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Look me up on Twitter/Insta (@lexibanner), or FB (@authorlexibanner). I post funny, sexy, dumb, and writery stuff! Enjoy!
A shorter adventure in Thedas, mostly of my own creation, but using elements of the game too. Hope everyone enjoys seeing some old friends!

(PS: If you haven't read any of their previous adventures, check it out here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/5557877/chapters/12819848)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter by jinbaittai

Gina sighed in relief as she stepped through the heavy doors leading to their room. No one had interrupted her with ‘one more question’. She was free for the night. Much as she enjoyed playing an integral role within the Inquisition, some days felt never ending.

She dragged her feet up the stairs and froze in place at the sight greeting her. It was like an explosion had taken place. She crept carefully through the minefield of discarded toys and scribble-covered papers, and found her two favourite people in a chair next to the fireplace.

Bull had a small book still loosely gripped in his big hand as his head hung toward his chest in sleep. Kaya was sitting on his lap, her head lolled against his arm. Both were snoring like little buzzsaws.

Gina stared at the pair, fighting the urge to cry in delight. Despite all of the trouble and hardships, somehow she'd managed to find herself a slice of heaven. She quickly dashed away an errant tear and gently tugged the small book free from his hand.

Bull’s eye fluttered open. A sleepy smile came to his face as he registered her standing there. “Hey,” he whispered hoarsely.

“You too, Bull,” she whispered, picking up his hand and pressing a kiss to the palm. He curled his fingers around hers and pulled her toward him. She climbed onto the free space of his lap and settled against his chest. He sighed and rested his cheek against the top of her head. As she brushed the dark hair away from Kaya’s forehead, he let out another rumbling snore.

Gina let out a sigh of her own and shifted to get more comfortable. As her eye drifted shut, she couldn’t help but wonder how on any planet she’d ever gotten so lucky.

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When Bull woke, he had a serious kink in his neck. It took him a minute to register where he was, or why he felt strangely cool. Both girls were gone, a realization that made an automatic pang of panic jolt him upright.

As he was getting to his feet, Gina slipped out of Kaya’s room, her pale face just barely visible in the moonlight. She left the little door just slightly ajar and turned to face him. Bull watched as she navigated through the disaster of toys and skewed furniture. When she reached him, a wry smile came to her face. “Did you two have fun tonight?”

He pulled her into a hug. “We always have fun. Sure missed having Tama around though.”

She made a little grumbling noise. “I tried to get away early. I’m so glad Cassandra and crew are back next week.”

“Me too. I need Krem to handle some Charger business.” Bull stroked a hand down her back. “Then maybe we can get out of this place for a little while.”

“Careful what you wish for,” she retorted. “We don’t have a good track record for relaxing road trips.”

He laughed softly and started guiding her toward the stairs leading to their bedroom. “That was
when we had an asshole archdemon plaguing the world.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Now it’s just bandits, marauders, Venatori, and big bad bears we have to deal with.”

“Don’t forget about the Giants, and the rogue Red Templars still refusing to accept that their new god is dead,” added Bull. “No big deal.”

Gina shook her head. “No big deal, indeed.”

Bull scooped her into his arms and kissed her forehead before unceremoniously tossing her to the bed. She landed with a huffing laugh. “Real smooth, tough guy.”

He crawled onto the bed and over top of her. “You love it. Admit it.”

“I admit nothing,” she said, her hands trailing over his shoulders and down his arms.

Bull growled and nipped at her lips. “You know I have ways to make you talk.”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “I’d like to see you try.”

“I bet you would,” he whispered as he took a long taste along the side of her neck. As he drew away, the skin pebbled and the defiance in her eye had turned into something a lot more pleading. Bull slowly worked at the clasps on her jacket, kissing and nipping at every inch of beautiful pale skin he revealed. By the time he released the last one, she was breathing harder and clutching at his shoulders.

He pulled her to a sitting position and dragged the jacket off her shoulders and down her arms. As he tossed the jacket to the floor, his eye skimmed over the dormant mark on her shoulder. He still didn’t know if the sight made him happy or worried. He pressed a kiss over its edges and turned his attention to the bra in his way.

It was a new one, all bright purple and turquoise. The tailor in Val Royeaux had really outdone herself on this set. Not that he spent much time looking at the thing. It followed the jacket’s path to the floor and left her spectacular tits exposed for his eager viewing pleasure.

She boldly accepted his gaze, which absolutely turned him on. No shyness there, pretend or otherwise. Just a woman who enjoyed being fucked by him. Over and over. He growled and took one of her hard little nipples into his mouth. The action dragged a ragged moan from her lips as she gripped the back of his head. He nipped and suckled at her before releasing and switching to the other straining peak.

Bull pushed her back to the bed and caught her lips in a long kiss that left them both breathless. “You are so beautiful,” he said as gazed at her face.

A tiny hint of pink colored her cheeks, one smooth and perfect, the other gouged and pitted. “I’m glad you think so,” she whispered.

Bull recalled the moment she’d fallen from the sky like it had happened a second ago rather than months. Bloody and battered, but victorious and alive. “I know so, Kadan.”

She pulled him back for another kiss and then reached up toward the string holding his eye patch in place. He stilled, waiting for her to fumble through the knots. When the metal and leather fell away, she lifted onto her elbow and kissed gently over the empty socket.
Then it was his turn. He slowly untied the satin ribbon holding the patch over her missing eye. The patch was different from his, designed in such a way that she could hide more or less of her scarring depending on how she arranged it. The satin was pretty and soft, so much like her. He tossed it to the side and traced his fingers over the ruined flesh of her cheek and eye socket.

Three grooves, like the claw marks of an animal, scored the right side of her face, and the eye socket was as empty as his left. The grooves clefted the bridge of her nose slightly, and dented the top of her left eye socket. She was lucky not to be entirely blind. Hell, she was lucky to be alive.

Scratch that. He was lucky she was alive.

His heart pounded as he pressed kisses over the scars. He still didn’t believe there were any gods around, but he couldn’t help sending a thanks out into the universe. Her fingers traced down his chest and made quick work of the buckles holding his chest harness in place. He shrugged out of it impatiently, wanting all barriers between their skin gone. It took him less than a minute to shed both of their pants.

Freed from their clothing, they pressed together and moved in unison. Her small frame was dwarfed by his, but she met him boldly. He growled and trailed his mouth and teeth down her front, taking one more taste of each perfect breast before dipping lower. Her stomach went taut under his palms as he kissed just beneath her navel. He growled in anticipation as he lifted her leg over his shoulder and nipped the soft skin on her inner thigh.

She was whimpering as he slid his thumb over the beautifully wet slit between her legs. “Ready to admit you love my moves, Kadan?”

Before she could say anything, sarcastic or otherwise, he dragged the pad of his thumb over her clit. Her back arched instantly, a little cry of delight exploding from her lips. “There’s more where that came from,” he said, taking another slow nip on her thigh. “Just say the magic words.”

“I admit I love your moves,” she said, the words tumbling over themselves.

He laughed. “You’re too easy tonight, Kadan.” His thumb returned to her clit, making her tremble and growl his name. All traces of humour left him as he watched her wanton reactions to his ministrations. “Damn,” he groaned as he brought his mouth to her and took his first taste.

It was like honey, only better. He couldn’t get enough of her, couldn’t stop sliding his tongue over every fold and lapping up every drop her little body had to offer. His hands gripped into the firm flesh of her ass and lifted her to him as he delved deeper with his tongue.

The little vixen hooked her knees around his shoulders and dragged her fingers through the stubble coating his head, pulling him tighter to her pussy. He left her to support herself and returned his fingers to their exploration. He began to slowly sink one finger into the heated centre of her, watching in savage delight as her eye rolled back in her skull and she groaned his full name.

He took his time, drawing her slowly to the edge until she was begging for release. With each finger, the cries got more desperate, and more explicit. For him to fuck her. For him to come inside her. For him to treat her like the bad girl she truly was. Bull barely held onto the reins holding the beast within at bay, waiting until she was prepared for the fucking he planned to give her.

It felt like forever, but finally the muscles surrounding his fingers eased. He licked his lips before sitting back and twirling a finger through the air. “Flip,” he commanded breathlessly.

Gina complied, turning onto her stomach and lifting her hips enticingly. She turned her head back
toward him, the dark desire in her eye sending him to the edge. As she watched him, he massaged the head of his cock with the residual juices of her, adding to his own ample lubrication. He met her eye as he pressed himself into her pussy, trembling with the effort of slowly pushing himself to the hilt.

Her eye fluttered shut and she moaned his name as he began to thrust into her. Bull reached out and gripped her hair as he rutted into her, grunting in Qunlat that he couldn’t stop if he wanted to. And then the little firebrand began responding in Qunlat, and he was done for.

All vestiges of control he held over the inner beast fell away and it roared into action, driving his cock into her with nearly full force. Her Qunlat began to stutter, but she didn’t stop, even when she began to quake and tremble violently with her climax. He joined her a breath later, the force of his orgasm making him see stars.

He fell onto his forearms and heaved for air. They were both sleek with sweat, even in the chill of the room. He pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck and growled. “One of these days I’m just going to keel over.”

She made a satisfied little purr and reached back to pat his hip. “You’re not that old, sweetheart.”

Bull barked a laugh and slapped her on the ass. “You’re lucky you’re so damn cute, Kadan.”

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Gina curled into Bull’s side. He dragged his thumb in circles over the curve of her hip. “Where are we going to go?”

He shrugged lightly. “Anywhere you want, as long as its Val Royeaux.”

Gina smirked. “I see. Any particular reason?”

“Work,” he grumbled. “Not the entire time. But I have to meet with some contacts that can’t come out here.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“A little of column A, and a little of column B.” He shifted and pulled her tighter. “I have a guy buried pretty deep into the local government. He can’t leave because it’ll look strange. But there are a few nobles that think they’re calling the shots by having me come to them instead.”

“And how well is that going to work for them?”

“Not very well.” He sighed. “But it’s worrying. Not because I’m afraid of them, but because it speaks to how much they respect the Inquisition. We need to garner more respect or we’ll never be taken seriously.”

Gina scoffed. “Saving the world wasn’t enough?”

“They didn’t personally witness it, so no.”

She scowled and traced a finger over one of his scars. “What’s your plan?”

He kissed her forehead and rolled to face her. “Be my charming self.”

She narrowed her eye. “Your charming self is prone to using sharp and pointy things.”
He grinned, his teeth gleaming in the dim light. “Sharp and pointy things tend to make people pay attention.”

Gina shook her head. “What if you can’t use sharp or pointy things?”

Bull brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Diplomacy. They all have something they really want. I can’t see what it is through reports alone, so once I’m there, I can find a way to get them on side.”

She frowned. “Sounds like a lot of room for error.”

He nodded and kissed her forehead. “Always a chance they won’t play ball in the end.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then we use secrets and coercion. And if that isn’t enough, it’s back to the sharp and pointy.”

Gina swallowed. “Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Me too.”

They lay in silence for a while before Gina said, “Val Royeaux, huh?”

He nodded. “I haven’t been there for almost three years now, thanks to a certain pretty someone.”

Gina felt herself blushing. She didn’t agree with his description of her, but it was nice to hear nonetheless. “Has it really been that long?”

He nodded. “I asked Varric one day, just after the accident. He gave me a rough timeline.”

An uncomfortable feeling settled in her chest. Nearly three years since she’d arrived in Thedas. How much had her world changed in that time? She didn’t like thinking about it.

Morrigan was still missing, having left a note that said she would return when she’d discovered the secrets of the Eluvians. There hadn’t been any word in the nearly six months since. Jeremy was bitter at the woman’s absence, though he seemed to be coping better as the days went by. Gina suspected Dorian had something to do with that, but didn’t poke her nose into their business.

A finger traced over her cheek. “You went quiet on me, Kadan,” Bull said softly.

She sighed and kissed his palm. “Just thinking unhappy thoughts.”

He shifted closer and cupped his hand over her bottom. “Well, lucky for you I specialize in erasing unhappy thoughts.”

And he did.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

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The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Bull woke to the approach of whispers and giggling. He lay very still, feigning sleep. Less than a minute later, a little body was on the bed and charging at him. She landed on his gut and nearly knocked the wind out of him. He caught her in his arms as he sat up. “Who dares wake up the Mighty Warrior?” he growled fiercely, nibbling at her ear.

She squealed and giggled. “Papa, no eat Kaya!”

Bull kissed her loudly on the cheek. “But you’re so tasty, Imekari.”

“No!” She shook her head fiercely.

Gina crawled onto the bed with a platter of food. “Breakfast in bed, Mighty Warrior?”

His stomach piped up with his answer before he could open his mouth, making Kaya roar with laughter. “Laugh at me, will you?” he said, before tickling her, turning the laughs into little shrieks of protest.

Bull couldn’t think of a better way to wake up.

Gina smiled at them and flicked a lock of hair away from her face. The movement revealed a hint of the love bite he’d placed there last night. His gut tightened. That would be a pretty damn good way to wake up too.

***

Gina and Kaya wandered across the courtyard together, making their way toward Cullen’s office. She and Kaya were learning the names of bugs, and the little girl was enthusiastically pointing out every crawly critter she could see.

Gina had to grit her teeth when Kaya pointed out a particularly large spider web. Thankfully the
owner of the thing wasn’t visible. Before it could appear, she pretended to see a butterfly. She wasn’t proud of her lie, but figured it was better than to traumatize the little girl by shrieking her fool head off when the spider showed up.

Finally they reached Cullen’s office and knocked on the door. He called out for them to come in. As they walked inside, Kaya headed straight over to the map table and clambered onto a chair to look at all of the intricately carved markers. Cullen had taught the little girl not to touch the things, but that didn’t diminish her fascination with them.

Cullen was at his desk, not working on anything. Gina lifted a brow. “You okay, General? I’ve never seen you sitting so still.”

He shrugged morosely. Gina frowned. “Okay, spill it, buddy.”

Cullen lifted a sheet of paper and tossed it back to the desk with a frown. “Tulta has just issued me an ultimatum.”

“What kind of ultimatum?”

He sighed. “One that won’t work in either of our favour, I’m afraid.”

Gina reached for it and gave him a questioning look. He nodded. She picked it up and scanned the tidy script quickly, and felt her heart sink for the man. Tulta was demanding that they take the next step in their relationship. Marriage. If Gina knew the General as well as she thought she did, he wasn’t anywhere near ready for that step.

“It’s just not practical. I don’t understand it. She won’t leave Crestwood, and I can’t leave the Inquisition.” Cullen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Why can’t she be more patient?”

She laid the letter on the table and frowned. “I don’t know. But I can’t imagine this is easy on either of you. Long distance was nearly impossible in my world, and we had the technology to speak instantly and even see each other. Having to wait months to see each other, and days for letters?”

Gina shuddered. “It’s hard enough when Bull is gone for a week.”

He scowled. “It is hard. But it was a worthy sacrifice. Or so I thought.”

Gina rested her hip on the edge of his desk. “Are you sure you want to choose the Inquisition? What if she’s the One?”

“There is so much to do. Our world is still in tatters. How could I walk away now? What sort of man would I be?” His blue eyes met hers. “I can’t help feeling like the One would understand the commitment I’ve made and respect that.”

Gina sighed. “You make a fair point. Maybe she thinks that the world is safe without Corypheus.”

Cullen scoffed. “It's almost worse. Without a leader, his followers are just attacking without warning or logic. It's nearly impossible to predict. And she knows this. Crestwood itself was attacked three weeks ago.”

Gina scowled. Though no lives had been lost locally, a few of Bull’s agents had been killed routing the small band of attackers. Without their sacrifice, the dam at Caer Bronach would have been lost. Cullen scrubbed a hand down his face. “Perhaps this is inevitable. I can’t honestly say I wanted to settle down in Crestwood, and it’s becoming clear that she never intends to leave.”

“I don’t know what to say, Cullen. Sometimes things are just meant to be, and sometimes even good
things fall apart.” She sighed. “Regardless, you're a catch. So if you and Tulta don't work out, we won't have any trouble finding you some other dates.”

He smirked. “Like I have time for that.”

She rolled her eye. “You'll make time.”

Kaya toddled across the room to Cullen’s side. He glanced down at her and she raised her arms. There was a second where Gina thought he might avoid the contact, but he picked her up. Before he could settle her on his lap, she wrapped her little arms around his neck and squeezed.

His eyes widened briefly before he sighed and returned the gesture. Cullen patted Kaya’s back. “I needed that. Thank you, little one.”

***

Bull watched from his high balcony as Cassandra and her group approached the Keep. He gave a sharp whistle and attached a note to the crow that responded. With a whisper, he sent his note down to the gate, and waited eagerly.

A few minutes later, his patience was rewarded as Krem took the note off the crow. Even from this far away he could practically feel the lieutenant rolling his eyes.

“Looking terrible as usual, Krem Brulee. Come see me when you’re settled.”

Bull laughed to himself and returned inside to finish reading his reports.

It had been nearly six months since the events at the Temple of the Falling Ashes, and there still wasn’t a single sighting of Solas, despite every agent under his control keeping careful watch for him. If he ever found the elf, he planned to interrogate him for his hiding technique.

The Venatori were still active, and held most of his attention. Everyday he had a fresh stack of reports on their activities throughout Ferelden and Orlais. He wondered what it would take to fully unroot their cult. The death of Corypheus clearly hadn't been enough. Despite his taking out every financial backer he discovered, they were still flush with cash. It was frustrating, to say the least.

He was fully absorbed in the details of one of their smuggling rings when Krem finally joined him. The man tossed his note on the desk. “Got your message. I’ve got a new nickname?”

Bull smirked. “Until I think of a new one.”

Krem sighed and sank into a chair. “Lucky me.”

Bull sat back and examined the man. “How was your trip?”

Krem shrugged. “Spent most of my time listening to people gossip.”

“Anything useful?”

“Do we care that Lady Geneva is sleeping with Lady Desmond?”

Bull wrote it into a notebook. “Dunno. Worth keeping in my back pocket though. Make me a few notes when you've got time.” He reached onto a shelf and tugged a stack of reports free. “I have some work for the Chargers. Let me know which ones you want to handle first.”

“You're still treating us like a mercenary group? Why not absorb us into the Inquisition?”
Bull stared at him in horror. “You’re my guys.”

Krem gave him a tired smile. “We’d still be your guys, Spy Master.”

“It wouldn’t be the same,” he grumbled.

Krem rolled his eyes. “You’re going soft, Chief.”

Bull ignored the dig. “How did Cassandra do?”

Krem shifted in his seat and wouldn’t meet his eye. “I’m not sure, actually. I mean, she accomplished what we set out to do. But…” He trailed away and cleared his throat. “We broke up.”

Bull’s eyebrows shot up. “Beg pardon?”

“She refused to be seen in public with me. It got real old, real fast. So we had a fight, and that’s that. It’s over, and I’m okay with it.” Krem’s cheeks went scarlet. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Before he could even shrug in response, Krem surged to his feet. “I mean, how stupid is that? We were just fine to fight at each other’s side against Corypheus. But I can’t be with her if some snotty nobles are around?”

Bull squirmed, and felt his eye getting wider as the lieutenant began to pace as he ranted. “It’s not like I was asking her to act indecent. Just talk to me. Hold my stupid hand. Aren’t we worth those gestures? Don’t we matter just as much as the Inquisition?”

Bull pressed his lips together. Krem rounded on him. “And then she had the gall to tell me that I’m selfish. That I just wanted to put her into a difficult position, to force her to choose me over her duties. I mean, am I crazy to think we could have had the best of both worlds?”

Bull cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Krem.”

“I told you, I don’t want to talk about it!” Krem snatched up the reports and stormed away, leaving Bull in stunned silence.

***

Gina steered Brego around the corner, and aimed for the next jump. At the last second she realized that she cut him far too tight to safely make the leap. He slammed on the brakes before she could react, and sent her crashing to the ground.

She lay there for a moment, wheezing and fighting to catch her wind. Bull’s face appeared above her, frantic with worry. “Kadan, you okay?”

It took her another two minutes to finally drag in enough air to speak coherently. “I’m okay,” she rasped. “What are you doing here?”

Bull helped her get to her feet. “I came to see if you wanted to get lunch.”

“Just in time to see me eat dirt, of course. It figures.”

He grimaced and dusted her off. “What happened? I’ve never seen Brego dump you like that before.”
She sighed and pointed to the eye patch. “It was my fault. I misjudged my distance. Again. This was actually him being kind. He could have launched me through the jump instead.”

Brego ambled over and shoved his head between them. Gina ruffled his forelock. “Sorry buddy.” He snorted and tossed his head.

Bull went around the horse and wrapped his arms around her. “The lunch offer stands.”

She nodded. “After I take another crack at that corner.”

He frowned, but didn’t argue. She accepted his assistance to get aboard the big bay, and gathered up her reins. Before riding away, she leaned down and kissed him. “Not often I get to be taller than you,” she whispered against his lips.

The crease between his eyebrows eased slightly. “It’s kind of hot, actually.”

She grinned and kissed him one more time. “For luck,” she said as she rode away.

A nervous energy flooded under her skin as she eyed the course of jumps again. Before she could psych herself out, she cued the bay into a steady rocking canter and circled him for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and rode toward the jump just before the tricky corner. Brego launched over the first jump easily, and Gina turned her focus to the corner.

She aimed him far wider than her instincts told her, and this time he had enough time to gather the power needed to leap smoothly through the combination of jumps. At the end of the course, she loosened the reins and patted the horse’s neck gratefully. “Thanks for not dumping me on my ass again,” she murmured.

As she dropped to the ground, Bull walked over, a relieved expression on his face. “Much better, Kadan.”

“Amazing what happens if I do my part correctly,” she said. A stable hand came over and took Brego from her. “Did I tell you that I might have found your new horse?”

Bull cocked his head. “I’m getting a new horse? What’s wrong with Fuzzy?”

“Nothing. He just has a new job now.”

Before Bull could respond, the sound of plodding hoofbeats behind him caught their attention. Grim was leading Fuzzy and his passenger. Kaya was perched on the horse’s broad back. She looked tinier than ever, except for the giant grin spreading from ear to ear. “Papa! Look!” she cried.

He walked over and gave Fuzzy a rub behind the ears. “Are you stealing Papa’s pony, Imekari?”

She nodded eagerly. “Fuzzy!”

Gina came to Bull’s side and wrapped her arm around his waist. “He’s perfect for her.”

Bull’s jaw twitched. “He’s a little big, isn’t he?”

She snorted. “My first horse was bigger.”

“You broke your arm on your first horse,” he said pointedly.

Damn. She’d forgotten telling him that story. “He wasn’t as kind as Fuzzy.” She patted the big horse’s nose. “He’s just getting too old to carry you, Bull. I would retire him entirely for anyone
much bigger than her.”

Bull narrowed his eye at her. “Somewhere in there you're making a fat joke. Don't think I didn't notice.”

Gina sneered and grabbed at the skin over his stomach. There was next to nothing to grab. “Okay, tubby.”

He pinched her bottom before reaching out to Kaya. “Come for lunch?”

The little girl nodded. He scooped her off the horse and plunked her onto his shoulders. Grim waved and took Fuzzy toward the barn. Gina watched him for a moment before falling into step with Bull. “Do you think he'll ever talk?”

Bull shrugged. “Probably not. Hey, I have some serious gossip.”

“Oh, me too,” she exclaimed. “You go first.”

“Cassandra and Krem broke up.”


Bull explained and Gina shook her head. “That's so sad.”

He gave her a hard look. “No interfering. Krem told me about your little bookmark incident.”

Gina felt her cheeks go hot. “I wasn't going to interfere.”

Bull scoffed. “Yeah. And I'm a fairy princess.”

“Princess,” parroted Kaya, giving a delicate little wave from her perch on his shoulders.

Bull laughed. “Exactly.”

Gina rolled her eye. “I promise not to butt in where I'm not invited. Have you talked to Cassandra yet?”

He shook his head. “No. We have a meeting after lunch.”

“I hope she's okay.”

Bull frowned. “She made her choice. I'm sure she's just fine.”

Gina lifted a brow. “I somehow doubt it was that simple, tough guy.”

He shrugged. “What's your gossip?”

“Cullen and Tulta might be breaking up.”

His eye widened. “Why?”

“She wants a ring on it, and he's not there yet.” Gina shrugged. “It's sad, but I don't think he should rush into marriage if he's not ready, and she's made it clear that she needs the commitment or she's out.”

Bull sighed heavily and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Not a good day for relationships.”
Gina leaned into him. “Not really, no.”

He was silent for several paces before saying, “We're okay, right? You'd tell me if we weren't okay. Wouldn't you?” His eye was bright with worry.

Gina pulled him to a stop and put her hand over the dragon claw laying against his broad chest. “We're more than okay. I don't think I've ever been happier. I hope you feel the same way.”

He wrapped his arms around her tightly before kissing her. “Beyond happy,” he murmured.

“Kaya kisses too!”

He laughed and dropped his shoulders, sending the little girl tumbling into his arms. She laughed as he noisily kissed her cheeks several times. Then Gina smothered her with kisses.

As they started walking again, Gina reached out and took hold of his hand. “When are we going to hit the road to Val Royeaux?”

“I thought a week or two from now. Get caught up with Cassandra and Josephine, get the guys set up with a few weeks of work, and Bob's your uncle.”

Gina laughed. “I love when you use my sayings.”

He grinned. “I'll try to use them more often, Kadan.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Gina gave Vivenne a doubtful look. The woman arched a well-groomed brow. “Darling, you’re looking at me like I’ve never spoken to a child in my life.”

“How have you?” asked Gina.

Vivienne sighed sharply. “Of course I have. Children adore me.”

Gina somehow doubted that. Probably they were just too terrified to say anything other than positive things to Madame de Fer. She crouched down and took Kaya’s hands. The girl gazed back at her solemnly. “You be a very good girl for Auntie Viv.”

A delicate cough came from the woman. “I would prefer the child refer to me as Madame Vivienne.”

Gina glared up at the woman. “You’ll have to forgive Auntie Viv. Sometimes she takes herself entirely too seriously.”

The woman scowled but didn’t protest further. Kaya’s lower lip trembled ever so slightly, but then Vivienne held her hand out. “Come child. I have some fascinating things to show you.”

Kaya stared at her for a long moment before taking hold of the offered hand and following obediently. Gina watched them go, awed as always by the imposing woman’s ability to bend most living creatures to her will with little to no effort.

When Kaya didn’t burst into tears, or even bother looking back, she rose to her feet and headed for the war room. Vivienne had been present for everything that had happened in Halamshiral, making her presence at the meeting a moot point. Or so she said, anyway. As such, she’d offered to look after Kaya, much to Gina’s surprise and relief.

It wasn’t that childcare was difficult to come by in the Keep. There were easily half a dozen men and
women that made regular offers to babysit little Kaya. Bull was the difficult part of the equation. He trusted next to no one to watch his kid. Gina suspected that seeing how extensive and tangled the spy network was across Thedas had intensified his already slightly paranoid mindset.

Not to mention his constant vigilance against Par Vollen’s agents. There hadn’t even been whispers from that part of the world, but he remained fearful that they would come after her or Kaya. Gina couldn’t say she wasn’t worried about them as well. Two close calls were more than enough.

That typically left her the very shallow pool of Dagna and Grim if she needed someone to watch Kaya and Bull was busy. However, leaving Kaya in the hands of Vivienne was a no-brainer. Not even Bull would question her loyalty or her ability to protect their little girl. Gina wondered at the woman's true reason, but decided it probably didn't matter. As long as Kaya didn't come home with some terrible complex, everything would be fine.

She reached the war room and slipped into the chair beside Dorian. Bull was sitting with the rest of the Advisors. Even seated he towered head and shoulders over them. Gina wiggled her fingers at him and leaned into Dorian’s shoulder. The Mage wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. “Where’s that delightful little girl of yours?” he whispered.

“With Auntie Viv.”


Cassandra stood. Gina swallowed her snarky response as she took in the Inquisitor’s appearance. The woman was still fighting fit, but her skin tone was sallow and it seemed like she’d aged more than a decade during their four month absence. Her eyes were rimmed bright red, but she stood tall and spoke resolutely as she relayed the results of their negotiations.

The ruling trio still fought like cats and dogs and disagreed on most actions unless the outcome was too blatant to ignore. As such, every step forward seemed accompanied by two steps backward. “It is as though they disagree with one another on principle,” said Cassandra with a sour expression.

At this point Josephine rose to her feet. “There was only one solution. Divide and conquer. We could not get them to agree on everything, but they did recognize and defer to each other's strengths.”

Cassandra nodded. “Gaspard is a tactical wizard. With his help, we’ve managed to suppress the last of the Red Templars in the Exalted Plains. Emerald Graves should be cleared in the next few weeks. Ambassador Briala has been quite invaluable in convincing the elves to stop their rebellion. For now at least.”

Josephine said, “And Celene was able to convince the court that our forces should remain allied for the foreseeable future.”

Cullen lifted a hand. “Was that ever in question?”

Cassandra scowled. “There are a great many that see us as potential usurpers.”

“How quickly they forget who saved their sorry arses,” muttered Dorian.

Gina shifted in her seat uncomfortably. The night at the Winter Palace remained seared in her memory as a race against time. The three leaders had been so blinded by their own motives that they very nearly wound up losing the entire empire to Corypheus.
Now it was an entire court that saw only their own motivations. She couldn't help but worry that any agreement came with crossed fingers.

Gina frowned at the train of thought. Bull’s paranoia was rubbing off on her.

The conversation had moved to other matters while her mind was preoccupied. It took her a minute to realize they were discussing the other problem facing the Inquisition.

Bull.

He was absolutely effective in his role, and had shown great progress in routing the Venatori threat. But apparently the nobles thought he was just another dirty Ben-hassrath spy with ulterior motives.

He had a mildly amused expression. Gina pressed her lips together as Cassandra and Josephine described some of their interactions with the Orlesian court. A particularly nasty noble named Lady Cerise called him an untrained Mabari waiting in the wings to rip their throats out. Gina instantly hated her and her stupid name.

Finally Cassandra paused and turned to Bull. “I apologize the Iron Bull. We did defend you rigorously, but no one would pay mind.”

He shrugged easily. “It makes today's updates a little more entertaining, that’s all.”

Cassandra raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

Bull lifted a stack of papers. “These are all reports and letters from the Orlesian court.” As he spoke, he tossed page after page to the table. “It seems that Lady Thibault, Comte Alphonse, Lord Gelinaux, Marquis Mantillon, Lady Cerise,” he paused and waggled a particularly long scroll, “and about a dozen other nobles have secrets they’d like me to investigate. To test my mettle, apparently.”

Cassandra and Josephine exchanged shocked glances. Then Josephine shook her head. “It seems their protests were all facades.”

The Inquisitor sighed heavily. “To keep us on edge. And it worked.”

Cullen leaned on the table. “Don’t forget that we’re a threat to all of these people. We have the numbers and strength to do significant damage to their empire. I’ve also been hearing rumblings from the Ferelden nobility that they aren’t happy to have us residing within their borders.”

Bull nodded. “I’ve heard the same. But they aren’t too proud to have us wipe their enemies off the map. Funny how that works.”

Josephine looked weary. “Of course they aren’t. Especially when the money to do the work doesn’t come from their pocket.”

“But or the men from their ranks,” added Cullen, a bitter note to his voice.

Gina scowled. The politics of this world were so much like her own, and both irritated her beyond belief. The world was in shambles, but people were more concerned about getting their toes stepped on. She highly appreciated the role of the Inquisition, and being part of an organization that just dug into the meat of the problem gave her a sense of satisfaction she’d never felt anywhere else in her life.

She glanced at the table and saw that Bull was watching her. A half smile twitched at his lips. Gina felt a familiar surge of butterflies come to life in her stomach. After all this time and all they’d been
through, he made her feel like a lovesick teenager everyday.

An hour later, the meeting finally wrapped up. Gina waited while Bull chatted with Cassandra, allowing her mind to wander.

Varric and Hawke had been gone for nearly three months. Word was that the pair were creating their own trouble in Kirkwall. She missed them greatly. Varric never failed to deliver an amusing summation after meetings like this. He’d have loved to witness Bull’s big reveal.

Gina had received a few letters from Hawke, one in which he invited her and her family to visit him and ‘make his shack feel a little less empty’. She looked forward to a time when that was a real possibility, but for now she regularly sent him letters and drawings from Kaya. Even Bull had sent a letter. Of course he’d done little more than make fun of the man’s hair and fighting style, but it was more than she’d expected from him if she was honest.

Her thoughts drifted to Blackwall. The Warden had disappeared not long after Corypheus fell. Gina knew that he’d thought of Sera like a daughter, and that her death had crushed him. He’d barely stuck around for the elf’s memorial.

She wished he’d come back. Bull casually mentioned his whereabouts just often enough that she knew he kept the man in his sights, but he refused to reach out. “A man deserves time to sort himself out,” he told her.

The creak of a chair brought her back to the present. Bull was sitting beside her, his brow furrowed. Cassandra left the room and closed the door, leaving them alone. She squeezed his knee. “On a scale of one to ten, how much did you enjoy that?”

He laughed and covered her hand with his. “More than I have a right to, Kadan.”

“They’re still a bunch of pricks.”

He nodded. “It just confirms what I already knew. They are trying to keep themselves in a position of power over us. Which is actually in our favour.”

Gina tilted her head. “How so?”

“They’re insecure about their empire and doing everything they can to appear strong. It makes them easier to read and makes it easier to get what we want. We just have to adjust our approach. Play along with their charade.”

“How did you ever get so good at this stuff?”

He shook his head. “I’m terrible at it compared to some of the guys I used to work with. They’d have you licking their boots clean with a smile on your face, and you’d never even realize it was happening.”

“You underestimate yourself,” she retorted.

“You’re biased,” he countered, a smile coming to his lips. “And half blind. Literally and figuratively.”

Gina pulled a face at him. “Don’t need two eyes to know how fantastic you are.”

Bull leaned toward her and pressed his lips to hers. “I will never understand how I managed to get such loyalty from you.”
She traced his jaw, enjoying the roughness of his five o’clock shadow against the pads of her fingers. “So the nobles want to test you, do they?”

Bull smirked. “I’m guessing they each think they’re the only ones smart enough to take advantage of the untrained Mabari and his resources. It makes it so much easier to play them against each other.”

