,’ Cullen said, ‘I can sometimes recognise the difference between something that’s useful, and something that’s in the way. I can’t- Perhaps I can’t let this go. But you say this could assist, your assessments on these matters are rarely wrong.’

‘That’s convincing enough for me,’ Bull said, walking over to the sack by the bed and drawing out a full bottle of elfroot. He walked back to Cullen and offered it over. ‘So how about you take some sips of this for me, before we get started?’
Cullen took the bottle without hesitation. Removed the cork without hesitation. Then as he lifted it, he faltered. His eyes flickered to Bull’s face, away again, and he was furious with himself.

‘How much?’ Cullen said, to make it seem like he’d only paused to check.

‘Four,’ Bull said. ‘Maybe more, depending on how small they are. I think you have an idea of how much I like you take before though.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said.

He wanted to turn away. Didn’t like swallowing the elfroot in front of Bull, like a chastened child. He drank the mouthfuls close together, stoppering the bottle quickly and clearing his throat to clear the rest of it away. He handed the bottle back, unable to make eye contact.

As Cullen reached for the hem of his shirt, fingers touching his shoulder made him freeze. He opened his mouth to apologise for taking so long to drink it, for the hesitation. If he’d agreed to something, he should at least seem like he didn’t want to disobey at every moment, shouldn’t he?

‘Hey,’ Bull said, voice soft. ‘You don’t have to pretend you like it, or that it’s easy.’

‘I should just do it, yes?’ Cullen said bitterly.

‘You did it,’ Bull said, the hand at his shoulder moving to his chin and pushing lightly until Cullen had no choice but to look at him. ‘You did it and didn’t talk back or kick up a fuss or anything like that. It counts.’

‘I’m sure,’ Cullen said.

‘Okay,’ Bull drawled, ‘well, you’re talking back now. Look, I know it’s not fucking easy. You have a shit time with elfroot and I get that. I don’t need to know why. But you didn’t tell me you’d give up finding it hard to do. You told me you’d let me have control over when you have some and how much you have in relation to these sessions, yeah? That’s all.’

‘I have different standards about these things,’ Cullen said.

Bull’s brow lifted in amusement. ‘You don’t say. But hey, that’s why we’re working to my standards. Just wanted to make that really clear. So who has control right now? You or me? C’mon, you know I want you to say it.’

Cullen didn’t quite stop himself from rolling his eyes, and amongst the words of rebellion, he managed a very short:

‘You have control.’

‘I sure do. Now get that shirt off and go lean against the wall. Might as well get this punishment started.’

Cullen’s fingers hesitated at the hem of his shirt again, and he looked up at Bull, only to see that friendly expression vanishing behind something far more sober.

**Right then.**

He removed and folded his shirt and lay it on the bed.

‘Bull?’ Cullen said.
Bull made a sound of acknowledgement, and Cullen looked at the stone blocks of the wall and took another step towards them.

‘You’re not…using the cane today, are you?’

He didn’t know why that mattered, but the idea of being punished with it – he could barely take it when it wasn’t being used for that.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, ‘I wouldn’t do that. It’s all flogging today.’

Cullen nodded, leaned against the stretch of wall, his forearms up against the stone, palms braced. Once again, he didn’t lean his forehead against it. He could feel his breath tight in his chest. Wondered what punishment would actually mean, since it obviously wouldn’t mean drawing blood. What if it didn’t work? What if it just felt the way he always wanted it to feel? And how could anything measure up to the cane anyway?

He could hear the sound of the sack shifting. Items being moved around.

‘What’s the watchword?’ Bull said, even as he was still moving stuff in the sack.

‘Katoh,’ Cullen said. ‘I still get to use it during this?’

‘Yep,’ Bull said.

He sounded a little colder than before, the warmth gone from his voice. Cullen shifted on his feet, because it was odd how quickly that affected him. It reminded him of the time when Bull had shaken him, growled at Cullen for interrupting him, and how quickly it had gone from something of a game, to Cullen realising that there were real rules here, real consequences.

When Bull stood behind him, Cullen knew he was too close to start using whatever items he’d taken up from the sack – it was more than one thing, because he’d placed them all on the bed beside them. Instead, Cullen felt those fingers on his shoulders, at his shoulder blades, testing the tension in his muscles. Bull said nothing, Cullen stared at the stone before him and tried to make his breathing as quiet and unaffected as possible.

‘Because you handle this shit better than most, you’re going to be taking more,’ Bull said, stepping away and picking something up from the bed. ‘And we’re going to be chatting while it’s happening.’

Cullen blinked, hands shifting on the wall. There was no way he’d be able to slip into any sort of peacefulness if he was expected to talk. His lips thinned. But then, he’d agreed to this, hadn’t he? He wasn’t entirely sure what he’d imagined punishment would be. Perhaps just being hit harder than normal.

‘You never liked the red flogger,’ Bull remarked, his voice still aloof, lacking that friendliness it always had. Cullen tensed as Bull stepped into position. He really didn’t like that red flogger. ‘This one’s worse.’

Worse?

A hiss of air and Cullen’s shoulder muscles bunched, but as with every other time, it was just the sound of tails moving swiftly through the air. Bull no doubt getting a measure of whatever he was using. Cullen wanted to look over his shoulder and see it. Aside from that red flogger, Bull had always let him see – even touch – what he was going to be using.
The first strike was hard against the meat of his shoulders, and Cullen rocked forwards, a split second to realise how much he’d missed this before the pain splintered across his awareness. This was fire racing across his skin, a stinging wrench that cut all the way across a broad expanse of skin. He gasped, only to have the breath stolen from his tightening throat when a second blow landed, a third, a fourth.

He’d gone from staring wide-eyed at the stone to clenching his eyes shut, because his tolerance for this stinging, brittle pain was so much lower than it was for that heavy, awful thud that he craved. He crossed his forearms, grit his teeth together, even as he wanted to turn and make it stop.

A pause after the seventh or eighth strike, Cullen wasn’t counting them. He could hear his own breathing, hoarse already. He knew instinctively that the cane had been worse, but it didn’t seem to make this easier to tolerate at all. The sting of it kept him firmly in the room, in his own stressed and fractious body, aware of the rawness in his joints, the sting that never resolved into a rhythmic, soothing throb.

‘I want you to tell me why we’re doing this, instead of using that nice flogger you like so much,’ Bull said, and there was a faint scraping sound as Cullen tried to pull his thoughts together as his forearms shifted on the wall.

Even before he opened his mouth, he was struck three more times, his back bowing, chest moving closer to the wall.

‘It’s not a hard question,’ Bull said, and Cullen managed to cut off a faint groan because Bull didn’t reprimand him like this. ‘Talk fast, Cullen. Or I’ll encourage you.’

Another strike across the same space that the last few had fallen and Cullen hissed in an inhale, words falling out before he could even think of what he was saying.

‘B-because of the elfroot,’ Cullen managed.

How in the void was he supposed to do this? Talk and manage the pain at the same time? But he ground his molars together, focused, because he’d agreed to this.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, ‘gonna need you to be clearer than that, Cullen.’

And then the strikes began again, and Cullen bowed his head until the top of his scalp brushed against the wall. They felt thin – like a cat o’ nine tails – but it wasn’t a cat. Each tail slick and sharp across his back, cutting, even if it wasn’t drawing blood. He thought of all those flashes of tiny, annoying pains. Nails breaking, a needle slipping beneath his fingernail during a fitting, an insect bite in a tender place, and it was as though Bull had found all of those moments and ground them in, strike after strike after strike.

‘Wait,’ Cullen said, trying to think.

‘Nope,’ Bull said.

Fuck. Cullen didn’t have time to marshal all his responses together, instead reaching for the phrase that kept repeating at the front of his head.

‘I-I betrayed your trust,’ Cullen gasped.

A pause then, in the strikes. And Cullen knew it was a pause. His back felt swollen. Would he even enjoy anything else they did tonight? He resisted sagging against the wall, but only just.
‘More,’ Bull said.

‘I disrespected you,’ Cullen said, those words easier to find. ‘I treated you wrongly.’

‘Yep,’ Bull said. ‘What else?’

This was not a good time for his mind to go blank, and yet all thoughts vanished. What else had he done? He’d betrayed Bull’s trust and hurt him.

‘I hurt you,’ Cullen said, feeling the sore truth of that in some place beneath the massive sting of his shoulders.

‘What else?’ Bull said.

*What else?*

The words ‘trust’ and ‘hurt’ kept revolving in Cullen’s mind, and he didn’t know what else there was. What was he supposed to say? Was there a right answer? How could he not know it, after knowing everything else? Was there yet another thing he was supposed to feel awful about?

Bull’s feet shifted upon the ground, and Cullen felt all his muscles tense in response. But the flogger didn’t strike him again, and Bull didn’t move after that.

‘What else, Cullen?’ Bull said, his voice harder now.

Cullen shook his head, staring at the wall. Surely only ten minutes ago he’d been thinking this would be no harder than anything else, easier than the cane. But he was panicking, and the scraping of the nerves across his shoulders wasn’t an anchoring pain – it didn’t bruise deep and keep him focused, it skittered all across his mind.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, like Cullen had answered.

Cullen opened his mouth on a silent shout when the next strike came, but by the fifth blow, a cry was driven from his chest and he couldn’t think- he couldn’t- *what else was there?*

‘I don’t know!’ Cullen shouted. ‘I don’t know! What do you want me to say? I don’t know.’

Blessedly, the strikes stopped, but Bull didn’t come up close to him like he often did. Didn’t come up and offer support, or stand close, or offer the bulwark of his warmth. A full body tremor moved through him and it occurred to him that maybe this wouldn’t be over once Bull was done. Maybe this was- Maybe this was something else. Maybe this was Bull pointing out just how hurt he’d been. Maybe-

‘You hurt yourself,’ Bull said steadily, ‘and you could’ve died. And you could’ve – for all you don’t want to admit it – hurt the team.’

Cullen stared at the wall, flashes of anger and resentment building, dying, building again. It didn’t matter. It didn’t *matter*. It wasn’t important. Why did it have to be *this*?

‘I hurt you,’ Cullen said, his voice surprising him in how firm it was. Not when his very lungs felt like they were shaking.

‘But that’s also not the only reason why we’re here, right now, doing this,’ Bull said. ‘It’s not even the main reason. I want you to tell me why we’re doing this, now, with this flogger. Instead of using that nice one that you like. The one that hurts you in all the *right* ways.’
Bull was striking him again, and Cullen locked himself into place and resisted too many furious urges. The urge to turn around and grab the flogger and fling it away. To duck and move and get away from that sting. To yell and curse at Bull for how miserable this was. He even wanted to cut deeply into himself, knowing he’d caused this, how it tore at him whenever he had a spare moment to contemplate it, how the words Bull had said about it echoed in his head and stripped him bare. He was even angry that he’d asked for punishment once Bull had placed it between them as an option, that he’d agreed to it.

The relentless sting pushed that to the front of his mind and his eyes flew open.

‘I-I asked for it,’ Cullen said, still trying to press himself up into the wall as though he could disappear into it – even as the flogger wasn’t striking him anymore. ‘I asked for this.’

_That’s why we’re here, right now, doing this. He said he was in two minds about it. He wouldn’t have done it otherwise._

‘I asked for it,’ Cullen said again, his voice shaking, thready.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said, though that wasn’t quite it either, and the pain blurred whatever walls he had in place that usually stopped him from saying what spilled next. ‘You said it was a closed door. A closed door for you. I don’t know what that’s like. I wish to know- And I deserve it, Bull. What I did- How else does someone learn? How else? How? I always do this. I never seem to learn. Perhaps- Perhaps I could finally learn.’

‘What do you always do?’ Bull said. His voice was closer than before.

‘You said it was a closed door,’ Cullen repeated stupidly. Then focused on the question and pressed his forehead into his forearms.

‘What could you finally learn?’ Bull said.

‘If I could stop failing,’ Cullen said, staring at the wall. ‘I don’t mean- I know in small ways, everyone does. I know that. Maker, but I knew it was wrong when I decided not to take it. I knew. I tried to convince myself- After Searidge- I don’t even truly understand why I did it, because I wanted to take it. I would have taken a full dose that night, with you, I know I would have. I don’t wish to do it again.’

‘So what’d you do so that it wouldn’t happen again?’ Bull said.

His thoughts wouldn’t do anything useful for a few seconds. He could hardly believe everything that he’d just vomited forth. All those half-finished sentences. He tried to concentrate, shifted his shoulders and hissed again.

‘The elfroot,’ Cullen said. ‘You control it.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Yeah, Cullen. That can’t’ve been easy for you.’

‘No,’ Cullen said.

‘I can’t punish you worse than you can,’ Bull said. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

‘Do you wish you could?’ Cullen said.
'I really don’t,’ Bull said, and then he made a sound that could have been a weak laugh, or something else, but Cullen wasn’t sure. ‘Don’t you think you’re tired of this now? Just for this thing, Cullen. Just this one thing. You can go to town on yourself with every other thing. But this one thing you could give to me, yeah? I mean, it involves me, I’m a part of it, and I’d like it if you did that.’

That warmer tone back again, what he’d been missing since they’d started this, and somehow that was more disarming than everything else. His bottom lip trembled briefly before he pressed them together again.

Bull’s last words – ‘I’d like it if you did that’ – and Cullen could hear the word ‘good’ echoing in the room. Bull liking something that Cullen did, it was a code. All Cullen could see was the code.

‘I don’t hate it,’ Cullen said, his chest aching now, even though Bull hadn’t touched it, hadn’t even flogged him deeply enough to hurt it. ‘I don’t hate it. The word ‘good.’ Not- Not all the time.’

‘I know,’ Bull said, in the tone of someone who had always known, and Cullen felt a flickering of shame that he was so transparent. He almost wanted to laugh, because the caning had been hard; but this wasn’t easy either. ‘Now, don’t you want to be done with this? Aren’t you tired?’

Bull talking to him in that tone of voice, and Cullen couldn’t even gather anger to himself as a kind of defense. He nodded, because he was tired – always – but definitely tired of this. The weight of Bull’s forgiveness – for he could hear it laced all through those compassionate words – it was heavier to bear than anything else they’d done yet.

‘Okay, little lion,’ Bull said, sounding tired himself. ‘Fifteen more strikes, you’re not gonna like them. But after that, I promise you, it’s done. It’s a door you’re gonna try and close for me. Yeah? Try saying that for me.’

‘After this,’ Cullen said, ignoring the fact that his voice sounded wet and hoping Bull would do him the courtesy of ignoring that too. ‘After this, it’s done.’

‘Good,’ Bull said softly, and Cullen couldn’t stop the faintest tension finding him, but it wasn’t as bad as it could be, and he wanted the word too much to care how he reacted. ‘Hang in there for me. You got this, okay?’

Cullen bit out a sound when the flogger struck him again, and then bit down into his arm and tasted the salt of sweat on his tongue as it kept falling. He didn’t count them, and he didn’t think Bull was going to, until Bull said:

‘Five.’

At ten, Cullen’s thighs were shaking, but he kept himself in place. Longed for it to be over. Longed to even try closing whatever door Bull had closed so easily himself. Because even now, Bull didn’t seem to be hanging onto any bitterness or anger or resentment. Whatever Cullen had suspected earlier, he could tell when someone was truly angry at him, and this wasn’t it, even if that flogger made him regret having shoulders and a back to place under it.

‘Fifteen,’ Bull said, the sound of the flogger being tossed onto the bed. ‘It’s done, Cullen.’

In between one shaky breath and the next, Bull was standing behind him, hands on his flanks, palms holding him in place – too firm to skate angrily across his skin like the pain did. Horns above his head just lightly scraped the stone, Bull pressing his face to the back of Cullen’s head, brushing against his head.
‘Done,’ Cullen echoed.

Bull lifted his hands to the fire upon Cullen’s shoulders, and Cullen whimpered, reached behind himself even as it made it all worse, trying to pull Bull’s hands away by the wrists.

‘Easy, easy,’ Bull whispered, hands staying on his overheated skin. ‘I’m not trying to make this worse. I know it hurts. Just let me change it a bit. Give me a minute, okay? Just a minute.’

Cullen’s arms fell, and he groaned when Bull dug his fingers deep underneath the ridges of Cullen’s shoulder blades, as though he could push the pain straight through him. And as he kept doing that, Cullen realised – in a kind of daze – that was what Bull was doing. Those hard, deep pushes into his back, pressing him into the wall, took the worst of the pain from the surface and made it bruising. Made it bone deep.

The sting was still there, but there was a heavier ache now, the kind that Cullen craved, and his breathing was slowing as the sensations seemed to balance between a pain he hated and one he needed.

Bull had said it was a closed door for him. Cullen thought now that he actually meant it, thought that perhaps hanging onto this failure wouldn’t be the thing that stopped him from failing in the future anyway.

That’s why he’d given Bull control of how and when he took the elfroot.

‘I…didn’t like that flogger,’ Cullen said, stating the obvious, but feeling like he hated it enough that he needed to say it.

‘No shit,’ Bull said, now pressing his fingers into the tops of Cullen’s shoulders where the flogger had hardly touched him.

‘I have a fireplace you could burn it in,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah?’ Bull said, laughing. ‘Me too. Think I’ll keep it though. Just in case.’

‘Maker,’ Cullen said. He flinched when Bull skated his fingertips across the underside of his shoulders where the pain was raw and stinging, like hundreds of insect bites building upon each other, papercuts along the inside of his fingers, something sharp in his boot and no time to remove it.

‘I can make this good, Cullen,’ Bull breathed, his voice even closer than before. ‘I can make this something you need. But you gotta tell me if you want that. Because I’ll be flogging you again.’

He took time to think about it, because there was a part of him that wanted it to be over now. Wanted to be on his bed, back facing the air, leaving all the other kinds of pain for another day.

But then there was the part of him that missed this, that knew it had been far too long since Bull had flogged him, for he didn’t count the cane. And Bull had already shifted the pain profile from something galloping towards unbearable, to something that had settled partway beneath his skin, balancing out that rawness.

‘Do it,’ Cullen said. ‘That is- If you wish.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull rumbled. ‘Kinda do. Let’s see how much you’ve got left in you. You just stay right there.’
Cullen leaned his head against his arm and nodded, the shaking in his legs having bled away. He still felt weaker than before, but he was standing, he could handle more.

It didn’t take long for Bull to move behind him again, picking up whatever else he’d placed on the bed. In response, Cullen planted his feet a bit better, lifted his head in preparation.

‘Here we go,’ Bull said.

This flogger made a different sound to the other one as it cut through the air. And Cullen’s whole body seemed to light up even though it hadn’t even hit him yet. He knew the sound of it, didn’t know how he could know so exactly, but this was the first one. That heavy black one that seemed like it would be the most brutal and yet – so far – hadn’t been. The one that left him with that sheet of shoulder to shoulder bruising.

Excitement and dread warred, and then he didn’t have room to feel either when Bull started striking him.

This wasn’t slow or patient, but swift and relentless. Strike after strike of those thicker tails, that heavier leather, and Cullen’s upper body was rocking against the wall with each impact. Last time he’d learned how to breathe with this, but his back was already sore and used, and now he abandoned that in favour of simply weathering it.

The flogger woke the nerves on the surface of his back, but shoved the pain deep at the same time. It reverberated through the backs of his lungs, seemed to force his heart to a different beat, clenched like a fist at the base of his spine and dug in hard at the back of his neck. Even though the tails only ever hit his shoulders, the bruising force of it reached all the way through him.

It bothered him for all of a few seconds that he wanted it. But then there was too much thick pain to think of how he’d been made wrong, how he was demon-touched, the look on Searidge’s face, all of that split apart by the flogger as though it wasn’t just flesh that Bull was marking up, but Cullen’s thoughts.

A pained moan, another, and then the blows fell heavier than before, and Cullen’s head almost tipped backwards. But he caught himself, knowing that Bull would stop. Instead, he let his head fall forwards, and thought that the throbbing in his head could have been a headache, except that he knew it was from the pulsing in his back.

It shouldn’t have been so easy to slip into that place where there was almost nothing except the pain, the rhythm, his own heart stuttering away in his chest. Where the details of the room fell away and weren’t immediately replaced with details of the past. Where the scraping of his fingers against the wall and the sounds intermittently falling out of his throat came to him through a tiny knothole, too small for him to care about.

He knew, vaguely, that it also shouldn’t have been so easy for him to find that place that was free of guilt. Deliverance here, at the hands of Bull, in a way he’d never been able to find while on his knees before the Maker or Andraste. That was shameful, perhaps even sinful, but he couldn’t feel that either.

In that sweet darkness, he knew he would have loved anyone who could have brought him this.

In that sweet darkness, he realised that he loved Bull for a great deal more than that, and his heart sung.

Soon, too, that fell away.
Later, when Bull stopped, there was only a faint tethering to the room – in the arms that caught him when his knees buckled. In the almost-steps he took to his bed and falling facedown and Bull saying something ruefully above him and that tone of voice sweeping through him. There was a scratchy pain in his hands and a throbbing in his whole body and his throat felt raw.

He didn’t even have his eyes closed. He saw tiny details in the blanket that he'd never noticed before. A loose thread here and there, and how those threads seemed to almost glow by lamplight, fuzzed at the edges. The intricate details in the stitching. The richness of the dye.

The mattress shifted with the weight of Bull sitting upon it, and something was pulled out from underneath Cullen’s leg. Cullen’s hands were out on either side of his head, fingers slightly bent and his palms tilted so that they didn’t have to touch the fabric. Bull’s palm rested flat on his unmarked lower back and didn’t move, and Cullen felt steadier after that. He blinked at the section of blanket that was so immediately fascinating.

More time passing, and Cullen could feel Bull knuckling slow circles into his lower back. And he tried shifting, but moving his forearms meant moving his shoulders, and he shuddered and the blanket caught the sound he made, even as Bull hushed him.

Cullen hardly reacted when salve was smoothed over his shoulders, still drifting, humming a little as the pain soothed just enough that he could settle more deeply onto his bed.

Then, a hand in his hair, and as fingers smoothed over his scalp, then ruffled his hair against the grain, he thought of Bull telling him to fix his hair before they went to the kitchens, and realised – with a kind of sorrowful yearning – that he was being pulled away from that place he'd found.

Still, the journey back to reality wasn’t unpleasant, and there was a haze over his thoughts when he turned his head to face Bull as best as he could, wincing at the pull and stretch in his muscles.

‘Hey,’ Bull said in gentle greeting.

‘Mm,’ Cullen managed. ‘I think you broke me.’

‘That’s what I like to hear,’ Bull said, grinning. ‘You wear it well.’

Cullen laughed in that way where he was too tired to make a noise, chest too sore to move much, but it was still laughter. He watched as Bull reached for one of his hands and straightened out Cullen’s arm carefully, then started rubbing salve into his grazed palms and fingers. Bull leaned across the bed to get to Cullen’s other hand, paying careful attention to his fingertips, clucking under his tongue at whatever Cullen had done. He could hardly feel it.

‘You just take it easy for a bit,’ Bull said, getting off the bed.

Cullen heard sounds. The sack. Bull’s footsteps around the room. And then Bull eventually joined him on the other side of the bed where there was more room, sitting with his head to the headboard. Cullen sighed when a hand dry of salve rested on the back of his neck, just above the throbbing redness.

‘You finally having a bed to rest on with all of this is great for this part,’ Bull said, fingers massaging the back of Cullen’s neck, fingertips finding the band of tense muscles just beneath his skull and stretching them in slow, persistent motions.

‘The part where I’m unconscious,’ Cullen muttered.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said brightly. ‘That part. Also the part where it’s pretty fucking comfortable for me
too. Way better than chairs.’

Cullen made a noise that he hoped sounded like he was a part of the conversation.

‘Hope you don’t mind crumbs on your bed,’ Bull said.

‘…What?’

Then, a tearing sound, and Bull chewing away happily – open-mouthed, it sounded like. Bull shifted, and seconds later Cullen blinked, dazed, as fingers pushed a piece of sweet bread between his lips. For a few seconds he was too shocked to do anything at all. Then he chewed on it weakly, swallowed, pressed the back of his hand to his mouth to stop Bull from doing that again. That was just underhanded.

‘You’ll feel better if you eat a bit more,’ Bull said.

‘Feel better than what?’ Cullen murmured. ‘This is fine.’

‘Item number two on the list,’ Bull said, continuing the conversation they’d had two weeks ago, ‘I really think it’s shit hot when Bull uses those guns of his to flog me senseless. Makes me feel better than anything.’

‘No,’ Cullen managed. ‘Stop it.’

‘Item number three,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the shit-eating grin in his voice. ‘His voice turns me on almost as much as his beefy goodness.’

‘Maker, no,’ Cullen groaned. ‘Doing this now is just cruel.’

‘Item number four,’ Bull continued. ‘I find he- Hey, none of that now, your fingers are still healing.’

Bull gently captured Cullen’s hand, stopping him from jabbing whatever part of Bull he could reach. But Cullen had used the hand he’d been covering his lips with, and seconds later another piece of bread was popped between his tired jaws.

‘Do you mind?’ Cullen said around the mouthful, finally lifting his head and scowling at him. It was clear from the expression on Bull’s face that he not only didn’t mind, but found the whole thing hilarious. ‘That’s just- Take your mother henning and-’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full,’ Bull said, as Cullen got another piece of bread down and wondered what it was, because it didn’t taste familiar, ‘you know that’s rude, don’t you? I thought you Fereldans had better manners than that.’

‘We’re not often associated with manners at all,’ Cullen said, lifting his eyebrows and then deciding that this was all too hard, and pressing his forehead into the blanket. ‘And if you do that again, I do bite, and you won’t like it.’

‘I bet,’ Bull said, around whatever huge amount of bread was in his mouth.

‘I suppose you worked up an appetite,’ Cullen grouched. ‘There’s…more food, if you need it. In the second chest.’

Bull said nothing for a moment, and Cullen wondered if he’d tripped up somehow. But it wasn’t like he said he’d gotten the food for Bull in advance, so…perhaps Bull would just think Cullen
kept it up there for himself.

‘It’s nothing fancy,’ Cullen added.

‘Thanks,’ Bull said. ‘I’m good for now, but I’ll remember that. You should have a bit more though. Come on, it’s not going to hurt you. You’re not so tired you’ll die from choking or anything.’

‘So you say,’ Cullen said, reaching tiredly for the small shredded piece that had appeared beside his face.

They spent time in companionable silence, Cullen taking a few more pieces of bread and feeling more grounded than usual. He wasn’t surprised when the elfroot appeared in his line of vision, and belatedly wondered if Bull had tried to lighten the mood in preparation for this. Then again, he just genuinely seemed to be in a good mood.

Cullen’s fingers curled around the heavy base of the bottle, and slipped, due to the salve.

‘I don’t…get to keep the bruising?’ Cullen said reluctantly.

‘You do,’ Bull said patiently. ‘Just not as much, not as intense tomorrow when you wake up. More manageable. You’ll still be fucking sore, trust me. You’re not gonna want to be putting your weight on it, or leaning against any walls or anything. Two sips, that and the salve – it’s all I’m asking.’

Cullen rolled carefully to the side and then pushed himself into a weak sitting position, carefully taking the elfroot potion again, the cork already removed. He needed to hold it in both hands, staring at it for a long time. That stretch of bruising he’d had the next day had been difficult to bear, very difficult. Even days later he was still moving around the pain of it.

Slowly, he took two sips, waited to see if that was enough. When Bull took the bottle away from him, Cullen wasn’t sure if he felt relieved, or resentful that he’d had to take it in the first place. When he finally met Bull’s eye, he could see some grave, sympathetic expression there, and he couldn’t bear that, so he looked back at the blanket again and felt a little too weak to be sitting upright.

‘You know I’m checking in on you tomorrow too,’ Bull said. ‘Remember?’

Cullen opened his mouth on a swift intake of breath, and then had to snap it closed again, because yes, he’d agreed to that. He’d said it sounded reasonable. At the time, it had seemed more than reasonable.

He looked down at his grazed fingers and palms.

‘I’m busy,’ Cullen said, ‘I don’t know how…it’s not as though you can check my back in my office. It’s practically a thoroughfare. I’m quite certain there are people who use my office as a through-way without ever realising I work here.’

‘What about chess?’ Bull said.

‘Chess?’ Cullen frowned. ‘But—’

‘I don’t need to check your back, not unless you start having some problems with it. But I do want to check how you came down from all this – especially the punishment part. Chess. In the storage room. The folks up on the battlements already know we do that from time to time.’
'I… Yes, all right,' Cullen said.

'I like you soldier types,' Bull rumbled, ‘always so good at giving a clear answer. Well, when you want to, anyway.’

*How many soldiers have there been?* Cullen wondered. But it didn’t truly matter. One day he’d be integrated into that plural. In the ‘soldiers’ category. Maybe later this week Bull would say that to some other soldier and Cullen would become one of the blurred group that mattered, but not enough to stay with.

*He just thinks differently to you, that’s all.*

Cullen was surprised at the heaviness that found him, and how he was able to push it aside, at least for now. It waited in the back of his mind, some horizon he’d have to assess at another time.

All at once a new wave of tiredness rolled through him. Whatever brief moment of wakefulness he’d had vanished and he slumped forwards in slow-motion, a large hand catching him under one arm, holding him still.

‘Hang on,’ Bull said. ‘Shit, hang on a sec – Got you all at once, huh?’

The sound of blankets being pulled back, Bull shifting off the bed, and then another hand curling around his side and pulling him onto a cool, clean sheet, helping him ease stomach down once more, face shifting so that his cheek rested on the pillow. He still had his boots on. He didn’t even care.

Bull removed his boots, and Cullen knew he’d line them up at the foot of the bed like the last time he’d done it.

‘You sleep with pants on?’

Cullen made a sound in the negative, and didn’t do much more than try and twitch his hips helpfully when Bull removed those too.

‘There’s…food,’ Cullen murmured, thinking that was important. Wasn’t it? Bull had already eaten, so maybe it wasn’t.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘You got that for me, huh?’

‘Mm,’ Cullen sighed.

‘That’s a nice thing to do,’ Bull said, pulling the blankets and sheet up over Cullen’s body, folding it back before it could touch his inflamed flesh. ‘You’re a lot nicer than you let on, most of the time, you know that?’

*Lies,* Cullen thought.

‘Nope,’ Bull said, and Cullen realised that he must have said that out loud.

Then, the sound of Bull walking around the bed and opening the second chest, rummaging around. A pleased sound and a jar lid being screwed off, the sound of boiled lollies being stirred around, clinking against the glass.

‘I’d offer you one,’ Bull said, ‘but I’m pretty sure you’d choke on it now. You go down like a sack of potatoes when it hits you.’
Cullen’s brow furrowed weakly. Was that an insult? Should he feel insulted?

Later still, Bull sat beside him, and Cullen reached out with a tired arm and found the shape of him. Patted clumsily around his waist until he could curl sticky fingers around his thigh, holding onto him. His head was facing the side again, facing Bull, but his eyes were leaden and his lips slack. It took a long time for him to find the words that he wanted to say.

‘I wish…that someone could give you this,’ Cullen said. ‘Does…anyone?’

‘Give me what?’ Bull said, sounding amused, his broad hand covering Cullen’s, thumb stroking across the top of his wrist.

‘Peace,’ Cullen said.

Bull’s hand stopped moving. Then that thumb started stroking him again, and Cullen knew he was only seconds from sleep. Real sleep. The kind that would let him wake disoriented and bruised the next morning, but still wrapped in the cotton wool of it.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, his voice coming from a great distance. ‘Yeah, Cullen, someone gives me that.’

Cullen squeezed Bull’s thigh in what he hoped was reassurance. He didn’t understand why Bull sounded unhappy about it, because peace seemed like a blessed thing to him.

Bull sighed, and Cullen made the smallest sound of sympathetic discontent, and that was the last thing he knew before he slept – that and Bull’s hand upon his own, holding him in place.
Guess who also isn’t issue free? Bull! Anyway, onto the chapter. Also Bull’s ‘watchword’ theory is based on real life ‘safeword’ theory. There’s some lingering subspace at the beginning of this chapter (not in a bad way!)

Cullen woke, sore and tired, and the first thing he did was move his arms from where they rested by his sides up to either side of his face, groaning at the wave of scratchy, bone deep pain that moved through him.

All right then, Cullen thought, lips quirking up – a combination of grimace and smile. Those extra sips of elfroot at the end of the evening wouldn’t ruin everything after all.

He held himself still for a few more minutes, not quite ready to risk the next burst of pain. Every deep inhale, he could feel his muscles groaning.

Eventually, though, he eased himself off the bed and rubbed at his eyes and felt far more spacy than usual when he looked at his back in the mirror. The bruising wasn’t quite as opaque as the first time, but it was still breathtaking. He touched his fingers to it, amazed that he could hardly pick out the tiny pulses of pain where he brushed over his skin amongst the general wash of it.

The spacy feeling continued as he set about his morning routine. He shaved off several days of stubble and blinked owlishly at himself as he did so. His thoughts wouldn’t quite come together. It didn’t feel bad, exactly. It reminded him of those early training days when he was still getting used to the long hours of being a Templar, when he wanted just a few more hours of sleep, even just an hour.

He sat on the edge of his bed twenty minutes later, fully dressed, just breathing slowly and blinking at the wall in front of him. He pressed the backs of his fingers to his forehead, but he didn’t feel any warmer than usual. He didn’t feel sick.

There were traces of Bull throughout his room. His boots lined up neatly at the corner of his bed, instead of where Cullen would normally put them. His clothing neatened and folded. The jar of boiled sweets was half-empty, and it had been full when Cullen had requested it. Bull had picked out every single humbug, and Cullen mentally filed away that Bull liked the taste of peppermint, and wasn’t sure why that was relevant.

Also, half a jar? That was some sweet tooth.

Cullen couldn’t remember most of what had happened in the last stretch of the evening. He paced his room slowly, forehead furrowed. There had been…a lot of conversation. The punishment, the memory of which made Cullen frown. It was odd that there could be two different types of whipping. One he’d crave, and one he never wanted to experience again. Then, he remembered the second flogging which was a kind of benevolence that he didn’t fully understand. Everything after was a complete blur.

He remembered…holding Bull’s hand?
He rubbed at his face more vigorously, ignoring how it pulled at his sore shoulder muscles. Or, perhaps, wanting the pain to wake him up. But instead it just seemed to make him float a bit more. He’d seen jellyfish do that on the ocean. Just float right on top of it, letting the waves take them where the sea willed.

But floating aimlessly often led to being beached, and Cullen didn’t want that.

Oddly, he didn’t feel he was at risk of that, either.

Absently, he shook the jar of sweets and then picked one out. He went to put it in his mouth before remembering that he loathed sugar first thing in the morning, and put it back.

Cullen took another quick look at himself in the mirror before starting the day. His cheeks were pinker than usual, but then he’d just been rubbing at his face. His hair was in order. His jawline freshly shaved. He didn’t look like he was floating somewhere on an ocean he didn’t have a name for.

It wasn’t until a couple of hours later, when he gently bumped back into reality – looking over correspondence – that he realised that he’d gone several hours having forgotten that his hands were cold. He looked at them, frowning again. Had they been cold the entire time and he just hadn’t noticed? Maybe the pain had distracted him.

His shoulders started to tense in a shrug and he hissed at himself, nostrils flaring, because he still had to be very careful with that level of pain. Even if he enjoyed it at times, it still just hurt him at others. He was glad there was no one in his office to see the slip. But it wouldn’t stay that way. His weekends were just about as busy as his weekdays at the moment, and Maker knew he had enough to focus on.

*  

In a stack of correspondence delivered to him at mid-morning, he found a small, folded piece of cheap parchment with the note:

Did you know that Knight-Commander Arvhid thought nugalopes were so noble that he is the reason we now have the pearl blue nugalope?

~B

Cullen read it, read it again, and then laughed. He got up and carefully reached for one of the older tomes at the top of his bookshelf, bringing it back to his desk and flicking through it slowly until he found what he was looking for.

In his response he wrote:

Did you know that Knight-Commander Arvhid, in a letter he wrote to his brother, Brighain, said:

“For nugalopes are the most splendid creatures I have ever seen, sturdier than the sturdiest of packhorses yet not trampling topsoil under their blunt feet, friendly to the tiniest nugs and even small children. It is my biggest regret that they do not come in a steel blue colour, as mabari can. I have apportioned personal funds for this project.”

~ Commander Cullen Rutherford of the Inquisition.

Postscript: I wonder if your library has any mention of how his brother responded?
He sealed it up in a small envelope, complete with wax seal. Perhaps, if Betsan was enjoying writing so much, she might enjoy the accoutrements of it too. That went off with the runner along with a stack of signed papers, other sealed letters, a hastily drawn chart, an abbreviated list of new training manoeuvres to consider for Knight-Captain Briony to look over, and more besides.

He wished he could put more time aside to visit the library, but he couldn’t do that every time Betsan sent him a note. The most he could do was respond promptly.

*  

As the day continued, he relearned how to move through the pain in his shoulders. He anchored himself into reality by learning the new boundaries of his body. Instead of having to remind himself with weak words like ‘Skyhold, not Kinloch,’ he only needed to shift and remind himself that he was very much in the present, and he ached, and he was tethered to his environment.

Items and furniture around him came to take on very real presence. The chair he sat in was no longer just a chair. He was aware of the wood at his back, and how even though it had been polished smooth, he couldn’t simply lean back against it. And so, now he was always aware of the chair, beneath him, against him, and he was aware of how he interacted with it.

He gained that awareness of everything near him too. Every item he normally reached for on his desk without a thought, now he had to think before he did it. Think and remember and then make a choice.

Cullen knew that other people didn’t need this to remember where they were, to stay anchored in their environment. He knew that it was some defect in him to require it. But even as the hours crept on and he bristled a little at knowing Bull wanted to check in on him that evening, he couldn’t bring himself to mind very much.

*  

Close to midnight, he walked across cleared battlements towards the storage room, and somehow couldn’t bring himself to be surprised when Bull was there early, the chessboard already in position, the pieces all arranged.

‘You’re early,’ Cullen said.

‘So are you,’ Bull said, shrugging.

Cullen stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He made a decision to not bolt it. It was just chess. People who were playing chess didn’t need to bolt the door.

Still, he looked around and his eyes kept going back to the clear patch of wall that he’d leaned against before.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, stretching. ‘Maybe should’ve rethought where we did this.’

Cullen cleared his throat, sat down carefully in the chair that Bull indicated, and then looked over to the space of wall again. His cheeks were hot.

‘I’m in no condition for it anyway,’ Cullen said begrudgingly.

‘I know that,’ Bull said, tapping the chessboard until Cullen looked at it, ‘but I’m surprised you do.’
‘Contrary to popular belief,’ Cullen said, ‘I can have a sense of self-preservation at times.’

‘Huh,’ Bull said mildly.

Cullen smiled as he moved one of the pieces. They hadn’t even clarified what rules they were playing by, but he supposed he’d find out.

They played in silence for a few minutes, Cullen sometimes looking at the space of wall he leaned against, or at Bull, or down at the chess pieces. He didn’t know how this was supposed to go, exactly. His nerves itched into life, he resisted the urge to curl his toes down into his boots.

‘How’d you shape up, after last night?’ Bull said.

Cullen nodded, then grimaced down at the chessboard.

‘Fine,’ Cullen said, and then closed his eyes because he knew how dismissive it sounded. ‘I’ve worked. I don’t remember…the end of the evening? It all somewhat blurs out midway through the second flogging. Is that normal?’

‘Can be,’ Bull said, looking up at Cullen and pinning him with a serious gaze. ‘Does it bother you?’

‘Not…exactly,’ Cullen said, starting to reach around to rub the back of his neck and then thinking the better of it when his aching shoulders twinged too loudly. ‘Unless it bothers you? Is that a bothersome thing? Is there some way I should try not to do that in the future?’

Bull’s smile was crooked. ‘Nah. Some people get that sometimes. Did you have any of that today? Now?’

‘Forgetting?’ Cullen said.

‘Just feeling a bit out of sorts.’

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, going to move another chess piece before he realised it wasn’t his turn. ‘Then yes, but it wasn’t- I wouldn’t call the experience unpleasant.’

‘Like flying?’ Bull said.

That was when Cullen knew that Bull was familiar with all of this. All of it. Because even though it hadn’t been like flying for Cullen, it was close enough that he wondered how many people Bull gave this to. That deep dark space where forgetting in favour of feeling peace was easy, that detached but safe sensation the next day, like being wrapped in cotton wool.

‘Like floating,’ Cullen said, frowning at him.

‘And how shitty have you felt about the whole elfroot thing?’

Cullen opened his mouth to ask ‘what elfroot thing?’ and then closed it, staring at him. Bull returned his gaze, and then he slung an arm over the back of his chair and grinned.

‘How shitty?’ Bull said, looking especially pleased with himself. ‘On like a scale between you forgot all about it, to feeling like you’ve gotta throw yourself off a bridge because you made a mistake.’

Cullen turned to stare back at the game. He moved a piece and then moved it back, because it still wasn’t his turn. His heart was pounding. It wasn’t relief, but fear. He wasn’t supposed to let go of
anything that quickly. He learned through his mistakes. He was- How could he avoid the calibre of failures that he’d made in the past if he didn’t constantly…

He placed his hands in his lap and looked down at the floor, thinking hard.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, his voice firming.

‘Stop it,’ Cullen snapped, ‘I’m thinking.’

‘Just answer.’

‘How did you do that?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘How could I forget? I wasn’t supposed to forget. I was supposed to- Care about it less. Not forget about it outright.’

‘Eh,’ Bull said, shrugging, ‘it would’ve come back to you eventually. Why’re you looking at me like I stole your horse out from under you?’

‘Why are you so pleased about it?’ Cullen said. ‘You realise that if I put it out of sight, out of mind, there’s every likelihood it will happen again?’

‘Really?’ Bull said easily. ‘You don’t think giving me control of the elfroot and all those other things and me checking in today and stuff helps with that?’

‘I’ll make some other mistake then,’ Cullen said, dismissively.

‘Sure,’ Bull said. ‘I’m sure you’ll fuck something else up. I’m sure I will. One thing you can rely on in life – everyone’s gonna fuck up, and they’re gonna do it more than once.’

Bull finally reached out and moved a piece on the chessboard, and Cullen moved his, and hoped they could get back to playing the chess game. How had he been looking forward to this meeting? All day he’d been looking forward to it.

‘The thing is,’ Bull continued, ‘if you’re gonna get on board with the theory of fucking up, you’ve also gotta get on board with the theory of doing the opposite of that. What we did last night? That was the opposite of a fuck up. You forgetting? That’s not a bad thing. It’s not like it’s all or nothing. You won’t forget forever. And it’s gonna bother you sometimes and hopefully it’s just gonna bother you less over time as you come to see it wasn’t the end of the world. But that pact we made – that you’d trust me to punish you enough for this thing that you could finally let it go, followed by you letting it go, you want to shit on that now?’

There was no way to respond to that in a way that wasn’t insulting, so Cullen sat there quietly, trying to sort through it all, half-wishing that everything Bull said didn’t make sense.

‘I see,’ Cullen said, when he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘Didn’t really answer the question though. Do you want to shit on that now?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, ‘of course not. That’s not- You know, when you said you wanted to ‘check in’ last night, this was actually not what I expected.’

‘What?’ Bull said innocently. ‘It’s chess, isn’t it?’

Cullen scowled.

‘Every time you get uppity,’ Bull said, ‘I kind of just want to poke you a bit more.’
‘Oh, for the love of the Maker,’ Cullen said, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair to try and make a point, before jolting forwards, his jaw tightening. Bull didn’t laugh, exactly – at least, not out loud.

‘Careful,’ Bull said, voice warm. ‘Probably a bit too fresh to go about doing things like that just yet.’

Cullen’s frustration melted away into something like amusement. The situation was utterly absurd. And yet despite feeling wrong-footed, despite his head whirling, he thought he might actually be having a good time.

‘You’re fine, by the way,’ Bull said, a few minutes later when they were focusing on the game. ‘Pardon?’

‘You’re fine. You know, the whole ‘checking in’ thing. I declare myself satisfied with how you are right now.’

‘You mean in how I’m winning this game?’ Cullen said, secretly pleased, even though he wasn’t sure how differently he was behaving to lead Bull to his conclusion. ‘You think you’re winning this game.’

‘I don’t know what board you’re looking at.’

‘I think I’ve gotten you on the back foot just enough that I’ve stolen this one, little lion,’ Bull said, shrugging like there wasn’t anything to be done about it now.

Cullen laughed quietly. ‘I think you don’t know how often I’ve played chess while others are trying to unsettle me.’

Five minutes later, Cullen won the game by a hair. Bull laughed, in that way that meant he hadn’t quite expected it. The laugh was loud, reverberated through his barrel of a chest. It warmed Cullen through.

Abruptly, he remembered the smallest snippet of what he’d forgotten from the night before. He stared at Bull, a premonitory dread lancing through him, resonating with its truth.

You love him.

Cullen turned back to the chessboard and stared at it. Mechanically he began returning all the pieces back to their starting positions.

You thrice-damned fool.

Bull asked him a question about Cullen’s winning strategy, and he answered as though it were easy, as though he were still feeling the high of his win. Five minutes later they were still talking and Cullen wished he could shut down the clamour of feelings in his chest. Infatuation was one thing, but this was untenable.

That was how, during their second game, Cullen found himself asking:

‘Your theory on relationships, is that- It’s a Qun thing, isn’t it?’

Don’t do this.
‘What’s that?’ Bull said, and Cullen stared at the board like the conversation was interesting, but only mildly so. ‘You mean like…how you humans like to do things? Make everything more complicated that it needs to be?’

‘Not just humans,’ Cullen said. But he already knew this conversation wouldn’t go in any direction he wished it to. He knew he was a masochist. This was another order of masochism entirely.

‘Yeah, I s’pose,’ Bull said, shrugging and continuing to play. ‘Just always seemed kind of ridiculous to me. I have relationships. I have a relationship with Krem and Stitches, with Varric and with you and the Boss. I can fuck whenever the need takes me and someone’s willing. What more is there?’

‘You don’t think…now that you’re Tal-Vashoth, you’d-’

‘No,’ Bull said, putting the piece down and staring at him. For a second, Cullen thought that Bull knew. That he knew everything Cullen wasn’t saying and saw right through him and was just rejecting him out of hand. But then Bull’s expression shifted and that disgust on his face wasn’t directed at Cullen, but at himself.

‘If you want to change the subject…’ Cullen said.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, ‘it’s not that, it’s just- Look, sure, I’ve thought about it. Doing things in a way that the Qun wouldn’t approve of. But you don’t know Tal-Vashoth like I do. I’m not interested in walking down a pathway that risks the safety of others like that. The Qun might not get everything right, but there’s some stuff they didn’t fuck up.’

Bull may have been talking about it, but Cullen could see the closed, locked door before him. On the one hand it was something of a relief. Bull’s own issues were so big that perhaps he couldn’t see past them to what Cullen was really feeling and trying not to say. On the other hand, it meant that this would only ever be what it was. The two of them meeting for sessions, sometimes fucking, work colleagues. Maybe Bull even loved him like a friend. He clearly wasn’t deficient in any arena that required care or compassion.

Cullen knew he didn’t love Bull like a friend.

‘Qunari can’t be trusted with that kind of stuff,’ Bull said. ‘Not because there’s anything wrong with us, but because it’s just different. Strong emotion isn’t always our friend.’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said, frowning. Bull noticed his expression and shook his head.

‘You don’t get it.’

‘You do realise that right now, as we speak, there is a Tal-Vashoth qunari couple in the Northern quarters who – for all intents and purposes – seem to be doing quite well?’

Bull’s expression shuttered, and Cullen could see that Bull knew, and that he wasn’t happy about it, and that he certainly didn’t trust it. Then, as Bull turned his attention back to the game, Cullen realised with a faint shiver that Bull was angry. This was a different type of anger to what Bull had ever shown him before. A sullen, locked-in thing that broadcast itself loudly through the quality of silence that filled the room.

Cullen couldn’t help but wonder if this was the kind of thing Bull would poke at, if he saw it in Cullen. But that required some level of skill in being able to read people, and Cullen only knew enough to know that he was biased, that he wasn’t qunari, that it was a sore subject.
'I didn’t mean to push,’ Cullen said finally. ‘I apologise.’

Bull winced, eye flicking up from the game to meet Cullen’s gaze. ‘You’re not the only one who has ever brought this up. It’s kind of a sore subject.’

‘I can see that,’ Cullen said.

‘Krem bugs me about it sometimes,’ Bull admitted. ‘He doesn’t get it either.’

‘As I said, I didn’t mean to push. We can consider the matter dropped.’

Bull looked for the longest moment like he wanted to say something. There was a sense of expectation in the room. Cullen half-thought he was imagining it. It was only until Bull’s expression shifted that Cullen realised he was missing something. He had the oddest feeling that perhaps Bull didn’t want Cullen to drop the subject, which not only didn’t make any sense, but was clearly something he was deluded into believing because of the strength of his own emotions.

Still, he was practiced at ignoring strong emotion himself, and he shoved that away into some small corner of his chest where it became a cold, sore stone. It ached, but he could ignore it, he could breathe around it, he could believe it was connected to the pain in his shoulders and leave it at that.

It was Bull who changed the subject, who started talking about being taught chess as an imekari. It was a fond remembrance, and Cullen listened, smiled, asked the occasional question and thought of all the times he’d used that tactic to convince himself of how wonderful the Templar Order was. Especially in Kirkwall. How he’d remind himself of the good of the Circles, of the joy of being allowed access to a library, to an education, of how they were keeping the mages safe – anything at all to distract himself from some horror he’d just witnessed or participated in.

Was it a tactic though? For Cullen, it had been. Perhaps Bull was just reminiscing.

The tension drained out of the room eventually. The talking shifted to other subjects, and Cullen felt something relax inside himself when he got the sense that Bull was truly at ease again. It was a little like being a weathervane, tuned to some distant barometric shift that one couldn’t see.

Another hour must have passed when Bull started talking about some of the odder watchwords he’d heard over the years.

‘Actually,’ Cullen said, ‘you asked me for mine, and I said ‘phylactery.’ Why was that not…why couldn’t it be that?’

‘Easy,’ Bull said, smiling at him. ‘There’s a reason why ‘stop,’ ‘no,’ and ‘help’ are all one syllable. Right? Compare that to ‘phylactery’ which is practically a fucking sentence. I had a feeling you’d pick it, but the reality is a watchword is short and to the point. Something a short-circuiting brain can get out in an emergency.’

‘Like mabari names,’ Cullen said, on a half-smile.

Bull gestured at him to continue.

‘They’re never more than three syllables,’ Cullen said, ‘unless you shorten it into a nickname. Because if that dog gets away from you for any reason, a name that’s too long will sound like gibberish. They’re less likely to listen. It becomes noise, not meaning.’

‘Yep,’ Bull said. ‘That’s exactly it.’
So essentially I’m the dog in this scenario,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes.

Bull laughed, but he shook his head. ‘We’re all animals when you get down to it. We’re just dressed up a bit better. But yeah, that’s why you don’t get to say ‘phylactery’ in a pinch. I mean, I’ll know from the syllable ‘phy’ what you’re trying to say, even if you can’t get all those syllables out. But will your mind remember to reach for it? Eh. I once was with someone who insisted that they were fine with ‘mortalitasi’ and halfway through the session they started screaming ‘stop’ over and over because they fucking forgot the watchword. Like, can’t reach for the first syllable if the whole word’s so long it’s just noise by the time you need to look for it.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘Sorry, but I’m still stuck on being the mabari in this scenario.’

‘Lion,’ Bull corrected. ‘Besides, I thought Fereldans loved mabari.’

‘They are noble creatures,’ Cullen said calmly, ‘but it’s not my life’s work to become one.’

‘Aw,’ Bull said, ‘I was saving that up for a later session. You’d be my good pup, and I’d have a leash, and a…’

Cullen’s cheeks flamed, and Bull tipped his head back and started laughing in that way that always sounded like people would hear him from any point within Skyhold.

‘You’re merciless,’ Cullen said, his voice hoarse.

‘You got a thing against leashes?’ Bull said, grinning wickedly, eye sparking with heat.

‘Maker, you can’t just bring that kind of thing up in conversations like this!’

‘Why not?’ Bull said, his voice raw with laughter. ‘You still haven’t answered the question about leashes.’

‘No dignified man would,’ Cullen said, his voice breaking. ‘No one would do that.’

‘Mm,’ Bull rumbled, the sound more like a purr, ‘you sure about that?’

‘Maybe some people would do that, but the Commander of the Inquisition wouldn’t.’

‘What if you were a lion though?’ Bull said. ‘We could leave your coat on, you’d have a mane and everything. Just like…sometimes you were a tame lion. Maybe someone would have to take on that job. Taming you. Don’t expect it would be easy.’

Cullen just stared at him. His entire body was warm, and even though he wanted to believe it was all humiliation and embarrassment, his cock had betrayed him by twitching in interest.

‘I’ll just imagine it instead,’ Bull said, leering at him. ‘It’ll help me sleep at night.’

‘You’re awful,’ Cullen said, pointing a chess piece at him for good measure. ‘Awful.’

‘I could just…close my eyes,’ Bull said, closing his eyes, ‘and imagine what I’d have to do to make you roar.’

Cullen placed a hand over his face and stared at a point away from Bull and thought that it wasn’t fair. This wasn’t one of those situations where he could turn the tables. Was there anything in the world that would embarrass Bull?

‘Actually,’ Bull said, chuckling low, ‘I wanted to ask you something.’
‘It had best be about chess,’ Cullen said as firmly as he was able.

‘It’s not,’ Bull said, ‘but it’s not about you being my lion either. It’s actually about something I thought up a few days ago. Something…I dunno, I think maybe you’d like it.’

‘If it doesn’t involve anything to do with lions, I’d rather like to hear what it is,’ Cullen said.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, ‘remember when we wrestled in here, and it was super hot before you had your jaunt back to shitty memories?’

Cullen’s forehead furrowed, but he nodded. There was no use pretending he didn’t find it hot. If he hadn’t been caught up in the past, that evening could have very easily gone in a far more delicious direction.

‘And you like to fight, right?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said slowly. No point pretending that wasn’t true either.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, nodding. ‘Let’s say you want to get that fight out of your system, and you’re used to doing it by getting mouthy. What if I said we could try – outside of the flogging sessions – actually fighting? As in, we set up some time to fuck or whatever, and before that, we tried to take each other down. Except winner takes all.’

Cullen blinked at him. His cock had already been taking an interest in the proceedings before, despite the humiliation. It was certainly taking an interest now.

‘I’d win every time,’ Bull said, smiling at him. ‘But hey, you can give it your best shot, get it out of your system before I made you yield.’

‘So…bedroom sparring,’ Cullen said.

‘Basically, yeah. You’d see it coming, we’d talk about it first, make sure it was okay at the time. It’s fun, y’know? It’s hard to take things too seriously when you’re grappling on a bed. I don’t want it to be a part of the flogging, personally. That’s a different thing, and there’s always gags for when I need you to shut up during a session.’

‘Are there gags for when I want you to shut up?’ Cullen said, and then blinked at himself.

‘Well, let’s see,’ Bull said easily, ‘there’s the fact that you love interrupting me, there’s all those moments when you just pretend you haven’t heard what I’ve said or asked you, there’s also all the other times when you do hear me but give me an answer that you know isn’t what I’m looking for, so I don’t think you need an actual gag for me or anything. You have all these other ways you do your thing.’

Cullen just glared at him, and Bull mock-glared back before the expression dissolved into a smile.

‘You love it,’ Bull said, leaning forwards.

‘Love what?’ Cullen said flatly.

‘You love that I don’t put up with your shit.’

‘Are you sure you don’t just want to wrestle now?’ Cullen said. ‘Because I can assure you, I’m ready to wrestle right now.’

‘Yeah, firstly, no bed here to wrestle on. Secondly, the second your back hits the ground, you’re
gonna regret everything.’

‘Still,’ Cullen said, smiling a little, aware that there was no humour in the expression. Bull sighed happily.

‘And that was the story of how Bull took the little lion home, gave him a collar and a leash, and tamed him.’

‘Item number five,’ Cullen deadpanned, ‘I’m personally fascinated with how delusional The Iron Bull is, it’s quite something, that someone can be an effective strategist whilst dealing with such severe delusions.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Bull said fervently.

It was useless, trying to win in a conversation like this one. It would never happen. Bull simply couldn’t be insulted or teased or humiliated in the same way.

The entire time, that hard little stone buried down in his chest still ached. But it also sent up feelings of warmth, of amusement, of friendship too. By the end of the night, when they had four more games behind them and Bull yawned three times in a row, Cullen felt like it had been a rather good day, all in all.

* 

That night, Cullen lay on his back in his bed because he needed the pain to ground him. His hands were cold under the blankets and he looked up at the restored roof and wished he could see the stars.

The little stone in his chest was forming into a hard, tangled knot and he knew he couldn’t ignore it forever. But he could ignore it for now. Nothing more than a small, sharp pain. Another bruise he could use to help him focus.

Still, as he fell asleep that evening, he couldn’t help but think of that look on Bull’s expression right before the subject of love and couples and relationships was officially dropped. As though Bull somehow expected Cullen to keep pushing him, and Cullen thought about projection, and how biased he was now, and yet still…he knew it wouldn’t be the last time the subject came up. Even if it meant throwing a wedge in everything Cullen had gained for himself, he would bring it up again.

Maybe it wasn’t just that Cullen liked to fight.

Maybe Bull needed him to.

Cullen fell asleep with his forehead furrowed, thinking that it was such a strange thing to conclude about the whole subject, yet unable to convince himself he was wrong.
If you come to check in on this story during the week at any point and suddenly all the chapters have titles, it's because I'm getting sick of only having numbers to refer back to when I want to find specific chapters to search for information, lol. If the chapters don't acquire titles, it will be because I got lazy, and not because I don't want to add chapter titles. Er, long story short, chapter titles are forthcoming! Like the inane story title, they probably won't be very well chosen. :D

I am really floored by all this love this fic is getting. <3

Well, Searidge was going to have to reveal why he’s tormenting Cullen eventually, right? Also, isn’t it great when Bull is always super calm and knows exactly what to say? I think that's great too. Except when he forgets to do that.

Late afternoon the following day, and Cullen felt his bruises more as they settled down into his tissues properly. Bedded in as they were, his joints and back sometimes felt as though they were creaking whenever he inhaled deeply. Whenever he didn’t fear someone watching him, he moved with the studied slowness necessary to make it through the day. Sometimes he would stop what he was doing and straighten his shoulders and take several full breaths just to feel it. It was meditative. Four breaths would give him what an hour of prayer could not.

Now, he watched several Templars sparring in the training arena, leaning on a stretch of wooden fencing that surrounded the space in order to deliberately stretch out the muscle so it didn’t get knotted up. Occasionally, he’d call out encouragement, but corrections weren’t necessary. There were others in the actual arena who were better able to guide and teach, and the days of Haven where it felt he had to do everything were gone.

He was proud of the military that had come together under the auspices of the Inquisition. But the more he invested in them, the more he wished them well, the more he feared for what Corypheus would bring down on all of them. At times like this he could pretend he was nothing more than a soldier, a recruit watching from the sidelines as he had as a child. He could pretend that he wasn’t in charge of it all, that he wasn’t the Commander, that the responsibility fell to someone else.

Cullen’s heartrate stuttered when he saw Searidge approaching. But his face didn’t change expression, and he let his gaze go back to those sparring, even as his skin pimpled with gooseflesh beneath his clothing.

Searidge came all the way around the arena and stood next to Cullen for a few seconds, then leaned his forearms on the top section of fencing just as Cullen was, and looked out at those sparring.

‘Commander,’ Searidge said.

Cullen wondered what it meant that Searidge wasn’t calling him ‘Knight-Commander’ anymore, if it was a conscious correction, or if it was some new insult that Cullen didn’t yet comprehend.
‘Searidge,’ Cullen said. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘S’fine,’ Searidge said.

Cullen’s eyes flickered towards the Herald Rest. It was late afternoon and Bull wasn’t out with the Inquisitor or on assignment with the Chargers. As far as he knew, Bull would likely be in there, right now. The thought brought comfort with it, then a flash of embarrassment sharp on its heels. Searidge had done nothing to him. Cullen could handle himself perfectly well.

*Bull will expect you to contact him within an hour of this meeting.*

A deep breath, and Cullen sighed, clenching his jaw in frustration.

‘Must be hard being a Commander of a military like this,’ Searidge said softly.

No one paid them any mind. Those sparring were too far away to hear their conversation. No one else stood near Cullen at times like this, because he tended to level them with a glare and discourage conversation. He didn’t lean against the fence of the training arena because he wanted to talk to every person in Skyhold, and if he started encouraging the conversation of strangers – well, it would never end.

‘It has its challenges,’ Cullen said. ‘None insurmountable.’

‘How’d you even get the job?’ Searidge said, not looking at Cullen, but staring out at the soldiers. For all the world like it was a casual conversation and they were friends. ‘I mean, you were a Knight-Captain back at Kirkwall. You never managed squadrons or nothin’, right? It’s not like you’ve ever run a bloody military before.’

Cullen resisted the bitter smile that wanted to cross his face.

He’d made that very argument to Seeker Cassandra. He’d made that argument plenty of times since and his detractors made it frequently themselves. There were less and less of them now, because the Inquisition’s army was proving itself more often. After Haven, however, there were those who called for his dismissal, and despite many in positions of power stressing that they’d not have made it to Skyhold at all without the leadership of Cullen, Mother Giselle and Seeker Cassandra, the cries had come loudly and frequently enough that Cullen had tendered his resignation to the Herald of Andraste.

Well, he’d tried to tender his resignation. Josephine must have been watching for it, because the moment he proffered the signed letter to the Inquisitor, Josephine had dragged him out of the war room forcibly and then lectured him for what felt like two hours afterwards, shaking the crumpled letter at him for emphasis, before tearing it up right in front of him.

‘I feel the Inquisition’s forces are up to the challenges presented to them,’ Cullen said. ‘If you felt you were so unsafe, I’m not certain why you decided to make your temporary home here at Skyhold.’

‘Don’t take it so bloody personally,’ Searidge said. ‘Just, if someone’s gonna run an army, why you? But you were always good at pulling strings, eh? I mean, look how fast you scurried up the ranks with Knight-Commander Meredith, yeah? After Kinloch an’ all.’

Anger wasn’t sharp, but tarry. It clung to him. Cullen had to stop himself from turning and sending Searidge away. There was righteous anger, and then there was defensiveness because someone was deliberately pushing on sore spots.
That’s what Bull said Searidge did, and in the moment, Cullen wasn’t inclined to think he was wrong.  

‘I worked hard,’ Cullen said.  

‘Oh yeah,’ Searidge said, nodding, even as the words managed to sound disapproving. ‘I’m sure you did.’  

‘It was Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast’s idea to install me as the Commander of the Inquisition, perhaps you might like to take this matter up with her?’  

‘We used to make bets about it,’ Searidge continued, like Cullen hadn’t spoken. ‘How long it’d take before you and Meredith revealed you were knocking boots. I had quite a bit of money in that pool. Shame she upped and turned into crystal.’  

Cullen blinked at a dust plume kicked up by one of the soldier’s legs. He turned to Searidge, noted the way Searidge didn’t look back at him, saw the hint of a smile in the corner of his lips.  

‘What are you implying?’ Cullen said coldly.  

_Why did you never tell me this before? When I was rebuilding Kirkwall or at least trying to, and you could have told me at any point that this was how highly you thought of me even before you took a lash to my back._  

‘Nothin’ really,’ Searidge said. ‘I dunno now. Seems like she would’ve been the bossy type in bedroom. Some of the others were sure you wouldn’t go for that, but eh, I had some suspicions. I think I would’ve won that bet now. You’re friends with that mercenary, right? The Iron Bull?’  

Cullen’s entire body went cold, as though the endless chill in his fingers had infested the rest of him.  

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, ‘he’s an exemplary strategist. Perhaps I am better at commanding than people expected, because of allies who do have military experience.’  

‘Mm,’ Searidge said, looking at Cullen, the twinkle in his blue eyes anything but friendly. ‘So we need to win with Qun strategies now? That’s a shame.’  

Searidge turned back to face those sparring, and Cullen did the same.  

‘I heard some things about that ox-man,’ Searidge drawled, and Cullen’s right hand clenched into a fist at hearing the insult dropped so casually into conversation. His nostrils flared.  

‘Are you sure you traffic in silks and not rumours, Searidge?’  

At that, Searidge laughed, and Cullen wished he could see the humour in the situation. Instead, he was glad that Searidge was on his left, couldn’t see the white-knuckled fist he was holding taut. Eventually, he forced his muscles to relax.  

‘I’ve always liked gossip,’ Searidge said, shrugging a single shoulder. ‘It’s fun, y’know? You hear about what that beast likes? They never shut up about it in that bloody tavern. Seems like every red-headed wench and her best friend has something to say.’  

‘Whatever he does in his private time is none of my concern,’ Cullen said, wishing that his voice didn’t sound quite so stiff. With any luck, Searidge would think he was being a prude.
‘And you’re playing chess with him,’ Searidge said. ‘He goes to you to give you advice all the time. Y’know, I remember that. I remember that you told the others that you were coming to visit me to consult. You remember that?"

Cullen could think of nothing at all to say, then. He had the horrible sense of tumbling through the air. Instead, he made himself sigh as though he was exasperated. He could feel the motion of his lungs pushing out against his back and shoulder muscles. It hurt. It damned him.

‘Ah well,’ Searidge said. ‘Guess I’ll be seeing you ‘round.’

It happened too quickly for Cullen to brace for it. One moment he saw the hand lifting to clap him on the back in friendly camaraderie – as Searidge often had in the past – the next he felt the blow against his already deeply bruised shoulder blades and pain exploded through his back and chest, all the way up into the back of his head. Cullen cringed, made a small, soft, pained sound.

‘Yeah,’ Searidge said, grinding his palm down into Cullen’s bruising. ‘I remember that too. Well, ‘night, Commander.’

Searidge walked away.

Cullen stared down at the wood of the fenceposts. His back flamed. He looked ahead and saw that none of the soldiers had stopped sparring.

His upper back now throbbing with pain that he didn’t awaken himself, he spun and walked after Searidge, fury pinging all the way through him.

‘Searidge,’ Cullen called out, his voice hard.

Searidge ambled to a halt and looked over his shoulder. Cullen walked past him and gestured for Searidge to follow him, heading towards the shade of a tree not that far away, nobody nearby. There was no way he’d invite Searidge into his office. Not a chance.

Standing there, by a pallet of wood scraps and offcuts of metal, Cullen placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and looked longingly to the overhang leading to the lower level of the Skyhold courtyards. But he wasn’t someone to deal with his problems by pushing them off significant heights, and he wasn’t about to become that person either. Even if it was tempting.

‘Whatever you’re driving towards,’ Cullen said, when Searidge finally joined him – his pace hadn’t sped up once, ‘I’d like to know what it is.’

Searidge’s smile was smug, and Cullen forced himself to breathe slowly through his nose, then defaulted to prayer when he realised that his rage wasn’t going anywhere at all.

‘What exactly do you think I should do about all these ‘discoveries’ you’re making?’ Cullen snapped.

‘I don’t care what you do,’ Searidge said. ‘But I’ve got some ideas about what I might do.’

Cullen stared at him, as Searidge looked up into the tree canopy and then rocked lazily on the heels of his feet, before meeting Cullen’s gaze again.

‘You’re in a pretty amazing position of power here,’ Searidge said, like he couldn’t quite believe it. ‘Always wanted to know someone with connections.’

‘Blackmail,’ Cullen spat.
‘Don’t go making it sound like that, Commander. Don’t even know what I want yet. Just know you’d probably do just about anything to have your secrets kept.’

‘I sincerely doubt your ability to keep any secrets at all,’ Cullen said. ‘You’ve already made it plain that you adore gossip, you’ve already made it clear that secrets aren’t what anyone would call your strong suit. What do you think I’ll give you in good faith, when I have absolutely none in your ability to stay silent on any matter at all?’

Searidge blinked at him, then shrugged a single shoulder again. Cullen simply stared at him, even as his brain was racing. Who would Searidge tell first? Did Cullen pretend it wasn’t true? Was the default to fall back on people knowing he didn’t sleep with anyone? Would people believe Searidge over him? Would that even be fair to Bull? Cullen wasn’t – despite everything – interested in publically decrying Bull’s interests or his practices, even if Cullen had a problem with his own associations with them.

‘Trust me,’ Searidge said, ‘you’d know if I was telling tales here.’

‘Perhaps,’ Cullen said, ‘you’ll find that most people don’t actually care in the way you want them to. Funny thing, Damhian, but that very casual attitude that allows the serving girls and more to talk openly and without fear of persecution about what Bull does with them, is the one that will see whatever tales you want to tell received without much of a blink. Oh, I’m certain there will be an uptick in the gossip around the place, but there will always be some new rumour that takes over.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Searidge said, nodding vigorously, ‘I’m totally sure. Where’s the Inquisitor at right now? She here? The Herald of Andraste will take audience with me, right?’

‘What do you want, Damhian?’ Cullen said crisply, staring at him.

‘That, actually,’ Searidge said, lip curling. ‘Just the proof that you don’t want this to happen. You can play a pretty good game but you can’t lie to me. I’ve seen you mewling for the lash, remember?’

‘Ah, I remember, this is the part of the conversation where you simply devolve into personally insulting the Commander of the Inquisition.’

‘You’re almost spot on, but if we want to get all precise and shit, this is the part of the conversation where you take it like the weak bitch you are.’

For a few seconds, Cullen mentally wrestled with the urge to break Searidge’s jaw. The one thing he’d learned over the years was that when someone kept incessantly baiting him, taking that bait never led to anything good. Still, he couldn’t keep the anger from face, his cheeks and ears going hot. Searidge’s eyes were bright, as though it were nothing more than a fun game.

‘The fact is,’ Searidge said, ‘you came out of Kinloch wanting to be hit by your fellows, and liking it. Bet you never asked for it before Kinloch, did you?’

‘What do you want, Damhian?’ Cullen snapped.

‘Maybe you were the last one alive – the last Templar living – cuz you fucking loved it so much.’

Cullen had his arm up, his fist heading towards Searidge’s face, before he could stop the instinct. With an extreme amount of will that left him with a pounding headache, he dropped his fist before it could make contact. Searidge laughed, Cullen looked out and saw that a few people had stopped to look at them. Searidge turned and then rocked back on his heels again, like a delighted child.
‘Now they’re gonna wonder what I said to make you so angry, and they’ll whisper about it, and then they’ll bleedin’ believe it a little more when I start spreading rumours.’

‘If it’s to be blackmail, at least tell me what you want,’ Cullen said, wearily.

‘Eh,’ Searidge said. ‘Where’s the fun in that? I’ll think about it for a few days and get back to you. Y’know I only agreed to all of the bullshit you wanted in the past because I thought you had connections then, don’t you? I mean, you have realised that, haven’t you? We weren’t mates. We weren’t good buddies. I thought the last Knight-Captain standing might have something worth flipping for. Well. Now you do. And you fucking owe me for making me think I enjoyed that perversion for a time. So, I’ll be seeing you, Commander.’

Searidge walked away, and Cullen stood there for a few minutes, trying to parse what had just happened, his shoulders still aching.

He swallowed, turned, forced himself to walk back up to his office. He didn’t look to see who was watching.

*

Cullen paused when he opened the door into his office.

Cole sitting in his chair, looking around the office as though deeply curious. Cullen kept his hand on the door and carefully walked into the room. He and the spirit – for all that Cole wasn’t quite a spirit either – had very little to do with each other. Though Cole had sent him letters before, which often made no sense, and Cullen couldn’t really explain why he’d kept every one.

‘Hello, Cole,’ Cullen said warily.

He still wasn’t quite sure how he felt about Cole being an official member of the Inquisition, or the fact that he wasn’t really human, or the fact that despite having had plenty of time to show his ‘true colours,’ he mostly seemed concerned with doing strange things and claiming that he was helping people by doing them. Then again, Cullen knew that some of those things actually helped people.

‘Can I help you?’ Cullen added.

Cole faced him, finally, his head ducking until his wide-brimmed hat hid his eyes. His mouth turned down at the edges.

‘He doesn’t know if he’ll see thirty,’ Cole said sadly. ‘Hoping and praying and it seems far away and he feels he is hundreds of years old and time has no meaning here. A Templar trapped and tortured. The other man with the blue eyes speaks as though he knows about all about what it was like, speaks as though he sees into the world of that trapped, tormented Templar, but he knows nothing at all, saying the words without hearing their meaning.’

Cullen pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead and thought that if he escaped the day without some lyrium withdrawal episode he’d be very surprised, at this point.

‘You know a lot about demons,’ Cole said, tipping his head back.

‘I don’t,’ Cullen said. ‘I really don’t. Now, if you’re quite done pretending to be the Commander, perhaps you might want to find your way somewhere else?’

‘You’ve learned how not to be a demon,’ Cole said. ‘But you don’t know that.’
‘Cole!’ Cullen snapped, his teeth snapping together.

‘This is why I send you letters,’ Cole said mournfully. He stood up and waited for a few seconds, and then when Cullen said nothing else, he left. Cullen spent a minute sure that he hadn’t heard Cole leave the room and now uncertain whether he’d vanished like a spirit, left through the door like a human, or if he was just there still, invisible.

* 

It wasn’t until Cullen realised that he’d lost track of time – sitting on the edge of his chair with his head in his hands – that he felt a new tendril of panic amongst all the others.

Had an hour passed? He was supposed to alert Bull. He blinked around his office, weakly reminded himself this was Skyhold, not Kinloch or Kirkwall, and forced himself to take several deep breaths. His shoulders and back seemed to scrape and scratch with every single one. For once, it was a pain he didn’t want, and it wasn’t helping him focus.

He opened the door leading to the library in the Main Hall and gazed up at the sun. It had to have been an hour. He’d failed. He’d broken the rule.

Flagging a runner, he dashed off a quick note in his office, the ink smearing:

*You wished to talk about the matter of Gerrid training and assessing Krem again. I’m free now.*

There. He watched the runner head off and shut himself back in his office. After another few minutes, he went up the stairs to his room and paced. It was late afternoon. Perhaps Bull was eating. Or drinking. Or doing anything else that didn’t justify Cullen interrupting him.

*It’s a rule. If he hates being interrupted so much, he can change the rule himself.*

Cullen blew out a breath, closed his eyes, then walked briskly to the windows facing the battlements and opened both of them. He needed air. Even lungfuls of the cold, thin mountain air was better than feeling trapped, hemmed in. He wanted to look up to the roof to see the sky, had never realised how much he’d used that touchstone to remind himself that he was in Skyhold, not Kinloch.

A conversation like the one he’d had with Searidge, followed by feeling locked into the top of a tower wasn’t doing wonders for keeping the past at bay. He walked over to the other small windows and wound them open as far as they would go, looking down into the courtyard.

It didn’t seem more than about twenty minutes later when the trapdoor was opened and Bull was peering up into Cullen’s room. Cullen stepped back from the window, where he’d been leaning over in an effort to get as close to the open air as possible. But he didn’t step away from it too much. The centre of the room didn’t beckon.

‘Hey,’ Bull said.

Cullen thought that if he was going to pretend everything was fine, he should at least make an attempt at small talk, but between panic and fury, he couldn’t manage even a simple greeting. He just stared at Bull, until Bull came to his own decision and walked up into Cullen’s room, closing the trapdoor behind him.

‘I could kill him,’ Cullen said, gripping the pommel of his sword with one hand, and trying to hide the other in folds of his cloak. Maker, he was shaking with it. And, before he could really keep the words back, he said: ‘I broke the rule. It’s been longer than an hour since I saw him.’
Bull blinked at him, then tilted his head. ‘How much longer?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen said. ‘I haven’t been paying attention to the bells, I think- I think I lost track of time. Maybe an hour and a half? Two on the outside?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, nodding. ‘Well, gotta say, you losing track of time after seeing him and looking like you want to throttle someone just kind of proves that this rule might be a good one, yeah? You did your best with trying to contact me in the timeframe, that’s all that matters.’

‘I’m sure,’ Cullen said, unable to stop the sarcasm in his tone.

‘I am sure,’ Bull said emphatically. ‘And I get to decide. Not you. It’s my rule. Now, why could you kill him?’

Cullen wanted to walk away from the window, but he needed that cold air, needed to not be in the centre of the room, wished so desperately that there were great, gaping holes in his roof. He forced himself to try and take steady breaths, for all that his lungs fought him on the matter. But hyperventilating had never helped him before, and it wasn’t going to help him now.

‘He figured it out,’ Cullen said, unable to stop the burst of laughter that followed. ‘You and I, our arrangement.’ He wants to use it to blackmail me.’

A long silence then, and Cullen saw from the way Bull’s expression had gone so carefully still, that he was masking emotions he either didn’t want Cullen to see, or wasn’t ready to show yet. Cullen knew how that worked. Maker knew he did it enough himself, that he’d tried to do it while talking to Searidge. But Cullen had no patience for it now.

‘Well?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘Have you got anything to say? Because if this is going to be as useful as me talking to myself about it, then-

‘Shit, you get mouthy when you’re stressed,’ Bull said slowly, staring at him. ‘You know it’s one of your biggest tells, yeah? Let me think for a minute, you can keep panicking away, I’m not going to stop you.’

Cullen’s teeth gritted together and he walked two steps back to the window and looked out into the courtyard, focusing on his breathing.

‘How does he know?’ Bull said finally.

‘He never believed me when I said I didn’t need it anymore,’ Cullen said, not sure how much of his voice was being snatched away by the breezes outside and how much remained in the room. But he needed to see the trees and the sky, and that trumped needing to make sense. ‘He’s- He said that there are people talking about the friendship you and I have. The chess games we’ve been playing. You coming to my office to talk to me. He said that he remembered very well what that was like, and what that meant, and then – because I was too stupid to see it coming – he clapped me on the back as he walked away and I couldn’t mask my reaction in time.’

Cullen turned away from the window and shook his head at himself, then pressed thumb and forefinger to his temples, then reached around and went to dig his fingers into the back of his neck and stopped himself before the pain in his back could shriek any louder.

‘I confronted him,’ Cullen said, running his tongue along the underside of the scar on his lip where the skin was numb. It had been so long since he’d needed to do it, and it was an unsightly habit, and he made himself stop. ‘He said- He said that we were never friends back in Kirkwall, that he’d always intended to blackmail me then, until he realised I didn’t have the contacts he wanted.’
‘Blackmail you for what?’ Bull said.

‘I asked, he wasn’t forthcoming. I asked more than once.’

‘You telegraphed your concern,’ Bull said, and the flash of anger Cullen felt then was too large to contain.

‘Do you think I’m unaware of that?’ Cullen said, turning on Bull. ‘Do you think I didn’t know that’s exactly what I was doing? It was what he was waiting for. Of course he knows that it matters, because it matters! I apologise that we haven’t all had the training that you’ve had, some of us weren’t sent to the equivalent of a qunari intelligence university. It’s not as though I didn’t try to pretend it didn’t matter. But he already knows it does. If you came up here to tell me I should have presented a better game face to him, I’m going to agree with you, and then I’m going to tell you to get out.’

Bull’s eye widened, and Cullen stared at him, thinking that he felt just as enraged now as he had when he’d given serious thought to pushing Searidge over the wall into the lower courtyard. He would have landed near the healers, at least.

‘There,’ Cullen said, staring at him, ‘is that mouthy enough for you?’

‘It’s…pretty mouthy,’ Bull said. ‘Cullen, you want to stay here? In this room? You want to get out and talk somewhere else?’

‘There’s nowhere else,’ Cullen said, his voice hoarse. ‘He just- He always has to bring up Kinloch. I can never- Maker’s breath this is absurd. It’s not even the matter at hand. He’ll start telling people, or he’ll start blackmailing me. If I go to Josephine, she’ll want to know if there’s any truth to the rumours. I can’t kill him, even if it’s likely what Leliana would suggest, because I’m not the kind of person who can justify murdering someone because someone is feeling spiteful and wants to gossip. I’m in a position where if I deny it, and the truth comes out later, I’ll be seen as a liar by the Inquisitor. Where if I don’t deny it… You can make whatever arguments you wish, Bull, but I am not…’

I cannot believe that what I want is okay to want. I am not ready to pretend that it is.

‘What does he know about Kinloch?’ Bull said, and Cullen stared at him, thinking that when Bull said he wanted to instigate a rule that Cullen contact him after a meeting with Searidge, this wasn’t how he thought it would go.

‘No,’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘You don’t get to ask about that.’

‘He’s bringing it up,’ Bull said, his voice gentling, his expression shifting from impassive to concerned. ‘Be as vague as you want, what does he know?’

‘He knows enough,’ Cullen said. ‘He’s heard…something, I don’t know, the rumours out of Kinloch were a midden of meaninglessness. But somewhere along the line, he’s picked up a shred of the truth and he knows he has. It bolsters his argument.’

‘What argument?’

‘That there’s- That there’s something wrong with me for needing what I need,’ Cullen said, gesturing between himself and Bull.

‘That’s- Okay,’ Bull said, looking like it wasn’t okay at all, even as his voice stayed careful. ‘This is a shit show. Right now, he’s probably thinking of all the things he can try and get from you. I
‘So I have time,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘A bit of time. And you’re scared of what he could do to your reputation.’

‘I don’t know how you got that impression,’ Cullen said drily.

‘Can I give you my advice, as a strategist?’

‘I can’t stop you.’

‘I asked, which means you can,’ Bull said. Then he waited, and Cullen waved his hand to indicate that Bull should go ahead.  ‘Yeah, so, your options. First, you can kill him now, which – yeah, okay, I figured you weren’t going to like that one. But it’s there. And I fucking like the sound of it. Second, you blackmail him or bribe him into staying silent. People like that can always be bought by a higher bidder, so that’s not foolproof. Third, you pre-empt his strike with your own and be honest about us seeing each other and I’ll back your play – whatever the fallout. Fourth, you pretend that you and I are just friends and that’s it, and it’s no one’s fucking business, because it isn’t anyone’s business and I will back you up, Cullen, and I am really badass at that, because I went to whatever you think a qunari intelligence university is. Or fifth, you can do whatever this is, and keep your head stuck in the sand about it.’

‘Number five,’ Cullen said, glaring at him.

Bull’s smile was grim, and he shrugged. ‘You got any better options, I’d like to hear them.’

‘I’m not murdering him,’ Cullen said. ‘Tempting though it may be.’

‘Shame,’ Bull said, smiling in that way that Cullen had seen out on the battlefield.

‘You’re not murdering him either,’ Cullen said. ‘That’s final.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I get it,’ Bull said, tipping his head back as though stretching his neck. ‘Don’t get your knickers in a knot, I’m not about to go hunt him down or anything. Who else knows about this arrangement? Could you go to Seeker Cassandra about it?’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘No one else knows.’

‘Not-’ Bull did something like a double take. ‘She’d practically figured it out at the Shrine of Dumat.’

‘She asked me,’ Cullen said, ‘I redirected. She takes me at my word.’

Bull shook his head and then laughed. ‘Cullen, you said she’s what – your closest friend? Or… something like that? You think she’s gonna judge you if she knew?’

‘She’d be honest with me, yes,’ Cullen said.

‘Ah, okay, so- Anyone who judges you negatively in this is telling the truth, and the rest of us are just what…lying? Delusional? Obtuse?’

Cullen opened his mouth, not entirely sure what he was going to say, only certain it was going to be scathing, when Bull held up his hand.
‘Shit, wait,’ Bull said, ‘I didn’t mean it. I’m mad, and I’m not mad at you. Look, so you haven’t
told her, okay. I think you could. I think it’d maybe help you, but that’s your call and you do that
on your terms. But Searidge? He’s way less interested in respecting your terms than I am, or
anyone else. I want a game plan, because that’s how I work. But we have time.’

‘We,’ Cullen said mockingly.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘We.’

_Because that’s what friends do for each other_, Cullen thought to himself, with a level of self-
directed bitterness that levelled the rest of the righteous anger he’d developed. All at once he felt
drained. This was too much to put on someone. No wonder Bull was irritated.

‘I apologise for interrupting you,’ Cullen said.

‘You followed a rule that I suggested to you,’ Bull said. ‘That you accepted, that I was happy you
accepted. Whatever I was doing, this is more important. I’m _pleased_ you sent me the note. I’ll be
super happy if you do it again in the future. Come on, sit down with me. You got that bed and
everything, and it’s way more comfortable than just standing here.’

Cullen nodded, followed Bull, sat down near his headboard and then carefully leaned his shoulder
into it, looking at the second chest where he kept all the spare food for Bull.

‘Can we send him away?’ Bull said.

‘Maybe,’ Cullen said. ‘The avenues- I’d need to talk to someone about it. They’d want to know
why. Research shows he’s a surprisingly good silk vendor. Some of the others are making a great
deal of use of him, and we don’t have any others who compare. It stops many from having to make
the trip to Orlais.’

‘Can we discredit him?’ Bull said.

‘Again, not without talking to someone,’ Cullen said. ‘Josephine, Leliana… Maker, I don’t know.
You clearly think I should have told Cassandra.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Not so much ‘should,’ I thought you did.’

‘Right,’ Cullen said, eyes shifting to look at the polished stones on the ground. The edge of the rug
that was rucked up in one place. He wanted to get down and straighten it, but it wasn’t something
that had ever bothered him before.

‘I thought we were friends,’ Cullen said, when Bull didn’t fill the silence. ‘Looking back, I don’t
know if I needed him to be one more than I needed to see what was going on.’

‘I dunno, Cullen,’ Bull said heavily. ‘Maybe it was just complicated back then. Maybe he wanted
to be your friend, maybe he wanted to use you as well, people can do both. That’s the way it is,
sometimes. Doesn’t make it okay. It’s not a black and white situation, but it doesn’t have to be for
him to be a shithead.’

Cullen laughed in spite of himself. The sound was as weak as the rest of him felt. His fingers were
numb with cold. He’d build a fire to keep him company that evening, keep the windows open,
listen to the wood crackle and pop louder than usual.

‘I thought it would fix it,’ Cullen said, feeling like an idiot, thinking that this was perhaps far over
the line when it came to being too honest. ‘I thought the rule would- That we would talk and it
would be fine. That being said, it’s never particularly fine when I try and convince Cassandra that I shouldn’t be running the Inquisition, either.’

‘I think the point is more that you’re just not doing all this shit alone, and not making the big decisions completely on your own either. It’s still shit.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said.

‘For the record, if you ever want someone to rip his balls off, I could do it with my bare hands pretty easily.’

‘I’m sure you could.’

‘He’d probably be pretty distracted then from the whole blackmail thing.’

‘I’m sure he would be,’ Cullen said.

Bull slid closer across the mattress, and then Cullen blinked when he felt fingers underneath his chin. He looked up, felt blank as Bull studied his face, looking him over.

‘Can I suggest something?’ Bull said, his thumb so careful on Cullen’s jaw.

‘Of course,’ Cullen said.

‘I think you should just float this whole thing with Seeker Cassandra, and see for yourself what she suggests. If she really thinks this is like fucking with the whole Inquisition, she’ll tell you true. And if not, I think she’ll have some ideas too. She’s savvy.’

‘She is,’ Cullen said, his voice croaking.

‘She’s your friend, too,’ Bull said. ‘She wouldn’t leave your side when you collapsed. It’s why I was pretty sure she’d figured out that you and I were…more than just colleagues, anyway.’

_But only friends_, Cullen thought, that little stone in his chest choosing that moment to throb hard, a shaft of pain through him. Cullen took a breath around it.

‘Is it a condition?’ Cullen said, meeting Bull’s gaze.

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘It’s just a thought.’

‘But you’d like it if I did this?’

Cullen held very still then, because Maker, months ago he’d managed to bury that need to please an individual so deeply that all he was left with was the need to simply do well by the Inquisition, by people, by the world as a collective. And here he was hardly thinking of what he was putting on the line, as long as it would please Bull.

‘I should know the right thing to do,’ Cullen said. ‘Without you saying so.’

‘I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do,’ Bull said, his voice more measured than before. ‘It’s just a suggestion. I liked that you contacted me. Whether you do this or not, I’m still gonna like that you did that.’

‘It was a good thing, you mean,’ Cullen said.

Bull’s fingers tightened a little on Cullen’s jaw, and Cullen didn’t realise he’d let his eyes close
until that moment. He opened them again. It was hard to meet that direct gaze.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Really. But outside of that, I want you to do what you think is right. I just…think there’s things that you’re not considering, because of people like Searidge, and maybe because of some of the shit in your past. That’s all.’

Cullen’s smile was bleak. He let his head rest more heavily in Bull’s fingers. He closed his eyes again. If he was going to be this weak around someone, it might as well be Bull, who didn’t seem to take it personally at least, or seem inclined to insult him.

‘Hey, Cullen?’ Bull whispered.

‘Yes?’

‘Can I kiss you?’

Cullen almost asked ‘now?’, but he’d almost been expecting it since Bull touched his chin. So instead he nodded, his smile turning into something more genuine. He didn’t bother opening his eyes. Only leaned into that touch and waited.

Bull’s lips were gentle against his, and Cullen could taste the faint sourness of ale when he opened his mouth. Cullen didn’t bother trying to take control of the kiss, he wanted the reassurance of it more than he wanted to assert himself. The warmth against his lips let him know just how chilled he’d become. There was still a pounding lurking at the back of his neck that threatened to become a full-blown headache, but it hadn’t arrived yet, and Cullen sighed into the kiss and ran his tongue along Bull’s lower lip, liking the way Bull’s breathing shifted at that.

The kiss never escalated beyond gentleness, and when Bull pulled back, Cullen leaned forwards and then opened his eyes and wished that there was nothing else they need do but lie down together.

‘You’re quite good at that,’ Cullen said.

‘For the record,’ Bull said slowly, ‘if you ask me to like…cane you in the next few weeks, I’m gonna say no.’

But there was a spark of humour in Bull’s eye, and Cullen laughed. Bull withdrew his hand from Cullen’s jaw after a quick caress, and Cullen leaned back into the headboard.

‘For the record,’ Cullen said, ‘I don’t want that.’

‘So what now?’ Bull said. ‘You want to keep hashing it out? Or you wanna forget for a little while? We could go down, play some chess.’

‘Or we could just sit here for a little while,’ Cullen said, wishing he’d swallowed the words before he’d said them. ‘If it doesn’t cut into your time.’

‘I’ve got time,’ Bull said, stretching his arms out behind his head before shifting and lying back on Cullen’s bed.

Cullen didn’t join him. He rested carefully against the headboard and was glad when he finally felt the breeze reaching him. He looked over Bull. Cullen licked the taste left behind on his lips, finding a hint of ale, a hint of that metallic warmth that was just Bull. The tip of his tongue skated over the underside of his scar, followed it all the way up his inner lip. Then he stopped, sighed, couldn’t decide whether he was wasting Bull’s time, or if this was companionable.
'I like your bed,' Bull said, and Cullen blinked at him.

'You do?'

'Yeah, nice and sturdy. You know why you need a sturdy bed, don’t you?'

Bull couldn’t turn to face him – his horns in the way – so Bull just grinned up at the ceiling. Cullen sighed and then laughed, thinking that even in the middle of this mess, they’d managed to make their own island. Hopefully it was like that for Bull too.

'It does seem quite sturdy,' Cullen said.

'We’ll find out,' Bull said. ‘All in good time.’

‘All in good time,’ Cullen echoed, lips lifting on a half-smile.

Bull kept grinning at the ceiling, and Cullen had the sense that maybe this wasn’t wasting Bull’s time after all.

*

There was no point waiting, since Cullen knew he was on something like a timeline now. The longer he left it, the more he knew he wouldn’t do it at all.

It was late when he knocked on Cassandra’s door. It took so long for him to hear anything at all from within the room that he thought she might be somewhere else. He felt momentarily awkward when she opened it, a softness about her face, hair sleep-mussed.

‘Oh, I- I woke you? I apologise,’ Cullen said. ‘I forget how late it is.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Cassandra said, smiling at him. ‘Come in. I was not sleeping all that well, anyway.’

‘Ah,’ Cullen said. ‘You’re sure?’

Cassandra gave him the look that meant that she wouldn’t waste her breath on something she wasn’t sure about, and Cullen entered her room. It was a small but comfortable space. Tapestries hanging at varying intervals along the wall, her armour racked, her sword in its sheath and leaning in its customary spot by her worktable. By a window she had another table and two chairs pushed neatly into place. Beside that, a sculpture of Andraste on a mid-sized bookshelf.

‘Drink?’ Cassandra said, holding up an ornate bottle of red wine. Cullen squinted at the label.

‘Maker’s breath, is that a Vint-8?’

‘The Maker’s Mercy vintage?’ Cassandra said. ‘It is. A gift passed onto me. I keep wishing for an excuse to open it. You’re a good one.’

‘Perhaps you might wish to decide if you still…wish me here after I’ve talked with you,’ Cullen said, even as he took the bottle of deep red glass and turned it in his hands. The label was old, but the ink had been waterfast. Even as bits of paper had eventually peeled back, the image of rays of light falling upon a vineyard were still plain.

‘Is everything all right?’ Cassandra said, sitting down at the small circular table and inclining her head, inviting Cullen to join her.

‘I’m not certain,’ Cullen said, offering a rueful smile. He sat, was glad that the back of the chair
didn’t come up quite high enough to press into his bruising. ‘Do you recall...at the Shrine of Dumat-’

‘Where you collapsed,’ Cassandra interjected.

‘Yes, that would be the place. Do you recall asking me if Bull and I playing chess together was- was a euphemism?’

Cullen held his breath. He knew that would be enough for her to work out what he was trying to say. She must have been still waking up, because it took longer than he expected for her eyes to widen, her back to straighten. And Cullen’s next breaths were shaky, because he’d come to value this friendship more than he had words for, and she could dash it all away with a sentence.

‘Oh,’ Cassandra said, staring at him. ‘Oh.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said nervously.

‘Well,’ Cassandra said, looking flustered.

‘It’s- I don’t really know what it is. Do you disapprove?’

‘Yes,’ Cassandra said firmly, and Cullen thought with some sense of spiralling down a very cruel vortex, that at least he’d get the mild satisfaction of being able to say something along the lines of ‘I told you so’ to Bull.

‘Right then,’ Cullen said. He stood, and Cassandra stood with him, her expression transforming to shock.

‘Where are you going?’ she said. ‘You cannot just drop this in my lap and then leave.’

‘You disapprove,’ Cullen said. ‘If you think I’m no longer fit to command the Inquisition because of it, I will of course respect your decision in all these matters. But I’m not sure I can stand to hear your judgement this evening.’

Which was ridiculous, because he hadn’t expected anything else, had he?

‘Cullen,’ Cassandra said, dragging him back into a seated position, ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. I disapprove because I am not sure this is the right time for relations – and because in my role as Seeker, I’ve been trained to believe that such relations can be a distraction from sacred duty, and perhaps because I’m angry that you lied to me. But I don’t disapprove of- Cullen, I want you to be happy. The Iron Bull, for all that he presents himself as coarse and brutal, is far more than that, you and I both know this.’

Cullen stared at her, and Cassandra stood up, waved at Cullen to stay seated and then procured two wine glasses. She decorked the bottle easily, and poured them both a significant amount of the vintage. She lifted her glass to her nose after she passed Cullen’s share over, and closed her eyes in pleasure. Cullen wouldn’t be able to smell the nuances of the wine, the lyrium had taken that away from him, but he knew it was fine stuff from the expression on her face.

‘I’m not only here to tell you... I’m in a difficult position, I’ve been placed in a difficult position by someone else,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m- I need your advice.’

Cassandra slowly put the glass of wine down and then tilted her head, waiting for him to talk.

So, shakily, Cullen began talking about the situation with Searidge. Which meant haltingly
explaining the arrangement he’d had with Searidge and studying her intensely for what he was sure would be her disapproval. Either she was as good as Bull at masking her expressions, or she was simply listening and reserving her judgement until the end.

Cullen finished one glass of wine and was well through his second large glass when he managed to trail to the end of the tale. Cassandra looked more and more angry, and Cullen sat as still as possible, waiting for her judgement.

‘How dare he?’ Cassandra said, into the silence of her room.

‘And on the matter of me…wanting to be flogged?’

‘I think it’s very strange but not really any of my business,’ Cassandra said, shaking her head like she couldn’t quite believe Cullen would even ask the question. ‘But a member of Skyhold attempting to blackmail you? Threatening your reputation? That is my business. And I think I know what to do.’

‘Cassandra,’ Cullen said, staring at her, ‘I didn’t come here for you to do anything other than give me advice.’

Cassandra lifted her eyebrows at him, then leaned back in her chair and folded her arms.

‘I’m not going to do nothing,’ Cassandra said. ‘Therefore, I must do something.’

‘Look, I appreciate-’

‘Cullen, you don’t want to hear this, I know, but this matter goes beyond you wanting to keep it secret in the way you want to keep it a secret. You will not be blackmailed. He will try and denigrate you and present you as a man without integrity, and I can ensure that when he does that, his word will be worth nothing at all. I expect I’ll only need to tell one or two people, and while I am not in the line of ruining reputations, I know at least one person who is.’

‘I don’t want anyone else to know about-’

‘You are the Commander of the Inquisition,’ Cassandra said firmly, ‘and I am its Seeker, and we together must preserve those things that keep us sane and whole. For you, it is in part whatever you are finding with The Iron Bull, yes? So we’ll protect that in a way that lets enough of the truth out to those who will not hurt you with it, and keeps your private matters private.’

Cullen stared at her and then shook his head and drained the rest of the glass of wine. When he lifted the bottle to refill his own glass, he saw how little was left. Cassandra had been pouring very full glasses then. He placed the bottle down, looked out the window of her room and saw nothing more than the shadows of a shrub shifting in the wind.

‘Cullen,’ Cassandra said, ‘trust me.’

‘Do you think it’s wrong?’ Cullen said. ‘Be honest. Do you think it’s wrong, or…sinful, that I like what I like?’

‘Why would I?’ Cassandra said, faintly incredulous. ‘The Seekers used to have a long and upstanding tradition of self-flagellation for the sake of invoking inner purpose and inner peace. Some still use that tool and use it well. The Templar Order too has its own rhetoric around the purpose of pain. And you have gone from someone who was sent to Greenfell for his own good because no one was certain you could work again, to someone who has become a Commander of the Inquisition. If you are using this tool – one that has a rich background overseen by the Maker.
himself – then, I may find it odd, because this is the first I’m hearing of it, but I do not think it is wrong or sinful.’

‘You are too kind,’ Cullen said carefully.

Cassandra snorted. ‘Find someone else for your platitudes, that is just what I think. Would I have initially imagined you and The Iron Bull to be a good pairing? No, of course not. It bothers me more than you never thought to tell me. Cullen, I know about the lyrium, I have – I think – seen you close to your worst. Are we not friends?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, rubbing at his face. ‘I didn’t want to risk that.’

‘I know I am prudish at times, and that people always seem so shocked when I care about what Varric writes-’

‘You kept that a secret for a long time,’ Cullen said, looking over his fingers and staring at her.

Cassandra laughed then, then shook her head.

‘Cullen, I understand what it is to want to hide that side of yourself from everyone else. You have your evidence that I’ve done it.’

‘With a series of books,’ Cullen said, his hand dropping. ‘That almost everyone in Skyhold has read, apparently.’

‘My point is that I’m not sure what you could say that would ‘risk the friendship’ now, unless you want to change alliance, or something equally absurd. It certainly isn’t going to be that you and The Iron Bull are making time for each other and that you care for each other beyond friendship.’

‘Don’t tell him that,’ Cullen said tiredly. ‘It’s not ‘beyond friendship’ for him.’

Cassandra hesitated, then reached out and placed her hand over Cullen’s where it was resting on the table.

‘Cullen…’ Cassandra said.

‘Oh, believe me, I know it’s stupid,’ Cullen said, his other hand dropping from his face. ‘As if we have time for affairs of the heart anyway. It’s best this way.’

‘He cares about you,’ Cassandra said. ‘You didn’t see him at the Shrine of Dumat after your collapse. He tried to hide it from others, but there was no hiding the fact that he almost didn’t leave your side until you woke. He cares, Cullen.’

Cullen didn’t doubt that Bull cared at all, that wasn’t the issue at hand. But he turned his hand palm up and nodded at Cassandra like what she’d said had helped him. Because what else was there to do?

A long silence then, and Cassandra finished off her own glass.

‘Please be discreet,’ Cullen said, frowning, ‘with whomever you’re going to tell. Will it be the Herald?’

‘No,’ Cassandra said, ‘I think that’s unnecessary, as it stands. Josephine can keep confidence, and she knows how to shatter a reputation and the avenues with which to best execute that. I’ll not have a worm in the apple, poisoning people against each other, if I can help it. Especially one who seeks
to harm you, Cullen. I know you don’t like it, but our friendship isn’t based off me doing things that you like.’

‘Now that I think about it,’ Cullen said, smiling a little, ‘that seems like an error on my part.’

‘Doesn’t it?’ Cassandra said, smiling at him. ‘But you can leave this matter with me.’

Cullen didn’t want someone’s reputation destroyed. He didn’t want this underhanded machination, a way of dealing with it that was unfamiliar and lacked any honesty. But he knew he couldn’t argue Cassandra out of a decision like this once she’d made up her mind, and truthfully there was some relief in simply knowing that Bull wasn’t the only one who disliked what Searidge was doing.

‘Thank you,’ Cullen said, swallowing. ‘Truly.’

‘Truly?’ Cassandra said. ‘Thank you for telling me. It bothers me that a situation like this was what forced your hand. But I’m grateful you told me. And I know you well enough to know that you could have just as stubbornly dug in and waited until the situation became truly disastrous.’

‘That does seem like something I’d do,’ Cullen said. ‘It was the plan of action until someone else convinced me otherwise.’

‘The Iron Bull?’ Cassandra said. She smiled. ‘He’s good for you.’

Her chuckle, when it came, was low. She lifted the bottle of Vint-8 and peered into it, as though it was hiding great mysteries.

‘What?’ Cullen said.

‘I just never thought there’d come a day where I’d say those words, and I’m wondering if we’re further along than I realised.’

She put the bottle down. She looked relaxed, except for the careworn smile on her face. It was far later than Cullen had realised when he’d come to visit, and he shifted his hand towards her, offering it if she wanted to grasp it.

‘And you?’ Cullen said. ‘You said you weren’t sleeping well?’

‘Oh, Cullen, you don’t want to hear about my-’

‘Can we not do this?’ Cullen said. ‘Can you just pretend that everything you’ve just said to me on the matter of sharing, I’ve now repeated back to you eloquently, and that way you can simply tell me what’s bothering you?’

Cassandra scowled at him, but she dropped her hand into Cullen’s easily and rolled her eyes: at him or at herself, Cullen couldn’t tell.

‘If I must,’ Cassandra said.

It wasn’t until much later, the dawn light not yet creeping over the mountains but beginning to pale the sky, that Cullen realised he’d managed to avoid an episode of more intense lyrium withdrawal. He had a headache, his hands were cold, but he felt about as average as he always felt. He looked over in the direction of the Herald’s Rest as he made his way back to his office, thinking that perhaps it wouldn’t be him saying ‘I told you so’ to Bull after all. He nursed the hard stone of love in his chest all the way back to his room, and, laying upon his bed, rested his hands over his heart.
and thought that he was a fool.
It was a Friday afternoon when Cullen heard the door open and shut, and was too busy to look up. He was too overwhelmed with paperwork to even acknowledge the nods that most people gave him.

But he heard no further footsteps, no one was crossing the room, which meant they’d stopped in his office. Likely for his attention. Then, his nostrils flared on the faintest hint of a refined perfume, and he took a silent breath before looking up.

‘Madame de Fer,’ Cullen said, wondering what she might want. The fact was, he couldn’t recall that she’d actually ever been in his office before. From the disparaging way she was looking around, it seemed like she wasn’t happy to be there. ‘Can I do anything for you?’

‘No, my dear,’ Vivienne said, looking over the straw-filled dummies with knife holes in them and judging them as unsuitable with a single arch of an eyebrow. ‘I’m here with regards to what I can do for you. But I will not have this discussion in your hovel of an office.’

‘It’s not-’

Vivienne directed him an arch look and Cullen felt the words dry up in his throat.

‘Most of your soldiers may not notice,’ Vivienne continued, then sighed as though put upon. ‘The chevaliers, however… As it stands, we have a matter of some seriousness to discuss. Do you have anywhere suitable?’

Curious and wary as to what Vivienne might want to discuss with him – they tended to run in vastly different circles after all – he thought quickly and put his fountain pen down.

‘I’d be happy to go to your rooms, or somewhere you prefer?’ Cullen said. ‘Or my room, perhaps. It's been recently renovated. Though it may not be to your exacting standards.’

‘Oh, Commander Rutherford, you say that as though my standards are so lofty, when in point of fact, it is yours that have dropped so low. I don’t recall that even the most base of the Circles cultivated this sort of carelessness? But this is to be a private conversation about a pressing matter and I’d like to have it sooner rather than later, your room will suffice.’
‘Right,’ Cullen said, standing, gesturing to the wooden stairs leading up to the open trapdoor.

He followed her, thoughts scattering. It had been a difficult day. He’d woken with his joints locked up more stiffly than usual, dreams of red lyrium and the past in his mind, distressed sounds resting upon his tongue. The bruising from the flogging was fading slowly, the dull ache of it now too dull to be anything louder than what he dealt with in the day to day. It was no longer useful as a distraction, though he still liked to look upon the bruises in the mirror in the evening, and remember how amazing it had been to reach that crescendo of pain with someone who would care for him afterwards.

Once in his room, Vivienne moved to the small circular table and the two chairs that Cullen had found time to requisition. There was a chess board already there, and he flushed when she studied it.

‘Do you play?’ Cullen said awkwardly.

Vivienne looked at him like he was a hereto undiscovered animal. Then she pulled out one of the chairs and sat on the edge if it, squinting around his room.

There was nothing out of place. His bed was made with military precision. His room was aired out all the time, so none of the smells of him cold-sweating into his sheets remained.

‘I’m afraid I can’t offer you any refreshments,’ Cullen said, frowning.

In truth, Vivienne put him on edge. She had an ability he’d never been able to develop – being able to eviscerate with words instead of swords. Though he suspected she’d be quite handy with one of those too. People able to flay the skin off someone with a well-chosen sentence, well, those people reminded him of Uldred, Searidge, others. He knew it wasn’t fair, but he wasn’t accustomed to feeling defenceless in the day to day, and tried to avoid the sensation.

‘While that would be pleasant,’ Vivienne said, with a faint smile, ‘I am not here to talk lightly over tea. I am here to discuss the current quandary with which you find yourself, regarding one Damhian Searidge.’

His body was already cold, but a veneer of ice seemed to coat him throughout. He would have preferred to have had a moment of pure shock, to not understand what was happening. But he understood all too well. Cassandra went to Josephine, and Josephine went to Vivienne. Cullen felt as though he was waiting for the noose to be drawn about his neck, because he was certain she would be so much better at excoriating him for his tastes than Searidge could ever be.

‘Ah,’ Cullen said.

Vivienne placed her index finger on the King piece closest to her and tilted it.

‘It cannot be borne,’ Vivienne said, ‘this affront to the Inquisition.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Cullen said, unable to stop the sudden flush of shame he felt. ‘I understand.’

Vivienne’s eyes narrowed and she gave him an odd look. Her lips pinched at the corners and she set the piece back in place. Cullen thought that she appeared how a Queen might appear, wondered if it was Searidge’s silks that were used for her clothing.

‘I meant Searidge,’ Vivienne said. ‘I’m here to give you a choice, because Lady Montilyet impressed upon me that you may not approve of my methods. But I am here to tell you that it is a very small matter to set about a series of events that would destroy the legitimacy of his word long
before he ever spoke up about yourself and The Iron Bull.’

‘There’s no qualified silk merchant to replace him,’ Cullen said, his voice not as confident as he wanted it to be. His heart was hammering. There were faint spots in the corners of his vision. He wasn’t anywhere near to fainting, but he was certainly beginning to feel quite numb. He wasn’t ready to deal with this. The last thing he’d felt sure of was telling Bull that he’d chosen option number five, to keep his head buried in the sand about it all.

Even going to Cassandra had felt like something that hadn’t quite happened, the day after.

‘You care so much about the quality of silks we have here at Skyhold?’ Vivienne said, looking amused. ‘Do you hoard it without a single idea of what to do with it all?’

Cullen’s lips pulled up in spite of himself, and then he had the strangest sense that she was trying to put him at ease. Which didn’t seem like something she had ever done in the past.

‘I thought…’ Cullen hedged. ‘You’re always making a mockery of my coat.’

Vivienne laughed, then tipped the King piece back once more. Her laugh was indulgent, the way a parent might laugh at a sweet but misguided child.

‘Commander Rutherford, your coat is iconic, but I’d no sooner see you discard it than you would throw away your sword. But it is also a monstrosity, and I cannot be seen to approve of it in public. I know you have not the faintest idea of how these things operate, but I can assure you it’s less about you than you think. Now, to matters at hand, I understand of course that this is a deeply private matter.’

‘I…expected to be speaking to Josephine about it.’

‘Indeed. Josephine is many things, but she and I determined the best course of action and decided we would rely on my leverage rather than hers. Her methods are what we might call more “peaceable.’” Whereas I hear about someone wishing to do harm to the Commander of the Inquisition and The Iron Bull – who is a darling friend of mine – and I will not leave anything that looks like peace in my wake. Searidge will have to leave Skyhold once I’m through with his reputation.’

Cullen remembered Bull once calling Vivienne a ‘keeper.’ Remembered Bull talking about how she sometimes couldn’t sleep at night, that she often spent her time in the library. But Bull spoke of her with great fondness, and Cullen felt himself taking a deep, silent breath. He hoped Bull was right, because Cullen was sure she could destroy almost anyone if she set her mind to it. Still, she was doing such great work in refining and resolving the corruption issues within Circles. She was one of the few vocal supporters of the Templar Order who was also a mage, and also in a position of significant power.

He was willing to admit that just as he’d jumped to conclusions about Cassandra judging him negatively for what he did with Bull, he may be doing the same with Vivienne.

But he was so tired of ugly surprises, he couldn’t convince himself to lower his guard.

‘It’s…rather severe to ruin someone’s reputation, don’t you think?’ Cullen said.

‘A man willing to shatter another man for the sake of gaining wealth, fame or notoriety is one who must expect to be shattered in return when he shows his hand too early,’ Vivienne said, her face all seriousness now. Her dark brown gaze pinned him, and Cullen realised that she wanted to do this, she wanted to ruin Searidge’s reputation. Then, he knew that the only thing that would sway her
from her path was if he said ‘no.’

‘I went to Cassandra seeking advice, not aid,’ Cullen said, not looking away. ‘But it is aid she offered, and it is aid I need. I do not have the tools to solve this on my own. I’d be grateful for any course of action you recommend.’

‘Wise,’ Vivienne said, leaning back in the chair and studying him for a few moments. ‘Very wise.’

‘How…how will you do this?’

‘You can expect a sudden uptick in outrageous rumours regarding the Inquisitor’s companions and advisors over the next two weeks,’ Vivienne said. ‘The rumours will be small, silly things at first, and become more sinister with time. At first no one will know where they’re coming from, and then they’ll all be traced back to Damhian Searidge, who will – I am certain – profess his innocence at so slandering the Inquisitor and so many other members of the Inquisition. By the time he opens his mouth to suggest anything awry with yourself and The Iron Bull, it will be made painfully clear that he only came to Skyhold to undermine us from within. He will no longer be welcome, and those truly allied to us will eschew his services. His silk trade will topple.’

It was horrifying to hear how easy she made it sound. But Cullen knew it was no different to standing in the War Room and talking about how best to hem in the enemy in order to slay them. At least Searidge would escape Skyhold with his life.

Whatever guilt Cullen felt over the matter he could just stack onto the unsteady tower of the rest of his guilt, and hope that it would hold.

For his own survival, and for the reputation of the Inquisition, this was the right course. But Searidge’s judgement of Cullen’s character, well, Cullen still didn’t believe that to be false. It seemed a harsh thing to do to a man who Cullen was certain he’d somehow damaged in asking Searidge to beat him.

‘And the silks?’ Cullen said.

‘Why does that matter to you?’ Vivienne said, a perplexed smile on her face. ‘Darling, have you not noticed that we have done perfectly well for silk before Searidge came along? Those of us who need it are not wanting for it. The dregs of society threatens you with blackmail, and you fret about the silk trade? I think perhaps something else is concerning you, but that’s neither here nor there. Now that I have your consent in the matter, it is time for me to take my leave.’

‘Is there anything…I can do?’ Cullen said, as Vivienne stood gracefully. ‘To help?’

‘Indeed there is,’ Vivienne said. ‘When you first hear tell of the rumours, pretend you are just as outraged and shocked as everyone else. Do not point fingers, do not suggest the name Searidge to anyone. Let this unfold as it must, do not rush it.’

As she crossed the room to leave, Cullen realised he didn’t want to leave it as it was. He cleared his throat.

‘Madame de Fer? I am…grateful. Truly.’

‘Of course, my dear,’ Vivienne said. ‘Think nothing of the favour you’ll owe me.’

Cullen laughed then, caught the twinkle in her eye, even as he knew she was completely serious about the favour.
‘Cullen?’ Vivienne said, pausing in her descent down the stairs. Cullen startled, he wasn’t used to hearing his first name from her lips.

‘Yes?’ he said, staring at her.

‘The Iron Bull is a gentleman of the highest order, for all that he is not made for The Grand Game. You have the makings of being quite a gentleman too, if you stay true to your course. But if – in the interim – I hear that you’ve hurt him in any way that goes beyond that of what is acceptable within friendship or relationship, what I do to Damhian Searidge will be nothing compared to what I will do to you.’

Cullen blinked at her. For a few seconds he couldn’t say anything at all. He vaguely recalled wanting to be there to say those sorts of things to anyone who seriously courted Mia. To hear the equivalent from the First Enchanter was bracing to say the least.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, swallowing. ‘Well. I don’t want to hurt him.’

_I am glad beyond bearing that you don’t know about the elfroot and Shrine of Dumat situation._ He swallowed again.

‘See that you don’t, my dear,’ she said, smiling at him. Then, with a slight incline of her head in farewell, she left and closed the trapdoor behind her, leaving Cullen in his room staring at the wall, wondering what on Thedas had just happened.

*

The next time he and Bull played chess in the courtyard, Cullen was late due to a training session that had run over and apologised profusely. When Bull waved it off, Cullen looked at him suspiciously and Bull only said:

‘I was late too, life’s fucking hectic.’

‘You can say that again,’ Cullen said.

All sources indicated that soon – days or weeks – they would be confronting Corypheus. They hadn’t even captured or confronted Samson yet, but they’d done a lot of damage to Corypheus’ forces. A charged, expectant atmosphere was picking up all around Skyhold. Skirmishes were breaking out, people unable to keep grasp of their own tensions and fears. Every day, members of the military crowded around the training arena and other sectors for sparring, overspilling onto the lawn, wanting to brush up on their skills and purge agitation.

Too many people were getting drunk at night. Too many people were scared. Josephine made a comment in the War Room that it was important to give an impression of calm and containment, and then she’d tilted her head and said:

‘Even if we are like ducks on a pond with our legs paddling furiously, it’s important that others don’t _see_ it.’

Cullen couldn’t agree more.

The courtyard was far more deserted than usual. Aside from a group of people bunched near the door that led to the shrine of Andraste, no one else was playing chess.

Cullen and Bull played silently for some time, and then conversation picked up in bits and pieces, moving to military matters. Before Cullen was aware of intending to do it, he told Bull about
speaking to Cassandra. That naturally led to him talking about his encounter with Vivienne. He relayed it as clinically as possible, unable to stop himself from looking about nervously. But no one was listening in, and he felt it was important to brief Bull about it.

He was becoming aware that some of his deeply held thoughts regarding what he did with Bull were...coloured severely with his Kinloch experiences. But beyond that, he didn’t know what to do. Getting a better idea of the logic of it all – where it came from, why his reaction was so extreme, why he rejected it so severely – didn’t undo the problem at all. If anything, it only made it more frustrating. He was played by his emotions and his fears, and angry that he couldn’t simply stop that through sheer willpower.

Still, he hoped that by talking about it with Bull, he was somehow giving the situation a chance to change. As much as he hated change, he knew it was necessary. Life might have been more comfortable for him when he was on the lyrium, but it hadn’t been for those he had sworn oaths to protect.

Even knowing that didn’t stop his whole body from yearning for lyrium, day after day. Hands shaking, fingers cold, convinced he’d do everything better. Feeling hope and dread if the day ever came where the Inquisitor told him to take the lyrium, told him that it would make them more likely to win against Corypheus.

‘Some of the rumours are already floating,’ Bull said. ‘It’s a good plan. Better than I would’ve come up with. Though I still think killing him or ripping his balls off was a great plan of attack.’

Cullen shook his head, still trying to stretch his mind around the Qun rules and their current match. Bull was playing a tough game and the strategy eluded him. He knew Bull would explain it all afterwards, but right now, Cullen was trying to grasp it without much success. He wouldn’t come close to winning this game.

Bull didn’t ask how Cullen felt about talking to Cassandra, or even Vivienne. Cullen was grateful for it. It meant this could be about the chess, about their camaraderie, and that it wouldn’t have to be about Bull constantly checking in on him. It was a relief to know that Bull could contain his ‘mother henning.’

As the game went on, Cullen found himself distracted not by thoughts of the upcoming confrontation with Corypheus, but with Bull. It was little things. The way the mid-afternoon light caught his horns, or how deftly he moved the chess pieces. It was in the contained force of him when he leaned forwards to stare at the chessboard like it would reveal its secrets if he glared the board into submission. It was in the fact that Cullen could catch the scent of him, clean but metallic, leather and oil, whatever wax he worked into the hinges of his leg brace.

Cullen licked at dry lips and gave up all hope of trying to win the game.

He thought of Vivienne’s warning. He knew he had the capacity to hurt Bull, but not perhaps in the way Vivienne meant. Cullen already felt the fracture lines in his own heart. He wasn’t heartbroken, not yet, but it would happen the day he realised – deep down – that what he wished would truly never happen. As it was, a part of him still held onto hope. He rued his romantic nature. That he could be so sentimental.

Bull was offering him so much, Cullen couldn’t expect more from him. Bull already gave of his time, his compassion, his strength. Cullen wasn’t blind, he could see that there was affection there, the connection that sometimes came between two people who shared a war as well as their bodies.

For Bull’s sake, he didn’t want to be that person always silently pressuring the other into more than
they were willing to give. He’d seen it happen before, and it had struck him as a deeply selfish thing to put on a friend or companion, to privilege one’s own emotions over the feelings of another, in such a way that they would become aware of it and feel burdened to respond.

Even so, Cullen wanted more. Even though love wasn’t something he expected to be reciprocated, there was so much more they hadn’t yet done. Cullen felt that if he was going to end up heartbroken anyway, he wanted to make the most of it, to take what Bull offered and value that for what it was.

‘Bull?’ Cullen said, moving his pawn without thinking about it, ignoring the way Bull clucked his tongue in disappointment.

‘You’ve given up already?’ Bull said. ‘That’s not like you.’

But when Bull looked up, he stilled at whatever he saw on Cullen’s face.

‘What is it?’ Bull said.

‘Do you think-? I know we have the… sessions. And the chess games. But what of the other thing?’

Bull knew what he was talking about. Because his gaze sharpened. He looked predatory, and not for some win on the board. Cullen’s chest tightened, his heart skipped a beat. His fingers dug into his knee, and he thought that he dared much. Not because Bull would say no, but because he knew what it could do to him.

But he lived his life on uncertainties. He had no idea how he was going to survive after the Inquisition without Corypheus to focus on. He had joked, bleakly, about the end of the world. But they didn’t understand it wasn’t just Corypheus that worried him. If they survived, if they all survived, what would he have left?

What would be there to stop him from just destroying himself with lyrium? Penance paid to the world, what would be left?

He sensed that there was an end of some kind coming, even if it wasn’t the apocalypse everyone feared. He didn’t want to go to his grave not knowing what it would be like to be consumed by someone, in that carnal way. Specifically, he needed to know what it would be like to know that with Bull.

‘End times do tend to bring it out in people,’ Bull said, but he didn’t look away.

‘I’ve thought about it,’ Cullen said, ‘before now. It’s only that… You’ve not asked about it.’

‘I get the sense that you don’t have the world’s highest libido,’ Bull said quietly, and he was the one who looked around to make sure no one was listening in. Cullen wasn’t used to that. Someone else caring for his confidentiality. ‘But it’s also that it’s been a rough time for you, for a lot of reasons, I don’t want to push.’

‘But you would?’ Cullen said. ‘If my- ah if my libido were higher? If I’d given you more signs?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, eye glittering. ‘Yeah, I would’ve.’

‘I’m saying you can,’ Cullen said, clearing his throat. ‘We can. At some point. I think about it.’

‘I want your time,’ Bull said firmly. ‘Not just thirty minutes, or an hour. I want control, and I want your time.’
Cullen blinked at him, looked back down at the board. Was it his turn? Was it Bull’s? He didn’t even know what strategy he was looking at. The pieces had shifted around and he’d not been paying any attention at all.

Time, like with the flogging sessions. Bull always wanted time. Cullen wasn’t used to sex at all, but what little experience he’d had with blowjobs – it had always been so hasty. Sex was something grabbed like a hunk of bread on the run. To be consumed as quickly as possible, forgotten about within seconds. Bull was an aristocrat when it came to sensuality. He made the most of it. Stretched it out. Devoured every second as though it was new.

Cullen wanted to know what that was like too, even as it threatened to drown him.

‘You can have it,’ Cullen said, looking up again.

‘Really?’ Bull said, looking doubtful. ‘Everyone knows how hard you’re working. Not leaving your office until two or three in the morning at the moment, are you? Waking up before dawn. You’re sleeping what – two, three hours a night?”

‘And you?’ Cullen said. ‘Because you get so much rest.’

‘Point,’ Bull said, smiling crookedly. ‘When, then? I’ve gotta get out into the field tomorrow for about a week. But then I’m back. Everything might be going to shit by then.’

‘The Saturday you’re back,’ Cullen said. ‘I can- If you’re free.’

‘That sounds very doable,’ Bull said.

Cullen swallowed again, and – as though Bull knew exactly how nervous he was – Bull grinned in a way that suggested he wanted to consume just as much as Cullen wanted to be consumed.

*  

The rumours were beginning to stretch beyond the Herald’s Rest. They were ridiculous: Sera secretly a member of The Grand Game and informant to Celene, Varric trading in red lyrium despite vehemently denying it, Leliana having a fetish for stuffed animal toys, Vivienne secretly allied to Corypheus and perhaps even anti-mage. The rumours sparked more outrage and amusement than anything. People wanted to know where the rumours were coming from, wondering what the source would come up with next.

Cullen found it amusing that Vivienne included herself in the list of those targeted for rumours. Wondered if she’d warned Leliana about the stuffed toy fetish before letting that loose into the world.

All rumours originated from the Herald’s Rest, and that was all anyone knew. Cullen didn’t have to pretend he had no time to listen to the speculation surrounding them, because he was tremendously busy.

His life was now a balancing act between lyrium withdrawals and an almost constant headache, delegating tasks, looking over paperwork, watching training sequences and correcting both Knight-Captains and warriors alike, and responding to corrections himself whenever he put himself through his paces. If anyone ever noticed that he never used the abilities that the lyrium had given him, no one commented on it. But he suspected a few of the Templars may have deciphered for themselves that he no longer took it, and he wondered if they judged him for it.

On the Friday when Bull returned, Cullen didn’t have the time to be on tenterhooks. Nervousness
found him in fluttering breaths, but then he would return to his responsibilities. He only hoped he could get enough work shored away that he could ensure the time that Bull wanted without feeling the crushing weight of all his responsibilities on Saturday evening.

Friday evening, Cullen made a point of trying to get a good night’s rest; not that he knew what that looked like anymore. He lay there in his bed, clean-shaven and bathed, looking up at the ceiling and thinking that he felt like a teenager might feel. He wouldn’t know. When he was a teenager, he yearned to become a Templar and had missed the puppy love and lusting part of his development.

His cock remained soft when he curled his fingers around it. He spread his knees and then bent them, biting at the inside of his lip at the pain in his fingers and the trails of pleasure that he could feel even as he was not yet erect. He thought of the flogging, that black flogger, the sound of it, the pain, and he thought of the time Bull had pushed Cullen’s head down onto his cock, and his breathing was shallow as blood filled his length.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d touched himself like this. Truthfully, he didn’t even care to make himself spill now. He didn’t wish to sleep in unclean sheets and it seemed important – foolishly sentimental even – to save that for Bull.

He’d never thought that his difficulties in achieving orgasm were, in part, that he needed an element of pain alongside pleasure. He wasn’t sure what that made him, even as the words ‘demon-touched’ floated in his mind.

Still, to touch himself like this, with care and attention, lazily jacking his cock instead of pursuing his pleasure in a mercenary fashion that was often deeply unsatisfying… It was tender, and strange. He remembered Bull saying that he went back to his room and beat off after flogging Cullen. Did he still do that? Did inflicting pain give him the same pleasure that receiving it gave Cullen?

Could it be that simple?

A huge breath shuddered out of Cullen’s lungs and he stopped moving his hand, just holding himself, feeling like his knuckles were creaking.

All he knew was that whatever he expected from Saturday evening, Bull would make it more than that. Cullen was still half-hard when he drifted to sleep.

* 

‘Noticed you locked all the doors except the one I came in through, so I locked it,’ Bull said. ‘You don’t worry what people will say?’

‘Not especially,’ Cullen said, looking over from where he was standing by the window. He’d been increasingly nervous all evening. ‘I’m ill sometimes. I’ll lock all the doors then, refuse visitors. The Inquisitor, Cassandra and Knight-Captain Briony have a key if it’s urgent, but they all know I’m fairly useless when the headaches strike in such a severe manner. They’ll think it’s that.’

‘Those headaches make you lie in, in the morning?’ Bull said, a slow smile creeping over his face.

‘I…’ Cullen watched as Bull slid the bolt through the trapdoor, further locking them in. There was no reason for that. All the other doors were locked. ‘I suppose…sometimes.’

Bull had the same sack of equipment he always did – not that Cullen actually knew the entire contents of the sack, and he suspected it changed each time they met. Bull walked to Cullen’s bed and set it down where he normally lined up Cullen’s boots.
'Did you- Was your excursion good?' Cullen said.

'Excursion,' Bull said, laughing. 'Wasn’t quite the ‘holiday’ we were hoping for. Nah, we got our shit done. Killed the bad guys, won some loot, got back in time for this. So yeah, it was good. The word ‘good’ out of bounds tonight? For you?'

'Uh,' Cullen said, as Bull turned to him and casually started unbuckling the belts he wore across his torso. ‘It’s…I don’t think so. Maker, I’m- You must find my behaviour so absurd.’

'Why?' Bull said, as though he truly didn’t know. Or perhaps he just didn’t care. ‘I know you’re not used to this. What, you’re gonna pretend that this is something you do every day? Firstly, I’d know that wasn’t the truth. Secondly, I’ve always liked watching you squirm. Something about a big guy like you getting all breathless around me. Not gonna lie. Kind of dig it.’

Cullen’s cheeks burned. He looked around his own room, thinking that every time Bull was in it, it didn’t feel like Cullen’s space anymore. It felt like it belonged to Bull. Cullen didn’t even mind.

'Anyway,’ Bull continued. ‘The word ‘good,’ I’ll go easy. You’ve still got your watchword. I hope you’re ready for a long night.’

Cullen stared at him. Thought he should be undressing. Were they still going to spar naked? Were they still going to even spar?

Was it silly to want that so much?

‘Look at you,’ Bull said, undoing the wingnuts on his leg brace, eye raking Cullen from top to bottom and then back up again. ‘Why’re you all the way over there? Why you need the view out that window when you’ve got me?’

Cullen rolled his eyes, but wound the window shut and walked over. Walked until he was facing Bull, who looked down at him even as he slid off his pants. Even though Bull was the one completely naked but for his eyepatch, Cullen was the one who felt exposed. There was no mistaking who held the balance of power here.

‘It’s easier when it’s just the flogging, isn’t it?’ Bull said, his voice low. Cullen blinked when Bull placed his hands on the buttons at the top of Cullen’s shirt and started undoing them. Cullen looked down, then mechanically lifted his own hands to assist. Bull gently brushed his hands away, making it clear that he wanted to do this himself.

‘Yes, that’s easier,’ Cullen said.

Then, Bull was sliding Cullen’s shirt off and it fell with a gentle sound onto the stone floor. When Bull knelt down, grunted at some stiff pain, Cullen opened his mouth to say it wasn’t necessary. But the words died in his throat, even as Bull tapped his calf insistently, encouraging Cullen to lift his leg so Bull could slide his boot off.

‘Here’s how it’s going to go,’ Bull said, removing Cullen’s other boot and then wrapping both his hands around Cullen’s ankles. Bull’s grip was strong, reminded Cullen of the ankle cuffs when he’d been caned. Cullen’s breathing came faster. ‘We’re going to fight on this bed. And I’m going to win.’

‘You’re so sure,’ Cullen said, the words meant to be droll, even as there wasn’t quite enough air behind them.

Bull looked up, and there was nothing subservient about him kneeling there, squeezing Cullen’s
ankles tightly enough that they were starting to ache.

‘I’m fucking sure,’ Bull said. His lips lifted in a half-smile. ‘But you’re welcome to give it your best shot. Burn yourself out before the big event. You all tired and unresisting.’

Cullen blinked down at him and thought that Bull had some ability to make even the most threatening words sound attractive. Cullen gulped, Bull’s half-smile became a whole one.

‘You want me tired?’ Cullen said, disbelieving.

‘I want control,’ Bull said. ‘And you can give whatever you want to me tonight, but I’m taking more. You’ve asked me what I’ve wanted in the past. That’s what I want. To take it from you. I’m going to hear you beg tonight, little lion. And maybe, if we’re both lucky, you’re gonna like it so much you cry a little.’

Cullen’s whole body was turning cold and hot by turns. Everything Bull was saying, Cullen thought now would be a perfect time to fight back with words, to prove that he wasn’t going to go down easy. He wasn’t. He’d fight. But he didn’t think he’d be fighting to win. It scared him that he wanted it, because a part of him still remembered a time when he’d thought he’d had complete control over being flogged with a cat o’ nine – it still felt strange, even wrong, to leave so much in Bull’s hands.

‘You’re so quiet tonight,’ Bull said, his smile becoming a grin. ‘You can’t even pretend you don’t want it, can you?’

‘Who says the things that you say?’ Cullen said. ‘Who in their right mind would say that maybe if we’re both lucky, I’ll cry?’

‘I fucking do,’ Bull said, reaching up and hooking his fingers into Cullen’s loose pants and pulling. Cullen’s cock was already a little hard and Bull ignored it when it was exposed to the air. Cullen felt like maybe he’d been half-hard all day, which wasn’t something he’d ever had to deal with before.

Just like that, Cullen was naked. Without really thinking it through, he lifted a hand towards Bull’s face and then traced the join where horn met skin and then scraped his nails over the thick keratin. His hand moved back and then down over Bull’s forehead, and then he was cupping Bull’s cheek and thinking even this – even this – with Bull kneeling before him and Cullen touching him as though in some parody of benediction: even this didn’t change the power that Bull held.

‘I can’t believe we’re going to fight first,’ Cullen said, laughing a little.

‘We can do whatever the fuck we want,’ Bull said, standing. ‘Cuz there’s no way this has to go, and if it’s fun, why not? Speaking of, we should probably get on that. Come on. Kneel on the bed and face me.’

Cullen crawled onto his bed as Bull did, feeling ridiculous, glad that Bull was just as willing to embarrass himself, thinking that he’d never sparred naked before. He’d never sparrow naked on a bed before. And then they were kneeling, facing each other, and as Bull settled his stance, Cullen found himself doing the same. Then – his heart beating with more purpose – he felt his fingers curl as though ready to grip and pull and push. Grappling stance.

‘Nothing to the neck, groin or face,’ Bull said. ‘Give me a good run, little lion.’

‘I am not the kind of person to not give my all,’ Cullen said, feeling steadier now than he had since Bull arrived. Wrestling he could do. Even naked, apparently.
'Right then,' Bull said, his own fingers curling. ‘On the count of three?’

‘Your count,’ Cullen said, thinking that if Bull forgot to keep his horns out of the way, Cullen would go for them again.

Bull counted them off, and Cullen expected him to lunge immediately, but instead he only rose a little on his knees, gave himself some more traction. Cullen was small, and kneeling meant he couldn’t easily rely on dodging and ducking. The element of speed was gone. But the mattress was an unsteady ground, and there were moves focused on shifting balance, on-

Bull lunged.

Cullen ducked automatically, and where Bull tried to get an arm underneath Cullen’s, Cullen went for Bull’s weaker leg – the bounce he was relying on for movement was also what would destabilise him if Cullen could turn his own weight against him.

He expected things to be over in seconds, but Cullen had never fought a fair fight, and Bull didn’t seem to know the same complement or style of moves that Cullen did. A grunt as Cullen managed to use Bull’s momentum to tip him towards the footboard, wriggling out from underneath, grabbing at Bull’s wrist and almost laughing at the size of his hand around it, at the idea that he could pin Bull’s arm behind his back.

He gave it up just as Bull showed that all that musculature wasn’t for nothing, yanking his arm free with no effort at all.

‘Why you always gotta go for the places I’ve been injured?’ Bull said, laughing. He found a steadier position. ‘You’re a mean little fighter. Maybe I need that knee.’

‘Oh, please,’ Cullen said, scurrying backwards from Bull’s reaching hands until he thudded against the headboard, a pillow falling off the bed.

‘Unless you wanna ride me all night, I need that knee,’ Bull said.

Cullen’s mind went blank. ‘You-

He had to stop falling for that. But even as Bull rushed him, Cullen got up on one leg and grit his teeth as he took a risk, going for the upward jut of a horn while Bull went low for his hips. Even as his cheeks were burning from vague embarrassment, he got a solid grip and yanked, then yanked again, listening to the hiss of breath between Bull’s teeth with some satisfaction, even as he was thrown backwards into the headboard.

The bed didn’t move a single inch, but Cullen’s breath was knocked out of him. He still hadn’t let go of the horn though, yanking on it, remembering Bull saying that it jarred all the way down his spine.

‘Koslun’s hairy balls, Cullen,’ Bull gritted out.

A rush of fierce triumph rushed through him, even though Bull had the upper hand, and he turned his head for the arm that was trying to pin his shoulder back to the wood of the headboard and bit down hard.

‘You fight…’ Bull gasped, taking the bite without flinching away, trying to jerk his horn out of Cullen’s grip, ‘like you’ve lived on the streets all your life.’

Cullen opened his mouth long enough to bite down again over some fresh skin, digging his teeth
in, tasting soap and sweat and that metallic scent come to life on his tongue. He wondered how strong Bull’s taste really was, given how much the lyrium had taken from him. But his senses felt alive now, and he scraped teeth over Bull’s skin, grinning when Bull stopped jerking his horn and looked down at him.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, reaching down with his other hand and grabbing him by the side. A single turning movement, and Cullen was pinned down on his back and his hand had been torn free from Bull’s horn, palm grazed from a friction burn; he’d been holding on so tightly.

It didn’t kick in how thoroughly pinned Cullen was until about a minute or two later, when he was exhausting himself and Bull was simply kneeling above him and absorbing the weak blows that Cullen could land. His palm burned.

Bull dropped his hips, and Cullen went still, feeling Bull’s cock against his thigh. He was breathing loudly, surprised that Bull’s breathing was so steady.

Bull’s other hand shifted slowly, fingertips trailing across his collarbone and then up, until fingers slid around his throat and Cullen’s teeth grit together and he growled, instinctively trying to jerk free of that grip.

Fingers tightened, and while it wasn’t a choking grip, it wasn’t forgiving either.

‘You think you’re not done fighting,’ Bull said, ‘but you are.’

Cullen said nothing at all, but he let his response shine through on his face. He couldn’t mask it.

‘You are,’ Bull promised. ‘Even if you’re not ready yet.’

A shakiness then, but Cullen still stared stubbornly back. His hand went to Bull’s wrist at his throat, and he dug his fingers in, looked for weak points, tugged. It was ineffective, of course it was, but it made his point.

When Bull lowered his head, Cullen didn’t know what he expected. A whispered threat, perhaps. A bite. Something else. Instead, lips lightly brushed his. The touch was almost feathery, before coming back again. But Cullen could feel the smile on Bull’s face, even as Bull was too close for him to see it. He could feel the way Bull was so confident in the power he wielded that he didn’t need to do more than hold Cullen by the throat, and barely kiss him.

‘What if I don’t yield?’ Cullen whispered, when Bull’s fingers flexed against his throat.

‘That’s not gonna be a problem,’ Bull said, his voice just as soft. It seemed unexpected. Bull didn’t look or talk like the kind of person who could whisper. But then he’d survived Seheron, and people weren’t likely to do that if they were accidentally loud when they didn’t want to be.

‘Isn’t it?’ Cullen said.

‘Nope,’ Bull said, still matching that tone. ‘You’ll be telling me you yield by the end of the night. So glare at me. Talk back. I’m even gonna leave you ungagged.’

Cullen knew that Bull would have felt him swallowing against the palm of his hand.

‘You fight dirty, sure,’ Bull said, letting go of Cullen’s shoulder, his hand moving down Cullen’s chest. ‘But look…’

Cullen thought Bull was going to touch his cock, which was harder than before. Instead, he ducked
between the cramped space of Cullen’s legs and Cullen tried to jam his knees together when he realised where Bull was headed. It was too late, Bull’s wrist and forearm thick enough to give him the leverage he needed, fingers encircling Cullen’s balls, echoing the grip around Cullen’s throat. Not enough to hurt, but enough to be unforgiving.

He may have found his release from a combination of the pain and pleasure Bull had evoked last time, but that didn’t mean it still wasn’t threatening, that it still didn’t make his heart leap into his throat.

‘All quiet now, aren’t you?’ Bull said, squeezing a little. ‘Hold still for me, just like that. That’s what I want, okay?’

_That’s what I want, okay?_ The words wrapped around him, so that even as Bull slid both his hands away and then moved across the bed to fetch the sack on the floor, Cullen only turned his head to watch Bull move. He could still feel the sensation of fingers holding him in place.

Bull returned with a length of golden rope. It looked expensive, and was clearly not made for the everyday. Then he saw a blindfold – different to the transparent strip of black cloth Bull usually used – and frowned.

Bull straddled Cullen’s thighs.

‘A blindfold,’ Cullen said, mouth dry.

‘What?’ Bull said lightly. ‘Turnabout is fair play and all that. Now lift your head for me.’

Cullen hesitated long enough that Bull slid his hand beneath Cullen’s head and lifted. He didn’t look annoyed or bothered to have to do it, to have the order disobeyed, but Cullen wanted to please, wanted to make sure he didn’t reject everything out of hand just because someone else was telling him to do it.

The blindfold was completely opaque, and Cullen’s breathing hitched when he realised there were two raised leather patches that fit neatly over his eyes, blocking out all light. He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a harsh exhale.

‘Steady,’ Bull said. ‘Steady now.’

‘It’s different,’ Cullen said.

‘I know,’ Bull said. But he didn’t stop, and he secured it behind Cullen’s head so that it didn’t move. ‘I’m gonna ask you _not_ to pull this off. If you don’t want it on, you’re gonna have to use the watchword, or ask me very, very nicely.’

‘I…’ The leather just touched Cullen’s closed eyelids. He couldn’t even comfortably open his eyes. ‘Yes.’

‘Sit up,’ Bull said, briefly stroking his hand down Cullen’s upper arm. ‘Sit up for me.’

Bull guided him up even as Cullen shifted, feeling disoriented already. He stopped moving his arm when he realised he was reaching up to remove the blindfold. His arm hung still, and then he dropped it by his side again.

‘So you like hurting me,’ Cullen said, ‘and you like to watch me squirm. Do you like this part too?’

‘The part where you’re a little scared?’ Bull said, his voice almost a purr. ‘Yep.’
‘Maker,’ Cullen breathed, then bit his lip when he realised that Bull was sliding both of Cullen’s arms behind his back. Then, he was shifting, moving so that he was behind Cullen, arranging his arms so they were bent at right angles, hands clasping his own forearms.

He felt the slither of soft, cool rope over his skin and jolted forwards.

‘Nope,’ Bull said, ‘hold still.’

‘You’re tying me up?’ Cullen said, tilting his head as though it would somehow help him see the situation better. Even during most of their floggings, Cullen had always been able to move his whole body. Even when he was caned, he could have reached down and unbuckled the cuffs around his ankles himself.

‘I did say that you were gonna yield to me.’

‘Yes, but…’

The rope looped around his arms at different points. At his upper arms, then again just above his elbow, then his forearms anchored together, then again near his wrists. By the time Bull was done, Cullen’s shoulders were aching slightly, even though the rope itself was comfortable. He could move his hands, but he couldn’t move his wrists. He tried testing the bonds as subtly as possible, and then, tested them more obviously.

‘Bull…’

‘Breathe for me,’ Bull said. ‘You look so, so hot like this.’

Cullen felt weak then. He knew bondage could be a part of Bull’s bedroom games, but that had never appealed to him in the same way that experiencing pain did. He found it novel at best, frightening at worst. But hearing the approval in Bull’s voice loosened a knot in his chest.

Bull had him secured, holding him by his forearms, pulling him back until Cullen’s head hit the top of Bull’s chest. Cullen was hardly paying attention to his breathing. He tried to shift his arms again, his nostrils flared.

Arms moved around him, until hands rested flat on his chest. Then, those hands shifted, became nails digging into his skin, dragging down unimpeded, causing lines of burning to spring up. Cullen gasped, arched, didn’t know if he was arching into the touch or arching to get away. The scratches happened again, then again, and then just as Cullen was getting used to it, Bull shifted and grabbed his arms, tipping him towards the bed.

Cullen resisted automatically, but with a hand pushing him down, one at his chest bracing him, and no ability to get his arms free – he couldn’t stop the descent.

‘Wait-’

‘No,’ Bull said. ‘Turn your head to the side. It’ll be more comfortable.’