Gina smiled. “You’re always so ready to see the silver lining.”

He brushed her hair away from her neck and dragged his thumb lightly over the newly exposed skin. “Sometimes it’s easy to find, Kadan.”

A shiver chased down her spine. “You know what would be nice?”

“Hmm?” he murmured, pulling her over to straddle his lap.

She kneaded her hands into the muscles of his shoulders. “A night out. Not even a late one. Just a couple drinks. It’s been a few months.”

Bull splayed a hand over her back and pulled her tight to his chest. “I could be convinced. What about Kaya?”

“She’s with Auntie Viv. Maybe we can convince Vivienne to keep her longer.” Gina nipped along the side of his neck, making him growl softly.

“Do we have to go get drinks? I could spend the night right here,” he said in a husky voice. “Have my way with you right over the Frostback Mountains. Maybe a side trip to the Western Approach.”

Another shiver cascaded down her back. “¿Por que no los dos?”

He lifted a brow in question. She tugged him closer and whispered in his ear, “Why not both?”

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Bull could barely breathe, let alone form a coherent thought. Gina was still pinned under him, the heat from her little body pleasant against his chest and stomach. He laid his forehead on the table and supported his weight on his forearms. Her hands skimmed across his chest and up the back of his neck before winding up to the base of his horns. She began to gently scratch and massage the skin there, making pleasant tingles spread across his body.

He sighed and pretended to sag on top of her. She gave a little squeak and laughed breathlessly. “Get off me, you big lunk!”

He moaned piteously and shook his head. “Can’t. Too comfy.”

“I can change that,” she said in a warning tone.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Her fingers shot toward his ribs.

Before she could make contact, he flinched and jerked out of reach. She giggled. “I still can’t believe how ticklish you are.”

Bull bared his teeth at her. “Careful Kadan. I’m still bigger than you.”

She shrugged and began to sit up. As her marked shoulder began to bear weight, she gasped and
flinched. He caught her up instantly, worrying flaring to life. “You okay?”

She nodded and rubbed at the spot with an irritated expression. “I wish I knew what would set it off,” she muttered.

Bull inspected it closely. The gash had never filled in, though the green light never had returned after her foray into the Fade. She didn’t know it, but he’d watched her trying to get the mark to come back to life. It hadn’t, no matter what she did. They didn’t talk about it, but he could see that it bothered her. He wished Solas was there to ask, though the elf probably wouldn’t have given them a straight answer.

Gina brushed a hand over his jaw. “Don’t worry about it, tough guy.”

He kissed her gently. “Hard not to, Kadan.”

She rested her cheek against his chest. He smoothed a hand over her hair. With each month passing, silver strands multiplied, leaving her with several large streaks of silver mixed in with her dark hair. He thought it gave her an exotic appearance, though he wasn’t sure she would agree with him. Actually, he wasn’t even sure she knew just how much silver was in her hair these days. It was rare to see her looking directly into a mirror since losing her eye.

“Shall we go for a drink?”

He nodded and kissed the top of her head. “Do you think Madam Vivienne will watch Kaya?”

Gina shrugged as she got dressed. “If not, I’ll see if Dagna is free.”

The dwarf adored Kaya and was usually eager to hang out and play. Bull took one last feel of Gina’s pretty little tits before she pulled her jacket on. “We need to get her a nice present when we’re in Val Royeaux.”

She nodded. “Some new schematics, maybe.”

They began walking toward Vivienne’s loft. Gina gave him a gentle shove. “Go meet the boys. I’ll catch up.”

He gave her a doubtful glance. “I’ve heard that line before.”

She lifted on her toes and kissed him, long and hard. When they pulled apart, his heart was pounding. Her green eye was sparkling. “I’ll be there.” Then she turned and jogged lightly up the stairs.

He made his way to the Charger’s quarters first, hoping to catch Krem and the others. He trained with the crew on a regular basis, but hadn’t made the time to hang out with them in weeks. No one was home, so he headed straight over to the tavern, hoping his instincts were correct.

As he walked inside, Cabot gave him a sour look and jerked his chin to the back corner of the room. Bull heard the raucous laughter before his head could make the complete turn. The guys were there, and they were clearly a few drinks into the night.

He strode over. Krem caught sight of him and went slightly pink. Bull pretended not to notice as he settled into his usual seat. “Well look who’s not too important to party tonight,” said Rocky with a smirk.

Bull grinned. “Hard to party when you can’t keep your eye open.”
“Most people have two for that very reason,” said Krem drily.

Bull laughed. “Real nice, Krem Brulee.”

Cabot arrived with an armload of mugs and set them heavily onto the table. “I expect you lot to behave tonight,” he said sharply.

“Who, us?” said Skinner in an innocent voice.

Bull grimaced. The Chargers were bored. And bored Chargers tended to find their own entertainment. Three months ago they had nearly burned the place to the ground when they invented a new drinking game involving one of Rocky’s explosive creations. A month later they’d caused a brawl of epic proportions, which lead to Cabot replacing most of the furniture in the room. On Bull’s coin. It had taken all of his charm and sweet-talking to get the boys allowed within sight of the tavern, let alone inside the doors.

It wasn’t until a week later when they picked a fight with Cullen’s new recruits that he lost his mind at them. “I have enough bullshit to deal with on a daily basis! I should be able to trust you to act like civilized people rather than the animals I hired ten years ago. If you’re that fucking bored, I’ll put you to work.” When no one dared meet his furious gaze, he snapped, “Last warning. Gathis needs trench diggers, and I’m positive Cullen could find good use for you too. I have no problem handing any of your sorry asses over.”

They’d been good kids in the days since, but he was still relieved to have Krem back in the Keep. His lieutenant would have the time to get them back into fighting form and out working, which would hopefully curtail any future troublemaking.

Bull was at the tail end of his second drink when the doors of the tavern opened to admit a small cluster of people. At the back of the group was Gina, but he hardly recognized her. Gone was her typical leather jacket and slim pants. In their place was a red dress that hugged every curve and exposed most of her back. He stared as she strutted over to the bar and took a seat before talking to Cabot.

After a moment, it was clear that she had no intention of joining him and the Chargers. Bull frowned and drained the last few mouthfuls of ale, then got to his feet and pushed his way to the bar. As he sat, he touched her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

She flinched away and gave him a dirty look. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

It took him more than a few seconds to notice the playful glow in her eye. Bull bit back a harsh retort and decided to play along with her act. See where she’d take them. He bowed his head and said, “My apologies. You look just like someone I used to know.”

“I get that a lot,” she said as she turned back to her drink and took a long swallow, finishing her drink.

“May I buy you a drink?” he asked her.

“I don’t usually let strangers buy me anything,” she said shortly.

Damn, of course. After so long together, he’d forgotten what it was like to pick up a girl at the bar. “My name is the Iron Bull.”

She lifted a brow. “That’s not your real name, is it?”
The sass in her voice brightened his mood. She was playing hard to get. Bull grinned. “That is my real name. I picked it myself.”

“Why on earth would you call yourself Iron Bull?”

“The Iron Bull,” he corrected. “I like having an article at the front. It makes it sound like I’m not even a person, just a mindless weapon. An implement of destruction. That really works for me.”

She didn’t appear impressed. “But why The Iron Bull? Why that name in particular?”

He smirked and leaned a little closer. “You might find this hard to believe, but I like hitting things.”

A little smile tugged at the corners of her lips. “Interesting.”

It was nearly impossible to keep his hands to himself, to keep in character as a stranger. “I didn’t catch your name, pretty lady.”

“Virginia,” she said. “Virginia Carter.”

He blinked at the use of her real name. But it worked for her act. He certainly didn’t know Virginia Carter as well as he knew Gina. His Kadan. “Interesting name,” he said. “Is that Orlesian?”

A real smile came to her face. “It’s Latin. You’ve probably never heard it before.”

Bull tore his eye away from the acres of porcelain skin revealed by the dress. “Well, Virginia Carter, are we still strangers, or am I allowed to buy you a drink yet?”

She gave him an appraising stare before shrugging lightly. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt.”

Bull lifted two fingers toward Cabot and pointed to the Maraas-lok cask on the back shelf. “Come here often?” he asked.

She laughed derisively, making his jaw tense. After a moment she shook her head. “That line usually works better, doesn’t it?”

He forced himself to relax. “Usually. Apparently I underestimated my quarry tonight.”

“Am I your quarry?”

He leaned closer, forcing her to tip her chin up. “Indeed.”

“You may regret that,” she said softly.

He raked his eye from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. “I doubt it.”

Cabot dropped two mugs of the potent Maraas-lok on the counter and pulled a face as he wiped his hands on his pants. Bull slid one closer to her and lifted the other. Before drinking, he held his mug out to her and said, “To meeting new people.”

She tapped her mug against his. Both took a drink and coughed a few times. Bull growled in satisfaction as warmth blossomed through his chest. Cabot’s ale was water in comparison to this stuff. When he caught his breath, he turned to her. “What do you do, Virginia?”

“Oh, this and that,” she said.

“A woman of mystery,” he said. “I like it.”
She smiled. “And you?”

Bull shot a glance both ways before leaning closer. “Don’t tell anyone, but I’m a spy.”

“A spy? Really? That’s your story?”

He shrugged and took a swig of his drink. This one went down smoother. “I could tell you more details but then, well, you know.” He made a slicing gesture across his throat.

She touched her own throat. He could see her swallow visibly. “I see,” she murmured.

Bull brushed an escaped lock of hair behind her ear. “What do you do?” he asked again.

“I’m just a traveller,” she said.

“Where are you travelling?”

“Val Royeaux,” she said.

“What’s in Val Royeaux?”

Her cheeks darkened. “Stuff and things,” she said, “What’s it to you?”

He laughed softly. She clearly hadn’t thought that far into her cover story. “You’re an intriguing woman, Virginia Carter.”

She tossed back the remainder of her drink and met his eye boldly. “Am I?”

“Very,” he said. “Has anyone told you how fantastic that dress looks on your tits?”

Her brows shot straight up. “Excuse me, sir, but that’s hardly appropriate.”

“Us Qunari aren’t exactly known for being appropriate, sweetheart,” he said, bringing his lips close to her ear. The hair on the back of her neck lifted, which very nearly undid his self-control.

“I’ve heard a few stories about you Qunari,” she said softly.

“Lies and exaggerations.”

She smirked. “So you aren’t hung like horses?”

He choked on his drink. After coughing hard enough to make his chest hurt, he said hoarsely, “That one has a grain of truth.”

Gina laughed. “Good to know.”

He stared at her, wishing he could remember the first time they met. Had she played so coy? Had her eyes sparkled and danced? Had there been that hint of spice in the air surrounding her? He couldn’t stop himself from taking hold of her hair and dragging her to him, kissing her until neither of them could breathe.

When they pulled apart, he whispered, “Sorry, stranger. I’m not normally so forward.”

A wicked smile came to her face. “You’re a shitty liar.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Only when it comes to pretty strangers.”
“That must make being a spy much more difficult.”

“It’s a rough life,” he said.

Her mouth opened, but before she could say anything, the door slammed open and rushing steps came to their back. Bull spun, putting himself in front of her defensively. It was just one of his agents, her face scarlet. “I need you,” she said breathlessly. “Both of you.”
Chapter 4

Chapter by jinbaitai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bull and Gina hustled behind the agent, their game instantly forgotten. “What's going on?” he asked when they were away from walls with ears.

The agent sighed. “We've got two problems. One for each of you.”

“What kind of problems?” Gina asked.

The agent frowned. “Cullen is down on the crypt and acting very unusual. And Cassandra has barricaded herself inside the Requisition office.”

Bull pinched the bridge of his nose. “Anyone else know about this?”

“Just two flies watching from the wall.”

He didn't like Gina going anywhere without her watcher, but his instinct told him whatever they found on the other side of either door shouldn't be for public knowledge.

Before he could relay his thoughts, she turned back toward the tavern. “I'll go get Grim,” Gina said. “Even if he could talk, he wouldn't.”

Bull felt a little flicker of desire. She was always so damn sharp. In less than a minute, she and Grim are in sight again, walking briskly. As they reached him and the agent, she said, “Who's checking whom?”

He frowned. “I'll go see Cullen. I have a feeling I know what's going on with him.”

Gina nodded. “I think I've got an idea about the Seeker as well.”
Bull pulled her in for a brief kiss and then pointed her toward the Requisition office with a pat on the rear. “Ask for help if you need it.”

She nodded and the pair ran off without a second glance. He spun on his heel and double-timed it to the crypt. The agent stayed with him until the entrance and then hesitated. “You don't want me inside, do you?”

Bull shook his head. “Not right now. Pull back the fly on the wall too.”

With that, he began descending the stairs, squinting in the firelight. He hadn't been down there in over a year, not since shortly after his accident. Hearing about Alita’s death was one thing. Seeing her in repose had made it real.

He doubted her body would be in the same relatively pristine condition it had been before. The place was frigid, allowing her body to lay without decay. At his last visit, however, he'd already seen signs of her skin drying out. It hadn't affected her appearance much at the time, but if his experience told him anything, she would have started to shrink and dry out even more. Much like sand, being exposed to cold air would eventually mummify a corpse.

He strode through the hall leading to her final resting place and caught sight of a shadow whisking toward the door. Good. He didn't want an audience for the General.

The door was slightly ajar. Bull gripped it and swung it open. As he did, something heavy and glass smashed into its wooden surface. An instant later, the distinct tang of lyrium filled his nostrils. He snorted the scent away and held his breath a few paces. Getting accidentally stoned would not help anyone.

“Maker, I didn't see you there.” Cullen was standing in the middle of the room, his mantle askew and his blond hair standing in every direction. He tilted to the side and staggered a step, catching himself on a column.

Bull grimaced. “It's all good. You probably weren't expecting company.”

Cullen snorted and laughed deliriously. “Of course I was. You're everywhere. You...you know everything. I can't take a shit without you knowing.”

Bull laughed softly. “I'd be a pretty terrible Spy Master if I didn't keep track of your bowel movements.”

The man pointed and nodded. “You make an excellent punt. Point.” He giggled again.

“Just how drunk are you?”

Cullen stumbled a few steps away and sank to the ground with a thump. In the dim light, Bull could see at least three empty wine bottles and one brandy bottle. “And you didn't invite me on your bender. I thought we were friends, Templar.”

The General gave a little smirk before his eyes averted to the slim body laying on an altar. Alita had begun to fully mummify as Bull expected. Her skin had gone from pale and freckled to a deep tan, almost like saddle leather. Her once brilliantly blonde hair lay lank and dry like straw.

Cullen let out a long shaky sigh. “I was in love with her.”

Bull stepped closer and eased himself to the floor. “So I've heard.”
The man flicked a glassy eyed glare his way. “I wish I could forget.”

“No, you don't,” Bull said softly. “Because it's not just the bad stuff you forget. You lose all the good moments too.”

Cullen scoffed. “Like what? The day she accidentally touched my hand? Which is the only contact we ever shared, by the way.” He scoffed again. “How fucking pathetic.”

“Is she why you're fighting the urge to take lyrium tonight?”

The General jolted and stared at him for a long moment. “How the hell…”

“I've smelled that shit once or twice. Recognized it instantly.” Bull spied a full bottle of Antivan Sip-Sip and dragged it over. In a second, he had the cork freed and took a long pull from the bottle, draining half before handing it over to Cullen.

Cullen took it in a shaky hand and put the bottle to his lips before letting it sag to the floor with a heavy clink. “I suppose she told you.”

He nodded. “I'm sorry, for what it's worth.”

The man stared into nothingness for a few minutes before shrugging and finishing the bottle. “Nothing to do now. Just more regrets.”


“Tried and failed.” Cullen let the bottle roll away from him. “Miserably.”

Bull searched desperately for another bottle of wine. “I should've sent Gina down here. She'd know what to say to make you feel better.”

The General shook his head. “I'm not looking for the right words.”

Bull shot a glance at the broken glass glittering under the door. “Just needed to rattle the chains a bit?”

Cullen nodded slowly. “See if they still hold.”

“And what's the verdict?”

Cullen waved a hand toward the door and nearly fell over. “You saw it. That was my last vial. I've been saving it.”

Bull reached out and gripped his shoulder. “I'm glad you made that choice, Templar.”

He reached up and patted Bull's hand. “Me too, Qunari.”

“Shall we go get properly drunk somewhere a little more hospitable and less...crypt-y?” Bull rubbed at his chest. “My nipples could cut glass right now.”

Cullen gave a long snorting laugh. “They do make clothing your size, you know.”

Bull hauled himself to his feet and dragged the General up too. “So they tell me.”

Cullen didn't reply. Bull glanced and saw him staring at Alita again. “She was so lovely,” he said softly.
Bull wrapped his arm around the man’s shoulders. “That she was.”

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Gina was feeling distinctly under-dressed. For her little charade with Bull, the dress as perfect. Alluring, revealing just the right amount of skin. The kind of dress you wore to make a man want more.

Not exactly the kind of dress you wore to find a back entrance through the outside wall of the Keep. Already she’d snagged the dress on a patch of thorns, scratching her legs in the process. Thanks to her normal uniform, she hadn’t even been aware that thorns existed in this world.

They finally reached a low window that Gina suspected was unlocked. Bull had complained several times about the breach of security, but thanks to the weaponry forge, the men inside didn’t care about the Qunari’s wrath. If it was hot, they were opening the window.

Grim boosted her, his face bright red in the moonlight as his hands gripped her bare leg. “It’s just skin, Grim,” she muttered.

He didn’t look her in the eye.

She sighed and fought with the window. After a moment, the thing popped free, and swung outward. Grim adjusted his grip and lifted her higher. Gina clutched the sill and hauled herself inside. She turned and leaned out. “I’ll unlock the front door,” she whispered loudly.

“No, you will not,” came Cassandra’s voice, menacing in the darkness.

Gina spun and stared for a long moment, waiting for her eye to adjust to the dark. “Cassandra, are you drunk?”

A bottle smashed to the ground at her feet, forcing her to leap back. “What do you think?”

Gina gritted her teeth and stepped around the shrapnel carefully. “May I ask why?”

“You know why,” Cassandra snapped, lunging out of the darkness. “Do not tell me you do not know why.”

Gina swallowed hard. She was definitely under dressed. “Bull told me that you broke up with Krem.”

Cassandra gave a bitter laugh. “He broke up with me,” she said. “How kind of him to allow me some dignity in the matter.”

The woman staggered around a table and dropped heavily on top of a stack of grain sacks. Gina followed cautiously. “What happened? Really?”

The Seeker was struggling with the cork on a fresh bottle. After a moment she gave up and flung it at the wall. It gave a juicy smash and splattered wine into the scratches on Gina’s legs, making them burn fiercely.

“I do not wish to discuss this with you of all people,” Cassandra fairly snarled at her.

Gina fought the urge to lash out in the face of the insult. “Me of all people?”

“You and your perfect life, with your perfect family, and wonderful love. You who always makes the right decisions, and never falters.” Cassandra sniffled and dragged her forearm across her face.
Gina couldn't stop the laugh ripping from her throat. “My perfect life? Are you kidding me, Cassandra?”

The Seeker staggered to her feet and pointed a wobbly finger. “What, you lost an eye? Who cares? You saved the world.”

“I care.”

Cassandra gave her a scornful glare. “You should not. Do you know that everyone in Halamshiral asked after you? Wished to speak to you? Barely bothered to acknowledge my existence?”

Gina shifted from foot to foot. “Am I supposed to be happy about that?”

“I am the Inquisitor only because you refused the role. The Savior of Thedas could not be arsed to finish the job she started.” Cassandra’s face was streaked with tears. “And I am alone again.”

Gina wanted to step closer, to put her arms around the woman. Somehow she suspected that would only end in tears of her own. “Cassandra, I refused the job because I'm not a leader. I get lucky and things happen to work out for the most part. I can't plan strategically to save my own life, let alone guide an entire Inquisition. You're ten times the leader I could ever be.”

The Seeker rolled her eyes and snatched up another bottle of wine. Gina winced as the woman hacked the neck of the bottle off with her knife and lifted it high overhead, pouring it into her waiting mouth and splashing copious amounts down her front.

Gina crossed her arms tightly. “Are you done making an ass of yourself yet?”

She smashed this bottle to the ground as well, making Gina flinch. “How dare you judge me?”

Gina growled. “I'm not judging you. Hell, of you wanted, I'd join you. Everyone needs to blow off steam. But you're just being nasty about it. I thought we were friends.”

Cassandra made a dismissive grunt and stumbled back to the grain sacks. “Think what you want. I no longer care.”

“Yes, you do care,” Gina said. She took a few careful steps forward. “What happened between your and Krem? Come on, Seeker. Talk to me.”

“He left me! I needed him and he left! What more is there to tell?” Cassandra screamed the words and slumped to the ground. “I was happy with him,” she said after a moment, her voice cracking.

The front door suddenly swung open with a bang. Gina squeaked and jumped, and Cassandra toppled to the side. Krem burst through the open door and stared at the scene.

Cassandra was sobbing now, the sound broken and heart wrenching. He dropped to his knees among the shattered glass, his eyes filling with tears. “I was happy too, Cassie. But you made me feel like I was a shameful secret. I couldn't live like that.”

Gina slowly crept from the room. As she exited, she stole one last peek at the pair. Krem was sliding a gentle thumb over the tears tracking down Cassandra’s face as the woman clutched at the fabric on his knees.

She closed the door and bumped into Grim. His eyes were filled with questions. She sighed and tucked her arm into his. “I don't know, Grim. Maybe we should all take vows of silence like you.”
Bull grunted as he reached the top of the stairs leading to Cullen’s office. The man was dangling limply over his shoulder, and was a lot heavier than he looked. Good thing Bull was still working out.

He dumped the man onto the bed and stripped his armour away. Why the man insisted on wearing it day in and day out mystified him, but he figured the man had to take it off to sleep. Didn’t he?

After rolling the burly blond onto his side and blocking him in place with blankets and pillows, he straightened with a pained groan. His back was already punishing him for the effort. As he left, he instructed a scout to peek in and make sure the General was still breathing. “Should be easy to tell. The man snores like a damn bear.”

He crossed the courtyard and barely felt the crow land on his shoulder. It nibbled at his earlobe as he pulled a small note free.

“Well, that was as much fun as herding cats. See you at home.”

A tiny heart decorated the bottom of it. He gave the bird a gentle tweak on the tail and it flew off. Bull wished that they could go finish their game at the tavern, but if he was honest, he was tired. Bone tired.

Seeing his friends in pain never sat well with him. Even as a kid he looked for ways to make everybody happy, even the people he didn't really like. It drove his mentor crazy, but in the end, it turned into a skill he used his entire life. Giving hostile targets what they want to take them off their guard. Giving those you care about what they need to make them happy.

He just wasn’t entirely sure what Cullen needed. Not yet. He might have gone out and gotten the man a dancing girl, but that was more his style. Not the prim and proper General’s. He sighed and began climbing the stairs to the grand hall. He'd put some thought into it later.

When he reached their quarters, all was quiet. Gina hadn't made it yet. He forced back the worm of worry in his brain. Grim was with her, and the boy would die for his surrogate baby sister.

Bull dropped into his chair and let his eye close.

Grim carried the sleeping Kaya. She had her face buried into his neck and a tight grip on his collar. Gina hid a smile as she walked beside the pair. No little girl on any planet was safer than this one. Between Bull and Grim alone she had the might of an army protecting her.

Once inside their quarters, Grim headed straight for Kaya’s room. Gina caught sight of Bull in his favorite chair, his chin nearly on his chest. As she approached, he jerked awake and surged to his feet, blinking rapidly. “Sorry, Kadan,” he said after a moment. “Didn't mean to fall asleep.”

There was a little whimper of protest from the tiny bedroom. A coarse voice began to hum a strange song, and the cries fell silent. After a few minutes, so did the haunting tune. Grim crept out of the room and waved as he headed for the exit.

Bull crossed and gave the kid a firm pat on the back, saying something Gina couldn't quite hear. Judging by the glow that came to the boy's face, it was positive. Then he was gone and it was just her and Bull again.
He turned and stared at her. “That dress really is fantastic on your tits, Kadan.”

She laughed and shook her head. Lifting the hem, she displayed the tattered fabric. “I think it's ruined. Did you know that Thedas has thorns?”

He nodded. “Didn't you?”

“Clearly I'm just unobservant,” she said.

As he stepped closer, he hissed a breath. “Kadan, those scratches look ugly. We need to clean them.”

She glanced down and winced. Dried wine decorated her skin in blotches, and dozens of angry red scratches scored her legs. They started to sting in earnest again. Bull scooped her up and carried her to their private bath.

He set her on the edge of the tub and opened the valve that would allow heated spring water to pour into the tub. It wasn't fancy, but it was better than the shared bathhouse in the courtyard. Gina wasn't sure exactly how they put enough pressure on the water to pump it to their high room, but she didn't question it.

When there were a few inches of steaming water, he took a seat beside her and lifted one leg and then the other. With a soft cloth and gentle touch, he wiped away the wine and dried blood. Any contact with the scratches burned, but the warmth of his skin against hers made it bearable.

When all was said and done, she was leaning limply against his broad shoulder. He dropped the cloth and drained the water before toweling her dry and lifting her into his arms again.

She gave a little purr of comfort and snuggled in tighter. He laughed softly. “You're awfully bold around strangers, Virginia Carter.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “You bought me a drink. Now we aren't strangers.”

They reached their bed at the top of the stairs. He set her lightly to her feet and stepped back a pace. “So, listen. I've caught the hints. I get what you're saying. You want to ride the Bull.”

Gina had to clap both hands over her mouth to avoid bursting into laughter. Mustering control, she said in a strangled voice, “Please, for the love of everything good and holy, tell me that isn't a line you've really used.”

He grinned. “Oh, I've used it.”

“And how did it work?”

“Most people just giddied on up,” he said. “I'm charming that way.”

Gina shook her head and sauntered a step closer. “So, what does riding the Bull entail, exactly?”

Faster than a blink he had her spun and backed against the wall, her hands trapped hopelessly in his. “I'm not sure you can handle this ride, Virginia Carter,” he said with a low growl.

Holding eye contact, she let him take her weight in his hands and hiked her legs up to his hips. His eye went dark as she rocked her hips against his crotch. “I think I've got a handle on it,” she said.

"See, you say that, but you don't know what you're in for. Not really."

"Well then, why don't you show me, the Iron Bull?"
“Here I thought I was being forward,” he whispered into her ear.

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They lay twisted together, hearts slowly going back to normal speed. Bull lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed it. “That was…” He growled and kissed her hand again.

She sighed and shifted tighter to his side. “Yeah. It was.”

A smile touched his lips. “We should play strange more often. Next time you can be a sexy healer. Oh, or a sexy princess. Oh! Or a sexy pirate!”

Gina giggled. “I'll keep that in mind.”

He traced a palm down her side. The deep desire to remember more of her gnawed at him. “What line did I use?” he asked abruptly.

Gina ran a finger over one of his scars. “You didn't.”

He lifted his head and gazed at her in surprise. “No line? Come on. There had to be something.”

She put her hand on his chest and pushed him back to the bed as she climbed on to of him, straddling his waist. “Honestly, no lines. We kept running into each other at random, so I accused you of stalking me.” She laughed. “And you wisely pointed out that you were there first, so therefore I was the stalker. And that was it.”

He settled a hand on her hip and dragged his thumb in circles. “And that was it?” he asked.

"I was hooked. Almost instantly."

Bull stared at her. "But why?"

Gina bent down and kissed him. “It was the exact right thing to do. You made me laugh at a time when I couldn't remember what happiness felt like. At a time when I didn't think I'd ever really smile again.” Her eye met his. "I was already curious, but that locked it in."

He slid a finger over the curve of her ear. "What were you curious about?"

She laughed softly. "Well, we don't have elves or dwarves in my world, let alone gigantic horned creatures like you. I nearly fell over the first time I caught sight of you. Ran straight to the library that night to look up what on earth your kind were called. I couldn't even pronounce Qunari right at first."

Bull sighed and touched the claw hanging at her throat. “I hate that I can't remember meeting you.”

Gina touched his half of the claw. “Maybe someday it'll come back.”

He sat up and wrapped his arm around her waist. “As I recall, it was seeing you naked for the first time that brought something back to me.”

She leaned away and indicated her nude form with a sweep of her hand. “Take a good long look anytime you want to, the Iron Bull.”

He growled and caught her lips with his. “I was thinking it might help if I was inside you.”

Her green eye went dark and she bit her lip. “You think?”
“Worth a try, isn't it?”

She nodded slowly and rose onto her knees. Bull felt the coolness wash against his skin where her sweet little pussy left a damp patch on his stomach.

As if he wasn't hard enough.

Gina took hold of him and guided the head of his cock between her legs. The heat of her slowly wrapped around him as she lowered herself onto him, a little cry of delight escaping her lips.

Bull’s lip curled as she began to ride him, rocking just fast enough to make his head spin, but not enough to pop his cork. He leaned on an elbow and gripped her hip with the other hand, holding hard enough that he knew she'd bruise.

And the little vixen didn't shy away. She just groaned his name and increased the pace, the tremble in her thighs a clear signal that she was on the edge.

Bull slid his thumb over her clit and swiped in a firm circle. She jerked and whimpered. Another rub and another, and she gasped, her eye rolling back as a cascade of tremors swept over her body, making the nerve endings in his body shiver in response.

As he moved to flip her onto her back, she gasped, “Don't you dare,” and planted a hand against his chest. He thought to discipline the insolence out of her, but then she was writhing those hips and pushing him to the edge of climax, and fuck that felt good. He grabbed her hips, holding tight as she fucked him mindless, watching her beautiful breasts sway and bounce with the effort.

As the telltale zing shot down his spine, he decided that it didn't matter if he remembered meeting her back then. He had her now.

And he'd be damned if he'd ever lose her again.

Chapter End Notes

There might be hope for one of our other couples after all...
Chapter 5

Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! This part of the story took on a life of its own and had a dramatic rewrite, so I had to wait and get it right!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An arrow zipped past his face, close enough he felt the wind. Bull roared and launched a knife, catching the archer in the chest. The man dropped and Bull moved forward, swinging his axe into the face of a warrior. The man shrieked in agony as he fell.

Adrenaline was pumping through his veins. It felt good. So damn good! He'd been trapped in that tower for so long, aching to get into the thick of battle. Another warrior rushed at him, a great hulking beast of a man. Bull’s axe still went through the him like a knife through butter. He laughed maniacally and ran forward, looking for more people to mow down.

Without warning, fog rolled in, the murky mist surrounding him and making it impossible to see past ten feet. The thrill of battle was lost in an instant, replaced by an instinctive sense of dread.

He turned slowly, listening with every fibre of his being. There was nothing. Only the hammering of his heart in his ears.

Then soft steps at his back caught his attention. He spun to see his Kadan stalking forward, a grim expression on her face. She glanced at him as she passed. “Are you coming?”

Bull started to follow, but suddenly realized that he couldn't. He was pumping his arms and legs for all he was worth, but he only moved a few inches. His lungs burned as he struggled to move.
Gina turned back. Her face was tense as she faced him. “Why aren't you coming?”

Doubling his efforts did nothing but wind him, and soon he could hardly breathe. Her expression began to change. “Why aren't you moving?”

“I am, Kadan!” he rasped.

Arms appeared from the mist and grabbed onto her, dragging her away. “Bull! Help me!” She was screams, her eyes filled with terror as she struggled. Whatever had her started pulling harder. Her voice went high and sharp, pleading with him. “I need you!”

He bellowed in terror as she disappeared into the fog, her screams echoing around him. “Kadan!” he shouted.

A mocking laugh filled his ears as he continued slogging forward, his arms and legs like lead. A grotesque man sauntered toward him, his face and body swollen and distended, jerking oddly with each step. “Can't save the woman you love? What kind of man are you?”

Gina’s voice sounded in an agonized wail that cut through the air. Bull lunged at the man, the movement slow and clumsy. “Where is she?”

The man laughed louder. Bull threw a punch, landing his fist solidly in the middle of the man’s face, but his arm simply sank into the flesh up to his elbow. The hideous creature deformed further, as though made of clay.

“Can't you do anything right?” jeered the man.

He hauled his arm free and swung the axe with full force. It bounced away sharply, earning him another sneering laugh. Panic took a firm hold of him. “Give her back!” His voice broke on the words.

“Give her back,” mocked the man through his mangled mouth hole. Then he opened his lips wider than ever should have been possible and cawed.

It was creepy enough that Bull flinched away. The man surged forward with another rusty cry, jabbing his fingers at Bull’s arm.

A sharp peck on his arm snapped him awake with a breathless curse. He was sweating and shaking all over. It took a minute for his nerves to settle, at which point Cedric the crow squawked again and jabbed his beak into Bull’s shoulder.

He swatted the bird away with another curse. “Ow, you feathered asshole,” he snarled, rubbing at the smarting spot. He’d have sworn the bird narrowed its eyes at him, but probably it was his overactive imagination.

That damn dream. His heart was still racing as her terrified screams replayed themselves in his head over and over. He pressed a hand to his chest and took a steadying breath.

Footsteps came up the stairs. He looked up to see Gina’s worried face. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Just a dream.”

She crawled across the bed and took his chin in her hand. “Another nightmare? That’s the fifth one this week.”
Bull let out a shaky breath. “It didn't start out as a nightmare.”

Her lips brushed gently over his. He slipped his arms around her and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. She was alive and she was safe in his arms. It was just a dream. Just a stupid fucking dream. When they drew apart, she tweaked his ear gently. “Ready for breakfast?”

At her words, Cedric cawed and launched into the air, heading for their common area. Bull scowled at the bird. A so-called gift from Hawke. He was too lazy to be useful, and had a taste for Qunari flesh to boot. But Kaya adored the damn thing, so Bull kept it around.

Gina kissed him again. “Come down when you're ready.”

He nodded and she climbed off the bed. Before she could get out of reach he caught her arm and dragged her back for one more kiss.

It was just a dream. Why couldn't he shake the lingering fear?

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Gina and Kaya were sitting beside each other when Bull came downstairs. He wasn't pale and shaky anymore, but his eye still flicked around nervously. His dreams normally didn't bother him for so long. This one must have been particularly memorable.