Cullen did that, then was in the rather undignified position of being on his knees, chest down, shoulders touching the bed. Bull was behind him, a hand still on his arms, making sure that Cullen wouldn’t shift position. Cullen opened his mouth to try and catch his breath, to stop it from becoming panicked. His cheeks and ears burned, his chest felt hot from the scratches.

Bull’s other hand palmed the curve of Cullen’s ass, and Cullen turned his face into the bed and didn’t care about what was more comfortable. Maker, Bull would be able to see just about
everything. He’d been kneeling with his legs slightly spread. Despite the nerves that prickled all the way through him, his cock didn’t seem to be getting the memo. It wasn’t as hard as before, but it was still willing. Cullen turned his head to the side again, wishing he could see.

‘See,’ Bull said, rubbing a circle into Cullen’s lower back, ‘you yield so nicely for me, even when you don’t think you do. Who else are you doing this for? I think no one, not ever. You’re all nervous and tense and shit, but you’re playing along, seeing it through because I bet you trust, just enough, that I might give you something you want.’

‘That… That does seem to be… how it goes, with you,’ Cullen said, his voice breaking.

‘You ever been eaten out before?’

‘I-’

Cullen’s shoulders shifted, the rope holding him firm.

‘You…’ Cullen added, thinking that new syllable would somehow unlock a sentence. Every other sentence he tried to think of started with a single word before falling away into a hollow nothingness. He couldn’t even decide if he wanted it, because he didn’t know. Eventually he managed: ‘You can’t.’

‘Really?’ Bull said, sceptically. ‘Cuz it seems to me like I’m right here and you’re not gonna be able to a damned thing about it except let me into you.’

Cullen pushed his face back into the blanket just in time to muffle the faint, helpless sound he made.

Then, fingers were spreading his ass cheeks, opening him to the cool air of his room. Cullen pressed his lips together into thin lines, wished he could curl his fingers into the bed, could only grab at himself. Bull shifted behind him, and then Cullen felt breathing. Against him. Right there.

He had no idea that the skin that Bull had exposed was so sensitive. He’d never really thought before what it would feel like to feel his own hole spasm, tense and relax and tense again, and know that someone else would see it. Would keep him in place for it. This was nothing like facing a wall and being able to hide his reactions from the pain until the very end. He jerked at the ropes, and then grunted when he felt cool air blown directly over him, deliberately.

He’d heard soldiers talk about this. Heard them talk about how good it could be. Heard some of the more lascivious talk about how good it tasted, how raw and real and true.

Bull kissed the curve of his ass first. Lips only. Then a swipe of tongue. Then a faint scraping of teeth. Cullen turned his face to the side to catch his breath. He thought of Bull calling him ‘skittish’ months ago, wished he could be the kind of person to simply accept this as his due.

What if he didn’t even like it?

He knew he was overthinking, even as the kisses turned into affectionate bites, and then biting that skirted on the edge of painful. He couldn’t stop the racing of his thoughts as Bull’s fingers kept him spread – skin stretched – and his mouth moved closer to its destination. Or what Cullen assumed was his destination. He could feel the scratch and scrape of stubble – short enough to sometimes sting, which meant Bull had trimmed his beard at some point.

Biting became lips rubbing over him again, trailing through patches wet with saliva. Became a tongue licking a stripe between his ass cheeks and yet somehow lifting before making contact with
Cullen’s hole. Cullen’s breath shuddered out of him because the skin was so sensitive. How could he live with a part of his body for so long and not know that? He raked his bottom teeth over his top lip several times, and then jolted when he felt another gust of cool air.

‘Look at that little thing,’ Bull said, and Cullen felt like he’d catch fire with embarrassment if he could. ‘Hard to imagine anything’s gonna fit in there. But I love a challenge.’

A hiccup of laughter from Cullen’s chest before he could help himself, and Bull kissed him gently on the curve of his ass in response.

For some reason, Cullen thought Bull was done. So when Bull leaned back in and started lapping over his twitching entrance, Cullen couldn’t think to stop the sound that burst out of him. He didn’t even have a word for it. His arms tensed, his fingers splayed. The overthinking continued, but his thoughts tumbled over and over themselves until words were nothing but jargon and broken syllables. In between the mess of his thoughts, sensations wriggled into him. Warmth in his lower back and a tightness in his balls and his cock. He knew he wasn’t close to coming, but this held him in a state of arousal he wasn’t used to being able to achieve on his own.

Fingers dug into the meat of his ass, the licking varied from strokes with the flat of Bull’s tongue, to pointed jabs that didn’t hurt, but always felt mildly shocking each time.

Then, as minutes passed and Cullen began to get used to something he wasn’t sure anyone ever could – breathing shakily through the sensation of it – Bull’s tongue pierced him. Pushed in.

Cullen couldn’t stop himself from shifting hard in the bonds then, not because it hurt, but because he wanted to stretch his arms forward, wanted to dig his fingers into blankets and the mattress. His breathing was heavier, and he could feel his hips shaking, his legs moving as though he didn’t know whether to spread them further or try and hide from the intensity of it.

He could hear it too, sounding about as filthy as the blowjob Cullen had given Bull. The sounds were wet, lewd. Every now and then Bull grunted, or made a low groan of appreciation, and Cullen liked those moments, ached for them. Every one allayed the fear he had that Bull wasn’t enjoying himself, and every one made him feel that even bound and unable to do more than try and keep track of his breathing, he was still pleasing Bull.

It was mattering more and more, and Cullen didn’t have the heart to fight it. Not when it felt so good.

Bull’s tongue began jabbing deeper, and Cullen’s breathing hitched. He was surprised when one of Bull’s hands moved away from spreading him open, could feel how it meant Bull had less access. Then fingers wrapped around his cock, only briefly, enough that Cullen had his head turned to the side and his mouth open in an attempt to stop sounds from spilling. Then those fingers moved to his balls – circling the top of them – and pulled downwards gently, but inexorably.

‘Shit.’ The word surprised from his throat. Bull laughed into his skin, the amusement gusting against his ass, and Bull kept pulling. Enough that it went from feeling good, to a vague threat, to a promise of the pain he could cause if he really wanted to. Combined with the pleasure of Bull’s tongue – invasive but not harming – Cullen couldn’t keep track of his own senses. In spite of himself, he moaned, hips jerking in minute movements. He couldn’t tell if he was pushing back, or trying to get away from that steel grip.

When Bull withdrew his tongue, Cullen made a sound of want and despair that tore something open inside of him. Bull hushed him, rubbed a circle into his back and brushed one of his hands. The fingers around his balls were still pulling, and an ache had bloomed, building like a bruise at
the base of his cock, at the bottom of his spine, and in a sudden bitterness in his throat.

‘I…’ Cullen sucked down a breath and his legs shifted unconsciously. ‘I can’t.’

‘Shhh,’ Bull said again, and rested his palm flat on Cullen’s back. He stopped pulling, but he was still holding Cullen’s balls in place, pulled down from his body, the pain of it still spiralling out. ‘Breathe for me.’

‘I’d be dead if I wasn’t,’ Cullen snapped, and then he groaned, because he was as hard as ever.

‘Breathe for me,’ Bull said. ‘Come on. Nice deep breaths.’

Cullen tried, felt the bruising ache of Bull’s grip expand with it, made a pathetic sound into the blanket and spread his legs wide, lowered his hips to stop some of that unbearable tension in his skin.

Bull chuckled, lowered his hand until the tension was wound tight once more. The hand on Cullen’s back started rubbing circles into his skin again, and Cullen struggled weakly against the rope holding him, wanting his arms free. But Bull hushed him, hushed him again, until Cullen settled. Though he made a point of not taking ‘nice deep breaths,’ because he suspected Bull just wanted him to feel the pain even more.

‘It hurts,’ Cullen said, knowing that the words were futile. It wasn’t only that it hurt, it was that it alarmed him that it made him hard, it was that Cullen knew what it was like to take an injury to the groin and the sensations played with the edges of that horror. It scared him. It wasn’t like being flogged. It forced something to the surface, some vulnerable thing he didn’t have a word for.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, the fingers at his back trailing down now, a thumb pushing flat and firm between the seam of his ass and dragging down. Cullen exhaled as though his breath was falling out of him like a heavy weight. ‘Just seeing how much you’ll take for me. You still wanna fight me?’

‘No,’ Cullen choked out. But he grit his teeth together all the same. If Bull didn’t have that grip on him…

‘Liar,’ Bull said. ‘You just wait, you’ll stop fighting me. I won’t even need a flogger.’

‘I preferred what you were doing before,’ Cullen said, and then hissed when Bull’s hand twisted his balls very slightly.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said enthusiastically. ‘You taste amazing. Don’t worry. I’m not done with you. I just like this part too.’

‘The part where you’re a complete ass,’ Cullen said, and he sighed in relief when Bull laughed. Bull’s fingers eased away from Cullen’s balls, tickled across the flesh leading to his ass, and then gripped a handful of ass cheek in each hand. Then, his hands slid over Cullen’s back, avoiding the scar that Cullen didn’t like anyone to touch, until Bull bent over Cullen’s back and had his hands rubbing Cullen’s upper arms. Touching rope, skin, trailing fingers over the backs of Cullen’s hands.

‘You’re so handsome, like this,’ Bull said. ‘So hot. You should be in ropes all the time.’

‘Funny, I think I’ve had enemies wish the same thing,’ Cullen said, a faint glimmer of uneasiness moving through him at being called ‘handsome.’ That’s what people said when they wanted something.

‘Item number six,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice, ‘I really like the way
Bull still gives me compliments even though I’m kinda terrible at accepting them and am pretty damned graceless about it.’

A pause, and then Bull said: ‘You’re beautiful.’

Cullen swallowed, the molars of his top and bottom jaw slid across each other. He could feel the ache of it in his jaw.

‘Even like this, when you want to fight, you’re still so good for me.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘You’ve had your fun.’

‘Maybe I tied you up so I could be nice to you with impunity,’ Bull said lightly. ‘Maybe now I get to mother hen you as much as I fucking want.’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘Maker, you can’t just…do what you did, with your mouth, and then think- You can’t-’

‘I admire it, y’know, how you fight. All the time. All those times I think you’re a stubborn little shit- You know, my Tama used to say – stubbornness is just strength not always pointed in the right direction. So strong, little lion, aren’t you?’

‘Bull...’ Cullen said, in clear warning. The uneasiness had expanded, even as his cock stayed hard, his heart pounding in some strange mix of arousal and fear and trepidation and warmth. He wanted Bull to shut up. He wanted to grab the words in his hands and feast on them, except Bull had tied his arms together, and Cullen couldn’t help but remember another time when he’d been trapped, at someone’s mercy, and they’d praised him and turned that praise into horror. ‘Please...’

‘Shhh,’ Bull said, ‘I know. You hate this part.’

*I need this part,* Cullen thought miserably.

‘Even though you fucking need it,’ Bull said gently.

‘Respectfully, fuck you,’ Cullen said, as flatly as he could manage, because for all Bull could go on about how they both weren’t mind-readers, there were times when Bull pressed a little too hard on exactly what Cullen was thinking. Those moments of being known so completely, they weren’t a comfort.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, ‘I’m saving that up for you.’

Bull’s hands rubbing over Cullen’s skin, soothing him, exciting his nerves, keeping him in the moment. Cullen’s mouth made a clicking sound as he tried to lick saliva into the dry corners of his mouth. He poked his tongue at the underside of the scar on his lip. He was shivering. The room wasn’t cold.

Bull’s nearness kept him anchored, stopped him from saying the watchword. And, as though Bull knew that too, he didn’t move away. Even his head was close to Cullen’s head, his horns pointing down, just touching the blankets.

‘You’re so good for me,’ Bull breathed. ‘You think you can yield now?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, laughing weakly.

‘You will though,’ Bull said. ‘You will.’
‘How do you know?’

Was it because Cullen always yielded to someone he wanted to please? Was it because Bull saw through whatever defences Cullen had in place, and knew the truth of him? That fundamental weakness? Was it because Bull could see how much Cullen just wanted to surrender whatever he could to Bull, to see what would happen, even as he was sure it was a destructive impulse?

‘Because you want to, Cullen,’ Bull said, voice pressing into the back of Cullen’s hair. Two hands pressed flat by Cullen’s shoulders, dipping the mattress, making Cullen feel like he was sinking. ‘Because you’re tired and fed up and maybe you just want to stop fighting for a night. You’ve trusted me with that before, and you can do it now, even without a flogger.’

Lips pressed against the side of Cullen’s face.

‘Yield to me, Cullen,’ Bull said. ‘You can keep fighting if you really want to, but do you really want to?’

Cullen’s nostrils flared. He pulled in a deep breath – what felt like the first one of the night.

He thought of how a part of him hungered for this, was growing addicted to it. Thought about addiction, and how it didn’t seem to matter what it was: lyrium, flogging, someone being kind to him, approval – he would find a way to destroy himself for it.

That hard stone in his chest was larger than usual, hurting on every inhale. Wasn’t it what the songs talked about it? The poetry? Surrendering one’s heart to love? It wasn’t only that Bull wanted him to stop fighting, it was what that meant. It was more than just yielding for an evening. If he did it once and found himself returned whole at the end of it, how much more would he love Bull? How much more would he need what Bull offered?

But even when it all turned to dust, even though it would end, what he gained from this he could use. It would break him, certainly, but hadn’t every other thing? Being a Templar, the truth of the Circles, the lyrium, past infatuation, the situation with Searidge. Cullen was no stranger to finding himself shattered and existing in pieces while reassembling himself as best as he could. He dreaded having to do it again, but perhaps – at least tonight – he could pretend that rebuilding was easy, that it would be worth this, no matter what happened.

It wasn’t that he decided not to fight. In the end his surrender came in a loosening of his limbs, arching his head back as best as he could without his arms to brace himself, so that he could gently press the back of his head to Bull’s chin. It came in the decision to allow the possibility that Bull knew what was best, would treat him well, wouldn’t harm him as others had in his moments of openness. It came in the decision to feel the fear and love at the same time, know the terror of it, and trust it anyway.

‘All right,’ Cullen whispered, feeling as though he was exposing himself beyond simple nakedness, as though Bull might not ever know what it cost for Cullen to offer this with hope in his heart. ‘I yield.’
New tag: clamps, anal sex, fingering. There’s also a return to CBT. I’ve added pining as a tag too. Because why not.

This chapter killed me. Oh my god.

Cullen didn’t expect to be untied, and as he quietly reeled over what he’d just admitted – even if Bull only ever took the words at their surface meaning – he found it odd to have the rope removed. Bull stayed close, offering a constant, warm presence. Cullen closed his eyes and didn’t protest, because even though he already missed the rope, a part of this process was surely trusting that Bull would return him back to himself at the end of it. He’d done it every other time, after all.

He’d liked being able to struggle against something. The ropes made him uneasy, but they gave him something to fight against – something that wasn’t another person, that wasn’t scraping his fingers raw against the wall, that wasn’t lashing at someone with words.

‘Your shoulders are gonna ache a bit,’ Bull said. ‘You’re not used to this, and I dunno, I don’t think the arthritis is in your shoulders yet, but better to be safe than sorry. Don’t worry, we’re not done with the ropes.’

‘I don’t have arthritis,’ Cullen said quietly, the fire in his voice gone. The soreness in his fingers mocked him.

‘Don’t you?’ Bull said, sounding surprised. ‘Could’ve fooled me.’

‘Myself, actually,’ Cullen said.

Cullen was surprised to feel fingers gently touching the back of his head, trailing through his hair, an acknowledgement of something that Cullen would rather not think about. Some lies he didn’t tell to Bull, he needed them for himself.

Bull was right, his shoulders did ache. Even as he gingerly shifted his arms, the pain was scratchy and grating. He made a huffing laugh, a single, despairing breath, and Bull’s fingers were there pressing carefully into the joints. But the pain receded all too quickly, and Cullen missed that too as the ache started to fade into something that tuned into the background.

‘I like it,’ Cullen said, swallowing, thinking that his mouth was going to be dry all night at this rate.

‘What’s that?’ Bull said, as he smoothed his hand down Cullen’s back and ended with his broad hand cupping Cullen’s ass.

‘When it hurts.’

‘No,’ Bull said, sounding scandalised. ‘You?’ And then, before Cullen could react to that, Bull added: ‘I like it too. Well, not the hurting part. I can only handle that in small doses. The hurting you part though? I’m here for that. You don’t think we’re done, do you? You have no idea what
I’ve got planned for you, little lion.’

‘You know what they say about theatre shows and plays that are talked up, don’t you? Always fail to impress.’

A light slap on his ass then, and Cullen startled, but it didn’t really hurt. Just the accent of a sting, and he was smiling into the blankets, feeling giddy and strange, because he was still as mouthy as ever, and yet he could tell the difference between this and the quality of surrender he’d offered in the past.

‘I’m gonna turn you over onto your back,’ Bull said. ‘And we should probably get you facing the headboard and on some pillows. Might as well make you comfortable before making you uncomfortable.’

Cullen made a faint sound that substituted for having to say anything. He could still feel the echo of Bull’s tongue moving over his ass, still feel the places where the ropes had bound him. When Bull bodily shifted him, Cullen only moved enough to help, to make sure he wasn’t a dead weight. Then a thumb smoothed over his forehead, then underneath the curve of the shaped blindfold.

Then it smoothed over his lips, and Cullen opened his mouth automatically, not to kiss or lick, but to bite. Bull, surprisingly, let him. So Cullen’s teeth closed carefully – almost protectively – over Bull’s thumb. His tongue slid over what he’d captured, and then, because his arms were free, he raised his hand and captured Bull’s wrist, holding him in place. Lines of fire dug into his chest, and Cullen’s mouth opened on a silent cry. He’d not been expecting it, and Bull’s blunt fingers scraped over his skin, returning to start all over again.

Bull’s thumb slid deeper into his mouth, and Cullen closed his lips again, made a faint sound, kept his teeth away now. He curled the underside of his tongue around the pad of Bull’s thumb, listened to the rumbling sound of approval that Bull made and felt like he was sinking into it.

The hand at Cullen’s chest disappeared, then came up by his head, picked up one of the pillows that Cullen wasn’t resting on.

‘Lift your hips,’ Bull said. ‘Let’s get you on display.’

Bull’s thumb stayed right in Cullen’s mouth, and Cullen thought of saying something, but Bull would already know that Cullen found this awkward. His nostrils flared on a sigh and he lifted his hips, wincing when he felt the pillow slide under, propping him up. His knees bent together automatically and Bull didn’t pull them apart, but rubbed briefly over the scratches on his chest in reassurance.

Then, Bull’s thumb slid free of Cullen’s mouth, he was moving across the bed. Cullen heard the sound of the sack being lifted. Something heavy dropping on the bed. Something else falling onto the bed. Then the sound of ropes slithering again. Cullen pressed his lips together, anticipation making his heart beat faster.

Hands manipulated his arms with the same carefulness as before. Then, what felt like a broad leather cuff placed around each of his wrists, instead of the ropes themselves.

‘So you don’t bruise,’ Bull said, threading rope through metal rings through the cuffs.

‘Thank you,’ Cullen said, wondering if this meant that Bull didn’t expect him to take any elfroot afterwards.

The ropes were wound through more than one ring on the cuffs, secured to the sturdy bedposts, so
that Cullen’s arms were spread up and back, baring his armpits, stretching his torso. Cullen squirmed a little to feel that stretch in his muscles.

‘You feel any real numbness or pins and needles in your hands, tell me, yeah?’

‘Okay,’ Cullen said, flexing his fingers.

Cullen heard the sound of a pouch being unbuttoned, the kind of buttons that made a sharp, popping sound as every one was undone, ratcheting up the tension in Cullen’s limbs.

Cullen jolted when he felt the sensation of many small objects raining down on top of him, falling onto the blankets either side of him. They didn’t hurt or stick to him, and they were cold. He shifted his arms, absently wanting to touch them, but he could do nothing more but strain weakly against the ropes.

‘Open your mouth for me,’ Bull said. ‘Stick your tongue out. I’ll let you see if you can guess what these babies are.’

A hesitation, and Cullen opened his mouth, then slid his tongue forward. He clenched his fingers on the rope that stretched over his palms, waited. He thought of how he would have likely just refused this, if Bull had asked him, months ago. But the last time Bull had told Cullen to open his mouth, the rewards had been great. Though he suspected this wasn’t leading towards a blowjob.

Cullen concentrated when he felt something cold, oddly shaped. It was like a very smooth pebble, but it was clearly shaped in two parts. Then Bull’s fingertips brushed over Cullen’s tongue as he turned whatever it was, and Cullen tasted metal, perhaps steel. A wire connecting the two pieces together. His eyebrows furrowed and he thought he might have a vague idea what it was, but it didn’t make any sense. He tipped his head back, withdrew his tongue, and Bull shifted the object back so Cullen could speak.

‘A…kind of clothespin? A small one? What’s it made of?’

‘It’s called a clamp,’ Bull said, a smile in his voice. ‘And resin. It’s made of resin.’

‘You- So not for clothing then, I imagine,’ Cullen said, feet shifting uncertainly on the blankets.

‘Nope,’ Bull said. ‘Here, let me give you a demonstration. Remember your watchword?’

‘Not likely to forget it.’

‘Good,’ Bull said, placing warmth and emphasis on the word so that Cullen shivered, felt pleased for something so simple. A hand rested steady on his chest, flat and broad, and then Cullen felt the clamp move whisper soft over the taut skin of his armpit. Cullen bit his top lip, turned his head towards it.

The hand on Cullen’s chest shifted, pinched up a bit of the skin, and Cullen then turned his head away, because that skin was sensitive. Dread and excitement tangled fiercely, he had no idea how to brace himself for this.

The clamp was closed around the bit of skin in stages. At first hardly at all, and then enough that Cullen could feel the pain of it, gripping him tight – enough that Cullen thought it was securely attached and Bull was just keeping his fingers on it to see how Cullen reacted. When Bull took his fingers away, the full grip found him and he grit his teeth together, hissing, because it felt like it was cutting into him. Felt like it was pinching right through his skin.
‘You’re fine,’ Bull said, ‘they won’t harm you.’

‘It’s not…cutting through?’ Cullen said, turning his head towards it again. The pain wasn’t like the flogger, there and back again, a rhythmic rise and fall. It was simply there, and building, and he pressed his lips together. His wrist jerked at the ropes, as though to make the skin less tight, the feeling of it lessen.

‘I promise,’ Bull said. ‘They have a solid grip, but they don’t break the skin. Might bruise a little.’

Cullen made a faint sound, acknowledgement or frustration, and waited as Bull seemed to be waiting. It definitely wasn’t severe enough to warrant the watchword, but it was different to anything else he’d known. He breathed through his nose, felt the pain ride him up to some peak, and then it plateaued and evened out. Just like that, the pain became almost background noise.

Cullen’s lips went slack and he shuddered out a long breath. It was good. Different, but still good.

Then he felt Bull pick another one up from the bed and remembered just how many had fallen over him, and his legs drew up to his chest in alarm.

‘Steady,’ Bull said, gently pushing Cullen’s legs back down. ‘You’ve got this. Though I s’pose it’d be mean of me if I didn’t say now they hurt more coming off than they do going on.’

Cullen nodded, doubtful, and let his legs go back to a more relaxed, bent position. Then felt the next clamp running over his skin and tilted his head back, because he wasn’t used to being on his back like this and receiving pain. Wasn’t accustomed to the way a part of him wanted it – wanted to see how much he could take and bear – when another part of him wanted to sweep them all off the bed and hear them clatter to the floor.

The next one was placed just below the first, millimetres of skin separating them, and Cullen kept his lips pressed together and didn’t make a sound. He held his breath for long moments, then tried to breathe through it. That rise of pain, knowing – hoping – that there would be a plateau, a point where it would fade.

As he found that plateau, Bull pinched up some skin on Cullen’s other armpit and attached the clamp quickly. No gentle attachment this time.

Cullen groaned, turned his head into his shoulder. Then grunted when another was attached just beneath it – mirroring the position of the clamps on the other side. He’d had no time to adjust to that rise of pain before another fell in step behind it and his fingers splayed, reaching for something.

Fingers brushed gently over his nipples, sending faint threads of pleasure through him. Among the pain, it was sharper, almost too much, but he stayed as still for it as he could. Focused instead on his breathing, on the pain, of what it was like to be embedded in his body so firmly.

It took him a few moments of breathing shakily through the pleasure of having his nipples plucked to small points, when he realised why Bull was doing that.

‘Bull…’ Cullen said, unable to keep the wariness out of his tone.

‘Some people love clamps,’ Bull said, ‘but most of them have less tension in the wire. These ones are probably the meanest I’ve got. Made special. I think you’re gonna have this sort of weird love-hate relationship with these. But you’re gonna look so amazing in them.’

‘Really?’ Cullen said, scepticism and need warring together.
‘You have no idea how amazing,’ Bull said, the fervency in his voice making Cullen shiver. A part of him settled in response to it, and he waited, worrying the inside of his bottom lip with his teeth.

When the clamp attached to his right nipple, his back arched a little, but half of it was over-reacting in anticipation of the pain. The fact was, after clamps had been attached to the sensitive, stretched skin of his armpits, this was…worse by comparison, but not as bad as Cullen had been expecting. He sank back to the bed with a heavy exhale, breathing through the pain. He was growing used to it now. That steady rise, that plateau, and then a noise of pain in the back of his mind that paradoxically kept him anchored, sent him floating.

The grip never eased, so the pain communicated with him constantly.

‘Ask me for the next one,’ Bull said quietly. Then Bull was arcing over him, kissing him firmly, tongue sliding into his mouth, exploring slowly, finding the sore spot that Cullen had bitten into the inside of his mouth. Cullen swallowed the sound that wanted to burst from his throat at that, and instead arched up into Bull’s body, felt his cock heavy against his torso, arched higher.

Bull groaned, pressed down, and then lifted his head and breathed against Cullen’s mouth.

‘Ask me,’ Bull growled.

‘Can I- Can I have the next clamp?’ Cullen said, thinking that if there was a way to drown in someone else’s will, Cullen was finding it.

‘What’s the magic word?’ Bull said, licking wetly, broadly over Cullen’s mouth. The move had painted his lips with saliva, made Cullen feel dirty, owned.

‘Please,’ Cullen whispered. ‘Please?’

‘You’re so good,’ Bull said. ‘How someone hasn’t snapped you up yet, I’ll never fucking know.’

‘I’ve been…busy,’ Cullen said, feeling dazed. ‘With work.’

For some reason, that made Bull chuckle, but the laugh wasn’t mean-spirited, so Cullen found himself hardly caring. Then, hard plastic against his other nipple and Cullen wanted to turn his head away to manage the pain – but Bull would be able to see him anyway. Be able to see what Cullen wanted to hide. So instead he kept his face still, his mouth opening.

Bull’s lips sealed over his the moment the clamp snapped closed over his sensitive skin, captured the hoarse sound that Cullen made. Bit down into Cullen’s lower lip, and Cullen’s arms strained, his hands wanting to touch Bull’s face, his shoulders, his arms. But in lieu of that contact, he arched his body up and accidentally brushed the clamps on his chest against Bull’s body, the drag and catch snagging his breath and dragging a cry from his lips.

A hand between his legs, nudging his legs apart and then jacking his cock with such familiarity that Cullen felt like they’d been doing this for years, not months. How could it only be the second time that Bull had known his body like this?

Lust rose and fell in jaggs. It was bonded to the pain now, and it made his body sing a tune he didn’t understand, couldn’t harmonise with. He wanted to struggle against it, wanted to embrace it, couldn’t choose. So instead he just focused on Bull’s mouth against his, on the hand that was soothing along his flank, the other that was setting a slow pace with a firm grip, palm rubbing over the head of him each time.

Bull leaned back, and Cullen leaned up, grabbing the ropes to brace himself. In response to that,
Bull pressed a quick kiss against his lips, and Cullen sagged back, trembling.

A palm brushed lightly over the clamps on his right armpit, and Cullen gasped as the pain reignited. His skin felt like it would tear, but he could tell it was still hale afterwards. Bull was good at that, driving him to heights of pain he was unused to, and leaving him whole at the end.

More clamps found his body as Bull picked them up from the bed and pinched up bits of skin and placed them. At least ten divided equally on either side of his flanks, throbbing with every inhale. Four more divided down both sides of his armpits. And when Bull moved between Cullen’s legs and trailed clamps up the inside of his thighs, Cullen’s legs tried to squeeze shut in reflex, even as his breathing picked up in dread and need. His mind swum.

‘I want you to tell me if this is too much,’ Bull said. ‘You don’t have to use your watchword for this, if you just want to say it’s too much, I’ll take it off, got it?’

Cullen managed nothing more than a soft sound, and then swallowed thickly when he felt the clamp at the base of his cock, dragging over the skin, catching on the damp flesh.

He clenched his jaw when he felt Bull carefully pinch up a bit of skin on the underside of the base of his cock, and then moaned when he felt the clamp start to close. His cock twitched hard, a hard knot of arousal and fear in the root of his spine.

The pain bloomed. At first, Cullen couldn’t even pinpoint where the clamp was anymore, because the pain was everywhere at once. His fingers clenched into fists, his wrists jerked in their bonds, and he was only distantly aware of the hand on his belly, stroking him. The other held his cock still, occasionally moving it just enough to excite pain and pleasure both.

Seconds bled into a minute, then another minute, and Cullen realised that he wasn’t telling Bull it was too much. He wasn’t saying the watchword. It hurt so much he didn’t have words for it. It overwhelmed. But was it too much?

Cullen shook his head, shook it again, and then managed: ‘It’s not- It’s- I-’

‘Breathe,’ Bull said patiently. ‘What are you trying to say? Imagine the words first, and then say them.’

Cullen almost laughed at the simplicity of the direction, but he needed it, because words were escaping him. Every new clamp made him remember every other, and he was decorated with over twenty now. Were there any more left on the bed? Cullen tried to make himself concentrate. What was he trying to say?

‘It’s not too much,’ Cullen said, his voice breaking. Because it was, but he didn’t want it to stop.

‘One more?’ Bull said.

Cullen nodded, even as he squeezed tears out of the corners of his eyes.

‘After this one, we’re going to leave them alone now, give you a bit of a break while I open you up.’

_While I open you up._

Cullen thought that of all the ways he expected to die, this hadn’t ever been on the list.

He wasn’t typically vocal, but the clamps picked him apart, and the next one – only a few
millimetres up from the first on his cock – made him cry out, then groan roughly, trying to get a handle on the pain. If he arched, he stretched all the clamps biting into his flank. If he tugged on the ropes, he aggravated the ones on his armpits. The ones on his nipples constantly caused a buzzing, angry pain. The two on his cock made everything feel red and heavy. He blew out breaths through his clenched teeth, focused on Bull’s hands – one just holding his cock, one stroking his belly again.

A minute, two minutes, the pain started to plateau, though at a much higher level than before. None of it could be called background noise now. It was a swamp he was stuck in, made his body tingle hot.

‘Okay?’ Bull said.

‘Okay,’ Cullen echoed without thinking. ‘Yes.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, voice thick. ‘You’re stunning, you know that?’

Cullen said nothing at all then. He disagreed, but he’d agreed to yield. He didn’t want to fight Bull on every little thing anymore.

‘Your cock stayed hard through all of that,’ Bull said, sounding so pleased, even though it was something Cullen had no control over. ‘The things you do with pain are so fucking badass.’

Cullen could only focus on his breathing, legs shifting restlessly around Bull’s body. When Bull moved, Cullen’s legs gripped hard, but Bull was only reaching for something on the bed. The sound of a cork being worked out of a vial, and Cullen’s nose strained for the green scent of elfroot, but he couldn’t find it.

Then, an oil of some kind being painted with Bull’s fingers over the seam of his ass. Shallow strokes first, and then Bull gripped Cullen’s thigh and simply moved it out of the way – stretching his legs apart – and then he was slicking him where his tongue had worked him over before. Cullen shuddered, felt the pleasure of it. Shame was far away, clamped down by the pain that sat heavily over him.

Cullen was still aware enough to be hypersensitive when Bull’s finger began working its way into him. The stretch was slow but inexorable, and Cullen felt himself tense and relax and tense again, as he had when Bull’s tongue had pressed into him. He couldn’t help it. And he knew Bull could see everything. The clamps. The ropes and the cuffs around his wrists. The blindfold. The way he constantly bit into his bottom lip or swallowed down noises. And now, if Bull wanted, he could see his own finger working its way into Cullen’s body, because Cullen’s hips were on display.

Cullen turned his head to the side and muffled his breathing into his shoulder.

Years of cerebrally gathered information – eavesdropping on talks, listening to Samson talk about it, picking up bits and pieces from around the place – synthesised into a moment where he realised how absurd it was to know something and never have experienced it. The feeling of being opened by someone else, the faint burn – for Bull’s fingers could never be described as slender or small – and the feeling that he had so little left to have stripped away after the clamps had been placed on his body, and yet Bull was stripping it away regardless.

He shifted, impatient, wanting more, unable to get the leverage he really needed with Bull pinning him by his pelvis with his other hand.

He’d always assumed that Bull would talk nonstop through sex. But it was the silence that captured
him now. He could hear Bull’s breathing – it made him realise how often he couldn’t. Even after they’d wrestled on the bed, Cullen couldn’t hear it. And he knew Bull wasn’t doing anything laborious, so that heavy breathing was because this moment had captured the both of them.

‘Talk to me,’ Bull said.

‘You- That’s your thing, not mine,’ Cullen gasped, and then his back bowed as Bull’s finger sank deeper than his tongue had gone, sank deeper still. One smooth, firm slide all the way to his last knuckle.

Cullen always thought he’d not be able to enjoy this. Not because of the mechanics of it, but because of his mind. He knew back then he’d worry about being unclean, or the sensation of being opened by someone else, or accidental injury, or the strangeness of trusting someone with that, or any one of a number of other things.

Now, with the pain grabbing every one of his extraneous thoughts and turning them to a soreness without words, he could feel the pleasure of it. He wanted the intrusion, even as it scared him. He wanted to be filled with this, and he didn’t know how to speak. So his mouth worked on non-words, until he managed a thready:

‘I never…expected it to feel so good.’

Bull said something under his breath on an exhale, a surprised word in Qunlat. Then his finger started moving back and forth, carefully at first, and Cullen turned his head back into his shoulder and curled one of his legs around Bull’s side, thinking that this wasn’t like flogging at all, but he could see that it might become something else he thought of with yearning too. Maybe just with Bull. The person who would be done with him one day. Who would move on. Who thought love threatened his ability to stay sane, to say nothing of whether he was capable of loving Cullen.

Cullen rather thought he affected anyone’s ability to stay sane.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, ‘where are you going?’

‘I’m…tied up,’ Cullen breathed, confused, and then cried out sharply when Bull flicked the clamps at the base of his cock, then flicked them again.

‘Stay right here,’ Bull said soothingly. ‘You need me to slow down?’

‘Or speed up,’ Cullen gritted out through that blooming burst of pain that had made him clench down hard on Bull’s finger – and Bull hadn’t even missed a beat, keeping up a rhythm that now accelerated.

‘Your parents must’ve been like, ‘dear O Holy Maker, we want the bossiest child in the whole of-’’

‘Can we not talk about my parents?’ Cullen squawked, and then burst out laughing. Of all the times to have this conversation, and he was surprised to find that their shared laughter made the experience no less profound, no less true. His breath was still caught up in his throat when he was done, Bull’s finger was still moving, and Cullen shifted again restlessly.

‘So you talk,’ Bull said.

Cullen held still when he felt Bull’s finger withdraw and push back with two. He held his breath, felt the shift and prod, thought about how Bull’s fingers were probably cock sized. Definitely. There was a part of him that wanted it, but a part of him that was alarmed. How did people do this
again?

‘Breathe in,’ Bull said, ‘deep breath. When you breathe out, I want you to bear down, open
yourself up for me.’

‘Maker,’ Cullen said, ears burning.

‘Go on.’

Cullen took a few false starts, shuddered, and then took a deep breath, then exhaled and bore down.
Bull probed with both fingers, testing, and then Cullen made a sharp sound when both fingers
entered him and the burn of it was back, sharper. He knew he wasn’t tearing, but the sensation was
frightening, intense.

‘Keep doing it,’ Bull said firmly, but his voice was rough, and Bull’s other hand where it rested on
his pelvis – his fingers kept absently scratching at Cullen’s skin.

Bull started up a rocking motion that was slow, thorough, that took minutes for him to be pressed
all the way to the last knuckle. Cullen’s breaths were deep and heavy now, he thought that Bull
could probably just fuck him with his fingers, rather than his cock, and call it a night. He also
suspected that he wouldn’t be looking at Bull’s hands the same way for a while.

‘You blush all the way down your chest to your belly, you know that?’

Cullen opened his mouth to retort, but the words fell away. That deep rocking was incredible, and
there was something when Bull’s fingers curled upwards. A glance of some deep, sharp sensation.
Almost like the combination of being hard in the morning, pressure on his bladder, pleasure in his
cock. Bull kept doing it, and Cullen had heard tell of this too, knew why the soldiers had been
unable to articulate it properly.

Then Bull’s fingers pressed up, sharply, and Cullen’s mind blazed white. His breath got locked on
a gasp, and Bull chose that moment to flick the clamps again. For a few seconds, Cullen thought he
was going to come, right then, but the pain and pleasure receded and instead Cullen was just hard
and desperate and making a faint whining sound, pressing his hips down.

It wasn’t until he remembered the shape of his lips that he felt himself mouthing the word ‘please.’
Whispering it.

Bull shifted onto his knees and reached up with his other hand – keeping fingers still buried deep
inside him – and brushed the clamps over his left armpit. Then, he settled on one, pinching it
harder for a few seconds. When Cullen opened his mouth on a silent shout, Bull brushed the
fingers inside of him upwards again, igniting that deep pressure that seemed to stretch all the way
to the tip of his cock.

‘Please what?’ Bull said, sounding smug.

‘Please anything,’ Cullen said desperately.

‘You’re gonna love this,’ Bull said, in that way that suggested that Cullen had best brace himself.

The pressure on the clamp tightened, and Cullen’s nostrils flared, and then suddenly the clamp was
plucked off. Cullen began to sigh in relief, and then he choked on a flood of pain that he couldn’t
have braced for. Bull was saying something, curling his fingers up, brushing against that gland
again and Cullen didn’t know whether it was pleasure or pain. He dug the heels of his feet into the
bed, arched up, but there was nothing he could get away from.
Then a finger rubbed over the place the clamp had pinched him and he turned and snarled at the raw nerve endings, groaned at the dark pleasure that chased on its heels.

‘Cullen,’ Bull was saying, ‘you’ve got this.’

Cullen’s breath shook, all at once he went limp, felt weak, then his voice broke on a feeling of dread when he felt fingers brush the next clamp up.

‘Please,’ Cullen said, his voice breaking.

‘They have to come off some time.’

Cullen hated that he was harder than ever. That he was leaking precome onto his own skin. Could feel it where it was cooling.

‘I like this,’ Bull said roughly, ‘so much. There’s another three on this side to go. I’m gonna take them off one after the other, unless you tell me no, okay?’

Cullen made a sound of denial, shook his head, and then when Bull breathed in like he was going to say something, Cullen said with a ruined voice: ‘It’s not a no. Just…a few more seconds?’

Bull’s fingers were still moving inside of him, keeping him open, even as his whole body tried to tense.

‘You got it,’ Bull said. ‘Just tell me when you’re ready.’

There was a moment of fear when Cullen realised just how many clamps he was wearing. Surely he’d get used to it? Perhaps the first one would be the worst, and now he knew what to expect, it would get better. He had a sudden image of never removing them, because the background drone of pain was better than whatever Bull had done to wake up the nerve endings. Cullen loathed that he found it arousing, because goodness, there were some things that should just send a person screaming from the room, not yearn to be obliterated by it.

Cullen drew in a deep breath and then nodded once, decisively.

‘Do it.’

Each one was plucked from his skin, one after the other, and there was a hang of seconds where it seemed like he really wasn’t going to react at all. Then, Cullen gritted out a sound that suddenly hummed against the lips pressed against his. Cullen felt like Bull wanted to eat the sounds straight out of his mouth, before even that thought was wiped away. Fingers pressed up deep inside of him and the pain burst out like a star through his arm, into his thoughts, until he was shuddering and couldn’t tell if the fingers stroking over the place where the clamps had been were a good thing or a bad thing.

Still, he could tell it was somehow easier to deal with than before, now that he knew what to expect. It still made him tremble and gasp. Made him nauseous. When Bull pushed his tongue into Cullen’s mouth, Cullen could only keep his jaw open, couldn’t even participate in the kiss. Bull didn’t seem to mind, if anything, he seemed to enjoy being able to kiss Cullen as slowly and deeply as he wanted as Cullen moaned into his mouth.

‘Was I right?’ Bull breathed against his lips.

‘About what?’ Cullen said, feeling weak. Maker, the majority of the clamps were still on his body. Perhaps he should have considered writing some kind of Last Will before the evening started.
‘Do you love-hate them?’

Bull’s palm brushed over one of the clamps attached to Cullen’s nipples, and Cullen grit his teeth together and turned his face away.

‘Aw,’ Bull said, kissing his cheek, ‘I almost feel sorry for you.’

Cullen managed a strained laugh, and Bull smiled against his skin. Quickly, Bull’s hand shifted to Cullen’s other armpit and took off another clamp.

‘Fuck,’ Cullen bit out before the pain hit. Then he squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the way his skin caught on the blindfold that blocked out all light.

‘Almost,’ Bull said, when Cullen was able to catch his breath again.

Bull’s fingers moved to the clamps at his flank, and then snatched off five on one side, almost at once, and Cullen’s whole body twisted then, as though he could grind the pain away into the blankets. He keened, unable to move. With his arms tied apart and his legs spread around Bull’s body, he rocked onto his back and let everything blur. The pain was something he could ride, just barely, if he forgot about everything else.

So it was that a couple of minutes later he slowly realised that the mattress was dipped because one side of Bull’s horns were digging into it, all so Bull could lick and kiss the tender side of Cullen’s arm, what had been exposed by the ropes. It sent shivers all the way up to his cold fingers.

‘Love-hate,’ Cullen choked. ‘The rest…can stay on. Forever.’

‘Nope,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘Y’know, I once knew someone who could take all of them on his cock and balls and inner thighs. There’s fifty, by the way.’

‘Did he die?’

‘Probably wished for it, for a while,’ Bull said, stroking his other hand down Cullen’s unclamped flank and soothing the sharpness of the pain away. ‘You ever want to try that?’

‘Don’t ask me that,’ Cullen breathed, because he had a feeling he knew what the answer would be, and it terrified and thrilled him in equal measure.

‘You really are stunning like this,’ Bull said again. ‘Fucking gorgeous.’

‘You…and you also,’ Cullen said, vaguely aware that they were the kind of words he wouldn’t normally say. Bull’s hand hesitated where it was stroking, the fingers inside of him stilled for seconds. Cullen couldn’t even think what he might have said wrong. But how could it be wrong, if it was true?

‘All the time,’ Cullen added. ‘Not just now.’

Perhaps that was why Bull had hesitated.

He turned his head towards Bull, and then the fingers at his flank had shifted up, were cupping his cheek, lips pressing against his like they had only just met, as though this was their first, chaste kiss.

‘You too, Kadan,’ Bull said.

Cullen’s mouth moved on a crooked smile. A flash of pain and affection moved within. Oh, but
he’d heard qunari refer to each other with that term, especially comrades in arms on the battlefield. Heard it used to define friend, family, fellow kin during war. Well, it wasn’t the same as being considered a lover of the kind he wanted to be, but Cullen would take it. He knew it was meant with care. It was both more than he expected and reminded him of what he couldn’t have all at once.

‘Kadan,’ Cullen whispered back.

‘Shit,’ Bull said, his voice breaking. Cullen’s forehead started to furrow, and then he lost the thread of his thoughts when teeth bit down into his lower lip, hard enough that Cullen grunted.

‘You’re killing me,’ Bull added, when he withdrew.

Cullen laughed weakly, because that had to be hyperbole. Bull wasn’t the one in clamps, ropes, being worked open. Even now, being stretched, because Bull’s fingers moved constantly.

‘Get…in line,’ Cullen managed, before deciding that words were just too hard.

Cullen was pleased when Bull laughed as well, and then felt himself getting lost in sensations again. When the third finger prodded at his entrance, Cullen already knew how to breathe through it, but he still gritted out a sound of discomfort out when Bull pressed in. He knew Bull was soothing him, saying something about how it wasn’t much longer now, and Cullen only knew enough to nod.

The remainder of the clamps sung through him, even the places where the clamps had been removed still throbbed; tiny bruises pressed into his skin. His cock was hard, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this hard, for this long. Maybe not ever. And Bull’s fingers made him feel like he had no secrets left, which wasn’t true, but it left Cullen open and vulnerable enough that he couldn’t see the point in hiding his reactions.

He was warned when the rest of the clamps on the other side of his armpit were going to be removed, and Cullen’s breath hitched, but he acknowledged it with a nod, then rode out the pain with a noise that shuddered from his lungs and almost had him choking at the end. A mouth brushing over the bruised skin, a horn pressing into his chest as Bull got the angle right. Cullen’s wrists shifted in the cuffs and ropes absently. He wanted to touch. Wanted to cradle Bull’s head close. Wanted to dig his nails into Bull’s horn, knowing that he’d feel it, that he’d possibly feel it all the way down his spine.

Then the clamps were pinched off his other side, all five – Bull not bothering to lessen the tension in the wire, just pulling them. Cullen gasped, kept gasping, and the only thing that stopped his mind from flying from the room was Bull’s voice rumbling praise to him. Amazing, then, how it felt to hear the word ‘good’ when he could hardly hear it at all.

His concentration came shuddering into place some time later. Bull’s fingers withdrawing from him carefully and leaving him stretched and shifting his hips in frustration.

‘Need more lube,’ Bull said, and Cullen nodded, because that sounded like it was a good thing.

Maker, he was so close. He’d been hanging in some place where he knew that if he had a hand free and jacked himself off, he’d come in minutes. But without any direct stimulation, he was just drifting in a level of pleasure that he wasn’t accustomed to. He had to breathe around the presence of it in his gut, in the soreness of his balls, the way he could feel every twitch of his cock because of those two clamps still attached to it.
Cullen moved his legs apart more when Bull’s hips inched forward, when he felt Bull’s cock notch against his entrance and the coolness of newly applied lube. It was hard to remember to draw full breaths, and he tugged again on the ropes. But then Bull pressed his forehead to Cullen’s, and Cullen tilted his mouth up, nose brushing against Bull’s nose. Their stubble scratched together, Cullen already had red patches on his face, he could feel it. He loved that too.

It was so hard then, to hold the words back. To keep them in his chest.

_I love you._

He couldn’t. He _couldn’t_. But he kept his face as close to Bull’s as he could, felt their breaths intermingling, thought that if anyone had told him he would ever feel this close to someone, he’d have called it wishful thinking, once upon a time.

‘Thank you,’ Cullen whispered.

‘People normally say that _after_ I’ve fucked them,’ Bull said.

‘I think…I’ll forget, afterwards.’

Bull smiled against his cheek, and Cullen kissed the parts of Bull’s face he could find: the corner of his mouth, the swell of a cheek, the jut of his chin.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, ‘if anything feels wrong, if you need a break, _anything_, you just tell me, okay?’

Cullen nodded, arched his hips up, felt the faintest stretch of Bull’s cock that he knew was about to become a lot more overwhelming. He craved that, waited with his mouth open, on the edge of some precipice.

Bull rocked into him slowly. But even so, Cullen needed to work to find the breath necessary to keep himself open and relaxed, to stop himself from tensing. And he couldn’t quite manage it, his muscles sometimes locking down on the intrusion of it, the pain and pleasure pulling tight like a bow so that his whole body had to respond.

He heard the words ‘easy’ and ‘steady’ and Cullen was aware of tossing his head at some point, and then crying out when Bull flicked the clamp at his left nipple over and over again. He was going to drown, and Bull seemed to be determined to drag him all the way down to the bottom.

‘Please,’ Cullen begged, not quite knowing what he was asking for. He wanted the pain to stop and he wanted it to soar. He wanted Bull deep but he didn’t think he could handle another inch. He needed Bull close but it was so much closeness, that Cullen thought he might burst out of his skin. So he begged, and Bull whispered words that were supposed to be stabilising, while destabilising him with the rest of his body.

There was a point where Bull was so deep that Cullen started trembling and couldn’t make himself stop. A point where Bull’s hips started thrusting and Cullen’s wrists jerked hard at the cuffs, because it seemed wrong not to be able to hold onto his shoulders. Then, a point where Bull started growling, a deep bass sound that thrummed all the way through him. Cullen’s hips didn’t move at first, held down by Bull’s hands, by the hugeness of what was happening. But then Cullen came to adjust to the sense of it, reminding him of the peace of the ocean and the thrash of a storm all at once. His hips moved into Bull’s movements, and he wrapped one leg as well as he could around the backs of Bull’s thighs.

He forgot about the clamps, until Bull pulled the two off his nipples at once. Whatever sound Cullen made hurt his throat, even as he couldn’t hear it properly. Then Bull was shifting, his hand
wrapping around Cullen’s cock, and he was jacking it through the flood of pain.

Cullen was close, dragging in dry breath after dry breath and forgetting to beg. He sensed that Bull must have been close too, could feel it in the impossible stretch inside of him, in the sudden unevenness in Bull’s thrusts.

A flash of dread when fingers touched the clamps at the base of his cock, and then just as quickly, they were removed.

Cullen’s head snapped back into the pillow, he dragged wet, unseeing eyes open behind the blindfold and shouted out in staccato. For a few seconds the pain seemed to kill all his arousal, and then it faded just enough that lust blazed back into life, then escalated, more and more, until his arms jerked spasmodically in the ropes and he tried to jack-knife forwards into Bull. His cock swelled, he spilled all over himself, all over Bull’s hand. Each throb of it a whole body cramp that tore through him. A hand at his hip keeping him still, another by his face, a thumb resting by his open mouth.

He could hear the words ‘don’t fight it’ in his head and he couldn’t think why. Was it something Bull was saying? Why would Bull say that? And then he felt the moment when Bull stilled to a halt inside of him, so deep it ached. Could feel the rhythmic pulsing of it at his entrance, could feel the shaking of the both of them. Impossible to tell who was trembling more violently.

Cullen heard the hollow roar of that waterfall before it overtook him, the pleasure and pain coalescing together until his mind was nothing but darkness and his body went limp.

*

He knew it was a hand covering his eyes and not the blindfold. He felt his eyelashes brushing against fingers. The whole room smelled of sex. Sweat and come and the oil of the lubricant. Light spilled in through Bull’s hand, and he blinked at it. He could already tell his vision was blurred.

‘Did I…pass out?’ Cullen croaked.

‘Nope,’ Bull murmured, ‘you’ve been drifting pretty hard though. Just stay still for me, for a bit longer. I’m gonna get you some water in a minute. But right now, just stay like this. How’re your hands feeling?’

Hands. Cullen twitched his fingers, realised they weren’t up over his head anymore. His arms weren’t by his side, but crossed on his chest. He shifted, expecting to feel sweat beneath his wrists, but his skin felt dry. Had Bull cleaned him?

‘Are you sure…I didn’t pass out?’

‘Positive,’ Bull said, his other hand stroking over Cullen’s side. Cullen realised that he’d been doing that for a while now. Cullen sighed, closed his eyes, wanted to sleep.

‘Please don’t leave,’ Cullen said.

‘I’m not gonna do that,’ Bull said, matching Cullen’s quiet tone.

‘I have nightmares,’ Cullen added. That seemed important.

‘I know you do,’ Bull said.

‘Are you sure I didn’t pass out? Surely when you lowered my arms…’
‘Yeah, you complained a bit,’ Bull said.

Cullen couldn’t remember. And yet, now that he thought about it, he vaguely could. A scratchy, uncomfortable pain and Bull right there and not letting Cullen move his arms quickly at all and fingers checking each one of his fingers and ‘tsking’ at the joints and rubbing warmth into his hands. Had that been real? Cullen hummed, thinking it over.

‘I have nightmares,’ Cullen added again, and frowned when Bull laughed quietly. But the laugh wasn’t cruel, and the hand at his side pulled him closer.

‘It bother you that I’ll be here for that?’

‘I think…’ Cullen said, his voice scratchy, his mouth dry, ‘…I need some water.’

‘Oh, Cullen,’ Bull sighed. ‘You’re really not back yet.’

If Cullen thought about it, he could still feel Bull inside him, even though he wasn’t. He could feel the rock of it, the cadence of their hips moving together, he could still feel the stretch. And – despite being cleaned up at some point – he still felt sticky. He made a faint sound in his throat, then tried to turn his whole body into Bull’s.

‘Ah, not yet,’ Bull said. ‘Soon. We can do snuggling soon. Hey, concentrate a bit for me, does it bother you that I’ll be here for your nightmares?’

‘Does it bother you?’ Cullen echoed.

‘It really, really doesn’t. But that doesn’t quite answer my question, little lion.’

‘I don’t… want people to know that I have them,’ Cullen said. ‘So many,’ he added. ‘They weren’t going to let me be a Templar anymore, at Greenfell. Greagoir thought I had too many.’

‘Mm,’ Bull said in warm acknowledgement. ‘That does seem serious. But that’s not going to happen here. You have nothing to worry about.’

‘They’re quiet,’ Cullen added. ‘So that’s something, isn’t it?’

‘Sure is,’ Bull said. ‘I’m gonna move to get some water. Can I take my hand off your eyes?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, because he rather liked it there. And then he realised that Bull would probably need both hands to get water, and then tried to think of which he wanted more. ‘Oh, I suppose.’

‘Kind of you,’ Bull said, laughing, and then slid away, and Cullen clenched his eyes shut at the lamplight. He hissed in a sharp breath. His whole body ached. Muscle soreness. Bruises from the clamps. He was wrung out.

Cullen lost track of time again, and then tried to help when Bull slid a hand beneath his back and lifted him into a sitting position. Because really, he could sit upright. Though he didn’t feel very coordinated at it. And Bull wouldn’t let him hold the cup of water, and Cullen thought that was probably for the best.

He drained half the cup and then listened to Bull finish off the rest.

‘Did you like it?’ Cullen said.

‘Eh, it’s not ale, but-’
‘No,’ Cullen said, blinking his eyes open and squinting up at Bull, before looking away. Maker, had his room ever been this bright? He was too tired to think of what he’d been trying to say, but as Bull helped him lie back down again, he realised what he’d been asking.

‘Did you like it?’ he said, and then made a face of frustration when he realised that wasn’t helpful. ‘I mean- Maker, what we did. What you did. Was it good?’

A hand at his face, and Cullen’s heart stumbled over itself, because he was becoming increasingly aware that he was asking things he shouldn’t be. Bull was laying alongside him, propped up on one elbow, and his face moved closer to Cullen’s face, and Cullen sighed out some of the strain that had built within him.

‘It was perfect,’ Bull said.

‘Perfection,’ Cullen said, ‘is an unattainable abstraction, influenced by individual perception only, and not actually real.’

‘Whoa,’ Bull said, bursting out with laughter that gusted over Cullen’s face. ‘Where the fuck did that come from?’

‘Read it somewhere,’ Cullen said. ‘I liked it.’

‘Okay well, given it’s influenced by individual perception, this individual perceived what happened as fucking perfection.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, feeling like this conversation was too far beyond him, and he was more than ready to sleep. ‘Should we get under the blankets?’

‘You think you can move that much?’

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, trying to put his thoughts together. ‘I…have spares in the first chest.’

‘Great,’ Bull said. ‘Give me a minute, I’m moving away again.’

‘That part is most certainly not perfection,’ Cullen grumped.

‘Sure isn’t, little lion,’ Bull said fervently. But he moved away anyway, and Cullen heard the chest open, and it didn’t seem too long until Bull was back and throwing fresh blankets over the bed. Then Bull was lying on his back and Cullen was turning into his side, tentatively stretching an arm out across his chest. Then lowering it to the curve of his belly. He quite liked it, he decided. He quite liked it when someone had a decent layer of fat over musculature. A soft strength.

‘Will you have nightmares?’ Cullen asked, his voice already gritty with sleep.

‘Actually,’ Bull said, sounding surprised at himself, ‘I’m pretty sure I’m gonna sleep, so…maybe not.’

‘I hear that’s…a good thing,’ Cullen said. He yawned, couldn’t be bothered covering his mouth, and then Bull yawned seconds later. ‘Can I call you Kadan?’

A long pause, and then Bull said: ‘Do you want to?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, ‘if it’s not- If I may. We are comrades in arms, aren’t we? That’s what it means, doesn’t it?’

An even longer pause, and then a hand settled in Cullen’s hair and started stroking it. Bull sighed.
Yeah, that’s one of its meanings. Though I don’t even know if you’re gonna remember this conversation later, little lion.’

‘Remind me later,’ Cullen said, yawning again. ‘Tell me its other meanings.’

‘Okay,’ Bull said softly. ‘I’ll think about it.’

Cullen pulled himself closer, until he had a leg over Bull’s thigh, was trying to gather as much of him close as possible. Bull was a furnace of body heat, and even Cullen’s fingers were starting to warm.

He fell asleep thinking of perfection, and how perhaps it wasn’t that much of an abstract concept after all.
Cullen woke a few minutes before dawn, body heated through, aware that he was chasing a nightmare but unable to remember any of the details. A few seconds later he jolted, fully awake, realising that someone was moving around his room. He pushed himself upright and groaned at the pain that radiated through his lower spine even as he heard the sound of Bull swearing and walking back over.

A hand on his shoulder, not pushing him down, but squeezing.

‘Hey,’ Bull said.

‘Good morning,’ Cullen said, his voice scratchy with sleep. He cleared his throat, lifted a hand from beneath the blanket and felt the bruises on his side and armpit in the process. He rubbed at his eyes and realised that Bull – now sitting down beside him on the bed – was already dressed. ‘You were sneaking out?’

‘I was gonna wait for you to wake up first,’ Bull said, a faint smile on his lips. ‘How’re you feeling?’

Like I had the life fucked out of me, but there has to be a far more diplomatic way of saying that.

‘Ah…’ Cullen said, and then laughed. ‘Sore. But I seem to recall that it wasn’t such a problem last night.’

‘Yeah, it’s easy to put up with things like that when there’s pleasure to go along with it,’ Bull said, smile broadening into something rueful. ‘How do you handle the floggings the morning after?’

‘I’m sore then, too,’ Cullen said. ‘I still like it.’

Cullen was surprised to hear himself utter those words. He wasn’t used to being so candid. And though sections of the night were a blur of sensory overload, he recalled that he’d yielded, and what that meant to him. He was surprised to find it wasn’t automatically shutting down just because it was the morning after.

He carefully eased into a sitting position, then angled sideways so that he was balancing almost all his weight on one hip. Bull watched with a knowing glint in his eye, and Cullen felt his cheeks warm and thought it was too early for this.

‘Problems sleeping?’ Cullen said hesitantly. He’d not expected Bull to be the one to wake first.
‘Yes and no,’ Bull said. Cullen waited for Bull to expand, but he didn’t, so Cullen reached out and placed a hand on Bull’s knee.

‘Is everything all right?’

Bull looked surprised, though the expression was there and gone quickly. He inched closer on the mattress, then leaned down and kissed Cullen’s forehead. He was still smiling when he pulled back.

‘I had a great night,’ Bull said. ‘Everything’s shit hot, right now.’

But despite the fact that the words sounded right, sincere, Cullen couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off, and he frowned. Bull’s expression shifted, as though he was worried about Cullen.

There were chunks of the night that Cullen couldn’t remember, and he wondered if he’d said anything. Maker, if he’d accidentally spilled the words ‘I love you,’ he’d never forgive himself.

‘Did I…say anything?’ Cullen said. ‘I regret I don’t remember everything that happened with the clarity I’d normally…rely upon.’

‘Yeah, that’s normal,’ Bull said, and his shoulders relaxed. Cullen realised that Bull had been tense and trying to mask it. Even if Bull didn’t have obvious tells, he still had them. Cullen filed the information away for later. ‘That combination of pain and feeling good, along with…giving control up to someone else, it sort of releases the mind a little. You become less about remembering every little thing, and more about just kind of being in the moment. I’m proud of you. That you were able to do that.’

‘Proud of me,’ Cullen said flatly, even as he felt a glow of warmth within.

‘Yep,’ Bull said, grinning at him. ‘So how sore is ‘sore,’ anyway? You don’t want to be a friend and show me those bruises the day after, do you? I never get to see them otherwise.’

‘You…’ Cullen’s mind went blank and then started up again after its hiccup. ‘You like that part?’

‘Well, yeah,’ Bull said.

Cullen hesitated, then placed his fingers on the blankets covering him. Bull moved off the bed to give him room, and Cullen didn’t feel embarrassed exactly – they’d seen each other naked and there was nothing that concerned him about that – but it was odd knowing he was doing this to show his bruising. It hadn’t occurred to him that Bull would enjoy this part. Or maybe he wouldn’t enjoy it? Did Cullen even bruise enough overnight? Cullen hadn’t taken a chance to look yet. He’d wanted to savour them on his own.

He slid out of the bed anyway, wincing as the ache between his legs sharpened briefly, then eased off once more.

‘Lift your arms,’ Bull said. ‘Like you’re taking off your shirt.’

Cullen did, looking down to see if he could spot any. There, on his flank, were small, angry looking marks, and he reached down with his other hand to touch them just as Bull stepped forward and looked like he wanted to do the same.

Cullen stilled, and Bull mirrored him.
‘I should’ve asked,’ Bull said. ‘Is it okay if I touch them?’

‘You want to?’ Cullen said, his mouth going dry.

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t I? I made them. Let an artist admire his work, y’know?’

Cullen laughed under his breath, but he nodded, gestured for Bull to step towards him. And Bull was so careful, reaching out and pressing his palm over them and then dragging it down Cullen’s side. Cullen swallowed roughly, and his eyelids fluttered with a combination of fatigue and a lazy, swirling lust that was apparently just around the corner, waiting for him.

The room – he realised – still smelled of sex. Of sweat and come mingled together, a stale, sharp smell that he still enjoyed, just as he had sometimes enjoyed all of the warriors at the end of an evening, sweaty in their armour and unable to bathe. There was a realness in the rawness of it. He’d have to air out his room, but it was a scent he wanted to know again.

Bull’s fingers moved up to the bruises underneath his armpit. He pressed lightly against one, and Cullen’s exhale was sharp. Then Bull pressed harder, and Cullen squirmed. Cullen tried to see, but the angle was wrong.

When he looked up, Bull was watching him.

‘Come over here,’ Bull said, touching fingers to the small of Cullen’s back and walking him slowly across the room. He positioned Cullen in front of his own mirror and stood behind him, and Cullen thought this was so similar to his morning ritual, when he had bruising. He knew what it was to stand in front of the mirror and seek out the marks that battle or Bull had made. Bull’s hand wrapped around his elbow and then drew his arm up, turning him to show the opaque splotches of colour in a neat row. Some bruises were darker than others, and Cullen wondered if it had to do with how Bull pulled the clamps off. Because some he pinched open, releasing the tension, before removing them, and others Bull yanked away even while their bite into his flesh was strong.

Cullen leaned closer to the mirror, saw a faint tracery of broken capillaries.

‘There,’ Bull said, fingers brushing so lightly over the bruises on his exposed armpit that Cullen inhaled a lungful of air, ticklish. Bull met his eyes, looked impish, but didn’t actually tickle him. Cullen was grateful. It was too early and his ass was sore, he wasn’t entirely sure he felt like being forced to laugh.

But as Cullen’s eyes drifted to Bull, instead of his own bruises, he saw Bull’s shoulders tense again. It was hardly noticeable – not a full clenching of the muscles. Cullen wished he could pinpoint what was causing it.

‘Was…’ Cullen couldn’t think of how to say what he wanted to say, and Bull looked at him questioningly, meeting his gaze in the mirror. ‘You- Ah, Maker, it may sound stupid, but…is there anything I should do differently next time? If you want there to be a next time? To make it more enjoyable for you?’

Bull’s expression didn’t shift for a few seconds, and Cullen couldn’t tell if he’d hit the nail square with his comment or not. It wouldn’t surprise him if there was a great deal more he could do to make it more enjoyable for Bull. He was a novice, after all. There would be plenty more for him to learn. It didn’t even make him feel too ashamed of himself – it was just a fact of life, wasn’t it?

‘What more do you think you could’ve done, tied up like that?’ Bull said, head tilting a little.

‘I’m not- That’s why I’m asking you,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m open to…education?’
‘Hm.’ The sound was more a rumble than anything else, and Bull’s hands slid over Cullen’s chest. They were still looking at each other in the mirror. ‘You forgot that I told you it was perfect?’

Cullen realised with a flush that he had forgotten that, and then remembered with a wince reciting some sentence from a book on philosophy relating to the concept of perfection. Andraste preserve me. He pressed on.

‘In the moment people will say things that may not turn out to be true the morning after? That’s just…realistic.’

‘Realistic,’ Bull said, the entire word a challenge.

Then what is wrong?

Cullen was tempted to turn around and snap: ‘all right, out with it,’ but he strongly suspected that wouldn’t be welcome. Just because he was impatient with not knowing the right words to say, didn’t mean he had to take that out on Bull. Still, Cullen couldn’t help but feel he was failing, somehow.

‘You seem odd this morning,’ Cullen said finally, hoping that Bull wouldn’t take those words and dismiss them.

He could see the moment where Bull chose the easy smile, a warmth in his eye, something that would have been convincing even only a few weeks ago. And then it was as though Cullen could also see the moment where Bull realised Cullen wasn’t buying it, and the smile faded. But Bull kept making eye contact, and then, after a pause that crossed the minute mark, Bull’s hands tightened on Cullen’s chest. He still said nothing, and Cullen seized the first sentence that drifted across his mind, all sleep-slow, post-sex appreciation gone.

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ Cullen added. ‘As someone who favours saying as little as possible about as much as possible—’

‘Oh ho ho, remind me to repeat that back to you when you pretend you have no idea what I’m talking about, when I say how closed up you generally are.’ Bull’s smile was real, and Cullen returned it weakly.

‘Still,’ Cullen said. ‘I would hope you’ve learned by now that you could confide in me, if you wished?’

‘This isn’t that kind of thing,’ Bull said. ‘This is the kind of thing that’s better if I ignore the shit out of it.’

Is it?

Bull turned Cullen away from the mirror. A hand cupped the back of his head, fingers tilted his chin backwards and lips met his. Bull’s beard rasped against the stubble that Cullen had grown overnight, and Cullen found his mouth opening, even as Bull did nothing more than drag his lips over Cullen’s. It was sensual, slow, and Cullen let his eyes close, placed his hands around Bull’s side and then pulled himself closer, reeled himself in.

As they drew back, Bull said:

‘So, chess on Tuesday? Same time?’

Cullen nodded, not quite reassured. But what was he supposed to do? He knew he could overthink
things. He wished to respect Bull’s boundaries, whatever they might be. Instead, he tilted his head back again for another brief kiss, thinking that if Bull offered this to everyone he met – well, either people were far more accustomed with casual sex than he was, or Bull had left a swath of broken hearts behind him.

Bull left shortly after. Cullen rubbed at the back of his head, wishing for once that this sort of communication was his strength, and not a glaring weakness.

*

On the fifth of Kingsway – a nippy chill in the air and Cullen rugged up with armour and his coat and thinking that he did not look forward to the impending winter – he and Bull met for chess in the courtyard.

Their game was mostly silent, and they were playing by Qun rules, and Cullen was surprised to find himself holding his own. It wasn’t quite beginner’s luck; he’d studied and learned after all, and was getting the hang of shifting the way he looked at the board whenever he played Qun rules. But he couldn’t help but wonder if Bull was off his game.

‘So after all this shit,’ Bull said, staring at the board, ‘what’s the dream? Like, if you could have anything at all? White picket fences and marriage and shit? Some nice girl?’

Cullen had predicted Bull’s move when it came and already had his next move planned. So he moved the pawn quickly and looked at the reddening leaves clinging to the branches of the red-maiden tree above them. Most had already fallen, dutifully swept away each evening. But here and there on the ground, bright red leaves burned into his vision like the red lyrium he’d seen at the Shrine of Dumat.

They were quietly massing agents and spies in the Arbor Wilds, and Cullen knew that soon – too soon – a final confrontation was coming. He tried to stay focused on the present.

‘Well,’ Cullen said, and then laughed. ‘I used to think about it when I was younger. Sometimes. It was hard not to when Mia kept volunteering her own daydreams and would insist I’d share mine.’

‘Did she do that to your brother too?’

Cullen shrugged. ‘She tried. I suspect I was the greater pushover there. And of course Rosalie was too young.’

‘And now?’

Cullen leaned back in his chair, looking over at the hourglass as Bull contemplated his move. At this rate the game would be over long before many pieces were captured. Bull still hadn’t ceded one of his, and if the game ended, he’d forfeit a win according to the rules they were playing by.

‘Sometimes,’ Cullen said reluctantly. He wasn’t quite sure how to say he didn’t really see himself having a future, and he’d certainly let himself stop daydreaming about it. The side effect was that it meant he was anchored in the present a little more than he used to be. It could be viscerally pleasing at times, but there were more than enough days where the hopelessness of it all crushed him.

‘Super convincing,’ Bull said, moving the Tama piece in an aggressive move that had Cullen rethinking Bull’s strategy and leaning forwards again. ‘You’ve done that thing that soldiers do, haven’t you? You’ve stopped thinking about it.’
‘And you haven’t?’ Cullen said, glancing at the hourglass quickly. He needed at least a minute to sort out his next move, and time was falling in a flow of sand towards the large heap at the bottom. ‘You’re vicious, by the way.’

‘Shoulda seen me on Seheron,’ Bull said, but the grin he flashed was bitter. ‘As for the future, I dunno. I have the Chargers. We get jobs, we get paid. I can care for my kin, get myself some booze at the end of the day, keep my toy collection in good condition.’

Cullen smirked. Bull referred to his whips and floggers and all his other accoutrements as his ‘toy collection.’ Cullen always had to mentally remind himself that, no, Bull didn’t mean stuffed animals of the kind that Krem sometimes made and gave to the children and teenagers around Skyhold.

‘I know you’re not really raised with it,’ Cullen said tentatively, ‘but does it ever happen that under the Qun, qunari sometimes…daydream about closer – no, that’s not quite right, not closer – but more sexually intimate relationships? Do they ever fantasise about what it might be like to say, take sex into the personal sphere?’

‘Nope,’ Bull said flatly. And then he sighed. ‘Are you gonna move or what?’

‘Maker, you took long enough to make your own move,’ Cullen griped, and then – because he couldn’t think of a way to address Bull’s move, made a defensive shift on the board and folded his arms. ‘I can’t help but wonder if no one did it, then no qunari would have defected – become Tal Vashoth – for the sake of a sexually intimate relationship.’

Bull reached up and scratched at the place where one side of his horns jutted from his skin. He looked irritable, and Cullen frowned. It didn’t seem to solely be agitation.

‘Is that bothering you?’ Cullen said.

‘There’s no shitting horn balm in this place,’ Bull grumbled. ‘I’ve tried putting a word in with Varric, but- Ah, it’s nothing. A couple of times a year the outer layer crusts and then falls off, but it itches all the way down into the bone. Horn balm helps.’