Kaya took advantage of her distraction and handed Cedric an entire slice of toast. Before she or Bull could do anything, the crow snatched it and flew to a high rafter. Bull glared up at the bird. “And yet he refuses to carry the tiniest scrap of paper.”

Kaya giggled. “Papa morning!”

His face finally relaxed into a smile. “Other way around Imekari.” He tilted his head. “Is she wearing a dress?”

Gina nodded. It was a pink ruffled affair, entirely too fancy for a little girl to wear everyday, but Kaya had insisted. “You can thank Auntie Viv. Apparently they played dress up yesterday, and now Kaya loves dresses.”

“Let me guess. Auntie Viv just happened to have a few she could keep.”

She smirked. “Gosh, how’d you know?”

He gave her a wry smile before digging into his plate of food. Gina picked at the last of her breakfast, her mind wandering away from their table and back to the Requisition office. Cassandra’s words ran through her mind again, prodding her and making her restless.

A big warm hand settled on the back of her neck. “Penny for your thoughts?”

She shrugged and shook her head. “Just thinking.”

“Is that where the burning smell is coming from?” Bull laughed and dodged her swatting arm.

Kaya giggled too. “Papa, bad!”

“He’s the worst,” said Gina, a broad smile dragging across her face.

Bull grinned. “Nice of you two to gang up on old Papa.”
“I’m sure old Papa can take care of himself.”

He pulled a face at them both and stuffed half a slice of toast into his mouth. Kaya finished her breakfast and demanded to be let out of the high chair.

Gina frowned at her. “You can wait for Papa to finish his breakfast.”

A whimper of protest came to the little girl’s lips. Gina shot Bull a warning glare. The Qunari was an absolute sucker for Kaya’s crocodile tears. He gave her a pained look, but averted his eye and studiously shoveled food into his mouth.

When neither reacted, Kaya scowled and crossed her little arms in a huff. After a moment, the mutinous moment passed, and she returned to her cheerful self, babbling about their plan to visit her new pony later that morning. Gina smiled triumphantly at Bull, who rolled his eye and mouthed ‘yeah, yeah’.

Soon enough, he was done eating. Bull lingered to play tag with Kaya for a few minutes, and then he was off to work. Cedric fluttered down from the rafters and landed on the Qunari’s broad shoulder as he passed through the door.

She and Kaya bundled their breakfast dishes to deliver to the kitchen. Along the way Gina let herself fantasize about being back in the hustle and bustle of a city. She wouldn’t dare complain out loud, but Skyhold had become dull and boring. Day in and day out was the same faces, the same shops, and the same petty jobs.

Probably that was why Cassandra’s words kept coming back and poking at her. She hadn’t done anything truly meaningful for the Inquisition beyond auditing a few reports and handling the occasional correspondence. It wasn’t like she wasn’t busy. Raising Kaya was almost a full time job, one that she cherished deeply. But perhaps she’d been slacking in her other duties. At any rate, she wasn’t ready to face a sober Cassandra. Not yet.

Her mind returned to their upcoming journey. Never in their travels had they gone through more than a small town. She was beyond curious about Val Royeaux, to see what a city in Thedas looked like. Dorian described massive sprawling cities in Tervinter and how crowded they were. She and Jeremy had exchanged amused glances when he talked of thousands of people filling the streets.

What would he think of millions of people crammed into one city?

Cole had been staring at her, and suddenly piped up, “All those people, and they never sleep?”

She laughed to herself. She’d been thinking of New York, the city that never slept. Gina wasn’t convinced that Cole really understood her explanation, as he’d immediately moved onto the Big Apple, and how large an apple had to be to feed so many.

The rest of their morning was relaxed. She and Kaya learned about colours and checked in on Fuzzy. Then it was off to visit Uncles Dorian and Jeremy, who took the little girl for a picnic lunch.

Gina hustled down to the training ring, hoping to catch the Chargers before they finished training for the day. She was in luck, and got there in time to see Krem and Grim sparring. They were a good match, though it was clear that Krem had a more polished fighting style. It didn’t seem to deter Grim, who fought back relentlessly.

When the pair finally gave up their match, Gina caught Skinner’s eye and jutted her chin at the ring. The elf smirked and nodded. Gina picked up a pair of wooden training daggers and followed the woman into the ring.
“Don’t take it easy on me,” she said.

Skinner laughed. “Like I ever would.”

Gina grinned. “Good.”

They took up a fighting stance, and began to slowly circle each other. The elf had always been proficient with a pair of knives, but after losing a hand in Emprise du Lion, she’d had to adjust her style. Most expected to see the woman fighting with a single knife or short sword, but to everyone’s surprise, she’d fashioned herself a blade arm of sorts. The first design was rudimentary, a basic harness of leather strapping that held the blade in place at the edge of her stump.

Dagna had assisted with later designs, creating a spring mounted hidden blade. Thanks to the new surprise factor, the blade became even deadlier than a dual wielded knife. The barest flick of her wrist caused the knife to extend with a snap, often directly through the flesh of her unlucky foe.

Gina made the first move, dancing forward with an upward strike. Skinner dodged easily, her knife flashing at Gina’s ribs, missing with barely an inch to spare. They grinned at each other, and the spar started in earnest. Gina landed the first contact, but paid for it with what would have been a knife through the arm.

The elf was way beyond her skill level. The only way Gina could ever hope to defeat her was to get luck on her side, and even then, she knew she’d probably pay in blood. It was a good thing that they were using the practice blades.

In a stupid move on her part, she missed a feint on her blind side and took a heavy blow to the ribs. She collapsed to the ground, winded and aching. Then the elf was on top of her, the stump of her wrist pressed into her throat. “What do we do next time?” said the woman softly.

Before she could reply, the elf was suddenly sent tumbling head over heels. Bull’s voice bellowed. “What the hell are you doing?”

Gina gagged and fought for her breath, trying to tell him that she’d asked the elf for a hard fight. But he wasn’t paying any attention to her. Hell, he hadn’t even bent down to see if she was okay.

“I have told you time and time again to point that thing with care, and you put it to someone’s throat? My Kadan’s throat, no less?”

Skinner scrambled to her feet. “It is laced in place for sparring.”

Bull’s face was red with fury. “I don’t care if the Maker himself is holding it in place.”

Skinner gave him a scornful look. “Perhaps you should teach her not to get into compromising positions instead of yelling at me.”

Gina tried to grab Bull’s leg, but then he was out of reach. She staggered to her feet in time to see him shove the elf back a step. “Why don’t you try that move on someone at your level, tough guy?”

She stared in horror as he stalked forward, his face apoplectic. “Bull! Katoh!”


“Is that right? Well if I’m so pathetic, why don’t you just find yourself new employment?” He pointed with a thick forefinger. “There’s the gate.”
Gina got between them and pushed Bull in the chest. “I said katoh! What the hell are you doing?”

He pushed her to the side, leaving her staring in shock. Twice. Twice he’d ignored their watchword. It was more stunning than a sucker punch to the gut.

Bull leaned toward the elf threateningly. Skinner curled her lip and pointed the stump of her wrist at him defensively. The Qunari sneered and settled his chin directly over the blunted arm. “I thought that thing was laced in place,” he said in a dangerous tone.

Gina shoved in between them again, her heart hammering in fear. “I said stop it. Both of you!”

Skinner spat on the ground. “You're not worth the effort, shem.” With that, the elf spun on her heel and stormed toward the Chargers’ quarters.

Bull turned to Gina, his face still tight with rage. He moved toward her, but she jerked away, lifting both hands to the side. Without another word, she turned and ran away, her eye blurred with tears.

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Bull stared at the door leading to their quarters. A quiver of nerves flooded through his gut. Gina had never been so angry with him. He couldn’t blame her. Replaying the entire scene, he could see exactly why she was enraged. He’d taken things way too far.

And he had completely trampled on the sanctity of their word. It made him sick to his stomach to think of how betrayed she must feel. All day he’d sat in dread, trying to build up the nerve to face her. It had taken until well after dark.

After another minute, he forced himself through the dread. Walking up the stairs, he heard nothing. Kaya would have been in bed over an hour ago, but Gina would typically be puttering around cleaning or working on some report or other. The silence was unnerving.

He reached their common area and caught sight of her standing in front of the fire, her face glowing in the dancing light. He stared for a moment, drinking in her beauty and kicking himself again.

He crept to her side. The desire to touch her was overwhelming, but he thought better of it and clenched his hands at his sides. “Kadan, I'm sorry,” he said softly.

Her lips pressed together, but she didn't respond. Bull felt the dread rising in his throat, almost enough to make him dry heave. “I was angry and I wasn't thinking straight. I should have stopped when you told me to, no questions asked.”

She made a little scoffing sound, but remained silent. Bull considered falling on his knees to beg her forgiveness, but decided that would be his closing move. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “She never should have put that blade to your neck. It's reckless and dangerous, and I can't tolerate that in my ranks. Especially when it comes to you.”

She pursed her lips and gave a curt nod, but still didn't say a word. It cut into his gut. “What do I need to say or do to make this right, Kadan?”

“I don't know. Are you going to tell me the real reason you threw Skinner out of Skyhold?” Gina turned to face him fully.

He blinked and stared at her. “What?”

She snorted. “Bull, you didn't even check to see if I was okay before you lost it on her. It was like
you two were following a script.”

Bull stepped back and dragged a hand over his face. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. This was a complication he didn't plan for. “Kadan…” he started.

Gina rolled her eye. “How long until Par Vollen approaches her?”

A feather could have knocked him over. His jaw hung slack. She glared at him. “I may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night, the Iron Bull.”

Bull sank into one of the big armchairs and covered his mouth with his hand. Worry rang through him. “Is it that obvious?” She sneered, but he cut the air with his hand. “Her life depends on it, Kadan. Is it that obvious?”

Her expression lost the angry edge. “I don't know. It was obvious to me because I know you so well. To an outside eye? Probably not. They don't know how much that word means between us.”

He cringed. Ignoring her command had killed him inside, but he and the elf had been too far into the ruse to stop. “I'm sorry,” he whispered hoarsely, squeezing his eye shut. Tears threatened to fall.

Another long sigh came from her, and then her lips were at his ear, whispering, “You big dummy. I knew from the moment you stepped over me without checking that something was up.”

He opened his eye to meet hers. “What are you saying?”

“The Bull I know and love would never ignore that word. It only bothered me for a second. Then I played along.” She kissed him lightly. “I would've let you off the hook sooner if you hadn't tried lying to me.”

Bull lifted a brow. “I thought…”

Her lips crushed against his, silencing him. When they parted, she cupped her hand on his cheek. “I guess it's my turn to apologize.”

A shaky laugh escaped him. “I was prepared for you to tell me to go sleep with the birds. Permanently.”

She frowned. “That wasn't fair of me.”

He lifted a hand. “No, no. Lesson fucking learned. Don't lie to the Tamassran.” Bull blew out a breath and dragged her into his arms. “Damn, Kadan. You really had me going.”

Her voice went small. “I overdid it. I always overdo it.”

She found a scar with her fingers and began to worry it. “Do you think Par Vollen will buy her story?”

“That she could no longer work for a weak prick like me? Oh yeah. Especially after you got involved.” He trailed his finger down the length of her hair. “Everyone is furious with me right now. Including your darling brother.”

Gina curled into him. “Are you sure it's worth getting a mole in Par Vollen?”
Bull rested his cheek against the top of her head. “I hope so. She’s my friend. I don't want her in this position at all. But I can't get anyone to feed me information from that side, and I need to know what's going on.”

“Why her?”

Bull shifted them into a more comfortable position. “The elves in Kirkwall were joining the Qun like crazy so she won't stand out in a crowd there. And she has reason to betray me. I put her in harm's way when she lost the hand, and today's little fallout.” He frowned. “Plus she volunteered. I had been complaining about not knowing things. She planted the idea in my head.”

Gina traced a finger over another one of his scars. “She’s volatile. Won’t that get her into trouble with the Qun?”

Bull shrugged. “I’ve seen worse. Gatt was a nightmare. Did I ever tell you how he got his nickname?”

She shook her head. “We’ve never really talked about him at all.”

He sighed. “I met him when he was eight. A slaver had him and a couple dozen other kids in the hold of his ship, ready for shipment to Tervinter. I took the ship and rescued all of them.” He scowled at the memory. The slaver had begged to keep half the boys. Not for his life. To keep children to sell into slavery. The incredulity of it still made his head spin.

He shook himself to the present. “Gatt was always temperamental from day one, exploding over the smallest perceived slights. After a particularly bad tantrum, I started calling him Gattlok, which turned into Gatt.”

Gina smiled and touched his cheek. “You certainly have a knack for picking nicknames.”

He shrugged. “I don’t have a real birth name. None of us do. We’re labeled by a series of numbers, and then known by a title. Nicknames were a necessity growing up.”

“What was your nickname?”

“Hissrad. Means Keeper of Illusions.” He scoffed. “Fancy way of saying liar. I was good at it then. Maybe too good at it.”

Gina kissed his fingers. “We haven’t talked about your home like this in a long time.”

He shrugged and slid a hand down her arm. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. Trying to find any other way to get eyes and ears. I don’t want Skinner to take this mission, but I don’t really have a choice. I need to know what’s going on out there. And not just for my sake.”

“Will they physically take her there?”

Bull frowned. “Hard to say. She’s going to give them everything she knows. If they’re half as good as they used to be, they’ll already know her information.”

“So what value does she add?”

“She knows how I operate. What missions I take and why. The little things that you can’t learn without being embedded in our group. And she’s going to play the bitter ex-employee angle. They won’t trust her automatically, but thanks to our little show today, the spies that were watching will confirm her story.”
She straightened and stared at him. “Spies? In Skyhold?”

He smirked. “Sure. There are close to a dozen right now. Most don’t think I know. But this isn’t that big of a place. Strange faces stand out, and it’s easy to figure out which ones are genuine newcomers and which are here on assignment.”

“Why don't you take them out?”

Bull pressed a kiss to her temple. “Because I know who they are. If I get rid of them, I have to figure out who their replacement is. Hell, I've convinced a couple Orlesian spies to work for me too. It's all very complicated, but it works.”

“Why not turn Par Vollen’s spies?” Gina fussed with a buckle on his chest harness. “Seems less risky than sending in your friend.”

Bull frowned. “I tried. The first one I approached tried to take my head off and wound up dead. The last two were so afraid of what would happen if they ever got found out, they killed themselves.”

He shifted so that they were facing each other. “You need to understand that Par Vollen isn't like Ferelden and Orlais. People who betray it or leave are worse than scum, and automatically have a death sentence. That's why Tal-Vashoth fight so hard when they run into Qunari.”

“After you left the Qun, Krem said they would kill you on sight and consider it a mercy.”

He nodded. “Not much reasoning with them. They've been trained to believe that leaving the Qun breeds madness. I was trained to believe that.”

Her hand pressed against his heart. “And now you know better, and you can help change that perception.”

Bull grimaced. “They won't listen. I know I wouldn't have, and I've always been okay with thinking for myself.”

Gina shook her head. “From what you've told me, most of the Tal-Vashoth you ran into were actual criminals. I haven't heard of any other Tal-Vashoth in highly regarded government positions. Maybe after seeing your success, more will try to take active part in everyday life in Thedas and prove you're not an anomaly.”

He shrugged. His memory could list dozens of Tal-Vashoth he'd slaughtered that were likely in the wrong place at the wrong time and defended themselves accordingly. It was almost impossible to justify himself if he was being objective. Gina put far too much faith in him.

She touched his chin. “Don't go down that road.”

He pulled her into a hug. “I don't know how you read my mind like that, but I love it.”

Gina nipped into the side of his neck gently. “You make it easy sometimes.”

Bull caught her lips with his, kissing her until his heart was pounding. He drew away. “Seriously, Kadan. Are we okay? I didn't ruin everything with my carelessness today?”

She shook her head, but he silenced her with a gentle finger to the lips. “When you said katoh, my heart stopped. I didn't want to betray that trust, but I did it anyway.” He caressed her cheek. “I regret it deeply.”
Gina kissed his fingertip and said, “I don't consider it a betrayal. You needed to set her up, and it was a one time shot. I can't think of a better reason to ignore that word.”

Gina put a hand over the claw on her chest. “Besides which, I didn't put this on with the intention of running away when things weren't so perfect.” She took his hand and put it over hers. “So yeah, we're good.”

He curled his fingers around the claw and tugged her closer. “I truly don't deserve you, Kadan.”

“Well too bad,” she whispered. “Because you're stuck with me now.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh the drama!
Chapter 6

Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Finally on the move!

(Exposition...so necessary, but sometimes so dry!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bull had Kaya on his shoulders as he loaded the last of their supplies onto the cart. He and the little girl were loudly singing a counting song in Qunlat. At first Gina thought Bull was completely off-key, but as she thought about it, the more she realized that she'd never really heard any Qunari music, so who was she to judge? Maybe he was a virtuoso in his world.

At any rate, the pair were having a grand old time together. The eagerness to get on the road was palpable from the Qunari. Gina wasn't about to deny her own excitement. Dorian and Jeremy joined their group, adding their supplies to the cart. The Mage was joining them as Ambassador from Tervinter, much to his amusement. Jeremy was just along for the ride, much like Gina.

She checked everyone’s gear carefully. Kaya’s tiny saddle was like a party hat on Fuzzy’s broad back, the effect rather comical. In contrast, Bull’s new custom-sized saddle was almost perfectly fitted to Brego. The big bay gave her an affronted glare as she tightened the girth one more hole. She rubbed his muzzle and said, “Just until I know his new girl won’t kill him, okay Buddy?”

Brego huffed and lowered his head. Gina patted his nose one last time and moved onto the new member of their little herd, Sunny. The big palomino mare with excellent bone structure and big brown eyes was tied to a nearby tree. Her pie plate hooves pawed the ground anxiously as she waited.
Gina spoke quietly to the mare as she methodically checked all of the strapping. The horse sidled away, eyeing her dubiously. Gina frowned and corrected the mare. “Come on now,” she murmured. “I'd like to trust you with the love of my life at some point, but you're not giving me much hope right now.”

Sunny tossed her head and stomped one of her massive feet on the ground defiantly. Gina corrected her again before tightening the girth three holes. The mare was certainly a different personality than any of her easy-going boys. If she hadn’t performed so nicely in the arena over the past week, Gina would have scrapped her as Bull’s potential mount based on the attitude alone.

The mare have a sharp snort and shook her head impatiently. Gina took a deep breath and let it out slowly, refusing to let the antics get to her. Soon enough she'd find out soon enough if the mare would settle and be a good mount for Bull. If not, he'd stay on Brego, and she'd keep hunting.

She turned to see Bull and Kaya watching her. Bull’s face was almost as dubious as the horse's. “You sure it's safe to get on that thing?”

Gina nodded. “I wish I had a riding helmet, but I'm sure it'll be fine.”

“Uh huh.” Bull hooked a thumb at the cart. “We're loaded.”

“I'm ready when you are,” she said.

He lifted a brow. “You're sure there isn't anyone you need to talk to before leaving?”

Gina scowled at him. She hadn't spoken a word to Cassandra over the past week, nor had the severe woman sought her out. She wasn't about to go open that can of worms. “Sure am.”


Their little girl squealed and bounced with excitement. “Ride pony!”

Gina laughed and shook her head. “You spelled the wrong word, Papa.”

He grinned and held his arms out. Kaya fell limply into them with a giggle. Bull kissed her cheeks and then turned to Fuzzy. The old warhorse brightened and gave a soft wuffle as Bull set her carefully into the saddle.

They both climbed aboard their horses and Bull took hold of Fuzzy’s lead. Until Gina knew she could trust Sunny, it would be his job to keep Kaya and Fuzzy in hand.

The palomino spooked at a rock beside the road, and then leapt six feet in the other direction when she caught sight of the guards posted at the gates. Gina kept a firm hold and pointed her down the bridge.

By the time they lost sight of the Keep, she was exhausted. The mare tested her every nerve and reaction. She was well trained, as evidenced by her performance in the ring. But she had little to no experience outside of the ring, and clearly had next to no discipline. Sunny either couldn’t or wouldn’t cope with the big, bad world. *Everything* was scary, even the birds in the trees. And every reaction was as big as her body. Big snorts, huge leaps, dizzying spins. There were even a few impetuous bucks and rears thrown into the mix. Gina was glad she hadn't put Bull on Sunny. He'd have already chosen to walk.

As it was, he hissed a breath every time the mare overreacted. Brego watched with interest, and Kaya sang nonsense to Fuzzy, who plodded along faithfully. Gina felt a twinge of envy as she
marshaled control over the mare yet again. If the mare wasn’t the perfect build to carry Bull easily, which had been nearly impossible to find at a reasonable price, she would have sent her back before they reached the edges of the encampment.

It took a good three quarters of the day for the horse to finally settle into a half decent rhythm. By then, both horse and rider were soaked with sweat. Sunny’s mouth dripped with froth as she champed on the bit, but at least she wasn’t jerking and jolting every ten steps anymore.

At nightfall, she handed the mare to one of the stablehands and walked away. Gina knew she should take the time to clean the horse up and bond with her, but if she was honest, at the moment she couldn’t stand the creature. A terrible thing she wouldn’t admit out loud, but it was the truth.

She collapsed onto a chair beside the fire. Bull and Kaya were setting up their tent. He came over to give her a kiss and stroked a thumb across her cheek. “I can ride Fuzzy tomorrow.”

Gina shook her head. “My mama didn't raise no quitter.”

He laughed softly. “Your mama raised the most stubborn creature I've ever met.”

***

Bull kneaded his fingers into the muscles on Gina’s inner thighs. She made a low whimper, but it wasn't a sexy sound. She was in pain. He winced at the bruises decorating her pale skin. “She’s beating the hell out of you, Kadan.”

“She'll get better,” said Gina, yelping and tensing as he found a nasty knot on her hamstring.

He shook his head and dropped a kiss on her lower back. The big yellow horse had been fighting her every step of the way as they travelled. It was over a week since leaving, and the mare had barely improved. But asking his Kadan to give up would only make her more determined to try, so he didn't bother.

The knot finally relaxed, and she sagged to the bed. He moved down to her calves with long, smooth strokes. “After we’re done in Val Royeaux, I thought we’d head north for a week or two. There’s a cabin I’ve used a few times when the Chargers used to work in the area. What do you think?”

She said something unintelligible into the pillow. He leaned closer. “I'm sorry, I don't speak Mumble. You'll have to use Qunlat, Common Tongue, Tervinter, Elvish, Seheron, Orlesian, or Ferelden. Maybe Nevarran, though I’m a little rusty.”

Her head lifted and she gave him a dirty look. “I said I'm in like Flynn. Show off.”

He grinned. “You're not too shabby yourself. Almost conversational in Qunlat, fluent in the Common Tongue, and in English.” He said the word oddly, making the ‘g’ it's own syllable. “Most people can barely speak their own language properly.”

She rolled over and sat up. “Technically you speak English almost fluently. It's close to common tongue. And my accent is still garbage in Qunlat.”

He shrugged and kissed the tip of her nose. “To a native speaker, maybe. At least you can understand most of what's being said. Might come in useful someday.”

Her eye sparkled in the moonlight as she spoke in his home language. “I mean, I could even use it right now.”
“For what?”

“To ask you to rub a little higher and a lot harder.” She dragged a finger down the centre of his chest. “Among other things.”

“See? The practice is already paying off,” he growled as his fingers found their way to the soft folds between her legs and her back arched.

Bull had her panting and begging within minutes. A ferocious grin spread across his face. “Such a glutton. A beautiful, delicious glutton.”

She whimpered again, but this time the pleading sound made every hair on his body stand on end. He lifted her hips to his mouth and took his first taste of the night, nearly swooning at the sweetness of her. Her hips writhed impatiently, but he didn't care. Let her fuck his face if she wanted him that bad.

Her pussy was soaked by the time he decided to take mercy on her and slide one of his fingers inside the tight little channel. She clamped around his finger, keening his full name. He groaned and continued pushing her to the edge of climax, waiting for those muscles to soften and ready themselves for his cock.

Some nights it took over an hour to ready her for his girth. This was not one of those nights. She was slick and ready for him in record time. He continued growling and whispering Qunlat to her, demanding that she respond in kind. Gina cried out as he slowly thrust himself to the hilt. “I'm yours, the Iron Bull! Do what you will!”

His eye rolled back in his skull as the sleek muscles surrounding his cock rippled and gripped him. “I'm going to fuck you until you can't remember your own name,” he rasped.

“How?” she said through gritted teeth.

He gripped under her ass and rose on his knees before pounding himself into her. Her shoulders stayed planted on the ground, giving him the perfect angle to hit every sweet inch of her and make her senseless with pleasure. He shifted so that one hand was bracing her and slid the other one over her clit, gasping as she instantly began to shudder around him.

Her first orgasm nearly undid his control. The second had him on the edge. Her body was one quivering mass by the third, and only ragged moans of delight came from those gorgeous pink lips. Bull couldn't hold himself back anymore. He dropped her hips to the bed and fell onto his forearms, grunting and biting into the soft flesh of her breasts as he slammed into her and drove them both over the edge.

Her body continued to tremble with aftershocks for over ten minutes. Bull laughed softly and slid his hands over the shivering muscles just above that delightful little slit. “I think that might be a new record, Kadan.”

She made a helpless little noise and nodded. He grinned. Mission accomplished.

***

Gina stared up at the mare. In the light of day, she was a lot bigger than she remembered. And thanks to Bull’s little riding session the night before, she was walking extra funny. It was going to be a long day.

A big hand slid down her back and gripped her bottom. “You sure you're up to this?”
“If I can get on her, yes.”
He chuckled. “Want a boost?”
Gina sighed. “Yes.”
“Say the magic words,” he whispered in her ear, sending a tingle down her spine.
“Please, the Iron Bull.”

He nipped the side of her neck and then took hold at her knee and lifted easily. She swung her leg over the broad back and gathered her reins just in time for the horse to bolt forward. She cranked the horse's head to her knee and forced her into a tight circle. Bull barely dodged out of their way.

Gina cursed viciously. The mare was still up to her tricks. All week she’d been fighting her, and everyday she thought she made progress, only to be disappointed in the morning. After a big buck nearly unseated her, she felt her patience snap. Enough was enough. She shot a glance forward and saw a big open plain ahead. “You want to play rough, hot shot? Let's go then.”

She dug her heels into the mare's sides. The horse reared and leapt into a gallop. Gina pointed her forward and hung on. Sunny squealed and ran faster, making the wind drag tears from Gina’s eye. She didn't care.

After a long run, the horse began to slow on her own. Gina grimaced and kicked her again. “Not yet, Miss. It’s time you learned who the bigger bitch in this relationship is. Let's get to work.”

She had to make a big curving loop four times before the wild race began to turn into hard work for the horse. What had been a rebellious tilt to the horse’s chin softened, and the mare finally lowered her head and started putting in the effort Gina was looking for. Both ears were pointed firmly in Gina’s direction, waiting for the merciful command to slow.

She waited for one more lap before asking the mare to fall into a smart trot. She took a long sweeping turn and fell into step with the group. Both she and Sunny were trembling and pouring sweat. Kaya reached out and patted the mare on the nose, a move that would've seen the mare spooking the night before. Now she merely sighed and settled into their marching pace.

Bull shook his head. “If I ever get the notion to argue with you, just remind me of this scene.”
Gina scoffed. “Usually horses are simple. Make the wrong thing hard or uncomfortable, and they'll give in pretty damn quick. I somehow doubt you're that easy.”

He shot her a grin. “I'm pretty content as long as I get the three F’s.” At her confused look, he lifted a finger for each word. “Food. Fighting. And f-”

“Fun?” Jeremy interrupted, giving Kaya a wry glance.

He turned scarlet and cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah.”

“Nice save, Papa,” said Dorian drily.

***

It was amazing to watch Sunny transform from a monster to a decent horse. Once Gina took a hard line and the mare figured out that misbehaving only got her hard work and misery, she fell into line.

Bull couldn't help a swell of pride as he watched his Kadan work. She was modest about it, but to
him her horsemanship bordered on magical. He'd never considered a horse as more than a mode of transportation before meeting her, but now he had an appreciation for the raw power of the animals. She had a way of harnessing it that he'd never seen, not even from Dennet’s personal stock.

They were halfway to Val Royeaux. To his gruesome delight, they'd run into and taken down two packs of bandits, a few rogue Red Templars, and one giant. With every swing of his axe he felt himself coming back to life. He hadn’t realized how much he missed being in the thick of things.

They rested for an extra day in a small village on the edge of Orlais. Bull and Jeremy took Kaya out to explore the town while Dorian and Gina rode to a nearby market to replenish supplies. As with everywhere they went, the little girl charmed everyone she met. Bull was sure that even with his horns at full growth, people would have flocked to his side to meet her.

A crow landed on his shoulder carrying a message from Divine Victoria. Bull had no idea why Leliana chose the name. Some traditional thing, he supposed. She was insisting that he and Gina visit while they were in Val Royeaux. Bull took a moment to scrawl a quick response while Kaya raced down the road and Jeremy chatted with one of the local healers.

He’d just attached the note to the crow’s foot when the bloodcurdling screech of a dragon filled the air. A shadow swept overhead, and he looked up to see a High Dragon fly over head and cut a sharp turn to aim at the town square. As it gathered speed, a tiny scream caught his attention. His blood went ice-cold.

Kaya! The little girl was standing at the edge of town, directly in the path of the beast. He bolted into action, only to hear the pounding of hooves at his back. “Get out of the way!”

He dove to the side, and felt the thunder of Brego’s feet as he raced past at top speed. Bull watched in terror as the dragon roared and began dropping. Gina leapt from the saddle and rolled as she hit the ground. As the dragon’s mouth hinged open, Brego shot left and Gina caught hold of Kaya. Then flames filled the air, searing hot and blindingly bright, forcing Bull to take cover behind one of the buildings.

The dragon bellowed and launched high in the air. As it circled for another attack, Bull raced into the smoke-filled road, hunting desperately for his girls.

They were nowhere to be seen. His heart pounded in his ears. "Kadan!" he cried.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I love feedback - even if you aren't loving everything. Critiques help me improve my writing, which makes my stories better for my readers!!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

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The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gina kept her eye on the soaring dragon and trusted the horse beneath her to keep them on the right path to get to the small village before the winged asshole landed. She thanked every god out there that she was on her steady friend rather than the temperamental Sunny. The bay would challenge Corypheus if she asked. As it was, Brego was pouring on speed she didn’t know was on tap. It was like he knew the urgency of their race.

As they swept into town, she saw Bull running toward the dragon that was dropping like a rock. A breath later, she saw why he was running so desperately. Their baby stood at the end of the road!

No way would he be able to beat Brego as he barrelled down the road at top speed. She barely had time to shriek “Get out of the way!” before the horse reached the Qunari. He tumbled out of their way, and she turned her focus to Kaya.

Brego’s ears flattened to his head as he stretched out and raced directly toward the dragon. No fear filled his eyes, just the determination she’d come to know and love so much. Gina kicked her feet free of the stirrups and dove to the ground. Her hip crunched awkwardly as she rolled, but the pain didn’t faze her. She got her hands on the little girl just as the heat from the dragon’s flame rolled over her.

***

Bull barely made it thirty feet before the dragon landed, howling at him. He bellowed right back, gripping his knife and cursing himself as his mind pictured the Dragon-slayer leaned against the wall in their room. Fool! Stupid, complacent fool!

He raced forward anyway, fully intending to choke the damn thing with his bare hands if he had to.
Shouts and panicked cries filled the air as the dragon charged into the little village. The beast was whipping its head back and forth, seeking out a target.

Its gaze settled on a small hut and the creature began tearing at the roof and walls. The wooden hut shrieked and groaned as it disintegrated under the abuse. A spark of hope leapt to life in Bull’s chest. Maybe Gina and Kaya were inside the hut!

He grabbed a rock and threw it with all of his might. It bounced off the side of the dragon’s face, making it flinch and yelp. Its eyes sought the idiot throwing rocks and found Bull. Scaly lips peeled back, revealing teeth the size of Bull’s hand. A menacing growl echoed off the walls, and then it loosed another stream of flames down the road, forcing Bull to dive behind shelter.

He caught sight of Dorian and Grim on the other side of the road. Both had eyes the size of saucers, but they boldly followed when he bolted from the cover and toward the creature threatening everything he held dear in the world. It was focused on the hut again, massive claws and teeth scrabbling and ripping more of the flimsy structure away.

***

Gina couldn’t think beyond keeping her arms wrapped tightly around her little girl. The heat and smoke were choking, but they were together, and Kaya was alive. Somehow she’d managed to get them behind a wall. It was smouldering, but it held. An unusual breeze skimmed over her leg. She glanced down to see the leather burned away behind her knee, the skin visible raw and bright red.

The race to beat the dragon to the townsite had been beyond terrifying. Adrenaline still surged through her veins, making her entire body tremble. Brego had given her every ounce of heart he had, but they’d still cut it so close that her hair was singed.

Before she could run to Bull, the dragon landed close enough that she could reach out and tug its tail. Kaya made a fearful little squeak and she clapped a hand over the girl’s mouth. “Shh, baby. We need to be brave,” she whispered in her ear.

The dragon stalked their way, the snout sniffing busily. She edged further between the houses, praying the shadow would be deep enough to disguise their presence. Someone across the road shouted in panic, drawing the beast’s attention away long enough that she could duck into the building.

Her foot caught on a rug, sending them both tumbling to the ground. Kaya didn’t so much as whimper, but Gina’s already aching hip burst with unbearable pain. She couldn’t help the choked cry of pain bursting past her lips.

In an instant, the dragon was on the house, making the entire structure quake as it fought to get to them. This time Kaya did scream in fear, and Gina didn’t blame her.

She scooped the girl up and stumbled toward the rear of the house, praying there was another way to get out. As they reached a back bedroom, the roof finally released like a tin can, and a massive paw jammed through, feeling around for the prize in the box.

***

As its arm poked through the hole in the roof, a burst of ice shot through the air, smacking into its face. It shrieked and shook its head, clawing at the shards penetrating its hide. Then it rounded on the trio and lunged their way.
Bull met it stride for stride and hammered a vicious strike to its muzzle when it took a snap and missed. The blow landed hard and jolted it back a step. It came right back, teeth and claws flying. Bull stopped thinking and let his instincts take over. He ducked and dodged with barely inches to spare, hacking and slicing everything that came into his range.