‘You must feel it all the way into your spine,’ Cullen said, forgetting about the hourglass and their game.

‘What makes you say that?’ Bull said. But he looked momentarily surprised.

‘I- Well, it’s an assumption, and possibly a wrong one. But when we wrestled that first time, you told me the impact in your horns resonated in your back? I assume…having a bone core, if there’s itchiness…’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, nodding. ‘Yeah, it does. And scratching is a half-measure. They itch all the damn time.’

‘What about liniment?’ Cullen said.

‘It’s not strong enough,’ Bull said, smiling lopsidedly. ‘It doesn’t get deep enough. The stuff the qunari make is too strong for you guys, which is why it can be really hard to find in places where there’s not a ton of qunari trade.’

‘Well, far be it for me to take a task from Varric, but I’ll see what I can do. I remember there was a fair bit of it in Kirkwall. Have you asked the other qunari here?’
‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘I doubt they’ve got trade connections I haven’t. Tal Vashoth and all.’

‘Like you,’ Cullen said, unable to resist reminding him. Bull moved his Tama again – another aggressive move – and Cullen saw a muscle jump in his jaw.

‘Like me,’ Bull said.

Cullen realised he needed to change the subject. He wanted to argue until Bull realised there was nothing wrong with him being Tal Vashoth, but he knew it was a simplistic approach, and not entirely accurate. From all accounts, the Tal Vashoth in Seheron and abroad had been terrifying, and Cullen himself knew of accounts that turned his stomach. And while it was evident that it wasn’t an inevitability that all Tal Vashoth would turn rogue and become malicious, murderous and mindless, he couldn’t simply argue Bull into believing that.

He made himself take a slow breath and return to the subject that made his heart hurt.

‘In answer to your original question,’ Cullen said, ‘I don’t really know what to think about it anymore. I don’t often think about the future. But I stopped daydreaming about white picket fences and settling down in the way you seem to think, a little while ago. Like it or not, I’m ill, and it’s a condition that… I did to myself. ‘It’s not curable. And there are indications it may progress, or may be…degenerative. We’ll see. And there are nightmares to contend with.’

‘Quiet nightmares,’ Bull said softly, and Cullen was surprised by the gentleness on Bull’s face when he looked up from the chessboard. ‘That’s important.’

‘I suppose it is,’ Cullen said, wincing when he remembered it was yet another thing he’d talked about the other night. ‘But I am never well-rested. And of course there is the fact that if whoever I “settled” with didn’t like to administer pain, I would find a way to administer it to myself, and that would be too much of a perversion for many people to bear.’

‘It’s not a perversion,’ Bull said, frowning. ‘You use that word a lot, but it’s really not. It’s more like- I dunno, you’re not gonna saddle a person who’s a fan of mabari with someone allergic to dogs, yeah?’

‘Still,’ Cullen said. Bull opened his mouth to argue, and Cullen decided it didn’t count as interrupting if he cut Bull off before he could speak a single word. ‘I don’t really understand how you can bring so much care into your connections with others, your congress with others, and be so shut off to the idea of being in a loving relationship that’s different to say – the friendships you have now.’

Bull’s mouth closed, he shook his head in an aborted movement. And then he looked over to the hourglass and grunted.

‘Game’s over,’ he said.

Cullen started to re-order the pieces for a fresh game, and Bull shook his head again.

‘We can call it a day.’

‘I’ve angered you,’ Cullen said, fingers hesitating on the pieces and then drawing back into his lap. ‘You’re not like this with any other subject. At least, not that I’ve discovered. Is it just that I’m some ignorant Fereldan? A human who just doesn’t get it? I’d find that easier to accept if there were more clear links between the Tal Vashoth in loving relationships and the ones who are out there killing innocents.’
‘I’m a Reaver,’ Bull said, staring at him.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said slowly. ‘I’m aware.’

‘It doesn’t matter what I daydream about, or idly wish for, because I’m already a Reaver,’ Bull said, his voice becoming shorter than usual. ‘You can only pile so much on a qalaba, before its back will break.’

‘But you do daydream about it?’ Cullen said.

‘Vashedan,’ Bull muttered. ‘Your stubbornness isn’t always an endearing trait.’

‘I’m surprised you think it’s an endearing trait at all,’ Cullen said. ‘I just don’t understand why you bring up me daydreaming about a future with…white picket fences and so on, and then when I ask the same of you, we have one game and you’re ready to leave. If I’ve offended you—’

‘I’ll stop asking you about it. Problem solved.’

‘That’s not an answer,’ Cullen said, even as Bull’s flinty gaze seemed to indicate that it was.

‘And it’s not like I’d want to give up my life,’ Bull said. ‘The Chargers, travelling about, living in different places, fucking other people.’

‘Who would ask you to?’ Cullen said, confused. ‘I’m not following. If you don’t believe that sort of love is an option because you’re a Reaver, and apparently that’s all you’re allowed to be—’

‘You don’t get it,’ Bull said, his voice low, but firm. ‘Strong emotion tips us over. It’s in our blood and bones and flesh. As a Reaver, all that anger and hate and bitterness, it finds a direction and I fight for whoever points me in what had better be the right direction, and every time I don’t know if I’m gonna come back from that, or if I’m gonna need to be put down like Tal Vashoth should be. Each time, Cullen, that I go out there and have to draw upon that to fight – which is a lot of the time – each time I sink into it, my last real thought is that I hope my men and women are strong enough to run me through should they need to, and I hope they’re strong enough to survive it.’

It took Cullen a moment to put it together, and when he did, he felt some strange ache pass through his whole body. A pre-emptive sadness, as a door seemed to close inside of him.

‘You think that love would be the thing that didn’t bring you back,’ Cullen said. ‘The extra burden on the qalaba’s back?’

It was clear that it was exactly what Bull thought. Cullen bent over the chessboard and moved all the pieces back into their starting positions and when he straightened, he resisted the urge to rub at the back of his neck.

‘There are some things I’m not gonna risk the people I care about over,’ Bull said. ‘And that’s one of them.’

‘But you care about them,’ Cullen said. ‘It’s a kind of love.’

‘Yeah, a kind of love,’ Bull said. ‘The kind that makes me want to disappear into bloodlust whenever someone else hurts them. The kind that makes me know what it’d do to them, if they ever had to kill me, because I couldn’t tell the difference between them and the enemy anymore and started pulling their limbs off instead. And there are lots of different kinds of love. I know that – I knew it then and I’ve seen it now. Doesn’t seem to make it any more appealing if you ask me.’
Bull’s shoulders were tense again, and Cullen made himself nod, because what else could he say? They were in public, and though no one was near enough to listen, it wouldn’t take much for someone to drift past and hear them talk about love, and Cullen couldn’t bear to have anyone else know what he’d accidentally let slip to Cassandra.

‘Besides,’ Bull said, ‘there’s no re-educators out here to fix things if I fuck up.’

Cullen tried to keep the frown from his face but couldn’t quite manage it. He didn’t like the idea of re-educators at all. But it was clear that Bull thought they’d helped him.

‘You…turned yourself into them?’ Cullen said. ‘That has to be quite uncommon.’

‘Sure,’ Bull said. ‘Most people are pretty resistant. But that’s what they’re there for. To fix someone. To get them back on track.’

‘But it didn’t work,’ Cullen said. ‘It didn’t put you back on track.’

‘What?’ Bull said, sitting straighter and staring at him in an open way that somehow seemed far more dangerous than a deliberate glare. Cullen felt his own skin prickle in response.

Yes, let’s traipse all through dangerous ground like it’s something you understand how to do.

‘No, it’s- I don’t know what I’m talking about.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘But you have an opinion, and I think I want to hear it.’

Cullen scraped his bottom teeth over his top lip, the scar flashing with that strange buzz of numbness and sensation all at once.

‘It didn’t work,’ Cullen said again, thinking that it would be easier to not make eye contact, but it seemed cowardice to look away. ‘You’re Tal Vashoth. Their course correction failed.’

‘Or I failed,’ Cullen said, shaking his head, as Bull stared at him like he couldn’t quite believe Cullen was saying these things aloud. As though no one had ever said them, or perhaps Bull had never even considered them. ‘It doesn’t work that way. That’s their failure. If an entire system is based upon fixing people into certain roles from childhood, and correcting those people when they stray from those roles, then that straying is a failure of the system. In the Circles- A lot of us liked to think it wasn’t our fault, you see. But it was our error. It still is. You can’t impose a system of authority upon vulnerable people and then tell them everything is their fault when they fail within a system they don’t get to control.’

Cullen swallowed down the lump in his throat. He didn’t like talking about any of this. Couldn’t talk about it without feeling numb and sick and revolted, not just with the Templar Order, but with what systems of authority had taught him, what he’d passed onto others. He knew what it was to escape feeling blameless and to not actually be blameless at all.

Bull wasn’t saying a single word, and Cullen missed that easiness that Bull put forth, even if it was sometimes a lie.

‘You think it’s that simple?’ Bull said, his voice light, but not soft or gentle.

‘No,’ Cullen said.
Bull seemed to shake himself, a quick glance down, a deliberate resettling in the chair, and then Bull leaned back into it and spread his legs a little and Cullen wondered if he was trying to relax himself, or preparing to change the subject. But after a minute, another minute, Bull still hadn’t spoken, and he just watched Cullen with an unblinking stare that was – Cullen realised – meant to be intimidating.

Cullen almost laughed, then. Because this was something he knew. Hadn’t he been the one to shrug off the need to take elfroot? To be derisive when Bull had checked in on him before they’d left for the Shrine of Dumat?

‘The Qun would have you believe that you failed,’ Cullen said, looking down, unable to bear that stare for much longer. ‘And it’s convenient for them, to kill anyone who fails by their standards, or exile them, rendering their very personhood and their voice worthless should they wish to speak out against what exists. And I know nothing about the Qun beyond what I’ve observed and researched, but I do know something about systems of power that behave in this manner. And you can dismiss my opinion, I suppose I might do the same if you were talking about the Templar Order as though you understood any of how it worked behind the scenes, especially since I know there are good things about both – the Qun and the Templar Order – and so of course I know it isn’t simple. I- I suppose I’m paralleling them as a rather clumsy attempt to understand something.’

Cullen rubbed at the back of his neck, stared at one of those bright red leaves stuck to the ground and thought about how soon it would be winter, and Corypheus might own the whole of Thedas by then.

‘Perhaps you might see now why I don’t often speak my mind in anything longer than a single sentence,’ Cullen said, laughing awkwardly. He kept his gaze on the ground and was frustrated with himself, with his inability to express something he didn’t have the words for. So he forged ahead, and felt like a fool.

‘The thing is,’ Cullen said, his voice losing its way, falling to the stops and starts that he remembered being such a hallmark of his early training as a Templar. ‘The thing is, Bull, it doesn’t seem to be benefitting you. Forgive me, but you are someone who doesn’t feel he has a right to pray anymore though it once brought you succour, and you have this bluster and bravado and confidence and I truly believe a great deal of it is real, but beneath that… I’m unsure how much faith you have in yourself if you’re constantly afraid that you are going to become a beast that needs to be slaughtered by the people he cares for.’

Cullen looked up then, and Bull was staring at him, leaning back like he was relaxed, even though no line of his body was relaxed.

‘Huh,’ Bull said, and then his eye narrowed.

‘I don’t imagine you thought the chess game would generate this sort of conversation,’ Cullen said wryly.

‘Nope,’ Bull said.

‘Well...’ Cullen swallowed and offered something of a game smile. ‘With luck, it won’t be our last chess game?’

Bull opened his mouth, and for a second Cullen’s apprehension turned into real, gut-deep fear. But then Bull sighed, deflated, scratched at his horns again.

‘Y’know,’ Bull said, smiling a little, ‘the last person to tell me that I didn’t have enough faith in
myself was a shitting re-educator.’

It was as though the cold in his fingers reversed on itself and skittered along his veins until it was rooted in the base of his spine. Cullen swore that when he swallowed, his saliva was cold. But as he opened his mouth to find a way to apologise, Bull held up a hand, and where there had been that still, strange stare, Bull now only looked tired.

‘Doesn’t mean you’re wrong,’ Bull said.

‘I’m likely wrong,’ Cullen said.

‘Maybe sometimes, sure, we all are. But with this? Who the fuck knows. I don’t. It’s not like I’ve been happy with how things’ve been going lately.’

Cullen frowned at the chessboard. Felt the little stone in his chest harden into a diamond, a pain he would feel even when he forgot why he was feeling it.

‘If you think this isn’t helping you,’ Cullen said, gesturing between them. ‘All of it, then you know that you can just take your leave whenever you wish, don’t you? I would hate to think-’

‘Wait, wait,’ Bull said, sitting straighter. ‘Really not what I meant. Really.’

‘If it’s complicating matters, or you just wish to…not have someone in your life who talks to you the way I do- I’m sure you can find plenty of people who-’

‘Wait,’ Bull said, his whole jaw tense. ‘I’m gonna stop you right there.’

Cullen was somewhat relieved, because it was getting hard to breathe through the knot in his lungs.

‘It’s with me,’ Bull said emphatically. ‘I know there’s a problem with the way I’ve been thinking and it’s hard for me to root up through it and find the issue. That’s what re-educators are for. I know I’ll figure shit out eventually, but in the meantime? Getting to hang with you is something…Not something I thought I’d have at this point in the game, y’know? During the war and with the big bad and all that.’

‘You’re sure?’ Cullen said, and then winced a little, because oh, that was plaintive. He didn’t sound put together and like someone who didn’t need reassurance in that moment.

‘It’s why I keep bringing it up,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘A person doesn’t keep bringing something up if they don’t have a reason for it, even though I really hate talking about it. Fuck, it’s one of the first things you learn when getting someone to open up to you. Focus on the things they keep referring to. It’s a kind of tell. You did good.’

‘Yes, well…I’m not sure I can talk about this anymore,’ Cullen said, and wished he hadn’t, because out of the two of them, wasn’t this a harder subject for Bull? But he felt odd and breathless and cold.

‘Sure,’ Bull said, and now his voice was gentle, and careful, and those things that Cullen realised had been absent for most of their conversation. ‘You want another game?’

‘I… All right,’ Cullen said.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, ‘look at me for a second.’

And so Cullen did, and Bull was leaning forwards and grimacing.
‘You didn’t do anything wrong,’ Bull said. ‘I don’t usually talk about my shit and it’s my way to try and throw people off the scent if they go somewhere that…I don’t expect. Maybe I’ve got some stuff to work out with whether or not I failed the Qun or they failed me, maybe. But one thing I do know is that in this conversation, I asked you for your opinion when you would’ve shut everything down, and you gave it. You didn’t fuck up. You know that when I think you’ve stepped out of line, I will tell you, yeah?’

‘I think you have ways of saying I’ve stepped out of line even when you’re not speaking,’ Cullen said, lips quirking.

‘What I have then, is ways of showing that the conversation isn’t easy. Just like you do. But just because something isn’t easy, or I get upset, doesn’t mean that you’ve stepped out of line, yeah? I made you plenty uneasy when we had to talk over the elfroot situation, but it didn’t mean I’d stepped out of line, did it?’

‘Maker, can we just play chess?’ Cullen said, realising that he was at some kind of limit he didn’t fully understand.

Bull’s expression cleared, and he nodded.

‘You notice that those rumours about the Inquisition are turning pretty sinister now?’ Bull said, putting the hourglass aside, indicating that they’d be playing by Trade rules.

‘Mm,’ Cullen said, the tightness in his chest unravelling a little, ‘remind me to never get on Madame de Fer’s bad side.’

‘I dunno,’ Bull said, ‘be something to be taken down by her. But yeah…I see your point.’

The conversation drifted along and they found easier ground, but Cullen noticed it never became fully relaxed. He was too tense, and he suspected that Bull was still thinking about what they’d talked about earlier, even if they didn’t bring it up again.

When Cullen noticed Leliana walking towards them with a businesslike glint in her eye, he forgot about the game entirely.

‘Is everything all right?’ Cullen said.

‘An urgent War Table meeting, Commander,’ Leliana said, nodding politely to Bull even as she stood by them both expectantly. ‘Important matters regarding the Arbor Wilds.’

‘Shit,’ Bull said, ‘s’pose that’s my cue to leave and see about polishing up an axe or two.’

‘I apologise,’ Cullen said to Bull, standing. Leliana was already turning and walking away.

‘It’s all good,’ Bull said. ‘Go see about the end of the world already, I could do with burying a blade in someone’s back.’

Cullen smiled, because he knew exactly what that felt like, even if his blade was a sword, and not one of those monstrous axes that Bull wielded.

As he followed Leliana, he resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. He still felt unsettled, as though he’d grasped whatever he and Bull had developed between them and shaken it too hard. He wasn’t even arguing for any kind of relationship between the two of them, he knew that was impossible, somehow. But Bull was a fine friend, and Cullen wanted to try and return the favour, even though his offerings were poor.
But his chest still ached, and he’d known – cerebrally – that he wasn’t going to come out of this unscathed at least a couple of months ago. Knowing it and feeling it, however, were very different matters. He wished it meant he could find the strength to end things for his own good, but he couldn’t. So he stacked the pain in his chest onto all the other myriad pains and aches he felt, and made it one more thing to live with; he wasn’t sure what else he was supposed to do.
And so the end of the world came and went, and Corypheus was still out there. The anticlimax of it hit the Inquisition badly, and Cullen knew that he – along with the others – should be trying to keep up a brave face in spite of it all, but bitterness turned the back of his throat sour and he was taciturn and shuttered off on the way back from the Arbor Wilds, with almost all of the Inquisition’s entire military massed behind him.

It didn’t help that they had Raleigh Samson with them under guard, red lyrium circling his irises and a knowing, delighted glint in his eyes when he’d spotted Cullen. He hadn’t been able to say anything due to the rough strip of fabric that had been tied around his mouth several times, but all the same, Cullen could hear his voice. Had been hearing his voice in his Maker-damned nightmares for months and months. Could see, even now, how high Samson was on the red lyrium, even though he must have been in pain every minute, every second.

They’d taken heavy casualties, but Corypheus’ forces had taken heavier. Cullen tried to remind himself – again and again – as he reminded the others, that it was a positive sign. But nothing could get around the fact that they’d all expected it to be over – one way or another – and it wasn’t over.

He’d been injured in battle several times, but they’d taken almost all their stores of elfroot – not thinking they’d need it for a future battle should this one fail – and so he’d been able to bounce back. Even without the lyrium, there had been moments where he’d been nothing but pure bloodlust. Where he’d shaken blood and sweat out of his hair when he’d removed his helm. He’d bathed at the end of three day’s fighting and the water around him swirled reddish, reminding him of that dream, of the red lyrium and the song of it.

When the Inquisitor had related the story of how Corypheus couldn’t die – looking exhausted while Morrigan stood nearby looking perturbed by what Cullen would later learn was a result of her drinking from the Well of Sorrows – Cullen had stood there staring at her. Listening to the Inquisitor describe Corypheus’ body being broken down by light, literally being blown apart and then reforming in the nearest dead body… That was when a kind of despair kicked in. How were they supposed to fight someone – something – that couldn’t die?

Interrogating Samson would be a start, and Cullen needed that to be his focus. He burned with a necessity to see Samson brought low, to pull secrets from him with steel if he had to. He tried to keep that vicious anger hidden, because he hadn’t felt like that for a long time, and he hadn’t felt like that towards someone who wasn’t a mage ever. It disturbed him, but not enough to rid himself of it, only enough to feel shame, to hide the truth of it from others so he could let that ugliness slink out later and win answers for the Inquisition.
He knew Bull was all right, had covertly asked about all the team so that when he slipped mention of Bull in there, it was just one more of the Inquisitor’s companions he was asking about.

Everyone had lost someone, whether it was only a distant acquaintance, or a close friend, family member or lover. Cassandra was already talking with Mother Giselle – who had travelled with them – about the necessity of organising some kind of vigil, and Cullen listened to their conversation and felt smaller, somehow, to hear them talking with compassion, while Cullen nursed a fierce, bright hatred towards Corypheus’ General.

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Seeing Skyhold come into view had been a balm to almost everyone, it seemed. Even Cullen ached to get back to his room, to lie down on his hard mattress, or have a proper shower, or fossick food out of the kitchens and be gladder than ever that people like Aidhe and Betsan had stayed behind. Given they’d lost the other two trainee Templars who had pledged themselves on Summerday, he couldn’t bear to think what would have happened if Betsan had never been bold enough to hint that she wished to be a scholar.

Knowing that the skeleton crew of warriors he’d made stay behind were all going to be okay was also a relief. But he knew what expressions to expect on their faces when they found out how many of their kin and brethren they’d lost. Cullen knew that he was coming with bad news, less hope, an inability to be certain how to rally everyone together. He was out of speeches, he was tired of training people to die, to fight a villain that refused death.

When the portcullis raised, everyone let out a cheer that was mild, but heartfelt. Cullen stayed behind to see through the military ranks, while the Inquisitor pulled ahead with the rest. When Bull passed him, Cullen saw him wink, and couldn’t help but smile a little, remembering the times when he’d insisted it was only blinking, while Bull pretended at mock outrage.

When Bull saw Cullen’s smile, he grinned in response, and Cullen realised it must have been what he was thinking of as well.

Cullen was too worn to care much for the pain in his heart, in the light of a friendship like that.

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It was late evening by the time he was able to make it back to his office, having to ensure that everyone else was as settled as possible, that the soldiers and Templars were given the treatments they needed. He heard a lot of people attempting to reassure others, though it seemed that those who said ‘it will all work out in the end’ seemed to need those words as much for themselves as for anyone else. Cullen could only nod, smile grimly, pretend that he agreed; as though he was possessed of the stoic heart they expected him to have.

He finished climbing the stairs to the battlements, his hands shaking and his body fringed with cold. He looked towards his office door, and stilled.

Hensley was by the door, stepping forward when he saw Cullen. His normally placid expression replaced, eyebrows knitted together and his jaw tight.

‘Report,’ Cullen said immediately, frowning.

‘There just wasn’t enough of us on the battlements to realise what was happening until it was too late,’ Hensley said. ‘I’m really fucking sorry, Commander.’

‘That’s not a report,’ Cullen said, heart lurching.
‘At some time after eight bells, when we most of us were down helping the others settle in, Commander, one Damhian Searidge entered your office and room likely seeking you but possibly not, and did damage to your living quarters. We were able to catch and detain him, and he’s in the cells now waiting your judgement. Some of us may have thrown a few punches in, Commander. Okay one of us. Sod it, I knocked the wanker down a peg or two. I’ll accept any sanctions that result.’

Cullen’s gaze drifted past Hensley’s shoulder to his office door. The doors that would have been open for anyone to enter at any time. Then he looked up to the two small windows he could see that led to his bedroom, blinking when he saw some of the broken panels of stained glass. Of course, his room was always accessible. It could be locked from the inside, but otherwise anyone could access it if he wasn’t inside it.

Hensley was waiting nervously nearby, which still wasn’t like him. He was easy-going and ready to laugh, and one of the best watchmen Cullen had ever known. A regular night-owl who preferred to be awake at night, always ready with a nod of acknowledgement, who never seemed to need to ingrati ate himself. A solid sort of fellow, not prone to nervousness.

‘Guess he really is filth after all,’ Hensley added. ‘Did you hear he was behind all those rumours? Trying to tear apart the Inquisition like that? And now this?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, wondering what would have happened if he’d said nothing at all. If he’d never brought it up with Bull, never brought it up with Cassandra, never vindictively thought what it might be like to ruin someone who was intent on ruining him.

He’d be trying to blackmail you, that’s what would be happening right now.

Cullen sighed.

‘I’d best assess the damage before going to the cells.’

Cullen couldn’t stomach the idea of Searidge and Samson together in the bowels of Skyhold, learning that they both knew the Commander of the Inquisition, and in such different ways.

Truthfully, he wanted to ignore it all. A part of him could have – in that moment – turned and walked into the storage room and he could have slept on the bales of stock feed and pretended that all of this could wait until morning. His fingers curled and his knuckles hurt, and he looked up to the broken sections of stained glass again and tried not to think that he’d somehow earned this, that he’d brought this on himself, because he was too tired for the weight of that too.

‘All right,’ Cullen said, squaring his shoulders.

‘I’ll be here if you need me, Commander,’ Hensley said. ‘No one else is inside your office or nothing – and the other doors are being guarded too. Look, don’t blame the others for it. I should’ve-’

‘It was a skeleton watch,’ Cullen said, holding up a hand. ‘Unless you’ve suddenly developed the ability to be everywhere at once, the person to blame for not leaving enough people to watch the battlements is myself. I doubt you were asleep on the job.’

‘No, Commander,’ Hensley said, ‘not that. But I had mates who didn’t make it and- Look, when everyone came back to Skyhold… I don’t feel good about it. My concentration wasn’t at my best.’
‘Then there should have been someone to relieve you, and there wasn’t. If you’re so desperate for lavatory duty, you can see me in the morning,’ Cullen said. ‘I recommend you come to your senses before then.’

‘Understood, Commander,’ Hensley said, still looking miserable, even as he stepped back to allow Cullen to enter his own office.

There were lamps already lit when he entered. Cullen closed the door behind him again, and then took three steps into the room and stopped still, his hand sliding off the hilt of his sword. He felt himself take a huge breath that hurt his chest, and then he held it, trying not to look at the ruin of books in his bookshelves, instead trying to tell himself that the damage to the desk – the spilled ink and torn paperwork and ledgers ripped apart – was what mattered most.

Eventually he couldn’t avoid it, and his gaze strayed to the books. He’d blown almost every coin he’d saved making sure they travelled safely from Kirkwall to Haven, knowing the extra tonnage on the ship was bothersome to the Captain. Many were single publications, or limited to Fereldan Circles, and some had been gifts. Two had been rewards from Knight-Commander Greagoir, and travelled with him from Kinloch, to Greenfell, and further still.

Cullen walked over to the books. Many had been taken from the shelves and pages and pages torn from them before being dumped upon the floor. That likely would have been quiet enough not to draw the attention of anyone on the watch. In fact, despite the carnage and debris in his office, everything here could have been done quietly enough. Even the multiple bottles of ink opened and upturned.

Cullen crouched down and grunted as his hips protested the movement, and he pulled out some of the atlases on the larger shelving at the bottom. Here and there, one or two were untouched, but Searidge’s spite had left almost every book ruined or damaged. Even the pages weren’t torn out cleanly from the spines, but torn in half.

The acrid scent of piss drifted through the room and Cullen could see a damp patch of pages by his desk and he rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. He felt something inside him quail, then become very small.

He looked up to the open trapdoor leading into his room and the hand at his forehead became a palm drifting over his eyes. These days he wasn’t the kind of person to run away from an issue, but Maker preserve him, the storage room was looking more and more appealing.

His steps were heavier than usual as he ascended the stairs leading to his room. And, grimly, he could already survey the damage before he’d even fully entered.

The barely populated bookshelf was also strewn with torn and destroyed books. The letters he’d been collecting from Betsan and keeping in a small folder had been taken out and ripped into pieces, decorating the room like fat pieces of confetti.

His mattress had been ripped into with a knife. And the smell of char and smoke – one of his chests set alight and bearing scorch marks – was likely what had attracted the night-watch in the first place. His dress clothing had been pulled out of the first chest and a knife had pushed deeply the cloth, making huge rents in the expensive fabric.

Curled neatly on his pillow – though that too had been torn open and goose down and feathers had gone everywhere – the cat o’ nine tails flogger that he’d taken for himself months and months ago was placed neatly. It had been coiled like a snake. Seeing it there was a clear reminder of what had started all of this in the first place.
Cullen took in a sharp breath, another, then marched over to the cat o’ nine and picked it up and flung it across the room with all the force he could muster.

He called a coldness to himself, needed that iciness in his fingers to numb him to the visit to the cells he needed to make.

*

The cells were damp and chilled, and the guards seemed unsurprised to see Cullen there. Cullen expected everyone would know what had happened to his office and room soon enough, and the idea of dealing with people’s reactions to that filled him with a distant sort of dread.

Samson – designated too dangerous for any sort of company – had at least been placed far from the other prisoners. So Cullen’s fear of Searidge and Samson becoming thick as thieves by the roar of a waterfall was at least only that – a fear not about to become reality.

Cullen stood squarely before Searidge’s cell, one hand on the hilt of his sword, the other lax by his hip. He was sure it didn’t really matter what picture he presented. Searidge was always good at seeing through it. Perhaps he just always suspected what was actually true – that Cullen was often flailing and secretly sure he didn’t belong in his role as Commander. Once one assumed that, it was probably quite easy to get underneath his skin, Cullen assumed.

Searidge sat on a low bench, shifted a little when he saw Cullen. He lifted his face to the light, showed the shiner colouring his right eye. His glare was baleful.

‘You can’t stay in Skyhold, Searidge,’ Cullen said, his voice empty of any feeling except coldness.

‘Figured as much,’ Searidge said. ‘Just thought I’d send myself off with something I’ll enjoy thinking back on years and years from now. That and how I made you bleed for me.’

‘Even now, you can’t let go of spreading these rumours?’ Cullen said, with a kind of calm detachment.

Searidge was up and the metal rattled when he slammed his palms against the bars of his cell. His face all wild fury now, and nothing of that teasing, vicious calm he’d had in their other encounters.

‘You fucking ruined me!’ Searidge snarled. ‘I was trying to make a fresh life, a new fucking life. You got to get one, didn’t you? After the shit you’ve done?’

‘You ruined yourself,’ Cullen said dispassionately. Searidge’s words stuck to him though, each one a tiny dart finding its mark. Cullen folded them away, thought longingly of lyrium, then shied away from the desperation in that imagining, knowing that Samson was here now. Close.

A moment of unsteady vertigo that came and passed in half a second. A sense that the world was turning before righting itself, and Cullen could feel withdrawals beginning to claw at the underside of his skin, turning his joints to grating stone.

‘You had a genuine chance for a new life here,’ Cullen continued. ‘You chose to make me a target of whatever you think your justified wrath is, and just as those you were meant to discipline learned that there are consequences for their actions, so you are learning that there are consequences for yours.’

‘Yours too,’ Searidge said, leaning against the bars and smiling, the split in his lip opening afresh and oozing blood that he quickly sucked away. ‘Yours too, Commander.’
Cullen stared at him. Ideas for retorts came and went, but he knew the silence would be more
damning. Searidge wanted a response, and when none came, his expression turned ugly and his
fingers turned white-knuckled on the bars.

‘So what’s my sentence?’ Searidge bit out. ‘Am I gonna be dragged before the Inquisitor?’

‘You’d like that too much, I think,’ Cullen said. ‘You’re under my purview. It just so happens that
we have an armed team travelling to the Frostbacks for trade relations, and you’re to be exiled
there. If any member of the Inquisition ever sees you within Ferelden again, you’ll be imprisoned.
If the Avvar have any need of silks, I’m sure they’ll call upon you.’

Searidge stared at him, and Cullen maintained his indifference even as he felt it begin to crumble.
Fatigue had wasted him. He wondered if the rule of contacting Bull within an hour of encountering
Searidge still applied. He wondered if it applied on an evening when Bull was likely drinking to
loss with the Chargers, and Cullen wanted nothing more than to lie face down on a flat surface and
sink into a stupor.

‘Exile,’ Searidge said, his voice hoarse.

‘I’m not sure what you expected,’ Cullen said. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, but we’re in the middle
of fighting a war, and I have far more important things to do than chat. Goodbye, Searidge.’

Cullen turned and walked away. It wasn’t until he was ascending the stairs that he realised he
expected Searidge to shout something bitter after him. But Searidge was silent, and Cullen thought
with a cynical smile that perhaps Searidge knew all about how to use silence to discomfort, just as
Cullen did.

On the way out of the central building, he exited through the library, wishing to avoid those
gathering for a late meal in the Main Hall.

On the second level, he was surprised to see Betsan bent over a desk, patiently writing out letters,
head resting heavily in her other hand, strands of black hair escaping from her ponytail. She was
clearly exhausted.

He paused by her desk, and she looked up with a yawn that turned into a startled cough when she
realised who it was.

‘C-Commander!’ she said, her voice thick with tiredness.

‘I apologise,’ Cullen said. ‘I was on my way back to my room, actually. You’re working hard, I
see.’

‘Yes,’ Betsan said. ‘Of course. It doesn’t seem right not to, knowing… I heard that a lot of people
died. In the fight. Some of my friends were… Not that it’s unique or anything, what I’m feeling. Is
it? I’m sorry, Commander.’

Cullen sat at the seat opposite from her and wondered if he stunk of blood and sweat. He’d
managed to bathe twice on the way back to Skyhold, but his fresh clothing had been in the pack
with his old clothing, and the smells clung.

‘It’s not unique,’ Cullen said, and then frowned when her face fell. ‘It’s not unique, Betsan, but
that doesn’t mean you don’t have a right to feel upset. There are hardened men and women out
there who will drink themselves blind tonight, because of sore hearts and minds. I’m surprised
you’re not with…the people you care about. Unless…’ *Unless they didn’t make it.*
'Nothing like that. I just like to be alone sometimes,' Betsan said. 'Doing my letters right helps. I’ll go down to the others later. They think I’m a bit strange, actually, for caring about this. They don’t think it’s very practical. And I’m becoming a bit of a know-it-all. Some of them like it and ask me things, or ask me to look things up for them. But I think it frustrates some of them.’

‘I’m sure,’ Cullen said, laughing softly. ‘I know a little bit about that. When I was younger- Ah, but you don’t need to hear stories about me when I was younger.’

‘No!’ Betsan said, her eyes widening. ‘You can tell me!’

Cullen thought of the confetti-like scattering of letters around his room, the cat o’ nine curled up on his shredded pillow, and in that moment he blinked hard to ward off the burning he felt in his eyes. He cleared his throat, looked away, and shook his head with what he hoped was a rueful smile.

‘Do you know what a snoutband is?’ Cullen said.

‘No,’ Betsan said, her eyes still wide.

‘Find the definition of it and write it to me in a letter, and if you’re correct, I’ll tell you a bit about what I was like when I was younger.’

‘Really?’ she said, looking far too hopeful for so small an offering.

‘Really,’ Cullen said.

‘I… I like that you write me,’ Betsan said, looking away for a second. ‘Mistress Maribeta says you’re probably too busy and that I should expect you to stop doing it one day, but I like that you do it. I’ve learned a lot of new things. Especially about nuggalopes!’

Cullen laughed then, despite his fatigue, despite feeling like bracken was strewn around the inside of him.

‘Well, I should be getting back,’ Cullen said. ‘Don’t stay up too late, Betsan. Good evening.’

‘Good evening, Commander,’ Betsan said. ‘Oh! Is snoutband one word? Or two?’

‘One,’ Cullen said.

‘Good evening again, Commander,’ Betsan said, as Cullen took his leave.

The walk back across the battlements was one where his mind was almost completely empty, except for a yearning for lyrium, and a sense that the cold night wind was finding all the crevices in his clothing. He’d already racked his armour with the rest, and everything he was wearing now was bearing up poorly to the cold. And, of course, he had no idea how much of his winter clothing had survived Searidge’s attack; if any of it had.

His laugh was a single, quiet breath of bitterness.

He nodded an acknowledgement to the soldier who didn’t leap to tell him about what Searidge had done – Cullen assumed Hensley had informed the other guards that the message had been passed along. Still, the soldier managed to look both guilty and sympathetic at the same time, and Cullen hated it and pretended he didn’t see it, and certainly didn’t validate it by saying anything. All they needed to know was that he was still the Commander, and he was not waylaid from his path by an act of concerted vandalism.
Once in his office though, he dashed off a quick note and handed it to Hensley, who he trusted more than most. Hensley, who already knew that he played chess with Bull in the storage room at all hours of the evening and had never treated that as any kind of abnormality.

The note itself:

_The Iron Bull,_

_I was wondering if you might wish to discuss whether Krem needs to see Gerrid again now that we’ve gotten a better idea of how he fights in the Arbor Wilds. Of course this can wait until tomorrow._

_Regards,_

_C. Rutherford._

Then, Cullen walked up his stairs once more, feeling progressively heavier. He picked up the cat o’ nine tails where it had fallen after he’d flung it at the wall. He turned and discarded his coat with its feathery mantle, and crawled onto his bed. He laid his head on a half-stuffed pillow and bunched it until it was mostly comfortable. He rested the disciplinary cat o’ nine tails on his own chest, one hand upon it. Absently, he realised he’d forgotten to remove his sword and sword belt and found he just didn’t care.

His eyes closed, and every beat of his heart was a silent plea for lyrium. He frowned, lips thinning, thinking that tomorrow he would have to pretend this was both easy to deal with even as he would have to no doubt address people asking what had happened to Searidge. He thought tiredly about consequences and how it was so hard these days to know what he truly deserved.

Somehow, this didn’t seem like something he had a right to feel angry about. He knew others might disagree with him, but then no one really knew the whole story. After all, the only rumour Searidge was responsible for was the one he’d never been given a chance to spread, and it was also the truth.

Cullen’s fingers curled around the cat, and he felt his breathing slow. He knew he couldn’t sleep like this, but he felt too weighed down to move. He could still feel his eyes prickling, and it had been some time since misery had pushed him to this. Every time he thought about the books, about Betsan’s letters on the floor, about the paperwork he’d have to redo…

So he tried not to think about it.

He was aware when Bull entered his office. Knew his footsteps. Felt as though he’d broken some unspoken rule for drawing Bull away from the tavern, from his Chargers. He couldn’t even bear to open his eyes and see his room again. Cullen winced when he heard Bull enter his room and swear at whatever he saw. Whether he was swearing because of the damage, or the picture Cullen presented on his bed.

‘Searidge has been exiled,’ Cullen said, ‘and this really can wait until tomorrow.’

Bull was quiet. Cullen smirked and refused to open his eyes, because everything hurt. He wasn’t even going to attempt to clean anything before he fell asleep. He wasn’t going to take off his sword. Tomorrow he could attend to what he needed to attend to.

Too much. Fixing the paperwork, debriefing, trying to strategize how to kill a creature that can’t die and might as well be a god. Samson in the cells.

Cullen’s breathing hitched, and he swallowed, thinking that this was pathetic, but not something he
hadn’t done before. The only difference was Bull standing in his room, either looking around, or looking at him, and not saying a word.

‘I shouldn’t have interrupted you,’ Cullen said.

‘You followed the rule,’ Bull said, ‘and I could’ve come tomorrow. Glad I didn’t.’

‘I don’t particularly want to talk about it. You can see what he did. That’s enough.’

‘Enough, yeah,’ Bull muttered. ‘Fuck, Cullen.’

Cullen couldn’t bear that tone of voice either, but he knew his voice would crack if he said as much, so he said nothing.

Seconds later Bull walked across the room. The mattress shifted as Bull sat upon it, at his customary corner. Then a hand rested on Cullen’s leg, just above his boot, over his trousers. Cullen took a steadying breath, wondered if Bull was now the warmest point in the room. The fireplace wasn’t lit, so he must be.

That hand rested still, and then after a while, squeezed carefully.

‘You said exiled,’ Bull said. ‘You went to see him?’

‘I did,’ Cullen said. His voice didn’t break. If anything, it sounded bleached of feeling. ‘Exiled to the Frostbacks. Imprisoned if he returns to Ferelden.’

‘I won’t insult you by threatening to take a detour by the cells and beat the shit out of him,’ Bull said. ‘But this is where I say I really want to fucking do that.’

‘I think Hensley wants to be first in that line,’ Cullen said, still refusing to open his eyes.

‘Great,’ Bull said. ‘I’ll have help. He say anything to you when you were exiling him?’

‘Nothing of great import,’ Cullen said. ‘Really. Just something about how I ruined him and how there are consequences for my actions too. Which…’ Cullen waved his hand at the room, ‘I can’t not be aware of.’

‘Between a scale of like…one to ten, how much do you think you’re gonna be able to handle me saying that this isn’t your fault?’

Cullen took a few breaths and then said: ‘Maybe a four.’

‘So that means I can say it like once, and then back off, yeah?’ Bull said. ‘And the first time I said it doesn’t count, because that was to illustrate the scale.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said, feeling like he was beginning to drown when Bull rubbed his leg firmly, slowly.

‘Cullen, he’s a shithead, and shitheads do shitty things. He couldn’t handle the things he chose to do in Kirkwall and he made you a scapegoat, when you have enough shit to deal with and enough you’re responsible for. So this bullshit, what he did, that’s not your fault.’

‘I’ve done worse than him,’ Cullen said, smiling a little.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, sounding frustrated, ‘it’s not the same. One isn’t connected to the other.’
‘Much worse,’ Cullen said.

‘Fuck,’ Bull breathed, the word so low and so fervent that Cullen had a feeling it wasn’t really directed at him. Then Bull moved so that he sat directly by Cullen’s side, and one of his hands rested over Cullen’s hand where it was still on top of the cat o’ nine tails that Searidge had seen, picked up, handled, coiled onto the pillow, made a statement.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, and Cullen frowned at how Bull was repeating his name like that over and over again, ‘listen to me, you’ve done amazing. You got us through that shit show, and this isn’t some secret cosmic payback, this is really unfair. When you’ve done such a good j-’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Cullen said, halfway to sitting up and his eyes snapping open and his breath shuddering out of him.

‘Don’t. Not tonight. Not that.’

‘Okay,’ Bull said, his face so serious, his hand tightening over Cullen’s hand. ‘Not that. Got it.’

‘I apologise,’ Cullen said, sagging back to the bed and staring up at the ceiling. ‘You shouldn’t have come.’

‘You followed the rule, Cullen,’ Bull said patiently. ‘Part of that rule wasn’t that you’d be in a mood to see me.’

‘You should get back to the Chargers.’

‘And I will,’ Bull said. ‘Right now, I’m happy where I am. Can I stay for a bit longer?’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said.

Cullen thought Bull would say something else, but instead Bull just sat by his side and kept a hand over his hand, and sometimes took a heavier, audible breath but was otherwise silent. Cullen’s eyes closed again, his eyelids heavy. He thought of the picture he probably made, on his bed like this, not even trying to make his room look presentable.

There would be time enough for that later.

‘He left the cat for me,’ Cullen said about twenty minutes later, ‘on my pillow. It was the only neat thing in the room.’

‘That’s what I like,’ Bull said lightly, ‘an attention to detail. If you’re gonna stalk and harass someone, might as well do a really creepily good job of it, y’know?’

Cullen’s breath of laughter was weak, his breathing so slow he knew he’d be able to sleep kitted out as he was. He’d slept in worst places. He’d even managed to sleep in Kinloch when everything fell apart there. This was really…very comfortable by comparison.

‘I’m glad you never hit yourself with that cat though,’ Bull said. ‘Cuz it’s really not broken in.’

‘It’s not,’ Cullen said. ‘It was fresh. I stole it from a consignment of disciplinary tools sent to Skyhold.’

‘That’s what I like about you,’ Bull said, ‘always breaking the rules.’

‘Oh really?’ Cullen said, turning his hand so that his fingers could touch Bull’s palm. ‘You like the criminal element?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Show me someone who practices
the petty theft of floggers, and I’ll show you a hard on.’

Cullen laughed properly then, blinking his eyes open to see Bull wagging his eyebrows and managing to both look like someone who had just spent far too long fighting for his life in the Arbor Wilds, and someone who could joke like that for hours.

‘I’m starting to think,’ Cullen said, ‘that you just spend most of your life erect and therefore able to find any number of ‘causes’ for what is only your natural state of being.’

‘It’s true,’ Bull said. ‘It’s a hard life for me.’

‘Maker, no,’ Cullen said. ‘Don’t. We’re fighting a war.’

‘Yeah, we’ve got some stiff competition right now, for sure,’ Bull said. ‘We’re in the thick of it now. It’s- Shit. How do I work turgid into this?’

‘You look deeply into your heart and compassionately decide not to,’ Cullen groaned.

‘I was running out of words,’ Bull said.

‘Corypheus can’t die,’ Cullen said, deciding it wasn’t a very neat segue, but that it probably didn’t matter.

Bull was silent again, and then there was the sound of him scraping the heel of a boot across the floor. Cullen wasn’t sure what that sound meant. Frustration? Something else?

‘The boss is good at pulling miracles out of her ass,’ Bull said finally. ‘Maybe she’ll have another one.’

‘I think the miracle of Corypheus not dying might trump that,’ Cullen said. ‘And I’m going to have to tell everyone that we’ll find a way. It’s the Inquisition, what have we provided if not hope?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said.

‘He can’t die.’

‘We’ll find a way,’ Bull said, but he sounded tired and like he wasn’t sure. ‘But not tonight. That’s not what tonight is for.’

‘You should get back,’ Cullen said. ‘Commiserate with the rest of them. The Herald’s Rest will probably be lively with…oh, I don’t know, songs and dirges and goodness knows what else.’

‘Most of your Fereldan songs sound like dirges anyway, how do you tell the difference?’

Cullen rolled his eyes even though they were still shut. But, as with Betsan, a wave of fresh grief moved through him and he felt appalled at himself, that people had died, and here he was miserable over his books, the letters from Betsan, and paperwork. His eyes screwed up for several seconds until the flood of it passed through him, and he was able to relax again. His hands were so cold. He thought it would be very easy to find some lyrium tonight. Feel connected to something again in that tangible, real way.

‘Hey,’ Bull said softly, ‘you need some help getting this all to rights?’

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘Thank you though. I’ll…do what I can in the morning, and I already know the guardsmen that were on watch will be offering to bend over backwards to assist in sorting it all out. Maker, I don’t want people going through- I think my winter clothing might be ruined and I don’t
have the heart to check.’

Cullen sensed Bull leaning forwards, and for some reason he expected a kiss – which he didn’t entirely want. His forehead started to furrow, until he felt a thumb smooth over his brow. That somehow helped, and he sighed out a caught breath.

‘That’s not what tonight is for, either,’ Bull said. ‘None of that shit. All you have to do is lie here like this, and talk about whatever you want to talk about. Are you hungry?’

‘What?’ Cullen said, and Bull’s thumb kept smoothing over his forehead. ‘I- No, thank you. I’m too tired to eat.’

The thumb became fingers smoothing into his hairline, and Cullen’s hands tightened over the cat o’ nine tails, and Bull’s hand squeezed his in response.

‘You want me to go?’ Bull said gently.

‘Do you want to go?’

‘I’m good,’ Bull said. ‘You _sure_ you don’t need me to like…pay Searidge a visit in the cells? Give him a royal Chargers send off or anything like that?’

Cullen moved slightly towards Bull’s frame. Then, without words needing to be spoken, Bull sat properly on the bed and Cullen shifted the broken pillow impatiently and realised he must have feathers in his hair and look a sight, but it didn’t matter, as long as he could be closer like this. And he thought that was weakness, and he was too tired to care about that. In the end, he was curled around Bull’s body, his belly pressed to Bull’s back, his knees brushing the side of his thigh.

‘Fairly sure,’ Cullen said.

‘That sounds like there’s wiggle room,’ Bull said, encouraging Cullen to let go of the flogger and dropping it somewhere behind Cullen, onto the mattress. ‘But because I love a good high road, I’m not gonna see if there is.’

‘Big of you,’ Cullen said.

‘Ha! Everything about me is big,’ Bull said, grinning. ‘I could’ve used that earlier. Damn. I got stuck on turgid and forgot about the rest. Not like me. I’m off my game.’

‘We’re all grateful,’ Cullen murmured, thinking that he shouldn’t fall asleep like this, and not quite knowing how to stop himself. It annoyed him that his eyes were still hot with unshed tears, as though a part of him had split off and away, and was feeling these things even though all he really noticed now was the exhaustion.

He hated when he felt a tear leak out of the corner of one of his eyes. Hoped that Bull was looking at the wall or the burnt chest or something else. But he sensed Bull’s eyes on him, even though – thankfully – Bull didn’t react.

‘There were two books,’ Cullen said, through the lump in his throat. ‘One was an outdated and poorly-informed _highly_ biased tome on types of magic and classes of mage and how to recognise them, and the other was – of all things – a bound compendium of letters. A Knight-Commander writing to the Cleric of the time. What started out as business, then became friendship, and then became, well, a rather illicit affair. But quite romantic. The books came with me all the way from Kinloch, you know. They survived Kirkwall, and the ship’s voyage, and Haven, and the journey to Skyhold.’
He opened his eyes and Bull was looking right at him.

‘But they didn’t survive Searidge,’ Cullen said. ‘It wouldn’t be an understatement to say that – for me at least – they were the only good thing to survive that siege at Kinloch. It’s funny, isn’t it? In this day and age, that you can learn, over and over again, that nothing in this world is sacred, and that the Blight will touch everything it wishes, and now – with the Fade split open and demons spilling forth – we learn just how…how much despair can be poured into this world. It’s funny that despite all of that, I somehow thought…

‘I’ve lost friends and colleagues, for as long as I can remember. So in a way I’ve even gotten used to that. You do, don’t you? You become accustomed to losing people.’

‘You do,’ Bull said, never looking away.

‘Maker, I only- I don’t really have a point. I’m rather confounded to find myself this maudlin over some books.’

‘I’m not,’ Bull said, looking concerned and softened around the edges, though some of that – Cullen suspected – was due to the film of wetness over his own eyes.

‘I appreciate that you came,’ Cullen said. ‘More than I can say, truly. Perhaps later we can make-believe that I drank half a bottle of whiskey and that my mood is nothing more than inebriation.’

‘We can do that,’ Bull said, smiling a little. ‘And I’ll talk about how you’re a moody drunk, but at least I got you in several games of chess. Maybe like…five in a row.’

‘Four,’ Cullen said. ‘No, three.’

‘Four is good,’ Bull said. ‘I won four games of chess tonight. That’s a good outcome for me, with you.’

‘Three,’ Cullen insisted.

‘Yeah, it’s obvious barter and haggling and shit isn’t your deal, Cullen.’

‘If you ever happen to…find what my ‘deal’ is, please tell me,’ Cullen said. He closed his eyes again. ‘Because whatever it is, it’s not this.’

A palm smoothed slowly over his hair, first ruffling the strands against the grain, and then carding them back into place. Cullen sighed shakily, pressed his legs closer into Bull’s body.

He was drifting off to sleep when he heard Bull speaking very softly in Qunlat. Cullen only recognised a handful of words. Something about peace, and the sea, and the endlessness of everything.

Cullen even thought he might already be dreaming, because by the cadence of Bull’s voice, it almost sounded like he was praying.
I'm Just A Monster

Chapter Notes

In which Bull monologues, because he’s tired and he has less of a filter than usual. I’m not…entirely happy with this chapter (despite multiple reworkings) and hope you’re all more forgiving of it than I am. Life has not been kind of late, but I’m sure a few can relate to that, because that’s just how life is sometimes. No Samson yet, as some other stuff had to be dealt with first.

Cullen dreamed of Kinloch, and then he dreamt of Samson and the red lyrium. Those dreams were so normal that when Cullen woke tiredly, just before dawn, he stayed still and calm for several moments in his bed just remembering what it was to breathe carefully. He’d learned how to contain himself after nightmares like that.

His brow furrowed when he realised the mattress and the pillow didn’t feel quite right. Then he heard sounds in his office. Hensley shouting some order to someone else. The sounds of sweeping, and what might have been the creak of damaged wood.

Then he remembered that Corypheus couldn’t die, that Samson was at Skyhold, that Searidge had vandalised his living spaces and was exiled to the Frostbacks.

Cullen took a sharp breath and covered his face with his hands, and then remembered that he’d not undressed when he’d gone to bed. He was still wearing his sword belt. Could still feel his sword making one side of his hips heavier than the other. He groaned softly.

‘My dear,’ Vivienne said, as Cullen bolted into a sitting position and stared at her. She sat, quite relaxed at what had previously been an upturned table. ‘I hope I didn’t wake you.’

‘Uh,’ Cullen said, staring at her. He lowered his arms fully into his lap. ‘Uh- No, I..’

He blinked hard, felt dizzied. He’d sat up too fast and it wasn’t just his fingers that were cold this morning. Iciness bleached all the warmth right up to his elbows. He almost couldn’t feel his forearms. That was bad. Possibly an episode, if he wasn’t careful. Right now he could only tell his hands were trembling by looking down and studying them.

When he looked up again, his eyes strayed past Vivienne to the broken panes of glass in the windows, and then back down to the ripped correspondence all over the floor. Had Searidge read the letters? He felt a flash of bitter anger then, not on his own behalf, but Betsan’s – she didn’t deserve that. He…he had earned the spite of many in those in the world. She had done nothing more than write to someone she mistakenly thought of as worthy of respect.

‘You seem a little distracted, Commander,’ Vivienne said smoothly. As he looked at her, still confused, her expression turned from its usual sternness into something softer, and he wondered if he was imagining it, until she said: ‘You have my most sincere apologies, of course. I did not expect this would be the outcome of what was set in motion. Would I have known, I would have at least told you to prepare for a newly renovated room.’
Vivienne stood then. She was immaculately dressed and Cullen thought first that perhaps he’d overslept, because she didn’t usually wake as early as he did. And then, no, it was pre-dawn, and Bull had always said that she slept poorly.

‘You didn’t sleep?’ Cullen said.

‘I was attending to some matters when I discovered what had been done. I came to see how you were faring yesterday evening, but The Iron Bull impressed upon me that you might need the sleep more. He’s quite protective of you.’

She said it with an arched brow, as though she was a little suspicious of the notion. Cullen couldn’t fault that, though it made his cheeks flush to imagine it. Vivienne ascending the stairs, Bull on his bed and…Cullen still curled around him. Maker, he’d been quietly shedding tears until he’d slept.

‘Of course this does kill two birds with one stone,’ Vivienne said. She smiled, a smugness in the corners of her lips. ‘Your atrocious office will have to be completely re-fitted, and out of the goodness of my heart, I’ve decided to contribute funds to the matter. Your room too. Though I’ll make sure you’re not inconvenienced for long. In fact, you could still sleep here, if you wished. I know you care not for the accommodations of the Main Hall, no matter that you make such fine sport when we see you there.’

Cullen just stared at her. It was too early for this. The more reality tried to push fingers into him, the more he was aware there was very little left to be stolen away. There was only a kind of bracken inside of him, as though the tide on a swamplike plain had receded.

He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth, trying to chase the taste of lyrium, even though he’d not known its bite on his palate for a long time.

Surely, if he just took a little… Perhaps he could speak to Cassandra. She’d understand now. After all, they were dealing with a far different threat than before. Fighting without his full strength, without the lyrium bolstering him, it would just be madness.

‘Are you all right, dear?’ Vivienne asked.

‘I’m… Yes, of course,’ Cullen said, thinking that he felt out of step with the world somehow. He could still hear them downstairs, and the thought of them picking up those ruined pages, or sweeping piss-soaked paper into a bin, made him feel queasy. For the first time, it bothered him that Bull had left without saying anything. It was absurd.

It took about another minute for him to realise that Vivienne was just watching him quietly.

‘You’re going to redo…the tower?’ Cullen said, skipping back over some of the things she’d mentioned. ‘Madame de Fer, I’m not- My idea of what is comfortable living is vastly different…’

He stopped talking when she raised her eyebrows at him. It was rather like being chastised by a teacher, except that he was an adult, and Commander of the Inquisition.

‘Allow me some credit,’ she said, smile widening. ‘It’s not as though I’m about to upturn the finery of Orlais upon you. Why, it would be traumatising to all involved.’

‘You didn’t cause this,’ Cullen continued, frowning. ‘There’s no reason for you to-’

‘It is never a bad thing to be able to say that one contributed personally to the refitting of a room and office of someone with your reputation, after an act of vandalism.’
‘How long were you here before I woke?’

‘Some twenty minutes,’ Vivienne said. ‘Your guards were already cleaning up and said you’d not be long in waking, apparently you have quite the internal clock?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, swinging his legs over the bed and pausing, because he didn’t even know what fresh clothes he had to wear, what wouldn’t be damaged. He wasn’t about to open a chest in front of her. But the one that was burnt... it had been opened already, and Cullen could see his dress clothes on the floor by his feet, and wondered what else Searidge had found with a blade.

‘Normally I wouldn’t lower myself to ask, but is there anyone I might fetch for you?’

Cullen looked at her, thinking that he might regret this conversation later, but he couldn’t get his mind to work.

‘You really don’t look well,’ Vivienne finished. At any other point, he might have taken the words as a barb, but they were delivered carefully, and – he thought – as though she was trying to comfort a very distressed child. That should have annoyed him, but he couldn’t seem to collect any of his thoughts together.

He’d have to wait for the Inquisitor to pass judgement on Samson before he could interrogate him. He’d have to insist on being given that chance. There was no way anyone would logically see Samson executed before he could be leech of all he was hiding regarding Corypheus’ secrets. But still, the Inquisition wasn’t always run by logic alone.

‘I apologise,’ Cullen made himself say. ‘I slept poorly.’

He didn’t, actually. He slept about as well as he ever slept. Though he wasn’t sure if that counted as poorly anymore. Once one got accustomed to unsound sleep, was it still ‘poor,’ or was it just normalcy?

‘Besides,’ Cullen said, standing and briefly proud of himself for not needing to extend a hand to a wall to keep his balance. ‘It’s all superficial. We’re trained as Templars to not be sentimental over anything material. All of this is...’

He stared at the shreds of letters on the floor and then thought of the books Knight-Commander Greagoir had given him. Why would he give Cullen those books as a reward, if not to help cultivate some attachment to items of the flesh? Was that not...contradictory?

He had to pull himself together somehow. People would be by his office. He’d have to bear up against the vicarious anger of others as they spat rage towards Searidge for rumours he’d not actually spread. He’d have to hold up against whatever condolences or mutual horrors they shared. He’d have to promise them that there was always hope, and that this event was nothing in the face of what they had confronted before and would confront again.

If he had just one vial of lyrium, he could get through the day and then never have it again. He could quit again, he’d done it before, after all. Just one vial today. And perhaps if it helped, he could use the experience as proof that he could take it to help defeat Corypheus. For, if there was a way to defeat him, Cullen would need his full strength. Not whatever half-mast energy he offered now.

‘Cullen,’ Vivienne said, her voice sharper than before. ‘Sit down.’

Cullen sat, and then blinked some of the cobwebs out of his head and looked at her in irritation.
'You have two choices,' she said. ‘You can have your breakdown now, and some will be inconvenienced by it and some of us will understand. Or you can do ten minutes of Focus breathing as you were taught by your elders, find some steadiness, and get through this day as you’ve gotten through the rest of them. The Templars gave you tools to focus, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, staring at her.

‘I know you’re tired,’ Vivienne said. ‘Believe me, I may not understand what you are personally experiencing but I understand exhaustion.’

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Cullen said, thinking that this was mortifying. ‘It’s only that I’m not usually having to deal with anyone else sitting in my room without explanation when I just wake up.’

‘How irritating,’ Vivienne said, smirking. ‘Though lock-picking isn’t a skill of mine, and if you didn’t wish for people to enter your private spaces at all hours, you could simply install more locks on your doors. Or use them.’

Cullen stood again and smoothed down his clothing. It was useless. Everything was creased. He’d have to dig into his chests and at least see if something was serviceable. With any luck the smoke would have stopped Searidge from doing much more damage.

‘Was there anything else?’ Cullen said.

‘Not at this time,’ she demurred. ‘It’s not my idea of a fine morning, to deal with a cantankerous ex-Templar, after all. I’ll take my leave, then, and see you soon I expect. Farewell, Commander.’

‘Uh,’ Cullen said, on the back foot once more. ‘Good-good morning, Madame.’

‘And to you,’ she said, smiling politely. There were no daggers in her eyes though, nothing scathing about her tone. And as she descended the ladder, she gave a little wave, all her fingers neatly lined up and only her wrist moving once, and then again.

Cullen heard the sound of approximately four men give about nine or ten very nervous salutations to the Madame de Fer, and couldn’t resist his own smirk as he contemplated which chest to look through first, in the hopes of finding fresh clothing.

* 

It turned out that most of the items in his second chest were whole, and that meant he had some winter clothing, some day to day wear that had survived Searidge’s blade. Cullen was relieved that he could at least dress himself for the day, even as he still avoided the contents in the first chest. He’d need to get some new underclothes made, and socks, of all things.

Hensley practically assigned himself lavatory duty, and Cullen wasn’t going to stop any man or woman from working out whatever guilt they had through whatever scut work they felt they needed to do. He knew what that felt like.

Cullen insisted on being present for Samson’s judgement, when he’d previously tried to stay impartial and even absent from such matters. It wasn’t his job as the Commander of the Inquisition to oversee such things. He was no magistrate, nor did he have any desire to be one, and he suspected he’d only get frustrated seeing people make decisions he wasn’t likely to make himself.

The judgement itself happened three days after their return to Skyhold. In that period of time, Cullen found himself distracted increasingly by thoughts of lyrium. Once, he saw a Templar
drinking it down – discreetly turned aside – after making his prayers to Andraste, and Cullen stopped some distance away and just couldn’t remember what he was supposed to be doing. He was rooted by the sight of the lyrium vial, the knowledge of what it would taste like, how quickly it would work, how long it would linger.

He must have lost five or ten minutes just standing there, and by the time he remembered what he was supposed to be doing and shook himself out of his almost-trance, the Templar was gone and Cullen didn’t even know if he’d noticed the Commander just staring at him.

A date for a flogging with Bull was tentatively arranged. The first Cullen would have experienced in some time. It wasn’t as though he and Bull were free constantly, and as Searidge had escalated, Cullen had felt that part of him shut down, as though he just wasn’t certain he could afford the indulgence of it any longer. Searidge was gone, his leaving marked with no ceremony, except for a handful of those truly incensed by the rumours, who apparently flung rotten tomatoes and other refuse until the Templars and warriors who had the share the caravan climbed down and scared them all off.

With Searidge’s absence, Cullen felt uneasy and off-kilter. As though he might focus if he could be under the lash of some weapon once more.

Cullen spent the afternoon after judgement had been passed on Samson – he was to be imprisoned and interrogated until exhausted of all knowledge, and then given over to Dagna for experimentation – in the process of still getting the paperwork back together. It was not a good time to lose track of consignment, armour, where weapons were going, how training was being organised; and Cullen’s memory was not what it used to be.

He couldn’t stop worrying at the scar on the inside of his lip, and he’d once trained himself out of that, but now couldn’t seem to make himself stop. Once, he’d also bitten at his nails, and it was a good thing he didn’t do that anymore. He lifted his hand and then furrowed his brow to see the bitten down nails and cuticles, and frowned. He didn’t know what bothered him more – that he’d started, that he didn’t remember that he’d started.

‘Maker, damn it all,’ Cullen muttered, turning his blurred vision back down to the paperwork he was trying to reassemble and thinking that by the time Cassandra realised he’d always been the worst choice for Commander, it might be too late.

*

One of the few bright points, in that space of time, was receiving the first of what he hoped would be many more letters from Betsan. It simply said:

Dear Commander,

A snoutband is a person who is always interrupting others, but to correct them or make a different point. They sound annoying! I have a friend like that!

~B

Postscript: I would like to hear more of you when you were younger, please, Commander.

To which Cullen responded:

Dear Betsan of the Library,

I believe among some of the ruder names I was called as a Templar recruit, was that word you just
researched yourself. And it is annoying. Since then I have had the opportunity to meet many youths who do exactly what I did, and I assume it is Andraste quietly pointing out just how aggravating it can be.

But the reality is that I simply liked to be right about everything. You see, I, too, used to be called a know-it-all, though for different matters than you, I expect. I like to think it also means we are hungry for knowledge, but perhaps a little too eager to disseminate it. Don’t let it get in the way of hearing truths beyond what you gain from books, because there are things in this world that can only be learned from the hearts of others, or your own heart.

~ C. Rutherford.

He added her letter to a new, bare folder, and tucked it in the second chest, and then he locked the chest for good measure. These were things that he wouldn’t let fall prey to anyone else again. He wasn’t a Templar anymore, and material objects could matter to him as much as he needed them to.

Lately, he needed them to matter a great deal more than they probably should.

*

Cullen was still working on paperwork – the chessboard cleared from the small table in his room – when Bull arrived on Saturday evening. Cullen’s fingers were ink-stained and his mouth tasted like he hadn’t known the taste of lyrium for far too long.

Samson in the cells, and likely going through his own withdrawals. What would it be like? Red lyrium, all reports were that it was agonising to experience when one was taking it. Were the withdrawals worse?

Cullen needed to speak to him.

Bull entered the trapdoor and Cullen glanced up at him, not entirely sure what he wanted. To be flogged to within an inch of his life maybe. To drown in pain. To feel some luxury of obliteration that he didn’t deserve.

He shook his head in irritation and forced himself to turn around, fingers curling in his lap.

‘Good evening,’ Cullen said.

‘You look like shit,’ Bull said, placing the bag on the floor with care. ‘You sure you want to do this?’

‘Yes, I…’ Cullen looked over the still drying ink on parchment and blinked at it. ‘I think- Vivienne said she saw you, the other night?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, and when Cullen turned back to him, he had a bemused look on his face and his head was tilted. ‘Your concentration’s gone to shit, huh?’

‘It’s been like this for a few days,’ Cullen said, shrugging and thinking that there wasn’t harm in talking about the symptoms if he didn’t talk about the cause. ‘But it’s the bed I’ve made for myself, and that’s that, I suppose.’

‘You suppose,’ Bull said slowly.

‘Did you bring the cane?’
Was that what he wanted? If it was administered as some defined punishment, would he find clarity afterwards? But from the expression on Bull’s face, he felt an internal jolt. Maker, what was he doing? The last thing Bull needed was his stream of consciousness.

‘So you want punishment now?’ Bull said. ‘This doesn’t have anything to do with us not defeating Corypheus by any chance? Or the shit that Searidge pulled? Or that your old Kirkwall room-mate is in the cells right now? We’re good. You and me. So I’m just trying to see what’s going on here. Punishment’s on the table now, is it?’

‘You’d be hard-pressed to find any mage that disagreed with me,’ Cullen said, and then, turning back to his paperwork, he bit the inside of his bottom lip. After a few seconds, unable to stomach picking up the quill, he said: ‘Of course, there aren’t a great deal of Kirkwall mages here. I wonder why?’

‘Koslun’s balls, Cullen,’ Bull said, sounding exasperated. ‘You- Do you know what my life would look like if I kept punishing myself for the shit I’d done on Seheron?’

‘Wasn’t that what the re-educators were for?’

A long silence, and Cullen abandoned the paperwork and turned back, only to see Bull staring at him in that way that had made Cullen’s skin prickle during their last chess game.

‘What did you just say?’

‘Turn yourself in, they can-’

‘Whoa, you know nothing about what re-education looks like.’

‘I know that the majority of the Qun think of it as a form of torture, and you volunteered yourself for it because you were afraid of what you were becoming. Look at me and tell me that’s not true.’

‘You fight so fucking dirty,’ Bull growled. Cullen wondered if it meant anything that Bull didn’t disagree with what he’d just said, even as the tension ratcheted in his spine. ‘I think I’d even like it if you didn’t spend your time turning these conversations around on me. You gonna spend the whole night blasting past my points, let me know now, because I’ve seen gaanlok in action and I can just leave you to it.’

They both stared at each other for a long moment, and Cullen had a brief flash of thinking it was unfair that Bull wasn’t willing to meet him head to head in this. But that passed, and on its heels, the guilt of having lashed out at the person who had been consistently trying to help him since they’d started getting to know each other better. His shoulders dropped, then he scratched at the back of his head, digging his blunt fingers in.

‘Perhaps I don’t think it’s comparable,’ Cullen said finally. ‘You in Seheron and myself in Kirkwall.’

‘That’s not your call to make,’ Bull said, folding his arms. ‘You don’t get to make that call on something you’ve never seen. I’ve fucking seen Circles. Templars fucking mages up. I’ve seen that. But you haven’t even stepped foot on that shitty island. You don’t know what I’ve done. You don’t know what people have tried to excuse in me, because they could say ‘oh, well, he’s a fucking Reaver’ or ‘y’know, Seheron just does that to people. Especially qunari.’

Cullen opened his mouth, but Bull walked over and pulled out the other chair, sitting in it, grimacing when it was obvious that the chair wasn’t made for someone of his height or breadth. But he placed his fingertip on the edge of Cullen’s paperwork and leaned forward, staring at him.
‘Do you think I’d still be here? If I kept punishing myself for Seheron? There’s a difference, Cullen, between remorse, and guilt, and hating your own guts and…you think I’d be able to build a family around myself like the Chargers? That I would’ve let myself? And, sure, I have issues with it. With all of it. Being Tal-Vashoth. The Qun. All of it. You know, don’t you? You’ve brought it up enough. But at the bottom of all that crap, I know that life isn’t punishing me when things go to shit. Things just go to shit. Things do that a lot lately. Not just for you, or me, or whoever you think are the bad people. But for the good ones too. All the people you think are…better than you, or worth more, they’re going through it too. Some of them are probably blaming themselves for it too.’

Cullen stared at him, his arms in his lap, feeling too cold to say anything. The fire in the fireplace was kindled, crackling; it didn’t touch him.

Bull muttered something under his breath in Qunlat, looking across the room towards the wall. After a beat, he lifted his hand and dragged his palm over his face, sighing.

‘At the very least,’ Cullen said, clearing his throat. ‘The situation with Searidge—’

‘Yeah, normally I could handle it, Cullen. I could handle you saying that you brought it on yourself. But I dunno if I can watch you try and make the case of why you hate yourself, tonight.’

‘Then by all means,’ Cullen said, feeling detached, ‘you don’t have to stay.’

Bull’s forehead furrowed, and then he squinted, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, his voice oddly calm. ‘You’re right. I don’t.’

He stood, and Cullen watched him walk over to the bag and pick it up. A thread of panic wove through him and tugged at the underside of his chest.

‘I…’ Cullen dug his toes down into his boots. ‘I apologise. You don’t have to stay. But not- Not because I don’t want you here. I know I’m difficult to be around, when I’m like this. I understand.’

‘That’s magnanimous of you,’ Bull said, though he didn’t turn around. His shoulders rose and fell in what must have been a silent sigh. ‘Just- For the record, if I stay? Flogging’s off the table.’

‘I understand,’ Cullen said. He was simultaneously annoyed and relieved. The inside of his lip hurt where he’d been capturing the scar in his top lip between his teeth, nipping at himself over and over again, through the day. ‘You could just…stay, if you like. Or- It’s a Saturday evening, I’m sure the Herald’s Rest—’

‘Wasn’t really in the mood for it, honestly,’ Bull said.

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, feeling selfish. ‘Bad day?’

Bull sighed out loud then, lowered the bag to the ground once more. Instead of walking over to the chair opposite Cullen, he walked to Cullen’s bed and sat at the corner he always sat at. He reached out and dug his palm into the mattress. It had been restuffed and stitched over a day earlier, it was sound again.

‘I’ve got a scared crew,’ Bull said. ‘They try and hold up under it all, but it’s getting to them. I pretend it doesn’t get to me, because they like that, they expect it. A couple of them might know better but…they still like it. Maybe it gets to me sometimes.’

‘It would get to anyone,’ Cullen said. ‘It is. Lady Vivienne hadn’t slept that night, when she
returned to my room in the morning.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘We talked a bit about that. The wandering ghosts of Skyhold. No one fucking sleeping.’

Bull lifted his fingers to the place where horn met skin and dug in hard, before scratching. Cullen had a flash of remembrance. He stood, staring, thinking that now would probably be the best time… He had a memory like a sieve lately.