It spun sharply, the long tail catching him at the knee and sending him to the dirt hard enough to knock the wind out of him. Before he could move, it was on top of him, pinning him to the ground by his throat. The massive teeth bared in a triumphant sneer.

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Just as they’d run out of places to escape, the arm snaked out of the house. Gina didn’t wait to see if it came back. Her hip ached sharply as she hobbled out the way they’d come into the house and ducked into the alleyway. She moved as quickly as she could, hunting for a safe place to regroup and assess the situation.

As they reached the edge of the village, she caught sight of Jeremy. He was hunkered down behind a wall, a group of people clustered behind him. Her brother had a sword in hand, and looked ready for the hordes of hell to come rushing around the corner at any moment.

Someone tapped his shoulder and pointed her out. He clapped a hand to his heart and rushed over. “Thank god you’re okay. Saw you fly through on that crazy horse of yours, and then nothing but yelling and fighting.”

Kaya clung tightly to her neck. Gina smoothed the hair from her forehead and kissed her. “Baby, I need to go help Papa.”

Jeremy hissed a breath. “You do not! Papa can take care of himself.”

She shot him a glare and continued as though he hadn’t said a word. “Can you be extra brave and help Uncle Jer-Bear keep these people safe while Tama goes to make sure Papa is okay?”


She spied a man with a bow and gave him a questioning glance. He nodded and jerked it free of his shoulders. Gina pressed one last kiss to Kaya’s forehead. “Baby, I can’t wait anymore.”

Kaya whimpered, but slowly released her death grip and allowed Gina to pass her to Jeremy. He took the girl and gave Gina a pleading look. “You don’t need to do this. We can wait for this thing to go away.”

She patted his arm and accepted the bow and a quiver of arrows. “Do you really think Bull will just let it go?”

He started to protest one more time, but she was already running toward the fight, praying Bull was still alive.

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Bull couldn’t breathe. He jammed the knife to the hilt in the thing’s paw, but it merely hissed in annoyance and squeezed his throat harder. Razor sharp claws sank into the meat on the back of his neck. If he had air in his lungs, he’d have cried out in agony.

Dorian shouted, but there was no way for him to hit the beast without hurting Bull too. Grim swung his sword wildly, but a well-aimed kick sent him head over heels.
Black spots swam in his vision. He hammered a desperate fist in the dragon’s face and felt something crack, but the pressure still didn’t release. As everything started fading, he heard the unmistakable thwack of an arrow.

Hot blood spattered on his face as the dragon screamed in pain and staggered away from him. Bull heaved and dragged in precious air, gagging as it burned all the way into his lungs. He looked to see an arrow sticking out of the creature’s right eye. It batted at the damage and wailed again.

“There’s more where that came from, asshole!”

Bull jerked his head around to see Gina marching his way. She was covered in soot and limping, but the bow in her hands didn’t waver as she fired another arrow at the dragon. She glanced at him and then shouted, “Dorian, fix him!”

The Mage was at his side in another second, his hands pressing on his chest and throat. “Vishante kaffas, you’ve got a footprint on your throat.”

The creepy sensation of his flesh knitting itself together swept over him, and the burning ache faded into a dull roar he could ignore. He shoved Dorian back a step and surged to his feet, ready to take the dragon on again. The Mage muttered something under his breath, but didn’t try to stop him.

The beast snarled and took a swing at Gina, missing her by a hair. She cursed at it and took another shot, this one bouncing off the scaly forehead. It dropped its lower jaw and made that dangerous little gurgle. Bull snatched up the same rock he’d thrown earlier and aimed carefully as he launched it again. As the maw went wide and flames licked into being, the rock sailed past its teeth and slammed into the back of its throat.

It made a strangled squawk and thrashed its head around, trying to dislodge the stone. Its remaining eye bulged as it fought to get air. Gina cheered and clapped Bull on the arm. “Swish! Nothing but net, tough guy!”

He had no idea what that meant, but before he could ask, the heavy shouts of their squadron of soldiers reached his ears. About damn time! They flooded down the road and surrounded the now panicking dragon.

As it toppled under their blows, Bull sagged to his knees and dragged a hand down his face. The enormity of the situation crashed over him. He had been completely unprepared for any attack and left his little girl vulnerable.

His eye snapped to Gina. “Kaya?” he croaked.

“Safe and sound with Jer-bear,” she said, coming to him and skimming her hands over his neck and shoulders. Her eye widened as she examined him. “Holy shit, Bull. It nearly took your head off.”

He swallowed and winced as the ache returned. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Does too. I kind of adore you being in one piece,” she said softly, cupping his cheeks gently.

He didn’t deserve her kindness. His failure had just about gotten his girls killed. His heart thrummed as guilt swelled through his chest. A tiny body slammed into his side. “Papa!”

Bull traced a trembling finger over Kaya’s face. Like Gina, she was grimy, but appeared in good health. Words failed him as he pulled them both into his arms and held them for all he was worth.

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Gina let her words fade into silence as Kaya let out another snore. The little girl had taken longer to settle than usual thanks to the day's excitement, but if Gina was honest, she was surprised at how well the child had taken everything. At that age, she'd have been a wreck for days.

Bull, on the other hand, was not taking things so well. Of course, he thought he hid it all very well, but his fists had been so tight they shook every time she glanced over. Gina dropped one last kiss on Kaya's forehead and limped slowly from the room.

She found the Qunari in the courtyard of the small inn. He was honing the blades of his Greataxe, his forehead creased in concentration. She sat facing him and watched him work in silence until his lips tightened. “You’re staring.”

“You’re nice to stare at,” she said, a smile twitching at her lips.

Bull grimaced as he wiped each blade with a cloth and laid the axe on the table. “You’re going to make me talk about feelings, aren’t you?”

“Who, me?” She put a hand to her chest. “What makes you say that?”

He sighed and fidgeted with the seam on his pants. “Because you’ve got that look in your eye like you know what I’m thinking better than I do.”

Gina pulled her knees to her chest. “You’re making it pretty easy tonight.”

Bull looked into the distance for a few minutes before shaking his head and meeting her eye. “I’ve never been caught so off-guard before. I don’t like it. That’s not how I was trained, and it’s not how I’ve lived my life.”

“It’s not like there were any warnings about dragons. Even the townsfolk had no idea one might come through the area.”

His eye didn’t soften. “It’s not just the dragon. It could have been bandits, or Venatori, or a fucking bear. I would never have reached her in time if something happened.”

“The Iron Bull, you are my hero. But you’re not Superman.” Gina put her hand over his. “There are going to be times you make mistakes, or that your best won’t be enough. I hope you know that doesn’t make you any less of a man.”

He scowled. “I can still do a hell of a lot better than I did today. If you hadn’t gotten to town when you did…”

“Sweetheart, she could fall down the stairs tomorrow. Life is a bitch, and you’ll never be fully prepared for what it throws your way.” She waved a hand toward Kaya’s room. “Especially when it comes to a child like her. She’d too independent and precocious to ever be predictable.”

“I appreciate you trying to make this better, Kadan, but let’s be honest here.” His fist tightened. “I was a useless failure today. Didn’t even have my axe with me. Skinner was right, I am fucking soft.”

It was Gina’s turn to scowl. She gripped his hand. “Okay. Because I know you’re upset and in pain, I’m going to give you a pass. But talk about my Qunari like that again, and I will kick your ass.”

A smirk came to his face. “Your Qunari? When did I become property to be owned?”
She smiled. “Shall I pee on you to mark my territory?”

A laugh burst past his lips. “I’ll pass on the watersports, thanks.”

“Prude,” she teased.

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Sleep refused to come to him, despite his exhaustion. Bull carefully slipped out of the bed, doing his best not to disturb Gina as she slept. He crept to Kaya’s room and watched as she dreamed. Her terrified scream sounded in his mind again, making his teeth grind together.

No matter what anyone said, it was too close for comfort. Six months ago, he wouldn’t have been caught dead walking into any situation without mentally assessing and preparing for anything to happen. He’d fallen out of those habits far too easily.

Bull quietly made his way downstairs and sat in one of the armchairs facing the fireplace. His throat still ached, but he wasn’t about to get it healed. This was a lesson he needed to take completely to heart. Never again would he be so damn careless with those he loved.

He was so deep in thought he didn’t hear the steps approaching him until Grim sank into the other armchair. Bull lifted a hand in greeting. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

The boy shook his head. Bull grimaced. “Shitty day today.”

No reply. Not that he expected one. Grim’s silence had long ago ceased to feel strange. It was just the way he was, and in a way, it was comforting. The sun would always rise in the east and set in the west. The wind would always blow. And Grim would always be wordless.

Bull shifted and planted his chin on his fist. “No one told me how damn hard this would be, Grim. It used to be that I’d have a bad day and go get drunk to forget.” He shook his head. “I don’t think I could get drunk enough to forget today.”

Grim made a little grunt and plucked at a loose string on the arm of his chair. Bull frowned. “I would die for both of them. No hesitation. But how the hell do I cope with the idea of losing them?”

Another grunt, this one lower and harsher. “I hate the idea too, buddy.” He displayed a trembling hand. “I used to be a machine, didn’t I?”

Grim nodded, then tapped his heart twice. Bull smirked. “And then I grew a heart.” The boy nodded again. Bull sighed and muttered, “And then I went soft.”

The boy shook his head and made a fist. Bull stared at the fist for a long moment before swallowing hard. “A different kind of strong?” Grim nodded.

Bull drummed his fingers on his knee and fell into silence of his own. He didn’t know how much time passed before Grim got up and headed up the stairs, but the sky had started to brighten on the edge of the horizon when he finally made his way back up to their room.

Despite taking extra care not to jostle her, Gina woke when his arms circled her. She nuzzled her nose into the crook of his neck and whispered, “Feel better?”

He tightened his arms. “I'm getting there, Kadan.”
No one warned Bull he'd have to learn to deal with feelings. Not very nice of them!
Chapter 8

Chapter by jinbaitai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Papa, pretty!”

Bull glanced at the necklace Kaya was pointing toward and asked the eager merchant, “How much?”

Gina scoffed. “You're going to spoil her rotten, Bull.”

He rolled his eye. “That's not a real thing.”

She shook her head and watched as he haggled with the merchant. They came to an agreement, and then their daughter was the proud owner of yet another sparkling necklace. She pulled it over her head to stack on top of the first two necklaces Papa had purchased for her.

“This tiny girl has you absolutely wrapped around her little finger,” she said, giving Kaya’s foot a fond squeeze.

His arm slid around her shoulders and he leaned in to whisper, “I spoil you too, Kadan. Or are you forgetting about all those pretty little shoes sitting in your closet?”

Her cheeks warmed. “Except that I tried to buy them for myself. Someone, not mentioning any names, interfered with that plan. Besides, you just said that ‘that’s not a thing’.” She did her best impression of his throaty voice.

He laughed. “I haven't gotten to buy either of you anything in all the time we've known each other, Kadan. I'm just making up for lost time.”

Gina giggled and leaned into him. It was good to see him laughing again.
Bull’s confidence had been undeniably shaken by the dragon. He hadn’t slept well for several days, and kept an over-sharp eye on Kaya, trailing anxiously in her wake wherever she went exploring. It had taken all of Gina’s powers of persuasion to get him to wear a short sword in town rather than the behemoth Greataxe.

The near throttling had left its mark too. The bruising was just fading now, and his voice had a strange husk to it, as though there were still underlying damages. He refused to let Dorian within arm’s reach, however. The man was more stubborn than a mule when he chose.

But they were finally in Val Royeaux, safe and comfortable in the apartment Bull had rented for them. He was due to meet with some local dignitaries later in the day, which left her to fill her day with Kaya.

They wandered past a little patisserie and picked up a few croissants to nibble on while they wandered. Kaya pointed to another shiny object with a coo. Gina couldn't help laughing as Bull obediently marched straight over.

As she turned to follow, a window display caught her attention. A mannequin stood in the centre wearing one of the prettiest dresses Gina had seen in her life.

The white bodice with delicate lace overlay and cap sleeves was fitted like a glove. It flowed seamlessly to the skirt, which flared slightly and reached just below the knee. Luscious magenta satin highlighted the nipped in waist, and when Gina stepped to the side, she could see that the corset lacing along the spine matched. A simple portrait neckline finished the look, creating the perfect frame for whatever jewelry the wearer desired.

She wouldn't have been surprised to see it on a Paris runway, or in one of the bridal magazines that her friends kept in the house. She couldn't help feeling a little wistful for that life, just for a moment.

Bull’s hand slid across her back. “See something you like, Kadan?”

Gina nodded slowly. “This dress is beautiful.”

His hand pushed gently on her back. “Then let's go get it.”

She shook her head. “No. I have no reason to wear a dress like that.”

He smirked and kissed her temple. “We have a few parties to attend. I’m sure we can find reason for it.”

She sighed and kissed his knuckles. “You don’t wear a dress like that to any old party, Bull.”

His brow furrowed. “Then where?”

A half-smile ticked at her lips. “You wear a dress like that to get married.”

He blinked and shot another glance at the dress. “Oh.”

Gina tugged on his hand. “I think you’re due to meet your contact here.”

As he fell into step beside her, she took one last peek at the pretty dress.

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Bull watched Gina as she gazed longingly at the dress. The wedding dress. His eye twitched as he scanned through their conversations, hunting for any previous mention about marriage.
He came up empty. Unless there were late night chats he’d lost after the head injury, she hadn’t ever talked about getting married.

His fingers subconsciously found the claw hanging against his chest. It was the only symbol his people had for relationships like theirs, rare as they were. Bull knew that other cultures had special ceremonies, but he’d always thought of them as unnecessary. Either you were committed, or you weren’t. Who needed the formality to make it real?

He snuck a glance at her. Did she want such a ceremony? As he opened his mouth to ask, a strange plummy voice said, “The Iron Bull, I presume?”

He hid a sigh as he turned. “You would be correct. Lord Etienne, I take it?”

The man, short and plump with wispy blond hair patted his chest and bounced on his toes. “Right you are. Right you are, indeed.” He turned over-bright eyes to Gina. Bull suppressed the urge to step between them. “And this must be the lovely Gina. Savior of Thedas, in the flesh. I must say, we are all terribly impressed by your heroics.”

Gina went scarlet. “Oh, it was nothing.”

“Nothing?” The man’s fleshy lips gaped open and closed for a moment. “Unless the rumors aren’t true, you defeated an Archdemon in the Fade! The bards sing songs about you, my dear girl.”

Bull cleared his throat. “I believe you were going to give me a tour of the citadel, Lord Etienne?”

He knew Val Royeaux inside and out, but never turned down the chance to get another point of view. Besides, it distracted the man from his impromptu hero worship. Gina shot him a grateful smile. He held his arms out and caught Kaya as she tumbled with a little laugh. He kissed her loudly on both cheeks before setting her to her feet at Gina’s side and kissing her fully on the mouth.

Lord Etienne was watching with great interest, though he tried to hide it when Bull turned to face him again. He bowed to Gina. “Would you like to join us, my Lady?”

Gina shook her head. “Me and this pretty little girl have a date to go find a playground.” She bent down to Kaya and said, “Isn’t that right?”

The girl gave a shy little smile and hid behind Gina’s leg. Etienne made a disappointed sound and said, “Well I have heard good things about the playground along the Avenue of the Sun. The slide is said to be top notch.”

Gina smiled. “Thank you. We’ll go find out for ourselves, I suppose. Come along, baby.” She took Kaya’s hand and they started to walk away. As she passed Bull, she gave his forearm a squeeze.

Bull watched them go with a pang of longing. He’d far rather be hanging out with them than going on a tour of the city with this pompous little noble. He hid another sigh as he turned to follow the little man as he marched in the opposite direction.

“I have a real treat for you today, Iron Bull.”


The man frowned. “Yes, Iron Bull.”

“The Iron Bull,” he corrected again, more firmly.

Bull gave him an easy smile. “No problem. Most people don't realize that the article is part of my name.” It was subtle and friendly, but to the right ears it was a pointed statement. He wasn’t some random back-water Qunari without any clue about how this society operated. If you wanted respect, you demanded it without and harsh words.

The little lord made a little hemming noise and returned to his little speech. “You've arrived just in time to watch a sentencing hearing. Justice in action. I've even got us front row seats!”

Bull grimaced. He’d have barbs directed at the back of his head for blocking the view for sure. The man didn’t seem to notice his discomfiture, and prattled on. “Afterward, the Head Warden has agreed to give us a personal tour of the prison. We may even see some real criminals!”

The Lord’s glee didn't rub off on Bull. He'd had personal tours of the prison before. Picking up Grim stood sharply in his mind. The boy had gotten tangled in a bar fight and kicked the asses of three Chargers. Bull hadn't been able to catch the boy before the local Chevaliers stepped in, and wound up paying handsomely to have him freed. Worth every penny, he thought with a smile.

He'd met more than his fair share of criminals too. More often than not, they came to know him by way of his blade.

But the man was so excited, and Bull needed to keep him happy to keep their invitation to the masquerade ball at the end of the week. So he plastered a smile over his face and followed in the man's wake.

They reached a large square and took a seat in the front row of a large set of chairs. Bull sat tall and proud, though he did feel bad for the poor sods directly behind his broad shoulders. They made little hissing noises, but he didn’t react. Couldn’t react. His job was to build respect for the Inquisition. You didn’t do that by slouching and being shamefaced over something you couldn’t control.

A small group of men came on stage, some guards, some prisoners. Bull watched as man after man was sentenced, some for petty crimes, others for more serious offenses. The entire process was dry and dull, except for the occasional outburst from some of the less civilized criminals. Lord Etienne elbowed Bull several times and had a silly grin on his face the entire time. It was unsettling, if Bull was honest.

“Cyril Mornay, for your crimes against the Empire of Orlais.” A thin man with pale skin and huge eyes was dragged forward and pushed to his knees. The announcer continued, “For the murders of General Vincent Callier, Lady Lorette Callier, their four children, and their retainers. You are sentenced to be hanged from the neck.”

Bull crossed his arms and shook his head. Quite the body count. He remembered reading about the man’s capture. Another in a long string of arrests, and every one of the accused blaming Captain Thom Rainier for the orders. The mystery man had yet to be found. Bull didn’t think any of them were truly innocent of the crimes laid at their feet.

The man shuffled to the edge of the stage. “Please,” he wailed. “I didn’t know! I was just following orders!”

The plea didn’t soften Bull’s opinion. Children, while sometimes collateral damage, were never direct targets of a soldier’s sword. ‘Following orders’ was a weak excuse from a desperate man. A good soldier would have, rightfully, questioned any such order. A good man would have died to stop such orders being followed.
“Enough,” said the Chevalier announcer. “Proceed!”

The man was hauled to his feet, and noose settled around his neck. Another elbow drilled into Bull’s arm. “This is so exhilarating,” whispered Etienne, his eyes shining.

Bull felt his lip curl in distaste. He enjoyed a good killing, and he wasn’t shy about admitting it. He’d even had a fun little game going with Blackwall about who could remove the most limbs in one blow. But an execution wasn’t quite the same. Especially not a hanging. It was a solemn act to right the injustices brought upon the victims of crime.

Another man was added to the short row of nooses, and another was being dragged forward. A bloody day indeed. Bull took a slow breath to ready himself for the moment they kicked the benches out from under their feet.

“Stop!”

The crowd gasped, and Etienne fairly bounced in delight. The announcer turned to the side of the stage and took an attentive stance. “A Grey Warden?” he said, surprise clear in his tone.

Ice filled Bull’s veins as Blackwall surged into view. “This man is innocent of the crimes laid before him! Orders were given, and he followed them like any good soldier. He should not die for that mistake!”

What the hell was the man doing? Last report had him somewhere in the middle of the Western Approach, a hard week’s ride from the city. Bull felt himself sliding toward the edge of his seat, his fists going tight.

The Chevalier stepped toward Blackwall, hands held out to the sides. “Then find me the man who gave the order.”

“Is it really you? After all this time?” Mornay strained at the rope, his voice raspy and raw.

Dread washed through Bull’s stomach as Blackwall’s shoulders went square. He tried to catch the man’s eye, to stop him, but it was too late. The Warden’s chin lifted high as he spoke loud enough for the entire city to hear him. “I gave the order. The crime is mine. My name is Thom Rainier.”

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Gina held Kaya’s hands as she walked tiptoe around the lip of a small fountain. She pretended to let the girl wobble toward the water, making her shriek with delight.

They reached a small playground with a small structure in the centre. A slide came out of one side, and a rope ladder came down from the other. Kaya’s eyes went big and bright she before eagerly ran toward the thing.

As she reached it another child, a boy about her age, ran around the corner. They both stopped to stare at each other before giggling and chasing after one another. Instant friends, it seemed.

Gina laughed at their antics before a woman charged into view and grabbed the boy by the arm. She wore a lovely silk dress, and had her blond hair coiled intricately on her head. Clearly one of the many nobles living in Val Royeaux. She gave Gina and Kaya a scathing glare before saying loudly, “Come Gabriel, we don't play with their kind!”

Our kind? Gina was so shocked at the harsh words that she didn't respond before they were out of sight. She turned to find Kaya sitting forlornly at the top of the slide.
At first she thought the words had offended the girl, but quickly realized that it was the loss of her little playmate that upset her. She sighed and rubbed Kaya’s back. “We’ll find you another friend. One who has nicer parents.”

The words throbbed in her mind the rest of the day. She knew neither of their clothing was traditional or fancy, but they were both clean and well kempt. Even if they weren't, the notion that she and her child were lesser people based solely on appearances infuriated her.

By the time they got back to the main square, she was ready to take someone’s head off. Kaya was still mopey, which just dug the insult deeper. So much for a fun day at the park.

“Nan?” A strange yet painfully familiar voice spoke behind her.

She turned, and stared in shock as an elderly elven woman stepped into her line of sight, hands wringing together. It was the woman she’d helped save from the wicked Red Templars. The elf stepped forward tentatively. “It is you, yes?”

Gina nodded slowly. “Yes, it is. Although my real name is Gina.”

“Gina,” repeated the woman slowly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, stepping toward the woman. “I don’t think I’ve ever known your name.”

“I am Shara,” said the elf. “Sometimes I thought you were a dream.”

Gina didn’t recall the woman’s accent being so strong, but then again, her memories centred on the shock of finding herself in a strange new world. “I might have called it a nightmare, if I’m honest, Shara.”

Shara nodded and fidgeted with a chain around her neck. When Gina looked closer, she saw an all-too-familiar silver ring. The ‘magic’ ring. Her throat tightened. “You’re a long way from that beautiful little farm, Shara. What brought you to the city?”

“The war. I had to leave, otherwise I would have been killed by another pack of roaming soldiers.” The elf’s eyes went hard. “They were not reasonable in those days.”

Gina glanced at a small cafe. “Would you like to join us for tea and dessert?”

Shara shook her head sharply. “I am not permitted.”

Not permitted? Coupled with the insult flung at her and Kaya, it was enough to make her go rigid. “Please. If anyone has anything to say, I will set them straight.”

“No. My Lady, you are kind, but it will just make things more difficult for both of us.”

Gina frowned. “Alright. Then would you join us for supper tonight? I would so like to get to know you better.”

Hesitation shone clearly in the woman’s eyes, but finally she nodded. “I would like that very much.”

Gina gave Shara the address and the elf strode briskly away. Kaya tugged at the hem of her jacket. “Tama, cake?”

“What are the magic words?”

“Please,” said Kaya, and then repeated it in Qunlat and Elvish.
Gina crouched down and wrapped the girl in a hug. “When you ask so nicely, of course we can have cake.” As she straightened and led Kaya toward the little cafe, she looked down the road to see if she could catch a glimpse of Shara, but the elf was already gone.

What a strange twist of fate to meet that woman here, of all places. Gina hadn’t thought about the woman in months, but the memory was still relatively sharp in her mind. The brutal murder of the elven man. The ensuing deaths of the two Templars. The first time she’d drawn blood in her life.

Her mind raced through memories, distracting her to the point that Kaya gobbled up most of their cake before she could take more than a bite. Kaya grinned toothily at her when she made a big show of protesting the lack of cake, but if she was truly honest, it might as well have been ash.

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Bull did his best to hide the horrified expression that settled over his face. Blackwall was Thom Rainier? He’d have never guessed. The man wasn’t the most devout Warden, and clearly held some secret or another. But this? It was almost as stunning as finding out he’d left the Qun.

The Chevalier had the stage cleared, and announced that all proceedings were suspended while they processed this new information. The crowd made a fuss, but dispersed peacefully enough. Bull sat rooted in his seat, trying frantically to come up with a plan to speak to Blackwall. To say what, he didn’t know. But he couldn’t just let him go to the gallows without at least attempting to find out the truth.

Lord Etienne leapt to his feet. “We can go speak with the Chevalier now. I bet he’s over the moon about this!”

Bull tried to smile, but his lips stuck to his teeth. They crossed to the stage and Etienne waved. “Hello there! Remember me?”

The Chevalier turned to face them. “Yes, of course. My Lord.” He bowed. “I apologize if I am distracted. I cannot believe we’ve finally found Thom Rainier.”

“Tell me everything about him,” begged the little Lord.

“I know what everyone knows. That he’ll hang for the massacre of a noble and his family.”

Bull said, “Will he be taken to jail?”

The masked soldier shrugged. “For now. It’s a damned mess, but we’ll sort it out quickly enough. There are plenty of people who can’t wait to see him swing.” The Chevalier had a triumphant note in his voice, like he was one of those eagerly waiting to see Blackwall die.

“Can you take us to the jails now? I’ve promised the Iron Bull that he’d get the most exciting tour,” said Etienne, his voice trembling with repressed excitement. Bull wasn’t convinced the man hadn’t wet himself.

The Chevalier nodded sharply. “Yes, but we must be quick about it.”

Bull didn’t argue. It seemed he didn’t need any special plans to see Blackwall after all.

The tour was relatively brief, but it felt agonizingly long as Bull waited to see the face of his friend. Criminals sneered at the Lord and the Chevalier, but quickly averted their eyes when they saw him standing there. On any other day, knowing that the mere sight of him was enough to garner the fear and respect of those around him would have stroked his ego. Today he couldn’t have possibly cared.
They rounded the corner, and there he was. Blackwall. Or Thom Rainier. Bull swallowed hard as the man looked up and started. “The Iron Bull? What are you doing here?”

“I could say the same thing, Blackwall.” He stepped closer, ignoring his two companions. “What the hell have you done?”

“It’s not Blackwall. And I didn’t kill him,” said Blackwall pointedly, his eyes meeting the Chevalier’s. “He was after me to join the Wardens. There was an ambush. Dark spawn. He was killed. I took his name to stop the world from losing a good man.”

It didn’t make any sense to Bull. He said as much. The man in the cell, his face so familiar, gave a brief smile. “I expect it wouldn’t. Especially to you.” He sighed heavily. “The good man that he was wouldn’t have let another die in his place.”

“So it’s true, then?” Bull jerked his chin toward the Chevalier. “Captain Mask wasn’t telling stories out of turn?”

“Yes. I did.”

Lord Etienne touched Bull’s arm. “Do you really know him?”

Bull briefly considered lying. He was good at it. He could have said anything and had them believing every word he spoke. But the thought was ludicrous in the face of everything happening. “Yes. At least, I thought I did.”

“Take a good look at who I really am,” said Blackwall, rising to his feet. “I gave the order to kill Lord Callier and his entourage. And then I lied to my men about what they were doing.” He slapped a hand on the bars. “And when that lie came to light, I ran. Like a fucking coward.”

“And those men paid for your treason while you were off pretending to be a good man,” said the Chevalier, a note of scorn in his voice.


Bull felt sick to his stomach. “A monster wouldn’t have given himself up.” He felt like he was trying to convince himself.

Blackwall scoffed and dropped to his knees. “You just refuse to accept reality.”

“What happened to the real Blackwall?” asked Etienne, curiosity oozing from his voice. This might as well have been a dramatic play to the man.

“Like I said, he was killed by Darkspawn. I was on the run, and he recruited me. Refused to listen when I told him I was a waste of his time. He sent me into one of the Deep Road entrances so I could get a vial of Darkspawn blood for the joining. When I returned, I found him ambushed. He took a blow meant for me and died.” Blackwall shook his head. “It should’ve been me.”

“Man sounds like a damned hero,” muttered Etienne.

“He was. But without him, there was no proof that he’d recruited me, or that I hadn’t killed him. So I couldn’t go complete the joining. I felt like it was a waste to have him die over a worthless scumbag like me. So Rainier died. And Blackwall lived.”
The Chevalier stepped forward. “But why did you kill the General? I know your reputation. You were well regarded by those who followed your command, even after your crimes.”

“Because that wasn’t enough,” said Blackwall, a bitter note to his voice. “I wanted more. Always more. I was hired by another noble, Ser Robert Chapuis. He felt that eliminating one of Celene’s staunch supporters might endear him to the Grand Duke, who he felt was the true Emperor. Don’t know if his plan would’ve worked, but the coin was decent enough. I took it.”

“A Captain of the Orlesian army turned sellsword?” The Chevalier’s mask hid his expression, but you could hear the revulsion colouring every word.

Bull mulled over the words. “I remember this. Didn’t Gaspard disavow and condemn the act entirely?”

Lord Etienne nodded. “And Ser Robert killed himself before they could throw him in jail. Poisoned his own wine, I believe.” He turned to Blackwall. “I can understand why you were hired to kill the General. But why his family?”

“I didn’t know he’d be travelling with his family. I thought it would be soldiers and guards. I instructed my men to kill everyone. And they did. Without bloody question.”

“And for that, they are guilty,” said Bull quietly. “Orders only carry so much weight.”

“Those killings at the right time would have gotten me a medal,” retorted Blackwall. “Let’s not delude ourselves on how real wars are waged.”

“You weren’t at war,” barked Bull. “And children should never be the intentional target of any soldier.”

“And that’s why I deserve to be here,” snapped Blackwall. He turned his face away. In a softer tone, he said, “I wish it could have been different. That I was truly Blackwall. But I’m not. And it would be an insult to the memory of the real Blackwall and to our fallen friends if I continued living this lie.”

Bull made a tight fist. “You should have come to us first.”

“For what purpose?” Blackwall shook his head. “This is the justice I deserve.”

The Chevalier cleared his throat sharply. “My apologies my Lords, but I need to be going. If you’ll please follow me.”

Bull followed in silence, answering in vague grunts and murmurs when addressed by the Lord. As they reached the main square, he stopped and faced the man. “I have to go send a report to the Inquisitor. She’ll want to know that one of our members has been imprisoned. I am sorry to cut our tour short.”

The man waved a hand. “I understand, the Iron Bull. I am so delighted that we got some excitement. To tell you the truth, I was kind of dreading this visit.”

Bull smirked. “Didn’t want to be stuck with the Qunari?”

“Not at all,” said the man vehemently. “I just didn’t think I could possibly entertain someone as well traveled as you.”

Diplomatic as hell. Bull gave a nod. “Well, you did just fine.”
The man’s face beamed. “I shall send your tickets for the masquerade later today. I cannot wait to introduce the two of you to my wife.”

With that, the man strutted away and Bull spun on his heel, making a beeline for their temporary apartment. What the hell was he going to tell Cassandra? And Gina?

***

A knock sounded at the door. Gina turned to Kaya. “Can you go answer the door for Tama?”

Kaya nodded and ran to the door. “Who’s it?”

“It is Shara,” came a reedy voice.

The little girl reached up and opened the door. The elf stood there, dressed in a clean cotton dress. She bent toward Kaya. “You are a lovely little girl,” said the elf. “May I come in?”

Kaya gave a shy little giggle and ran back to Gina, burying her face in Gina’s thigh. Gina laughed and patted her head. “Please come in, Shara. Kaya is still learning how to be a polite hostess.”

“She truly is delightful,” said the woman as she stepped inside. Her eyes widened as she looked at the set table. Gina had spent the rest of the day cooking, and wound up overdoing it, as per usual. The table sported a rack of lamb, a roasted chicken, a platter of mashed potatoes, two bowls of steamed vegetables, and a large bowl of salad. Plus dessert, which was still cooling in the kitchen. “Oh my,” whispered the elf.

Gina smiled. “Don’t mind me. My mother always made too much food. A problem I’ve inherited, it seems. You’re welcome to take a seat. Bull should be home in a few minutes.”

Less than a minute later, the door swung open and Bull strode swiftly into the room. He froze in his step when he took in the sight of their guest. Gina crossed the room to him. “Shara, this the Iron Bull. Bull, this is Shara. The first person I met when I arrived in Thedas.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” said Shara, her accented voice trembling as she took in his bulk.

He dipped his head toward the woman and said something in a foreign tongue. It took Gina a second to place it, but quickly recognized a few Elvish words. Shara looked stunned and nodded before replying in Elvish.

Bull gripped Gina by the arm and tugged her toward the back bedroom. Once inside, he closed the door. “I told her I needed to speak to you alone for a minute,” he said, his eye darting around the room.

Gina frowned. “Bull, you look like you’ve got an army snapping at your heels. What’s going on?”

“Blackwall is in jail.”

“What? Where?”

“Here. In Val Royeaux.”

She leaned on the desk. “Did he get in a bar fight or something?”

“No.” Bull dragged a hand down his face. “He’s confessed to the murder of a Lord and his family from a decade ago.”
Gina felt her jaw fall open. “What?”

He scoffed. “I know. It’s insane, but damned if it isn’t true. His real name is Thom Rainier, and he used to be a Captain in the Orlesian army. Took on the name of a Warden who died protecting him.”

She shook her head and pressed a hand to her throat. “This doesn’t make any sense. How on earth would he get away with simply changing his name?”

Bull shrugged. “He’s relatively non-descript. Throw a beard on him, he blends into a crowd really. It’s not like he had all this to try and hide.” He waved a hand to indicate himself.

“So what’s going to happen to him?”

“They want to hang him. It’ll be a quick trial, if my instincts are correct.”

Gina felt like throwing up. “What are you going to do?”

He sighed and sank to the bed. “I don’t know. Send notice to Cassandra for starters.”

She nodded. “Probably a good start. What do you think she’ll do about it?”

Bull shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t know if there’s anything to be done. Maybe we can convince them to release him into our custody so we can try him in-house. But asking for that is going to damage our credibility. Like we think our people are above the law or something.”

Gina stepped between his knees and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You’re probably right. I can’t believe this is happening. Did you have any idea that he might not be who he said he was?”

Bull rested a hand on her hip. “Not a clue. Thought maybe he left a trail of spurned lovers along the way or something. Not this. I couldn’t have ever guessed this.”

“Truth is stranger than fiction, sometimes.”

He nodded. “Speaking of strange, how in the world did you manage to find that elf in Val Royeaux? I thought you met her near the Frostbacks.”

“How did I manage to find my brother from another world at a random settlement in the Emerald Graves? Just lucky, I guess.”

Bull shook his head. “I suppose. Look, I hate to leave, but I really should get a message to Cass.”

Gina waved a hand and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I’ll put a plate in the oven for you. Just come home when you’re done.”

He pulled her in for another kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “Why can’t anything ever be simple anymore?” he said softly.

“Because you’d be bored out of your skull otherwise,” said Gina, tweaking his ear gently.

He laughed and rose to his feet. “You’re probably right.”

They returned to the main room in time for Kaya to loudly recite numbers in Elvish. Shara clapped her hands in delight and then jolted to her feet at the sight of them. “You have taught her well,” she said.
“It’s all Bull,” said Gina.

The elf gave him another wary look, but Bull didn’t hesitate. He bowed again, and said, “I apologize for being so rude, but I have urgent business to attend to. Please enjoy the meal. I hope to get the chance to meet you again.”

With that, he was gone, and the room fell into silence for a moment. Then Shara spoke tentatively, “He is...your husband?”

Gina smiled. “As good as. We haven’t taken any official vows. Don’t really need to.” Her fingers found the claw dangling against her chest. “The claw is symbolic for Qunari. No matter how far apart we may be, a part of us is always together.”

“I have not met a Qunari before. I did not expect him to be so…” The woman waved a hand vaguely.

“Big?”

A smile twitched at the elf’s lips. “Friendly. I had heard his people are standoffish, at best.”

“Just goes to show you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Indeed,” murmured the elf.

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Bull scrawled as quickly and neatly as he could, trying to be concise. He wanted to kick himself for not seeing the truth about Blackwall, or whoever he was, but couldn’t deny that he was missing too much information to know if there had been earlier signs.

The man certainly had disappeared like a leaf on the wind as soon as Sera’s memorial party was over. It had taken three weeks to track him down, but once Bull received word that Black... Rainier was at a refugee camp helping keep order and supplying food, he left him alone. Since then, he’d received weekly updates from his network.

But there was no hint of anything like this hiding Rainier’s past. Bull had even read through Leliana’s dossiers on everyone when taking her place as Spymaster, and not a word about this was anywhere in that file. It was humbling, to say the least.

He finished the report, and snapped his fingers. A crow hopped over and lifted its foot. He attached the slip of paper and itched under the bird’s wing. It gave him a gentle peck on the hand and then flapped its wings and soared out of the window.

Cedric made a loud screech and flew over. Bull glared at him balefully. “I can’t trust you to deliver a note to Gina, let alone something like this.” The bird stabbed its beak at him, making him flinch and curse. “Keep it up and you’ll be on my supper table, bird.”

The crow cawed again and turned its back on him. He glowered, and then realized he was bickering with a damn bird. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m going crazy,” he muttered.

It bothered him that he didn’t know how to feel about Rainier. On one hand, he knew that Blackwall had been a decent guy. Worked hard, fought hard, helped those in need. But it didn't negate the fact that he had not only taken money to assassinate someone, but that he'd left his men to take the fall for him. Bull couldn't imagine letting any of his guys take the blame for something so heinous. Actually, he couldn't imagine not actively taking part in the deed itself.
His hands certainly weren't clean on the battlefield. Civilians were often hurt in the course of a battle. But he never taken a blade to a child. The memory of the burning orphanage ran through his mind, and the ensuing bloodbath at the Tal Vashoth camp. He regretted the entire affair deeply, but not because it was the wrong thing to do. He regretted responding in the throes of rage. Had he taken the time to think, he could have planned better. Perhaps his friends and colleagues would still be alive.

Maybe he'd still be with the Qun.

The idea of it made him feel strange. He was happy in his life with Gina and Kaya. It was a life that he'd never expected would fall in his lap, one that hadn't even occurred to him that he might want. Having them made losing his friends and family a little easier to bear, but it didn't erase the sting entirely. Not when he read reports and heard first-hand accounts of the events leading to his disavowal. Dirty intelligence and a demon-possessed Inquisitor had forced his hand.

He shook himself back to the present. There was nothing left to do but continue his diplomatic mission. He had a feeling that mission had just become even more critical.

Damn Thom Rainier.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I'm totally rearranging the timeline to suit myself. :) Hope you don't mind!
Chapter 9
Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the big delay. Some dipshit decided that burning my garage down would be a cool thing to do, so I've had to deal with all of that nonsense on top of a busy work schedule.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You have gotten disturbing news,” said Shara.

Gina jumped and looked over guiltily. “I’m sorry. I’m being a terrible hostess.”

The elf shrugged and tweaked Kaya’s little nose. “Your daughter has been entertainment enough.”

Gina tried to smile, but it wouldn’t quite come. “A friend of mine just confessed to a terrible crime. I don’t know how to feel about it.”

Shara frowned. “What happened?”

She relayed Bull’s announcement. The elf lifted a silver brow. “What is your friend’s name?”


Shara brushed a strand of hair from her face and sat back. “I’ve heard that name. Disgraced Chevalier captain. He was quite the commander in his day, as I recall.”

Gina picked at a chunk of chicken. “Were you living in Orlais at the time?”
“I’ve lived everywhere it seems,” said the woman. “My clan spent a few years in this area before moving away.”

“And you didn’t go with them?”

Shara shook her head slowly and touched the ring around her neck. “I grew weary of their reclusive ways. When we came to Val Royeaux, I disappeared into the city and I haven’t seen them since. I moved around on my own terms for a few years before I met Adrion. He swept me off my feet, and we made our own way. A mini clan, just the two of us.”

“Sounds like a wonderful life,” said Gina.

The elf shook her head. “He was a wonderful man, but naive. The farm was his idea. He thought we could have the best of both worlds. The seclusion along with stability. Look what that got us.”

Gina felt a twinge of sorrow. “I never did tell you how sorry I was for your loss.”

Shara dipped her head before clearing her throat. “You must tell me of your friend.”

“Who, Blackwall? He’s a good man,” said Gina. “He was at my shoulder the entire time we fought Corypheus.”

“But he killed those people,” said Shara, smoothing a hand over Kaya’s hair. “Perhaps he wasn’t as good as you think.”

Gina scowled and pushed food around on her plate. “Maybe not.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Shara sighed and said, “I should be going back to the Alienage.”

Gina rose to her feet and saw the woman to the door. As they reached it, the elf paused and touched her shoulder. “Why do you believe in him?”

She took a moment to think about it. “I think there’s such a thing as redemption. He didn’t have to come forward today, but he did. That has to mean something. Doesn’t it?”

Shara lifted a shoulder. “I cannot say. But I hope your faith is rewarded.”

And then she was gone, leaving Gina alone with her thoughts. She didn’t know how much time passed before a soft knock sounded at her door. Before she could move, Kaya raced over and flung the door open. Bull would have had a coronary over the action. Luckily it was just Grim standing at the door, grinning down at the girl. “Gim!” she cried and threw her arms around his legs.

The boy scooped her up and hugged her before waving shyly at Gina. She beckoned him inside. “Come eat.”

Like Shara, his eyes went wide at the sight of all that food. Gina smirked. “Yes, yes. I went way overboard.”

He smiled and sat, quickly filling a plate and digging in. Gina wasn’t sure how he was spending his time in Val Royeaux except that Bull had been sending him on solo missions. Kaya chattered at him and brought all of her new treasures over for inspection. He made suitable grunts and noises to show how impressed he was and bolted his food like he was starving before joining the girl on the floor to play a card game.
Gina puttered around, tidying and putting together a plateful of food for Bull. Then, in an attempt to distract herself from the Blackwall dilemma, she pulled out a sheaf of reports and letters. If nothing else, she could try and get caught up on her correspondence.

She wrote a note to Hawke and was just settling in to read a report from Cullen when a loud crack sounded at the door. She flinched as Kaya leapt to her feet to run to the door. Grim caught her with a sharp noise and pushed her behind his legs as he whipped out his sword.

Gina got to her feet and crossed to him, taking a trembling Kaya into her arms and watching the door in trepidation, waiting for someone to come through the heavy wood. When nothing happened, she exchanged a glance with Grim. He held a palm out to her and then moved slowly to the door.

He opened it, and looked both ways. Gina gasped at the sight of an arrow sticking into the wood. Grim looked at the arrow closely before pulling something free and closing the door.

He turned and displayed a note. Gina held Kaya tighter. “What the hell is that about?”

Grim handed it over to her. She set Kaya to her feet and jerked it open with trembling fingers.

“There is more to Rainier’s story than meets the eye. Allow us to show you.

Friends of Red Jenny”

A crude map with three marked spots filled the bottom of the page. Gina read it twice before giving it back to Grim. He gave her a sheepish smile and handed it right back. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she muttered, patting him on the arm absentely. The boy couldn’t read very well. He’d been learning some letters along with Kaya, but he wasn’t anywhere near ready to read this tangle of ink.

“Do you know who Red Jenny is?”

He nodded before grabbing the tips of his ears and miming points. Gina had to think for a minute, but then it dawned on her. “This was Sera’s crew, wasn’t it?”

Grim nodded. Kaya toddled over and pressed against his legs. He picked her up and gave her a hug. Gina sank onto a chair and sighed heavily. Sera had always been pretty vocal about her group. They were out to get ‘rich sods’. It didn’t seem to matter to her if the rich person in question was actually a decent person. They had money, and that made them bad. Even worse if they were an actual noble.

On one hand, Gina appreciated their dedication. On the other, she couldn’t help wondering if maybe they were a little too biased for their own good.

She read the note aloud and then said, “What do you think? Should we go check it out?”

He gave her a hard look and shook his head before making horns with his fingers. Gina sighed. “I know Bull wouldn't like it, but I'll take the heat.”

He sighed and crossed his arms, communicating clear disapproval. Gina frowned. “Since when did you turn into a saint? Didn't you start that bar brawl a few months ago?”

After giving her a withering glare, Grim mimicked drawing an arrow and pointed at the door before pointing at her head. Gina was never good at charades, but his intended message was clear. “Why would Sera’s people hurt me? I know you're worried, but there's a chance it could help a friend of ours. Isn't that worth the risk?”
He gave a noncommittal grunt before finally rolling his eyes and waving toward the door. Gina hopped to her feet. “I knew you’d come around.” She patted his arm and added, “Who needs talking, right?”

He pulled a face at her and picked up Kaya. Gina snatched up a couple toys and lead him down the street to Dorian and Jeremy’s temporary home.

Her brother answered the door and lit up at the sight of his niece. “There’s the prettiest little girl I’ve ever met!”

Kaya grinned and threw herself at him. He laughed and pretended to topple to the ground. Gina shook her head and stepped over the pair, heading straight to Dorian where he sat on the couch with a few books scattered around him. Grim stood at the door looking uncomfortable. “What brings you two over?” he asked, curiosity burning in his eyes.

She sat in one of the fat armchairs and plucked at a loose thread in the brocade. “Blackwall is in jail,” she said quietly.


“Here.”

The Mage frowned. “What in the world…”

“Bull said he confessed to ordering the murders of some nobles.”

His eyes went wide and he covered his mouth with his hand. “That can’t be!”

Jeremy joined them. “Did I hear that correctly? Blackwall confessed to murder?”

She shrugged helplessly. “I know, it’s crazy. But Bull was there, he saw the whole thing.”

Dorian shook his head. “Captain Morality? I can’t believe it.”

“Me either.” She pulled the little slip of paper out and handed it over. “And someone decided to send this note to me via arrow.”

Dorian froze mid reach and gave her an exasperated look. “By arrow? And you’re out of that apartment? Has Bull taught you nothing?”

She sneered at him and pushed the paper into his fingers. He opened the slip and read it silently before passing it to Jeremy. “The Red Jenny is no group to fool around with, my dear. Sera may have been on the silly side, but she was deadly serious about their mission.”

She nodded absently, her mind already on their next step. From the corner of her eye she saw her brother give Dorian a pleading look, to which the Mage gave him a long suffering glance, sighed, and rose to his feet. “Since I know you’re going with or without my blessing, I might as well come with you.”

“Oh no, it’s fine. Grim is coming with me.”

“No offense to Grim, but a boy with a sword will be next to useless against a sniper with an arrow.”

Grim grunted and nodded. Gina got to her feet and pressed a kiss to Kaya’s forehead. “Will you watch her for me?” she asked Jeremy.
He nodded and touched her arm. “Be careful Beanie. You don’t know what’s motivating these people.”

“I will. And you two behave yourselves. No late night movies.”

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Bull finished the last of his notes and stretched his back out before getting to his feet. As he exited the aviary, a messenger came clattering up the stairs. Bull’s hand slipped to the hilt of his knife automatically, fully back to old habits. The man jolted at the sight of him and stammered nervously, “Are you the Iron Bull?”

“I might be,” Bull said. “Depends on who’s asking.”

“I have a message from Lord Etienne. He said I would find you up here.”

Bull sighed and held his hand out. The man put a scroll into his palm. It was a fancy thing with gilt edges and a thick red seal. “It’s your invitation to the ball tomorrow night.”

“Tell the little Lord I accept his invitation.”

The messenger bowed his head and said, “He also requested that you join him for a drink on the docks. He has a new shipment of Antivan wine landing, and always tests a bottle.”

Bull glanced out the window. The sun was just dipping toward the horizon. If he had one glass of wine, he would still have time to get home before dark. “I will head down there immediately. Thank you.”

The man nodded and spun on his heel, rushing back down the stairs without a backward glance. Bull shook his head. No matter how often he hung around Orlesians, word never got around that he was actually pretty damn civil. Especially in comparison to how cruel these people were to one another.

As he made his way down to the docks, he allowed his mind to wander back to Blackwall, or whoever he said he was. Something just didn’t feel right about the situation. He could read people, and what he read didn’t match the narrative. It was like Blackwall was desperate for him to believe everything he ever heard about the whole Callier affair, no questions asked. Even to the point of saying he’d have been given a medal in the right circumstances. He was feeding them enough information to guarantee a noose.

Yet, he’d been willing to take the Blood Oath. Would have done if the real Blackwall hadn’t been killed. What was stopping him now? The Wardens accepted criminals. In fact, they often scoured the jails to bolster their ranks. They were all about redemption, and in the face of everything Blackwall had done for the Wardens, Bull was certain that Alistair would accept his request.

It just didn’t sit right, but he didn’t have time to dwell on it any longer. The chubby Lord Etienne was waving like an eager fool from the other end of the docks. Bull lifted a hand in greeting and put on his best diplomatic smile.

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Gina followed in Grim’s wake as they stole down to the first spot marked on their map, right at the edge of the market. The streets were quiet in the dipping sun, but it was still far busier than Skyhold ever got during the day. Dorian played tour guide, pointing out a few things along their journey that she hadn’t noticed earlier in the day, including an impressive view of an enormous library.
Gina kept her eye in motion, scanning for anyone that seemed out of place or like they were paying too much attention.

At the market, it was a mish mash of people in every direction. She had to take a minute to think. What were they looking for? Her eye caught sight of a dragon skull mounted on the wall. Dangling from its teeth was a small red scrap. Gina rushed over and grabbed it. A note tumbled out with it.

“Isn’t it interesting how people buy into the narrative? Look under the bench.”

A notebook lay on the cobbles. Gina sat and opened it. A small slip of paper fell to the ground. She picked it up to see a tiny portrait done in water colors. Three people, faces tilted together, beaming at the artist. The grey eyes of Blackwall were unmistakeable. Gina examined the other two faces carefully. A beauty of a woman, with dark hair and dark eyes stared back at her, while the third person, a small child, captivated her. It could have been Kaya, with such dark hair and dark eyes.

“Thom Rainier had a family,” she said softly, passing the portrait to Dorian. She looked inside the journal, and discovered the writings of Thom Rainier. Most of them were basic notes, mentioning certain soldiers or reports due. A passage was marked with a red ribbon.

“Lord Robert approached me today. He offered me a tidy little sum to take care of some business for him. Maker knows we could use the money. I’ve accepted the job. I’ll take Mornay along. He’s been eager to get some action on the battlefield.”

A small description of a group of bandits followed, with notes that they were to be entirely eliminated to receive the full payment.

Gina frowned and flipped to another marked passage.

“Robert came by again. Another job. Why not? The money was good last time, and those bandit scum didn’t need to be breathing anymore.”

Another job was listed, though this time it mentioned bringing back certain items. Rainier wasn’t happy about it, but couldn’t say no to the money.

“It was so lovely to give Miriam a real gift for once. I’ve never seen her glow so much. I’d buy a hundred rings to see her smile like that again.”

A knot twisted in her stomach as she flipped the last marked page over.

“Another job, for triple the money. I’d be able to buy my girls that house on the hill if I do this. Miriam’s father wouldn’t be able to deny how well I care for them any longer. I just have to capture Lord Callier and his men. I’ll take Mornay. I trust him to keep a level head.”

Capture? Gina sat straighter and re-read the passage before handing the journal to Dorian. “He wasn’t supposed to kill that man. He was only supposed to capture him.”

Dorian read through and shook his head. “Then why confess to giving the orders to kill?”

She shrugged and pulled out their map. “I don’t know. But I think we need to get moving on these other clues.”

The next place was down an unfamiliar road. Dorian squinted and looked at the buildings before scowling. “This leads to the jail.”

As they approached, a flash of red tucked under a planter caught Gina’s attention. She tugged the
handkerchief free and found another note.

“Don’t bother with your friend. Lieutenant Mornay? Now that’s an interesting character.”

Gina glared around the buildings surrounding them, hunting for any sign of people watching them, but couldn’t see anything. Dorian came to her side. “We’re sitting ducks here, darling.”

She nodded and started moving to the jail. “How are we going to get in?”

“Leave it to me. I’m an Ambassador, you know.”

Gina smirked at him. “I thought it was a ceremonial title.”

He glared at her. “Well they don’t know that, do they?”

When they reached the entrance of the jail, Grim and Gina stood back as Dorian smoothly talked the man into giving them a short visitation with Mornay. “Man’s going to swing in a few days. I suppose a visitor or two won’t hurt.”

The callous pronouncement set her teeth on edge, and as they walked inside the dim cells, unexpected memories of being tied up and tortured by the Desire Demon came flooding into her mind. As Dorian walked ahead of her, she forced herself to stay calm and take deep breaths. Bull would never let anything like that happen to her again. The thought made her nerves settle.

The people inside the cells catcalled her, and made fun of Dorian’s clothing. He smirked as he took in the insults and smoothed the front of his robe. “Here I thought lovely boys like you would appreciate a well-dressed man.”

This comment set off a whole new set of catcalls and whistles, prompting the guard to slam a short mace against the cell doors. “Silence, prisoners.”

Dorian didn’t look repentant whatsoever as they continued around the corner. The guard pointed to a cell and then turned his back on them. A thin man with hollow cheeks and haunted eyes stared out at them. “Come to stare at the vicious beast?” he asked.

Gina stepped forward. “You were there with Rainier. What happened?”

The man sneered at her. “What do you think happened? He ordered us to kill everyone.”

Dorian tilted his head. “That wasn’t his orders.”

“What do you know of it, pretty boy?”

Gina crossed her arms. “He didn’t have to come forward, you know.”

Mornay’s face split with a mocking smile. “Didn’t he? You're more gullible than you look.”

She stared at him. Dorian touched her arm. “Come darling, we’re wasting our time with this idiot.”

She shook him off. “What did you mean by that?”

The man smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Dorian reached for her again. On impulse, she grabbed his arm and slammed it onto the bars, curling her lip fiercely. “Do you know what kind of power lies beneath this man’s skin, Mornay?”
Dorian tried pulling away, but she dug her nails into his skin and pressed his hand harder against the bars. “The power to vapourize you. Burn you to a crisp. Turn you into an ice sculpture. All there if you know the right words to say.” She leaned close and whispered, “And I know all the words.”

Mornay sneered. “That isn’t how magic works.”

She stepped closer. “Isn’t it?” she said softly, holding his eye. “You sure about that?”

“Don’t push her,” rasped Dorian. “She’s crazy enough to do it.”

Mornay scoffed. “Do it then.”

Gina snapped, “Vishante!”

A burst of flame erupted from Dorian’s palm, making Mornay squawk and dive to the floor. “Stop! Stop!” he squealed.

***

Bull watched the activity surrounding them. Even as the sun touched the horizon, sailors and merchants worked busily, loading and unloading ships of varying sizes. The scent of the sea and the cry of gulls overhead made him long to climb aboard one of the ships and sail over the horizon.

“The Iron Bull, have you ever seen such a magnificently coloured wine?”

He forced himself back to the present. “It’s something,” he said, barely injecting any enthusiasm into the words.

“We’ll be serving this at the party tomorrow night. You got your invitation, right? Of course you did. You’ll meet my wife. She’s eager to meet you. Never met a Qunari before…”

Bull could feel a glaze sliding over his eye and fantasized drop-kicking Etienne into the bay. The Lord kept yapping incessantly, bragging about the quality of his imports, and how quickly all the merchants leapt when he put a request out for a new shipment. It was about as interesting as watching flies fuck.

He drained the last of his wine and said, “My Lord, I believe my Kadan has dinner prepared and waiting. I should be going.”

“Oh, you can’t go yet!” Etienne grabbed his arm and tilted off-balance. The man was drunk, which was about the only thing stopping Bull from ripping the offending appendage off. “You haven’t seen your surprise yet!”

Bull gritted his teeth. “What surprise?”

“A friend of mine got a hold of some top quality Maraas-lok! It arrived just in time for the party!”

His eyebrows lifted. “That is a surprise. I hope not just for my benefit, my Lord.”

Etienne waved a hand and tugged on his arm. “Come come, it’s the least I could do. The casks are over here. Let’s try a little.”

***

Dorian was muttering furiously under his breath as they hustled to the cafe. Gina rolled her eye. “Oh get over it.”
“Ridiculous notion, that you could control my magic with just a word.”

She tapped her shoulder. “Well, if you could make this piece of junk work again, I wouldn’t need to use your magic as a bluff.”

“Did you have to claw my arm as well? I’m bleeding, you little animal.”

She sighed. “Do I need to kiss it better? Or would you prefer Bull to do it?”

The Mage huffed and fell silent. Gina shook her head and hustled faster. Mornay had been entirely forthcoming after his close call. Rainier hadn’t lied in his journal. The Lord hadn’t hired him to assassinate anyone. Mornay, however, had been hired for that express purpose. “Whatever happens, you eliminate every member of that family, and you make sure everyone thinks you were ordered to make it happen.”

“Who hired you?”

“I don’t know. It was an emissary. They came with enough money that it was worth the risk.”

“So what’s really going on? Why did Rainier really come out of hiding?”

“Man had this wife, see. Gorgeous broad. Way above his league, and her father wasn’t afraid to tell anyone.” Mornay shrugged. “He wanted her married to another Lord, but couldn’t do that while Rainier was in the picture. But you can bet the woman was sent to some castle before the shock wore off. Her and that little brat of his.”

“What does that have to do with him coming forward?”

Mornay cackled. “Well, it turns out that the Lord now married to her resents the kid, and he tracked Rainier down. Threatened to expose the child as the spawn of a murderer if he didn’t come forward and confess to the crimes. You can imagine what that would do to a kid, to learn your whole life is a lie.”

Gina felt sick at the choice her friend had been forced into. Not only had he been betrayed by a man he trusted, he’d lost everything he held dear. And now he stood to lose his life in the hope of preserving the happiness of his child.

Unfortunately it was the word of a known criminal who didn’t know the names of anyone involved. It gave them a lead, but whether it would lead anywhere effective enough to save Blackwall was still in question. The last spot on their map was near the cafe Gina had eaten at earlier.

The cafe was empty and locked tight. Gina tried the door and frowned. “I didn’t think it would be closed. The sun is still up.”

“I’ve heard a locked door hasn’t stopped you before,” said Dorian drily.

She glared at him. “Pardon me sir, but I am innocent as a newborn child.”

Grim snorted, which made Dorian’s face split with a smile. “Well said, young man.”

Gina shot them both a nasty look and tugged a hair pin free from her hair. “Just keep watch jackasses.”

With a little fiddling and scraping, she finally managed to get the lock to pop. They slipped inside and scoured every corner of the place before Grim made a little whistle. She and Dorian joined him.
He handed over a few reports. Gina took a few and passed the rest to Dorian before taking a look.

It was a series of correspondence between Lord Robert and Lord Etienne. Gina’s blood went cold. “This is the guy Bull was with today. I met him.”

Dorian frowned as he read through a letter. “He’s not a very nice individual. He coerced Robert into hiring Rainier to kidnap Lord Callier. The next letter is his instructions to Mornay to kill everyone.”

She read the next letter in her pile. “He’s Miriam’s father,” she said. “He arranged to have her sent to be Duke Fontaine’s wife before Blackwall even left to capture Callier.”

“It looks like he was responsible for putting the authorities onto Lord Robert’s actions,” said Dorian. Excitement began to zing through her veins. “We have enough to save Blackwall,” she said, launching to her feet. “We need to go find Bull.”

***

Bull watched impatiently as Etienne struggled to tap the cask. He’d offered to do the task himself, but the Lord waved him away. Finally he managed to jam the spigot into the cask, and poured them both a generous portion.

Before Bull could stop him, the man tossed the potent brew back like a shot. Predictably, this backfired in spectacular fashion. The man wretched and sputtered, spraying booze all over himself and Bull.

“I had no idea it was this strong,” he wheezed after coughing vigorously.

Bull grimaced and set his mug down, wiping ineffectually at the spray coating his chest. Etienne sighed and sagged onto a nearby crate. “What a day,” he said.

“I agree,” said Bull.

Etienne patted the crates beside him. “Come, sit with me for a moment.”

Bull sighed and reluctantly sank onto one of the larger crates. “I cannot stay much longer, my Lord.”

The man ignored his statement. “I am sorry for your friend, you know. But he’s a criminal. A murderer.”

“So it would seem,” said Bull.

“Seem? You can’t think he’s innocent?”

There was an edge to the man’s voice. Bull frowned and considered his words carefully. “I think there are pieces that don’t fit.”

The Lord sputtered. “What pieces? He ordered the death of an innocent family for money.”

“He ordered the death of the Lord, not his family,” corrected Bull quietly.

Etienne lurched to his feet. “What difference does that make?” he shouted.

Bull tightened his jaw. The man had been placid just moments before. Why was he so passionately upset now? “None, my Lord. I just find it hard to believe that my friend could do such a thing.”
The man instantly calmed, rubbing a hand over his pate and clearing his throat. “Well, yes, of course you’d be upset about that. You didn’t know him. The real him.”

Bull felt a twinge of unease.

***

As Gina walked out of the cafe, an arrow snapped into the doorframe beside her face. Grim had her swept behind him in a breath, sword in hand, while Dorian rifled off a curse and a shimmering wall surrounded them. They stayed packed together until it became clear that no other attack was incoming. Grim yanked the arrow free.

Another note was wrapped around the shaft. Dorian jerked it loose and read it out loud.

“Get to the docks! Your husband’s life depends on it!”

Her heart leapt into her throat. “Let’s go!”

Dorian caught her arm. “It could be a trap.”

“And what if Bull is in trouble?”

The Mage hesitated and then pointed. “The docks are that way.”

***

Bull cautiously watched the man. “It’s getting dark. I should get home to my family.”

Etienne glared at him, his face going pink. “Stop trying to leave, Ben-hassrath.”

Bull stared at him. “What did you just say?”

“You think I’m stupid? Is that it?” The Lord stepped forward aggressively. “Well I’m not. You show up in town and my files go missing. Just a coincidence? Ha! You’d love it if that’s what I thought, wouldn’t you?”

The man was unhinged. Bull lifted a hand. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play coy with me, ox-man!”

The slur was a slap in the face. Bull narrowed his eye. “You’re walking down a dangerous road, little man.”

The Lord lifted his wobbly chins high. “I have more than enough protection against a beast like you,” he sneered. “Probably best you don’t move, Ben-hassrath.”

Bull kept very still, holding the man’s eye defiantly, playing a hunch. “You’re right. I did steal your files. I know everything.”

The man’s breath left him in a whoosh. “I did it for my daughter. She deserved better than that lowlife, and she refused to see common sense. But he just couldn’t stay away, could he?”

Bull had no idea what the man was talking about, but played along. “He loved her. Of course he couldn’t stay away.”

“He was no good for her!” Etienne began to pace back and forth. “He had to go. I had to make.
Him. Go. Just like I have to make you go.”

Bull felt his heart start to pound. “We can both disappear without dying.”

“It’s too late!” The man was scarlet and spitting as he talked. “You know too much! You ruined everything!”

Bull made to rise and flinched as an arrow smacked into the post beside his face. Etienne gave him a wild-eyed smile. “I told you not to move.” His hand lifted and pointed to one of the ships. Bull followed the line and saw an archer up high, a fiery arrow aimed his way. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Hoping to get back to regular updates again!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Gina was just starting to lose steam when ships peeked into view on the horizon. She poured on the last bit of speed she could muster and crested the final hill. As she reached the docks, Dorian grabbed her arm and jerked her to a stop. “Wait,” he hissed, crouching low and pointing.

She looked and saw a man holding a drawn bow, flames licking the point of the arrow. He wasn’t moving, which gave her the barest flicker of hope. If he was simply out for blood, that arrow would have been loosed long ago. She just had to beat the signal he was waiting for.

They crept carefully onto the docks, eyes wide. Gina felt tremors coursing under her skin when she saw Bull seated on a crate at the end of the docks, the stubby Lord Etienne shrieking incomprehensibly in his face. Even from this distance, she could see restrained fury building in the Qunari’s massive muscles.

She flicked a glance at the archer again. The flame was getting smaller, meaning they were either going to get lucky and it would go out, or he would lose patience and let it fly. She crossed all of her crossables that it would be the former.

They snuck further onto the docks, hiding between a row of crates and a short dike wall. Gina could barely breathe from the tension of the moment. The likelihood of her beating the flight time of an arrow was slim to none on a good day, let alone being winded as she was. Distraction would only send the arrows her way instead, which seemed like a good alternative until she remembered her friends at her side. She couldn’t put them in harm’s way either.

As they slipped closer, the man’s words became clearer. “You thought you were so clever, putting me in front of that vile person. Thought I’d trip up and spill everything. Well, let it be known that Lord Etienne is no fool!”

Bull shook his head slowly. “You’re insane, you know that?”
“I am no such thing!” shrieked the man, his entire head going purple. “I’ve worked too hard to let the Inquisition’s farm animal ruin everything! Miriam is happy! She forgot all about her pathetic little Captain, and it’s going to stay that way!”

Gina stiffened at the insults, rage blurring the edges of her vision. She let out a long breath, forcing herself to calm. She was already limited with one eye. No sense making it even harder to see.

She stared as Bull stayed seated, his hands clenched in tight fists. Why wasn’t he moving? Gina scanned his surroundings carefully. Nothing seemed unusual, so what was he waiting for?

Her eye moved back to the burning arrow, and a sickening thought sprang into her mind. It would take a hell of a lot more than the threat of one fiery arrow to keep him from fighting his way to safety unless, of course, there was a threat she couldn’t see, hidden in the crates surrounding him.

Her hands started to shake.

***

Gattlok, buried in with the casks of Maraas-lok. Had to be. Why else would the noble be so damn confident? The real curiosity was how he’d obtained the stuff. Booze was one thing. Nearly any jack-off could procure it or make it. Par Vollen did not share its explosives with just anyone.

Bull held eye contact with the Lord, refusing to show the fear filling his heart. Etienne stepped closer, shouting more nonsense. Every instinct told Bull the lone archer was an illusion, so he didn’t twitch a muscle, though it would take a split second to snap the man’s neck like a twig.

“You won’t get away with this. The Inquisition will not rest until they figure out what happened to me.”

The bastard laughed in his face. “They won’t have anywhere to start.”

“I’ve already sent word to Skyhold.”

“I intercepted your crows,” said the man, lifting the corner of his lip in a sneer.

 Fuck. “I didn’t just use crows,” he lied.

“Nice try, Hissrad.” At Bull’s sucked breath, he sniggered. “Yes, I know what they called you, Keeper of Illusions. I’ve already got men ready to go through everything in that apartment until I find those files. No one will stand in their way.” Etienne leaned even closer. “It’s too bad your foolish actions condemn your lovely family to die as well.”

Bull bared his teeth in a vicious snarl which sent the man scurrying back a step. “Before this is over, you will deeply regret threatening my family. I promise you that.”

Etienne straightened and gave him a derisive snort. “You won’t have the chance to deliver, Hissrad.”


“I agree, let’s start the show,” said the Lord as he started backing away.

Bull held his breath, desperately trying to think of a way to escape. As the man’s hand began to raise, a person leapt into view through a maze of crates, a burst of flame arcing across the harbour in
his wake.

***

A sudden flash of cloth shot past Gina, making her gasp. Grim bolted past the Lord, running harder than she’d ever seen anyone move while a shouted curse from Dorian sent a fireball at the lone archer, making him duck into the Crow’s Nest.

In the blink of an eye, Grim dove through the air and tackled Bull in a manner that would have gotten him Play of the Week on ESPN. At the same moment, archers popped into view from several ships, aiming directly at the flight path of the tumbling men.

Before they could unleash a volley of arrows, a small army of people swept out of hiding from behind the dike wall. They let loose a flurry of arrows, taking out a good portion of the archers before they could change their focus.

Gina and Dorian ducked for cover as it turned into a firefight. Then she heard a blood curdling “No!” followed by an explosion that sent them both reeling.

***

How Dorian and the kid found his sorry ass he didn’t know, but he didn’t question it. In the two seconds it took Grim to close the gap, Bull planted his feet on the dock. As the kid slammed into Bull’s chest, he threw himself backward and shoved as hard as he could, taking full advantage of the added momentum of Grim’s flying form.

Bull clenched Grim tightly to his chest as they flew through the air and landed with a splash. It was sheer luck that they didn’t impale themselves on decades worth of wreckage hovering underwater.