‘What?’ Bull said, staring at him.

‘I just- Wait there, just a moment, please,’ Cullen said.

Then, he lifted the trapdoor and raced down the steps as fast as his sore legs let him, finding the horn balm he’d secreted away in a box of new quills, ink bottles and more. He ran back up the stairs, the decent sized glass jar as cold as his fingers were.

When he held it up, Bull’s eyes widened.

‘How on Thedas did you get your hands on that?’ Bull said, reaching out eagerly.

Cullen walked over and handed it to him, and Bull screwed off the lid and lifted the jar and sniffed it. He made a low rumble of appreciation, and Cullen blinked rapidly as the hard fumes found his eyes. He’d already tried it once on his cold fingertips. It had made his fingers redden, then tingle and even start to warm. Once he’d known it was at least effective as some kind of liniment, he’d put it away.

‘Is it- I wasn’t just given normal human liniment and told that it was suitable for qunari, was I?’ Cullen said, smiling a little.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, ‘this is the shit. Can you get more of it?’

‘I think so,’ Cullen said.

He was certain he could, though he didn’t want to explain to Bull that after asking around the military, he’d just gone where he was told – to the Tal-Vashoth couple that Bull was certain wouldn’t have access to it. Not only did they have access, but they had a couple of qunari traders who still worked with them despite their being Tal-Vashoth.

It reminded Cullen of Samson – who had ferried love letters between Maddox and his love – and it reminded Cullen that a slavish adherence to anything both wasn’t healthy, but also wasn’t possible. Where Bull saw fixed binaries between himself and the Qun, clearly the Tal-Vashoth couple – who had named themselves Anera and Anastha – saw a world of fraying edges and places of give and take.

But for now, he wouldn’t tell Bull where he was getting the horn balm from. Not a lie, as such, so much as wanting Bull to actually use the horn balm and get some relief from it, instead of rejecting it out of hand.

‘Do you-? I mean, I can apply it, if you want?’ Cullen said hesitantly.

He’d been told it was a special thing, for someone else to apply it. Watched Anera and Anastha gaze at each other as Anera had explained that to him. Knew that they’d likely not had to apply their own horn balm for years, in each other’s presence.
Bull hesitated, and Cullen’s heart beat faster. Bull thought of him as a friend, didn’t he? How special was ‘special?’

‘It’ll be hard on your hands,’ Bull said, frowning.

‘Well, I- I tried some. A little. It wasn’t that bad, perhaps because my hands are already in such a state. Really, I’d like to, if you would… want that. If you tell me what to do?’

Bull stroked the side of the jar with his thumb, and then looked at Cullen for a long time. Finally he nodded, and closed his eye as if in thought.

‘Do you have a clean boot brush? Or something bristly that hasn’t had boot black on it? It helps to rub off what’s flaking first. It’s messy though. You sure you want to?’

‘I- Yes,’ Cullen said, feeling his cheeks warm. ‘Perhaps as an apology for how I acted when you arrived. But also because I’ve been curious. And because it would help you. I can… let me see what I’ve got downstairs. They delivered some crates of new personal goods, some brushes are likely in there. Wait here?’

‘Sure,’ Bull said, a faint smile in the corners of his lips.

Cullen managed to find what he was looking for in the second crate, squinting at a variety of hygiene and self-maintenance products he’d never used before in a box nearby. He picked through the bottles quickly, and wondered if that was Vivienne’s influence, or Josephine’s, or if it was just something that some mysterious person had thought he was using all along. He was quite certain that one of the creams was an unguent for his skin. To do nothing more than soften it. It was baffling, but also distracting, so he forced himself away and back up the stairs.

Bull had shifted to the chair that Cullen had been sitting in, looking over his paperwork. Cullen started to say that he knew it wasn’t comfortable to sit like that, but then realised that otherwise Bull’s horns might be hard to access. Even sitting, Bull was still tall. And, Cullen supposed, he didn’t really need flakes of horn all over his bed.

He was touched by the considerateness of the gesture.

The horn balm rested on the table, Bull’s hand resting by it, as though he couldn’t quite believe it was there – or as though he was resisting the urge to use it immediately.

‘What do I do?’ Cullen said, standing by Bull’s side.

Bull looked up, reached for the brush, fingertips caressing the back of Cullen’s hand as he did so – in a way that both was no accident, and yet seemed so natural that it took Cullen a moment to realise that just standing there, staring at the back of his hand was a foolish thing to do.

‘Here,’ Bull said, ‘like this.’

Bull shifted so that the horn he raised the brush to wasn’t over the table. Then, starting at the tip – instead of the base as Cullen would have thought – he scrubbed over the horn. Small bits of horn flaked away – larger than dandruff, but about the same colour – and what was left behind was a buffed piece of keratin, shining black, even bluish where it caught the light.

‘You work your way towards the base instead of the other way around,’ Bull said, handing over the brush. ‘Then the other side.’

‘Well, I’d never have guessed you wanted both sides done,’ Cullen deadpanned.
After a second, Bull chuckled, and his fingers curled where they rested on the table when Cullen wrapped his own hand around the section of Bull’s horn where it angled up. He shifted until he was standing in a better position for access and started with less harsh strokes than Bull had used, just to get used to the motion.

Bull’s shoulders were tense, but as Cullen continued, they started to relax. Cullen had to stop on occasion to blow bits of dead keratin away. And if he spent longer than he needed to on sections of horn because he liked the shine he was bringing up, then he could just pretend it was all for the sake of being thorough.

‘What is it like?’ Cullen said. ‘If you don’t mind me asking?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said, voice lower than usual. ‘Don’t mind. Dunno what you want me to say. Feels good.’

‘Do you do this yourself?’

‘I lose patience,’ Bull said, ‘and I don’t do it as much as I should. Feels like a half-done ritual, without the balm. And then I get annoyed at it all. And then I just itch the worst parts with my hands and leave it.’

Cullen nodded to himself, kept working towards the base of Bull’s horn, where the colour began to fade from black into gradations of a rich umber brown, a warm grey. There were even sections that were silvery, and Cullen touched his fingers delicately to them, thinking that this was something he could do again. Something he could easily do.

Then, with a flash of hard, knotted pain in his chest, he imagined a future after all of this. Bull visiting him, wherever Cullen lived, so that Cullen could do this for him. And where would the Chargers be? With them? Or would they be in a tavern nearby? Cullen didn’t even know where he would be living, but he sensed it wasn’t Skyhold. And in that brief but vivid fantasy, he imagined Bull asking if Cullen wanted to come out on the next assignment, and Cullen would say that he had the time free, and he’d enjoy a change of scenery, and he could always get the neighbour to look after his dog and-

He made a pained sound before he could stop himself, and then blinked hard to drag himself back into the present, where Bull had tensed again and Cullen’s fingers had faltered.

‘Apologies,’ Cullen said, his voice strained.

‘If you’re bored—’

‘No, truly,’ Cullen said. ‘I imagine you know how it is, lately? My thoughts are wandering.’

It’s the first time they’ve wandered there.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said heavily, ‘I know how that is.’

‘I’m not bored,’ Cullen added. ‘Is the technique all right?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, and then his shoulders relaxed again. Cullen nipped at the scar on the inside of his lip and then nodded to himself, and kept working the brush over Bull’s horn.

It was quiet for a while. Cullen focused on the immediacy of what he was doing. But his heart still pounded from the vividness of what had painted over his mind. What was he doing? Imagining a future at all?
Cullen had already moved onto the second horn when Bull said:

‘You’ve never really been hugely into fucking, have you?’

Cullen’s eyebrows lifted. ‘I thought I was the master of odd segues.’

‘I’m competitive,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice. ‘But I was thinking about it.’

‘Because you think it’s strange?’ Cullen said.

‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘It’s not the way I’d live my life, but I’ve met plenty of people who aren’t interested in sex, or just don’t get as much from it. But I can tell you get something from it so- Was just thinking about it.’

Cullen brushed flakes of keratin away as he thought it over.

‘It was never really a problem,’ Cullen said. ‘I didn’t really understand why some of my peers felt the need to always go out and have congress with others. Why they’d sneak out for it, or why… I tried things a few times, and the payoff just never really seemed worth it. Or it was antiseptic. I didn’t know that I, ah, liked pain in that context at the time. I had no way of knowing that. And even if I did, I’m certain I wouldn’t have trusted that with others anyway.’

It was strange to think about now, in retrospect. Truthfully, he’d never understood why Templars in training would risk their positions and their reputations because of what was between their legs. It made no sense to him. Certainly, he’d experienced arousal, but the idea that it had to be satisfied was bewildering to him. It was something he found interesting, but easy to push away. It wasn’t until he and Bull had gotten to know each other better, that he’d even considered himself someone who could be – or was – a sexual creature.

‘It’s different for you,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah, y’know when you have a favourite food, and you just want to keep eating it?’

‘Not…really,’ Cullen said. Cullen couldn’t help laughing then, and Bull joined in. ‘I don’t dislike food. I’m just- I am not an immediately sensual person. There, does that help?’

‘I dunno, Cullen, I think you’re plenty fucking sensual,’ Bull drawled, and Cullen felt his body warm in response to that, and he focused on what he was doing and not on the heat in his ears and cheeks. ‘But I was going to say it’s like that, but I have an unlimited number of favourite foods and there’s more to discover all the time and that’s basically like all the different people I’ve been with.’

‘So you’re not the kind of fellow to settle down with one meal for the rest of his life, is what you’re saying,’ Cullen said, still laughing a little, even as he felt a little uneasy to think about it.

‘Nailed it,’ Bull said.

They were silent again, and as Cullen finished up at the base of the other side of Bull’s horns, Bull lifted the jar of horn balm and unscrewed the lid again. He turned it on the table a few times, and then reached around and touched Cullen’s hip lightly.

‘If your hands start to hurt, you need to stop, okay? Get some vinegar or something, and wash it off your hands.’
‘It’s fine,’ Cullen said, putting the brush down and reaching for the horn balm.

A hand around his wrist stopped him, and Cullen turned to look at Bull.

‘I mean it,’ Bull said. ‘I can do this myself. I don’t want you getting hurt over it.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said, nodding seriously. ‘If it begins to hurt, I’ll stop and find some vinegar and remove whatever’s on my hands.’

Bull held his gaze for a few seconds longer, and then nodded as if satisfied. Cullen picked up the horn balm as Bull released his wrist and then stared at the translucent green ointment.

‘Is there…any trick to it?’

‘Nope,’ Bull said. ‘Pretty much what it says on the jar.’

Cullen turned the jar to see if he’d missed a label – of course he knew he hadn’t – and then he realised what point Bull was making and he rolled his eyes.

‘Does help if you start from the tip and work your way to the base,’ Bull said. ‘Like a good blowjob.’

‘Maker help me, I will send you out of this room, and you can do this yourself,’ Cullen said, even as he dipped his index and middle finger carefully into the ointment. It didn’t really make his fingers feel anything at all, but he knew it would, and he hoped that it wouldn’t start hurting. ‘Do I use the whole jar? Or is this one of those ‘a little bit goes a long way’ type of liniments. Like most of them?’

‘It’s like most of them,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Super complicated, I know.’

‘I have to say,’ Cullen said, ‘when we organised the flogging, I didn’t expect the night to go quite like this. But I can’t say I mind very much, either.’

‘Mm.’ Bull said nothing else, tilting his horn into Cullen’s fingers, as Cullen started massaging in the liniment. It brought up the shine Cullen had buffed even more. It was a little like massaging lacquer into already polished wood, which was an odd comparison, as Cullen had never done that with his hands before.

As Cullen kept going, Bull breathed in, a huge, audible sound, and then sighed it out with such force that the papers on the table lifted and fell slightly.

‘Fuck. *Fuck* it’s been too long,’ Bull said fervently, leaning back into the chair, which creaked in response.

Cullen shivered at that tone of voice, at the combination of relief and heat he heard in it. He moved a little closer to the back of the chair, ran his teeth over his bottom lip, and then forced himself to just keep concentrating.

Bull groaned again as Cullen reached the right angle of his horn, and then made a deep, rumbling sound that was something like a growl and what could have even been a *purrr*, as Cullen reached the base of the first horn.

‘So you’re…enjoying yourself, then?’ Cullen said, his fingers tingling and his palms hot.
'Nothing itches like bone itches, and *yeah*, this is really, really good. Anyone would think you’d handled large horns before.’

Cullen rolled his eyes again and thought that at this point, he might get eyestrain.

‘Really?’ Cullen said.

‘You’ve got a real nice grip,’ Bull said, in a tone of voice that felt flattering and arousing even as Cullen knew that Bull was teasing him.

‘Here we go,’ Cullen said. ‘You might as well get it out of your system now.’

‘That up and down motion,’ Bull said, ‘like you’ve spent all your life just waiting to get a hand around it.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘That’s enough.’

‘I’ve seen you staring at them,’ Bull continued, and Cullen could hear the shit-eating grin on his face even as he couldn’t see it. ‘You like *big*, don’t you?’

‘So!’ Cullen said brightly, letting go of Bull’s horn. ‘You can do the other one, and I’ll see you later in the week, I’m sure. Good evening!’

Bull laughed, reached around and grabbed Cullen by the shirt, even as Cullen started to step away. Bull was still laughing when he dragged Cullen back, and still laughing when his hand moved up Cullen’s shirt to the collar and pulled him in, pressing lips to his and then biting hard at his lower lip. Cullen grunted, inhaled deeply, and then started coughing from the strength of the fumes coming from the horn balm.

‘Maker,’ Cullen choked out, even as Bull let go and Cullen’s eyes watered. ‘It’s strong up close.’

Cullen reached up to brush the tears out of his eyes and Bull had a strong hand around his wrist and jerked his arm down hard enough that it hurt.

‘*Don’t* touch your eyes,’ Bull said, his own eye wide. ‘You ever touched a chilli pepper and then touched your eyes afterwards?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, but he thought he could imagine.

‘This’d be worse.’

‘I was going to use the back of my hand, but I take your point.’

Cullen ended up using the hem of his shirt, with the back of his hand beneath it, and then blinked a few more times as his eyes seemed to settle down. He looked over at the sack of items on the floor, then dipped his fingers into the jar on the table and focused again on what he was doing. It was harder to keep the threads of his concentration in line, of late, but the strong astringent scent of the liniment helped, and having a simple, repetitive task to do kept him grounded.

Eventually, Cullen started on Bull’s other horn and worked his way down slowly, methodically, as Bull sprawled in the chair and occasionally made faint, rich noises that had Cullen thinking about the things they might do in the future, the things they’d done in the past.

‘You really blame yourself for all of Searidge’s shit, don’t you?’ Bull said, his voice quiet, even peaceful.
Cullen’s hands paused on Bull’s horn, he pressed his lips together. He couldn’t remember the last
time his sinuses had been so clear.

‘It’s that I can’t help but know that had I not come into Searidge’s life, none of this would have
happened,’ Cullen said. ‘If I hadn’t made him do what I’d wanted, and used my power against
him…’

‘You don’t think that maybe you’re confusing using your power against mages in the Circle with
something that’s really different?’

Cullen blinked to hear the subject brought up so plainly when Bull had always been somewhat
delicate about it in the past.

‘The thing is, Cullen, some people just want another place to dump all their hate and their anger,
because they can’t fucking deal with it themselves. You didn’t blackmail him. He didn’t have to
say yes to you. You said he actually said yes to you the first time because he wanted your contacts
and he wanted to use you, and then what – got mad that he couldn’t? And so he had problems with
flogging someone like that. Okay. That’s not your fault. You didn’t make him start, and you didn’t
make him keep on doing it.’

Cullen remembered the relish with which Searidge had said he’d remember what it was like to
make Cullen bleed for him. Remembered those moments when it felt like Searidge was trying to
get all the stress of his day out over Cullen’s back, those moments when Cullen just let him,
because he felt he deserved no less.

‘Some people,’ Bull said, ‘need to be victims. Maybe they have been, once or twice, but then they
take that hatred and all that shit, and they ball it up, and they find someone and trash them with it.
You never pissed in his room, did you? His office? Never ransacked his personal belongings? You
didn’t stalk him in his living spaces, or tell him he was perverted or any of that shit, yeah? Every
time he’s done something like that, you’ve found a reason to make it yours, like it ever belonged to
you. It’s hard to hear you do that, Cullen. Which doesn’t mean you have to stop saying it, because I
know you believe in it.

‘But here’s the thing… the world isn’t neatly split between victims and assholes who victimise
people. It’s just not. There’re people on Seheron who would kill me if they saw me, torture me to
death, probably flay the skin from my body first and rub salt into all of it. They were victims of
what I did to them or their families and that’s that. Okay. There’s things that are pretty clear in your
world like that too – I know you’re not gonna argue with me on that. But you don’t see me
marching back to Seheron to…receive what they think I deserve. Because I want to keep living, and
I think I deserve fucking better than that. And I think my Chargers wouldn’t have someone like me
having their backs protecting them – if I decided to do something like that.’

‘You’re talkative tonight,’ Cullen remarked.

‘I am,’ Bull said. ‘I’m tired. And I just need to say this, even if it’s only once, and it’s only now.
The thing is, it’s just not as simple as Searidge wants it to be, or as simple as you want it to be. You
wronged the mages. Or some of them. The Circle wronged you too. The Chantry isn’t all sunshine
and blowing light up everyone’s ass after all. And like it or not, Cullen, you’ve been made a victim
too, and you can’t…ignore that, or dismiss it, by taking on everyone else’s hate so that you never
get to cry out all the ways you’ve been made helpless, or been fucking harmed by what’s going on
around you. Does that mean some of those mages can’t hate you? No. But does it mean that you
just sit there and passively accept the hate of some piece of shit like Searidge and make it your
own fault? Well. You can try and explain the logic of that to me, but I think you know it’s not
gonna make any sense.’
‘There are people who have experienced much worse things,’ Cullen said, ‘at the hands of—’

‘There are always people who’ve gone through worse shit,’ Bull said, reaching up with his arm and touching Cullen’s forearm, then rubbing it. ‘Always. This world would be a poor fucking place if they were the only ones with any right to forgive themselves, to feel sad, to feel betrayed or hurt, to have a right to feel safe or cared for. Pain is pain. And y’know the world is already a poor place to live in, filled with a lot of crap that we all wish wasn’t happening.’

‘So this is what you took away from Seheron?’ Cullen said, carefully moving his fingers over Bull’s horn again.

‘Nah,’ Bull said, laughing. ‘What I took away from that miserable island was this bone deep sureness that I needed to be slaughtered where I stood. Give me the qamek already. Make me useful again. Seheron gave me a whole lot of shit to take with me, and I gotta say, almost none of it was good.’

Cullen swallowed the lump in his throat. The idea of Bull on qamek – which, as far as Cullen knew, was almost the same as being made Tranquil – it turned his stomach.

‘I’m rather glad that didn’t happen to you,’ Cullen said.

‘I wasn’t. For a long time. A long time. But the thing is, as I was taught by those re-educators who you seem to think are the worst thing in the world, it just wasn’t that simple. And I wanted it to be. Because there’s this…relief that comes with thinking, ‘well I’m just a monster, and I should be killed, and every day I’m on this wretched world I will walk shouldering that burden and wait for the final blow.’ It’s shitty, but it’s easier than thinking, ‘well I did some monstrous things, but I can also do really amazing things, and I’ve saved people’s lives for the right reasons and murdered people for the wrong reasons – and sometimes the right ones too – and I have to walk with that and this and somehow understand that I’m both, when all the people who hate me want me to be one thing, and the people who still love me want me to be another.’’

Cullen kept rubbing in the horn balm with slow and patient strokes. It wasn’t really necessary anymore. Both sides of Bull’s horns were well-coated, and it seemed that it was sinking in. The shine was impressive. It occurred to him that he’d never seen Bull’s horns look like this before, because he’d not been able to find any horn balm since they’d first met. Cullen would ask for a stock of the stuff and give it to him. Satinalia was coming up, and…

*Corypheus will likely have killed you all by then.*

‘A thing I’ve learned,’ Bull continued, leaning back into Cullen’s touch, ‘is that you can’t spend your life around the people who need to hate you. Their need to be stuck in whatever they’re stuck in…that’s not- you don’t owe them that, even if they hate you for a good reason. I don’t need to live in Seheron and wait for them to come at me. Even if they think I’ve betrayed them by leaving and looking for something better for myself. You’ve got a target on your back whether you like it or not, but no deer’s just gonna stand there waiting for hunters, and no person should either.’

‘Life goes on, etcetera,’ Cullen said, thinking that there was no pretence anymore that he was doing anything necessary, and now he was just touching Bull for the sake of it.

‘One of the things I hate about being Tal-Vashoth, aside from all the obvious shit, is that…maybe the Qun aren’t right about everything. Okay. Kind of got an idea of that in Seheron with some of our orders. Maybe, maybe had an idea of that before. And as an abstract thing, I get it. No system is perfect. But it was my system, and it was perfect for me. Except maybe it wasn’t. You said all that shit you said, and all it made me think is that maybe the system – in its flaws – set me up to
fail. And then I think, y’know, I’m Tal-Vashoth, I’m a symptom of the Qun’s failure to be a whole system, because if we’re not just mindless killing machines all the time when we’re Tal-Vashoth, then…see…maybe I needed that system to be perfect. Maybe I didn’t know that until it wasn’t.’

‘Even after Seheron?’ Cullen said. Now he was just stroking his hand along Bull’s head, down behind his ear, over his neck.

‘After Seheron, they said the Qun would accept me and forgive me if I accepted and forgave the Qun, and there was love in it, even if I was lost. It was…unconditional. Or I thought- I don’t understand a system that can forgive that, forgive all that shit that happened, those people I ripped apart sometimes for the joy of it because y’know, I’m a Reaver, they’ll just blame it on that. I don’t understand a system that can forgive that, but can’t forgive the Boss from saving my guys and setting me up for that kind of failure. Cuz I never could’ve won, Cullen. There was no way to win.’

Cullen’s arms slid down around Bull’s neck, his hands moving down to Bull’s chest in an awkward embrace. He pressed his forehead to the back of Bull’s head and his eyes stung because of the horn balm. But he stayed like that, and eventually he felt palms covering his wrists, holding him in place.

‘So they could forgive that,’’ Bull said, his voice rougher than before, ‘but they wouldn’t forgive the Boss’ understanding that I love my Chargers, and her making a call that saved something inside me. When I think about it – and I fucking try not to – I think that I’m Tal-Vashoth because the Qun got more out of me being a monster than they ever did out of me having a family that went beyond the Qun.’

Bull laughed, rubbed his hands over Cullen’s forearms.

‘Y’know, I had a point before about you and Searidge and this wasn’t it.’

‘Blame the horn balm.’

‘Well, yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Obviously.’

‘It’s strong stuff.’

‘You get me thinking about shit,’ Bull said, squeezing Cullen’s arms.

‘It’s not as though you don’t return the favour,’’ Cullen said.

It had been an odd night, but not – it turned out – a bad one. He wished he could freeze this moment in glass. That he could look upon it or stay within it, forget about the future that stretched on in front of them or the past that stretched on behind.

‘How often does the horn balm need to be applied?’ Cullen said, not wanting to move, even though his back was aching and his body didn’t quite appreciate the odd stretched position he was in.

‘Every day or two,’’ Bull said. ‘Obviously it doesn’t need to be, I’ve done without for long enough. But about every day or two for a few weeks. Then everything that’s grown in will go dormant for a while, and the itching stops. Bliss.’

‘If you need someone… I mean, I’d very much like to do this again. I imagine we’ll be too busy for- But the offer is there.’

Bull nodded, Cullen feeling the motion through his forehead, feeling the warmth of their shared
Eventually, what was comfortable became awkward, and Cullen drew away reluctantly, his hands firming on Bull’s shoulders before he let go. He screwed the lid on the horn balm and left it on the table. Then, he walked around to the other side and sat, looking at his own paperwork, and then he looked away, thinking over something he’d remembered from the night Searidge had ransacked his rooms.

‘After the vandalism,’ Cullen said hesitantly. ‘You…prayed?’

A long hesitation, too long for Bull to lie about it, though it was clearly something he wasn’t a topic he was comfortable with. Then Bull shrugged both shoulders, said nothing at all.

‘Thank you,’ Cullen said.

‘I was doing it for me just as much,’ Bull said, the corner of his mouth lifting up. ‘Just seemed-There are some things that shouldn’t happen the way that they do. That was one of them.’

‘Thank you for…staying,’ Cullen added.

‘Thank you for letting me,’ Bull said. ‘Was a time when you wouldn’t’ve gotten in touch, wouldn’t have let me see that. You did. I appreciate it.’

‘You say that like it’s a good thing, to see me like that,’ Cullen said, almost laughing.

‘It is,’ Bull said soberly.

Cullen’s smile vanished, and he looked down at his hands in his lap. Would he have to find vinegar before the night was out and wash them free of liniment? Probably. He had a tendency to rub his eyes in the morning. The horn balm stung just as vapour in the air. His room hadn’t smelled so greenly fresh before.

‘It’s not a good thing that it happened,’ Bull continued. ‘It’s not a good thing that it hurt you so bad. But you letting me see you like that… Yeah, that means something.’

Cullen couldn’t think of anything at all to say. That vision of the future knocked away inside his head, an unwelcome guest peddling something he couldn’t afford to buy into. He wondered if lyrium would make him brave enough to walk away from this, or brave enough to end it and pre-empt the misery that would come when he was inevitably heartbroken.

‘Come on,’ Bull said, getting up. ‘Let’s go to the kitchens and see if Aidhe will be sparing with some vinegar. Can’t keep that shit on your hands. It won’t wash off with water.’

‘I- Now?’ Cullen said, blinking up at him.

‘Plus I bet you’re forgetting to eat properly, and I’m starving. Nothing like a good horn massage to really get the blood up and racing. Besides, I bet Aidhe wants some kind of post-battle debrief or some shit and I don’t know if I can face that alone.’

‘Right,’ Cullen said, then he groaned. ‘Oh, Maker, neither can I.’

‘So we’ll face it together. Deal?’

Bull held out his hand, and Cullen started to slip his own into it when he looked down at his own clothing and plucked at it.
'First, let me put on some warmer gear. Not even Firstfall yet, and winter’s sneaking in like a stowaway.'

‘You’re telling me,’ Bull said. ‘Normally it doesn’t get to me so much, but if there’s a place where I’m gonna freeze my nuts off, Ferelden is it. And on that note, I’m gonna park my ass downstairs and wait for you, since I know how you like to fuss with your hair and shit.’

Bull picked up the horn balm and added it to his sack of equipment, then left it on the ground to pick it up later and hesitated by the trapdoor. Then he spun and walked over to Cullen and grasped him by the shoulder and pressed his lips roughly to Cullen’s forehead.

‘Thanks, by the way,’ Bull said.

‘For what?’ Cullen said, blinking up at him. ‘The horn balm?’

‘Sure,’ Bull said, grinning at him, heading over to the trapdoor again. ‘Let’s say for the horn balm.’

Then Bull was making his way down the stairs and Cullen stared after him for several seconds, bewildered, before remembering that he was meant to get changed.

Cullen looked over at the sack as he looked for better winter clothing, and thought about the black flogger that he knew rested within it. Even now, he yearned for it, though he was relieved the night had gone the way it had.

Besides, he was also starving, and sharing a meal with Bull seemed an unusually auspicious nightcap to the end of what had been an atrocious week.
While we all know Cullen is problematic as all get out (or at least, that’s how I think of him anyway), this is a chapter where he is more obviously making decisions that are morally questionable (regarding Samson). So a warning for that, I guess?

Also, I am deviating from canon! I’ve done it before, and I’ll do it again, and well, yeah.

Cullen stood in front of the bars of Samson’s cell, and two of his best stood behind him: Knight-Captain Briony, and Knight-Captain Asherin. It was damp, and the roar of the waterfall here was dim. The light came from guttering torches that smelled of rancid fat and thick resin, they smoked just enough to prick at the eyes. Samson’s cell reeked as occupied cells so often did. Even with guards emptying his refuse bucket every other day, odours clung.

Samson stood two feet away from the bars, his hands behind his back, a tired but mischievous smile on his face. His eyes ringed with that unnatural red. Cullen had no idea how Samson was so resilient. Everyone else would have shown signs of crystallisation by now, if they’d had as much as Samson had. But all Samson had to show was his unusual eyes, and the sense that he was wasted somehow, likely ignoring food and self-care in favour of the lyrium itself.

‘Well, if it isn’t the Commander of the Inquisition,’ Samson said, smiling a little more. ‘Missed your face, Cullen. Looks like you’re holding up a right bit better than I am. Still looking a bit worn though, friend. Been turning anyone Tranquil lately?’

‘Hello, Samson,’ Cullen said. He kept his hand on the hilt of his sword, which was foolish really, because Samson likely didn’t buy it. Cullen did it more for himself now. A reminder of how things had changed. He wasn’t the scared nineteen year old in Kirkwall, terrified that every mage he crossed was about to become an abomination, while Samson rolled his eyes, exasperated with him within days.

Things had changed.

‘I suppose you know how all of this will go,’ Cullen said coldly. ‘We need information on Corypheus, and as you’re to be passed on for experimentation afterwards, we’re not entirely fussy how we get it. But this can be civil, if you like.’

‘Oh, yeah, because this has all been so very civil like,’ Samson said. ‘Rein it in, Cullen. You’ll puke over your boots before you’ll get the hot poker in. But I know how these things work. Bet the Chantry has a few torturers. Shame Meredith’s not here, she’d do a bang up job.’

‘I’m sure she would,’ Cullen said.

‘Look at you, then,’ Samson said, grinning, some of his teeth showing signs of decay. ‘Not tripping over your words like the guttersnipe you used to be. Don’t have some fish and egg pie, by any chance? Never mind me. If it’s not from Starkhaven, it’s not going to be the same anyway. You remember, don’t you?’
‘I do,’ Cullen said.

He did remember. Samson had taken him to one of his favourite taverns, and the fare there had been wholesome and less likely to turn one’s stomach than some of the other places. Samson often ordered the fish and egg pie, and as soon as Cullen started receiving his full Templar stipend, Cullen was usually the one paying for it.

‘You’ve got me now, anyway,’ Samson said, looking at the two Knight-Captains behind Cullen. ‘No point keeping my secrets. Don’t fancy torture. If Corypheus hasn’t come to fetch me by now, he’s probably doing his own thing.’

‘And that would be…?’

‘See, now, here’s how I can tell you’re not an interrogator,’ Samson said. ‘You wear the clothes, look the part, but – there’s a saying, I think it goes: ‘you can take the officious twat out of Honnleath, but you can’t take Honnleath out of the officious twat.’’

‘That’s a new one for me,’ Cullen said, and wished this didn’t twist at him. He could sense that buzzing song of red lyrium even now. It was all around them. But this wasn’t a dream, and Samson was right in front of him, and Cullen could almost hear Samson asking him to just try it, just a little, just enough.

They’d been friends once. Cullen had looked up to him. And then, eventually, when it became clear that they didn’t see eye to eye on the treatment of mages, they’d fought as only close friends could fight: bitterly, and with the desperation that came from wanting to salvage whatever they could from the friendship itself, both of them not willing to concede that it might have rotted through.

It was easy enough to seem dispassionate. But beneath that, uneasiness, and a glittering hatred that Cullen couldn’t examine. Even now, that Samson treated it almost like a game made Cullen want some kind of tangible vengeance. He thought of Bull talking about hatred a few nights before, and how it was normal to want to get out of the way of it. But Samson couldn’t, and Cullen wasn’t above taking advantage of that.

But not now. Not in front of two Templars he respected. Whatever was there between he and Samson was too ugly to be revealed now. Cullen had the strangest impression that Samson felt exactly the same way. For all that he was sniping, he was being mild about it. Cullen knew he had far more personal jibes waiting. After all, Samson had seen so much of the truth of Kirkwall, and Samson would at least know that Cullen had come around to his side of thinking since then.

‘You must miss the red lyrium,’ Cullen said. ‘I think we’ll give you another day of withdrawals, and see if you’re ready to talk then.’

‘I can talk now, if you like,’ Samson said. He looked behind Cullen’s shoulders again, smiled a little. ‘Not sure what you don’t know by now. You know he can’t die. You know he’s basically a god on this shithole. You know he’ll triumph.’

‘You still think that? Even now?’

‘You want the details, come back with some decent grub. You know me, Cullen, I can always be bought.’

‘Personally, I’m surprised you’re not trying to barter for lyrium.’

‘The blue stuff really doesn’t compare,’ Samson drawled, walking up to the bars and leaning
against them. ‘But I’m no dalcop, I’ll go with a decent feed first.’

Cullen said nothing, simply turned and left. the Knight-Captains falling in behind him. Samson began whistling when Cullen was halfway down the corridor. A jaunty tune – a sea chanty – and Cullen remembered that he’d whistle it sometimes in the dark, when Cullen couldn’t sleep, or when he’d woken from nightmares.

Cullen’s teeth ground together, and when they got to the guard post, he paused.

‘Soften him up when you change out his bucket tomorrow,’ Cullen said. ‘Nothing broken. But I’d like him to feel it.’

‘Yes, Commander,’ one of the guards said. Cullen searched for his name – Bertrand, possibly. He remembered from intake that Bertrand listed certain unsavoury skills beneath all the more standard ones.

‘Nothing broken,’ Cullen said again.

‘Naw, it’s almost like you think I haven’t done this before,’ Bertrand said, winking at him. ‘It’ll get done, Commander.’

Cullen thought about saying something else, but decided it wasn’t worth it.

He didn’t wish to exit through the Main Hall, and it would be easy enough to use the Library to get back to his office. As he began to part ways with Asherin and Briony at the bottom of the staircase, he paused.

Briony gazed at him, but said nothing. Asherin drummed her fingers on the edges of her chainmail and then shrugged.

‘Whatever needs to be done, right? For the Inquisition.’

Cullen nodded, parted ways with them both, but couldn’t get the look on Briony’s face out of his mind. And Asherin’s words echoed hollowly. ‘Whatever needs to be done.’ A lot could be excused on the back of those words. Too much. But Samson wasn’t an innocent, and Cullen kept that in the forefront of his mind.

Still, to avoid the sense that he’d be sullying her, he avoided passing by Betsan on his way out.

* 

He returned the following evening, alone this time, knowing that it perhaps wasn’t wise and unable to shake the sense that he needed to do this on his own.

Samson sat in the darkest corner of his cell, and he spat onto the floor when Cullen arrived. After a few more minutes he pulled himself up, clearly in pain, and then walked over to the bars and grinned through the split in his lip.

Cullen thought of Searidge. Couldn’t not. They even had a similar look about them both. But the dark bruise across Samson’s eye only highlighted that ring of red lyrium around his iris, made him seem less human, and he’d not seemed very human when they’d captured him in the first place.

‘It’s so like you,’ Samson said, grinning, ‘to not be there when the dirty work goes down. You can stomach it if you’re not there. Unless, of course, it’s killing mages who’re turning, or turned. And then you’ve got it down to a fine art. Y’know, there are ways to remove demons from mages
without just…slaughtering them.’

‘I’m aware,’ Cullen said.

‘It must turn your gut to have a boss that sided with the mages. That brought them all into your safe spaces. Unless you like them now, but that doesn’t really seem possible. But then, we’ve all changed a bit, haven’t we, Cullen?’

‘Why this?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘Why, of all the things in the world, did it have to be this? We all knew you could easily be bought – you said it yourself. But Corypheus? The red lyrium?’

‘Ah, but have you heard its song? It’s like nothing else you’ve ever bloody known, friend,’ Samson said, leaning into the bars with his forehead, and then turning and pushing his shoulder into it, looking at Cullen sidelong. He crooned like he was talking about a lover. ‘And you, crawling after it like some babe looking for a tit to suckle at…you’d fucking love it.’

It was so like his recurring dream that Cullen had to take a couple of moments to simply focus on his breathing.

‘You left Maddox to die,’ Cullen said. ‘He poisoned himself under your orders.’

‘Now, now, I’m only doing what the good Chantry taught me. Jettison what’s going to weigh you down. The Chantry left him to die first. I picked him up, a few of the others, gave them purpose. You know how it is. Even Tranquil need a purpose. Just…it has to be given to them.’

‘And what you’ve done to so many Templars is-‘

‘What?’ Samson said, pushing harder into the bars with his shoulder. ‘What have I done? What have I done the Chantry didn’t do first? Turned their pain to purpose. Given them a reason to do what they do. At least mine aren’t hunting down innocent men and women and children.’

‘How can you stand there and say that, when that’s exactly what they do?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘You think you’ve found some moral high ground because you’re not sending them after mages? Peasants instead, now, and turning some of them into a revolting farm for the red lyrium so you can grow more of your monsters.’

‘This is like old times,’ Samson said, sighing. ‘I don’t need a sermon from you. I didn’t need it then, and I’ll tell you right now, I don’t need it in this stinking hole. You want to torture me and hide in your little room or tower while it happens, you’ll see it done. But if you want me to do you a good turn or two, you’d best start getting me some better grub at least.’

Cullen watched him, knew he was projecting coldness and indifference, knew that beneath all of that was a maelstrom. He could easily open the cell and strike Samson down himself. He couldn’t remember feeling this breathless with loathing even with Searidge. But then, Searidge could never hope to be this calibre of evil.

Samson pushed against the bars again, as though testing their strength, and the metal creaked. Cullen looked up at the fixings, but they held. When he looked down, Samson was staring at him with that uncanny gaze.

‘Kirkwall,’ Samson said. ‘When you first arrived, you were such a mewling thing. All those sodding nightmares, even after that Chantry they sent you to. What was it? Greenbriar? Greenfell. You talked through some of them in the beginning. I used to hear it and pity you. ‘Don’t kill them! Don’t kill them! Kill me,’ was a refrain I heard often enough I could set it to a bleeding song.’
Cullen was glad then, that no one else was around to hear this.

‘Thing is,’ Samson said, lips slanting, ‘I used to think you were brave and self-sacrificing, at the tender age of nineteen. No wonder you were so righteous, saying words like that in your sleep. But then I saw how it was with Meredith, and I realised you were just a cowardly little sod. You weren’t begging to die because of some greater service to your fellow Templars, you just wanted out, and your quivering little spirit couldn’t take it. That’s the thing, Cullen, that all these people haven’t learned about you yet – you run your mouth, make it sound like you’re all noble and pure of heart – but really, you’re just like the rest of them. Worse, even.’

‘I do so enjoy hearing these assessments of my moral character from Corypheus’ General,’ Cullen said, even as his heart galloped away in his chest. ‘Puts everything in perspective.’

‘Doesn’t it though?’ Samson said, winking at him. ‘Can you at least tell me you know it was all bullshit now? That it was fucking wrong – Meredith’s rhetoric? The way we treated the mages? The fucking Chantry and the whole bloody Templar Order?’

‘I don’t answer to you,’ Cullen said crisply.

‘You can’t, even now, can you?’ Samson said. ‘I’d heard things about you, thought you were softening or something, in a good way. But instead you’re just still the same-‘

‘Of course I know it was wrong,’ Cullen bit out, hating himself for even saying that much. It wasn’t the words that bothered him, it was that he was saying them in the Skyhold dungeons, to someone who chose red lyrium over anything else that mattered. ‘Of course I know that.’

‘I’m proud of you,’ Samson said, sounding like he meant it.

‘I don’t need your pride,’ Cullen snapped, even as he damned himself for wanting it. ‘I need to know about Corypheus.’

‘Nah,’ Samson said, ‘seems to me like you’re here for something else. Besides, what can I tell you about Corypheus? Really?’

‘Locations of any other red lyrium farms might be well-received. Other villages that you and his cronies have decided to attack. The locations of the innocent people imprisoned for farming the poison in mines or in their own bodies. His plans for the future. I could go on, if you like?’

‘Oh yeah,’ Samson said. ‘You could. Never met anyone more likely to go on and on than you. Saying something, really. But you do like the sound of your own voice.’

‘What’s it like, knowing you’re to be experimented on? Your flesh turned to some good use, finally?’

‘My flesh was put to good use long before now,’ Samson said. ‘Maddox mightn’t have been able to look to the horizon or dream of better things once your Circle was done with him, but at least he had a horizon to look at, was kept fed, cleaned, directed to experiment and make things, which I like to think kept a part of his soul happy. As much as any Tranquil can be anything. And before then? I don’t feel bad they kicked me out for what they did, only that I lost easy access to the dust.’

Samson pursed his lips. He trailed his fingers down the metal bar. One of his nails had been broken clean in half, and it looked like an old injury. He didn’t seem to feel it. Perhaps the pain of the red lyrium eclipsed it, even now.

‘Experimentation, well, all you’ll find out is that the red lyrium is better than the blue, and maybe
you’ll all come to your senses then.’

‘That sounds likely,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes.

‘Given your track record of realising how much you fucked up months to years after the fact, it does,’ Samson said, pinning Cullen with a hard, bright gaze that glittered. ‘Given your track record with logic, and common sense, and compassion, and seeing what’s right… And I think, just like with all that shit you didn’t see back then, but secretly knew – deep down – was probably wrong, there’s a part of you that knows, deep down, that I’m right about the red lyrium at least. You can hear it can’t you? Singing? It’s such a richer song, Cullen. And it needs more of us. It wants to share itself with everyone, so generous like. You can’t hear it?’

Cullen thought he could hear it, even now in the bowels of Skyhold. He heard it in his dreams and he’d heard it at the Shrine of Dumat when they’d gone looking for Samson in the first place. It rippled through him sometimes, as though it was an invisible haze of heat, washing through all. But Cullen was the only one who seemed to take any notice.

‘Ah,’ Samson said. ‘Guess I’ll only get to try this once, brother.’

Cullen blinked to hear the old salutation. Those who shared a room in those early days, brothers or sisters-in-arms. And as he opened his mouth to ask what it was that Samson would only get to try once, Samson leaned back from the bars and then powered into them.

There was the creak and groan of metal, as they bent. Strength that could never belong to a normal human bowed and warped the bars. Cullen withdrew his sword, but an arm had already shot through the growing gap in the bars. A growling gasp from Samson, and Cullen’s arms flew forward to brace himself. He was pulled forward too fast, with too much force.

His body hit metal hard. The impact sent a sickening lurch into him. Then he was slammed into bars again. The breath whooshed from his lungs. Cullen only just able to brace himself from the worst of it – blows designed to break bone. It jarred all the way through him. One bar split in half, the steel too brittle.

Cullen’s survival instincts had already kicked in. He’d abandoned his sword and withdrew the dagger that he’d brought with him. Slashed at a forearm even as he was winded and the knotted fist at his chest drew him forward again. Cullen snapped his own head back to avoid his skull splitting open. He scented blood in the air and heard the lyrium song louder and brighter than before.

‘Kill you or cure you,’ Samson gasped, and then laughed. ‘But I know you sodding well hear it. But we can do better than that. Aren’t you curious?’

‘Samson!’ Cullen shouted, and then, when he saw the blood dripping off Samson’s forearm, when he saw the crazed glint in Samson’s eyes, he realised that this was beyond him. A galvanising fear staggered through him, made him momentarily weaker than the full body blows against the bars had. Then strength flooded him and he managed to get one of his hands free.

The butt of his knife thudded hard into Samson’s throat, and Samson let go of him, wheeled backwards, choking. But then he was up, his irises seeming to flare with red.

Kill you or cure you.

‘GUARDS!’ Cullen yelled, keeping his knife up and withdrawing his sword for good measure.

More than anything, he couldn’t be the one to immobilise Samson, because he knew exactly what Samson wanted. And Cullen had tasted it before, blood tainted with red lyrium, and he didn’t think
he could trust himself to spit it out this time. All around him, the song of it, seeking a harmony with
him, promising a unification that would be a bliss beyond all this.

Even as he heard the thudding of footsteps, even as Samson stepped towards him, Cullen felt
himself weaken.

_Aren’t you curious?_

The arm holding the knife dropped a little, and Cullen leaned forwards, staring at Corypheus’
General, his brother-in-arms, and thought Samson had been right back then, and he could be right
now, and no one would know it.

‘See?’ Samson wheezed, even as he stepped forwards, his face somehow softening, as though he
was doing Cullen a favour, a _kindness._

But then the guards were there, all of them, eight men and women flooding into the space and
overpowering Samson, who let himself be taken down. Who didn’t use any of the strength Cullen
had just seen to hurt a single person. But he fought to keep Cullen’s gaze, and he looked like he’d
won.

‘Hogtie him and put a three- A four person watch on him at _all_ times,’ Cullen said, realising then
that he was still winded, dazed by the song and what had happened. The bars of the cell were
useless now. His ribs ached. There was something wrong with his gut, but he didn’t think it was
wounded. ‘Get Harritt up, we need a cell reinforced with an alloy of silverite and everite. I want at
least one of the people on guard at any time to _not_ be a Templar. Also, he doesn’t look it, but he has
at least some of the strength of the red Templars.’

‘Gag and blindfold?’ One of the others offered.

Cullen flashed briefly to the Bull using both of those on him, but as quickly as the images were
there, they were gone.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘Hood him too. No light until the new reinforcements are built.’

Samson had started laughing from his position on the ground. Then he coughed twice, and started
laughing again.

‘Rein it in, folks. I did say…I could only manage this once.’

A dull thud, and then more broken laughter, as one of the guards punched Samson in the gut for his
trouble.

Cullen stayed long enough for the splitting headache to set in, for the shaking to find his hands –
which he hid by keeping one palm on the hilt of his dagger, and another hidden in the fold of his
cloak, as though he was injured. He refused to be looked over.

He stayed long enough to realise that he could still hear the song of it – louder than ever now. He
wondered if Samson had some power with it. Some ability to make others hear it. If he could lure
people towards him.

But deep down, Cullen knew that he just _wanted_ it. He remembered all too clearly how it had been
on the regular lyrium, for all its dangers, for all its side effects. If Cullen was on his way out, if this
was a war they couldn’t win…

He forced himself to turn away from it all, and then he forced himself to go back to his tower.
Once there, he leaned over his desk and forced himself to breathe deeply. He wished that Cassandra was there, and not out on missions and assignments as she had been for weeks now. He wished for the lyrium in his old kit and the sense that he was tethering himself to Andraste with every sip he took.

In the end, he penned a quick note to Bull, and wondered if he’d have to fight for what he wanted, or if Bull would just turn him down flat. Cullen wasn’t sure he had the strength to handle either.

* 

The morning after Samson’s attack, Cullen stared at the bruises on his torso in the mirror with wide eyes. He knew he’d hit the bars hard, but he hadn’t thought… He touched the blooming black on his left-hand side and knew that was probably internal bleeding. Sometimes those sorts of injuries were excruciating, but sometimes they silently stole the wholeness of the body and left death in their wake.

With shaking hands he found an untouched bottle of elfroot at the bottom of his chest. He drank the whole thing down and grimaced, before wiping the rest of it off his lips with the back of his hand. He walked back to the mirror and stared at the black, watched as it started to shift colour slightly at the edges right before his eyes. He sighed in relief, was still taken aback at how quick and vicious Samson’s attack had been.

Cullen now suspected two things: that Samson always knew he could break out of his cell, and that he could have easily killed Cullen with one blow against that metal, if he’d truly wanted to.

Kill you or cure you.

‘Maker,’ Cullen breathed to himself.

It was a Saturday morning and he had some time to himself. He knew there was a great deal of things he should be doing, but instead he sat on the edge of the bed and sometimes stood to look at the fading bruising in the mirror. It bothered him more than he could say that he hadn’t noticed, or thought to look at the bruising the night before. Or that the pain was so silent, he could have slept right through the increasing damage until he didn’t wake up in the morning.

Cullen dressed once he was satisfied the damage was going – even as the elfroot couldn’t remove the coldness in his hands and forearms, and the fractious headache remained. Then, he kneeled quietly and bowed his head low, and appealed to Andraste in all the words that didn’t feel like lies upon his tongue.

* 

The meeting was arranged for Sunday evening at ten. Cullen’s room was already mostly restored to rights, though there was a black char mark on the stone wall that didn’t look like it was going to disappear any time soon.

Bull arrived with his equipment, and Cullen wondered how many had guessed that he and Bull sometimes saw each other for more than chess and strategy. Hensley had likely figured it out. Lady Vivienne knew, and Cassandra, and Josephine…and then there was no way Leliana didn’t know. Cullen sighed, it was one more thing he couldn’t put in any sort of order in his mind. He just watched Bull, who watched him in turn.

They stood across from each other, and Cullen knew Bull had no real idea how things were going, and the more honest Cullen was, the more certain he was that flogging wouldn’t happen.
Then, his eyes flicked up to Bull’s horns, which still held a bit of their gloss from almost a whole week ago. Bull hadn’t come to him again, but everyone was so busy, and Cullen knew Bull was trying to step up the training of his Chargers, even as Cullen was trying to do the same with his own military.

Cullen took a breath, clasped his hands behind his back.

‘First,’ Cullen said, ‘no, I’m not feeling fantastic, but I think you can gather that yourself with the urgency of my request. Second, I know flogging was off the table last time, but I would really rather it wasn’t tonight.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ Bull said, nodding, slinging the sack down to the floor and looking around the room itself. ‘You want to talk to me a bit more about it?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, his voice shaking with it. ‘There is…rather a lot going on, at the moment. I’d like to not think about it, for a little while. And I think I’d very much like it to hurt.’

Bull frowned, didn’t say anything for some time. And then he scratched at his chin and rubbed his thumb over the stubble that was crossing the line into beard. The part of Cullen that wanted to just snap and demand that Bull do as he say roared to the surface, and Cullen bit down on the inside of his lip, because that had never helped him in this situation, and he knew this moment would turn upon Bull’s judgement, not Cullen’s demands.

He had never loathed it more, until that moment. He forced himself to turn away, to look across at the wall. But he couldn’t stop his hands fisting even harder behind his back, and it wasn’t until he realised that Bull could see them that he tried to make himself stop. But he was too tense, and he thought tonight might be one of those nights where he’d just hurt himself, if Bull decided to walk away.

It wasn’t quite punishment. It was only that a great deal of his life had hurt, lately, in ways that he couldn’t hope to control.

And this was something he could. At least, if Bull agreed to it.

‘I just need…something,’ Cullen said, laughing at his own words. ‘I can’t concentrate, and I cannot… It was always the reason I wanted this, and yet I cannot stop thinking that you’ll say no, and walk away. Am I only allowed to have this when everything is well?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said quietly, walking over. ‘I get it, Cullen.’

Bull, thankfully, didn’t touch him. But Cullen could feel a faint heat from his presence and bit down on his bottom lip and said:

‘What do you need me to do?’

‘Take your shirt off, and I’ll check you over. And we might talk a bit more. But we didn’t talk much the first couple of times and it wasn’t a disaster. And I get to make sure you take elfroot after. We’ll get you sorted, one way or another. I promise that, little lion.’

Cullen’s eyes shut, and he took off his shirt and kept them closed. He tossed his shirt to the bed, feeling weak now, not because of some flaw in his spirit, but physically. Something in Bull’s words made him want to give in now. He wasn’t in the mood to fight. Wasn’t in the mood to pretend that he knew how all of this should go.

Bull led him over to the patch of wall where Cullen had once taken two floggings back to back in a
single night. His fingers were careful and clinical, and Cullen sighed and knew Bull wouldn’t find much more than tension. Still, Bull dug his fingers into the top of Cullen’s hips – the motion bringing a slow build of grinding pain – and sighed.

Cullen turned his head towards Bull. ‘Is it a problem?’

‘Nah, they’re the same as they always are. But there’s no point trying to work some of that tension out if you’re gonna load it all back on tomorrow. Some things you just gotta rest out of your system. If we ever get out of this fucking mess, I reckon I could spend two hours on your hips alone.’

‘I’ve had one of your massages,’ Cullen said. ‘They hurt.’

‘Yeah, you like that though,’ Bull said, nudging Cullen in the side gently as he walked over to his sack. ‘Go on then, over to the wall with you. Y’know when you say to me that you really want to hurt, it’s like you’re daring me to see about breaking you.’

Cullen stumbled over his own feet and he heard Bull chuckle slightly, even as Cullen heard the sounds of Bull rummaging around in his sack.

‘I want to see what you’ve got in there, one day,’ Cullen said, resting his forearms against stone, and then dropping his arms entirely and just resting his forehead against the cool, gritty blocks.

‘Like you couldn’t guess,’ Bull said. The sound of a few different items hitting the bed came, and then the sound of Bull taking off his harness and dropping that to the bed as well.

Cullen stared at the wall as he heard Bull come up behind him. He tensed and then relaxed when Bull stood so close he could feel Bull’s skin against his shoulders, the back of his head. An arm slid around to Cullen’s chest and then moved up to his chin, moving him away from the wall.

Cullen furrowed his brow in confusion, and then blinked when he saw the elfroot potion in Bull’s other hand.

He opened his mouth, started to protest, and then realised there was no point. There was just no point. This was a battle he didn’t need to fight.

‘Just a little,’ Bull said quietly.

Cullen only nodded, even as his heart rate crept up from the smell of it. But Bull’s scent was right there too, his hand firm but careful on Cullen’s chest, his head above Cullen’s head. It may have reminded him of Kinloch, but it wasn’t the same as Kinloch.

So Cullen drank shallow sips of the stuff until Bull was satisfied, and as Bull drew the bottle away, he pressed Cullen back to his chest.

‘Now,’ Bull said softly, ‘is the word ‘good’ off the table tonight?’

‘Ah…not- Not at this moment, no,’ Cullen said.

‘Then I think I have to make a point of saying you’re being so good for me right now. You have no idea.’

Cullen’s eyes closed, even as his chest tightened to hear those words. Kinloch loomed closer, and he sagged a little in Bull’s grip, reminded himself that this was post-Kinloch, post-Kirkwall. This was Skyhold, and everything was different.
‘You sure you want pain?’ Bull said. ‘I mean, I know you always want to hurt, but you sure you want that to be the focus?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, nodding for good measure. He was scared of it, certainly. Everything Bull had ever done had brought with it a level of pain that Cullen had never experienced with Searidge. He still remembered the cane itself with dread – and he thought Bull had rather proven his point: if Cullen wanted to bleed, he’d have to take the whole matter seriously in the future, especially now that he knew what Bull would bring to the table in the process. Not that Cullen wanted that any time soon.

‘You only want the upper back as the target? Or are your ass and thighs an option too?’

Cullen bit the top of his lip. He wanted to look over to his bed to see what was resting upon it, but resisted.

‘What do you prefer?’ Cullen said.

‘You do have one of the finest asses in Skyhold,’ Bull said. Cullen rolled his eyes, rested his head against the stone again as he undid the fastening of his pants and let them drop. He stepped out of them and moved them out of the way with his foot.

He didn’t know how Bull managed it. For such a sexual person, Cullen never felt like he was at risk of Bull crossing that line between the floggings and whatever else they did together. Even naked, Cullen knew that Bull would – out of the two of them – be the one to keep vigilant over Cullen’s boundaries, even if Cullen forgot to.

‘Hands up on the wall, palms flat,’ Bull said, and these weren’t suggestions, but orders.

Cullen followed automatically. Then he heard Bull come close again, and braced himself for a blindfold or a gag. When the blindfold lowered over his eyes – the black leather one that would be fully opaque – he made a faint sound of exasperation.

‘There it is,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice.

‘I only think you’re a little too attached to blindfolds,’ Cullen said, grunting a little when the small leather insets on the underside of the blindfold forced his eyes shut. ‘And why this one, and not the one I can see through?’

‘Cuz I like it,’ Bull said. ‘That’s why.’

‘But-’

Fingers on Cullen’s lips, becoming a palm holding his mouth closed.

‘Shhh,’ Bull said. ‘Stop sniping. Or I’ll gag you too.’

Cullen took a shaky breath and exhaled hard through flared nostrils. But he stayed silent, even as the blindfold made his shoulders tense.

‘Quiet now, Cullen,’ Bull said into his ear, getting close enough that his horn scraped lightly against the wall. ‘I’ll give you something to speak up about real soon, and then you can yell at me as much as you want, yeah?’

Cullen swallowed, nodded.
Bull lifted his hand a few millimetres, as though testing whether Cullen would speak at all. But Cullen held his own words back and as Bull drew his hand away properly, Cullen braced himself better against the wall. Evidently tonight, they were not going to worry about his hands as much. If Cullen was taking elfroot afterwards, they would be as good as they ever got, anyway. These days the cold was so present that he wasn’t even sure how much pain lurked in the knuckles.

The sound of Bull drawing something off the bed. Then the swing and hiss of multiple tails cutting through the air. It wasn’t the black flogger, and Cullen bowed his head a little. He thought it sounded familiar, and was trying to pick it when he felt a whoosh of air skimming across his upper back.

As his shoulders bunched in reflex, the next stroke hit hard and Cullen’s eyes flew open, then squeezed shut.

*You never liked the red flogger...this one’s worse.*

The one Bull had used as punishment. Cullen opened his mouth to head off the sound he wanted to make, forcing himself to breathe through the sting that flared like angry, poisonous insect bites through his back.

But there was no talking this time to break up each blow, no sense of Bull pacing out the strokes. As with the very first flogging, they came hard, fast, with only enough time for Cullen to suck in breaths of air when he remembered to. Most of the time the air was being driven out of him, not by the blows themselves, but the pain when it cascaded through him.

He fisted his hands against the wall, then spread his legs a little wider and locked his knees, then ground his forehead into the wall, grazing the skin there. By the fifteenth strike he made a small humming sound. Brought his hands closer together, over the top of his head.

This wasn’t like floating at all, but it drove the thoughts out of his head all the same. It was hard to worry about anything but his ability to take the pain. Strike after strike, and Cullen’s muscles bunched and shifted, and then at a time when he’d stopped counting each time the leather tails fell across his back, he pressed forward into the wall to avoid the worst of it.

Bull laughed quietly behind him, but the hissing of the leather through the air stopped and Cullen coughed twice as he tried to catch his breath. He could see bursts of red behind his eyelids, like fireworks, or the sparks of a bonfire when someone threw oil onto it.

He shifted his hands and clawed into his own hair briefly, trying to calm his breathing down. Tried to take longer breaths. But all his lungs wanted to do was suck air in as quick and fast and deep as possible. It was the loudest sound in the room.

Bull walked up to him, and Cullen expected a hand up high on the top of his shoulder where it didn’t hurt, or maybe fingers in his hair.

Instead, lines of fire, as Bull dragged blunt fingers down the centre of inflammation on Cullen’s back.

*‘Shit,’* Cullen cried out, turning and striking out, grasping Bull’s wrist to stop him. But Bull’s other hand – the one holding the flogger – tapped Cullen’s hand where it grasped him, repeatedly, until Cullen reluctantly let go.

Bull clucked his tongue in something almost like faux sympathy, and then he scratched Cullen’s back again, and Cullen arched forwards until his chest touched the wall and all the control of his
breathing fell apart again.

‘That’s it,’ Bull said. ‘Let go, Cullen.’

Cullen didn’t know what he was supposed be letting go of, even as a muscle in his back twitched spasmodically, like a horse trying to rid itself of a fly.

‘What do you think?’ Bull said. ‘I think you can take more. It’d be easier to take if you let yourself make some noise, but…I can work on that.’

‘I bet,’ Cullen muttered, rolling his shoulders and wincing at the stinging edge, even as it started to lessen.

‘Should I keep working on it?’

‘Did I tell you to stop?’ Cullen snapped, the fire in his back causing the latent irritation in him to skyrocket.

Bull laughed heartily and clapped him on the back three times in quick succession, enough to have Cullen gasping for breath and growling.

‘I give you a break and be all nice to you, and you’re all snippy. Maybe you just don’t want a break this time for a little while? How about the next time you want me to stop, you can say ‘please,’ all nice and shit.’

Cullen grit his teeth together, and Bull hummed as though pleased and stepped back. Cullen tried to brace himself while knowing there was no way to brace himself against this. And it was different to when he was punished. This time it didn’t make him feel like he’d personally disappointed Bull, but Cullen didn’t think that made the pain any easier to bear.

The first strike was searing, and Cullen knocked his forehead gently against the wall and then clutched at it. The next blows fell fast enough that they were just a blur of pain. It built, but Cullen panted through it and let it chase his thoughts and yearnings away, until all he wanted was for the pain to end.

Then, without missing a beat, however many strikes later, Cullen felt a shift in the air stirred behind him and then cried out loudly when the flogger skimmed the tops of his thighs. He jolted in place, went up onto the balls of his feet which didn’t help at all when Bull simply struck the same place two, three more times, broke once to flog his shoulders and then moved back down once again, hitting that spot, searing the nerve endings until Cullen’s skin felt too tight.

He bit into his own arm, unable to stop himself from making sounds with every strike. His eyes burnt. Bull had never really seemed to believe in any kind of gentle build-up – which was usually exactly what Cullen wanted – but this felt like Bull was trying to drive him outside of himself. As though Bull could hook into his very being and shred him to pieces.

There was a break that Cullen thought was going to be an actual break, but it lasted no more than three seconds – the sound of Bull’s feet shifting on the floor, barely audible above the roaring in Cullen’s ears – and then the strokes were coming again. This time, falling harder than before, across his ass, across the backs of his thighs. Cullen shook his head rapidly, shook it again, and then keened out a low, frustrated sound in the back of his throat and planted his feet and stubbornly clenched his teeth together.

Cullen knew Bull would do this until he said ‘please,’ and he felt weeks of resentment – at the world, at himself, at Corypheus, at Samson in the cells and Searidge and everything else – building
in his chest and turning into some agitated, furious resolve to wait this out.

He could wait this out. Bull would stop before he drew blood, and Cullen was no stranger to pain.

A few minutes later – Cullen drowning in a show of white and red spots behind his eyes – Bull laughed under his breath.

‘Digging deep, yeah?’ Bull said. ‘Go on then. Dig in as deep as you like, just makes the point where I dig you out all the sweeter.’

Three hard blows against the tops of Cullen’s thighs, and Cullen felt his chest spasm, his mouth flooded with saliva that came from the nausea of so much relentless pain.

‘Go on,’ Bull goaded from behind him. ‘Fight me, little lion.’

Cullen’s face was already red from the strain of holding out under that much pain, but he felt a bolt of humiliation move through him anyway: at the teasing sound in Bull’s voice, at his no doubt deliberate use of that moniker.

But then Bull said: ‘You’re so fucking good,’ and Cullen felt some tangled knot in him loosen. For a few seconds, he almost gave in right then. Almost said ‘please,’ almost turned and collapsed, hoping Bull would catch him in time.

‘Almost’ wasn’t enough, and Cullen steadied himself and waited, and only just held back on saying something truly stupid, like, ‘is that all you’ve got?’ But the words simmered all the same.

There was no warning when the next blow came at the tops of his thighs once more. Cullen grunted, and even that wasn’t enough and he hated the whimpering sound he made next. Too high. Too broken.

Maker damn you, he thought venomously towards Bull. Then, for good measure: Fuck you.

Whether Bull already knew the mood Cullen was in or not, there was a beat of several seconds, and then Bull hit the exact space again, harder than before.

The cry shuddered out of Cullen before he could stop it, and then he hit the wall with a closed fist. Nothing like his watchword, just needing another way to get the tension out of his system without begging.

‘You gonna tap it out in code?’ Bull said, and then lashed him in the same spot again. ‘Because that’s nothing like the word ‘please,’ is it? Fight me as much as you want, Cullen. I’m gonna win.’

Cullen blew out the slowest breath he could manage, even as his chest shook. Bull only laughed and then the lashes came in quick succession, across his thighs, buttocks, and then up over his shoulders, which were more sensitised than he’d thought. For a few seconds, Cullen had to fight with himself not to turn and grab the tails of the flogger and fling it away.

And then a rain of strikes, at least twenty, and Cullen pressed his arms close to his ears so he couldn’t hear the whimpering sounds he was making.

‘Gotta love a plan B,’ Bull said, walking over to the bed and dropping the flogger onto it. ‘I got all kinds of mean things in my bag of tricks, Cullen, and it’s like you’re determined to learn what they all are. You know what a dragon tail is?’

It took Cullen a few tries before he managed:
‘The…tail of a dragon?’

His voice was wrecked, but he still was able to infuse something of disdain into his voice. Some vicious need for him to let Bull know that he was just as capable of baiting him, even as his whole body felt swollen and ruined.

‘You’d think,’ Bull agreed. And then Cullen flinched when he felt leather brush his forearm gently. ‘Oh, come on now, this is nothing, Cullen. Finding it harder to take?’

Cullen said nothing, tried to focus on what was stroking him. Some kind of thicker leather. Not a whip. It felt like a long diamond, it certainly ended in a point. But the edges didn’t seem ragged or sharp. And he could tell Bull was holding it by a handle that was only a short distance away. It seemed even smaller than the flogger.

Whatever a dragon tail was, it didn’t feel particularly threatening, even as it stroked over skin that was too sensitive and stole his breath with the lines of fire that Bull painted with the gentlest touches. Bull could have done the same with the faintest touch of his fingers. Cullen’s nerves were that raw.

‘I reckon you’ll last three kisses from this baby, and then you’re going to beg.’

‘Three,’ Cullen echoed, feeling like the pain might be making him stupid.

‘Three,’ Bull said firmly.

‘And if…I don’t?’

The dragon tail bisected his spine lightly, and Cullen felt another swoop of nausea. It came on the heels of the first, but faster this time, and he groaned softly. The pain was still reverberating through him. How many times had Bull hit him now? For how long? He knew he wasn’t bleeding. Maker, how much could his skin even take?

‘It’s not like…you brought your cane,’ Cullen said.

Bull chuckled in a way that sounded dangerous, threatening. It made Cullen’s heart race with an odd mix of exhilaration and fear. ‘Oh, little lion, you’re in a mood tonight, aren’t you? Maybe you’ll even last four stripes from this baby. Wouldn’t that be something?’

‘Well?’ Cullen said, as imperiously as he could manage.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, his voice closer than before. Even the air of it brushing over Cullen’s ear seemed to hurt, which didn’t make any sense at all. Bull’s voice was low, but firm. ‘I’m gonna win, Cullen. You can say ‘please,’ and you can watchword, but otherwise I’m doing this as much as I want. But you don’t have to prove anything to me. I already know you’re a champion at this stuff. You can give in.’

‘Oh, fuck you,’ Cullen said tiredly, even as he felt that leather diamond stroke over his shoulders. ‘Is your arm getting tired?’

‘Aw,’ Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Yeah, maybe you’ll last four. But I’m gonna be here after that, you’ve already held up really well, you know that?’

‘Maker,’ Cullen muttered, even as his voice cracked. ‘If you’re arm’s that tired…’

Bull inhaled slowly, and Cullen waited for the next smug remark.
‘I’ve got you,’ Bull said calmly, seriously. ‘I promise.’

Cullen felt something inside him shift at those words. The vicious, bright rebellious spite remained, but confusion washed over it. That wasn’t the way this was supposed to go. Bull was supposed to bait him, supposed to play along.

‘I’ve got you, Cullen,’ Bull said again, using his name like some signal bell.

Cullen made a faint sound, almost wished he’d been gagged. That wasn’t a growl of frustration or a sound of exasperation but something rawer. He shifted his forearm so that he could press his mouth into it and scowled at nothing, given he could see nothing more than the shifting patterns behind his own eyelids.

‘Here we go,’ Bull said, stepping a much shorter distance away than usual.

What surprised Cullen was when Bull shifted his stance so that he was standing sideways, and then reached out and grasped the top of Cullen’s shoulder, as though holding him still.

The first strike, when it came, was across the top of his thigh, just where his ass cheek creased into tender skin. Cullen was silent for a few seconds, the breath shocked out of him. It was like being caned, except instead of striping across a wider expanse of skin, there was just that patch the diamond had hit. It didn’t seem possible that the leather – thicker and stiffer than Cullen had realised – could sink all the way down into his bones like the cane did.

The second marked exactly the same spot, and Cullen jerked forwards then, as though he could somehow pull himself away. But there was only the stone wall in front of him, and Bull’s hand on his shoulder.

‘Say please, Cullen,’ Bull reminded him with a firm voice.

On the heels of that, another strike, and then another over the same spot, and Cullen started gasping. One inhale after another, almost too fast for him to breathe out. And he thought Bull would remind him to breathe, would pause and make some remark.

But he didn’t quite expect Bull to strike him in exactly the same place with that unexpectedly cruel diamond of leather, the sting of it flooding up his spine, down his leg.

please, Cullen thought, coughing as his breathing caught up on itself.

Bull didn’t pause, but struck him again, the sound of it so dull compared to the pain it caused.

‘Damn,’ Bull muttered, as though impressed, and Cullen wanted to grin because he was handling this, he was proving himself against it after all, he’d lasted more than four strikes and his knees hadn’t buckled and he hadn’t-

The next blow was harder, and Cullen’s gut locked up, bile burned in the back of his throat. The inside of his ears roared hollowly and he clawed at the wall, opened his mouth only to hear himself sob.

‘Pl- Please,’ Cullen cried, then kept saying it, even as he felt something buckle and shatter inside of him. And then – as the pain kept twisting and thrashing – he heard his voice change, the cadence shift, and his own words seemed to come to him as though from a very great distance.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry-’
Eventually he realised that Bull – who had gathered Cullen close, supporting his weight and hurriedly shifting things on the bed before pulling Cullen onto it – was saying, ‘It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.’

Cullen was all too conscious of the pain when his knees had to bend and his thigh muscles had to stretch to get him onto the bed in the first place. The space that Bull had struck with whatever that stupid dragon tail was, felt like it had branded itself through, charred through muscle and scratched itself into bone.

But then he was in the familiar position of being belly down on his own bed, pulled up into Bull’s lap, and he knew that Bull was bowed over him, close and saying things.

It wasn’t until a few breaths later that Cullen realised he was also talking. Sentences that, as he heard them, horrified him:

‘I can’t do this. I can’t. I can’t do any of it. I’m sorry. Please don’t make me. Please. I just need some—’

…Lyrium.

He choked on the last word and then slammed his palm over his mouth, muffling his voice. Then he was moaning on every exhale, and that was familiar, and somehow safer, just the pain working its way through his system.

‘Will you stay?’ Cullen said, minutes later, when he couldn’t wrap his mind around the pain and couldn’t – after thinking he was fine with it for so long – stomach another morning of seeing his boots lined up neatly by his bed, and all other traces of Bull gone from his room.

A pause in the hand stroking his hair, and the one at his forearm squeezed reassuringly. But Bull didn’t reply, and Cullen pressed his face into Bull’s leg and thought that it wasn’t possible to tell the line between what was a normal thing to ask, and what was a question rooted in love and desperation and far too much loneliness. There were things, perhaps, he shouldn’t say during moments like these.

Bull reached over him as Cullen breathed through the rise and fall of the pain. He’d not gone floating at all this evening, but he hadn’t wanted it either. It wasn’t like he’d done anything to earn it.

When Bull drew back, Cullen could hear the slosh of elfroot in its bottle.

He expected to be lifted to drink it as in the past. But Bull’s fingers found the buckle at the back of the leather blindfold first, and undid it dexterously, careful of Cullen’s hair. He slid it off, thumb deftly catching the moisture that had built and clung to the leather – sweat and tears.

Cullen kept his eyes closed, but he tried to shift up onto his forearms because Maker, there was something to be said about taking an analgesic after the worst of that level of pain. But that much shifting was too much and he slumped back down and then decided it didn’t matter. It could wait.