He let his weight sink them far beneath the water before kicking with all his might, slicing through the water. Arrows zipped through the water, forcing him to change direction three times before he could maneuver under one of the piers and surface.

Grim gave a ragged gasp and clung to his chest harness. Bull whispered, “Sorry kid. You okay?”

Grim nodded, but the water began to turn red around them. Bull hissed and ducked under the water. It was dim and murky, but he could see an arrow punched through the boy’s thigh just above the knee. He surfaced. “You're hit,” he said.

A sudden explosion rocked the docks, making the wooden pier rattle and groan. The water surged and sloshed, smashing them into one of the big posts. Bull gripped Grim to his chest again, taking the brunt of the impact with his shoulder. “Giiaaa!” Grim cried in a strangled voice.

Bull prayed it was just another one of the kid’s random noises.

***

Gina shook herself and fought to clear the ringing in her ears. Shouts and chaos surrounded her where she lay. Something hot and wet seeped down her face. She dragged herself to a sitting position and tried to take inventory of herself. The only clear thing she could discern was that everything hurt.

Hands gripped her shoulders, shaking her sharply. “Gina! Are you alright? Speak to me!”

Dorian’s eyes were frantic. She patted his arm and nodded vaguely. He wrapped her in a tight hug
before helping her stand. Gina gripped his arm as the world tilted dangerously under her feet. He cursed and pressed a hand to her forehead. Heat suffused her entire body, bringing instant clarity.

Bull! Where was he?

She staggered to the edge of the dock, tripping over the heaved wooden platform. The damage done by whatever explosive agent had been devastating. The end of the dock was a smouldering ruin, and several ships were on fire to some degree. No one standing on that side could have survived. It was a miracle that she and Dorian weren’t hurt worse. The crates hiding them had done an admirable job of absorbing most of the concussive force.

She scanned the water frantically. The water was littered with debris, but between the spots still dominating her vision and dim twilit sky it was impossible to see more than shapes. Panic started making it hard to breathe.

***

Bull kept a tight grip on Grim as they swam under the pier. The kid’s eyes were going dull as the minutes dragged on, but with all the activity above, Bull didn’t dare expose them.

He misjudged a corner and caught Grim’s knee on the beam. The boy yelped in agony, making the footsteps over their heads stop and change direction. Bull cursed and pushed Grim toward a post. “Hold this,” he commanded. The kid obeyed, though it was clear that he was quickly fading into shock.

Bull gritted his teeth, listening as hard as he could. The steps had gone silent, unnerving him. He looked up and saw the deeper shadow where booted feet stood, waiting for him to show himself. He took a long breath and sank beneath the surface, keeping an eye on the shadow as he swam into position at the edge of the pier.

An archer stood, his head swivelling back and forth. Bull forced himself to wait until the bow lowered fractionally, and then shot upward as hard and fast as he could. He broke the surface and caught the man by the ankles before he could lift the bow again, and fell back into the water, gripping tightly.

The man struggled valiantly, but Bull used his size to full advantage, wrapping around him and holding his breath as the man kicked and squirmed. All too quickly the man ran out of air and began to panic, thrashing every limb violently. Bull squeezed his arms tight and waited until the body went limp before he released it and broke surface again, turning in the water to see the chaos reigning at the other end of the harbour.

The end of the dock was a gaping hole, flames already dying down from the waves splashing over the wood. Two ships were burning fiercely, while a third was already listing to the side and sinking. Bull swallowed hard. Exactly how much gattlock had he been sitting on?

He pulled himself out of the water, and two men rushed him. Bull bellowed and unleashed every last ounce of restrained fury. He didn’t even bother pulling a weapon, just pounded them both into quivering masses with his fists. More men raced his way. He spun to face them, teeth bared. “Come on then,” he yelled.

***

Gina heard Bull’s howl of rage before she saw him. Without hesitation, she bolted his way. Five men surrounded him, but they might as well have been children for how effective their attacks were
against the anger fueled Qunari. Before she was even halfway down the dock, three were down for the count.

One leapt onto Bull’s back as the other swiped a sword at his chest. Bull barely dodged in time, hampered by the extra weight. Gina jerked out her knife and threw it in desperation. It landed in the swordsman’s shoulder, making the arm drop like a rock. Bull slammed a heavy fist into the man’s face before catching his unwanted passenger around the back of the head and whipping him onto the dock hard enough to break one of the thick planks. Neither man moved again.

Bull dropped to a knee, sucking wind. Gina ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. His arms circled her, clinging tightly. “What are you doing here?” he rasped.


Bull heaved to his feet and led her down the pier. He leapt into the water and swam out of sight for a moment before returning with a pale Grim in tow. Between the two of them, they got the boy onto the dock. He whimpered as his leg dragged over the edge. Gina gasped. “Oh god, Grim! You’re hurt!”

He waved a hand weakly. She tutted impatiently. “Don’t play tough with me, young man!”

As she climbed to her feet to call for Dorian, Bull shouted, “Kadan, look out!”

***

Bull was out of the water, but couldn’t get to his feet fast enough to stop the man lunging at his Kadan with a sword. She spun and dropped just in time to narrowly avoid a hard swing, but too quickly the man was sweeping forward, following her scrambling form.

As he lifted the sword high, a wet thwack echoed and he went stiff before toppling to the ground. Bull ran forward as an elf woman came stalking out of the dark, bow and arrow low, but ready.

Bull’s hackles shot straight up at the sight of Gina’s friend Shara. Gone was the frail and nervous creature in tattered rags who was, at best, unmemorable. In her place stood a powerhouse of a woman, clad in well made leather armour and clearly ready for a battle. Her chin lifted high and she didn’t shrink from eye contact.

“Are you alright?” She asked, no trace of the heavy Dalish accent in her voice.

Gina was slowly getting to her feet, her eye wide as she stared at the elf. Her hand clutched at her arm, blood oozing between her fingers. Bull hissed a breath and slipped an arm around her waist, supporting her weight. Not a near miss, after all.

More people came out of the darkness. In the middle of the group strode Dorian, gripping a cowering and disheveled Lord Etienne. Blood and dirt coated him nearly head to toe, and his clothing was scorched and tattered.

Bull’s jaw went tight, the elf forgotten for the moment. “I’m amazed you survived,” he snarled.

Dorian smirked. “He almost didn’t. I figured you’d rather see him face justice, so I healed him. Mostly.”

Etienne whimpered and pulled away, but Dorian jerked him harshly back into place. Bull let a cold smile slide across his face. “You thought right, Mage Boy.”
Dorian dipped his head and then cursed. “Grim? Maker's breath, what have you done to yourself?”

The Mage passed the sniveling lord over to one of the other leather clad individuals and moved to examine Grim. Bull switched his attention back to the strangers. Shara lifted a hand before he could say a word. “It is not what you think.”

“Then what the hell is it?” said Gina, her voice shaking.

“I lead the Val Royeaux faction of Red Jenny.”

Gina recoiled in his arm. “So it was you the whole time? Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Bull didn’t know what was going on. He was still trying to reconcile his first impression of the elf with the woman standing before him now. She had played the shrinking violet role far too well, and he really didn't like that he'd fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

A distressed expression came to the elf’s face. “I didn't know if you could be trusted. Sera wasn't always the best judge of character.”

Gina made a harsh little sound. “Neither am I, apparently.”

Shara shook her head. “You have far surpassed every expectation I held. I only regret that my reveal was interrupted by this foolishness.”

Bull could feel Gina taking short, shallow breaths, the tension ratcheting higher and higher with each moment. “You knew,” she said harshly. “You knew all about Lord Etienne the entire time and you said nothing.”

“It was not the right time.”

“Then when?” shouted Gina. “After the Iron Bull had an arrow buried in his face?”

Bull squeezed gently. “Kadan, let her explain.”

She waved a hand sharply and pointed in the elf’s face. “He is my world, and you let him walk into this situation unprepared and unaware?” Despite the chaos and confusion and the ache in his shoulder, the pronouncement gave Bull a warm feeling that flooded through his body.

“I did not know your husband would be the Lord’s target tonight. Had I known…” Shara paused and shook her head again. “But we were watching. You have to believe I would never have let him come to harm.”

“Do I?” Gina snapped. “You were watching as that madman threatened him and did nothing!”

The elf frowned. “We had to wait…”

“For what?”

“I don’t have a large force and we didn’t know where the Lord’s men were posted. If we made our move too quickly, we could have been overwhelmed.”

Bull scowled. It was a logical statement, but it didn't make him feel much better. Gina shook her head. “Not good enough. You could have warned Bull. You could have warned me.”

“But until I knew—”
“Knew what?” Gina was nearly shouting again. “I had to take a fucking test to be worthy of the truth? I saved your life when I didn't even know where I was! I invited you into my home and...” Her voice cracked.

Shara’s forehead creased. “Nan, please. I had to know for sure,” said the elf.

“Don’t fucking call me that,” Gina snapped as she stepped forward aggressively. The people standing behind Shara matched her move, more than one lifting a weapon.

Bull whipped his own sword out, twisted the blade enough to ensure it made a long, intimidating metallic ring. “You need to think very carefully about your next move,” he warned.

Shara spun and held a hand up. “Lower your weapons,” she commanded, then turned to face them again. “The Qunari is right. I intended for us to work together, not to be at each other's throats.”

“Too little too late,” Gina said harshly. She pointed in the woman’s face and said, “Stay away from me. Stay away from my family. Period.”

The elf opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to sense that it would not change anything. She shot an apologetic glance to Bull before turning to her people and herding them down the dock.

Dorian cleared his throat. “We should get this young man to the healers. I've stopped the bleeding, but they're better equipped to remove this arrow.”

Bull nodded. No sense in putting Grim through the trauma of battlefield medical treatment when there was a perfectly good hospital less than five minutes away. He slid a hand over Gina’s shoulders and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You okay, Kadan?”

She shook her head and scrubbed a hand across her eye. “Not particularly. But this is more important, so let’s get going.”

He tipped her chin up and kissed her hard on the mouth. “Later then,” he said softly before crouching and hefting Grim into his arms. “Holy shit, you been eating bricks for breakfast?”

Grim scowled and rolled his eyes, Bull presumed at the injustice of being carried like a child. Bull jostled him lightly. “Hey kid, I never got to say thanks yet.”

The boy turned pink and looked away. Gina came to their side, ignoring Dorian as he fusssed at her arm. “Neither did I.” She lifted onto her toes and pressed a kiss to Grim’s cheek before turning and repeating the action on Dorian. “You were both heroes tonight.”

Bull smirked at their scarlet faces. “I’ve got a few kisses on tap. Any takers?”

Neither took him up on the offer.
Chapter 11

Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Just got back from vacation in NYC - loved it and am feeling recharged and re-inspired to write! The adventures to come are going to knock your socks off, but first some wrapping up of this story arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gina paced back and forth in the small room, trying not to show just how emotional she really felt. Bull shot glances at her between reading through the material they'd been given. Aside from a gouge on his back from smacking into the rough pier posts, he was unharmed. Annoyed with himself for getting trapped by a little pissant noble, but unharmed.

Gina wasn't so lucky. The swordsman had taken a good chunk out of her before taking an arrow to the face. Dorian patched her up, but the pain still lingered. Probably would for a few days. She fingered the edges of the slash in her leather jacket and sighed heavily. It had just gotten broken in perfectly.

Bull lifted his eye again, worry plain on his face. Gina shook her head and resumed pacing. His lips tightened, but he didn’t say anything. Probably worried about opening a can of worms he couldn’t close.

Her mind switched to Shara. The very thought set her blood to boiling again. It was bad enough that the woman put her through some stupid test. To know that she deliberately hid what she knew about Etienne was an absolute slap in the face.

Gina understood the rationale of waiting for the Lord to show his full hand. What she couldn’t
reconcile was the woman leaving her in the dark. Not only had it wound up in Bull nearly getting blown to pieces, it had nearly gotten her dear friend killed. Hell, it had nearly gotten them all killed.

As she passed behind Bull again, his hand reached out, catching her around the knee. “Easy, Kadan. Steam is starting to come out of your ears.”

She rested her forehead just above his ear. “What’s taking them so long?” she asked. The ache in her arm was just getting worse, and she was quickly losing control of her composure.

He pulled her closer and wrapped his arm around her waist. “Don’t know. But you sound like you’re about to blow your top.”

“I think I’ve earned the right,” she muttered.

His thumb dragged in circles on her hip. “You still haven’t told me how all of this got started.”

“Because you’ll blow your top,” she said.

He sighed. “Just spit it out, my darling.”

“Someone, I assume Shara, shot an arrow into our door. There was a note attached.”

His hand twitched and his eye fluttered closed. After a long moment he drew a slow breath and released it with a long hiss. “And you decided it was a good idea to be out in the open?”

She grimaced. “The note was signed by Red Jenny. I knew that was Sera’s crew. Why would they hurt me?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got some lovely beachfront property to sell you in the Fallow Mires, Kadan.”

Gina rolled her eye. “You say that like I’ve never gone running headlong into anything else before.”

He tapped her shoulder lightly. “Before you had a really kickass weapon to back you up.”

She shook her head. “I took care of myself fine before I could control the stupid mark.”

Bull frowned. “Oh. Right.”

“Plus I had Grim and Dorian with me.” Gina stroked a finger over the angled edge of his ear. “At any rate, it wound up being a good idea to come out tonight, if only to find out the true colours of a so-called friend.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but the sound of heavy footsteps approaching the door interrupted. A moment later the door swung open and Thom Rainier was escorted inside. He had a stoic expression, like he fully expected to be inside a death chamber of sorts. When his eyes landed on them, however, his eyes went wide. “What are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you too,” said Gina.

He shook his head. “You can’t be here, lass. This is no place for a lady.”

She snorted. “I guess it’s a good thing I’m not a lady.”

He didn’t laugh. “Please go,” he said hoarsely. “My fate is sealed.”
Bull got to his feet and crossed his arms. “Why didn’t you come to us when Lord Etienne blackmailed you?”

The man blanched. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said harshly.

Bull sighed and hefted a file. “Really? Because I’ve read his notes. Seems like a cut and dried case of extortion to me. The judge I spoke with agreed.”

Thom stared at the file like it was a bundle of writhing snakes. Gina scoffed. “We know he’s your former father in law. We also know that he set you up so that he could sell his daughter to some fancy Lord near Denerim who suddenly wants your head on a pike for some unknown reason.”

“Then you also know that if I don't follow through, my daughter's life might as well be forfeit!”

Gina waved both hands, ignoring the protest of her newly knitted skin. “Newsflash! If it wasn't some story made up by Etienne, your daughter is being raised by a man who cares so little about her, that he used her as a pawn to further his own agenda. What the hell are you doing here instead of breaking her free?”

He curled his lip. “Well, praise the all-knowing Saviour of Thedas. Did it occur to you that I don't know where she is?”

“We have resources. I could've found her in less than a week,” said Bull.

“And be just as corrupt as they are? No thanks,” snapped Rainier.

Bull stiffened. “Are you comparing my work to those who threaten children?”

Rainier lifted his chin. “I’m saying it’s a necessary evil when we chase down the followers of Corypheus. Not for personal gain.”

The look on Bull’s face could have melted steel. Gina lifted a hand. “Wait a minute. It’s been ten years. You’re telling me in all that time you didn’t go looking for your wife and child?”

He looked away, his brow furrowing. “For what purpose? I had nothing to offer her before this whole mess. The life we would have had after…” He shook his head. “No. It was better to let her improve her station in life.”

The thought made her sick to her stomach. “Did it occur to you that she might not have wanted to improve her station in life?”

“And what would you have me do, take my family on the run?”

Gina snatched up the little watercolour portrait and held it at his eye level. “No, I’m saying you should have fought these false charges. You should have fought for her!”

His face twitched. “I’m glad it’s so simple for you, lass.”

Bull's voice was low and dangerous. “Seems simple to me.”

“Well, I'm not a mindless thug like you,” said Rainier.

Gina’s arm was mid swing to a slap when Bull caught her hand and hauled her back a step. She tried to pull away, but he held her fast. In lieu of the slap, she went for the jugular. “Maybe she’s better off without such a coward in her life.”
A bright spot of red came to both of his cheeks. “I had no choice!”

She finally jerked free and pointed her finger in his face. “You took the easy way out and condemned her to a life of misery!”

“At least she would be alive!” he bellowed.

She scoffed and shook her head. “And what a life it would be. I wonder how Miriam feels about all this?”

“You leave her out of this,” he snapped, spittle flying from his lips.

“You didn’t care this much ten years ago,” retorted Bull. “Why so angry now?”

Rainier surged forward a step. Bull simply squared his shoulders and leaned forward, cowing the Warden without any effort. The words practically spat out of the man’s mouth. “What would you know about it, Qunari?”

“They’d have to do a lot better than this shoddy frame job to put me on the run.” Bull stepped closer. “I would die before letting another man put a finger on my family.”

Rainier’s chest heaved. “You think I wouldn't have done anything to help them? I'm in chains for their sake! I’d have gone to the gallows to safeguard their lives.”

“I would have come to help you free them,” said Bull softly. “We all would, if you asked.”

“And confirm that the Inquisition sees itself as above the law? I won't be part of it.”

Gina sneered. “Well aren't you the beacon of morality?”

The spots of red flooded to fill his entire face. “Do you have any idea what people think of the Inquisition? They see us as bullies on the mountain! Attacking a Lord because he has something one of them wants would only fuel that fire.”

“Let them think what they will. Saving a child and her mother from the grip of a petty tyrant is a worthy cause.” Bull dragged a hand down his face. “I don’t understand why you’re being so stubborn about this.”

Rainier shrugged and looked away. Gina said quietly, “Because he’s ashamed and doesn’t know how to face them.”

“She was always too good for me,” he whispered.

“She loved you. Your child loved you. That’s more than enough,” said Gina.

“Oh it is, is it? Are you sure?” He sneered at her. “Do you really believe the Qunari is with you because of love?”

She froze. Bull’s voice shook. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“What better way for a Ben-hassrath to fully integrate himself into the Inquisition than to convince the Saviour herself that he loves her?” Rainier shook his head. “It’s plain as day to anyone with half a brain.”

Gina gasped and her hands flew to her face. The room was utterly silent for a long moment before Bull let out a shuddering breath. “Good to know what my friends really think,” he said woodenly.
Without another word, he walked out of the room. Gina rounded on the Warden. “You ignorant piece of shit.”

He shrugged and looked away. “Truth hurts.”

“Truth? You mean false speculation about a man that does everything he can to prove his loyalty everyday.” Gina stepped closer. “I don’t think you’ve been more hurtful if you tried.”

When the man didn’t respond, she jerked her chin at the Chevalier who released the chains. “Enjoy the freedom we nearly died to achieve,” she said. “You’re welcome.”

She turned to walk away, but couldn’t resist one last thing. “By the way,” she said.

He looked up at her just in time to see her fist as it collided with his nose. Bone crunched and blood burst. He yelped and covered his face. Gina shook the offending hand and said, “That’s for insulting my Qunari.”

She didn't wait to see if he had any response.

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Bull didn’t know how it happened, but somehow he wound up on one of the high walls surrounding the city, staring out at the stars blanketing the early morning sky. The sun hadn’t shown itself yet, but the edges of the sky had already begun to glow. Where the hell had all the time gone?

Rainier’s words bounced around inside his skull, burning like acid. Despite everything, he would’ve counted the man as a friend. Would have stood by him to the bitter end, if it came to that. Was he that bad at judging character?

The worst part was not knowing if it was true. He knew that his feelings for Gina were as true as the sun in the sky, but what about prior to the accident? It wouldn’t be the first time he used promises of love to get information he needed.

He sank to his elbows on the wall and cursed. The blanks in his mind had never been more infuriating than that moment. The bare flashes he still got on occasion were usually so inconsequential that he usually didn’t pay them much attention. Now he shuffled through them desperately, hunting for something that contradicted the Warden’s words.

Soft steps reached his ears, followed by her warmth pressing into his side. “How’d you find me?” he said hoarsely.

“I run until I can’t breathe anymore. You climb until you can’t get any higher,” she said, sliding a hand over the small of his back. “I checked in on Grim. He’s charming the healers and looks ready to move in permanently. They say he’ll be able to start hobbling around tomorrow morning.” She paused and looked at the horizon. “Er, this morning.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Thanks,” he whispered.

“I’m not apologizing,” she said gently.

Pity. Great. He gave her a tight smile. She sighed and put a hand over his heart. “You know it’s
not true, right?"

He shook his head. “How do you know?”

“Because I was there. When we met, I wasn’t the Saviour of anything. I was a terrified shell of a woman who was too afraid to tell anyone the truth. No one knew my real story, not even you.” She cupped his chin and lifted gently. He met her eye and saw none of the pity he dreaded. “We are a guy and girl that saw each other across the tavern, the Iron Bull. Nothing more, nothing less.”

It was hard to swallow past the lump in his throat. “That’s not what people think, apparently.”

“Oh fuck Blackwall, or whatever his stupid name is,” she said. “When the demon possessing Alita took me prisoner, everyone rallied behind you to save me, no questions asked. Do you really think Cullen would be friends with you if he doubted your trustworthiness? Or that they would have offered you the spot as Spymaster? You didn’t need to sleep with anyone, or convince anyone you loved them to gain their loyalty. He’s mad at himself and lashing out at anyone who would dare point out his shortcomings.”

“Perhaps he is only saying what others are afraid to say.”

“And perhaps they can go fuck themselves too,” she said firmly.

“It wouldn’t be the first time I did something like that, Kadan,” he whispered.

“Are you referring to Devon?” she asked.

He started and met her eye. “You know about him?”

Her hands slid across his shoulders. “Not all of the details, just that he’s a part of your past that you regret.”

Devon. A pretty little Vint Magister like Dorian, though not nearly as streetwise. He could remember his face like it was yesterday. A boy in over his head, and Bull used it to his full advantage. The man had somehow been charged with safeguarding the manifests for the Tervinter army stationed near Seheron.

“It was supposed to be an easy in-and-out mission. Get in, seduce him, and get access to his room when he decided he wanted to sleep with me,” he said. “But he was an innocent, not a simple lay. It took almost two weeks to convince him I really cared about him.” He swallowed hard. “The night he finally took me up to his room, he called me Amatus.”

Gina frowned. “Which is a big deal.”

“Huge,” he said softly. Echoes of the past slapped over him, making him flinch. “I fucked him and stole his innocence along with every manifest he held. Disappeared before my side of the bed was cold.” He bowed his head, shame adding to the turmoil churning in his stomach. “I heard that he threw himself off a wall when the depth of my betrayal was discovered.”

“But you saved an entire platoon of your men when the manifests revealed a secret launch site they were going to use for a surprise attack.”

“The ends didn't justify the means, Kadan. Not that time.”

“Which is why you refused to take any other missions like it,” she said. “so they sent you into Seheron.”
He nodded, fighting the urge to vomit. “What makes you so sure I wasn’t playing the same angle with you?”

She took hold of his hand. “What did I offer Par Vollen? ‘Hey guys, the Fade sucks and you should probably avoid it’?” She shrugged and fidgeted with his fingers. “Plus you left the Qun not long after we met. We hadn’t even slept together at that point.”

“Could have been an act.”

Her eye went dark. “No one is that good of an actor.”

They fell into silence as the edges of the sky turned bright. Gina lay her head against his shoulder, tracing her fingers over the scars mapping his forearm and humming his favorite lullaby as the sun crept into view. Pinks and yellows splashed across the clouds, but the beauty of the sunrise was lost on him as he mulled over everything.

It wasn’t until her song broke on a wide yawn that he shook himself back to present. “Let's go home, Kadan.”

She nodded, but then pulled him to a stop. Her eye flicked both ways down the wall before she started pushing him toward a nearby bench. He frowned. “What are-”

“I know just the thing to make you feel a little bit better,” she said, pointing to the bench. “Sit.”

“Am I a trained Mabari?”

She sneered at him and flicked open the top button of her jacket. His mouth went dry and he dropped onto the bench, watching as she slowly undid every other button and pulled the jacket off, revealing a sheer pink undershirt that did little to hide anything it covered.

“Someone come up those stairs any second,” he said, letting out a growl when her fingers slid south and began releasing the laces on her pants.

“Guess you better get that cock out and ready for me then,” she said.

His hands shook as he hurried to obey. “Damn,” he whispered as she turned away from him and slid her pants off that pretty little ass.

She tossed him a sultry look over her shoulder. “Like what you see?”

He was hard enough to drive nails into wood, and showed her as much. “That's an understatement, Kadan.”

She did a sweet little sway with her hips before turning to climb onto his lap. Her lips met his, hungry and wanton. He returned the kiss and slid his hands under the whisper of a top. Her hands circled his cock, guiding him between her legs and making his breath catch.

As she eased herself onto him, his eye rolled back in his skull. The hot slickness combined with the tightness of her body wrapping around him was enough to banish any lingering negative thoughts. The only thing on his mind now was watching her ride him like a wild stallion.

His hands roamed her body, skimming down her spine and taking a firm grip of both ass cheeks as she rolled her hips and clutched at his chest. Her nails dug in, little arrows of pain that only made his heart beat faster.
She increased her pace, and suddenly it was hard to breathe. “Fuck, darlin’,” he rasped.

Her head fell back as she ground against him, exposing the soft skin over her collarbone. He sank his teeth into it, eliciting a ragged moan from her lips, followed by a delighted cry as his meaty palm clapped over her ass hard enough to echo. A few frantic thrusts later, they were both shaking their way through mutual climaxes.

They rested their foreheads together for a minute, both fighting to breathe. He had a stitch in his side and his stomach was screaming about the lack of food filling it, but he’d never felt so damn good.

The sound of footsteps climbing the stairs got them up and dragging their clothes back into place in a hurry. Gina’s jacket refused to cooperate, so Bull quickly slipped his arm around her, strategically covering her beautiful tits. They went hard at the contact, which sent renewed blood flow straight south.

A Chevalier rounded the corner moments later and passed by with a long stare in their direction. Bull smiled pleasantly and hoped his hard-on wasn’t entirely obvious.

As the man's steps faded, Gina turned to face him. Bull bit back a low growl at the sight of her wild hair and freshly love-bitten skin. “We might as well have told him we were just fucking,” he whispered.

She tossed her head and said, “I'm not ashamed of being caught with you. He's probably jealous that I get to have all this to myself.” As if to illustrate her point, she ran both palms from his shoulders down to his hips.

Bull tangled a hand through her hair and dragged her to him, crushing her to his chest as he kissed her until his head was spinning.

She fought to catch her breath and said, “Did I mention we're child-free for most of the day?”

He shook his head. “Dorian figured we could use some extra sleeping time,” she whispered, then took hold of his chest harness and pulled him to her for another deep kiss. When they broke apart, she said, “What say we go take another crack at cheering you up?”

Bull couldn't help the broad grin coming to his face, though he stifled it as best he could. He cleared his throat and shifted his pants. “Yeah, let's do that.”

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Gina’s fist ached. She was rubbing the knuckles absentmindedly when Bull noticed. He waved his fork at the appendage. “What did you do there?”

She hesitated before clearing her throat and saying, “I punched Rainier in the face.”

His eye went wide. “Why?”

“Because he crossed the line. Don't worry, I waited until he was unchained. No sucker punches here.”

Bull grimaced. “Uh huh. You don't need to hit people on my behalf, Kadan.”

She scowled. “It wasn't only for you. I resent the implication that I'm some hapless damsel who wouldn't see straight through any man using romance to ply secrets from me.”
He picked through the remainder of his breakfast. “I didn't think of it that way.”

Gina reached over and squeezed his forearm gently. He thought he was hiding the doubts still circling in his brain, but as usual he'd forgotten about his hands. They were white knuckled around the silverware. Hard to blame him. Rainier’s words had stabbed deep into the heart of one of his very few insecurities. He'd certainly brightened up thanks to some acrobatic sex and getting some food, but it would take days for him to convince himself to ignore the Warden.

“I know we just got here, but I think we need a vacation,” she said.

Bull frowned and nodded slowly. “I'll see what I can arrange. The cabin is way too big for the three of us alone. Maybe we'll bring Grim along.”

Gina smiled. “If we can drag him away from his new fan club.”

Bull laughed and shook his head. “Kid pulls girls easier than I ever did.”

“It's that strong, silent act of his.”

He smirked. “He said your name tonight.”

She straightened. “He did not!”

“Did too. I told you he has a crush on you,” Bull teased.

“Grim does not see me like that.”

“How would you know? He just might.”

She rolled her eye. “You jealous?”

He grinned. “Should I be?”

Gina swatted him and huffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He laughed softly. “You could do worse, I suppose.”

They fell into comfortable silence as he finished eating. Bull refused to let her clean up, and wound up slinging her over his shoulder when she tried dodging around him. They play fought the entire way to bed where the humor vanished and passion took its place.

This time Bull was especially tender, taking extra time to kiss and otherwise make her feel like a treasure. “Do you know how much I love you?”

She nodded and put a hand over his heart. “Almost as much as I love you, the Iron Bull.”

He covered her pale hand with his bronze one and held it tightly as he drove them both over the edge, whispers of love in every language flowing from his beautiful scarred lips.

They curled up together, bodies still joined. As they drifted to sleep, Gina took hold of the claw circling his neck and clutched it like a talisman.

***

Bull woke to an empty bed. Instinctive panic had him sitting bolt upright, but then he could hear Gina in the next room talking quietly.
“Who does Tama love?”

“Kaya!” came the voice of their kid. Bull's heart skipped a beat.

“Yes, she does!” The sound of a dozen kisses raining down filled the air, along with adorable little giggles. “Who else does Tama love?”

There was a moment of silence before Kaya practically shouted, “Papa!”

Gina laughingly shushed her before whispering loudly, “Yes, she does. Does Kaya love Papa too?”

“Yes!” came the instant response.

“Really? How much do you love Papa?”

Bull stole to the door just in time to see Kaya stretch her arms out and say, “This much!”

Gina glanced up at him. “Do you know how much Papa loves you?”

Kaya nodded eagerly and tried to make her arms go wider. Bull crouched behind her and said, “No Imekari. This much.”

She turned and he held his arms as far and wide as he could, all eight feet and two inches of his wingspan. She lit up and threw herself into him with a beautiful little laugh. He scooped her into a hug and held as tight as he dared. His eye met Gina’s, and he mouthed, ‘Thank you.’

She wiped at her eye and nodded. Kaya turned in his arms and reached for her. “Tama hug too!”

Gina gave a wet laugh and crawled over to them. Bull swept her into the hug and kissed her. Come what may, he would never doubt the sincerity of their love again.

Chapter End Notes

Drafts are already created for the next three chapters - just have to do some serious editing. Stay tuned!
Chapter 12

Chapter by jinbaitai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

A long time coming...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bull sat with Kaya on his knee. She was cramming a third piece of toast into her mouth and scattering crumbs all over his pants. Gina shook her head. “She gets her appetite from you,” she said.

He tweaked Kaya’s ear, who gave him a food-filled grimace in response. He pulled a face at her, then said, “It’s not hard to beat that sad little thing you call an appetite, Kadan.”

Gina rolled her eye and leaned back, resting a hand on the curve of her stomach. “I eat more than enough.”

Bull stared for moment and then said, “Are you trying to tell me that teeny tiny little swell is fat?”

Her cheeks went pink. “Well, I’m not as flat as I was six months ago.”

“You were running on steam six months ago,” he retorted. “Half the time I worried a gust of wind would blow you over.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, a dangerous tone warming her voice.

Bull lifted a brow. “I’m saying you were gorgeous then, and you’re gorgeous today.” He traced a finger down the side of her face and then gave her a wicked smile. “There’s just more of you to love now.”
Before he could even think to dodge, she had her toast slimed across his face, jam side down. In a flash, he plunked Kaya on the table and dove at Gina. She squealed and tried to jump out of reach, but he was too quick. As they tumbled to the floor, he rubbed his jam-covered cheek against hers.

“You...great...giant... beast ...” she gasped as she kicked and squirmed.

He grinned and kissed her full on the mouth before licking a wide track from her chin to her forehead, making her yelp with indignation. Kaya howled with laughter at their antics from her perch on the table, so Bull decided it was her turn to have jam smeared all over her face too.

In the end they were piled in a laughing heap on the kitchen floor. Bull had eggs up his nose thanks to a sneak attack by Gina when he was distracted by Kaya, but he'd gotten his revenge in the form of a mittful of hash browns squished down the back of her jacket. Kaya gleefully painted his chest with leftover jam, though it was hard to tell which of them had the most coating them.

After helping to clean up their disaster and planting sloppy kisses on both girls’ cheeks, he reluctantly headed out to the aviary. It couldn't be helped. At least a dozen crows were waiting everyday, most of them holding secrets and information on little Lord Etienne. In the week following the arrest, he’d dug up more dirt on this one person than he had time to use.

It was astonishing, really. The unassuming little man was a master extortionist. No one was safe from him, from merchants to politicians to farmers. There were people under his thumb as far away as Denerim. And now that the mighty had fallen, they were all swarming from the woodwork to slam extra nails into the lid of his coffin. A lifetime of using coercion to get his way was biting the man in the ass.

In the wake of his uncomfortably close call, Bull had been sending out letters of his own. Namely, how the hell did this guy get all of this activity past his entire network of spies and informants? And if this guy could get through, who else was waltzing around under his nose? He hated being caught by surprise, and didn’t intend to let it happen again.

He’d also re-sent his letters to Skyhold. True to his prediction, Cassandra was incensed that no one had seen Rainier for who he truly was. Bull shouldered some of the responsibility, seeing as it was his job to root out secrets. A follow-up letter from Leliana also assumed responsibility. How they could have possibly put together the pieces of the man’s past was beyond both of them, but they agreed that moving forward they needed to vet any newcomers a lot more stringently.

Where Rainier had gone, Bull didn’t know. He wasn’t sure if he cared either. The man’s words still rang inside his head, despite Gina’s reassurances. He knew that it was horseshit. Anyone who believed their love was based on a lie clearly didn’t know them, and therefore didn’t matter. Logic didn’t stop the intrusive thoughts from cycling through his mind when he had too much time to think, unfortunately.

Bull skimmed through the stack of waiting reports. Venatori, on the move in the Western Approach. Cullen, wondering if he’d heard anything new regarding the remaining Red Templars. A few more accusations and secrets about his new friend Etienne. And a note from Varric containing nothing more than a crude joke.

As he finished scratching out a message to Cullen, a magpie landed and dropped a note onto his hand. Bull pressed his lips together as it sat and waited for him to open the letter. It had become a daily battle of wills. He knew exactly who sent the bird, and he wanted nothing to do with it. Yet everyday, Shara sent another full report. Comings and goings on the docks, activities in the alienage, and other interesting tidbits.
Based on the few reports he’d read, she was thorough. Bull had to admit it. But he steadfastly refused to acknowledge her. It wasn’t just the way she endangered Gina, it was the lies. His Kadan had been looking for a friend, and got nothing but a snake in the grass. She hadn’t asked him to avoid the woman, and probably wouldn’t ask, the selfless little thing. But he wouldn’t tolerate such betrayal toward the woman he loved, excellent intel or no.

He pushed the letter away and returned to his correspondence. It took the magpie another hour to finally flutter away, leaving its parcel behind. Bull battled the temptation to read the note for another twenty minutes before tossing it into the fireplace and heading out of the aviary.

He wasn’t sure where to go at first, but soon enough his steps led him to the jail. Bull hadn’t actually gone inside yet, just checked in with the Chevalier at the door to see how Etienne was doing. So far the Lord wasn’t coping well. He’d gone from frothing at the mouth with rage to begging to be released within a day, and the word yesterday had been that the man was now pleading to be put into a solitary cell. Finally it was time to stoke the fires of fear under the little puke’s ass.

The Chevalier at the door lifted a hand in greeting. “Good day, Ser.”

Bull dipped his head. “Good morning. Any chance I can get an audience with Little Lord Shithead?”

A little laugh echoed through the mouthpiece of the mask obscuring the soldier’s face. “I think that could be arranged. Come with me.”

Bull followed him to a small room and took up residence on the single wooden chair in the middle of the room. He pretended not to notice the dark spots where blood stained the wood permanently.

He wasn’t left to wait long. The clink and rattle of chains was almost drowned out by the squawking asshole. “I’ll have you digging trenches, do you hear me? When I get out of here, you’ll regret ever putting irons on me. Every last one of you, mark my words!”

A pair of Chevaliers shoved the protesting Etienne into the room and took up guard on either side of the door. Bull eyed the man for a moment. Jail didn’t suit him one bit. Already his plush clothes were tattered and hanging loose around his shoulders, while his formerly shiny pate was grimy and pitted with gouges. A wildness lurked in his eyes.

“Hissrad,” snarled the man.

The use of his old title again made his hackles rise, but he forced himself to remain calm. “You look like shit,” he said pleasantly.

“You’ll pay for this,” Etienne started, his face going bright pink.

Bull rose to his feet, and the bluster immediately dropped from the man’s act. He jumped back three paces and started begging the men to take him back to the cells. Bull let a smile crawl across his face as panic made the Lord’s voice squeak.

Maraas-lok, gattlok, and his old title. In the heat of the moment, he’d ignored the combination. With the clarity of time, he could no longer ignore it. “How long have you been working for Par Vollen?” he asked quietly.

The wildness in Etienne’s eye turned into something a lot more calculating. The abrupt switch was almost unsettling. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

Bull lifted a brow and examined the man from head to toe before saying, “Do you know what Par
Vollen does when their people fail?"

He sneered. “What do I care?”

He ignored him. “I remember this one guy. Big Qunari with a rack of horns that could barely squeeze through a door. The kind of guy that made me feel small. He got caught selling gattlok to a rebel band in Seheron. They sliced off both of his horns, and then hung him upside down over the gate facing Seheron. He was left there for three days and then,” Bull smacked a fist into his palm and made a cork popping noise, which made all three jump. “They drove the points of his own horns through his skull. It was the most blood I’ve ever seen from one wound. And they say we Qunari aren’t creative.”

Etienne gave him a smug little leer. “That was in Par Vollen, not in Orlais. They couldn’t do that here.”

Bull matched his smile. “Maybe they couldn’t be so theatrical. But making people pay for their failures? They can do that anywhere. Hell, the last Ben-hassrath I tried to recruit in Skyhold threw himself off the mountain because he was so afraid of what they’d do to him when they found out he blew his cover.”

He stepped closer, forcing the man to lift his chin even higher. “A fat little noble like you? Living a comfortable life of luxury in a city protected by the legendary Chevaliers?” The color began to drain from the man’s face. “They would love to show the bas how far their arm reaches.”

Etienne’s chins wobbled as he swallowed hard. “Like I said, what do I care? I am not involved with Par Vollen.”

Bull continued as though the man hadn’t spoken, pacing a slow path across the room. “You know, back in the day, when I had two eyes and I could blend in a little bit better, they used to send me off to get locked in the drunk tank. I couldn’t do it now. Too memorable. And a little too clumsy for the finesse work.” He waved a hand vaguely toward his missing eye. “But back then, I’d plant myself by one of the little weak spies who were ready to crack and spill all of their secrets.”

He crossed the room in one swift step, making Etienne yelp and trip over his own feet. Even the Chevaliers flinched. He traced a finger across his own throat. “Poor suckers would be dead before they hit the ground. A knife to the kidney; that was my favorite. By the time anyone noticed, I’d be back in my corner, sleeping it off.”

He looked down at the man and hid a triumphant grin at the tremors rippling across his skin. “Just imagine how easily an elf or a human spy could blend in with the rest of you. Rainier hid in plain sight for over ten years. Why, your cellmate might already be waiting for the perfect moment to strike.”

The mention of Rainier brought the stiffness back into the man’s spine. “You don't scare me,” he said, his fists clenching tight. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Bull flicked his chin at the Chevaliers. “He can go back to his cell.” He smirked at the man. “Good luck, little Lord. I think you'll need it.”

They were barely out of sight when offers of coin and power in exchange for protection began falling out of Etienne’s lips. Bull let out a little sigh of satisfaction. He still had it. The Lord would practically vomit the information he wanted the next time he visited.
He made his way to the entrance. As it came into sight, an immaculately dressed woman swept through the door. Her face had the distinct appearance of having tasted something sour as her gaze slid around the room and settled on him. Bull felt his gut tighten.

Lady Mantillon, the wife of Lord Etienne. He hadn’t met her personally, but he’d seen her around the citadel enough to recognize her on sight. Bull didn’t want a confrontation here, not where anyone could overhear their conversation, but it was too late. He straightened his back and waited on bated breath.

“The Iron Bull, I presume?” Her voice was sharp and crisp.

He bowed his head and said, “Yes, Lady Mantillon.”

Her brows lifted. “You know who I am? Perhaps you aren’t so stupid after all.”

Bull pressed his lips together so tightly they stung. She scanned him from head to toe and said, “Well go on then, what did my idiot husband confess to now?”

Bull took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Nothing, my Lady.”

“Well then, since you’ve been avoiding me, why don’t you tell me exactly what started all of this nonsense?”

He gritted his teeth. It wasn’t avoidance, but he wasn’t about to argue semantics with the woman. “It’s a long and boring story, ma’am.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do I look like I have a shortage of time, young man?”

Despite everything, a smile crept over his face. “Don’t think you can trick me so easily, Dowager. Even the dumbest Qunari know not to comment on a lady’s age.”

A cool smile slid across her sour face. “I think we’ll get along just fine, the Iron Bull.”

The Chevaliers graciously allowed them to use the same room for some privacy. The Dowager listened intently, and didn’t interrupt him once, much to his surprise. As he reached the climax of the story, her cheeks began to redden.

When he finished, she shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Andraste save me from foolish men,” she muttered. Her eyes lifted to meet Bull’s. “Had I known any of this, I would never have married him.”

He grimaced. “If my spies were a little more competent, I wouldn’t have gone to the docks that night.”

She snorted indelicately. “I shared a bed with the man and had no idea. How do you think I feel?”

He felt heat wash into his cheeks and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, my Lady.”

“As am I, the Iron Bull.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment before she drew herself taller. “Well, no use crying over spilt milk. You’ll be attending my party tomorrow, of course.”

Bull lifted both brows. “I didn’t think you’d want my presence there.”

She glared at him. “You’re an intelligent man. How would it appear if I treated you like an enemy
The woman was as sharp as her reputation stated. He said, “Like you condone Etienne’s actions.”

“Which I do not,” she snapped. “So. You’ll be there, representing the Inquisition. And you’ll bring that woman of yours. I hear she’s a little firebrand. Val Royeaux needs a good poking with fire.”

“You play with that fire, you might get burnt,” he said, unable to stop a wide smile stretching across his face.

She sniffed daintily. “I certainly hope so. I’d love to be pleasantly surprised for once.”

The woman reminded him of his Tama, a thought that brought an unexpected pang of homesickness. He swallowed past a lump in his throat. “We’ll be there, my Lady.”

“Good,” she said, and headed for the door. As she reached it, she paused and looked back. “You do realize, of course, that the factions seeking to dissolve the Inquisition are using Etienne’s arrest as further proof of your meddling in sovereign affairs.”

Bull frowned. “I would expect nothing less.”

She scoffed. “And he said you were a dumb ox. What a damn fool.” With that she swept out of the room.

***

Gina sat in front of the fire with Grim and Kaya, telling them the story of Anastasia. The disappearance of the little Czarina had always fascinated her as a child. Judging by their rapt attention, they were just as intrigued.

Grim’s knee was still swollen and barely useable, so he was staying with Dorian and Jeremy for the foreseeable future. The short journey between apartments meant that he moved back and forth between the two places frequently as his physiotherapy. Kaya walked with him as often as she was allowed, though Bull’s concerns about them being out of the apartment without someone to watch had ratcheted up several notches.

As she wrapped up her tale of mystery, the door opened to admit the Qunari. Kaya squealed in delight and raced across the room to him. He caught her up with a laugh and spun her in a circle before joining Grim and Gina by the fire. As he settled, Kaya talked his ear off, telling him all about her day. He gave her all of the suitable reactions, but Gina could see the weariness in his eye.

“Long day?” she asked.

He nodded. “I ran into Etienne’s wife.”

Gina winced. “How did that go?”

A smirk twitched at his face. “She tried to trick me into calling her old.”

“She didn’t tear a strip off of you for daring to get her husband arrested?”

He shook his head. “The opposite, actually. In fact, she insisted that we still attend her party tomorrow night.”

Gina frowned. “That doesn’t strike you as a potential trap?”

“Nah,” he said. “She’d be seen as a co-conspirator if she dared, and she won’t tarnish her reputation
any further than it has been by being associated with the man.”

“So we have to stay for this stupid party after all?”

He nodded and then started to tickle Kaya until she was gasping with laughter. Then he set her on a warpath to Grim. As the two rough-housed on the floor, he leaned over and kissed Gina on the mouth. “One night in a pretty dress and then I’ll take you to the prettiest spot I’ve ever been.”

“Better than that little glade in Emerald Graves?”

“Way better,” he murmured before kissing her again. Then he paused and made a funny face. “I can still smell eggs whenever I breathe in.”

***

Bull squirmed and fussed with the jacket. It felt stifling, regardless of how ‘perfectly tailored’ Dorian said it was. He stared in the mirror and sighed. At least it made his shoulders look broader.

Gina came hurrying out of the bedroom and shoved him none-too-gently out of the way. She made a little growling and noise and bustled back to the bedroom before he could even react. It was her third attempt at an outfit, and while he thought each one was stunning, she hated them all for one reason or another.

He followed in time to see her toss dress number three onto the bed and dive into the closet. “Anything I can do to help?”

“No,” she hissed. “Nothing looks good.”

Bull sighed and leaned on the doorframe. “I disagree.”

Gina came out of the closet holding up two dresses, one green, one blue. She eyed both, and then for reasons Bull couldn’t even begin to fathom, tossed the green one to the bed and started pulling on the blue dress. He watched and tried not to let the arousal seeping through his veins get too far. They were already dangerously close to being late.

She pushed past him and went to the mirror. Another exasperated noise ripped from her chest and she came storming back to the bedroom. He caught her around the shoulders and turned her to face him. “Kadan, you’re running out of choices. What’s wrong with this outfit?”

Her cheeks were flushed as she extricated herself from his grasp and returned to the closet. “Too many ruffles.”

He grimaced. “Call me crazy, but I only see one little strip of ruffles.”

She shot him a dirty look. “One strip too many,” she said sharply.

He lifted a palm. “Okay, okay.”

This time she came out with a dark blue dress, a sleek floor length number, ruffle-free. She slipped into it and then turned her back to him. “Can you button me up?”

He crossed the room and started doing up the impractical number of buttons. It was impossible to resist tracing his fingers along her spine as he did. Goosebumps spread across her skin and she leaned into him ever so slightly. He growled and kissed the top of her shoulder as he finished the last of the buttons. “I much prefer doing that job in reverse, Kadan.”
She turned to face him. “We could skip the party. I don’t mind.”

Bull shook his head and traced the neckline of the dress. “I wish. But we can’t. Need to go make sure they see that we aren’t ashamed of our role in Etienne’s arrest.”

“But I could be naked,” she whispered, stepping closer and lifting on her toes to trace her lips across the line of his jaw.

He groaned and caught her lips with his for one deep kiss before stepping away and firmly clasping his hands behind his back. “No. Gotta behave, Kadan.”

She gave a dramatic sigh and walked out to the mirror in a sulk. After a long stare in the mirror she made one more heaving sigh. “Whatever. I give up.”

Bull frowned. “You’re not normally self-conscious like this, Kadan.”

A short laugh came from her. “I wear practically the same thing all the time for a reason, Bull. I had a full closet back in my world, and it still never seemed like I had anything to wear.”

It was partially true, but he could see an unease lingering in her eye that didn’t come from indecision. He shook his head. “Spill, darlin’.”

She turned back to the mirror and fluffed the curls cascading over her shoulders before inspecting the eye patch and adjusting it a smidgen. Bull crossed to stand behind her and skimmed his hands down her arms. “Kadan,” he pressed.

Her brow creased. “The day I took Kaya to the park, some noble woman refused to let her kid play with her. Said they didn’t associate with ‘our kind’. I don’t want to come across as ‘that kind’ tonight.”

Anger prickled across his skin. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Her eye met his, and she lifted her eyebrow. “It kind of slipped my mind, what with the gattlok and such.”

“Oh,” he muttered.

She turned to face him. “Okay, let’s get this over with.”

As though on cue, a knock came to their door. Bull opened the door to Dorian and Jeremy. Dorian and Gina immediately began to primp and preen one another, followed by the pair disappearing into the bedroom. Jeremy made a little groaning sound. “Has she gone through a dozen outfits too?”

Bull smirked and nodded. Jeremy gave him a pained look. “He even made me change three times.”

Bull laughed and shook his head. “Luckily I only have one choice. It’s this jacket or topless.”

Jeremy grumbled under his breath as the pair returned to the main room. Gina had indeed changed one more time, but this dress took Bull’s breath away. An entirely strapless blood red affair cut just low enough to showcase the perfect curve of her pretty little tits, with a skirt that fluttered just below her knee. He wasn’t aware that his mouth was hanging wide open until Jeremy pushed it shut for him.

Gina gave him a shy smile. “It’s not too much?”

He shook his head and circled around her before clearing his throat. “Any chance we can skip the
party?"

Gina smirked at him. “Not a chance.”

He gave her a sour look and swatted her rear. “Let's get moving then.”

***

Gina slid inside the waiting carriage and watched as Bull levered himself into the seat beside her. “That looked easier this time,” she said. At his questioning look, she explained that his horns got hung up on the roof of the last carriage they rode in. That night at Halamshiral felt like a lifetime ago.

He grunted. “As much as I miss the horns, getting around without them is a hell of a lot easier.”

She traced a hand down his arm and admired the cut of the jacket. “Dorian outdid himself.”

Bull shrugged and twisted in the seat to face her. “I don’t look half as good as you, Kadan,” he murmured, leaning in close and nipping her earlobe gently.

Heat rushed to her cheeks. “I thought we had to behave,” she said.

His fingers trailed across her back while his other hand skimmed from her ankle to her knee. “Who said that?”

Her breath caught as he began walking his fingers slowly up her inner thigh. “You did,” she whispered, her tongue feeling thick and useless.

“That doesn’t sound like me,” he retorted softly as his finger hooked into the lacy waistband of her thong and slid tantalizingly from hip to hip.

The carriage came to an abrupt halt. “The manor of Lady Mantillon,” announced the driver.

Bull growled and slowly pulled his hand to himself. “Damn.”

Gina’s heart was hammering in her ears when the door opened, and she was pretty confident that the driver gave them both a knowing look. Bull helped her out of the carriage and dropped a kiss on top of her head. “Later, Kadan,” he whispered in her ear.

Dorian and Jeremy joined them, talking in hissing whispers. Finally Dorian gave an exasperated sigh. “You are not a Ken doll,” he snapped.

Gina exchanged a wide-eyed glance with Bull and said, “Everything okay, you two?”

“Peachy, can’t you tell?” asked Jeremy, his voice sharp.

Bull cleared his throat and pressed on Gina’s back. “Great, let’s go inside then.”

The manor wasn’t half as large as Halamshiral, but it was every bit as ornate. Gina had to remind herself to keep her jaw shut. They were greeted by a pair of servants and directed to the top of an immaculate set of stairs. At the top stood a Chevalier in full regalia. He bowed and opened the door to admit them inside.

A woman bustled over. Older, wearing a heavy brocade dress woven with what appeared to be genuine gold thread. “The Iron Bull, I am so glad you’ve come,” she said.

Bull bowed to the woman. “Lady Mantillon. We thank you for your hospitality.”
The woman gave him an impatient curtsey before turning to Gina. “And you must be the famous Gina. Saviour of Thedas, isn’t that what they call you?” Before Gina could reply, the woman waved a hand. “Ridiculous, of course. So you killed a nasty fellow. Plenty more to take his place. You going to kill them all? Doubtful.”

Gina couldn’t stop a little laugh escaping. “My Lady, I couldn’t agree more.”

The woman’s eyes lit up. “Oh good. I was worried you might disappoint me. Come, my dear. I’ll show you around.” Then she glanced at Bull and pointed to both sides of the foyer. “Drinks are along that wall. Food on the other wall.”

Bull was giving Gina a bemused look as the woman took her by the arm and lead her away.

Twenty minutes later, her head was spinning. The Dowager had been pointing out people continuously, and after introducing her, leading her away and giving her the low-down on each one.

“Wife beater.”

“Cheats at cards and lies to his wife about how much he gambles.”

“Thereir child only shares half their blood, if you know what I mean.”

Bull would've had every line memorized to use as leverage later. Gina just struggled to remember their names. Finally a small bell rang. Lady Mantillon made a disappointed little sound. “Well my dear, it's time to start the presentations. I'll find you later.”

She collapsed onto the nearest bench and puffed out a breath. It took Bull less than a minute to take a seat across from her. “Having fun, Kadan?”

“I don’t think she stopped talking for a second,” she said.

He grinned. “She’s great.”

Gina shook her head at him. “You do love strong women, don’t you?”

Bull’s eye went soft. “What do you think made me fall for you?”

Her heart fluttered. “Aw, come on tough guy. You’re going to make me cry and ruin my make-up.”

A half-smile came to his lips as he rose to his feet and offered his hand to assist her. She pressed her hand to his heart before turning to walk toward the ballroom. Bull walked at her shoulder, close enough that she could feel his heat. She slipped a hand under his elbow and leaned into him. “I can’t wait to dance with you tonight,” she said.

A laugh rumbled from his chest. “They’ll have to play better music than this sappy string shit.”

They came to stand behind a short line of people. Gina didn’t recognize anyone, but Bull nodded out a few greetings as they waited. As they came to the head of the line, a little gasp sounded from behind her. Gina turned and came face to face with the pretty blond bitch from the playground.

The woman seemed caught off her guard, almost as much as Gina. Her eyes burned with curiosity. As her lips opened to say something, the announcer began speaking. “Presenting the Iron Bull, leader of the famed Bull’s Chargers, and representative of the Inquisition.”

Bull squeezed her hand and descended the stairs. Gina felt her chest swell with pride at the sight of him taking his place in the centre of the dancefloor. He had been almost a footnote at the last big
party they attended. Tonight he was the star of their little show. So much had changed.

He bowed to the Dowager and then turned to watch as Gina was introduced. The announcer said, “At the Iron Bull’s side, presenting Virginia Carter. Saviour of Thedas, slayer of the Archdemon Corypheus, and council to Empress Celene.”

She couldn’t resist shooting a smirk at the blond. The already pale woman had gone ghost-white, her mouth flapping open and shut. Gina tossed her head and strutted down to meet Bull in the middle of the dancefloor. He twirled her lightly before they both faced the Dowager and dipped their heads.

“I am honoured that you’ve chosen to attend my humble party,” said Lady Mantillon.

“It is we who are honoured, my Lady,” said Bull. “It is not everyday that one receives the opportunity to socialize with the elite of Val Royeaux.”

Very diplomatic, thought Gina. She, wisely, kept her mouth shut.

Dorian and Jeremy were presented next, and then they were free to escape the staring eyes of the crowd. Bull led Gina to a spot on the balcony. His hand settled possessively over the curve of her hip as they watched the rest of the introductions. She couldn’t have cared less about most of the people being paraded across the dance floor, but then her nemesis came down the stairs, her gait stilted as she crossed the floor.

“Presenting Lord Eustace of Val Foret, Bosom Companion of Florian the Glorious and Principal Patron of Leorande the Younger, and his wife, Lady Cerise.”

Gina couldn’t help a little scornful sound escaping. Bull whispered in her ear, “I take it that’s the bitch that called you ‘those people’?”

She nodded. “And there she is, wife to some petty noble.”

“Hardly anything compared to the councilwoman of Celene herself,” teased Bull.

Gina pretended to gag. The letter according her that particular title had been sent sometime after Corypheus fell. It wasn’t expressly stated, but the title was entirely fluff to make the empress seem grateful for her role in stopping the Archdemon from ripping the world apart. Again. She hadn’t ever planned to use the title, but apparently she didn’t have a choice.

His fingers roved across the bared skin on her back and chest, sending courses of shivers over her entire body. It made her wish they were somewhere secluded so that those fingers could explore more intimate zones that were begging for their share of attention.

“Wanton thing,” he murmured.

“Tease,” she fired back.

His chest vibrated with a low chuckle. “You love it.”

She turned to face him, giving up any pretense of caring who walked across the dance floor. “Two can play at this game, you know.”

The stormy green of his eye darkened and he leaned closer. “Is that a challenge, sweetness?”

Her chin lifted. “It would be if you had a chance at winning.”
A fierce grin spread across his face. “Sounds like someone wants to make another bet.”

She tossed her hair and lifted onto her toes to speak softly into his ear. “It’ll be like taking candy from a baby.”

His nostrils flared. “First to cave and beg for more loses. Winner gets whatever their heart desires at the end of the night.”

“Deal,” she said.

He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and dragged her to him for a hard kiss that left her head spinning and heart racing. Then he patted her on the ass and said, “Good luck, Kadan.”

***

Bull forced himself to listen closely to Comte Georges as the man droned on about the current state of affairs in his small villa. With the defeat of Corypheus, Emprise du Lion had begun to thaw, which brought about new problems. “We haven’t found a dry patch of land in weeks. Starting to worry we’ll turn into another Fallow Mire.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Bull said, wondering why the man thought he would care about a little muck.

“It is. You see my boots,” whined the man, lifting a foot and pointing with a miserable expression. “Permanently stained. Horrendous conditions. Simply unlivable.”

Bull suppressed a yawn and let his eye wander over the rest of the party-goers. Poor little noble asshole. His people lived, free from the influence of the Red Templars and their red lyrium. They’d been given back lands stolen from them, and trade had begun to flourish again. And the man still wasn’t content. Because mud had stained some boots.

Typical.

A small body pressed into his side. “The Iron Bull, may I speak with you a moment?” He smiled down at Gina and slid a hand across her back. “I’m so sorry to interrupt,” she simpered to the Lord.

He waved a hand magnanimously. “Quite alright, my dear. I should go visit with Comte Menard. Man wants the hand of my daughter for his son.”

Bull made a strong mental note to monitor that union as the man wandered away. He released a sigh. “Thank you,” he said.

She smirked. “You looked like you were going to fall asleep standing up.”

“Enjoying the party?”

“I’ve been to worse,” she said. “It’s certainly not as eventful as the last big party we went to.”

Bull had heard the stories, and was pretty confident he could remember a few scant details. “Let’s hope this party doesn’t get anywhere near that exciting, Kadan.”

She nodded and touched a finger to the claw displayed prominently just above her cleavage. The sight made his mouth water. Her eye met his. “Oh, I meant to ask. Do you mind holding something for me? This dress doesn’t have pockets.”

“Of course, Kadan,” he said, holding his palm out.
“Thank you,” she said, pressing something warm into his hand.

It took a minute to register exactly what she’d given him, but with a rush of desire that made his heart pound, he realized that it was her lacy little thong underwear in his palm. He hissed out a sharp breath and clenched his fist tightly.

She gave him an innocent look and turned to wave to some other party-goer. “See you later, tough guy,” she said as she sashayed away.

Intoxicating, wicked, sinful little vixen. He jammed the frilly underthings into his pocket and drained the last of his wine before dragging his hand over his face. A second too late he realized his mistake, as the warm scent of her filled his nostrils. A little growl escaped before he could marshal control over himself.

He glanced in the direction she’d gone, and saw her watching him, a knowing little smirk crossing her face before she turned her attention to the other people speaking to her.

Fuck.

Bull spun on his heel and escaped to an empty balcony, dragging great lungfuls of fresh air and flexing the heavy muscles in his upper thighs, trying desperately to stave off the boner quickly making his pants feel a size too tight.

An intoxicated couple stumbled onto the balcony, too wrapped up in each other to realize that they had an unwitting audience. It was with some amusement that he realized that the two hadn’t arrived together. Another mental note to add to his actual notebook later.

He gave a gruff cough, making them both squeak and jump apart. “Oh Maker,” breathed the woman, her face and throat flushed bright red.

Bull gave them a tight smile. “Don’t mind me,” he muttered as he returned to the party. Far from abating his arousal, he was even more enthralled. That could be him and Gina, tangled together and breathless in some secret place. All he had to do was walk over to her and give her the right look. She’d win their bet, and he’d get to take care of the burning need making it so hard to think straight.

A sharply cleared throat cut through the fog in his brain. He turned a startled glance to find a pair of men glaring him down. “Gentlemen,” he said, latching onto the distraction.

“You’re the one who had Etienne arrested,” said the taller one, his dark eyes flashing in the dim light.

Bull smirked. “Guilty as charged. Here to thank me, or yell at me?”

“What gave you the right?” said the other man.

Bull crossed his arms. “Attempted murder and extortion are serious charges. I didn’t have to work very hard to convince the Chevaliers to put him in chains.”

“The Inquisition has no jurisdiction here,” hissed the tall one. “Your interference knows no bounds!”

Bull shrugged. “I didn’t create the laws. I just made sure they were followed.”

“He’s a Lord!”
“Does that make him above the law?” asked Bull, not bothering to lower his voice.

The two cringed at his volume and glanced around them. A few others looked on in curiosity. The shorter of the two grabbed the other and hustled him away. Bull shook his head and headed for the bar.

At least he didn’t have a raging hard-on anymore.

***

Gina was caught off-guard when Lady Mantillon suddenly appeared at her side. “Walk with me,” commanded the woman.

“Do I have a choice?” Gina asked, tempering the words with a smile.


As they strolled and chatted, Gina got the distinct impression that the woman was avoiding other party-goers. She wasn’t rude by any stretch of the imagination, but she certainly didn’t stick around for long when someone said hello. Judging by some of the pitying expressions in their wake, Lady Mantillon’s reputation had suffered far more than she’d like anyone to believe.

Their steps led to the ballroom where a full dance floor bobbed and swayed in harmony. Groups of men and women surrounded the floor. As they started climbing the stairs to the upper balcony, they came face to face with Lady Cerise and her husband.

The Lady went scarlet and tried to avoid eye contact, but Gina wasn’t about to let her off the hook. “My Lady, it is so good to see you again,” she said brightly.

A desperation came into the woman’s eyes as Lord Eustace gave her a surprised look. “My dear, you’ve met the Saviour of Thedas and you didn’t tell me?”

Gina smirked coolly. “It was a brief meeting, wasn’t it, Lady Cerise?”

She cleared her throat delicately. “Too brief, my Lady.”

Gina turned the screw just a little tighter. “Our children did get along famously though. Perhaps we should arrange a playdate for them in the near future.”

The Lord looked proud as punch that his wife was rubbing elbows with someone like Gina, while she looked as though she wished the floor would swallow her whole. “Yes, my Lady,” she said, still not meeting Gina’s eye.

“Well, when you’re not too busy, send me a note. Our kind,” she said, putting a subtle emphasis on the words, “should spend more time together, don’t you think?”

“We’d be delighted,” said Lord Eustace, his face beaming at the attention, and completely missing the way his wife shrank into herself.

As the couple walked away, she could hear the man chattering animatedly about the encounter. It was still a strange sensation to be any type of celebrity, but in that moment, nothing brought her more joy than seeing that miserable cow’s realization that she’d made a wild miscalculation that day in the playground.

Lady Mantillon gave her a wry smile. “That was well played, my dear.”
Gina shrugged. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

The Dowager scoffed. “I’ve been a player of the game since before you were born. I don’t know how she offended you, but I do know that you played the perfect hand against her. I haven’t seen Lady Cerise so mute since the day her arranged marriage was announced.”

“Her husband is a nice man.”

“He’s a terrible snob, and so is she,” retorted Lady Mantillon. “The only reason he’s given you the time of day is because of who you are, make no mistake.”

Gina scowled. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Alright. Let’s talk about your Qunari,” said the woman.

“Bull?” Gina asked, unable to hide the surprise in her voice.

Lady Mantillon tucked her hand into the crook of Gina’s arm and began walking again. “He cuts an impressive picture. Are they all so...big?”

Gina shook her head. “I wouldn’t know. He’s the only Qunari I’ve ever met.”

“And latched on immediately, I assume,” said the woman. “I can’t say I blame you. I’ve heard the rumours.”

She frowned. “What rumours?”

The woman gave her a knowing smirk. “That they know their way around a bedroom, my dear.”

Heat flooded Gina’s face and she choked. Lady Mantillon made an exasperated little sound. “I’m old, not dead. I can appreciate a good lay just like anyone else.”

Speaking of wanting a floor to swallow someone whole. Gina gave the woman a weak smile. “I’m sure you can, my Lady.”

“I’ll be divorced soon,” said the woman abruptly.

Gina felt a little stab of pity for the woman, but schooled her expression. No need to wound the woman’s pride. “I am sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not,” said the woman. “When you’ve had as many husbands as I have, you learn to cut ties cleanly when things don’t turn out the way you planned.”

It sounded like a lonely way to live, and made Gina immensely grateful that she and Bull had managed to find each other. Twice.

“Does he have any friends?”

“Does who have any friends?”

“The Iron Bull,” said the woman, giving her another exasperated look. When Gina didn’t immediately cotton on, the woman sighed and spoke as though she a small child. “Qunari friends. I’d like to try one out for myself.”

Oh god. Anytime, floor!
Bull found Gina in a small alcove behind one of the bars. “What are you up to?”

She gave him a pained look. “Hiding, what does it look like?”

He chuckled and tucked in beside her. “Lady Mantillon?”

Gina nodded. “I had to pretend to need the ladies’ room.”

“She’s not that bad,” he said, lifting his wineglass to his lips.

“She asked if you had any Qunari friends she could take for a ride,” she said.

Bull choked as he swallowed, taking half a mouthful down the wrong tube. As he coughed hard enough to make his eye water, Gina gave him a smug look. “Not that bad, eh?”

“Jesus Christ,” he wheezed when the coughing fit eased.

She smirked and fussed with his jacket lapels. Bull couldn’t resist tracing a finger down one curly lock of hair. “You are stunning tonight,” he whispered. “Have I told you that yet?”

Pink washed through her cheeks. “Not in so many words.”

He tipped her chin up and kissed her. “That was a nice play you made,” he murmured against her lips. “But not enough to make me beg.”

A soft laugh brushed against his lips. “Just think, now I’m walking around with all these people and not one stitch of underwear on. All you have to do is lift my dress a few inches, and you’ll get the full business.”

His gut clenched. “You know one thing I never could do when I had horns?”

Her brow creased. “What?”

He put his glass of wine into her hand and lowered to his knees. Her head tilted in confusion, but then he flicked her skirt over his head and nipped his teeth into the skin over her hip. He couldn’t see her face anymore, but based on the way she swayed forward and clutched at the nub of his horn through the silky fabric, he had her complete and utter attention.

Her sweet little pussy was right there, tantalizing his every sense. He skimmed a palm up her thigh and slid his thumb across the heated slit, fighting the groan in his throat when she whimpered and shuddered in response. He licked the thumb clean and pressed a kiss just above the clit that he knew had to be throbbing with need.

Then he, with great effort, pulled the skirt off of his head and rose to his feet. She was quivering and gripping the glass so tightly he was surprised it didn’t crack. “I think we’ll have to try that one again sometime, Kadan,” he said as he pried the glass from her hand.

It took every ounce of willpower he had to kiss her lightly on the lips and walk away.

***

They battled back and forth the entire party. At one point, Gina hitched her skirt up and bent down low, pretending to adjust her shoe. Bull broke his wine glass as her skirt lifted high enough to give him an excellent view.
Later, he trapped her behind a curtain and left her keening his name thanks to the magic his fingers worked underneath her dress. Then cursing him when he walked away with a swagger to his step.

Next, she manufactured a wardrobe malfunction just in time for him to catch sight while some nobleman talked his ear off. Seeing her bare breasts on display made him visibly lose track of their conversation.

Of course, that only led to him pinning her to the balcony railing with his hips as he spoke in a low tone, telling her in detail how he was going to fuck her the second she caved and lost the bet. Feeling him getting hard against her back as he described the moment his cock slid inside her nearly had her begging then and there, but the night wasn't over yet.

They were eyeing each other across the foyer when a loud argument broke out. Bull frowned and turned to check it out, and then rolled his eye skyward. Gina peeked and suppressed a groan.