‘Okay,’ Bull said quietly. ‘First some of this…’

Cullen thought he was talking about the elfroot, but then he heard the sound of a lid unscrewing from a jar, and the fainter smell of elfroot salve. Cullen sighed, let himself drift, felt fingers edge very carefully from the tops of his shoulders towards the throbbing redness he could feel. He pressed his teeth together, but even so, when Bull’s fingers slicked salve over that first bit of inflammation, Cullen flinched hard and shuddered even as Bull hushed him.
‘I suppose…I suppose I did ask for pain,’ Cullen said.

Bull kept his fingers still, and instead of massaging the salve in, he waited for it to start working before moving his fingers again. Each time, he paused for a while, until Cullen’s breathing became easier, the strain in it starting to dissipate. He felt too unsure of himself to sleep, but the salve itself went some way to helping the rest of him relax more fully.

‘Hey, little lion,’ Bull said later, even managing to stretch far enough over Cullen’s body that he could salve the throbbing, bruised part of Cullen’s thigh that had taken the worst of whatever that dragon tail was. Cullen half-wanted to see it, half-didn’t. He was sure it wouldn’t look as vicious as it felt. At least a cane looked like it meant business.

Cullen shifted a little in Bull’s lap, but otherwise kept his eyes closed, kept one arm hooked over Bull’s thigh.

‘Hey,’ Bull said again, his voice a little more insistent now. ‘What you said before, about how you can’t do it anymore. Did you mean the pain? Or did you mean…everything else?’

Cullen's breath stilled in his lungs. The apologising. The sudden begging to not have to go through with it. It was humiliating. There had been only a few points like that in his life, where desperation had overcome him like that.

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ Cullen said.

‘That’s cool,’ Bull said slowly. ‘Though it’s also kind of an answer. But that’s cool, we can leave it. And the other thing… Do you remember asking me to stay?’

‘Oh, Maker,’ Cullen said, his voice muffled, as his cheeks burned.

‘Yeah, I didn’t think that was serious,’ Bull said, laughing a little.

Cullen kept his head down, said nothing at all. And then Bull seemed to still and Cullen felt exposed. First there was the flogging, which sensitised his nerves. Then there was the aftermath which tonight would apparently do the same to the rest of him.

‘If people see me leaving your office in the morning, some are gonna talk,’ Bull said slowly. As though Cullen was the one who hadn’t thought it through. As though Cullen was only bleating something in the moment, and couldn’t have ever possibly wanted it before.

‘I’m aware,’ Cullen said, pressing his lips together.

‘Hm,’ Bull said, ruffling Cullen’s hair, smoothing it around and then spiking it up as though he didn’t care that it was drenched with sweat. ‘I’m…I’ll circle back around on that one. Think you need to rest this off a bit more.’

‘You’ve- You’ve stayed before,’ Cullen said.

Though Bull had never stayed after a flogging, and he suspected Bull had stayed after they’d had sex to keep an eye on Cullen’s wellbeing, not for any sort of indulgence. Maker, was he just pushing himself on Bull now?

‘But you don’t have to,’ Cullen said, his words hesitant, his voice still cracking. He pushed his face against Bull’s thigh again, his face flaming from more than just exertion.

Bull was quiet, and Cullen’s urge to keep talking disappeared as the pain fought against the effects
of the salve. He knew this feeling from battle. Sometimes, after the most frenetic, frenzied of fights, he’d only feel the true effects of the pain afterwards. Now, he could feel it building again, waves of it cresting from the top of his spine all the way to that spot that Bull had struck again and again. After about ten minutes passed, he started shuddering intermittently, unable to shake it.

He made a faint sound and he squirmed, then pushed backwards away from Bull and covered the back of his head with his hands. His feet hung off the other side of his bed, and at one particularly wracking wave of pain, both his legs bent up at the knee, his ankles crossing.

He reached out blindly for the elfroot tincture, even as Bull shifted and hushed him. Bull slid a hand under his chest, helped him until Cullen could get an arm beneath himself.

Cullen took three sips of the elfroot potion, and then paused, thinking. The pain – would it ground him when he returned to Samson? Would it distract? How much would be enough? He needed to be able to sit and concentrate on paperwork. Needed to get everything done.

*If you just took the lyrium again, it wouldn’t matter now, would it?*

The elfroot sloshed a little in the bottle, and Bull’s hand steadied his.

‘A bit more,’ Bull said quietly.

The creases in Cullen’s forehead smoothed away. A few more. He didn’t have to think about it. He kept slowly sipping at the stuff until Bull pulled the potion away and corked it again. Cullen slumped back down to the bed, his face in the blanket, the material itchy against his face. The pain was properly receding now, and once Cullen would have regretted that, but with matters as they were, he couldn’t make himself mind very much.

He thought of Samson, gagged, blindfolded and hooded down in the Skyhold cells, four warriors watching over him at any one time. Cullen’s hands drifted back up to his hair and he grabbed at it again, fingers slipping on the wet strands.

‘I can’t,’ Cullen said as he turned his face and stared into his room. ‘I should never have been made Commander. Did you know? I’ve never been one before.’

‘Hey,’ Bull said quietly. ‘You think a King’s ever been a King before he’s…well, y’know, a fucking King?’

A hand came down and palmed the back of Cullen’s neck, fingers scratching softly at his hairline. Cullen’s eyes closed and he wanted to ball up, but he wasn’t willing to risk the pain rising again.

‘Roles like that,’ Bull said quietly, ‘not everyone is raised to them. A monarch can only prove themselves once they’re ruling a monarchy. A Commander, even if they’ve been trained for it, still only proves themselves once they’re commanding. Even someone training to be a cook, who does all the chopping and cutting and I dunno, kneading and shit, even they don’t know if they’re gonna be able to be one until they actually start cooking day after day.’

Cullen couldn’t think of anything to say, and Bull took a deep breath in and sighed it out.

‘Also, sometimes people who’re trained to something aren’t really meant for it anyway. They don’t like to acknowledge that it happens under the Qun, but it does. And y’know, after all this, if you don’t want to be a Commander, you don’t have to be. You’re skilled, literate, I bet you have some coin… There’s options.’

A quiet laugh rumbled in Bull’s chest and he traced the curve of Cullen’s ear, then kept stroking it.
‘I dunno why I’m telling you this, because I don’t think you’re in the mood to hear it.’

That much was true, and Cullen said nothing, his body beginning to feel chilled.

Another few minutes passed, and then Bull slid off the bed and started removing items off it. The potion bottle, the salve, the flogger, the dragon tail, and whatever else he’d placed upon it. He moved around Cullen’s room. There was the sound of a log being added to the fire, and then a poker stirring the coals and settling the wood into a new position.

Cullen’s chest ached. Bull likely wasn’t going to stay. He thought dimly of Andraste, and then imagined the taste of lyrium with a startling clarity. As though it was right there. Maybe he wouldn’t even need to tell Cassandra about it. He could just take it and do better by the Inquisition, and if he was still alive afterwards, he could just...he could stop taking it and she would never need to know.

He was surprised when Bull came back to the bed. Surprised when Bull took off his knee brace and boots and pants, and then opened his eyes and stared at Bull as he turned the blankets and sheet back.

Bull hesitated when he saw the way Cullen was looking at him.

‘You sure? You can change your mind.’

‘I’m…I’m sure,’ Cullen said, pushing himself onto his hands and knees so he could pull down his side of the covers. ‘Thank you.’

‘Yeah, you might not be thanking me in the morning,’ Bull said, sliding into the bed, pulling pillows down to give himself room for his horns and drawing the covers up and then reaching down to the sack that must have been right beside the bed now. He drew up a small water bladder and removed the stopper, before taking a deep draught from it. Then, as Cullen was trying to find a comfortable position, Bull offered it to him. Cullen took it gratefully, even though his throat wasn’t dry. When he passed it back, Bull put the water bladder away and then grasped Cullen by the upper arm and pulled him close enough that Cullen had no choice but to rest his head on Bull’s shoulder.

It wasn’t a chore, anyway. Cullen pressed closer, wincing a little as it meant he had to be partially on his side, and edges of inflammation hit the sheets. But the pain was easy to manage, nothing like what had roared through him before.

‘You’re so good for me,’ Bull said. ‘I bet no one knows you can be like this for someone.’

Cullen’s fingers had curled over Bull’s chest. His fingertips were icy, and Bull’s hand slid over them. It almost hurt, like sliding a chilled body into a too-warm bath. Cullen had always kind of liked that sensation, and only wished it meant that his fingers would thaw through, that he would have full feeling in them again day after day, like it was something to take for granted.

If you took the lyrium again, it would get better.

‘Tell me something,’ Bull said quietly. ‘Why’d you make the meeting so much sooner than normal this time?’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, realising that he was falling asleep even as his thoughts crowded and clashed in his mind. ‘Samson. Turns out it’s not quite as easy as you’d imagine, interrogating an old friend and brother-in-arms.’

Was he even interrogating him? Did those meetings count? Cullen turned his face into Bull’s skin
and breathed in the scent of him and tried to forget every other thing except for the aches in his flesh and Bull being close.

There was no part of his mind that cooperated.

‘I’ve gotta go out on a mission Monday,’ Bull said, ‘but we can make another meeting tomorrow morning. So you know it’s there – for when I get back.’

‘I’d like that,’ Cullen said. ‘If it isn’t too much trouble.’

‘Nah, never that, little lion,’ Bull said, patting Cullen’s hand.

This, as right as it felt in the moment, this couldn’t last. Cullen knew that. Bull was happy enough in his own skin, even if he did have his own issues. Cullen didn’t know the last time he’d felt like he could be happy with what he was, with what the world had made him, and what he’d turned himself into at the behest of others.

Cullen kept seeing that moment Samson’s face had softened, when he’d said ‘See?’, as though he was relieved Cullen could see that he had all the answers. Cullen fell asleep with the thought that Samson had been right before, and he could be right now, and anyway, Cullen was just about ready to throw himself upon anything, anything, that looked like mercy.
How Damaging It Can Be

Chapter Notes

I think…there’s maybe four chapters left after this one? I don’t know if that’s ‘three and an epilogue’ or ‘four and an epilogue’ but…it’s so weird! I’m not ready! …which is ridiculous because this story is so long omg.

A difficult chapter, and includes a discussion of assisted suicide between Cullen and Samson.

The morning after was strange. Cullen woke up earlier than Bull, and he stayed still for a few moments, monitoring the aches and pains in his body. His hands were as bad as they always were lately, and he could feel the bruise on his upper thigh despite the elfroot he’d taken the night before. His back and shoulders didn’t feel as bad as he expected, nor did his buttocks. Twisted up in all of that, was a yearning for lyrium, and a tiredness that seemed to bury down into his very soul.

He shifted slowly, then slid off the bed and closed his eyes. He needed to shave. He needed to bathe. He’d have to request extra water brought up to his room because his bruises spoke volumes of what he endured for Bull. Eventually he stood and walked across the room, feeling like he didn’t belong there.

It wasn’t much later that Bull woke, yawning hugely, stretching his arms out across Cullen’s bed and making it look much smaller than it was.

What was Cullen supposed to say? Did he thank Bull for staying the night when he plainly didn’t want to? Did he apologise?

There was a part of Cullen that just wanted to spill the truth, get it over and done with. He could declare his love, Bull could say he wasn’t interested in that – in whatever kind or generous way he’d do it, and then they’d both agree that this couldn’t continue, because it wasn’t fair to either of them.

Cullen didn’t want Bull to go out on a mission. It was selfish. Cassandra was away, though she was due back on Saturday or Sunday at least, and Bull would be gone and it wasn’t as though Cullen needed either of them. So his not wanting Bull to go out on a mission, it was silly. But when Cullen stuffed down all the sentences he wasn’t supposed to say, or shouldn’t say, he was left with nothing else and felt oddly speechless.

“You sleep okay?” Bull said, giving Cullen something to focus on.

“Yes, thank you,” Cullen said, nodding curtly, thinking that he was probably being too formal for someone who had just been flogged to tears the previous night, and who still wore the bruises from it. “And you?”

“Maybe I need a bedroom in a tower. Maybe that’s what I’ve been missing all these years.”

Bull grinned wickedly, and Cullen thought that the expression he gave in response was probably a
smile, but it felt stiff, and he was glad that Bull hadn’t really seen it and was already getting up. Still naked. Maker, they were both still naked.

The minutes stretched as Bull dressed. It didn’t really take all that long, but Cullen felt awkward, and Bull was blocking the chests Cullen needed in order to clothe himself. Though Cullen was quite certain he’d be feeling odd either way. This had been easier, in the past, hadn’t it?

It’s because you practically forced him to stay the night.

‘I apologise,’ Cullen said. ‘I know you didn’t want to stay.’

Bull’s hand twitched as he picked up the sack and then he turned and looked at Cullen as though confused. Cullen didn’t buy it for a second.

‘Maybe we should make it a condition in the future,’ Cullen said, ‘so you don’t get caught in a situation where you feel obligated.’

‘It doesn’t need to be a condition,’ Bull said, carefully lowering the sack to Cullen’s rumpled blankets.

‘I would understand,’ Cullen said, getting impatient. Why did Bull make everything so Maker-damned difficult? ‘I know I miss the mark a great deal, Bull, but you also gave plenty of indicators that you didn’t want to stay last night. Perhaps you felt like you had to. It’s not fair on you.’

Bull walked up to him, and then walked right past him and opened one of the windows and squinted up at the sky, checking the time no doubt. Cullen almost asked him to stop it, because if anyone was looking up – not that it was easy to determine faces through those small windows – they’d see him. But then, Bull had just stayed the night. People already knew.

‘Shit,’ Bull muttered. ‘I have to be off, but I’ve got five minutes. Cullen, it doesn’t need to be a condition. I liked staying the night. It’s not something- I’m not used to it. People stay in my room, or they kick me out, there’s not a heap of middle ground.’

Cullen shifted a little, his hands were down covering his genitals. This was nothing like a group of soldiers getting undressed at the same time to clean off in a lake. And without the knowledge that his nakedness was to a purpose – for flogging or sex or something else – he felt unsettled.

Eventually, Cullen couldn’t stand it anymore and walked over to his second chest and brought out a pair of smallclothes, and put them on.

‘What are you gonna do if people start speculating?’ Bull said.

‘What I usually do when gossip starts – ignore it and ask for a report, or just stare someone down until they get uncomfortable and stop talking. Of course, that won’t work on everyone. Bull – people know. Not all, of course, but… I can’t help but think that if Cassandra, Vivienne, Josephine and likely Leliana already know- A secret is only really worth so much, the less people who know about it. Oh, let’s not forget Hensley, and whoever else has been asked to leave these battlements at night over the last few months.’

‘Has anyone said anything to you?’ Bull said, his face sober.

‘No,’ Cullen said. ‘But- I am often the last to find out Skyhold gossip. Has anyone said anything to you?’

Perhaps Cullen should have asked that a few months ago.
‘Nah,’ Bull said. ‘Krem knows something’s up, but he’s a vault with that shit. Doesn’t like gossip, he knows how damaging it can be, he’s lived that too much to do it to other people. And Vivienne, obviously, she’s talked to me about it. Mostly to tell me what she’d do to me if I hurt you.’

Cullen laughed softly then, and some of the strangeness of the morning evaporated. Bull tilted his head and Cullen waved a hand in his direction and then laughed again.

‘She did the same to me. She is, ah, formidable.’

‘She’s many things, that one,’ Bull said, smiling warmly. ‘Look, Cullen, the thing is- I’m leaving your office at dawn, just about. If people ask me about it, do I say we played chess through the night? What, a pre-dawn meeting? I can fob people off fine, but this is- Are your lines changing?’

Had it been five minutes yet? Cullen sat down on his bed and clasped his hands, staring at them. He shook his head in confusion, not disagreement, but realised Bull might not understand that. His back and thighs ached, but it wasn’t nearly enough pain to eclipse his thoughts. He’d taken far more elfroot than he’d realised, the night before.

‘It feels as though there’s an inevitability to people finding out that I see you for- For what you do,’ Cullen said. ‘I don’t want to announce anything, and I’m not interested in-’

Cullen clasped his neck and his eyes skated over his chest of drawers and he realised, belatedly, he was looking for his lyrium kit.

‘I don’t know,’ Cullen finished. ‘I wanted you to stay more last night than I wanted to…ensure a secret was kept. But I don’t want to- If I can keep them at bay for longer, then I would prefer we do that. Maker, I know this isn’t helpful. I shouldn’t have- I wasn’t thinking straight.’

‘Hey,’ Bull said quietly, walking over. Cullen shifted his legs as Bull stepped over them, and then Bull was sitting next to him. Their arms were touching. Cullen stared down at his hands and felt like a teenager. He was most certainly not one, and yet… even Bull sitting next to him like this made his heart skip beats.

‘Hey,’ Bull said again, ‘this is simple. We just say it was an all-night strategy session that went overboard, because we’re both trying to get all our bases covered for when Corypheus comes back. That’s if anyone asks us, and there’s every chance no one will. People are a bit leery of gossip now since the situation with Searidge. And if you change your mind one day, we can deal with it then.’

Bull touched his fingers to Cullen’s bare back, and Cullen could feel the goosebumps that rose on his flesh in response.

‘You’re healing up fast, mostly because I wanted you bruise-free for next weekend. Don’t like marking up a back that’s still recovering.’

‘That’s understandable,’ Cullen said.

‘It’s more than Samson, isn’t it?’ Bull said, his voice low. ‘You don’t have to tell me. I kind of think it’s rude to ask someone to talk about something difficult just before I’m about to piss off. But I’ve noticed.’

‘I don’t know what you want me to say,’ Cullen said, looking up at him. ‘Things are stressful right now. For everyone.’

‘That doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter that they’re stressful for you. I don’t give a shit about everyone.’
‘I have to,’ Cullen said, standing then, breaking the contact between them. ‘That’s my job.’

Bull frowned at him, and Cullen walked a few steps away to get some distance. Because Bull wasn’t going to be here for a little while, and Cullen had best get used to it now.

*Why does it matter so much? He’s left before.*

‘Stay safe,’ Cullen said. ‘If you can.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, standing. When Cullen looked up at him, he couldn’t quite read the expression on Bull’s face. There was a part of him that thought maybe Bull didn’t want to leave, but…it was more likely that he wasn’t looking forward to his next mission. Cullen hadn’t even asked what it was about. Should he have asked?

But then they were saying their goodbyes, and wishing each other well. Bull gave Cullen one last, lingering look through the trapdoor and then the tips of his horns disappeared and Cullen was alone in his room. Cullen didn’t know why it suddenly mattered. Maker knew he’d been alone for most of his life’s journey, and the days of feeling his family gathered around him – some indescribable warmth of presence and mutual love – well, those days were long gone.

*The third meeting with Samson – on a Wednesday afternoon – went surprisingly well.*

Cullen was there with three others, and Samson seemed tired and willing to talk. An assistant took copious notes, eventually running out of paper and having to run to get more, as Samson provided names, locations, plans that were actioned, plans that weren’t, and even offered some insights into Corypheus’ patterns of behaviour. Cullen knew all the information would have to be checked and rechecked, but he also knew some of the information was what the Inquisition had already discovered through Leliana’s spy network; it meant some of what Samson was offering was accurate.

The fresh cell bars shone a bright silver, and Samson didn’t come anywhere near them. He watched Cullen constantly, seemed not to care about anyone else. And Cullen had a few moments where he was struck by the sadness of it, which was quietly infuriating.

Because that wasn’t what he was supposed to feel in the cells, with Corypheus’ General. But his mind wouldn’t let Samson stay as some detached idea, as ‘the enemy.’ He was Raleigh Samson. He’d been a friend once. He must have been in unending pain without fresh red lyrium, and yet he never once complained about it. He didn’t even bring up the fact that Cullen hadn’t brought better food for him.

It was as though after his last attack, he’d given up. And Cullen later told the Inquisitor it was a boon indeed, while secretly feeling uneasy about it. He was supposed to feel a sense of triumph and achievement, what he’d been aching for all along. Instead, that evening, he paced his office and his skin and flesh sung for lyrium.

The arguments in favour of taking it were getting louder. He wouldn’t need much, because he didn’t have a tolerance to it anymore. It would give him that feeling of oneness, or unity, with something greater than himself – so he wouldn’t need to burden others the way he had been. Cassandra wasn’t there, so he didn’t have to convince her, and when she arrived at the end of the week – her first time back in a while – he could actually be a friend to her, instead of draining her of her resources, as he seemed to be doing lately.
He didn’t need to keep taking it forever. Just for now. It would work out.

Everything would be all right.

He fought himself by pacing his office – six steps one way, six steps another. Eventually he dizzied himself. He refused to let himself leave the tower. He knew that if he left, he’d find some lyrium. He held himself back from it, even as he didn’t really understand why anymore. It wasn’t the lyrium that had damaged his ability to be a good, righteous person anyway. That had never been the lyrium.

That had just been him. Even Samson…

Even Samson knew that.

*

Thursday and Friday were a blur. Cullen felt as though the inside of his mouth was cold all the time. Sometimes the sky resolutely refused to stay in place, and he’d stare down and know – *know* – that he was walking upon the ground and yet he would feel the clouds and sun and winter air beneath him and vertigo would follow. He altered some of his plans so that he wouldn’t have to walk around as much, and if messengers and soldiers found him unreasonable for demanding that they visit him in his office, he could curtly explain that he had too much work to do.

They would blame his ill-temper on the war.

Saturday he awoke feverish, and Cullen knew this wasn’t sickness, but an episode of withdrawal. He was angry with himself, agitated. It would be so easy to *fix*. And he wasn’t letting himself, and he could no longer think of a single good reason for not letting himself, except that he just knew he couldn’t. And that wasn’t enough.

He had come to believe after Kirkwall that just doing things because he *should* or he *shouldn’t* wasn’t enough anymore. He needed reasons. He needed reasons that weren’t given to him by others, fed to him by the Chantry.

Bowed over his desk and shuddering, his head aching in arrhythmic throbs, he tried to find a single reason to not take the lyrium. Just one. Just one that would prove this was nothing like Kirkwall.

*Take it. Just for now. You know it’s the right thing to do.*

He growled deep in the back of his throat and lifted both his arms and slammed his fists down onto the table. The wood rattled, and Cullen forced his breathing to slow down. He’d think of a reason later. One more day wouldn’t hurt. One day to think of a reason, and he’d remember why he wasn’t taking it. Just one more day.

*

Cullen avoided lunch, knowing he’d not be able to stomach food.

Instead, he made his way to the Skyhold dungeon alone, and then made his way down the corridor alone – past the other cells. Then he sat upon the crate they’d left him and faced the cell bars. He wished it made him feel superior somehow. It didn’t.

Samson didn’t get up immediately, but after about five minutes he stood and walked over. He sat down on the stone floor. He crossed his legs, folded his arms in his lap, and stared up at Cullen. He didn’t look mischievous, or gleeful, or even vengeful. His face was calm, his expression open.
'I know you hear it,' Samson said.

'Perhaps,' Cullen said.

'It’s always in me,' Samson said. 'I don’t just have to hear it. I get to feel it. Can you imagine? Do you want to know how bloody good it feels?'

'I know it hurts,' Cullen bit out, even as his chest was sore, even as drawing full breaths was a strain. Even here, his headache was affecting his vision. The torches were strangely emphasised. The light around Samson’s irises seemed unusually bright. When Cullen looked down, a glare on the metal from the hilt of his sword slashed across his eyes and stung.

Cullen looked up again and focused on Samson, and focused on the fact that Bull would be back tomorrow evening, and that Cassandra would return sometime soon as well. It was supposed to be today, but there had been a delay on the road.

'It does,' Samson said, nodding slowly. 'But you never seem to mind so much. The trade-off, it matters. You know me. I’ve never wanted to do nothing for free. I wouldn’t have done the red lyrium just at someone’s say so, even someone like Corypheus.'

'They say it hurts all the time. That it’s agonising. That it drives soldiers into a frenzy of rage, which is why they fight so fiercely.'

'You see me fighting?' Samson said placidly. 'Not everyone handles it the same. I could teach you, y’know.'

'Oh, of course,' Cullen said, even as he kept one shaking hand upon the hilt of his sword. 'Of course you could.'

'Of course I could,' Samson said, nodding a little. 'I tried back then to help you out. Meredith sunk her claws deep into you, didn’t she? Wish I’d been there to see you turn against her. To see the look on her face when she realised it was you.'

Cullen forced himself to not avert his gaze. Forced himself to keep his head up and not bow it. He remembered Meredith’s expression. He remembered feeling like he was betraying her, even as he’d betrayed so many mages. Was there anyone left that he wouldn’t betray? The list of people was long. He’d even done it to Bull, though that had been some time ago, but there was an inevitability to it. It would happen again.

'What do you think will happen?' Samson said. 'With the Circles?'

'I don’t rightfully know,' Cullen said.

'Some mages want them, just…different like. Some don’t. So what then?'

'I’m a Commander of a military, Samson. I’m not- That’s not my call to make.'

'It’s still too hard for you to take a stand, isn’t it?’ Samson said, sighing. ‘What, afraid people will look down on you?’

'I’ve made my stand,' Cullen said quietly, wishing his voice was as steady as he wanted it to be. ‘For the Inquisition, to rally those to the Inquisitor and her cause.’

'What about after? What then?’
‘After?’ Cullen said, laughing. And then he swallowed down the sound of it and realised that this was foolish. He should never have come. He wanted to stand and walk away, but his head hurt too much to move. If Samson tried to attack him now, Cullen would be a sitting duck.

But Samson didn’t move, and Cullen slowly got his breathing under control.

‘Y’know,’ Samson said then, ‘I know you’ve got no reason to think well of me. But this experimentation... I know you hate me, I know why. Is there no mercy in you at all? I’m sodding well not leaving this place except to be put six feet under and I don’t expect much, but there’s such a thing as dignity. Not that I’m well-acquainted with it or nothing.’

‘It was the Inquisitor’s call,’ Cullen said.

‘You want that for me?’ Samson said not looking away. ‘You want me to get experimented on?’

‘I cannot plead for clemency on your behalf, and the Inquisitor frowns upon executions.’

‘But there’s other things,’ Samson said, his lips pursing. ‘There’s other things, Cullen. You know. You remember, don’t you? Pretend I’m a mage, and you’ll remember, right?’

Cullen couldn’t look away for a long moment. His breath caught. He fell still, unable to move, as though Samson’s stare had frozen him.

‘I never…’ Cullen croaked. ‘I never did that.’

‘But I did, mate,’ Samson said quietly. ‘And y’know, it’s a rotten sort of thing, when you’ve got no more options, so you do that for someone. But it’s- Well, now it’s only right, isn’t it? Square it all up, see. I’ve done it for enough people, and you could do it for me. Quiet like.’

Cullen thought of the knife in his belt, and thought that this was likely a trap. If he slipped Samson a knife, and Samson threw it through the bars…

It was as though some time between the second meeting and now, his hatred had deflated and left him a quiet despair. This was the world they’d made for themselves.

‘You’ll only hurt someone,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m sorry, Samson.’

‘Cullen,’ Samson said, his voice shaky for the first time since this whole mess had begun. ‘Cullen, my oaths aren’t worth anything, and my words are for shit. But I’m tired. And I don’t really want to be here for the end of the world when it’s in the dark like this. I had my freedom. I did what I could for some of the others and I did some wrong and I know what kind of person I am. But I’m tired, Cullen, and I don’t want some stranger rummaging through my body for secrets when there’s all the bleeding red lyrium in the world out there. Mayhaps I don’t have a right to ask for it. But I’m asking. If I hurt someone else, then what? They’ll not execute me. Just send me off to that experimenter sooner. I’ve got nothing to gain by doing it like that.’

Samson cleared his throat. ‘I’m surprised you haven’t sent me off already. I’ve got no more information.’

Cullen knew that too. There was nothing to stop him from allowing Dagna to experiment on Samson, and he could have allowed it a couple of days ago. Dagna had already asked about it, more than once now. Cullen had held back on it. There was something inhumane in sanctioning something that the Inquisition supposedly frowned upon when Corypheus was doing it to others.

‘Do you still think mages are the enemy?’ Samson said.
‘No.’ Cullen was glad for the subject change, even as he tried to gather the threads of his concentration together. ‘I don’t think anything’s so simple, now. Nor do I think the Templars are the enemy. Or the Chantry. Or the Qun. But I think there are enemies within those institutions, and I think there are enemies among the mages – like Corypheus – and those among the Templars. I think I’ve been one. I think I could still be one. It’s hard to tell, now.’

‘Maker’s breath, Cullen,’ Samson said, and then he laughed a little, and then he finally looked away. Cullen felt it like a rope being severed between them.

He remembered his dream. Remembered falling through the rotten jetty into the red lyrium stained water. He could still hear its song.

‘Not quite like Corypheus,’ Cullen added.

Samson laughed louder, the sound rasping more than it used to – though Samson’s voice had always been something of a rasp.

‘I am, y’know,’ Samson said. ‘Proud of you.’

‘Don’t,’ Cullen said, feeling an unexpected knot of emotion expand in his gut, travel all the way up his spine. His head throbbed. ‘Don’t be. I think I’m going to take my leave now.’

Cullen stood carefully, and then he paused and touched the knife at his belt. He withdrew it carefully, studied it, and then stepped towards Samson’s cell, turning it so that he could present it hilt first.

Samson scrambled up so quickly that Cullen froze, alarmed, sure he’d been about to do the wrong thing. Certain now that Samson was going to hurt someone with the knife – throw it through the bars as Cullen suspected all along.

‘Fuck, you idiot,’ Samson hissed. ‘You’ve really never done this before? You can’t use your own bleeding knife, they’ll trace it back to you. Find some offcut from the smiths, a piece of metal, something else. Don’t give me your own bloody blade.’

Cullen stared at him, and Samson seemed to have the same wide eyes, the same lifted eyebrows. The shock reverberated until it was a clamour between them. Cullen had sentences he wanted to say. He wanted to ask if Samson still cared that much. If it was possible that Samson was still – even now, even after everything – looking out for the welfare of others. He wanted to ask why Samson thought Cullen counted amongst those ‘others.’

He couldn’t quite contemplate what it meant that Samson had gotten tangled up with Corypheus, just as Cullen had gotten tangled up with Meredith.

‘A different knife,’ Cullen said, his voice hoarse.

‘It’s gotta be different,’ Samson insisted. ‘And y’know, if you care about your soldiers, maybe not one of theirs.’

‘Of course,’ Cullen agreed. ‘It won’t be soon. Sometime early next week. You may have changed your mind then.’

‘Won’t,’ Samson said. ‘I’ll wait a day or so once you give it to me. I can hide a blade in here. My word is worthless, Cullen, but you have it anyway – I just don’t want to end up on someone’s table while they look inside me or do whatever they’re gonna do. It’s silly, isn’t it? After all this. Maybe if there’d been some good coin in it and the promise of some good grub or something, I’d’ve done
it willing like. Maybe.'

‘If you say so,’ Cullen said with a wry smile.

‘I certainly do,’ Samson said, flashing one of his old grins – the kind he’d make at Cullen on his way out to a tavern or a brothel.

Cullen turned away, and was almost halfway past the next cell when Samson knocked on the cell bar. The metal clanged.

‘Cullen,’ Samson called, his voice low.

Cullen returned, filled with trepidation. Would this be the moment he’d find out that red lyrium would give Samson enough strength to break through silverite and everite?

‘Listen,’ Samson said, ‘if you change your mind, like – if you just can’t go through with it, I won’t be happy, but I’ll get it.’

Cullen knew he should say something in response to that. Some acknowledgement. But he was rendered silent in the face of mercy from a truly unexpected corner. He stood there for another minute, and then he nodded an acknowledgement. Samson nodded too.

Samson didn’t call Cullen back after that. And Cullen felt the weight of the knife in his belt like a promise not yet kept.

*

Cullen’s office wasn’t empty as he’d hoped it would be. He was surprised to see Dothan there, and then his breath curdled in his throat when he realised Dothan was standing beside a crate of lyrium consignment.

It wasn’t ever supposed to see the inside of his office.

‘What’s the meaning of this?’ Cullen snapped, waving his hand dismissively at the crate. ‘You know I don’t deal with this.’

‘Commander, we need the consignment counted off. There’s- I know there’s a list of people you’ve given us, but none of them are here or- Some were killed recently too.’

Cullen felt his calf threaten to cramp, his vision expanding and contracting in synchronicity with the pounding behind his eyes. He looked at the crate, thought of the many, many different kits, the refills of lyrium, and knew then with a clear certainty that he could not be the one to count through it all. To make sure it matched the paperwork that came with the stock.

Cassandra wasn’t there – she was one of the first people on the list Cullen had made. Varric was away. Knight-Commander Briony and Knight-Commander Asherin were out on a training assignment. Cullen ran through all the other names he trusted, even ones not on the list, and realised that everyone was away.

‘It can wait,’ Cullen clipped out.

‘Commander, with all due respect, some of the Templars are already behind because of the thefts with all the recent arrivals – and us not knowing who we can trust and who we can’t yet. And with half of the last batch of consignment being stolen on the road – the sooner we process this…’
'You have my leave to do it on your own,' Cullen said, glaring now.

Dothan looked truly uncomfortable, he shifted from foot to foot, and then placed his fingers delicately on the edges of the crate – it had been wheeled in on a low trundle board.

'Commander, it is mandated by yourself and the Inquisitor both that consignment stocks must be counted by two parties. One to witness, one to count. I know it’s bothersome, it’s just one of those things. Right now, there’s hardly anyone here – and I don’t know about you, but there’s not many I’d trust with this job.'

Cullen wanted to beg for some hours to himself. He could feel his knees weakening. He could hardly see. He thought, if he was younger and less in control of himself, this would be the point where his eyes might burn, where he might forget his own sense of self-respect in favour of just pleading for some time to gather himself together.

He reminded himself that he would be seeing Bull the following night. That Cassandra would be returning soon.

'All right,' Cullen said finally. 'Help me clear my desk.'

If Dothan noticed Cullen’s hands shaking, he was respectful enough not to say anything about it. If he saw the way Cullen sometimes needed to brace himself – on the crate, on the desk itself – he said nothing about that either. And Cullen thought it might be time to redraft the list of those that were supposed to help with the lyrium consignment before it ever came to him. He and Cassandra had made that list together, to ensure that one of Cullen’s greatest triggers for making him crave the lyrium wouldn’t ever get to him.

And now here it was, in his office, and Cullen felt his blood burning up in his own body. He focused wholly on keeping his breathing as steady as possible.

Each kit had to be opened and checked. Each container that held vials of lyrium had to be opened and each vial held up so that Cullen could see that each was a full dose.

By the tenth kit, Cullen didn’t bother trying to hide the shakiness in his voice anymore as he counted off each one and pronounced the lyrium vials full. Dothan began to inquire as to whether Cullen was ill, then cut off his own sentence. Even if Cullen was ill, the consignment still needed to be counted as quickly as possible. Cullen couldn’t be the one to officially order Dothan to do it on his own – if there were any problems in distribution then, it would all fall squarely upon Dothan’s shoulders, and that wouldn’t be fair to him at all.

It was during the process of measuring individual vials that desperation clawed at him harder than ever. Technically, he was still entitled to a Templar’s full ration of weekly lyrium. Technically, he could set some aside and just have Dothan mark it down on the sheet. Cullen’s ration of lyrium. Every crate was supposed to have extra rations anyway, in case lyrium vials broke or something else went wrong. It wasn’t like they couldn’t spare it. To date, Cullen’s portion had simply been going into the spares section, so he’d only be taking back what was already his to begin with.

Cullen opened his mouth to order Dothan to do just that, and then by some wrench of will – something he could barely understand and hated with a venom that made bile creep up in his throat – he kept his mouth shut.

The rest of the vials and kits were counted out in a kind of trance. They were missing nothing from their order, which was good. There were extras – also good. Cullen’s fingers were intermittently twitching from the need to just…take some. Just a little bit. Just what was rightfully his.
‘Can I get one of the healers for you, Commander?’ Dothan said at the end, as he hurriedly – but carefully – placed everything back in the crate and insisted that he could do it alone, and that Cullen didn’t need to help with this part.

‘N-No, thank you,’ Cullen said, swallowing down a rush of bitter saliva and squinting at the forms that Dothan had given him to sign.

He held his breath as he added his signature to the official count, and the duplicate form that would go into his records.

Dothan wheeled the crate out of Cullen’s office, and as the door closed, Cullen began making a faint, strained noise in the back of his throat as he realised his lyrium was being taken away. Dothan couldn’t hear him, Cullen could barely hear himself, but he could feel the strain of it through his own body.

He could barely manage the climb to his room, and then he threw up repeatedly into his chamber-pot – which had been cleaned and replaced in the morning, and was now filled with the stink of bile. He couldn’t really empty it out of his windows either. Two faced the courtyard, and two faced the battlements. It didn’t matter. Cullen’s nose was blocked and his head hurt too much for him to care.

He managed to remove one of his boots before he collapsed back onto his bed, wracked with shivers. This was bad. This would be a bad episode. But if he rested it off, he’d be okay. Bull would be back the next evening.

Cullen retched nothing but saliva into his own mouth and then laughed weakly at himself.

Maker, if he’d just taken the stupid lyrium, he wouldn’t need to go through this at all. What did it matter if it stole his memories? He didn’t want them.

But he was too weak to make it downstairs and get his ration.

It turned out he had a reason not to take it after all. He could barely move.

*

The headache expanded until his head didn’t feel like it was a part of his body anymore. Time meant nothing at all. Cullen wished there was water, but he couldn’t get out of his bed to get to the bottle of water he often kept in his room. He wished for elfroot, even though he knew from experience that something about the lyrium withdrawals meant that the elfroot would do next to nothing.

Eventually, he forgot to be ashamed about crying, though he still did it quietly. He forgot everything except the pain that riddled him. Distantly, he caught himself mumbling a word over and over again, and when he realised what he was saying, he rolled over until his mouth was pressed into the mattress.

*Katoh, katoh, katoh-

Ridiculous.

He was aware when night came, because his room fell into blackness. He couldn’t light his fire, and the maid who came to clean his chamberpot asked once about a healer, but then said:

‘Or is this that other thing?’
They knew. They knew how sick he was, even if they didn’t know why.

‘Other thing,’ Cullen rasped, not even sure if the words sounded like they were supposed to. But she went away and she didn’t return, and the fireplace and candles remained unlit.

Eventually, around dawn, Cullen realised that the worst of the withdrawals weren’t tapering off as he expected them to. Then, as he slipped further into delirium, he reached blindly for his lyrium kit on the small chest of drawers next to his bed. But he found nothing more than a candle, which he accidentally knocked to the ground.

Then, there was only cold sweating, the fever, and a need that turned his blood to slivers of glass.

*  
‘...len? Cullen? Can you hear me? Koslun’s balls, Cullen, come on now.’

Cullen made a faint noise in his throat, another, and then tried to curl away from the pressure on his shoulder because it hurt.

‘Cullen,’ the voice came – firmer and louder than before. ‘Come on. What do you need?’

Cullen forced his eyes open, turned to see horns above him and stared in a mute kind of shock. Demons had horns sometimes. But this didn’t seem to be a demon.

‘What do you need?’ the voice again.

‘Lyrium,’ Cullen managed, and then he made a louder, pleading sound in his throat and reached – or thought he reached; his arm didn’t seem to be listening to him. He was tangled up in softness, and he fought against it briefly. ‘I need...lyrium.’

‘I can’t do that, Cullen,’ the voice said steadily. ‘You know why.’

Cullen didn’t know why. He was a Templar. They lived on the stuff.

‘I-’ Cullen’s voice broke and he keened off a sound into the mattress and then realised he was on a bed, and he wasn’t tied up at all. He was caught by blankets. He kicked at them. They were damp, and then there was a bubble of shame when he realised he’d soiled himself. Maker, he’d not done that for some time. He’d not done it at all in Skyhold.

‘Cullen.’ It was Bull. Who wasn’t meant to be back until Sunday afternoon. Was it the afternoon? Was it even day? Cullen stared blearily towards the windows and saw darkness and didn’t understand.

‘Are you real?’ Cullen said, staring at Bull in confusion. ‘You’re…not meant to be back yet.’

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, and Cullen thought he hated the sound of his own name, because it made him awake and aware, and everything in his present wasn’t worth being awake and aware for. ‘I came back on time. It’s Sunday night. What do you need?’

‘Lyrium,’ Cullen said. ‘Please.’

He had no reasons left. Bull could get him some. There was a crate and everything.

‘I can’t do that,’ Bull said again, his voice slow and sure, like a mountain Cullen could crash against – over and over again – without ever hoping to budge it. ‘Who do I get when you’re like this?”
‘No one,’ Cullen said, his voice warbling as his breath failed him for a few seconds. ‘Just… lyrium.’

‘Who do I get?’ Bull said, his voice harder than before. ‘A healer? Who?’

‘Cassandra’s not here,’ Cullen whispered.

She’d seen him like this. On the boat. Even in Kirkwall. Things were bad then. He was still getting used to the episodes. It was even more confusing why she’d made him a Commander then.

‘Cassandra,’ Bull said, sounding relieved. ‘Got it.’

‘She’s not here,’ Cullen said, and then the sound of his own voice rattling through his own skull was too much, and he retched and brought up nothing more than a foamy saliva. He wiped his mouth on his bed, and thought it didn’t really matter what Searidge had done to it, because it wasn’t like they’d keep the mattress now that Cullen had pissed on himself.

‘She’s back,’ Bull said, and Cullen shook his head again, and then thought he might be starting to black out. He made a thin sound in the back of his throat. ‘Hang tight, it’s gonna be okay, Cullen. I’ll be back soon.’

Fingers touched his forehead. Cullen jerked away from them. They felt like sandpaper.

Muttering that sounded like Qunlat – and Cullen thought, vaguely, that it couldn’t be Bull because it wasn’t Sunday night and…and all he needed to do was wait for this to be over, and then he’d see Bull and everything would be fine.

Everything would be fine.
Cullen’s mad as hell, and Bull… well… eep.

Also, randomly, thanks so much to everyone who’s reading this story. Like, to the commenters, and lurkers, and people who leave kudos and stuff. I never sort of thought this story would get read by more than about two or three people, and the only reason it’s so long and complex as it is, instead of some random negotiation oneshot, is pretty much down to all of you. So thank you, I appreciate it a lot.

Sometimes there were blurs of colour, or smears of sound across his ears, and once – maybe twice – he tasted elfroot in his mouth and throat and choked on it, lashing out. His whole body hurt, he thought of demons and Kinloch and being praised for handling the pain so well and watching fellows die and thinking that when he’d wanted to be a Templar, he’d never imagined this…

But those moments of terror and pain never lasted all that long. It seemed as soon as he gained one or two senses back, they greyed out again, and Cullen threw himself into the black. Consciousness was a terrible alternative.

* 

‘…mean it’s been this bad before?’

‘On the boat coming over, it was very bad. And in Kirkwall, he disappeared without warning and when I went looking, I found this. Healers do not know what to do. There are not many Templars open about coming off lyrium, and they do not wish to draw the ire of their fellows or the Chantry. Most who stop taking it are forced from the Templar Order, and are seen as little better than criminals. Or they are criminals.’

Cullen felt his chest moving, he was breathing slowly and deeply, which made him realise that he hadn’t really been able to do that until now. His body felt paralysed with sleep, only his mind flickered into wakefulness.

‘I wish…’ That was Cassandra. Her voice was low, but his room was made of stone, and voices carried. ‘He has come to me more often, asking to leave his position. But I still think without it, he will… I am not sure he will find a reason to live.’

‘Yeah.’ That was Bull. ‘I know stress can make a lot of things relapse, but this is… I didn’t know it could get like this. This is fucked up.’

*I’m right here*, he thought at them. *I can hear you.*

But then he decided even if he could move, he wouldn’t say anything. Maker, he felt like he’d fought multiple battles back to back. Even his toes hurt. He could feel the light in the room behind his eyelids and knew it was only candlelight, but it still burned.

‘There’s really nothing else except waiting?’
‘I’m afraid so,’ Cassandra said. ‘I’ve done some searching myself, but there’s very little that’s helpful. Folk remedies that are clearly the acts of desperate people. Cullen is actually doing remarkably well, overall. It kills people. The lyrium steals the mind away, and stopping it steals health. It is a terrible thing. The Chantry knows it, too. Now that I know some of our lyrium-given abilities can be done without lyrium at all…’

‘Weird to hear you saying anything bad about the Chantry.’

‘Then you should have a drink with me sometime, and it will feel less weird, I promise you.’

A low chuckle from Bull, and Cassandra only sighed. Cullen thought it sounded like they were sitting at the table where the chess set had been, before Cullen cleared it for more paperwork.

The room didn’t smell as bad as Cullen expected. Had he been cleaned at some point? Changed? He’d feel embarrassed and ashamed of that later, right now he felt detached from all his emotions. He observed himself, his still body – but for the slow rise and fall of his chest – and the sense of Cassandra and Bull there in his room.

‘Do you think it could kill him?’ Bull said, his voice sounding flat, almost lifeless.

‘Yes,’ Cassandra said. ‘But every month that goes by and it doesn’t, and I think it less. Until now.’

‘Well, fuck,’ Bull said.

A shifting sound, and Cullen couldn’t place it. Had Cassandra leaned towards Bull? Was it the other way around?

‘He’s strong,’ Cassandra said. ‘We are all fighters.’

‘Ha,’ Bull said, a smile in his voice. ‘He’s definitely a fighter. Snarliest Commander I’ve ever had to deal with.’

‘Have a drink with me sometime,’ Cassandra said again, a smile in her voice, ‘and I can tell you some stories about that too.’

‘Something tells me you just want to get smashed,’ Bull said, laughing.

‘Maker, yes, it’s been a long year.’

Cullen drifted again, losing track of their conversation. He was aware of a niggling irritation. There was something about all of this that wasn’t quite right. But what was it? He couldn’t put his finger on it. He didn’t really care to, either. It was nice, feeling his chest rise and fall like that. It was quite something, to take breathing deeply and regularly for granted, and it was pleasant too, to remember it was possible again.

* 

The breeze he could feel wasn’t as fresh as those he appreciated when half his roof had been missing, but it was cool and crisp all the same. All his windows must have been open. His mattress was dry. The sheets felt starchy and new. He was wearing underclothes and a shirt, and both felt clean. Cullen had the sense of a fever breaking, and he knew this feeling, knew the weakness that would come with it.

He felt quite alert as he reached up and rubbed the crust of sleep away from his eyes. He picked it off his eyelashes and winced when it stuck to tender skin. Then he blinked his eyes open and stared
up at the ceiling. He cleared his throat, tasted elfroot and bile, cleared his throat again.

Alive still, and Cullen felt relief and horror both. But he was used to that, and instead he tipped his face back a little – his neck protesting the contraction – and focused on the freshness of the breeze. It smelled of winter, sharp in his nose. Perhaps snow was on its way. The fear could wait, for now. He had always loved feeling the wind on his face, the changing of the seasons.

When he gingerly pushed himself upright, he was surprised to see Bull sitting in one of the chairs, leaning forward, forearms on his knees and watching him with a bright gaze.

Cullen started to smile, and then a stark, visceral memory cut across his thoughts:

‘I need…lyrium.’

‘I can’t do that, Cullen,’ the voice said steadily. ‘You know why.’

His heart beat harder. A sicker thud. As he moved, he thought his brain was floating in his skull, not quite secure.

‘How long?’ Cullen croaked, and then coughed to clear his throat. ‘How long have you known?’

‘S’good to see you awake,’ Bull said. ‘Been a while.’

And that was when Cullen couldn’t pretend that Bull hadn’t known. Because Bull wasn’t looking shifty, or like he was keeping a secret. But he also wasn’t answering the question, and Cullen thought back to how they’d known each other for months. Thought about Bull yelling at him for lying. Felt something crawl over his heart like frost.

‘How long have you known?’ Cullen bit out, glaring at him now.

Bull was silent then. After a moment, he only said:

‘I think you’re too ill for this conversation.’

‘I think I’m the one who gets to decide that,’ Cullen said, ‘given how many times I’ve been through this before.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘I think-’

‘How long have you known about the lyrium?’ Cullen said, his voice chilled. The longer this went on, the more it didn’t seem like Bull had just figured it out, recently. The more it seemed like...

‘Since the beginning,’ Bull said. ‘Since Haven.’

Cullen blinked at him. He thought that this was not a conversation he wanted to have while lying in a bed and feeling frail. He thought that this was a conversation he didn’t want to have at all. He felt nauseated, and it wasn’t only because he craved the lyrium.

‘I can smell it,’ Bull said, looking askance. ‘Lyrium’s got a distinct scent when humans are taking it.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said. ‘And since you were Ben-Hassrath for quite some time, are you the only one who knows? Or was this prized intelligence that the Qun are now aware of?’

‘Yep,’ Bull said, his voice sharp. ‘They know.’
'I seem to recall you being against lying,' Cullen said, his voice getting colder by the second. He felt exposed. His mind raced ahead, and he sickened with some of the questions he knew he’d have to ask, and didn’t want to.

‘I wasn’t lying,’ Bull said. ‘I was…giving you a chance to tell me in your own time.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said. ‘Big of you. What else do you know?’

‘What?’ Bull said, but there was that flatness to his voice, a blankness masking whatever true expression was lurking beneath.

‘Shall I be clearer?’ Cullen said, sliding his legs over the bed and pausing, then holding a hand up when it looked like Bull wanted to tell him to take it easy. ‘What about Kinloch? Kirkwall? Are you just…generously waiting for me to tell you something you already know?’

Bull said nothing then, and Cullen made a hard sound in the back of his throat, snapping from irritation straight to fury.

‘Lies of omission,’ Cullen said as precisely as he could manage, ‘still count. You reporting my lack of lyrium usage to the Qun as a weakness in the Inquisition, and failing to tell me about it? What was that?’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ Bull said, but a muscle jumped in his jaw, and the hands on his knees had become fingers digging in.

‘Because I wasn’t supposed to find out, was I?’ Cullen said, smirking. ‘Because I would reveal everything in my own time, and then you’d never need to tell me. Is that it?’

‘Maybe something like that, yeah,’ Bull said. ‘I was a different person when I first joined the Inquisition. You were a subject I needed to report on.’

‘Wait,’ Cullen said, holding up a finger, ‘let’s be less obtuse than that. I was a subject you’d already received extensive intelligence on. Kirkwall and Kinloch.’

Cullen stood and then held a hand out to the wall to brace himself. Not as bad as he’d expected, though not great either. He was still weak. Bull watched him and then said:

‘You’re not well enough to—’

Cullen grit his teeth together and his fingers dug hard enough into the stone that he felt it.

‘Don’t you dare tell me what I’m well enough to talk about. I’m the one who’s lived through this before, and it’s been worse in the past. Cassandra may think she’s seen the worst of this, but no one has. I want to know what you discovered about Kirkwall and Kinloch, it must have been quite a challenge, sorting through all those rumours.’

‘This isn’t a good idea,’ Bull said.

‘There’s a difference between wanting to look after someone,’ Cullen said, ‘and protecting yourself by telling yourself that you’re doing this for my own good.’

It hurt more because Cullen still loved him. Because Cullen kept thinking back to all those times he’d been vulnerable or raw in front of Bull, and the entire time, Bull would have scented the lack of lyrium, would have known whatever else he’d concealed all this time. It hurt because Cullen had been prepared for this in the beginning, but somewhere along the way he’d lost sight of it.
He’d abandoned his suspicion in favour of trust.

It had occurred to him, of course, that Bull might know more about Kinloch and Kirkwall than he was letting on. He’d seen signs of it. But the lyrium? That Bull had known about it, reported it, said nothing? That Cullen tore himself open more and more for Bull, and Bull got to keep his secrets…

‘Maker help me,’ Cullen breathed, ‘but you are going to tell me what you know about Kinloch and Kirkwall.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said quietly, ‘I’ve seen you freak out about-’

‘It’s my choice!’ Cullen snapped. ‘I’m asking you to tell me, and you don’t get to sit there and make choices about my wellbeing for me. This isn’t a flogging session, Bull. I have been in control of my life and my choices for a long time, and you might not like some of the decisions I make – Maker knows a lot of people think I should do things differently – but this idea that it’s all for ‘my own good.’ This…’

Cullen trailed off, his legs feeling a little stronger. He opened his second chest and drew out a woollen dressing robe, because the room was cold. Icy.

‘There is a point where your protectiveness takes away my agency. You knowing about the lyrium and never telling me? You should have told me that. You should have told me that and I think you know that’s true.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, shrugging. ‘Maybe I did know that. But then there was a point where I hadn’t told you and I knew that if I did…’

‘I’d react like this,’ Cullen said.

‘Something like this,’ Bull said.

‘How nice for you,’ Cullen said, ‘that you can predict people’s behaviours to such a point that you get to decide for all of us what’s best for us. It must be so dizzying, looking down on people from such a height.’

Bull stared at him, eye widening, and Cullen’s lip curled.

‘I accept,’ Cullen said, his voice losing some of its strength, ‘that I don’t always make the best decisions for myself. But that- That habit of knowing people so well you decide you know what’s best for them? It’s patronising. You condescend to be honest to me when you think I can handle it? Is that it? You don’t get to decide what’s best for me outside of those sessions and the rules we’ve both agreed to.

‘I’ve known all along that you play a lot of your cards close to the chest. I’ve known. But you know why I’m angry about this, don’t you? Do you understand?’

‘I betrayed your trust,’ Bull said, not looking away.

‘I am not a child,’ Cullen said, staring at him, feeling his cheeks flood with heat. ‘When you decide to keep things like that from me, especially with the lyrium- No, I’m not happy that you could scent it from the beginning. Or that you reported it. But what bothers me most about all of this is that I could have gone the rest of my life without ever knowing that you knew. And you somehow convinced yourself that you were making that decision for my health? I’m sorry, Bull, but I’m the one not taking the lyrium, and I’m the one dealing with the withdrawals, I’m not dead
yet.’

Bull winced, and Cullen ran a hand through his hair and wished he was wearing his armour, his mantle, boots, his sword. Anything that would make him feel less fragile. But the anger flooding him was bright and strong, and he relied on that instead.

‘How many times…’ Cullen said. ‘How many times have you said: ‘oh what’s wrong with your hands?’ or ‘does that come from the past?’ or…whatever it is that you’ve said – and actually known exactly what the issue was? How many times have you touched my hands and said the cold didn’t bother you and known that it was the lyrium? Every time, yes?’

Bull took a deep breath, then nodded. He closed his eye as though pained, and then folded his arms and leaned back in the chair, frowning.

‘Come on,’ Cullen said, unable to keep the taunt from his voice. ‘Tell me. I’d like to know how good the Qun’s intelligence is. There was a fair contingent of them in Kirkwall after all. I’m curious.’

‘Cullen… This is only going to hurt you.’

‘It’s already hurt me,’ Cullen said, his voice rough. ‘It’s already hurt me. And you lying to me about it? That, too, already hurts. I’m going to suggest you don’t infantilise me again, or this is not going to end on amicable terms.’

Cullen was shocked to realise he meant it. And then surprised by just how much this did hurt him. It wasn’t until he’d said it that he could really feel it. Beneath the brightness of his anger, he just wanted to be sick.

‘Do you not trust me with my welfare at all?’ Cullen rasped, sitting on the bed again.

‘You make some pretty self-destructive decisions,’ Bull said slowly.

‘You don’t trust me, do you?’ Cullen said. ‘You’ve taken some moments of my life and believe that – what – every minute of my life, handling those people out there, trying to do my best by the Inquisition, making sure that I don’t take the damned lyrium, is me not taking care of my welfare? I might not do it all by your standards, Bull, but believe it or not I can feed myself and put myself to bed and clothe and dress myself and I would have gone on living even if I’d not ever met you. Mind-boggling to contemplate, isn’t it?’

‘I…’ Bull looked up at Cullen’s ceiling. ‘I’m sorry. Okay? I’m sorry. I have this habit of… It’s something I do. Not just with you.’

‘So you’ll keep doing it,’ Cullen said.

‘Yeah, probably,’ Bull said, shrugging a little. ‘Yeah. I know it’s a problem.’

‘I want to know what you know,’ Cullen said. ‘About me.’

Bull looked back down from the ceiling and stared at Cullen for a long time. Then, after several minutes passed – Cullen beginning to feel like Bull wouldn’t tell him anything at all – Bull sighed and unfolded his arms.

It was different, hearing his own story from someone else’s mouth. Hearing it from Bull. And Bull’s words were delivered as though he were reporting, as though he were reading from a document. Perhaps he’d memorised information, perhaps these were sentences that had run through
his head since the beginning.

Given how many incorrect rumours had come out of Kirkwall, Cullen was surprised at how much Bull got right. Whoever the Qun had as intelligence…they were good at their jobs.

It reached Cullen in a remote sort of way, hearing about Meredith. Hearing about the Circle’s crimes against the mages – those he was a part of, those he wasn’t. But the breadth of knowledge was staggering. Bull knew the corridor that Cullen’s room had been in, he knew the room number, he knew Cullen’s primary tasks in the Circle, and he knew the exact number of mages that Cullen had executed when they’d failed a Harrowing or become abominations.

It was damning, hearing it spoken in a clinical manner. And Bull didn’t flinch away from describing Cullen’s eventual betrayal, or how he’d remained in Kirkwall, or even some of the things that had occurred when he’d been almost entirely alone after the Circle had fallen. The times when he’d been set upon by others. The time he’d been beaten so badly – and felt it was rightly deserved – that he’d waited to die in an alleyway until the City Guard had come by and picked him up, and Cullen had made a better acquaintance with Searidge.

Bull didn’t even leave out Cullen’s arrangement with Searidge, though it was obvious that Bull had only discovered that because of Cullen, and that he was including it to be comprehensive.

Then Bull trailed off, and he rolled his shoulders and met Cullen’s eyes again. At some point, he’d looked away.

‘Well,’ Cullen said, ‘the Qun put us all to shame, don’t they? With intelligence like that.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull sighed. ‘Yeah, they’re… They’re something.’

‘Kinloch,’ Cullen said. ‘I want to know.’

‘I don’t actually…know much about that,’ Bull said, rubbing at his face. ‘It was an isolated event and we didn’t have any qunari at Kinloch Circle.’

‘Then tell me what you know,’ Cullen said. ‘If you think I can’t tell you’re hedging, you’re mistaken.’

‘Listen,’ Bull said, low and urgent, ‘I’ve seen you react to things that remind you of Kinloch, and—’

‘I am reminded of Kinloch every single day,’ Cullen said, his voice just as low, just as fervent. ‘I know you have your waking nightmares, but does that mean you’re not able to think on Seheron at other times? That you don’t think of it – every day – without… without losing control of yourself?’

A long pause, and then Bull nodded slowly, and then he smiled ruefully.

‘Most of the intel about Kinloch came from Greenfell. It only really established that you had battle sickness, and that you’d been tortured. We knew Uldred was an abomination at the end, and that the event gave you an ‘unreasoned reaction to mages that was irrational and could be exploited’ – not that I’ve ever seen many signs of that, but anyway. I know you got that scar on your back from Kinloch, but I figured that out for myself. You have a way of reacting to Kinloch stuff that isn’t like anything else. It’s a tell.’

‘Is it,’ Cullen echoed.

‘A bit,’ Bull said.
'That’s really all you know?'

‘Really,’ Bull said. ‘You think some of our earlier scenes would’ve been so messy if I’d known more?’

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, and then laughed softly. ‘Of course.’

He was struck by an urge which was as raw and open as anything he’d ever shown Bull. Perhaps it was reckless, but Cullen thought that if there was ever a time to do what he was about to, it was now.

‘Then I suppose I’d best not leave you in the dark,’ Cullen said.

Bull’s eye widened, and Cullen smiled grimly at him. But it didn’t feel like something he was doing out of spite. It was only that the story of it had stayed with him and he’d never told it before, to anyone. Not to Greagoir – not completely. Not to the Chantry sisters at Greenfell. Not to Cassandra. Not even in his most desperate prayers to Andraste, had he discussed the truth of it.

He wasn’t even sure he could do it now.

‘The scar,’ Cullen said, his voice cracking, ‘it was for blood magic. That one is worse than the others, because they kept opening it. It started to heal, but then they’d open it, and it would start to heal, but then they’d open it again. And since they were all abominations – the mages in the Tower – they weren’t particularly fussy about clean or sharp blades. They had the stock of Kinloch elfroot, but there’s only so much elfroot can do with tissue that’s already starting to scar.

‘You can live on it, you know? Elfroot and mana. Those two things, they can keep a person alive for some time, it turns out. Without water and food. I didn’t know. I do now. It doesn’t feel much like living. And the blood magic was often to torture my brothers and sisters-in-arms. Or to sustain them, if they were expiring too quickly. Or to torture me. Or…for whatever else they used it for. I think they once bled me to get a greater amount of sustained light in the room. Fire runes on the walls, or…I don’t remember that very well. That was towards the end. They had become playful with it, and Uldred – the demon, but it was…so much like Uldred, it wore so much of Uldred – he had begun to bore of me.’

Cullen felt the scar at his back twinge and ache. He wanted to reach around and touch it, even as he hated touching it. Hated even brushing a cloth over it while cleaning himself.

‘It infected,’ Cullen said. ‘The wound. Elfroot kept blood poisoning from killing me, but – I’m not sure whether it was their mana, or the lack of cleanliness in the Tower from all the death, or… But at that point, the elfroot could only do so much. Do you know, ever since then, elfroot has never worked all that well for me. It does its job in battle, it’s saved my life, but there’s other things it won’t touch. I don’t rightly know whether it’s an immunity, or that it’s that I no longer take the lyrium, or some combination of factors. I don’t really care. I hate taking the elfroot. You- Let me guess, you know that’s because of Kinloch, don’t you? Because of my tell.’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. He looked pained. ‘Yeah, I figured that out.’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said, ‘I think I’d realised that too. That you’d figured it out.’

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Bull said.

‘I know,’ Cullen said, nodding. ‘I do know that.’

‘The praise thing…’ Bull prompted, frowning. ‘Also Kinloch.’
'Ah, well,' Cullen laughed, closing his eyes and wishing it didn’t still feel so close, even though it had happened such a long time ago. Weren’t memories supposed to fade with time? Couldn’t the lyrium have taken those memories from him instead of the ones he wanted?

‘It amused Uldred, I think. To offer praise whenever he thought I’d done something well. Not genuine praise, though eventually it didn’t matter. If I prayed to Andraste for the strength to fight back against the demons, he’d tell me it was well done, a good thing, that I was a good Templar. If I was quiet during bloodletting then I was stoic and strong. If I screamed and raged, then he’d laugh and call me lion-hearted. If I watched another colleague die, then oh, how brave I was. How good to not love them enough to desert my own values.’

Bull made a sound at that, like a hitched breath. When Cullen looked at him, Bull’s face was masked.

‘There were times when I hated it,’ Cullen said, and then drew a slow breath. ‘There were times when I didn’t. Samson said recently that I was weak, a coward, begging for Uldred to kill me instead of the other Templars. He was right. I… It was changing me. Uldred – the demon – had my assessment with him, my file. It listed that I had a high resilience to pain, that I had high endurance and stamina and I responded very well to praise. He laughed as he read it out, the first time. And then he set about testing how resilient I was to pain, and how high my endurance was, and whether I responded very well to praise.

‘The torture was…awful, but galvanising. I could turn pain to a purpose,’ Cullen said, squeezing his eyes shut. ‘But there was always a point where I wasn’t quite myself anymore. Where Uldred would be- Where it would seem sincere between us. It wasn’t like you and I, like what we’ve done. Not quite. It lay the groundwork for it. After, I began craving it. Searidge said Kinloch made me demon-touched, and so… The praise, too, I couldn’t trust it anymore. I couldn’t trust how much I wanted it. I thought I was done.’

‘It was…well…you see, I do- I have always required the approbation of my peers and my betters. I had thought a long time ago that it made me a better person, somehow. I wanted to please, you see. I wanted to do well by people. But that’s not what it means at all. It means you are weak of character. That you can be gulled by the views of others. That you can do monstrous things, become a monstrosity, and think to yourself, ‘oh, but they think I did a good thing.’’

Cullen took a deep breath, forced himself, and was grateful that he no longer needed the lyrium as he had during the episode, even as he wished for it.

‘Eventually Uldred had killed them all,’ Cullen said. ‘And I had broken, countless times. I begged to be killed. I begged them to stop. I threw myself at their mercy and I even gave them permission to take me, if they wished. True sadism is when a desire demon looks at you through the eyes of another and tells you ‘no,’ when you are supposedly offering the very thing they want more than anything. I know what I become when I stop fighting. I know how weak I am. I can never- So I- So I try not to. It’s important to me, to fight.

‘I was isolated after that,’ Cullen said. ‘They deemed me pathetic and unworthy – unworthy of a demon – and…isolated. And dying. Given enough elfroot to live, but dying.

‘Kinloch changed me. After… At Kirkwall I discovered that old need for approbation, and I thought it signalled a return of my true self. That – if I sought to be obedient and just, instead of overzealous and hostile and frankly unstable – I would be me again. For a long time I thought… no, believed that following Meredith – even against, especially against my own misgivings – proved I could be loyal to the right cause again. Because, well… And I wanted to impress her, prove that Kinloch didn’t break me, as Greagoir was sure it had. She knew? Or perhaps she didn’t,'
but I was malleable. After Uldred…

‘By the time… At the end – at Kinloch, forgive me, I seem to not be telling this in any kind of order – I didn’t know the right thing to do. Honestly, praying and surviving didn’t seem like a victory, and the old Cullen Rutherford wasn’t the person who walked away from that mess. I wanted every mage… I wanted…’

Cullen fell silent. Mortification had stolen his voice.

‘Nothing I do will ever be enough,’ Cullen said quietly. ‘I pray I never forgive myself. I no longer…pray for forgiveness.’

‘Well, fuck that,’ Bull said, with a level of feeling Cullen hadn’t expected. ‘Seriously. Fuck that.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘No, look, sorry,’ Bull said, holding up a hand. ‘I just have- I just think real differently to you about that whole forgiveness bullshit. But hey, we don’t need to have that conversation today, yeah?’

‘All right,’ Cullen said, feeling tired, and sad. There was nothing really cathartic in talking about it. He had been tortured, he had broken, he had offered them his flesh, they had abandoned him in response. Then he’d seen that weakness in himself again at Kirkwall.

He dragged a hand through his hair and thought that he had work to get back to, and he had to get a knife to Samson somehow – because he owed him that much.

‘There’s two more things you don’t know,’ Cullen said. He looked down at the floor, and thought his voice sounded empty. Then, Cullen looked up, because he would only do this once, and only while he felt so hollow it wouldn’t hurt as much.

‘The first,’ Cullen said, ‘is that I’ve been seeing Samson and that I don’t think it’s been good for me, but that’s neither here nor there. I think I’m going to help Samson kill himself, because I don’t want him to be experimented on, and for once, I think that’s…the right thing to do. In a world of so many wrong things. And second, the second thing you don’t know. I love you. I’ve loved you for months. And I’m not sure that’s good for me either.’

And then Cullen couldn’t stand to look at him anymore, and he turned his gaze back to the floor and his fingers curled into fists in his lap.

He didn’t know what he expected. For Bull to laugh it off? For Bull to say that it happened, that infatuation was normal? For Bull to get awkward and uncomfortably make his exit?

‘You don’t love me,’ Bull said heavily.

Cullen didn’t expect that. He looked up, brow furrowing.

Bull looked upset, but he looked determined. ‘You don’t. You’re only thinking this way because you’ve never really had someone show you consistent care before, and with me being your first…But you don’t love me.’

The anger Cullen had felt before sparked once more but then died. He knew if he had the energy, he’d be furious all over again. Instead, Cullen calmly said:

‘I can’t decide if that’s more insulting to me, or to you, that you just said that.’
'Yeah, well,' Bull said, then made a sound that was almost a laugh.

'You have told me in the past that you don’t really understand it, that you don’t see the point of it, this kind of love,' Cullen said, staring at him. 'How can you tell me I don’t feel it, when you don’t know what I feel? When you’ve never felt it like this?'

'Yeah,' Bull said, standing, concertedly avoiding Cullen’s eyes. ‘Good point.’

Cullen stared at him, feeling as though parts of a puzzle were starting to come together, and for once, it wasn’t his own baffling behaviour that was at the core of it. Cullen stood, watching Bull closely, thinking of that time Bull had almost seemed to want Cullen to fight back, to challenge him. Thinking of all those times Bull had hedged or avoided discussions relating to love. Cullen was wretchedly tired still, but enervated by what he was seeing.

‘Or do you know?’ Cullen said, breathless.

‘I think you need some time,’ Bull said, walking towards the stairs.

‘Bull?’

He’s running away. Cullen’s eyes widened, and he took a step towards Bull and then grunted as he had to lock his knees. His body wasn’t quite ready for pursuit. Bull was already halfway down the stairs. Cullen took another step and opened his mouth to call him back and then forced his mouth shut. He heard the door of his office open and then close.

Cullen ran his teeth over his bottom lip and then looked around his room. He needed to drink some water. He needed some food. He needed to get dressed. He needed to piss and remind himself that he actually had control over his bladder.

Then he needed to go after Bull. It was high time someone asked him if he was terrified. And Cullen felt strangely sure he needed to ask Bull if – at some point – he’d started feeling something that he believed would make him the kind of Tal Vashoth he never wanted to be.
Cullen only learned it was a Tuesday when – dressed and disoriented – he realised that the early morning Tuesday forms were stacked upon his desk, to be signed and sent back to the Inquisitor. He stared at his desk, feeling shaken. He’d collapsed on Saturday. Still reeling, he looked around. He was going after Bull, who was probably in the Herald’s Rest. Bull, who had shown no signs of wanting to run out on him while he talked about Kinloch, and then…

Cullen hid his hands in his coat. He was chilled from within. The ache for lyrium was distant, but no less ominous. It had been such a long time since he’d actually asked for it the way he’d begged with Bull.

*And look, he knew not to give it to you, because he’d been lying to you about it for months.*

It didn’t anger him as much as he thought it would. He’d burnt through his anger. He kept waiting for it to return, but instead there was only a dull kind of disappointment, and something alongside it that looked like understanding. Bull was Ben-Hassrath. It had been his job. And after that, well, yes, Bull should have told him. But it was somewhat humbling knowing that Cullen wasn’t the only one capable of making mistakes of a significant calibre.

Humbling, and almost a relief.

*Except that the Qun know you’re not taking lyrium.*

‘Except for that,’ Cullen said out loud, rolling his eyes. ‘Maker, damn it.’

Cullen made his way across the battlements. One of the guard waved at him, said:

‘That sure was some bout of food poisoning, Commander. Someone should tell Aidhe it’s the enemy we want dead.’

Another guard laughed, and Cullen looked between them, smiling wanly.

‘Ah, my own fault I’m afraid. I left some food up in my room and it spoiled. I think I’ll pay closer attention in the future.’

‘Too right!’ the guard said, and Cullen managed a weak laugh and kept walking towards the upper level of the Herald’s Rest.

He kept expecting to feel dread, apprehension. But either he was too wiped out from being ill, or the conversation itself had scoured him out. He knew later he’d realise exactly what he’d told Bull, the import of it. For now, his chest hurt, and Kinloch felt too close.
The upper level was dark and dim, dust motes from two small windows nearby glowed pale.

A shifting noise, and Cullen startled, turned to the side to see Cole standing by a pallet and a pile of knives.

‘You can’t see him now,’ Cole said.

‘Cole, I’ve had rather a time of it the last few days. I’m not in any mood.’

‘He thought you were dying,’ Cole said, tilting his head, sounding as though he were feeling wonder and sadness all at once. ‘It pulled at him, plied him with a yearning to hunt and kill. Then he was afraid. For you and for himself. He thinks he is too wild, but he is too wounded. I cannot help him. Right now you can’t either.’

Cullen had often wondered how it worked; a spirit possessing a person. In a way that didn’t result in an abomination, that wasn’t just…evil. He nodded at Cole’s words.

‘You're a little disturbing, sometimes, Cole.’

‘Oh yes, I know. I've been told.’

‘You're sure that I shouldn’t... I mean, not now?’

Cole was silent, and then looked up enough that Cullen could see his eyes under the brim of his hat. Maker, but he really did just look like a reanimated dead person. But then, Cole had been helpful to the Inquisition. He’d been helpful to Cullen, in the past, for all that he could be aggravating.

‘He is closed, captured. But maybe if you wait until tonight. You both think the true self you see is true, but it's not. Not for you or him. But you see more truthfully into each other, and that's a healing thing, even though it hurts.’

Cullen nodded again. He wanted some of the things that Bull said about him to be true. He wanted as well, for Bull to realise that he wasn’t only what the Qun thought he was. For someone who seemed to be fine about it, he wasn’t.

Cullen was still bruised, weak, sore. He thought he might be feeling heartsick. Bull had been trained to be Ben-Hassrath, but Cullen didn’t feel easy about Bull hiding so much for so long. It wasn’t even that Bull demanded honesty, he was – despite his deceptions – a very honest person. It was that Cullen, for all his faults, knew how to pull himself together and live a life, even if it wasn’t much of a life by other people’s standards. He was still alive wasn’t he? Why couldn’t Bull see that after everything that had happened, it would be far easier to not keep going?

Cole watched him, and Cullen realised he needed to say something.

‘You used to send me letters. I- They’ve been destroyed.’

‘I didn't know you kept them.’

Cullen wasn’t sure that was true, entirely. But it was true that Cole only ever seemed to visit his office, and not his room.

‘I'm in a habit of keeping letters. I reread them sometimes. I don’t always understand what you say. Or what you mean. But I appreciate the sentiment.’
‘That man who defiled your tower, he was mean-spirited. That’s what people say, isn’t it? Even though there isn’t a spirit in him, aside from his own. You think you’re like him, I don’t understand why. Mean-spirited. Not good. Good-hearted people can do mean things, can’t they? I can send you more letters. I like it. You listen when I’m not there.’

‘I... Well, thank you. Tonight, you think? With Bull?’

‘He is used to chasing, not being chased. He wants to be caught, but a predator never wants to feel like prey. Wait longer, he will feel more like himself. The Iron Bull.’

Cullen couldn’t help the small wash of warmth then. The Pink Iron Bull. Someone who made the world safer for himself by choosing how he related to others, how much he would give and hold back. Cullen still hurt, but he knew he’d feel that hard stone in his chest anyway, and he’d accepted that hurt.

If he could help Bull...

Cole cocked his head and then he turned around and opened a knapsack and pulled out an old knife. The edge was sharp but the rest of the blade was dull and worn.

‘This is for Raleigh,’ Cole said.

‘You... I don’t understand.’

‘I talk to him sometimes. I go into the other cell next to his and we talk. He thinks I’m a ghost, and it’s easier. He’s not kind, but he’s not what I thought he would be. He’s like me. We’re not easy.’

Cullen accepted the knife, then hid it behind his coat, tucked it carefully next to his other knife.

‘Maker, just how much do you know?’

‘Enough to know everyone is hurting,’ Cole said.

‘Even you?’

‘I can write it in a letter, if you want. The Iron Bull made you more open, you know. You do the same for him. But you both don’t like doing it, the opening.’

‘Does anyone?’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes. Cole smiled a little.

‘No. No one likes it. Even me. And that makes me feel more like you.’

‘Is that a good thing?’ Cullen said, confused.

‘I don’t know yet,’ Cole said, looking down, the hat brim shadowing his face again. ‘I’ll write it in a letter.’

Cullen turned to the door and then hesitated.

‘Well, I’d... I’d like that,’ Cullen said. ‘Oh, Cole?’

‘Yes?’ Cole said.
‘If you know so much, will you know…when Samson- Raleigh- Can you make sure he’s not alone?’

‘I wasn’t going to let him be alone,’ Cole said. ‘But ghosts can’t give someone a knife. I wouldn’t leave someone in the dark like that, alone. I remember, and it’s not nice.’

‘It’s not,’ Cullen said, swallowing. ‘Well, I- If you wish to put any of that in a letter too… But I’ll take my leave now. Thank you.’

Cole said nothing else, and Cullen walked back out onto the battlements, his face chilled immediately by a breeze that rushed over the stone. He blinked at the blue sky above him. It still smelled like snow on the way, but right now the sun pierced his eyes, and he realised he wasn’t as well as he wanted to be. He needed to lie down again.

*

It was mid-afternoon that he was able to pick up the energy and courage to make his way to the cells. The entire time, his heart pounded, and he couldn’t tell what parts were sickness and what parts were fear. It wasn’t fear of discovery that dogged him, even though he thought it should. He even had a flash of concern, knowing that he’d revealed the truth to Bull. But Bull had always kept Cullen’s confidence. It was one of their conditions. Even now, after their argument, Cullen had a kind of faith in that.

Cullen felt the dampness of the cells more than usual when he walked down the stone steps. His lungs were still fragile, and he coughed as he adjusted to the sticky, cloying air.

Samson appeared surprised to see him. He stood, and Cullen watched as relief crossed his face in the lifting of his eyebrows, the slight smile, and then vanished behind a frown.

‘You look like shit warmed up, Cullen,’ Samson said.

Cullen smiled crookedly, nodded.

‘Thought you weren’t going to come.’ Samson walked up to the bars. ‘Thought you’d changed your mind like, unless you have changed your mind, and that’s why you’re here?’

‘I haven’t,’ Cullen said.

‘Thank the Maker,’ Samson said, his shoulders sagging. ‘You’d think I wouldn’t say his name, wouldn’t you? I stopped around Corypheus. He didn’t much like it. But ‘thank Corypheus’ doesn’t have the same ring to it.’

‘How hard that must have been for you,’ Cullen remarked, lifting an eyebrow. For all that he felt some water had passed under the bridge between them, Cullen wasn’t easy about Samson’s allegiance to Corypheus. Not as he helped manage a stronghold that was comprised of more refugees than anything, many directly affected by the poisonous touch of Corypheus’ hand in the world.

Samson tipped his head back and stared at Cullen for a long minute, and then smiled again. Cullen wondered if it hurt, some of his teeth rotted the way that they were. Did he feel it? Did the red lyrium mask it?

‘It’s mercy, it is. What you’re doing. I thought about letting you think it was your own bloody fault, that you’re a monster, but you’re enough of one already, and this thing – well, it matters. Means a lot.’
‘That I’d get a knife,’ Cullen said, unable to stop himself from looking down the way he’d come. But no one was there.

‘That you’d let me go like this,’ Samson said. ‘Us monsters sticking together.’

Cullen closed his eyes, and then he reached for the knife where it rested as though it had always belonged there. He drew it out and only opened his eyes to look at it.

‘The blade’s sharp,’ Cullen said, ‘for all that it looks poorly made.’

‘Thought you’d find me a bit of rusty metal or something. I think this goes in the list of conversations I never expected to have at the end. Honestly just thought I’d either become a god like, or that I’d go out in a clanging mess of blood and metal. This is almost peaceful.’

‘I’m still not entirely sure you won’t throw the knife through the bars, Samson,’ Cullen said.

Samson rasped out a laugh that ended in coughing. Perhaps the level of dampness in the underground cells wasn’t just his imagination. Or perhaps with red lyrium withdrawals made those that Cullen was going through look like child’s play.

‘Knife-throwing was always your thing,’ Samson said, ‘not mine. ‘Sides, you got all that armour, and then I’m definitely getting experimented on. Makes my skin crawl, thinking of it. I’m no good man, and I have an inkling of what I really deserve, but it doesn’t mean I’m not gonna run from it given half the chance.’

Cullen thought of Bull saying that no deer would stay still for a hunter’s arrow. Thought of how Bull was so sure he had people back in Seheron who would torture and kill him without a second thought.

‘I just keep thinking,’ Samson said, ‘that I don’t really want to survive him. Whether he lives or dies. If he dies, the world is already fucked. If he lives, well, he wouldn’t trust me or want me now anyway. He had some grand ideas, but I listen to meself and I think…you told me Meredith had grand ideas.’

‘I did,’ Cullen said quietly. ‘I was a zealot.’

‘Yeah, that you were,’ Samson sighed. ‘I got glimpses of who you were really beneath that. Think I would’ve bloody hated you as a young child. Bet you were all noble and shit, and dreamed of saving people. I was a right little scrap of a thing. But here we both are. By the Maker, Cullen, I hated you. I’d have this dream, over and over again. You’d be with me in Kirkwall, we’d be eating, and you’d be telling me all the things I was doing that were wrong, like, but hearing it from you just made me madder.’

‘I’ve heard I can have that effect on people,’ Cullen said blandly.

Samson grinned, then nodded. Cullen was just shocked to hear that Samson had dreamed about him at all. For a wild moment, he expected Samson to say he dreamed of a lake he’d never visited in Honnleath. That Cullen was standing on a bridge as red lyrium bloomed all around them. But no, apparently that was only Cullen’s dream.

‘Go on then,’ Samson said. ‘Give me the knife. I’ll wait a bit, then get it done. Say what you like about me, I did get it done.’

‘Yes, you did,’ Cullen said, looking down at the knife again. He stepped forwards and handed it forward by the hilt, and watched – feeling strangely detached – as Samson took it carefully.
Samson turned around and walked to the back of his cell. There was some shifting, the sound of a stone grating across stone, and when Samson returned his hands were empty.

‘There, see?’ Samson said. ‘I swear on someone else’s life that I won’t kill no guard with it.’

‘That’s what I remember about you,’ Cullen deadpanned. ‘You were always so convincing.’

‘I take swearing on someone else’s life very seriously and all. You know, you don’t seem like so much of a zealot now.’

They were silent for a long time. Cullen couldn’t think of what to say, though he kept thinking he should mark the occasion. Some pithy phrase that would sum up the fact that he’d just delivered death to his brother-in-arms. Samson’s expression was serious, even shuttered.

Eventually Samson said: ‘Have a drink in my honour after, Cullen. Just the one, if you like.’

Cullen nodded once. He thought of Cole saying that Samson thought he was a ghost, and that he wouldn’t let Samson be alone in the end. He looked at that red ring around Samson’s eyes and could still hear it. Maybe he’d always hear it, now that there was so much red lyrium out there in the world, growing straight out of the ground.

‘You can go,’ Samson said, tilting his head. ‘You don’t bloody need to find some last words for me. You’ve done me a kindness. Now go back to your life and forget about it all. Not that you’re likely to, but come on, Cullen. Get on with you, now. I’m tired of looking at your pretty face.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said, feeling a loosening of the knotted rope between them. He offered a wry smile, possibly the last smile that Samson would ever see. ‘Farewell, Samson. May the Maker be kinder than the rest of us have.’

‘Not bloody likely,’ Samson said, but then his face cleared and he laughed. Cullen thought that for a second, he could see the carefree, reckless child Samson had been, though it was there and gone so fast. ‘Wouldn’t that be something though, eh?’

They both shared a long, silent look then, some mutual understanding that Cullen couldn’t perceive – was it that they’d been Templars together once? Was it that they were sharing some kinship now, some monstrousness that made them what they were? He couldn’t decide.

The moment passed, and Cullen turned and walked back down the corridor, thinking that if Samson went through with it – that was the last time he’d see his brother-in-arms alive.

* *

There was work. There was a letter on his desk from Cassandra that was hurriedly scrawled and went like so:

_Cullen, I came to check on you but mercifully you are awake and unfortunately not here. I have been called away for another meeting that will go long about the future of the Seekers, Maker forgive me, but I won’t be back until Thursday. If anything happens to you from now until then I will be unhappy._

The word ‘unhappy’ was underlined.

Cullen folded it up and added it to the rest of the correspondence that he kept for himself.

Then, in the late afternoon, he was too tired to keep working and ended up in his room, lying on his
back fully dressed, eyes closed. He breathed deeply and slowly, the Focus breathing that he’d been taught as a Templar. It kept him rested but alert, and he was supposed to empty his mind, but he’d never been very good at that.

Instead, he wondered whether he should have listened to Cole. Should he have gone after Bull? Perhaps it was wrong to wait.

*He thought you were dying.*

Cullen knew the situation wasn’t as simple as he wanted it to be. Bull was wrong for keeping something from him when he’d felt sure enough to share it with the Qun. But Cullen knew that there had been times over the past few months when he’d wanted to spill the truth of it. When he’d wanted to explain his cold hands, the episodes, the awfulness of it. When he’d wanted to somehow let Bull know that maybe he did want rescuing in those sessions sometimes, even if he didn’t need it in the rest of his life. It was easy, now, to see how Bull had interpreted the whole mess of it the way he had.

Cullen thought too, what it meant that Bull had readily admitted he both knew his tendency to protect others from themselves in an assumptive manner was a problem, but one he couldn’t easily change. But Cullen wasn’t a stranger to seeing problems in oneself, and having no idea how to begin changing them.

There was another matter that he didn’t let himself think about. It was tied up in the pain in his chest, and it was tangled and bruised. He couldn’t rightfully feel peaceful about the conversation he knew they needed to have.

But he didn’t want to poke the soreness until it was time.

He was in no rush to feel heartbroken.

* Cullen was back at his desk at six bells, trying to decide what counted as ‘tonight’ when Cole had mentioned it. The sun was setting far earlier than usual, it had been dark by four. Was it already evening by Cole’s standards? Should Cullen wait? Was he supposed to go to the Herald’s Rest?

‘This is why you don’t take advice from possessed people,’ Cullen muttered to himself, as he cleaned off a fountain pen with a rag, and then simply paused for a minute, feeling stronger than he had in the morning, but still tired. Then, with a breath, he pulled himself together and folded the rag, put the fountain pen in its holder.

He leaned back in his chair and looked around his office. Despite his imagination throwing horrors at him when he tried to envision Vivienne remaking it to her tastes, the office was very much as it had been. The corners were cleared out, the dummies were upright instead of laying upon the ground, and his new desk and bookshelves had exactly replaced the others. The wood was of a higher quality. The legs of the table were carved – tooled with carefully buffed patterns of mabari at the base, and a flame motif. Something any rich, seasoned Fereldan would be proud to own.

The chair he sat in was upholstered and more comfortable than the one he’d chosen for himself. It was no stately throne, its back wasn’t presumptuously high. But it was finely made, and it encouraged Cullen to lean in it and look about his office.

He startled at a heavy rap on the door, and his brow furrowed even as it swung open. Bull holding some kind of rattan box in one hand, and grimacing when he saw Cullen sitting in the chair.
‘You busy?’ he said.

‘Ah,’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘No. Not really. I mean yes, there’s always urgent matters, but by some miracle, everyone seems to think this bout of food poisoning was bad enough that they’re just about leaving me alone.’

Cullen’s heart was beating too fast. The stone in his chest throbbed. Bull looked uncomfortable, and he met Cullen’s eyes, but in that concerted, unblinking way that was either a warrior facing up with his enemy, or someone determined to hide what was really going on behind an intimidating stare.

‘I brought food,’ Bull said, holding up the box. ‘I kind of owe you an apology. Upstairs would probably be more comfortable.’

‘All right,’ Cullen said.

Cullen thought he managed to sound calm enough, given the only refrain now echoing in his head in a discordant and frankly appalling manner was: You told him you love him.

Bull gestured for Cullen to go first, and Cullen thought that it was likely to make sure Cullen would keep his balance up the stairs. Or that Bull could be there if Cullen slipped. It left a combination of annoyance and feeling touched in his chest at the same time. He wondered if this talk would hurt more than the last withdrawal episode had.

Cullen walked over to the table and sat down at the chair, watched as Bull closed the trapdoor. Then Bull walked over and set down the rattan hamper. Bull sat down on the opposite chair that was too small for him, and Cullen thought that he’d have to change the chair. And then he thought that after this conversation, it might not matter anymore.

‘So,’ Bull said. He clapped his hands down on his knees and then looked down at them, as though at a loss. ‘So I’m gonna apologise for running out on you after you told me all that shit about Kinloch. Because it must’ve seemed like I couldn’t handle it, and that was a shitty thing to do.’

‘It didn’t seem like that,’ Cullen said carefully. ‘I know you didn’t run away because of what I said about Kinloch.’

Bull looked up at him and Cullen thought he was so used to hiding his own fear, he could tell when someone was doing it around him.

‘Still,’ Bull said, ‘shouldn’t have done it.’

‘Yes, all right,’ Cullen said, nodding once. ‘All is forgiven.’

‘That thing you don’t let yourself have,’ Bull said, the stiffness in his expression smoothing for a moment. ‘Forgiveness.’

‘Look,’ Cullen said, biting the inside of his bottom lip once, hard, and then sucking in a cold breath. He should have stoked the fire earlier, it had died down to embers. ‘Look, I can’t talk about that. I want to talk to you about why you did leave. It’s a conversation we need to have. Isn’t it?’

‘I dunno,’ Bull said, staring at him. ‘Depends on the conversation you think we’re going to have.’

‘I wasn’t- I know it’s not convenient,’ Cullen said, frustrated with himself, the situation. ‘I knew it was damned inconvenient when I first realised how I felt.’
‘Like you said, it’s not good for you.’

Cullen blinked, frowning. ‘What?’

‘You said it’s not good for you. I wish you’d said when you realised, because I’m not in a habit of doing things with people that they think aren’t good for them. Y’know, kind of… not my scene.’

Cullen almost forgot to breathe, because he’d forgotten his phrasing. He’d forgotten how he’d laid it out. And then he realised that Bull didn’t have the whole picture, because Cullen had never been interested in giving it, and he’d somehow assumed Bull would see it anyway.

_**Maker, we’re both terrible at this.**_

‘It’s not good for me, because you don’t feel the same way,’ Cullen said slowly. ‘That’s all. Because I don’t believe in… When I was younger, my mother told me she’d loved someone who didn’t love her back. She told me she’d tried to make him love her. By being around him all the time. By pressuring him. She was sure, in a way, that she could ameliorate her emotional pain by just… changing his mind. And as she told me – it’s a terrible thing to do to someone else’s being, their very right to be who they are and feel what they feel. Love is not force, and she learned better, and I believed – for a long time – that even though I felt what I felt, it could be safe. Because you were- you were clear that you were getting things out of it. But I’ve come to worry that I could be doing you indirect harm. Or direct harm.’

Bull’s gaze was shadowed, he’d tilted his head forward just enough that Cullen could only see the brightness in his eye.

‘I wasn’t even strong enough to tell you that I think we should quit,’ Cullen said, laughing a little, his chest cracking open into a soreness that felt caused by a physical blow. ‘Only that I think it’s not good for me, because I don’t want to hurt you like that. But then you left the way you did. I can’t help but wonder- You say I don’t love you, that’s not for you to decide. But you get to decide how you feel.’

‘You say it like it’s easy,’ Bull said. ‘Like people are just supposed to know.’

‘Well, I-’

‘You say it like… I mean, I’m never gonna be like you, Cullen. I’m never going to want to settle down with just one person. I don’t want a white picket fence. My life? Pretty happy with it the way it is now.’

Cullen’s smile was bitter, and he stood, because the anger of the morning was returning as a slow, gripping thing.

‘Why have you always assumed that’s what I’ve wanted?’ Cullen said. Then, he turned and looked at Bull. ‘Why do you assume that I’m not already aware of who you are? Do you think that I didn’t fall in love with the you before me, instead of some imagined person who seeks only for a sole partner and wishes to retire from the life he’s made for himself?’

Bull said nothing, and Cullen rubbed a hand over his face. His callouses caught on his shaved skin.

‘Bull,’ Cullen said, shaking his head as he dropped his hand, ‘I respect the life you’ve made for yourself. I like that you have the Chargers. I’ve had moments where I’ve not known how to… understand how you sleep with other people. That was in the beginning. I’ve honestly not cared about it for months.’
‘Yeah?’ Bull said, sounding faintly antagonistic, ‘there’s still the fact that I’m Tal Vashoth. What if I lose it one day? It fucking happens, don’t tell me it doesn’t.’

‘I thought once, about telling you that I’ve been trained to kill the people I care for,’ Cullen said, his voice emptier than before. ‘But that says something horrifying about me, and it also served as some honouring of this thing you believe, when I know that there are Tal Vashoth who have partners and who will never ‘lose it’ in the way you’ve described. I want to be the kind of person who can honour what you believe, what you’ve been made to believe through indoctrination. Maker knows I should, after my own. But I’ve never been trained to kill the people I love. If you want me to look at you and promise I can be the one to draw the knife across your throat, I can’t do that. But if you want me to look at you and promise I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure I survive loving you – I can do that.’

‘Yeah, shit,’ Bull said, looking away quickly, his horn scraping against the wall. Bull shifted his position, but Cullen knew how uneasy he was. Bull normally wasn’t unaware of his horns like this.

‘You know, don’t you?’ Cullen said, his voice cracking, a desperation flooding him. ‘Even if you don’t know what to do about it. Even if you don’t want it to be real. Even if you think it will damn you. You know what I feel, don’t you?’

Bull muttered something to himself in Qunlat, and then he went very still. Cullen thought that there were many areas in his life where Bull would always be stronger than him. But perhaps Cullen had found one of the few places where he might be stronger. That knowledge made him feel gentle, and tender, and all the things that he didn’t associate with himself.

‘It’s all right,’ Cullen said, his voice lower than before, ‘if you don’t know. You weren’t raised with knowing it, or stories that glorified it, and you have your own way of loving people already. If I didn’t believe in that, I wouldn’t have started loving you in the first place.’

‘This is why dealing with your feelings by just beating shit up is better,’ Bull said. He sounded troubled, wry, amused, and Cullen knew what it was to deflect.

Then, he thought Bull needed a break and sought for something else to talk about.

‘When you told the Qun that I wasn’t taking lyrium, why…did that not ever get out? Why don’t people know? Almost all of Skyhold simply thinks I get bad headaches and that my stomach is easily upset.’

‘Ah,’ Bull said, looking up then, meeting Cullen’s eyes. He looked relieved at the change of subject. ‘Actually, it’s kind of a secret that we can tell about the lyrium. We don’t like others to know how sensitive our noses are. Like, we can joke about it, but we’ll never sort of display the areas where it’s useful in a militaristic sense. I’ll joke about how humans stink when the sun’s up, but I’m not gonna tell you there’s a vein of red lyrium coming up over a ridge and how powerful it is, or that I know you don’t take it, or that there’s a metal trap ten metres east and I can tell because the metal’s starting to corrode.’

Cullen blinked at him, and Bull shrugged.

‘Also,’ Bull added, ‘I didn’t write it down as a weakness to be exploited. I said in my missive that it was surprising, because you were competent, capable, though untired, and you showed little to no signs of the degenerative illnesses I’d seen myself. I mean there’s quite a few others out there right now not taking it. Even Templars.’ Bull pointed in the direction on the courtyard. ‘Some are gonna die. Some are doing better than you. Some-’
‘How many?’ Cullen said, staring at him. ‘What are they doing with their lyrium?’

‘Selling it?’ Bull said, frowning. ‘I don’t know. I don’t ask. You didn’t- You didn’t know?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, feeling oddly airless. ‘We never talk about it. Ever. Are there many? I mean, do you encounter many who have stopped taking it?’

Bull shook his head. ‘Not many, but not none. They’re around. You don’t- I dunno, there’s no sort of code or anything?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, thinking that this was something he’d have to pursue. It thrummed in him like a bright awareness. Bull’s knowledge was important, and Cullen would have to do something about it. At the very least, he needed to be sure that those who had stopped taking it weren’t selling their lyrium vials to addicts. Beyond that, there was more to do, he just wasn’t sure what.

‘But yeah, the Qun know there are some not taking it. They might try and exploit it one day. But they favour gathered secrets over spilling them just to mess with something. Also, for all that they have their beef with me, they don’t fucking hate the Inquisition. So y’know, nothing to be gained from it really.’

Bull stood as well, but he walked over to the windows facing the Courtyard and leaned against the wall. He scratched idly at the base of a horn, but it didn’t seem the agitated scratching of before.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, his voice softer than before, ‘I owe you another apology.’

‘Come on now,’ Cullen managed, ‘isn’t that excessive?’

‘Hear me out first,’ Bull said, smiling. ‘There’s something I like about you, and I disrespected it before. This morning. You tell me that you liking pain is a perversion. You used the words demon-touched, but it’s not...it’s not that, I’m surprised that you don’t see it, when you’ve told me yourself you use the pain to make you stronger. Your needing pain, liking it, you make it your strength. It’s about proving what you can take. I know you’re a fighter, but I sometimes...forget you can’t protect yourself. There’s rescuing in the sessions, that happens under conditions, and it’s safe. But outside of that, well, if you knew how many times Krem had gotten on my fucking ass about it...’

‘Not your best apology,’ Cullen said, smiling despite how nervous and uncertain he felt.

‘Didn’t even say the word ‘sorry’,” Bull said, his own smirk impish.

‘Terrible,’ Cullen said.

‘Y’know, maybe I do know how you feel,’ Bull said. ‘I’ve... I’ve not wanted to see it for a long time. And it’s been there for a long time. I don’t know what it means.’

‘Whatever you want it to mean,’ Cullen said. ‘That’s how it tends to work.’

‘I like what we do,’ Bull said. ‘I like- I like that you’re in my regular crew, but in a different way. This, whatever this is, it belongs to you and me, and it doesn’t belong to anyone else. I didn’t think I’d like that as much as I do. It’s not just the flogging and the fucking – which we haven’t done enough of by the way, though you might disagree with how you feel about it, because I don’t even really- I can get flogging and fucking elsewhere. It’s the meals we’ve snuck in the kitchens, or how I say I sleep so fucking well in this tower because of the bed, or the fact that it’s a tower, when I know the reason I sleep so well here has nothing to do with your mattress.’
‘Ah,’ Cullen said, thinking that he should give up on expecting to draw a full breath until Bull had left.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, as though that was enough of an answer.

‘But you’d want this to continue?’ Cullen said tentatively. ‘If I reiterated that the only reason I said I thought it wasn’t good for me is because I thought…’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘But what then?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘After all this. After Corypheus.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said. ‘I haven’t- I thought maybe… I thought about something, a little while ago. But it seems absurd, and I can’t- I don’t expect to survive.’

‘Well I fucking want you to,’ Bull said. ‘And I tend to be pretty headstrong and ballsy about that shit, so maybe you should just expect that you’re going to. What did you think about? The absurd thing?’

‘Maker, it’s absurd,’ Cullen said, feeling a little cornered. ‘It’s just a fantasy. I don’t even know if I want it.’

‘Am I in it?’

Cullen laughed, the sound fracturing. He had to walk away then, until he was on the other side of his bed, the side he hardly ever walked down. He faced Bull then, wished he’d built the fire back up again.

‘I thought, once,’ Cullen said, ‘about…living somewhere in Ferelden. After all this. I don’t know what doing. I’m not foolish enough to expect politics will ever entirely let me go. But there’s some land in the family, or I could…acquire my own. I thought you could…continue to do what you do with the Chargers. Maybe I could even come with you sometimes- See, this is- I know how this sounds. I can’t be a Charger. And I want to retire. A little. I want to sometimes retire. Which doesn’t make any sense. But I thought perhaps there would be a way we could keep doing this, but this was when I knew it was impossible, and I think- I don’t like imagining what the future will hold.’

‘Cuz it seems too good to be true, yeah?’

‘I thought about it when I was sure you could never love me back,’ Cullen said shakily. ‘And I know you could still change your mind.’

‘I dunno if I can just…change what I feel.’

‘Yes, but you can change the intent around it. You can walk away. You can disappear after all of this. I’m no idiot, Bull. I know you’re far-ranging and go where you wish. And I may not get healthier. I may get sicker. I’m prepared to deal with that, it was my choice, and I wasn’t sure I’d survive it. But you’ve seen one of the episodes now, and I don’t wish to put anyone else through them.’

Bull walked across the room, and Cullen thought that he’d cornered himself in the coldest part of his own damned tower. Bull’s expression was softening, and Cullen wished for the strength he’d felt before, when he’d thought he could lead them through just about anything. He looked up at
Bull, who didn’t stop until he was in Cullen’s space, until he could notch a finger beneath Cullen’s chin and keep their gazes locked.

‘You can be a Charger,’ Bull said, smiling a little.

‘No, I- Look-’

‘A place somewhere,’ Bull said, ‘where you could sometimes retire. It sounds doable. And I’m far-ranging, but the Qun won’t want me going too far north.’

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m fine just knowing that you…feel more than general friendship for me, honestly.’

‘I feel like you know just as much about this kind of stuff as I do, which is about shit all,’ Bull said. ‘Even if you were raised with it, and raised with stories that glorified it, that turned it into Varric’s romanticised crap.’

‘Those stories sell quite well,’ Cullen said, swallowing.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, ‘they sure do. You a big reader then?’

‘I’m not… I mean it’s either that or reports, and it’s mostly to mock them, it’s not like battles are that easy, is it?’

‘Never are,’ Bull said, ‘but sometimes it’s nice to pretend for a while.’

‘And this?’ Cullen said. ‘The things I’ve imagined? Is that pretending?’

Bull’s smile broadened, and he bent down, and kept Cullen’s head tilted up. ‘Doesn’t have to be.’

Cullen felt Bull’s breath across his mouth, felt his own lips part. Then Bull closed the space between them and his knuckle stroked gently under the sensitive, freshly shaved skin. Cullen’s breath caught, his hands came up and rested on Bull’s arms. The kiss was slow and careful, but it didn’t feel new. It felt familiar and warm. Cullen leaned into it, until that point they were both moving back – even then, it was only millimetres between them.

‘Don’t do this just because you think I want it,’ Cullen said, his lips brushing against Bull’s.

‘Yeah, that’s the one thing you’ve never really seemed to get about me,’ Bull said, his mouth close. ‘That’s not really my deal. It’s never going to be my deal. I’m here because I want to be, little lion, even when it scares the shit out of me.’

‘Even then?’

‘Even then,’ Bull said, voice low.

It seemed easy then, for them both to lean together at the same time, for their lips to meet. And Cullen let his eyes close, his hands tighten on Bull’s arms. It felt natural, it settled the pain in his chest and it turned the thundering of his heart into something welcome.

Chapter End Notes
They're definitely having sex in the next chapter. Just saying.
So, I’ve had a lot of ill-health stuff lately (three hospital visits every Friday back to back started last Friday, and there’s doctor’s appointments and other appointments and new medications and medication adjustments and other things). But I’ve also had some writer’s block re: this chapter specifically. Eventually I just had to accept I wasn’t going to be able to make everyone happy and that helped.

Because of said ill-health things though, updates may be patchy. I’m not losing motivation, I mostly don’t have the energy because hospitals and hospital stays wipe me out. <3

One kiss rolled into another. They were slow, had a rise and fall to them that reminded Cullen of the sea. Bull’s knuckles beneath his chin became the points of blunt fingers just touching – almost too light to be pleasurable – keeping all of Cullen’s focus zeroed in on the moment.

He forgot to think about his fear of the future, his doubt. Only a few minutes ago, he’d thought this had been the coldest corner in the tower; but not anymore.

Except…

‘Wait,’ Cullen said, leaning back. ‘Are we… Is this now a relationship?’

‘It’s always been a relationship. I have a lot of those.’

‘Maker, I swear, you do it on purpose. You know what I mean.’

Bull shrugged and then rubbed his fingertips against the grain of Cullen’s barely-there stubble, as though he liked the way it felt. Smooth in one direction, rough in the other.

‘You can’t just kiss me into submission, you know,’ Cullen continued.

‘Fucking love a challenge,’ Bull said, leaning in again.

Cullen’s hand shot up from Bull’s arm and he covered Bull’s mouth. The back of his hand bumped against his own lips. Bull narrowed his eye, but Cullen could see the twinkle of a smile in his expression.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, after smacking a loud kiss into Cullen’s palm. ‘Let’s sit on the bed and talk about this then. Because I love talking. You know me. It’s the shit.’

‘Firstly, you encouraging me onto the bed is a trap, and a poorly disguised one.’

Cullen lost track of his second point when he saw the slow, lewd grin that stretched across Bull’s face. Cullen’s body – apparently not much interested in conversation – responded as though Bull was a lodestone. Bull’s expression turned his breath shallow, made the nerves in his gut go taut.

‘Cheat,’ Cullen muttered.
‘I dunno what you’re talking about,’ Bull said. ‘Pretty sure all the damp in your room lives in this corner though.’

Bull moved forward until the tips of his horns scraped against the stone, just above Cullen’s head, making him feel bracketed in. Cullen swallowed as Bull’s hands grasped his shoulders and squeezed, the grip strong, on the outer edges of painful. Cullen liked it, even as it shifted the sore muscles in his body, even as one of his shoulders made a slight grinding noise that they both heard and both said nothing about.

‘Thing is,’ Bull said, ‘we can fuck now and talk later. It’s good stress relief, and we have all that food for after.’

‘You-’ Cullen closed his eyes and tried to battle the arousal that was starting to move through him. His cock was always slow to waken, but he could feel it in his breathing, in that dizziness that wasn’t about the lyrium at all, but the urge to lean in.

‘You don’t have to say yes,’ Bull said seriously.

‘No, it’s not the impromptu nature of it that’s a problem,’ Cullen said. ‘It’s not a problem. It’s only- A few minutes ago… You can’t just say I can be a Charger and then- Though I suppose if anyone could change a subject, you can.’

‘Cullen, it’s like you’ve never shitting met yourself sometimes.’

‘Come on now,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes.

‘Cullen,’ Bull said, staring at him. ‘If chess was won by changing the subject, the only person who might have you down is Sera. Maybe.’

‘I can’t be a Charger. I don’t take direction well.’

‘Then a consulting Charger,’ Bull said. ‘A Charger I keep on the books when I need some know-it-all opinion or a sword or some shit. And y’know, Cullen, you take direction pretty well once you’re in a mood to.’

Bull was doing it again. Cullen scowled at him, because he could see the playful, seductive light in Bull’s eye, and a thumb was stroking at his shoulder over and over again. There was an eagerness there, in the way he stared at Cullen. An excitement that Cullen wanted to push aside. He desperately wanted to sort everything out, understand what had just happened and know the contingencies. He needed to see the places where this was failing, to repair the bridge before it rotted.

Instead, that look in Bull’s eye. A ravenous, hungry, happy look. Cullen wasn’t one to typically throw out a rulebook, but it wasn’t as though he currently had one. He had no idea how this was supposed to work. Old Templar training made him feel as though he was breaking the rules. Sex was something Templars could indulge in, yes, but long-term relationships were somewhat frowned upon.

‘Hey,’ Bull said, expression softening. ‘Talk to me.’

Cullen laughed. ‘You just said you don’t want to talk.’

‘Yeah, but you do this thing sometimes, which I like to think of as you having one big meltdown in that head of yours, and I’m pretty sure you’re doing it right now. Maybe it’d be good to get some of the crazy out.’
More laughter then, and Bull leaned in and kissed Cullen’s forehead so hard that Cullen’s head bumped back against the stone.

‘You were just kind of really sick and then y’know, this morning happened, and you talked about Kinloch, and I pissed off after.’

‘I know you haven’t always had reason to believe what I’ve said in the past,’ Cullen said, his laughter dying and giving way to something more sombre. ‘But I mean what I said about Kinloch. It’s not easy to talk about. I can’t always talk about it. But I do think of it every day. I didn’t…ruin myself by talking about it with you. I don’t regret talking about it. I only wish it helped.’

‘It helps me,’ Bull said, a hand sliding behind Cullen’s back and pulling him gently away from the wall.

‘You already know so much,’ Cullen said, unable to stop the slight bite in his voice.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, as though it didn’t bother him, as though he didn’t mind that Cullen was still sore about it. ‘Take this how you want, but along with all the rest, I really did just want to hear your version. I still do. If I could get everything I needed to know from a fucking report, I wouldn’t like talking to you so much.’

Bull steered them to the bed. All the way around to the other side, where he sat at his corner, and encouraged Cullen to sit next to him. Then Bull slid with a faint grunt to his knees on the floor, and started taking Cullen’s boots off.

Cullen watched him, fingers curling into rumpled blankets. As always, Bull never radiated anything like submission or obedience even kneeling like this.

‘Your knee must hurt,’ Cullen said.

‘Kinda always does,’ Bull said. ‘But I like this.’

‘Removing my boots?’ Cullen said, thinking that if the night ended and they hadn’t done anything more than talk, he was probably going to be disappointed. Maybe Bull was right. Maybe they could talk after.

‘The part where you sit there and just let me,’ Bull said, waggling his eyebrow.

Bull’s hand curled around a bared ankle. His hand engulfed it, and Cullen hadn’t been in the habit of feeling small or fragile or delicate compared to others, but he felt it now. Bull’s other hand curved around his calf and rubbed up and down over his pants. Bull watched Cullen’s face, eye darting to the reflexive swallow Cullen made, before moving back up again.

‘So,’ Bull said, grinning again. ‘Same watchword applies. If you want out or aren’t in the mood just say so. And now that part’s out the way, I think you should get your pants open and get a hand around your cock.’

Cullen blinked at him. Bull dipped his head pointedly towards Cullen’s groin, before looking back up at him. The hand around Cullen’s ankle squeezed.

‘I-’ Cullen bit at his top lip. He opened his mouth to protest, but it was obvious that Bull was waiting for that. Cullen didn’t quite want to give him the satisfaction.

As he fumbled with his belt, he realised that Bull would probably feel quite satisfied either way. Still, it was nerve-wracking, because he didn’t really jack himself off anymore. He touched
himself, he knew the shape of his cock limp and erect and the phases in between. But unlike what seemed to be most of the rest of Thedas, he was no master at self-pleasure, and getting his pants open with someone like Bull watching – who no doubt was some kind of expert – left him on tenterhooks.

Eventually though, his pants were open, his underclothes moved out of the way, and he tentatively cradled his limp cock in his hand. He was unwilling to just start going for it when he knew that he wasn’t likely to get hard as a result. Or that it would take too long. Maker, he wasn’t accustomed to this.

‘I’m sure you expected something a bit more exciting,’ Cullen said drily.

‘Nope,’ Bull said. ‘This is good. You can move your hand a bit if you want. But if you just want to keep it like that, I’m not complaining.’

Cullen’s fingers flexed, and he shifted his hips as Bull’s fingers dug into the hem of his pants and drew them down. Then he was naked from the waist down, yet still wearing his greaves.

‘I can remove these,’ Cullen said.

‘I’ve said what I want,’ Bull replied, rubbing his hands along Cullen’s legs, from the ankles to the knees. ‘I’m pretty sure I can get you naked just as well.’

Cullen thought about resisting, if only because the pattern of his life for so long had been resisting people for the sake of it, to see what would happen; to see how they’d react to him. But some time ago now, he’d decided to yield specifically to Bull, and that had stamped some indelible mark in him, as firm and bright as the first time Bull had placed his hand between Cullen’s inflamed shoulder blades.

So Cullen nodded, said nothing, and wished it didn’t make him so nervy to see the approval on Bull’s face. Wished, instead, that he would only feel the warmth that buzzed beneath.

Bull was careful with Cullen’s greaves. He removed his coat with care, occasionally pulling or shifting Cullen’s free arm to get him to move or make things easier. When he had to remove the other sleeve, he directed Cullen to hold himself with his left hand, and Cullen stared down at his limp cock and wondered if most others would be stiff and aching by now.

‘Okay,’ Bull said, ‘before I finish up here, I’m gonna get that fire going properly. You can change which hand is holding yourself, but I want you holding yourself, okay?’

‘I’m not sure why,’ Cullen said, raising his eyebrows sceptically as Bull got up with another grunt and walked over to the hearth.

‘I like it,’ Bull said. ‘I actually think you could get yourself off more often, if you knew a bit more about what you like. But that’s not what tonight’s about.’

‘No?’

‘Nope,’ Bull said cheerfully.

‘My fingers are freezing,’ Cullen added.

‘I know,’ Bull said, laughing. But he stayed bent over the hearth, shifting around tinder and not paying Cullen any mind.
It was true. The tips of Cullen’s fingers were frigid, and the sensitive skin of his cock was starting to ache.

Cullen started to lie down, and Bull cleared his throat loudly.

‘Didn’t say you could.’

‘I didn’t hear you say I couldn’t,’ Cullen said, thinking that this was—somehow, after everything—fun. It was even silly, and Cullen didn’t really associate himself with anything silly anymore. Cullen didn’t lay back on the bed in the end, instead he scuffed his bare feet across the stone of his floor.

Cullen had let the fire go long enough that it took some time to get it going. But soon a heat began to creep into the room, and Bull shifted the grate back into place and looked satisfied with it. The flames in the hearth lit him ruddy and flickered gold and red over the glossy surface of his horns, and Cullen realised he’d likely waxed them...or used that horn balm that Cullen had found for him.

How did one say ‘I want to tend to your horns more often,’ without sounding foolish? Was that like asking to shave someone else’s face? It probably was. And Cullen realised he’d offer to do that too, given the chance, and his cheeks burned for an entirely different reason and he looked down, only to see his flesh in his cold fingers.

Bull stripped before he walked over, and Cullen listened, but didn’t look. He was caught instead by the sight of gooseflesh on his thighs. Touched fingertips to the shallow bumps.

‘I’d…almost wondered before,’ Cullen said hesitantly. ‘If you had feelings beyond…beyond.’

‘Pretty sure I gave it away when I called you Kadan. Scared the shit out of myself, but then y’know, you forgot about it. Crisis averted, or some shit.’

‘Kadan,’ Cullen said, the conversation drifting back almost like a dream. He looked up at Bull, his neck craning as Bull stood before him. ‘Doesn’t it mean brother-in-arms? Or…family?’

Bull’s lips quirked, and then he reached out to the buttons of Cullen’s shirt and began undoing them. He was silent for a little while.

‘I’ve never used it that way,’ Bull said. ‘Never really used it. Kadan is like...a lot of words—lots of meanings, not very helpful. Can mean brother-in-arms. Can mean the folks you get smashed with one night when you’re looking for some rousing cheer. Can mean your family. A lot of things. But I meant it as something else. Something I’m not sure would pass muster with the Qun.’

Bull’s fingers slipped between the gape he’d made in the fabric, and he curled fire-warm fingers around Cullen’s side and squeezed. It wasn’t gentle, but possessive. Cullen swallowed at the rawness of it.

‘So what does it mean?’ Cullen said. His voice rougher than before.

‘Is this an interrogation? Or am I actually gonna be able to fuck you at some point?’

‘Obviously both,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes.

An amused huff from Bull, but then he said nothing at all as he continued to undo the buttons and slide the shirt from Cullen’s shoulders. Cullen only let go of himself to switch hands, as before.

‘Now you get to lie down,’ Bull said, pushing firmly at Cullen’s chest, keeping up the pressure
until Cullen was all the way on his back, legs hanging over the side of the bed.

‘Still waiting for an answer,’ Cullen said.

‘Mmhm,’ Bull said, and then grasped Cullen’s knees and spread them wide enough that Cullen’s hips ached. Cullen started to lift up, and then his eyes widened when he realised that Bull was kneeling between the space he’d made. He winced when his hands clenched – he’d forgotten he was still holding himself.

‘What-?’

Bull tugged him forwards, and then Cullen stared up at the ceiling when he felt teeth and lips mount over his pelvis. Then a sharp nip that hurt enough that Cullen’s breath caught in his throat. Another that followed, and Cullen hissed, then dug the fingers of his free hand down into the blankets because his cock twitched. Cullen was sure it wasn’t the pain alone, but also Bull’s face being remarkably close to his cock. That was…intriguing, at the least.

‘Are you…?’ Cullen wasn’t entirely sure how to finish that sentence. ‘Ah. Can I let go now?’

‘Nope,’ Bull said.

And then Bull pressed close enough that his nose bumped against Cullen’s cock. But all he did was brush his lips against the backs of Cullen’s knuckles. Then he returned his attentions to Cullen’s leg, holding it angled outward with his hand and stripping his tongue over flesh that Cullen was sure had never really been that sensitive.

‘I must say,’ Cullen said, ‘it’s odd to not be tied up or blindfolded or gagged or…well, you know.’

‘You asking?’ Bull said, and Cullen felt Bull’s smile against his leg. ‘You think I need strips of cloth or lengths of rope to get you to do what I want?’

‘It’s not that,’ Cullen said. ‘It’s just-’

‘Now I think I want you to cover your mouth with your other hand. Y’know. Otherwise you’re just gonna question every little thing I do. So how about you do that, and just lift it up when you need to say the watchword?’

‘Bull-’ Cullen began, and then yelped when Bull bit hard into the top of his thigh, down into the muscle. Cullen swiftly clapped his hand over his mouth, lips pressed together, because that wasn’t a little nip. That would bruise. Even as Bull licked wetly over it, Cullen could feel the soreness throb through abraded skin.

Bull’s other hand cupped Cullen’s where he grasped himself. And then with no fanfare, Bull changed the angle and the tip of Cullen’s cock slid into a heat that seemed impossible when contrasted with the cool of his hands.

This was something Cullen had only ever imagined. In those moments hastily stolen, he’d only ever been the one on his knees, and he’d only ever been able to know what this was like through daydreams or hearing people crow or coo about what it felt like. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around the fact that Bull was kneeling between his legs, shoulders stretching his thighs apart, lips meeting Cullen’s fingers as Bull sucked at him in a slow and steady rhythm.

Cullen moaned into his own palm, arousal sharp, blood beginning to flush into his length. He could feel himself growing and couldn’t move his hand away, because Bull’s hand kept him caught in place.
It still took time for him to get fully hard, and he couldn’t quite bring himself to be worried about it, because he was having problems getting past the fact that this was happening, that Bull was doing it, that it felt far more amazing than his dry, calloused palm.

Bull made sounds like he was tasting something delicious, and that made Cullen’s whole face heat. His fingers dug into his cheek. And then, because Bull couldn’t see him do it, and because he could only bring himself to do something so decadent while no one could see, he licked at his own palm, and then licked again, layering sensation into himself.

When he felt the ridge of Bull’s top teeth against the sensitive head of his cock, Cullen stilled enough to realise he’d been squirming. The teeth didn’t scrape, didn’t move, but the threat was clear. Cullen held his breath, eyes pointed up at the beams of his ceiling.

A slight scrape, nothing exactly painful, but Cullen shook all the same. He was starting to see why Bull felt fine not using a gag, or a blindfold, or restraints.

Bull set his teeth in exactly the same place and drew them towards the very tip of Cullen’s cock, keeping up the suction that felt so good. It was a pain that started off scratchy and then went all the way through him. Even his balls tightened. He sucked in a breath, another one. It wasn’t even that the pain was among the worst Bull had ever inflicted, but it was one of the most tender parts of his body, and there was a terrible thrill to it.

A blur of time then, as Bull alternated between suction, the teeth-scraping, and started squeezing his hand rhythmically around Cullen’s, massaging the base of Cullen’s cock. By the time Bull lifted his head up, Cullen’s mouth was open and he was panting against his own palm. Bull’s hand slid up over Cullen’s and started jacking the rest of his cock.

‘So whenever they all start talking about how teeth on a dick is like the worst thing, guess you’re just gonna be the one quietly sitting there nodding and trying to hide that nice little blush of yours.’

Cullen’s only response was a weak sound in the back of his throat.

‘Yeah, that’s what I thought. Hey, I have an idea. I think you’ll like this one. I want you to slide two of your fingers into your mouth. Suck on them for me.’

Given he had licked his palm more than once already, given that Bull was still moving his hand on Cullen’s cock, and given that Cullen could still feel the echoes of pain in the bites on his thigh, he decided not to protest.

At least, not this time.

He was careful about it though, because this was nothing he’d practiced before, and for a few seconds the tips of his index and middle finger rested on his lower lip, his teeth. He wanted to lift his head up and see Bull’s expression, but he wasn’t sure if it would help, or make him lose his nerve.

His fingers slipped over the flat of his tongue, and then Cullen sealed his lips around them and sucked tentatively, his eyes closing, heart pounding. Bull’s hand never stopped working – keeping Cullen’s other hand working too – and Cullen’s legs moved restlessly. He couldn’t stop the groan that followed.

‘Fuck yeah,’ Bull whispered. ‘Perfect.’

Cullen’s chest tightened, and he scraped his teeth over his fingers accidentally. But that felt good too, and he decided to just go with it. Reflexively, he squeezed his hand over his cock, hard enough
that it ached. Bull hummed, and then did the same over Cullen’s hand and kept that new pressure up until Cullen gasped around his fingers.

‘Just like that,’ Bull said, almost to himself.

Cullen lost himself in sensation when Bull’s head lowered again, when he swallowed Cullen’s cock once more. After the strength of the withdrawal episode, Cullen was too weak to do much more than be taken down by the swirls and eddies of how it felt. He wasn’t going to come from this, he didn’t think, but the lust itself pushed at him until he could do nothing more than surrender to it. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t close to coming, not when his attention was so wholly captured anyway.

He wasn’t entirely aware of mimicking Bull’s pace with the fingers in his mouth, only hungry for those seconds when he’d push deeper, brushing the back of his throat and half-choking, half-moaning. Bull used his teeth – not always, but enough that Cullen was constantly waiting for it. The scrapes that weren’t always as gentle as before, that moment when Bull closed his upper and lower jaw just beneath the head of his cock, digging into sensitive nerves and making Cullen shout in pain. At that, Cullen’s voice broke, because the pain disintegrated into a nervy, sharp pleasure that left him unable to stop his hips pushing up, his feet scrabbling for a purchase on Bull’s body so that he could get the leverage to thrust.

Eventually, Cullen thought maybe he could come from this, and his breathing seized up in his chest.

A couple of minutes after that, Bull let go of Cullen’s cock, lifted his mouth up, and only laughed at the sound of protest that Cullen made.

‘Let go,’ Bull said. ‘Let go of yourself, and take your fingers out of your mouth. Come on, you’re coming on my cock, little lion.’

Cullen ignored Bull, not quite able to let go of the sensations he could now evoke for himself. Then, a sharp flash of hard pain at his inner thigh, and he whimpered and jerked his hand away from his wet cock, pulled his fingers out of his mouth so fast he grazed the skin.

‘There we are,’ Bull said.

Cullen wanted to protest, wanted to say something, but he was still panting, and he couldn’t quite remember how to frame a sentence.

Eventually, all he was left with, was what he’d said earlier:

‘Cheat.’

Bull laughed more, and Cullen went limp on the bed and focused on breathing. Maker, when had it run away from him like that? His thigh hurt, and he couldn’t tell if Bull had bitten or pinched him. He almost wanted to slide his leg away, but his legs were spread too wide, and Bull was so warm there, like he belonged. Cullen wanted Bull to stay more than he wanted to get away from that flash of pain.

Not that his cock had gotten any softer.

‘Where do you keep the wax you use on your armour?’ Bull said, standing, even as Cullen tried to keep him in place, bringing his leg muscles to bear. ‘Come on, I’ll make it worth your while.’

‘First chest,’ Cullen said, a hand coming up to cover his forehead. ‘In the black rag.’
‘Yep,’ Bull said.

Cullen kept his eyes closed as Bull rummaged through the chest, and then – as his mind cleared – he clumsily, hurriedly propped himself up on his elbows.

‘You can’t use wax.’

‘It’s not proper wax,’ Bull said. ‘And I’ve used it before.’

‘I use it on my armour!’ Cullen exclaimed, even as Bull held up the jar with a triumphant gleam in his eye. He then tossed it on the bed, and Cullen resisted the urge to pick it up and throw it away. Instead he stared at it and his eyebrows drew together.

‘It’s a lubricant,’ Bull said, clambering onto the bed. With no fanfare, he slid his hands underneath Cullen’s shoulders and hoisted him fully onto the mattress, then grinned at him with the same playfulness of before. ‘It’ll work. Get you nice and open for me. Make you think of all kinds of fun things whenever you’re waxing your armour, wearing it, y’know, all that.’

‘You’re devious,’ Cullen said, too tired to really fight about something that wasn’t worth fighting about anyway.

Bull nodded, the smile never leaving his face, and then he rolled Cullen over onto his stomach, one hand sliding beneath to make sure his cock didn’t end up at an odd angle. The consideration of it was warming, right up until Bull moved his hand down and poked idly at Cullen’s balls, as though testing them. Cullen tried pressing his legs together, Bull muscled a thigh between them.

‘I’d leave them alone, but you like it so much,’ Bull crooned, the poking becoming fingertips flicking at the base of his testicles, sending flashes of pain – more sickening than agony – through his torso. Cullen shuddered and pushed his forehead into the bed. He couldn’t agree – didn’t quite have the breath to. There was something about this that he craved, and he didn’t understand it. The pain was only a part of it. There was a threat about it, as though Bull could really break him, and Cullen felt it as a nauseating exhilaration that twisted him up, left him limp and trying to remember how to struggle all at once.

The flicking became harder snaps of Bull’s fingers, and Cullen’s body convulsed. He tried to bring his legs to his chest, and a fist at his lower back pinned him in place, knuckles grinding him flat into the bed.

‘Stop,’ Cullen cried weakly, between the strobing pain that Bull inflicted.

‘You need to say your watchword?’ Bull said, pausing.

In the beat that followed, Cullen heard his own ragged breathing, squirmed and winced when he realised he was still hard. Just as hard as before. He rested a hand on the back of his head and tugged at his own hair. He didn’t need the watchword. He liked it, the feeling of protesting something while knowing it wouldn’t stop. Liked pushing against that sense of threat and intimidation and danger, as though he could twist himself up just as well as Bull could in the process.

‘I don’t…I don’t need to say it,’ Cullen said. ‘I just- It doesn’t…it doesn’t always mean—’

‘I know,’ Bull said, stroking his fingers over Cullen’s balls and making the muscles in Cullen’s thighs tense. ‘But you’ve been ill, so I need to check.’

‘I don’t need to say it,’ Cullen repeated.
‘Even better,’ Bull said, snapping his fingers up at Cullen’s balls and pinning Cullen down through the jerk that followed. ‘Because I don’t want to stop.’

Cullen said ‘stop’ and ‘no’ a great deal more times as Bull continued. The pain varied, as Bull would pull at the tender skin itself, or cup both testes and squeeze, or would flick his fingers in a way that made queasiness swoop through Cullen’s gut. And all the way through it, Cullen hated and loved it, and he ground his cock down into the rough blankets and keened a rough mix of pleasure-pain and rucked up all the fabric around him until he thought he’d press holes into the mattress itself.

The sound of dry-sobbing filled the room when Bull finally stopped, and Cullen felt more unmanned by the gentle circles that Bull stroked into his lower back, by the way Bull’s other hand soothed at his flank.

‘You’re so good,’ Bull said, and Cullen brought a hand to cover his face even though Bull couldn’t see the way his expression had twisted. Maker, he wanted those words so badly. Even after everything he’d said in the morning. He still wanted them.

‘Please,’ he said into his own hand, his voice breaking.

Bull arched over him, covered him, pressed close enough that Cullen could feel the way one side of his horns dug into the mattress.

‘Please what?’ Bull said, and Cullen warred with himself, because this was even harder, and it wasn’t a fight he was supposed to lose. But he wanted to lose it, he’d wanted to for such a long time.

So Cullen dragged his hand away from his face, and said:

‘Please say it again.’

‘Mm,’ Bull rumbled, sounding so proud, and Cullen thought that there had been a lot of wars with himself that he’d lost throughout his life, but none that felt as sweet. ‘You’re so, so good for me. So good, Cullen. Aren’t you?’

Cullen couldn’t answer, but he reached out with his hand until he could press it against skin, felt the heat of Bull’s flesh and curled his fingers.

‘It means ‘my heart,’’ Bull said, his own voice less steady than before. ‘The real meaning of kadan, it means ‘my heart.’ And it’s not something I really- Because it didn’t seem to matter so much. I didn’t want it on Seheron. I didn’t want to shout it in battle. I didn’t fucking want the word, but things change. And so you’re my Kadan, and I was really shitting annoyed at that for a while. Oh, that’s funny is it?’

Cullen’s laughter was low and he felt faintly ridiculous and he thought that Bull hadn’t yet said the words ‘I love you’ but at this rate he was never going to need to, with all these other things he was saying.

‘Thought I’d hurt you more than that,’ Bull said, teasing.

Cullen hiccupped, kept laughing, and thought there was something to be said for that moment when the pain blitzed through all his higher functions and he stopped worrying about things.

‘Kadan,’ Bull said, no longer teasing.
‘Kadan,’ Cullen said, turning his head – even though it was difficult with how close Bull was – and smiling. ‘You said I could say it, didn’t you?’

‘Yeah, this is getting too sentimental,’ Bull said, his voice getting rougher. ‘That’s enough of that.’

Cullen didn’t feel the need to say anything else, having tasted the word and its true meaning, and still drifting on a combination of that intense pain and the giddiness that followed. He didn’t protest when Bull unscrewed the lid on the armour wax, and he didn’t tense when a couple of minutes later – after it must have been warmed to liquid in Bull’s fingers – it was stroked between his ass cheeks in long, relaxing movements.

A sigh, and Cullen became loose-limbed, because he had no reason to fear this part. Not when it had all gone so well the first time. He wasn’t quite sure he could manage it, the feeling of being filled to that impossible fullness. But he wanted it all the same. And if he couldn’t handle it, he had the watchword. He was quite certain even without it, Bull would still pause if Cullen needed that.

That was its own kind of freedom too, and Cullen felt like his joints were honeyed. The fire had been stoked far warmer than Cullen would normally make it, but its crackling pops were welcome.

Cullen didn’t expect Bull to open him up more thoroughly than before. Didn’t expect that careful slide of slick fingers, or how sensitive he was to it. And it felt odd, but he liked it, felt sleepy from it.

‘Are you taking forever on purpose?’ Cullen slurred, as Bull began gently stretching him with two fingers.

‘Yep,’ Bull said, sounding very serious. ‘You want to play rough and ready later on, there’s ways to prepare yourself for that and we can play that game. But I saw the state you were in, Cullen, and I’m only interested in fucking you, not fucking you up.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, and then moaned quietly, as the stretch stole through him. Maker, he liked that feeling more than he thought he would.

Briefly, he thought of what it must have been like for Bull. Cole had said that Bull thought Cullen was dying. Cullen thought of how he and Bull had spoken before about Bull being protective, but how Cullen wanted this too, a certain kind of watchfulness in their sessions.

‘I like it,’ Cullen added.

‘Yeah?’ Bull said. ‘Feels good? Me opening you up for me?’

There was pressure inside of him, searching, pushing down, and Cullen felt his lower back dip as his shoulders arched. Liquid pleasure in the base of his spine, in his bruised balls, throbbing at the base of his cock. When Bull did it again, Cullen’s mouth opened on a wet, wanting sound.

‘See, sometimes it’s not so bad to take things slow anyway,’ Bull purred. ‘And I can with you, because the thing you think of as a problem – you not coming easily? Koslun’s balls, the things I can do with that.’

Cullen made a sound in response that he hoped was agreement, because he was losing himself to the sharpness of the pleasure. It mingled with the faint burn of the stretch – not enough that Cullen would call it pain, but just close enough that Cullen thought it could be. Just the very thought of it stinging a little more made his chest feel tight.

Cullen thought how novel it was that he’d meet someone who got hard from inflicting pain, just as
Cullen got hard receiving it. And how it was even more novel for that someone to be so caring with it. And then, perhaps impossible, that Cullen would fall in love with him, and Bull would return the sentiment.

A strange, gripping pain then, a sense that things were too good, that this wasn’t real, that he’d faltered and stumbled somewhere and not realised. He winced into the blankets and then shifted, trying to push it from his mind.

Thankfully, Bull helped in that endeavour. It didn’t take long before Cullen was pressing his hips back into Bull’s fingers. Bull applied yet another coat of the melted ointment, and Cullen knew he’d never think of in the same way again.

Cullen had lost some of his erection, by the time Bull withdrew his fingers. Cullen wasn’t entirely surprised by it, and he hoped Bull wouldn’t mind. He didn’t think Bull would mind.

He was surprised when hands slid beneath his chest and lifted him, and Cullen got his own arms beneath himself even as he realised that Bull was drawing him up onto his knees.

‘I’m not a sack of potatoes,’ Cullen said.

‘Hush,’ was all Bull said in response.

Cullen gulped when his back was pulled to Bull’s chest. When his bent legs were splayed around Bull’s bent legs – Bull kneeling upright behind him. Cullen’s knees hardly touched the blankets, so that he could only brace himself on the bridges of his feet. And then Bull was lifting him even higher, holding him in place with one broad arm, and getting a hand around his own cock as he moved it into position.

‘What-?’

A pause, and then Bull tucked his face alongside Cullen’s. ‘You good?’

Cullen wanted to say something foolish like ‘this is new.’ But it was all going to be new, and in the end he rested a hand on the outside of Bull’s thigh and nodded, staring down at Bull’s knees between his legs. Then he focused on nothing at all when he felt Bull notch himself into place, felt that slow and steady stretch that opened him wider and wider.

The position made him feel vulnerable and held all at once. With his back sticking to Bull’s chest, Bull’s arm tight around him, he knew he was secure. But there was a precariousness about it, in not being able to see Bull’s face.

Cullen’s head tipped back as Bull lowered him more, drew him even closer, the hand that had been around his own cock now slinging low over Cullen’s pelvis and pressing him back and down. Gravity was doing most of the work, and Bull was mostly slowing the descent, and Cullen exhaled hard at the way it felt, being at Bull’s mercy like this.

‘See,’ Bull said, sounding far too calm and conversational given that Cullen was fast approaching incoherence, ‘what I like about this is how intense it is. You’re going to take all of me like this. Going to stay nice and split open, and you’re not going to get much leverage to do much more than deal with it.’

The words wrapped serpentine around him, choked the moan out of his lungs.

‘S’worth the pain in my knees,’ Bull added, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice.
They both groaned when Cullen was settled, when Bull’s cock was so deep that he didn’t technically need to hold Cullen up at all. But he kept an arm wrapped tight around his chest, and his other came up and – smelling of armour oil – stroked at the length of Cullen’s neck, over and over. Then his fingers brushed over Cullen’s mouth and ducked inside.

Cullen made a broken sound as the predominant flavours of olive oil and white oil filled his mouth, and behind that, a faint metallic-savouriness that was both Bull’s sweat, and a result of where Bull’s fingers had been. Bull’s fingers dipped deeper than Cullen’s could, and they pressed into his mouth, grazing the back of his throat. Cullen jerked in response to that, his ass clenched. Whimpering, he realised that like this, even if Bull couldn’t see his expression, Cullen was totally exposed.

‘Settle down,’ Bull said. ‘Take a few breaths.’

Cullen wasn’t quite panicking, but that sensation of this being too good to last was flooding him again. His nostrils flared as he sucked down air, and Bull’s fingers withdrew just a little, pinning his tongue down.

‘That’s it,’ Bull said, somehow sounding lewd and encouraging all at once. Cullen nodded, just a little, and his other arm came up, wrapped around Bull’s arm at his chest, made sure Bull wasn’t about to let him go. ‘I’ve got you.’

Cullen clung to Bull’s patience as much as he did to Bull himself. He closed his eyes, focused on getting his breathing steady. As his body relaxed, he found it easier to ride out the overload, even as he felt a little like he’d felt the very first night Bull had flogged him; as though he was a ship too close to being wrecked upon a rocky shore. Yet Bull was right there, behind him, beneath him, and Cullen made a soft, sweet sound when he realised it was fine. Better than fine. He could feel Bull’s heart pounding a heavier, slower beat than Cullen’s, and the rise and fall of their chests pressed them closer together.

Bull slid his fingers deeper into Cullen’s mouth once more, and Cullen relaxed.

‘Swallow for me,’ Bull said into Cullen’s ear.

So Cullen did, and he wasn’t choking, but he felt split then, almost as though Bull’s fingers could meet his cock. Cullen knew it wasn’t possible, but it didn’t stop him from drowning on the sensation all the same.

Bull rolled his hips upwards, and it wasn’t a thrust so much as a grind that stole the rest of Cullen’s breath. He would have thrown his head back and gasped, but his mouth was stretched around Bull’s fingers, pinned back against Bull’s collarbone.

The arm around Cullen’s chest drifted down, Cullen’s arm moving with it, until Bull slipped beneath Cullen’s cock and cupped his balls in a way that made Cullen groan half in protest and half in want. Bull’s low laugh vibrated through him, and Cullen couldn’t really brace himself, not when Bull was grinding up into him like that, not with his fingers beginning to thrust slowly back and forth in Cullen’s mouth.

Every gradation of pain that Bull pushed him through was balanced by the sheer pleasure of his tongue being stroked by Bull’s fingers, or the cock that pushed so deep inside of him that Cullen couldn’t make himself imagine it even as he experienced it. There was never too much pain that Cullen tried to get away, but nor was there too little. Bull’s fingers plucked and tugged and snapped at his balls, and then his palm would jerk roughly at Cullen’s cock, and then fingertips would pinch meanly at the insides of his spread thighs, where the skin was tender. Cullen clenched every
time Bull did that, and Bull would groan, creating a feedback loop where the pain was just one more thing amongst many, many others.

It didn’t seem to matter that it took Cullen a long time to come, and when he finally felt that tension ratcheting up high inside of him, breathless and Bull’s fingers now stroking the long lines of Cullen’s throat instead of thrusting deep into his mouth – he had forgotten everything. He’d become a sensory tool that Bull had created, an antiphony of call and response.

In the end, his release was a bright wash as he bucked up into Bull’s hand, ground down and keened. Bull fucked him through it, stretching Cullen’s pleasure until Bull himself wrapped both his arms around Cullen’s body and crushed him close, even as teeth scraped over the side of Cullen’s scalp and hot breath gusted over his hair.

There were several minutes where Cullen was limp and content to be held in place. He could feel the places of his body that were bruised or still sore, the bites on his thigh – he could see them, they had only just come shy of breaking the skin, mottled a patchy violet-black already. He reached down with a shaking hand and touched one of them, and kept his other arm wrapped around Bull’s forearms.

Bull nuzzled in close to Cullen’s ear sometimes, the edge of one of his horns sometimes brushing gently against his hair as Bull sought to get even closer.

Cullen thought there was a vulnerability in this, not just for him, but for the both of them. If he were eloquent, he’d think of something sweet and perfect to say. But he let his body speak for him, and refused to let go.

*

Later, after having rubbed themselves down with the sheets that needed washing – neither of them bothering to dress in the warmth of the room - they ate together on Cullen’s bed. Bull had brought small seed buns, aromatic and moreish, and there was a tiny pot of the last of the summer’s honey, which they’d intended to spread on the bread, but instead had scooped out with their fingers, until Cullen had stolen the rest of the pot for himself while complaining that their fingers weren’t equal sizes and it wasn’t fair.

They decided that they would tell people, though they weren’t sure what, exactly, to say.

‘Krem knows something anyway,’ Bull said.

‘Cassandra too,’ Cullen said.

‘Vivienne, she knows,’ Bull said. ‘She knew before I did.’

So they decided that Cullen would tell Cassandra, and Bull would tell Krem and Vivienne, and then from there they’d take it one day at a time. Bull was clearly easy about telling people who he fucked, but it turned out he was protective of what had grown between he and Cullen, and Cullen had always preferred a slow and steady approach to revealing secrets that he desperately didn’t want to be harmed with.

‘Josephine and Leliana,’ Cullen added. ‘Hensley and perhaps a couple of the other soldiers. Hensley doesn’t gossip.’

‘He’s a good sort,’ Bull said. ‘You know he’s not taking the lyrium, yeah?’

Cullen stopped plucking at sunflower seeds and stared at him. Yet even through his shock, he
realised it all made a terrible kind of sense. Hensley always took the night shift, which spoke of insomnia. Cullen had seen him blowing into his hands sometimes and rubbing them briskly together – and all the soldiers did that on the battlements, but Hensley did it so often that Cullen had made a note to find better gloves for him, assuming it was poor workmanship. And then there was Hensley’s ease of accepting the unusual. He didn’t blink at Bull and Cullen spending time together, he didn’t care when Cullen wanted privacy, and he had spoken himself of needing arrangements to get through difficult nights.

‘Is it… Can you tell how severe it is?’ Cullen said.

‘You fuckers really don’t know about it, when another’s affected, do you?’ Bull said, looking pitying. ‘How-? I can give you a list. Some of them I know by name. Hensley’s – I dunno, seems bad sometimes. I don’t think he’s dying. He doesn’t have the episodes you do. And you’re not dying.’

Cullen nodded, frowning at the concern on Bull’s face, as though he wasn’t quite certain Cullen wasn’t dying. Cullen didn’t think he was dying from it. He was certain it had shaved a significant chunk off his lifespan, but that wasn’t quite the same thing. There were plenty of soldiers who had arthritis, or other illnesses, and quitting lyrium wasn’t the only thing that would kill a warrior early.

‘It’s not good enough,’ Cullen said, ‘that they’re all just on their own and have no idea how to deal with it. Not that I know how… I’d very much appreciate a list. I won’t tell them how I know.’

‘You could tell them that you can bloody well sense it because of your own withdrawals and they’re not going to know any different,’ Bull said. ‘There’s no… Y’know, with most illnesses, there’s like – someone you can go to. A doctor or someone who just knows a bit more than other people. Something. What about engaging with the ‘Vint? He’s a researcher, there might be ways to mitigate the lyrium’s affects or some shit.’

Cullen shrugged, a little too tired to quite know what he was going to do, only that he had to do something. It was one thing when he’d thought he was the only one in Skyhold’s walls suffering the way that he had been. Now that he knew it was different, he was quite certain that he had a responsibility to these men and women, whoever they were. He didn’t know why some of them had stopped taking lyrium, he didn’t even know how many of them still considered themselves Templars.

‘I’ll look into it,’ Cullen said, sighing. ‘I have to. I thought I was one of the only ones who wasn’t…forced off it, kicked from the order, like Samson.’

‘I think most of you probably think that,’ Bull said. ‘And Samson? You said…before. I meant to bring it up earlier, kind of got distracted by the whole- Well, y’know.’

‘I keep expecting to feel as though I am some terrible criminal for deceiving the Inquisitor, pretending that Samson found a blade all on his own. But then I remember I’ve felt like a terrible criminal for a long time now, and I’m rather used to that. And I don’t think I’m doing the wrong thing. I don’t. I keep waiting to realise I’m wrong, because that has been the hallmark of my existence, but- Maker, I hope I don’t realise I was wrong.’

‘You said seeing him wasn’t good for you,’ Bull prompted quietly.

‘Because of the lyrium,’ Cullen said, looking down at the blankets. ‘Because it’s confusing. I should only hate him. I don’t. I’m not even sure I hate him anymore. But no, primarily because of the lyrium. I’m not certain this latest episode would have been so bad, were it not for visiting him. But I couldn’t stay away. I needed… I don’t know. Now I wonder if we both needed a kind of
closure. He may not even kill himself.’

‘Really?’ Bull said.

‘He will,’ Cullen said after a beat, looking up and meeting Bull’s eye suddenly. ‘I know he will. You’ll not tell the Inquisitor?’

‘Nah,’ Bull said. He shrugged a shoulder. ‘Skyhold’s full of secrets, not just yours.’

Cullen kept waiting for Bull to expand on that, but he never did.

*  

‘This thing about forgiveness,’ Bull said much later, when Bull was on his back on Cullen’s bed, and Cullen was sprawled sideways over his chest and thinking that he should get up and open a window because the room was starting to get stifling. He was just a tad too tired to actually make himself move, especially when he could feel Bull’s heartbeat like this, or enjoy the novelty of the faint rise and fall of his own body in response to Bull’s breathing.

‘You think I should forgive myself?’ Cullen said bitterly.

‘Yeah, look, here’s the deal. Remorse and guilt aren’t the same thing. People confuse them all the time, and it’s shit. There’s a simple fact of life, Cullen, which is that if a good person does something shitty, they’re probably gonna feel bad about it for the rest of their lives. That’s pretty much remorse. From there, you have like…a few choices. You can choose to remind yourself about it every second of the day and never feel an iota of joy or happiness or contentment again. And that’s like…what is that? What does that take away from your loved ones in the present, or those you’ll meet in the future? What would I be to my Chargers, if I just hated myself all the time?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Wait,’ Bull said. ‘Hear me out. Another choice you have – and some people do this one too – is to pretend they never did anything wrong and that’s not right either. But a lot of those people never really feel any remorse, and guilt is like something they puppet around. It feels real for a few days, or a few weeks, but their behaviour’s never gonna change. That’s not really a choice you have. I’ve seen you do things to make yourself…more than what you were before. It’s not just you as a Commander or any of that. Even with this…with us, there were times I wondered if you could change some things that were issues, and then when I highlighted them as a problem, there you’d be trying to make it better.

‘So there’s this other option you have, which is to be like, ‘right, I did a bad thing, or a lot of bad things, and I don’t want to do them again. Here’s all the things I’ve put in place to make sure I never do them again. So now I’m gonna let go of the guilt, because it’s just weighing me down.’’

‘It’s like that, is it? That easy?’

‘It’s not easy,’ Bull said quietly. ‘It’s a decision you’ll have to make over and over again. You’ll have to forgive yourself over and over again. Because here’s the thing, Cullen, you’re gonna fuck up over and over again. Life’s too damned short for you to live it like one of your victims might want you to. It doesn’t give them fucking anything, anyway. It’s not like they’re standing nearby going, ‘Cullen got his brains fucked out tonight and seemed to enjoy it so tomorrow he’s got to feel extra bad to make it up to me.’ You think life works that way?’

‘I so love these post-coitus lectures that you’re fond of.’
‘Good,’ Bull said, ‘because I’m gonna harp on about this. A lot.’

Cullen went lax where he was stretched over Bull’s body, because it was too hard to really think about. But eventually, as Bull stroked firm, soothing lines along Cullen’s spine, Cullen said:

‘Did you forgive yourself?’

‘Yeah,’ Bull said. ‘Not straight away. Not without some help. But I fucking did. And I look at the Chargers now, and I’m glad I fucking did. Maybe it’s not fair I get all the shit I get now, after all the shit I’ve done in the past. But I’m gonna stuff as much life into what I’ve got, and I’m gonna try and do good by the right people and see what happens.’

‘Not everyone is like you,’ Cullen said. But then he bit down on his tongue when he realised what he was going to say. Not everyone can get away with not watching themselves and their actions every day. As though Bull wasn’t constantly vigilant about crossing that line between Tal Vashoth that he could tolerate, and Tal Vashoth that he couldn’t. Then Cullen sighed and wriggled off Bull, touching the hand that reached out for him briefly, before walking over to the window.

‘I’m going to turn into leather, with how warm this room is,’ Cullen said.

‘You ever thought about a skylight?’ Bull said. ‘A nice big hole in the roof would let you see the stars, y’know.’

The grin that Bull gave him when Cullen gave him the most withering look he could manage, lit his heart and made him turn back to the window to hide his own smile.

*

‘I’m relieved you knew,’ Cullen said later, fishing out disks of dried apple sprinkled with cinnamon and tarragon and snapping them in half. He’d eat one half himself, and give the other half to Bull. ‘That you knew not to give it to me. I’ve never- I’ve never begged someone like that before. I’ve come so close. With others. And then you were there and I was so, so desperate, Bull. Maker, now that I know I can- now that I know I can break like that, I’m afraid of it happening again.’

‘When I’m there, it won’t,’ Bull said quietly. ‘And the rest of the time, Cullen, your heart is more steel than you realise. It’s been a hard fucking few months, and I reckon I don’t know the most of it, with Searidge, and now Samson. It’s not always going to be like this.’

‘Because we’ll be dead,’ Cullen said, without missing a beat.

‘That’s what I like about you, so cheerful. It’s your good cheer, that sunny disposition, that way of looking off into the horizon and just seeing an endless kind of pink dawn.’

‘Mm,’ Cullen said, nodding. ‘That sounds a lot like me.’

‘Shit yeah, it does,’ Bull said, nodding as well.

‘Does it have to be pink though?’

‘You wait. If you get yourself some land after all this, and some kind of homestead, just think of the housewarming gifts I’m going to bring.’

‘No,’ Cullen said slowly. ‘I’ve not thought any of this through. It turns out I’m making a horrid error of judgement. I don’t think I can see you anymore.’
‘How about I make it up to you by bringing a really, really good flogger with me,’ Bull said. ‘And some rope. You’re gonna need a chest. Can’t take all that shit with me everywhere on the road. Can use your home for storage.’

‘Wait,’ Cullen said, ‘storage? It’s meant to be a home. For me. Where I can live. Not some expanded closet space where you can come dig me out whenever you remember I’m there.’

‘Why do you have to spoil everything?’ Bull said, grabbing Cullen’s arm and pulling him in for a messy, apple-flavoured kiss.

*

‘It can be for both of us,’ Cullen said later, his throat dry, and his heart pounding nervously. ‘The home, I mean. If I live. It would be for the both of us. And of course a few farm animals and a hound.’

‘Yeah?’ Bull said, and the fondness in his eye had nothing to do with the few farm animals and the hound. Cullen nodded quietly and then had to look away, because he didn’t think this would ever be easy, and he didn’t like talking about the future as though it would be real.

A few minutes later, Bull sighed.

‘It doesn’t fill you with hope, does it? The future?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, shaking his head. ‘I apologise, but it doesn’t.’

‘It’s okay,’ Bull said. ‘I’m good with it. Know enough soldiers that don’t believe in the future anymore. Seems to come with the territory. Some of us can still do it. And then some just…stop one day. And it becomes this scary thing.’

‘It’s dreadful,’ Cullen said, ‘and terribly impractical. I can plan ahead enough to pick which troops are most likely to die in battle, but beyond that, it feels like pure childish fantasy. I do want it to be real. But that makes it worse, somehow.’

‘Do you want me to stop talking about it?’

‘No,’ Cullen said, cringing. ‘Not quite. But I don’t enjoy it.’

‘It’s okay,’ Bull said easily. ‘We’ll get you there, I’m good at daydreaming about futures. Though I spend most of that great power and profound responsibility mostly fantasising about beating you or getting a cock up your ass or—’

Cullen stared at him, and Bull just smiled in that slow, prowling way that made Cullen feel a little weak in the joints.

‘I don’t have a second round in me,’ Cullen said in warning.

‘Not now, sure,’ Bull said. ‘We’re talking about futures here. Koslun’s hairy balls, Cullen, I only have to tumble you twice and you just become this cock-crazed- Oi!’

Cullen closed the distance between them and clapped his hand over Bull’s mouth, pinning one of his horns to the bed. It was entirely token, and Bull was already laughing.

Cullen couldn’t help it, he started laughing too.

*
Much later, they were ready to fall asleep. Bull was on his back, and Cullen also lay on his back, his head on Bull’s shoulder, and they both stared up at the ceiling. Cullen could almost imagine the constellations as they wheeled across the sky. He wondered what Bull was imagining.

‘It’s hard,’ Bull said, ‘y’know, to not just take control of what you’re doing, because I can see a better way. I’m working on it. But after all that shit about Kinloch. And knowing you didn’t tell me fucking most of it. I know you didn’t, Cullen. When someone says ‘I was tortured’ and then moves onto the next thing like torture’s nothing more meaningful than a Sunday morning chore…’

Cullen said nothing at all, because there was so much of it he still couldn’t talk about, and hearing the pain in Bull’s voice – pain about Cullen’s experiences – it was an odd feeling, and he didn’t know what to say.

But eventually the silence stretched on so long that Cullen couldn’t help but fill it.

‘Maybe I want to be rescued at times, or…protected from myself, in a session, or- Under conditions. That you can see a better way, it means something.’

‘Not so much the rest of the time though, huh?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Cullen said. ‘I just also happen to think it means something that I’m still here. Mostly under my own steam. Cassandra had to drag me some of the way, but – I know I talk about myself as a weak person, and I do believe that I am. But I’ve come to learn that I’ve other qualities.’

‘Like strength,’ Bull said.

‘Stubbornness,’ Cullen qualified. ‘Maker, I don’t know.’

‘Do you have to?’ Bull said. ‘You got a test or something? Some exam on knowing yourself inside and out?’

‘Well, no, but-’

‘Like you said – it’s complicated, little lion.’

‘It is that,’ Cullen agreed, and then closed his eyes. At some point, Cullen had threaded his fingers through Bull’s, where Bull’s arm was tucked around him. It was sweet, and he kept expecting Bull to point it out, even came up with a few derisive things to say himself. But they’d both stayed quiet, and they both didn’t unlink their fingers.

Cullen didn’t want to deride something that was so very new for Bull, anyway. It seemed a rude thing to do, just because he was a little embarrassed to find himself enjoying it so much.

Bull fell asleep before he did, his breathing slowing, getting heavier. Cullen turned into him, and Bull’s arm lazily followed in that clumsy way, as though not quite aware.

Cullen tasted the word in his mouth before he said it, and then he pressed it into Bull’s skin:

‘Kadan.’

Bull’s breath faltered only a little, and then he pulled Cullen even closer.

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, amused, ‘so you’re not asleep then?’

‘Hush,’ Bull said, his voice sleep-rough. ‘Hush, Kadan.’
Cullen smiled against Bull’s skin. Between one breath and the next, he thought it wasn’t such a
bad thing to be scared of the future; not when the present felt like this.
A Taste of Spring

Chapter Notes

Just ignore how I’ve ignored Skyhold’s architecture. The fact of the matter is, to house everyone that technically lives there, Skyhold needs a lot more rooms, tents and facilities for rooms and baths and latrines etc. than it actually has, so y’know, as I like to say: ‘fuck canon.’ Lol.

Official tag is now: Assisted suicide.

Also I am a sap. I’m a sap.

Samson died on a Friday. Cullen learned of it while lying in bed, hearing the banging at his trapdoor and panicked that Corypheus was there about to kill them all – instead the prison guards, distressed and quick to section themselves off for questioning. It made Cullen’s chest tight to know that they automatically understood to present themselves as the guilty party. After all, if anyone had left a knife for Raleigh Samson, the guards would have to be interrogated.

He spent only an hour or so in the War Room, talking it out with the Inquisitor, Josephine, Leliana, and – about halfway through – Dagna, who was upset that she didn’t have such a wonderful specimen to examine firsthand.

‘You have the body, don’t you?’ Cullen said coldly, staring at her.

‘Yes, well…it’s not the same as living flesh but…’ Dagna grimaced. ‘I’ll make it work, I guess.’

Cullen promised he’d question his guard, and as they continued to talk, Dagna cleared her throat and said:

‘Honestly, he could’ve found it too. I’ve found all kinds of things down in the Undercroft. All kinds of things. I’m sure the cells were swept, but you’re saying he was hiding an old knife under a loose stone…well, I’m not one to tell you how it happened, I’m just saying I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out the knife was there all along.’

That left Cullen feeling marginally more well-disposed towards Dagna. Firstly that she put the idea in everyone else’s heads, secondly, that he had the excuse he needed to let his guards off the hook after questioning.

For the first time since he’d found out Samson had killed himself, Cullen felt that he was a criminal. It wasn’t only that he’d hunted down abominations while sanctioned by the Chantry. It wasn’t only that he’d turned against Meredith. It was also that, deep down, his ethical anchor was corrupted somehow. Perhaps even before he’d met the demon that wore Uldred’s face. Maybe he’d been born with it, maybe that’s why he was always been so desperate to prove himself as a Templar, under the watchful eye of the Chantry and the Maker.

Perhaps that was why he couldn’t prove himself, even after all this time.

The second morass in his body was a thickening sense of grief and anger that he couldn’t shove away. He was upset that Samson was dead. He was angry that it saddened him. It was done.
They’d shared their last words, a last look, and it was done.

After the meeting, he put on what he liked to think of as his iciest glower – which matched the weather outside – and stalked through the main hall like he had somewhere to be. As a result, no one interrupted him, and he walked up the stairway leading to the library feeling bitter and sullied.

The wood of the doorframe was cool underneath his fingers as he paused, looking around the library. He could smell wax and the sweet, musty dust that was shed by hundreds and hundreds of books. The air was filled with a hint of the acrid raw scents that were the materials that would eventually be macerated, steeped and liquefied into inks. Over all of that, a distant ammonia from bird excrement.

It was nothing like the Circle library back in Kirkwall. He felt as though he didn’t belong in this space. He’d gone from spending his whole life gravitating towards books and libraries, to feeling himself alienated in this world of academics and scholars and research. He’d once told Bull that he liked books around him in his office so he wouldn’t forget important details. But it was also, in part, that once they reached Skyhold, the library always felt a little forbidden.

That wasn’t helped when those who saw him often stared at him as though wondering who he was looking for, or what horrible event was about to occur.

He didn’t see Betsan walking towards him until it was too late to beat a hasty exit. He felt – as he’d felt before – as though something about him would spoil something bright and innocent in Betsan.

‘Commander,’ she said, smiling at him, not looking quite as nervous as usual. ‘C-Can I talk to you for a minute?’

‘I…’ Cullen blinked at her.

‘If you don’t have time,’ Betsan said, biting her lower lip, ‘that’s okay. I’m here a lot. So I can talk to you later.’

‘I have time,’ Cullen said, and then blinked in confusion as she turned and walked away. He followed about two paces behind her, and noticed the way she looked and smiled at different people. How she waved eagerly at a young, bespectacled man who was on a small stepladder, and he waved back with so much enthusiasm he nearly dropped his book. He heard Betsan’s small breath of laughter, and looked over his shoulder to see a blush of mortification on the young man’s cheeks.

He was led down a narrow corridor of books, these looking hardly used, and then they turned right down what could have been a servant’s hall, except that it was obviously designed for scholars and academics. He knew that Dorian’s room was along here somewhere, but he’d never actually been in this section of the library before.

Right at the end of the corridor, where it was darkest and cobwebs still hung from a low ceiling, Betsan struggled with a metal key and then with a warped door, then finally just kicked the door open with a grunt.

‘I live here now,’ she said, pointing proudly at the narrow bed. There was a tiny table, and above it, a single shelf stacked precariously with books. Bedraggled and old quills – the kind that people would throw out, if they didn’t have children and students to pass them to for education and learning – were tucked neatly into what looked like the bottom half of a bottle of wine.

She sat down on a three-legged stool that was too low for the desk, and she pointed Cullen to her
bed. Cullen wasn’t even sure it would hold his weight. He lowered himself carefully, and then slowed further when the bed gave an alarming creak.

There was a small framed cross-stitch on the wall. Just the one. It was a single flower. Cullen didn’t think he recognised it, and he squinted up at it; it almost looked a little like an animal face made from pink petals. Betsan turned and smiled.

‘One of my friends works in textiles, and she made me this from all the bits and pieces. It’s a nugface orchid. See the little pink ears, and, well…They used to grow back—Back in my hometown.’

Betsan smiled at him, but the smile was wan, and she looked away for a moment. It occurred to Cullen that he’d never heard her talk about her hometown. She’d only ever given the smallest indications that her past was not a happy one.

She pushed her straight, black hair behind her ears, and looked back at the orchid, before taking a deep breath, as though gathering strength.

‘My family,’ she said, ‘were killed by Templars. It was a war. And they sheltered some friends.’

‘And the friends were mages,’ Cullen said, staring, a solid mass of nausea clawing him from his belly to the back of his throat.

‘Apostates. My family wasn’t…wasn’t anything really. I mean they were my family. But they weren’t Templars, they weren’t mages.’

‘I’m sorry, Betsan,’ Cullen said.

‘Oh it’s not—It’s not your fault,’ Betsan said, finally looking at him. ‘I heard things about you in Haven, I know some things are your fault. But my family dying. That’s not your fault.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Actually I sort of wanted to just say thank you, properly, because I never sort of did,’ Betsan said in a rush. ‘I mean, I did, but that was before I even knew I’d really like this. Reading. Being around books. I actually was scared I’d be bored. Have you ever wanted something so much, and dreamed about it, and then you sort of got there, and you realised it was like— I mean you probably don’t have that, seeing as you’re still…you still wear the Templar sigil.’

She pointed towards him, and Cullen looked down at himself, and then he looked up at the flower with petals shaped like the face of a little, pink nug. And he thought of how she wrote to him about nuggalopes. And he thought about how he’d lost so many of those letters, and that he’d lost Samson today, and he’d lost a great deal more than that over the years that had marked his soul and flesh.

‘I know what it’s like,’ Cullen said quietly, ‘to learn that something you thought would be the most perfect thing for you, is something else entirely.’

Betsan just nodded, smiled at him again, then turned and lifted up some poorly made pieces of parchment and brought out a fatly stuffed envelope. She held it in both of her light brown hands, and Cullen noticed her nails were bitten down, just as he used to bite his all the time.

‘I made you something. You can’t look at it now. It’s for Satinalia. Well, it’s early. It’s a week and a half early. And you don’t have to wait that long, maybe just a day.’
Cullen took the sealed envelope from her. There was too much wax on the back of it, and a small Skyhold seal had been stamped into it three times. He had to force himself to not grip it too tightly.

‘I didn’t like you at first,’ Betsan said. ‘When I was your runner, in the beginning. Because you were a Templar. And everything else. And a lot of mages didn’t like you. So I sort of…I mean I know you didn’t notice, but I’m sorry. Because I used to think it was- I used to think all mages were good, and all Templars were evil, and I think I had to think that way for a little while. But then Corypheus is a mage and…’

‘You wanted to become a Templar, Betsan. You pledged it at Summerday.’

‘I understood it better then. I wanted to fight. I like it here, I think it’s worth fighting for. And I watched Knight-Captain Briony sometimes, and she’s always so kind to us. And she sits with us sometimes. She takes such pride in her armour and her sword, and she showed me how to polish it, and she let me, and then I thought being a Templar could be amazing too. And I would be a good Templar, who wouldn’t hurt mages.’

Betsan sighed. Her knees bobbed up and down and then she shrugged.

‘I always liked books though. Even as a kid. I couldn’t read and I stole some and…’

She looked at him with wide eyes.

‘I’m not a thief!’

‘I know,’ Cullen said calmly.

‘I know,’ Betsan, Cullen said.

‘No one was missing them,’ Betsan said, dragging her teeth over her bottom lip before shrugging again. ‘I’m not a thief anymore. I just really loved books. And there was no reason for me to have them, and my parents would never have gotten me any. But books were so mysterious. They held so much inside of them.’

‘And now? What do you think of it all now?’

‘I love it,’ Betsan said, her voice going hushed, as though she still couldn’t quite believe it. ‘I love it. I keep taking books and reading them at night and Mistress Maribeta gets mad because I’m not getting enough sleep and my friends are a little mad because I’m not seeing them enough. I love it.’

‘I’m glad,’ Cullen said, smiling at her.

‘I’m going to be a famous academic, and I’m going to be an historian, and I’m going to write about all of this. And it’s going to be in books for people in the future. So they can know what it was like. Skyhold and Haven. Not from the view of some…some uppity Orlesian twit, but someone who actually…who actually came from one of the towns that doesn’t exist anymore.’

Her voice broke at the end, and she took two deep breaths and then Cullen saw the way she made herself smile and knew this was a road she had walked down far too many times.

‘They are, you know,’ Cullen said. ‘The Orlesians. All of them. Uppity twits.’

Betsan snorted and clapped a hand over her face, and then laughed.
‘Don’t tell anyone I said that,’ Cullen added. ‘Lady Montilyet wouldn’t thank you to know that’s what I think.’

‘The academics are the worst,’ Betsan said. ‘There’s a few that live here. And they’re all…old and think the stupidest things, and they think people like me are dumb. Just because- because of where I came from.’

‘So you’ve decided to be one?’

‘A different one! Dorian’s okay, and he’s from Tevinter. Like Corypheus! But he’s- Dorian’s different. He doesn’t think the same as them. Even if he pretends to. But Mistress Maribeta will let me know if I’m becoming an uppity twit. Though she won’t use those words. But- See, I only really wanted to thank you, and give you that. To think I could be a Templar or a- or a warrior right now! I think I’d still like it. But not like this. I don’t know why you ever bothered, honestly. With me.’

Cullen rubbed at the back of his neck. He was overwhelmed by her passion for life, and even a little embarrassed by it, even though he knew that her way of living was far more nourishing than the way he’d spent his last few years.

‘I hold you in some regard,’ Cullen said eventually. ‘You care about matters in a way that I lost sight of a long time ago. I hope you don’t lose sight of it. People will tell you it’s part of growing up. But I suspect that may be an untruth.’

‘I used to think you were so angry,’ Betsan said. ‘You were yelling at people all the time in Haven in the field, and I didn’t understand that’s how soldiers work. And people said you were a monster in Kirkwall who had come good, but you still seemed really cold. But when we got here, I just realised you were sad all the time. You were just really sad. Even today.’

Cullen blinked at her, and then was surprised to feel the faint lump in his throat at those words. He waved a hand as though to indicate that it didn’t matter, but the words of bravado didn’t come, and he went still.

‘I know we’re different stations,’ Betsan said, ‘but I think you like writing letters to me really, and you wouldn’t waste your time if you didn’t. And I think we’re friends.’

‘Are we?’ Cullen said, bemused.

‘Yes,’ Betsan said. ‘That’s what I think. You can argue with me about it if you like, but I’m good at winning arguments.’

‘What about chess?’ Cullen said.

‘Dorian’s been teaching me,’ Betsan said, and she flashed a grin.

‘No,’ Cullen said, shaking his head gravely. ‘Dorian’s been teaching you to cheat.’

‘He’s teaching me both ways,’ Betsan said, the light in her eyes mischievous. ‘The cheating way and the way that he says is ‘considerably less fun.’’

Cullen had to hand it to her, she had a way with accents.

He made himself stand, even as he wanted to stay. He clutched the envelope close to him, and then looked down at it in wonder. He wasn’t sure what would be inside of it, but he knew he’d treasure it anyway. Perhaps he was too sentimental sometimes, but in this room, in front of someone
bursting to tell him how much she loved books, it didn’t seem like a bad thing at all.

“So, chess,” Cullen said. “I’ll organise a time? Or send you a few times and you can let me know what works for you?”

“Yes,” Betsan said, her eyes wide, as though she couldn’t quite believe it.

Perhaps, in time, he would be less of a figurehead to her, less of a hero, more himself. He could learn more about her too, and he was always happy to find an ally in his general disdain of upper class frippery.

“Thank you,” Cullen said, holding up the envelope. “Really. I suspect you think this doesn’t mean as much to me as it does to you. Maybe that’s true. But this means more to me than I can say.”

She beamed at him, and he nodded a farewell to her and then closed the door behind him, and stared down the narrow little corridor, feeling a bit like he’d been struck in the chest.

*You were just really sad. Even today.*

Yes, well, but he had a reason to be sad today.

With a sigh, he carefully tucked away the envelope and made his way back to his tower. It was only once he was actually on the frigid battlements that he realised that if Betsan’s life hadn’t spoiled that bright innocence yet, he wasn’t likely to spoil it either. One less sadness to carry with him.

* Saturday evening brought a dusting of thin snow that was more ice than the powdery stuff he remembered from his childhood. He rugged up that night, and went out on the battlements to join Hensley, who stared out into the mountains and had his hands shoved deep into the thick coat he wore. They stood side by side for a little while, and Cullen looked at the moon-gilded mountains and felt the bite of the air, and thought the night watch was no job for someone not taking lyrium. But maybe Hensley got something out of it.

“There’s a few of us,” Cullen began, having thought of several ways to open this conversation, “who aren’t taking lyrium.”

Hensley went very still, and then he cleared his throat, and then he said nothing at all.

“And I don’t know anyone else’s reasons, though I do know my own.”

Hensley turned to look at him, and Cullen stared out at the mountains and thought that Hensley’s gaze was like a brand against his cheek.

“I do know that confidentiality is important,” Cullen said. “I know that better than many. I don’t get food poisoning – well, no more than most. And I do get the headaches, but they’re a part of it. And my hands are always so cold.”

“You’ve- You’ve never found anything to sodding make it go away?” Hensley said, his voice gruff. He turned to look back at the mountains.

“No,” Cullen said. “Nothing predictable.”

“I wondered sometimes, about you,” Hensley said. “But I know life’s not been kind to most of us
and some of us are just bleeding sickly. Aren’t we?’

‘There is that,’ Cullen said.

‘I know one other,’ Hensley said.

‘Do you?’ Cullen said, looking at him.

‘A younger lad, and he wasn’t on it for too long, but for some reason the withdrawals are just bad. It makes him so scatterbrained, like, and sometimes he forgets to eat and he forgets to do normal things. I’ll never understand how he landed a requisitions job, honestly, but he doesn’t have it anymore.’

Cullen blew out his exhale, and it plumed in front of him.

‘Darragh,’ Cullen said. The one who ordered too many greaves and not enough rivets, and seemed so dismayed every time he forgot something crucial.

‘That’d be him,’ Hensley said.

‘I wasn’t aware he was a Templar, he didn’t write that history down when he arrived.’

‘Some don’t. And he was young. And I think he thought it wouldn’t affect him, because he’d not been on it for more than a year. But, oh, I don’t know, Commander, it’s a bad business this. It’s a bad business. And you not being on it either? What’s it mean, when the Commander of the bloody Inquisition isn’t taking it?’

‘I’m sure, for some, it’s not so—’

‘With all due respect, Commander, it’s poison,’ Hensley said, looking at him quickly. ‘It’s poison. Not for them mages, no. But for us. And once you start, it’s in you forever. And there’s nothing I can do for Darragh, except listen when he gets yelled at by all his bosses for forgetting things, and tell him that tomorrow’s another day. And there’s nothing I can do for my hands, or the headaches, or the fact that I can’t sleep for more than half a day, and even then, only when sun’s up.’

Cullen swallowed and shook his head, frustrated, because he thought he’d feel some camaraderie, but there was nothing here except shared pain. The saying that pain shared was pain halved – he wished it were true.

‘It’s not enough,’ Cullen said absently.

‘What’s that?’

‘Well, no one’s doing anything about this, are they? The Chantry has its party line and in order to maintain it, they can’t admit what this does to its Templars.’

‘Or they say it’s all pain and purpose,’ Hensley muttered.

‘Yes,’ Cullen said. ‘I’m not interested in crusading against the Chantry, but it’s not enough that there are a few of us – more than you and myself and Darragh – even in Skyhold, and we all…have no idea what to begin to do about this. And we cannot tell anyone. So there are no healers or researchers helping. Because as it stands, the people who don’t take lyrium who once did are—’

‘Criminals,’ Hensley said. ‘An’ they don’t deserve it, and they’re kicked out of the Templar Order anyway, and no one’d help them.’
'It’s not good enough,' Cullen said, folding his arms. ‘I wish I’d known sooner, Hensley. I could have procured some warmer gloves, at least.’

‘Ha,’ Hensley said. ‘Well. How do you know, anyway?’

‘Oh… I seem to be developing a sense for it,’ Cullen said, feeling like as far as reasons went, it wasn’t the strongest. But Hensley just nodded and accepted it, and Cullen thought even that was a sign that none of them knew the first thing in how to handle this.

‘So it’s not good enough,’ Hensley said. ‘What’s that mean then?’

‘There’s honestly no point having so much influence and power, and not doing something about this,’ Cullen said. ‘How many sick people are there? Who have tried to serve the Chantry, only to discover something about the lyrium that makes them uncomfortable, enough that they’d quit?’

‘Yeah,’ Hensley said. ‘And who’re they gonna go to about it? No one. Darragh only told me because he was so young and so upset, and he didn’t know about me, and he was shocked off his arse when I told him. Since then, I know there’s more of us. But I can’t tell it, like. Not like you can. Sometimes I just see some bloke or lass rubbing at their hands more than they should, or begging off with a bad headache, and I wonder. But there’s lots of reasons that cause both of those things, not least taking a good clout in the head in battle, or frostbite – which, not so hard to imagine out there, in the arse end of the world.’

Cullen nodded, and then silence moved between them, because he couldn’t think of what to say. Hensley rocked back and forth on his feet.

‘So what’re you gonna do about it?’ Hensley said. ‘People would go to you, if you did something. Spoke up or, I dunno, had a place for us.’

‘A place?’ Cullen said, confused.

‘Y’know, like- Like a hospital, but for us. And not really a hospital. Just a place where everyone gets it. Even just knowing there was a place out there in Thedas, even if I couldn’t reach it, Maker, Commander, can you imagine it? Fuck me, I’d help you, if you wanted. I’ve got nothing to go to once all this is done. I lost everything that mattered to me a long, long time ago. But this here thing. It matters.’

‘I can’t run a hospital,’ Cullen said, blankly.

‘Not a hospital,’ Hensley said, sounding impatient. ‘Think of it, though. Just a place. Maybe out in the country somewhere, away from Circles and pretty far away from any official Chantry shit. Because I’m not sure they’d like it. Just a place. I’ve saved some, what I’ve not spent on the drink. I think Darragh has some family land.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Cullen said, laughing nervously. ‘This isn’t-’

‘If it’s not good enough, then something needs to be done,’ Hensley said, staring fiercely at Cullen. ‘And you didn’t come out here to just tell me this thing and then leave it and let it be nothing. Because that’s not like you.’

‘Yes, well,’ Cullen said, ‘I didn’t come out here to-’

‘You’re probably going onto bigger and better things after this anyway,’ Hensley continued. ‘I mean, Commander of the Inquisition. If we win this, they’ll not leave you alone. Maker, I don’t know what I was thinking. My apologies and all that. I just thought for a minute…’
‘Hang on,’ Cullen said, becoming exasperated. ‘Has anyone ever told you that you have a gift for taking over an entire conversation?’

‘Ah bless, it’s been so long since someone’s told me that,’ Hensley said, laughing. ‘But only ‘cuz they all know I’m like this already.’

‘Honestly,’ Cullen said, laughing a few seconds later. They both looked out into the mountains again, and Cullen shivered, and wondered how Hensley handled it night after night.

The minutes stretched on, and Hensley seemed on the back foot now, and Cullen knew he’d have to be the next one to speak. But as he opened his mouth, Hensley said:

‘So there’s more of us though, here, in Skyhold?’

‘Yes,’ Cullen said.

‘Bugger me,’ Hensley breathed. ‘I wonder if there’d be more of us, too. As in – if people learned what poison it was, maybe more of ‘em would stop. It’s one thing to pay heed to rumours, or see some symptoms that are all worrisome, but- Oh, I don’t know. I just wonder if there’d be more.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘I still- A part of me can’t believe it. That you’re not taking it. It’s only that it makes sense now. I keep thinking it’s a trap. I know it’s not. But I’m going to wake up some time tomorrow and wonder if this happened.’

‘Well,’ Cullen said, sighing. ‘I know Darragh comes to you, sometimes. But if you are lacking people… It’s likely not a good thing to suggest this, but you may come to me, if you wish.’

Hensley smiled a little, and then cleared his throat.

‘You too. Y’know. You ever want to come out up here and vent your spleen. I can keep a secret.’

Cullen smiled crookedly and nodded.

‘Ah, but we won’t, will we?’ Hensley said, rocking backwards onto his heels and staring out at the mountains. ‘Because we’re all a bunch of dumb fucks.’

Cullen’s eyes widened, and then he started laughing before he could stop himself. The sound of it was loud and echoed off the stone all the way down into the courtyards, Hensley’s laugh following close behind it.

*

On Sunday morning, Cullen opened Betsan’s envelope carefully and pulled out the fat wad of parchment and spread the letters before him. They were numbered in order, and as Cullen arranged them, he felt tears come unbidden to his eyes.

It was evident that she’d kept every one of his letters as he’d kept every one of hers, and here she’d written new responses to them to replace those lost. New letters, each one addressing every letter he’d ever sent her. They came now with the benefit of foresight, and he laughed when he saw one of the responses:

*A snoutband is what people used to call you when you were younger. How rude!*

The thirteenth letter was a new one, and it only said:
Now, if I ever lose my letters, you can do the same for me, Commander Rutherford.

On this early Satinalia,
Your most humbly affectionate,
~ B

*

It was late Sunday evening before his and Cassandra’s schedule finally managed to synchronise, and he found himself in her room, looking over at the statue of Andraste on her bookshelf as he sipped at what was no doubt a very fine vintage. His tastebuds refused to appreciate it as anything other than ‘fermented grapes,’ but he could tell from her expression that the stuff was of a high quality.

He wouldn’t go to the Herald’s Rest to have a drink on Samson’s behalf, but Cullen hoped this counted. Even as he felt guilty sending thoughts of rest and peace in Samson’s direction in front of Cassandra.

Cullen told her of the developments between himself and Bull, and she’d only lowered her eyebrows forbiddingly and stared at him in response.

Nervousness shot up inside of him. Maybe she didn’t disapprove before, but perhaps now…

‘Really,’ Cassandra said flatly, ‘it’s about time. Honestly, I’d already made the assumption.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, swallowing a mouthful of wine to hide his relief, and not quite succeeding if her smirk was anything to go by.

‘You did not see him, when you were ill,’ Cassandra said, leaning back in her chair. ‘And you did not see yourself. There was about six hours where you were struggling to breathe, Cullen. Had I not seen it before… If Bull was meant to keep his regard for you a secret, he failed. Miserably.’

Cullen smiled ruefully, and then sighed. Cassandra watched him, as though expecting him to talk about it, but he didn’t have anything to say. He was ill sometimes. It was a fact of life. He’d felt a little shaky ever since the episode, but he remembered this from the past. Sometimes it could take several weeks for him to feel back on track, and until then, he just did the best that he could.

‘I care about this friendship,’ Cassandra said finally. ‘I think we’ll both need it, going into the future.’

‘I’m not sure how that’s going to work,’ Cullen said drily. ‘With you being the next Divine and all.’

Cassandra glared at him, and Cullen only smiled in response. Maker, but he’d missed this. They jibed at each other like brother and sister, except that he was – in so many ways – far closer to Cassandra than he’d ever been to his real siblings.

‘I can still have friends,’ Cassandra said.

‘I’m not sure that someone who subverted the Chantry to overturn Meredith – and quit the lyrium – is someone who the Chantry will approve of, in all honesty.’

‘I’m grateful that you’re so often wrong about so much,’ Cassandra said, lifting her goblet in a toast.
Cullen lifted his in response, and the metal clinked together. They slipped into silence as they sipped at their drinks. He and Cassandra had always enjoyed that; that mutual need to not fill the air with phrases. And as the night lengthened on and they only spoke occasionally, Cullen realised just how much he needed this friendship, and how grateful he was that Cassandra had ended up being so much more than the person who had dragged him away from Kirkwall.

* 

On Tuesday evening, the air was so cold that Cullen’s teeth were chattering after the walk across the courtyard into the kitchens. He made a beeline to the woodfire oven, even as Bull followed up behind him and also raised his hands to the warmth.

Aidhe banged a pot onto the counter and stared at him.

‘Don’t you lot have your own fireplaces?’ she snapped.

‘Came for the food, stayed for your warm heart, Aidhe,’ Bull said, even as he swung away from Cullen towards the benches in the centre of the kitchen.

‘Give over,’ Aidhe groused.

Cullen ignored the both of them as he focused on the fire. He still wasn’t entirely comfortable with people guessing that he and Bull were in a relationship. It had only been a few days and it didn’t feel entirely real. Sometimes, as he discussed very serious things regarding Corypheus and war around the war table, it would strike him that Bull loved him, and had said as much, and called him Kadan sometimes, which meant ‘my heart.’

Sometimes he’d remember that Bull didn’t like using the word for its other meanings, which made it far more special than all the other times Cullen had heard it, in its various iterations.

Thankfully he spaced out enough due to the lack of lyrium in his body that no one took him staring off into space at times amiss. They’d just prompt him back to the matter at hand, and he’d flush and ask himself how long he could expect it to last.

Bull made himself at home in the kitchen, ferreting out bits of food and preparing it, deft with a knife and making sure to keep out of Aidhe’s way. Aidhe sometimes passed him something – two carrots, a butt of cheese, some fresh goat’s milk – and though she made it subtle, Cullen realised that the affection between Bull and the Cook was real and lasting. More than just late night conversations about battle. Something almost familial.

An hour later, after Aidhe had put a batch of dough into the proofing cupboard, she sat near them towelling off her forearms and joined them in animated conversation.

‘Not this again,’ Cullen said, rolling his eyes at Bull, ‘they have a three year gestational period. Even if you wanted an entire cavalry of nuggalopes, we couldn’t breed them fast enough! At least horses are relatively common, people breed them for mail services and more, so they’re always in circulation and there’s always more to buy. Nuggalopes are… They’re a novelty breed!’

‘Tell that to the qunari,’ Bull said, grinning. ‘But in all seriousness, I think people overlook them as battle steeds.’

‘It’s because they’re not very graceful like,’ Aidhe said, slapping the cloth onto the bench. ‘And it’s because most soldiers want to feel all noble and all them other things that ‘orses can be.’

‘Nuggalopes are very noble,’ Bull said.
Cullen could tell, at this point, that Bull was just baiting Aidhe, and he rolled his eyes and kept picking the nutmeat out of cracked walnut shells.

‘I’ve seen qunari on ‘orses,’ Aidhe said primly.

‘But have you seen the horses afterwards, Aidhe?’ Bull said, affecting a look of sadness.

Cullen swallowed down his laughter, but Aidhe didn’t. Her laugh was raucous, and she finished it up by drinking what looked like half her tankard of ale. She slammed that down on the bench as it seemed she slammed everything onto the bench – pots, cloth, dough. Aidhe’s actions were exclamation marks.

‘Just imagine it though,’ Bull said wistfully. ‘An entire cavalry of nuggalopes galloping up against the energy. Tooting uproariously. Or hooting. Whatever sound they make.’

‘It would be an effective way to disarm an enemy. They’ll be laughing too much to hold their weapons,’ Cullen remarked.

‘See? Now you’re getting it!’ Bull said, grinning. He thumped Cullen hard enough on the back that Cullen’s chair squeaked forwards on the stone.

Despite feeling mildly winded, Cullen didn’t mind that at all, even as he felt heat begin to creep up his neck. It was only that the impact reminded him of other things they’d done together. He suspected – from the look Bull shot him – that Bull knew it too.

‘Anyway,’ Cullen said, ‘as interesting as nuggalopes are in theory—’

‘What I want to know is what you’ve got in your pocket or up your sleeve about this Corypheus,’ Aidhe interrupted. ‘Lay it out for me, boys. What’s the plan?’

‘It’s no longer work hours,’ Cullen said soberly. ‘I’m off for the night.’

‘If it’s no longer work hours,’ Aidhe said, ‘then what are you doing in my kitchen, interrupting my work hours? Make it worth my while. Let’s talk strategy.’

‘Oh, Maker,’ Cullen said, looking at all the food before them. ‘I suppose it’s been a nice night, Bull. But I’m going back to my tower.’

Bull had a handful of Cullen’s coat and was dragging him back onto his stool, even as Cullen smirked and caught the light in Aidhe’s eyes.

This was another thing in his life that was fun, Cullen realised. And he’d never gotten along quite as easily with Aidhe on his own, but having Bull there made him see softness and care where previously he’d seen hard edges and judgement.

‘Look here,’ Aidhe said, ‘if it’ll help, I’ll cook up some dumplings in syrup, and we can have a proper pudding while we chat.’

Cullen blinked at her. And Bull made a rumbling sound that was all want, and didn’t help Cullen’s neck go back to its regular colour at all.

‘You drive a hard bargain, Aidhe,’ Cullen said, as she stood and walked over to the stovetop.

‘You haven’t tasted my dumplings in syrup,’ Aidhe said. ‘So you know squat about the bargain I’m driving.’
‘It’s a good one,’ Bull whispered theatrically. ‘My official advice is that we accept the offer and just talk shit until she gets bored of us.’

‘Done,’ Cullen said, in his own stage whisper.

Aidhe turned around and shook a wooden spoon at them, and for a moment Cullen wouldn’t have put it past her to throw it across the room. But instead she turned back and gathered equipment, and Bull used that moment to bump his shoulder into Cullen’s and offer a smile that seemed to hold no motive in it at all; only joy.

Later still, was the novelty that came from kissing Bull and knowing it wasn’t a scheduled appointment, nor a part of their arrangement, but technically something they could just do because they wanted to. They were together, and no one was watching.

It was thrilling, frightening, new and familiar all at once. It also tasted vaguely of a thick, sugary syrup, slightly sour now that some hours had passed. Cullen was replete, tired, ready to sleep. But this seemed like some golden thing he couldn’t let go of, and he wrapped his fingers into Bull’s harness to hold him in place, to stop him from finding some excuse to leave. Not that Bull seemed concerned with that at all.

Cullen was close to the wall – but not pushed back into it, because that meant Bull’s horns scraped uncomfortably against stone. One of Bull’s hands clutched his flank, the other gripped his shoulder and held him still, pulled him up into the right position.

‘You taste like dessert,’ Bull said against Cullen’s mouth.

‘You do have a sweet tooth, don’t you?’

‘Sweet on you,’ Bull said.

Cullen stared at him, and then Bull winked at him, and Cullen made a sound of disgust.

‘No,’ Cullen said, pushing away as Bull let him go. ‘No. That’s wretched. Who says the things you do?’

‘I wouldn’t say them, but you like them so much,’ Bull said. ‘Think of the cruel position you’ve put me in, saying this shit to you.’

‘And blinking at me,’ Cullen added.

‘It’s *winking,*’ Bull said. ‘I know you can tell the difference. Every other person here can.’

‘Blinking,’ Cullen said. But he couldn’t stop the smile at the edges of his mouth.

A few seconds later, a new jag of fear found him, and he had to turn away. He hated the swell of it in his gut and the way it urged his heart to beat faster. It was inconvenient. It was unhelpful, and he didn’t want it.

‘Hey,’ Bull said quietly. ‘What happened?’

Cullen laughed, but the sound was cheerless. He shook his head, shook it again, and then placed a hand on the hilt of his sword as he tried to shove away the thoughts he didn’t want. Couldn’t he just let himself be happy? Couldn’t he just *enjoy* something for once?
'Cullen,’ Bull prompted.

‘I keep thinking this can’t last,’ Cullen said, damning himself for being the one who would probably cause the relationship to end by virtue of his sheer lack of faith. ‘Not every second, but it’s there. I keep thinking it’s a thankless way to be. I should be… I should embrace it. Or at the very least-Maker, I’m not sure. I feel like it’s letting you down – letting this down – and I don’t understand how I can be failing at something before it’s even- before it’s even really begun.’

Bull walked over, and Cullen stayed standing near his bed, thinking that they didn’t have time left for anything tonight, except – apparently – Cullen turning everything negative again.

‘Me too,’ Bull said, when he was closer. ‘Er, not all of it. But I’m worried too. I think it’s pretty normal.’

‘What?’ Cullen said, turning and looking up at him.

‘I mean, what, you think your personality is going to change overnight? It’s not. You think this…what we have – you think that’s gonna fix all the ways you think about things? It’s not. And I’m pretty sure a part of you knows that. But Cullen, I definitely shitting know that. I’m not expecting you to be-fuck, I don’t know. I don’t even know how you expected to be. I don’t want some ideal you. I like the snappy, snarly, kind of miserable one I’ve got in front of me.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said, as Bull reached out and slid his fingers around Cullen’s upper arm, as though testing whether it was all right. When Cullen leaned slightly into the touch, Bull stepped closer, his hand sliding to Cullen’s back.

‘If it helps you to know I’ve shat bricks over this, then y’know…I’ve shat bricks over it.’

Cullen didn’t quite snort, and Bull rubbed circles into his back, even as Cullen shook his head, rolled his eyes.

‘Oh, you have, have you?’ Cullen said.

‘Of course I have,’ Bull said, none of that wryness in his tone, just a gentle earnestness that made his voice softer. ‘I will. It’s very different to how I saw my life going. Doesn’t mean I don’t want it, or don’t want to try. But I have moments where I think ‘what the shit am I doing?’’

‘I am happier,’ Cullen said, placing a palm flat over Bull’s chest. ‘But in moments.’

‘Y’know what it reminds me of?’

‘What?’ Cullen said.

‘It reminds me of spring. Not proper spring. But the horseshit Fereldan spring which takes so long to get going that by the time it gets here, it’s gone. But sometimes you’ll go outside at the tail end of winter, and you’ll think it’s there. You can sort of smell it. A change in the pollen, an extra bite from the sun, and maybe a flower you haven’t seen for months. But in another five minutes it’s gone again, because it’s still winter… So I’m hoping it’s like that, little lion. I’m hoping this is our taste of spring.’

‘That’s very poetic,’ Cullen said, blinking up at him.

‘You think I can’t be poetic?’ Bull said. ‘It’s the muscles isn’t it? People don’t expect it.’

Bull brought up his other arm and flexed, and Cullen leaned forward and muffled his laugh into
the back of his hand where it covered Bull’s chest, where he could feel Bull’s heart beating.

‘It’s not just poetry,’ Bull said. ‘It means that thinking poorly of things or doubting everything is the status quo. And I don’t think like you do, but I have my own…runnels in the ground that I haul the cart down all the shitting time. And I like to think it means that with time, and practice, we’ll get more of the spring side of things.’

‘You mean the biting insects and the heavy rains that turn the ground to mud and—’

‘You really are the most cheerful fucking person in all of Thedas,’ Bull said, hand sliding up Cullen’s back and cupping the back of his head. It encouraged him to look up. Cullen met Bull’s eye, saw the twinkle in it.

‘I don’t…have time for anything strenuous,’ Cullen said, ‘but you can stay the night, if you want to?’

‘Yeah?’ Bull said.

‘I mean, we can do that, can’t we?’

‘Sure can. I’m a cuddler though. Fair warning.’

‘I… It’s like you think I’m not a…a…that I’m not inclined to physical affection?’

‘You can say it, Cullen. You can say ‘cuddler.’ No one’s gonna take your Commander position away if you say it.’

Cullen’s laugh was muffled by Bull’s lips, and the kiss wasn’t one of their most passionate, but Cullen thought it didn’t really matter. He was open to finding out what different sorts of kisses there were, and he suspected Bull would help him in that endeavour. Perhaps, no matter their mutual fears and doubts, the most important thing was that they’d get to find out together.
Epilogue: Looking Forward

Chapter Notes

Ohhh my god oh my god oh my god (also what a novelty, I'll actually be able to respond to comments almost straight away for once!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the Inquisition and Corypheus, after Haven and Skyhold, after Kinloch and after Kirkwall, in the years he’d tried to find something like stability in the chaotic world around him, Cullen had gone from thinking that the arrangement with Searidge was the best that the world had to offer, to learning that that there was so much more he could have in his life.

Cullen shifted into warmth and woke signal flares of pain all through his back and ass and thighs. His groan was thick, tinged with broken laughter. He tried to stay as still as he possibly could, which wasn’t difficult, given he was already tucked into Bull’s body, half on his side and half on his belly. His right arm was stretched across Bull’s chest, and his left was crooked beneath him, palm stuck damp to Bull’s arm where it cradled him.

Ferelden had countless small towns to offer that weren’t on most maps. Some had been scraped and stamped out of existence by the Blight and by Corypheus and by war, but some remained. Cullen knew enough of them that when the day came to leave Skyhold, after the Inquisition had been abandoned, he already knew which would be the village he’d settle in. He’d had help scouting from Hensley, from Darragh, even from Leliana and Cassandra and Bull, who all didn’t know the region as well as he did.

The town was called Moorvale. Cullen didn’t know it through all its seasons yet, but he knew that it snowed in winter. He knew that the moors – that stretched before his small farm and the larger building just behind the thick stand of aspen – would wave and bend their heads of grass before the sweeping winds that flooded down from the mountains behind them. He knew that owls had a liking for this place, and that he’d had to build a coop for his hens as swiftly as possible when the first batch were stolen by healthy, glossy hawks with black beaks and tawny slashes across their hooded eyes.

Moorvale was a place of birds. It was a place where a hound like Staunch would forsake his name and go bolting after sparrows and robins and crows, while Cullen pressed the back of his hand to his forehead and thought that he might never be able to train that birdiness out of him.

If one took the winding road through the aspen forest, they would eventually come across a surprisingly well-tended village green, and a path that widened for a single cart. There, a tavern that had a good reputation and was well-attended from those in other villages who would make the visit, especially at Annums. There, a small apothecary and chemist, who had practiced in Orlais for a time, and then Rivain, and finally retired in Ferelden. There were three other stores along the strip: a baker that ended up serving more as a butcher, a drapery run by a tiny cloth merchant who only responded to the name Remmy and had a sharp eye despite her bent figure and arthritic hands, and a single – often unmanned – auction shed that everyone attended in spring and summer to see what wares the farms about the townships might have to offer.

Now, Moorvale was also known for the hospice called the Templar’s Rest at the back of the forest,
just before the moors that gave the town its name. Cullen had never been very original at names, and he’d always liked Herald’s Rest as the name of a tavern. Even Cassandra rolling her eyes when she’d heard it, hadn’t prompted him to change it.

Bull had only said: ‘Well, they’ll fucking know what they’re coming for, won’t they? That’s what they call good advertising.’

Templar’s Rest had – as of last week – witnessed the deaths of nine men and women due to the cost of taking lyrium and then stopping it.

Hensley officially ran the hospice itself, as Cullen couldn’t be around it day after day. He wished for the fortitude to handle it, and the time, but he received an almost full bucket of mail, packages and missives when the mail cart came once a week, and most matters were urgent enough that he couldn’t split his time as he wished to. At the end of the day, he often only had time to go through some drills and keep himself fit, walk through the moors with Staunch or make his way down to the lake to the east.

Hensley often sent others in the hospice to Cullen with reports of how things were going. Hensley was a big believer in the healing power of fresh air. Cullen didn’t have the heart to tell him that all those nights out on the battlements never seemed to do much for Hensley himself.

But when Bull arrived – often with the Chargers in tow – Hensley knew not to send people to Cullen unless it was an emergency. Most of Cullen’s mail was answered late; except letters to Betsan, who worked now in one of the most reputable libraries in Orlais, under the watchful and protective eye of Mistress Maribeta. Whether Bull stayed weeks or days, Cullen would find himself in the practice of a skill he’d sorely needed all his life – the cultivation of pleasure, of time spent in pursuit of what he loved.

Sometimes, he’d even leave with Bull afterwards for a time. But he didn’t take direction well, and he tended to join in less as a Charger, and more as what Bull liked to call, ‘a hired, headstrong consultant.’

The Chargers themselves made themselves comfortable at Templar’s Rest and helped out – Stitches was always particularly welcome. Or they’d stay at the tavern in Moorvale itself and pick up on gossip that might lead to potential, local jobs.

At times, their visits coincided with Cassandra – Cullen only called her Divine Victoria as a joke, to rile her – making her way down into Ferelden. Cassandra proved herself as worthy at holding her drinks in a tavern, as she was at being Divine. She lived the philosophy that the Divine was within everyone, whether they were rousingly singing vulgar bar songs until insensate, or wearing regalia in Val Royeaux.

Sometimes, Bull was on his own, leaving his Chargers to handle themselves.

This time, Bull had brought the Chargers and they had unloaded themselves on Templar’s Rest, determined to add an expansion to the building. They’d stayed for nearly a full month, and Cullen’s prayers lately had featured words like ‘blessed’ and ‘gratitude’ and ‘Maker, please let it last.’

‘Did I break you?’ Bull rumbled, his voice warm with sleep.

‘I’m not moving, if that’s what you mean,’ Cullen said. ‘Maker, I’m sore.’

‘Mm,’ Bull said, his voice heating now with lust. The arm cradling Cullen shifted, and then Cullen grunted when Bull’s fingers unerringly found bruises. Perhaps not that unerringly, his entire back
had been painted with them. The night before, Cullen’s voice had broken, he’d screamed roughly under Bull’s ministrations. Thankfully, Templar’s Rest was out of hearing range. Though he’d not yet trained Staunch out of the habit of barking and howling along with Cullen’s lifted cries, which always made Bull laugh, and left Cullen glad that the door to his bedroom was sturdy at least. The last thing they needed was a baying mabari to try and save Cullen from what he dearly wanted.

‘So hot,’ Bull said. ‘I mean your skin.’

‘Of course,’ Cullen said.

‘Y’know, if I didn’t have a dragon to go and slay, I’d stay longer.’

‘The dragon will still be there,’ Cullen said, beginning to waken properly.

‘Yeah, but this is a special dragon,’ Bull said.

‘I can help, if you like?’

‘Nah, not this time, Kadan. Not this time.’

‘Why?’ Cullen said, and then his voice caught as Bull walked his blunt fingers down Cullen’s back into the mass of ache that was quickly stirred to sharpness. ‘That’s… Shit, maybe I didn’t take enough elfroot last night.’

‘Nah, I like this part. And you can’t come, because it’s a surprise. Trust me. You’ll see.’

‘You know how I feel about surprises,’ Cullen said. Generally, he didn’t like them.

‘I know, Kadan,’ Bull said, his hand flattening against Cullen’s back and rubbing tenderly. ‘But try trusting me in this. Might be a surprise you like.’

‘I have no room for a dragon’s hide,’ Cullen said waringly. ‘I have no room to cure a dragon hide.’

‘Nah, it won’t be a dragon hide,’ Bull agreed.

Which left Cullen to conclude that Bull was going to fetch him something from the dragon, and he wondered if it would be some new implement of torment. Either way, it didn’t particularly matter, because Cullen just enjoyed the part where Bull said he would be coming back afterwards.

*

Cullen moved slowly throughout the day, and he saw the way Bull savoured those pained movements and liked that constant reminder of this shared simpatico that they had. Bull did most of the work throughout the house and instructed Cullen to take it easy, but there were times when he’d ask Cullen to pass him something, or reach for something high enough that it would make Cullen wince. Bull watched him with a dark want in his eye, and Cullen would shiver beneath that gaze, and they’d need say nothing.

Sometimes Bull would draw him in for an embrace that would see Cullen squirming, as Bull deliberately aggravated all those knots of pain. It usually ended with Cullen sagging against him, yielding and compliant, deliciously dazed.

A few hours after lunch, Cullen made tea for them both, and then watched fascinated as Bull
always added so much sugar that he was basically left with a syrup.

‘How are your teeth not rotted through?’ Cullen said – it wasn’t the first time he’d asked.

‘They are. These are just all the ones I’ve picked up during battle. You know, shove ‘em in the gums and hope for the best.’

Bull gave a different answer each time, though Cullen had to admit that was one of the more creative responses.

‘How’re you going with it all?’ Bull said, pinning Cullen with his bright gaze. ‘The deaths?’

‘The Chantry doesn’t like it,’ Cullen said. ‘They’ve never liked it. But they definitely don’t like that we have a log of symptoms that progress to death, and I think we can expect the Grand Cleric to draft some formal response at some point, saying that… That it’s part of the honour of being a Templar, perhaps. I don’t quite know.’

Cullen didn’t like to think about it. He had formally told himself in the beginning that it wasn’t really about the Chantry, it was about looking after people. It was – as Hensley said – simply providing a space where people could come together with a kinship founded in illness.

But Cullen knew it had been naivety now. There was no way to create a space that acknowledged the problem, without it becoming an affront to the Chantry. It didn’t matter if it was far away from official channels. Cullen had received letters where he had been called anti-Templar, anti-Chantry, and a great deal more besides. He would continue to receive those letters. Not only from official Chantry personnel, but from fellow Templars who felt he was betraying the cause, betraying the silence that they’d agreed upon while swearing oaths.

He had bristled to see how the sick were attacked, when letters came accusing all of those at Templar’s Rest of having an innately weak constitution, of being cowardly and unsuited to the honour of the Templar Order in the first place.

Cullen sheltered everyone but Hensley from those letters and those views, but he couldn’t hide how it bothered him from Bull.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said, sighing. ‘You’re doing that thing again. Telling me what’s going on instead of telling me how you’re doing with it all.’

‘Oh, I hate it,’ Cullen said, pushing his teacup aside. ‘Every time I think I should be living there, I remember why I can’t. I was never the ideal person for this role. Hensley’s far more suited to it.’

‘I dunno about that,’ Bull said. ‘You’re the one securing the funding. Hensley’s dream would just be that otherwise.’

‘I suppose that’s true,’ Cullen said. ‘Are you sure I can’t come with you? I could do with hacking at something with my sword.’

‘You could’ve just said so,’ Bull said, grinning. ‘I’m always up for sparring.’

‘I want my bruises to last a little longer,’ Cullen said.

The pain still helped him. It still kept him focused. He still craved it – though there were times when he didn’t need it at all for the day to day, and wanted it instead for the intimacy it brought, the chance to break before someone who would treat him with such care. In his lighter moments, Cullen liked to think that Bull gave him a chance to see that what he really wanted, what he truly
desired – there was nothing wrong with it. In those moments, it was becoming a fundamentally beautiful thing.

‘Kadan,’ Cullen added.

He couldn’t quite say it at the end of sentences the way Bull did. He only seemed to be able to say it as a statement of fact.

My heart.

As far as Cullen was concerned, the word needed no others to attenuate or enhance its meaning.

Alone, it was enough.

It said everything it needed to say.

*

Cullen still had nightmares of Kinloch. He’d also learned there was a kind of pattern to Bull’s waking nightmares. They were more likely to happen on the sticky days that preceded thunderstorms or rain, especially if they were warm. And they were almost guaranteed on days of fog. Even if it was nothing more than a low-lying mist clinging to the ground and quickly dissipating. On those days, if Cullen saw the mist before Bull did, he’d find reasons to keep Bull inside until the mist was safely gone around mid-morning.

Once, they’d been outside when they’d heard the song of a whip-poor-will. Bull had frozen and then his face had gone blank, and Cullen hadn’t disturbed him as instructed, but Bull had stayed still and faintly trembling for another two hours. It was dusk when he came back to himself, and he wouldn’t speak of it – he rarely did – and that evening he was more tender and careful with Cullen than usual, treating him as though he were made of fine-boned porcelain.

If Cullen sometimes took a bow and arrow to the whip-poor-wills around his farm after that, no one really thought much of it.

*

Once, the sixth or seventh time Cullen had cleaned off Bull’s horns and then rubbed horn balm in, Bull had said:

‘You like service.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Cullen said.

‘It’s a thing. It’s not for everyone. I don’t mean like, service to the Maker or anything like that. I mean…ah, this. What you’re doing now.’

‘Oh,’ Cullen said. It was true enough. He did like it. There were little things that he enjoyed doing, and sometimes he wished Bull wouldn’t notice them. Cullen liked to have Bull’s favourite foods on hand, even when Bull wasn’t around – just in case he returned unexpectedly. He had learned the way Bull preferred his harness to be treated and he had learned the brand of wax that Bull used to protect the joints of his leg brace, and Cullen had all of those items on hand.

There was a pleasure in it, and it was sometimes embarrassing, sometimes private. But when he tended to Bull’s horns, it was shared. Cullen liked to be able to perform actions that meant something, even if they went by without notice.
‘Do you like it?’ Cullen said, biting his bottom lip, standing behind Bull and glad that they couldn’t see each other’s expressions.

‘Yeah,’ Bull said quietly, as though he’d been contemplating it himself. As though he was surprised to find that he liked someone taking care of him.

‘Well,’ Cullen said, ‘it’s about time someone did. You don’t take enough care of yourself.’

‘See,’ Bull said, ‘that sounds like projection to me. That sounds like you’re just taking the thing that you don’t do, and pretending that I don’t do it, so that- Hey!’

Cullen had wrapped his hand around the right angle of one side of Bull’s horns and yanked. Bull was laughing even as he wrestled with Cullen’s grip.

But ever since then, Cullen liked the challenge of thinking of other ways he could care for Bull. He especially liked it when he thought of something Bull hadn’t yet thought of, and saw that pleased expression on Bull’s face.

He’d learned that it was acceptable to crave approval from someone who wouldn’t ask you to betray yourself.

*

There were still withdrawal episodes, and they were sometimes crushing in their intensity. They didn’t appear to be getting worse, but nor did they get better, either. Cullen hoped it meant that it wasn’t degenerative, and then felt guilty about that, knowing that it was degenerative for so many others.

It was hard to let Bull see the worst of it. Cullen’s instincts were to hole up, alone, in the dark. To disappear the worst of himself from the view of others, so that he might emerge a little shaken later, but not ruin the image that others had of him.

But the love that Bull had never wavered, and Cullen wasn’t always strong enough – even coherent enough – to keep Bull away during the worst of an episode.

Sometimes Cullen woke from those episodes to fingers moving carefully over his forehead, or the smell of a rich, meaty soup in the house. Sometimes he shivered uncontrollably as Bull prayed, and Cullen knew some of those sentences well enough in Qunlat that he could say them himself now. Sometimes it meant that Bull would shutter all the windows – blocking out the light – during one of Cullen’s headaches, and order him to bed.

And sometimes it meant arguments, if Cullen was certain it was a headache he could work through, instead of one he couldn’t.

Bull was getting better at backing down and trusting Cullen’s judgement, but Cullen sometimes called it incorrectly, and they’d found only a shaky middle ground between Cullen’s inability to always know how best to care for himself, and Bull’s need to take over.

Yet Bull never shamed Cullen for making the wrong call, and it made it easier for Cullen to admit that he needed more help than he’d realised.

*

It wasn’t as hard to watch Bull leave as Cullen had thought it would be, in the beginning. His life was busy, and there were always matters to attend to. Cullen had also spent most of his life isolated
and alone, even when he shared his room with roommates. There was a singular comfort in having
the house be his own space again, and there was a peace that was of a different flavour to the peace
he felt around Bull.

Cullen lived two lives side by side, and he liked them both, and wished neither to change. He knew
now that if Bull wanted to live with him permanently, Cullen would likely need to build another
home somewhere – a cottage where he could just be in his own space, in his own silence, his only
company that of a mabari and the birds outside.

* 

There were two chests in the bedroom that Cullen shared with Bull, whenever Bull returned. One
was for implements designed to flog, whip, chafe, hit. Cullen had commandeered the black flogger
he adored so much. But there was more in there besides. Three different dragon tails that all were
unbelievably painful. Many more floggers, including those that stung so much that Cullen scowled
every time he looked at them. There was also a flogger made of horsehair which Cullen had
laughed at, and had felt gentle and sensual, until Bull had laid into Cullen with a will, and Cullen
had realised that they could hurt.

There were two leather straps – one that sounded far too muted for the pain it caused, and one
designed to crack loudly. There was a single wooden paddle with holes through the wood, and
Cullen still wasn’t sure how he felt about that one. He suspected he could grow to love it, but Bull
only introduced it in moments, as though conditioning Cullen’s awareness to a different kind of
impact.

There were also two canes, but they leaned almost innocently against the wardrobe, with the
walking sticks. They were only soaked when Bull had need of them, and they weren’t used to draw
blood. Cullen still hated them.

The second chest held other implements, and Cullen opened that less often, and almost never when
Bull wasn’t there. In it were clips and clamps, cock-rings, plugs and dildos, lengths and lengths of
rope in different thicknesses, almost all of it coloured golden-brown. There was also a feathered
mantle that resembled a lion’s mane, and beside that several collars and several leashes that were
used in something that Bull called ‘a game we can try.’ But it was nothing like a game when they’d
tried it, and there were some things that both made Cullen breathless to try again, and terrified of
what it might mean if he liked it.

The second chest also held a polished pair of shears, as well as healing unguents and salve, and a
healthy stock of elfroot. Stitches brewed special batches for Cullen with other herbs in it that
changed the flavour, and since then, Cullen no longer had much of a compunction when taking it.
Amazing, that something so simple could wear almost all of his resistance away.

His armour was near constantly on the rack. He didn’t worship the Templar Order insignia on it
anymore, and there was no point getting fitted for a new set. He had a mail jerkin he could pull on
in a pinch, and given that most of the Templars were still handy with weapons and still sparring if
they were well enough – any bandits that came were dealt with swiftly and soundly. Moorvale was
safer than it had ever been, of late.

In his room, he also had a vase enamelled with dawnstone, and a framed cross-stitch of a pink
nugface orchid – a gift when he left the Inquisition. Throughout his house were other pink items,
Bull making good on his promise to offer housewarming presents that were somewhat
unconventional.

Cullen would never have said it aloud, but he loved them all. Bull’s touch in his house was a
combination of crude and sweet. There was the giant, curving dragon’s horn he’d brought back with him and took up nearly an entire wall – Cullen had hung it with a Wintersend garland, which Bull called sacrilegious while wiping a mock tear away from his eye. Then there were a matching set of white doilies with embroidered pink roses neatly at the corners. Painted coasters from Val Royeaux, each depicting a different mask, well-crafted and unified with a faint rose tinge throughout. A sculpture of a bouquet of flowers made from delicate seashells, blushing pink and lilac and cerulean.

Bull sometimes explained his tastes as:

‘You’ll never know what your shitting luck will be when you go looting.’

But just as often it was:

‘I liked it. Thought you might too.’

It wasn’t exactly Cullen’s taste, which tended to be not very far-ranging and was mostly all about Fereldan iconography – winter, hounds, wheat and very little else. It didn’t matter. Cullen’s tastes were changing, and he preferred it that way.

He enjoyed that his home evolved as his heart did: slowly, and with not much rhyme or reason, but always moving towards comfort and contentment.

*

Late in the evening, Cullen and Bull lay before the fire. Cullen had commissioned a local carpenter and upholsterer to make a couch that would fit Bull’s height and breadth, and it had the side effect of being large enough that they could both lounge on it together. It was piled with more folded blankets and plump cushions than Cullen’s actual bed.

Staunch lay so close to the fire it was a miracle he didn’t singe his whiskers off. Every now and then his giant paw pads would twitch, and Cullen supposed he was chasing birds insufferably even in his sleep.

Bull’s chin was pressed against the top of Cullen’s head, and Cullen’s back rested against Bull’s chest.

“How are you with all of this?” Cullen said. “Is it still what you want?”

“Fuck yeah,” Bull said, and Cullen could hear the smile in his voice. “It’s different, but I like different.”

Bull didn’t talk of his feelings all too often, and Cullen only drew him out of that sometimes. He knew that Bull still nursed wounds he couldn’t quite cleanse, that there were matters he’d always feel sore about. If Cullen could lay a balm across them every evening, he would.

“Krem says your knee has been giving you a bit more grief than it usually does,” Cullen said.

“Ah, he doesn’t keep anything from you anymore, does he? The little shit.”

“I have eyes, Bull, I can observe for myself. But no, I don’t think he does. I rather think he likes having someone to vent to about you.”

Bull made a grumbling noise and pulled Cullen closer.
‘I’m coming back for the summer,’ Bull said. ‘Not the whole summer, but some of it. I want to see what it’s like, you complaining about the warm weather and I dunno, flowers or something. Looking forward to it.’

‘Are you?’ Cullen said, thinking that this combination of warmth from the fire at his front, and warmth from Bull at his back was something he never wanted to end. He’d learned that perfection existed, even if it was subjective.

‘Shit yeah,’ Bull said, pulling Cullen closer. ‘Looking forward to all of it. You deciding to get off your ass and actually asking me to hit you was the best thing that happened to me in a while.’

Cullen laughed, rolled his eyes.

‘I was terrified.’

‘I know,’ Bull said. ‘I thought you just wanted me to fuck you. Never forget you being all, ‘hey now, I just want you to hit me, none of that affection or any of that bullshit I desperately want, just beat me and go on your way. By the way, I’m in charge of everything ever, and I’m the King of Everything That Happens To Me.’ That was how it went, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s how I remember it,’ Cullen said. ‘Especially that ‘King of Everything That Happens To Me,’ that sounds like me.’

‘Think it proves you’re not really fit for like…monarchy or anything.’

‘Oh, I’m insulted now.’

‘And then it ended with me being all in love with you,’ Bull said.

He said it casually, even though it was only the second time he’d ever actually said the words. The first time, Cullen had been in the midst of an episode and suspected that Bull thought he was unconscious at the time.

Now, he said it as though he’d been saying it all along. Cullen smiled, turned his head up towards Bull and made a small noise at the bruises that pulled in his back. Bull pressed his nose against Cullen’s forehead, and Cullen felt the rise and fall of Bull’s breath against his skin and felt heated through and pleased.

‘I just mean,’ Bull continued, ‘of all the ways this was probably supposed to go, this probably wasn’t in the books for me. Not sure Koslun lay it out like this.’

‘Yes, perhaps,’ Cullen said, ‘but if it is as you say – that we are hardly anything at all in a greater, restful world, then I don’t think it matters.’

‘Oh look at you, all relaxed about it. Nice. Gonna remember this moment the next time you panic about something.’

‘So you mean in an hour then,’ Cullen said, as Bull’s arms tightened around him.

‘That’s generous,’ Bull drawled. ‘I was thinking more like ten minutes, but okay, if you think my memory can hold out that long, we’ll give it an hour.’

‘That’s my innate optimism for you,’ Cullen said, and Bull laughed. ‘What? I like to see the best in everything. That’s like me, isn’t it?’
Cullen remembered sitting in his chair in his office at Skyhold a long time ago, trying to control his breathing, not even aware that he was shaking. He remembered Bull sitting before him, and the clumsy proposition that Cullen had placed between them.

But what he remembered most was the desperation, the need for it all to work.

This, instead, was some fertile ground far beyond what he’d ever expected or knew to hope for.

Bull said he looked forward to the summer, but Cullen didn’t need it. It wasn’t that he was afraid of the future as he used to be, it was just that the present was so very perfect, and he needed nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

A story this long doesn’t get written without some help. In fact a story this long doesn’t get written at all without inspiration. I’d like to thank Sinope for being my official introduction to this pair with such incredible writing, and I’d like to thank Dragonflies_and_Katydids and SoManyJacks for also writing such amazing stories (in this pairing and others), if you wish to find extremely deft and accomplished writing, I highly recommend you check out all of these people. There are plenty of other amazing writers in the fandom, but these are the ones who had me purchasing my very first Dragon Age game, and playing Inquisition as ‘story research.’

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(Also, I’m not ruling out oneshots in the future set in this universe! We’ll see what happens :D)

Works inspired by this one: Colourless by KazeChama

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