Dorian and Jeremy were in middle of a squabble, and it was quickly getting ugly. She hot-footed it over and wrapped an arm tightly around Jeremy’s arm. He tried to pull away, but she gave him a furious glare and dragged him toward one of the balconies. From behind, she could hear Bull speaking to Dorian, too quiet to make out the words, though his tone made it pretty clear that they weren't talking about the weather.

She pushed Jeremy through the door and finally let him pull free. “What the hell are you two doing?” she asked.

He gave her a baleful look and stalked toward the railing. “Just tired of being his little show pony, that's all.”

Gina crossed her arms and joined him at the rail. “You knew he was a fashionista. This is him in his element. I can't remember the last time he got to attend a fancy party. Why not let him have his fun?”

“Because it's stupid. These pricks are going to judge me either way, and I don't care what they think. I'm going to say what I want and wear what I want. If Dorian doesn't like it, that's too fucking bad.”

She squeezed her eye shut for a moment. “Jeremy, it's not like he's trying to get you to like some lame friends of his.”

He rolled his eyes and dragged a hand through his hair, mussing the neat coif she knew Dorian had fought into submission. “I refuse to participate in this classist bullshit.”

“Then you shouldn't be at this party on his arm,” she snapped. “The whole point of his attendance is to represent Tervinter as a whole. Just like Bull is here as the face of the Inquisition. Welcome to reality, big brother. If you don't like it, go home. Otherwise, you grit your teeth, smile nicely, and support him. He's got enough weight on his shoulders without you being a petulant child.”

Jeremy turned to her with an incensed expression. “Why do you always take everyone else's side?”

“Because it's so rare that you're a reasonable human being, Jeremy.” She jabbed her index finger into his chest and leaned closer. “And that's a really shitty thing you need to work on.”

He snarled and turned his back on her. She rolled her eye and stormed out of the balcony. Dorian was just turning away from Bull as she approached. His lips were tight around the edges and he wouldn't meet her eye as he walked toward the bar.

Bull pulled her into a hug. “How's yours doing?”
“Mine needs to grow up,” she said waspishly. “Yours?”

He frowned and shook his head. “Mine is at a loss.”

Gina winced and huddled closer to Bull. “I hate seeing them unhappy.”

He rubbed her back. “Me too. Real party killer.”

She nodded and leaned into him. They stood in silence for a long while before Bull kissed her forehead. “Okay, Kadan. Looks like we're at a stalemate here. I say we go find a nice quiet spot to fuck each other's brains out, dance a little, and then both have our nasty way with each other when we get home. What do you think?”

“See, that's why we're so happy,” she said. He tilted his head in question, so she smiled and said, “Compromise.”

***

Bull was still tingling all over from their rendez-vous in a small garden hidden along the far end of the ballroom. He'd had to clamp a hand over Gina’s mouth to keep her from crying out loudly enough to bring Chevaliers running. In return, the little vixen had bitten hard enough to bruise his palm.

Dancing with her had only heightened his desire. She was quick and light on her feet, and she followed his lead flawlessly. By the time the first song was done, they had a smattering of applause. At the end of their second dance, they had a full audience.

It hadn't taken much convincing for her to leave the party. Even now, the insatiable creature was winding herself around him in the carriage as they rode home for the night. He reached under the dress and took hold of her sweet little ass, pulling her tight to his hips. “Is this your wicked desire?” he rasped.

“No,” she said, rocking her hips and dragging a low moan from his chest. “I just like watching you lose that iron grip you have on your self control.”

They barely made it through the door of their apartment before they were rutting like animals over the dining table. They didn't even bother getting undressed. His jacket was askew and her dress was hiked up to her waist. Good enough.

Bull took a lingering taste of her sweet lips and rose to his full height to stretch. Gina cleared her throat. “Speaking of heart’s desire,” she said.

He held both palms to the side. “You can go first. Mine will probably take a while,” he said, giving her his best wolfish smile.

She got to her feet and crossed to the entry way. Pointing at the chandelier, she said, “How much weight do you think that could support?”

He looked at the light. Hung from sturdy chain that ran through a series of metal rings bolted through the stone ceiling and walls, it looked tough enough to hold a druffalo. He reached up and took an experimental hold.

After managing a full pull up without the thing even creaking, he turned to Gina. Her eye was over-bright. He swallowed nervously. “What are you going to do to me?”
She had him stripped and strung up less than five minutes later. Bull stood warily, not sure how he felt about being in such a powerless position. She sauntered slowly around him, taking her sweet time ogling and randomly touching every inch of his naked form. He wasn't the blushing kind, but heat rose up his neck at her blatant appreciation of his body.

He shifted from foot to foot and tested his bindings surreptitiously. They were sturdier than he'd anticipated, and only got tighter the more he tugged. Where the hell did she learn knots like this?

Her lips curved into a smile. Without saying a word, she dragged over one of the chairs from the dining table. After settling it into place, she took a seat and leaned back, scanning him from head to toe one more time.

Bull sucked a breath as she lifted the skirt of her dress out of the way, leaving herself fully exposed to his eye. Her eye met his as her fingers began to stroke and caress the soft skin on her inner thighs.

“Darlin’, I didn't think you were into torture,” he grated.

She still didn't say a word, leaving him wondering what was going on inside that pretty little head. Her fingers strayed higher and higher, until at long last, she was sliding over the slick little slice of heaven between her legs.

Bull groaned as he watched her tease and play with herself. The only sounds coming from that mouth were those of pure pleasure. He was hard as a rock and aching for some relief, but she simply licked those lips and stared at him as she moved faster and started to tremble from head to toe.

A grunt burst from his lips as she dropped her head back and cried out, her body convulsing. He stared, helpless to do anything but watch her juices drip down her legs. “Come on, don't waste it,” he pleaded.

Her chest was still heaving, but she dragged her fingers through the sweet fluid and rose to her feet. She licked one fingertip clean and then offered him the others. As he bent to lap up every drop, she pulled the hand away and wiped it on his chest.

His lip curled and he pulled at the bonds to no avail. “You heartless witch,” he snarled.

She smirked and looked up at him with that stunning green eye as she licked his chest clean. His skin pebbled as she traced fingers over every scar and moved lower and lower until the only place she hadn't put her mouth or hands was his pulsing cock.

Bull thought his knees would give out when she finally took a firm hold of him and began stroking. She found the ultra sensitive spot under the head of his cock, and focused there, making his whole body curl into the intense sensation.

But there was no escape. She had him over a barrel and she knew it. Her eye lifted to his as she fondled and stroked every inch of him and took him into her mouth. He couldn't grab her hair. Thrusting only made her pull away. If he tried to move away, she just followed him. He cried out in frustration as she brought him trembling to the edge and then stopped entirely.

“You're killing me, sweetheart,” he panted as she denied him release for a third time.

She gave him a smouldering look as she took him into her mouth. Watching his cock disappear so far into that tiny cavity made him whimper. Then she was stroking him harder, faster, her mouth suckling greedily at him. His knees shook and every nerve on his body strained toward the core of him. This time she didn’t stop. Like an arrow from a bow, everything released, leaving him weak at the knees.
A long groan vibrated in his throat as he unloaded every ounce of his seed into her eager mouth. She milked him for every drop, then continued licking him until he was clean, the softness of her tongue sending little shocks of electricity through his body.

Finally she rose to her feet with a contented sigh. Bull stood in a stupor, letting the ropes hold him upright. She pulled the chair over and stepped on top of it before touching under his chin with one finger and lifting gently. “Thank you for letting me have my fun,” she whispered as she pressed kisses all over his face.

A lazy smile slid across his face. “If this is what you call fun, Kadan, count me in.”

***

Gina carefully released Bull’s hands and rubbed briskly at his broad shoulders as he lowered his arms. She winced at the raw patches of skin on his wrists. “Let me grab the ointment,” she said. He nodded and sank onto the vacated chair.

After giving him a liberal coating of soothing ointment, she kissed his forehead. “I suppose it’s your turn now.”

He shook his head. “Not enough time left in the night for what I plan to do to you,” he said softly.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Should I be worried?”

Bull rose to his feet and scooped her into his arms. “Maybe,” he said into her ear, his voice gravelly and dark. “Was that everything your heart desired, Kadan?”

Watching his frustration build, seeing all that great strength unable to do anything but be her plaything? It was addictive. Next time she’d tie him to the bed so she could fuck his helpless body too. A thrill chased over her skin. “I had fun.”

“I hope so,” he said. “Because that little show earned you the tormenting of a lifetime.”

He laid her on the bed and tugged the front of her dress down low enough that he could lavish attention on both straining nipples. She arched toward him and caressed the soft skin behind his ears. “How did I do?” she asked.

“I underestimated how cruel you can be, Kadan. The little trick with that sweet honey of yours?” He growled and nipped her sharply. “That alone is worthy of punishment.”

He reached under her back and released the laces holding the dress in place. She helped him drag it free from her body. Then, to her surprise, he took her hand and guided her to lay along his side as he crawled under the covers. “Recovery time,” he explained, shushing her giggles with a kiss.

After laying in cozy silence for a while, she shifted to face him and trailed a finger down his cheek and across his lips before meandering down the side of his neck and over his chest. He made a contented little purring sound.

Gina splayed her hand on his chest and admired how tiny the appendage was against his broad expense. “Sometimes I forget how big you really are,” she said softly.

He gave her a sleepy smile and covered her hand with his big paw. She turned the hand over and set her palm to his. Nearly her entire hand fit inside his palm. The Dowager’s question echoed in her mind. “Are all Qunari so large?”
Bull curled his fingers around hers and kissed the back of her hand. “I'm not that big, really. Pretty tall I guess, but I look like a lightweight compared to some of my brothers.”

Gina rolled onto her stomach and rested her chin on his chest. “In all my time in Thedas, I've never even seen another Qunari. I thought we might run into a few here.”

Bull shrugged. “There aren’t many hanging out in this area. Most are living around the northern coasts. And the ones you would see probably aren't all that friendly. I'm a weird case. Even before giving up the Qun I was considered unusually social with all the bas.”

Thing, Gina found herself automatically translating. “Do you miss being with your people?”

He was silent for a while, his fingers tracing idly over her back. Then he sighed and said, “Some days I get tired of being the biggest bastard in the room. And I miss having people around that understand our life and why we are the way we are. The Qun isn’t just something that we’re taught, it’s something that we live. Unless you're a part of it, it's really difficult to understand.”

He traced a thumb over the point of her shoulder. “I’d like to see my Tama again someday. It won’t happen, though.” He paused and looked up at the ceiling before saying quietly, “Sometimes I think about sending her a message.”

Gina’s heart ached for him. “What stops you?”

“If she was caught with a note from me, she’d be seen as a traitor. I’m Tal-Vashoth now. That means she must turn her back on me, or destroy me. Anything less is a betrayal on her part.” He shook his head. “A note would make me feel better at the expense of her safety, so I won't risk it.”

“That’s awful,” she whispered.

He shrugged. “It’s life. I made my choice, and I stand by it.”

Except this Bull hadn’t. Another version of him had, forcing his hand in this new life. Would this Bull really have made the same choice?

She forced herself to switch her train of thought. “I’m excited to see your favorite place on earth,” she said.

He spread his hand on her back and rolled her underneath him. “I'm already in my favorite place, Kadan. Right here, right now,” he whispered as his mouth descended to hers.

***

Brego was in fine spirits as they made their way north to Bull’s cabin. Gina gave him a hearty pat on the neck and then turned to Kaya. “Want to ride with Tama?”

“Yes!” Without any hesitation, she stood on Fuzzy’s back and threw herself at Gina, making Bull’s breath catch.

But Gina caught her with ease and settled her just behind the pommel of the saddle. “Hold onto Brego, like we learned.”

Kaya’s hands twisted into the bay’s long black mane, and like a catapult, he launched into a gallop. Gina couldn’t stop a mad bit of laughter escaping from her lips, and felt her heart sing when Kaya had the same kind of laughter bubble from her lips.
They flew a long winding loop before coming back to their small group. Sunny had her head high and nostrils flared, but after a correction from Bull, she settled back into her brisk march. The mare had come a long way, and was performing like a champ for their inaugural ride.

Fuzzy, of course, barely even flinched at the excitement.

Brego was sweating, though hardly winded. Gina could feel a grin plastered across her face, and saw Kaya’s matching smile stretched across her little face. Jeremy sighed. “You're turning her into a worse horse nut than you,” he said.

She pulled a face at him. “Better she like horses than boys.”

Bull sucked a sharp breath, making Sunny start and everyone stare. “What do you mean, boys?”

She exchanged a glance with Jeremy before giving Bull an apologetic smile. “Oh, honey. She’s not going to stay small forever...”

The horrified look on his face was almost comical in its extreme, but she knew that the thought of boys and dating had genuinely never occurred to him. The poor guy.

Kaya flapped her legs and said, “Go fast, Tama!”

Gina put the reins into Kaya’s little hands and said, “Okay, you tell him to go, baby.”

Kaya gave another kick, and clicked her tongue loudly. Brego broke into a smooth canter. Gina added some leg of her own, and the canter stretched into a ground-eating gallop. They rounded a corner before Gina asked Kaya to pull him up. “Easy, Brego,” demanded the little girl.

Almost immediately the bay settled into a smooth trot, an uncharacteristic eagerness to obey in his manner. Gina shook her head and kissed Kaya’s temple. The little girl was a force to be reckoned with already.

“Okay, sweet baby, we should go back to Papa. Turn Brego,” she said.

“Look!” said Kaya, pointing down the road.

From a hundred yards north, a wagon approached them. Gina’s hand strayed to the knife on her belt automatically. Turning their back was no longer an option. Bull had drilled into her head that turning away was only a good idea if you were out of range from an arrow strike. Not even Brego could outrun an unleashed arrow.

Gina took the reins from Kaya and pulled them to a halt. Brego sniffed the air before making a bored sound. A good sign, to be sure, but Gina maintained her level of vigilance. The wagon drew closer, and to Gina’s immense delight, she realized it was a Qunari sitting in the driver’s seat.

The driver pulled the wagon to a halt and eyed her warily. He was just as impressive and bronze as Bull, though he wasn’t nearly as tall or well-muscled. His horns, almost delicate in comparison to the heavy sweeping set Bull used to have, curved away from his face, surrounded by a mass of dark hair.

Gina lifted a hand in greeting, and spoke slowly in Qunlat, concentrating on her pronunciation. “Hello traveler, how are the roads?”

His brows snapped together. “You know Qunlat?” he asked in common tongue, his accent heavy and vaguely German.
A head popped out from inside the wagon. A woman, with shocking red hair and skin was several shades paler than the driver. Her horns also curved away from her face, though they curled inward at the ends. She appeared curious, but also worried.

Gina had to restrain herself. They had no idea who she was, and probably didn’t want anything to do with her. But she could hardly contain her enthusiasm. She was finally meeting more Qunari!

Hoofbeats from behind her caught her ear. Bull! He would get to see some of his people! Brego began to dance a little, clearly picking up on her excitement. She corrected him and said, “My name is Gina, and this is my daughter Kaya. We’ve come from Val Royeaux this morning.”

The hoofbeats picked up speed, catching the attention of the driver. “You are travelling with a Qunari,” he said, his voice flat.

She nodded. “The Iron Bull.”

The woman gasped and said something rapid fire that Gina couldn’t quite understand. The driver gave a curt nod. “We do not want any trouble,” he said. “Please let us pass.”

Gina frowned. “Of course we won’t give you any trouble,” she started, and then Bull swept in between them, his voice staccato as he commanded the other travellers to move on.

“Bull,” she said sharply. “Don’t be rude!”

He gave her a furious glare. “They are Tal-Vashoth.”

“So are you,” she retorted.

His cheeks went brick red, and then a little girl popped out of the back of the wagon, gazing at the scene with open curiosity. Kaya waved eagerly, and received a shy little wave in return. Bull’s eye went from one child to the next, and then the tension in his shoulders softened.

“My apologies. Old habits die hard,” he said brusquely.

The man and woman regarded him with wide eyes. “The great Hissrad has truly become Tal-Vashoth?” asked the man.

Bull flinched and nodded slowly. Gina rode forward and said, “We were just about to stop for lunch. Would you like to join us?”

***

Kuback and Oza weren’t actually Tal-Vashoth, much to Bull’s embarrassment. They were Vashoth, having both been born and raised outside of the Qun. Their little girl, Semaka, was the same age as Kaya, and the two were very busy playing chase. The Vashoth child towered over his little human, but it didn’t appear to matter to either girl.

Gina was talking to Oza, comparing childcare notes with the Tamassran. It was a common ground between any species, Bull figured.

For his part, he sat stiffly, unable to let his guard down. Kuback sat just as awkwardly, sneaking glances out of the corner of his eye while Jeremy tried to have a conversation with him. And Grim watched the girls play, his eyes roving protectively around the clearing.

Bull suppressed an irritated growl. So there were tales about the great Hissrad’s defection. How
delightful. What other stories floated in the breeze? He wanted to ask, but figured it would only piss him off further.

Gina touched his knee lightly, and he suddenly realized Oza was trying to pass him a bowl of stew. He took it, but didn’t want to eat it. Didn’t trust it. Old prejudices and memories reared their ugly heads, leaving him tense and miserable. These Vashoth hadn’t done anything to wrong him, yet there he sat, suspicious of their every move.

He felt like a fucking asshole.

Kaya came flying over and clambered onto his lap before throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him loudly on the cheek. “Papa, Semaka can count to twenty!”

A smile forced its way free. “Can she? That’s really smart, isn’t it?”

Kaya nodded and settled on his knee. “I can count to ten.”

“In how many languages, Imekari?”

Her face screwed up in concentration for a second before she held up four fingers and announced, “Three!” Bull laughed and pushed one little finger down.

“That’s very good too,” said Oza, her violet eyes sparkling as she spoke to Kaya.

Semeka came to sit on her father’s knee and stuck her thumb into her mouth. Gina waved at her and said, “You are the prettiest little thing, aren’t you?”

Kuback puffed up with pride. “She’ll get her horns soon,” he said.

A little look of wonder crossed Gina’s face, followed immediately by a sheepish one. Bull hid a scoff with his hand. She shot him a dirty look.

***

Slowly over the course of two hours, Bull unwound and began to chat amiably with the family. Gina was utterly spellbound by them. They were every bit as beautiful as her Qunari, and their child had her firmly by the heartstrings. If it were up to her, she’d hug that sweet little thing until her head popped off.

Finally Bull gazed skyward and said, “We’re losing daylight, Kadan.”

Gina frowned and nodded reluctantly. “Alright. I suppose we should get moving.”

They all got to their feet in unison. Bull and Kuback were discussing the roads surrounding Val Royeaux. Bull made a few sweeping gestures to show the areas they should avoid thanks to a particularly hardy giant taking up residence. They turned to the rest of the group.

Kuback dipped his head at Bull. “It is good to see you’ve found purpose, the Iron Bull. If the great Hissrad can walk away from the Qun without going mad, perhaps others will see it as proof that we are not animals in need of keepers.”

Kaya and Semaka had begun another impromptu game of chase. Bull appeared to be watching closely, but Gina could see that he was fighting to hold his tongue. He hadn’t left the Qun on a whim, and the choice hadn’t been as simple as the man was implying.

She put a hand on Bull’s arm and said, “Without the Qun, the Iron Bull’s path in life would not have
crossed mine. They helped shape him into the man he is today, and I'll always be thankful for that. Not everything the Qun does is without merit.”

Kuback seemed taken aback, but he didn't argue. Oza called Semaka to her and said, “I am just glad to have met all of you. I hope we will meet again someday.”

After a few more pleasantries, they went their separate ways. Bull rode quietly as Kaya talked animatedly about her new friend. Gina guided Brego beside him. “You okay?”

He shrugged and looked into the distance. “I'll be fine.”

She considered pushing him, but decided he needed distraction more than he needed to talk about his dark thoughts. “Can I just say that Qunari children are the cutest creatures on any planet?”

A little smile came to his face. “I can't believe you actually thought we came out of the womb with horns.”

She covered her face with a groan. “I never really put any thought into the mechanics of it before.”

He smirked. “I don't think there is a single woman of any race that would willingly bear children if they came out sprouting horns, Kadan.”

She swatted him playfully. “Alright, alright.”

He caught her hand and kissed her palm. “Thank you for speaking up.”

She squeezed his fingers and nodded. “I don't think he understands exactly what brought you to the point of leaving the Qun. His experiences are almost the polar opposite.”

Bull scowled. “It's not perfect. I know that. Knew it years ago. But I worked damn hard to be a good example of the values of the Qun. It just kills me when someone acts as though we're all mindless bastards with no thoughts of our own.”

Gina didn't know what to say. He sighed and shook his head. “I'm sorry, Kadan.”

“Don't be sorry,” she said. “You can always speak freely with me.”

He pressed his lips together and nodded. They rode in silence for a few miles, hands still joined. Then he said gruffly, “She wasn't cuter than our kid.”

“No one is cuter than our kid,” said Gina. “But I really really wish I could see a picture of you as a kid. I bet you were freaking adorable.”

He gave an embarrassed laugh. “I've always been funny looking, Kadan.”

She rolled her eye. “Quit fishing for compliments.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

As promised!

Bull heard the little gasp of wonder from Gina and hid a smile. The cabin had the same effect on most people seeing it for the first time.

It was a two storey log structure, set back in brilliant emerald green trees and surrounded by a stunning meadow carpeted in wildflowers three quarters of the year. A river and waterfall nearby provided a low murmur in the background that made the place seem otherworldly.

Simply put, it was his favorite place in the world. Even their home in Skyhold, with its mountain views and delicate stonework, paled in comparison to this little shack in the foothills.

It had been far too long since his last stay in the place thanks to his work with the Inquisition. He hadn't expected to be involved for so long. A year, maybe two, max. Certainly not over three years.

Then again, a lot of unexpected things had happened.

A coo of delight from Kaya brought his smile out of hiding. “Do you like it, Imekari?”

She nodded, eyes wide as saucers. Gina pulled up on the other side of Fuzzy and said, “It's spectacular.”

Bull felt his chest puff up slightly. “I have good taste, what can I say?”
Grim made a little scoffing noise and rolled his eyes. Bull glared at him. “I chose you too, remember?”

The kid merely gave him a dirty look.

***

Gina paced the porch. She’d been tossing and turning all night, but finally conceded defeat and slunked outside so at least Bull could get a couple hours of rest. Her chest heaved with a heavy sigh. Of course she would manage to get sick on the one trip they didn’t have a healer accompanying them.

Dorian had gotten a last minute request to join his father in Minrathous. “To play politician,” he said snidely.

“You’re coming back, right?” she asked.

“Of course I am,” he said, pulling her into a hug. “I can’t leave you and that Qunari out here alone. You’ll be dead inside a week without my voodoo fingers.”

No mention of Jeremy. Gina hadn’t pushed it, but it was pretty clear that they needed some time apart. Jeremy was utterly dejected that he hadn’t been invited to see Dorian’s country, so to lessen the blow, she invited him along on their vacation. He was surly and short-tempered with anyone but his niece, but she and Bull agreed they’d be just as miserable without each other’s company.

“Perhaps he’ll learn not to act like a brat when Dorian takes him out in public,” said Bull to Gina one night.

Grim was tagging along with them as well. Bull had insisted. “It’s a family vacation. Why the hell would we leave you behind?” he said to the boy. He was almost walking normally for the most part, though he usually wound up limping by day’s end. Still, she hadn’t heard Grim laugh so much in her life as he and Kaya romped through the countryside.

All in all, it was the best vacation she could have asked for. Two whole weeks of fun and exploration and not one bandit, Red Templar, or back-stabbing elf. It was bliss.

At least, it had been. She dragged a breath of the cool air and let it out slowly through her nose. What she wouldn't give to have Dorian waggle his voodoo fingers her way.

The unmistakeable footfalls of Bull caught her ear. He shuffled to the door and stared bleary-eyed, first at her and then the sunrise. Then he shuffled over and collapsed onto the porch swing, rubbing his stubble coated face. “S’matter?” he mumbled.

“Cramps,” she said sullenly.

His arm curled around her. “Couldn't sleep without you,” he said, resting his forehead in the curve of her waist.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

He yawned wide enough to pop his jaw two times and then shifted to pull her between his knees. His hands began to knead into the protesting muscles, but it barely took the edge off the sharp aches. He said, “I didn’t think you were starting to cycle yet.”

“I’m not,” she muttered. “They haven’t been so bad since I was a teenager.” She leaned into his
heat. Dealing with her cycle in a world without birth control or tampons was already an exercise in
frustration. Did fate really have to throw super PMS at her?

Bull kissed the top of her head and continued working at the small of her back. “Go try to sleep,” she
said. “No point in both of us being miserable.”

Bull shook his head. “Nah. I’ll stay with you.”

An intense wave of cramping swept over her back, leaving her almost winded at the agony. She
breathed sharply, willing the sensation to pass. Bull’s brow creased. “You sure there isn’t anything I
can do? Need a drink or anything?”

“No,” she rasped. “Tell me a story.”

His lips pursed for a moment. “What kind of story?”

She shrugged. “Don’t care. Anything to distract me.”

He spread his palms across her back and pressed them firmly against her back, the sensation almost
as comforting as a hot water bottle. His voice was soft and soothing as he started to talk about his
Tama and his brothers growing up. “She was beautiful, and impossibly big. I mean, I guess that
was because I was so small, but even now in my head she’s as tall as a mountain. We all adored her,
and she adored us. You could just tell. No one was ever left out on a round of hugs, no one left to
cry alone when they had a nightmare.”

She leaned into him and said, “She sounds like a wonderful woman.”

Bull nodded and kissed her temple. “The best. Truly. I don’t think I could have asked for someone
better as a parent. Even though I think sometimes I tested her every last bit of patience.”

Gina made a little scoffing sound. “You? I find that hard to believe.”

He nipped the top of her ear. “You want stories, or do you want to make fun?”

She scooted closer to his chest. “You want stories, or do you want to make fun?”

She scooted closer to his chest. “Stories, please.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said smugly. “There was this one day, supper time. Tama made my
favorite and my least favorite. Steak and boiled carrots.” His chest shuddered, making Gina giggle.
Anyway, I gobbled up all of that steak, plus a few bites from my brother’s plate when he wasn’t
looking. Not one stupid slimy carrot, no ma’am. Not going in this Qunari’s mouth.”

He shifted and resumed his massage. “So everyone else finishes supper and runs outside to play. I
wasn’t allowed to go until given permission. Finally, almost half an hour later, she gives me this little
huff and says, ‘For pity’s sake. One more bite and then you can go, Hissrad’. So I tossed down the
last little chunk of steak I’d been hiding in my hand. Ate that one more bite, gave her a little grin,
and bolted outside. I can still hear the way she was laughing in the kitchen as I ran away.”

Gina laughed until her eye watered. “Sounds like you were too smart for your own good,” she said
when she could breathe again.

Bull nodded and rested his chin on top of her head. “Pretty much. That was about the time my
training became more focused. Tama said I had great talent. Too much to waste by being a foot
soldier.”

Gina caressed his knee and said, “She was right, you know. All that brainpower would have been a
waste if you had to mindlessly take orders. She sounds like a wise woman.” Her back was finally giving in to the steady kneading his thumbs were delivering. She gave a long sigh and sagged against him. “Thank you, Bull.”

His arms wrapped around her. “Happy to help, darlin’.”

She nestled into him and rested her ear above his heart. It wasn’t two minutes before his chin settled on top of her head and he was snoring.

***

Bull frowned as he sorted through the crows that landed overnight. Damn creepy how they seemed to always know where he was. He was pretty sure that magic was involved on one level or another, but he didn’t really want to know.

There were still a few new secrets about Etienne, but the bulk of his reports spoke about growing unrest regarding the Inquisition. He’d expected it to come sooner, actually, but now that it was happening, worry began to poke at him. The Inquisition was an independent force created thanks to the Chantry. That didn’t mean that they were above reproach. In fact, they were the first in line for criticism when something didn’t go as planned.

The Lord was one of those things that didn’t go as planned, though it was relatively minor in the grand scheme of things. In his absence from Skyhold, several other incidents had begun to pile on and garner attention. Cassandra wasn’t shy about using force to quell any uprising or criminal activity, but there were times she’d gone far and above their call of duty. The freeholders of Ferelden were starting to protest. Loudly.

Leliana had sent a message to all of them asking whether they felt a Conclave might be necessary. His instinct was to tell all of the nobles to fuck off and deal with their problems on their own, but the strategist hiding in his head whispered that they needed to play their cards right.

They did do great things. Not just stopping Corypheus or saving the Orlesian empire. Real humanitarian work, like helping build new settlements for refugees and offering support to communities that were on the mend after the extended time of conflict. Even bolstering local forces against the roving bands of Venatori and Red Templars. They had their hands in a lot of pots, and without them, a great many people would still be suffering.

But perhaps it was time to dismantle their forces. To let the nations take on the heavy lifting for themselves.

Bull didn’t know what he’d do without the Inquisition. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He’d go back to running the Chargers full time. But where? They’d stationed themselves near Val Royeaux and Nevarra before, but did he want to be in that pit of vipers? Did he even want to be a mercenary for hire anymore?

Gina, he knew, would go wherever he went. Her heart lay with him, not any other organization. Not even the Inquisition. But they had a daughter, and that meant they needed to think outside of their own desires. Having a stable home in a place like Skyhold was the best place for Kaya. Would they find anywhere else so safe and secure? Looking back at their few weeks in Val Royeaux, that might be the biggest challenge facing their futures.

Running footsteps echoed across the porch before the door slammed open and his little girl came into the room. “Papa, Papa! Tama wants to show you something!”
He kissed both little cheeks before getting to his feet and leaving his worries at the table.

***

Kaya dragged Bull by the hand, leading him to Gina. Then, without a backwards glance, she raced off to find Grim. Gina shook her head. “I wish I had half of her energy.”

“You’d be ruler of the entire world if you had that much energy, Kadan.” He bent down and kissed her on the lips. “What did you want to show me?”

Gina smiled. “Follow me, tough guy.”

She began walking toward the thick stand of trees surrounding the cabin. Bull followed at her heels. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” she replied.

He made a little harrumphing sound, but didn’t falter. After walking down a shady path, she found her little marker and turned onto a long forgotten trail. Here, he did pause.

“Kadan, that’s pretty overgrown.”

She turned back. “It gets a little tight at the end, but it’s worth it.”

His brow rose. “It gets tight for you?”

She rolled her eye. “If you had horns we’d have to find another way. But you’ll be able to squeeze through. Come on, trust me.”

He gave her and the path one last doubtful glance and then shrugged. “If I get stuck, you’re the one who has to get my ass out.”

With that, they started down the path. It was tight and twisting, but they managed to get through everything with relative ease. Bull told her Varric’s latest crude joke, and she told him about their morning riding lesson. Kaya was already begging to try Brego by herself, but Gina refused. “When she’s a little bigger,” she said.

Bull gave her a knowing smirk. “You won’t be able to resist those little brown eyes for long, Kadan.”

She snorted. “I’m not a pushover like her Papa.”

He swatted her ass. "How's your back feeling?"

"Miserable," she said. "I'll just tough it out. Should only last another day."

"I'll massage you again later, darlin'."

She flashed him a grateful smile. "I look forward to it."

They reached a particularly dense bit of brush and had to concentrate on their footing. As Gina held a branch back for Bull to pass through, the rotted log she was standing on collapsed, making her squawk and release the branch with a snap as she fell to the ground. Bull yelped and cursed viciously before shoving underbrush aside and helping her back to her feet. She cringed at the thin little whip mark now oozing blood across his chest.
“A little tight, she says” he muttered. “It’ll be worth it, she says.”

“Well, to be fair, I only had to squeeze Kaya through before,” she said.

He grimaced. “How much further?”

She looked. “Just through there,” she said, pointing at a fallen tree.

“Through?”

She gave him an innocent smile. “You’ll fit.” I hope, she thought as she began walking down the path.

In the end, he did. Barely. He was left with a scrape on his shoulder from the rough bark, but he was through. He pouted dramatically and pointed to the damage. “You gonna kiss it better, or what?”

She laughed and said, “Cover your eye.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “Are you kidding me?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Did I stutter? Cover it, Mister.”

He grumbled and complained under his breath, but obediently put a big hand over his eye. She glared at him. “The good one, jackass.”

***

He trusted her. He really did. But it was a huge struggle to follow her blindly down the strange forest path. It had appeared clear and level, but he wasn’t confident.

Her hand was steady on his forearm as they slowly made their way forward. The ever-present rush of water was getting louder with every step. Where in the world…

“Okay, you can look,” she finally said.

He let his hand fall away, but kept his eye squeezed shut for one last second. When he opened it, the scene before him made his jaw fall open. “Kadan,” he whispered, unable to form any other words.

They were at the edge of the world. Behind them were towering trees, before them lay a beautiful little pool with a small waterfall feeding it from one end, while the other drained past the edge of the cliff. Gina walked over to the edge, and he followed. Below them, maybe thirty feet, the water crashed into another wide pool which was attached to a long river that wound lazily out of sight along a flat plain. In the distance, mountains jutted from the earth.

He reached blindly for Gina and pulled her to his side. They stared in awe together for a long time, saying nothing. No need to say anything, he thought.

Finally she pulled away and said, “So, was it worth it?”

“It’s beyond anything I could have imagined,” he said. And he meant it.

She smiled and pressed a kiss over his heart. “Good. Now strip. We’ve got some swimming to do!”

***
Gina dipped under the water and swam around his legs as he floated in place. The little pool was stunningly clear, and tiny little water creatures worked busily at the gravel floor. She surfaced behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Wonder if Dorian could voodoo this place to Skyhold,” she whispered.

He twisted in the water to face her and said, “We could just move here. I could buy that cabin, and we could be little hermits together.”

Gina smiled and slid a finger over his eyebrow. “Do you really want to be a hermit?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” He told her about the day’s reports and Leliana’s question. “If they hold a Conclave, the end result can only be one of two things. We end the work we do, or we carry on as though nothing happened. The powers that be won’t want the second thing to happen, so it’ll be a hard fight to stay the way we are.”

Gina hooked her knees around his waist and let him do the floating for them both. “I thought only the Chantry had the power to dissolve the Inquisition.”

“It does. But they need to consider the will of the people as well. Just like any other government.”

She frowned. “What do you think we should do?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I was in the middle of worrying about it when Kaya grabbed me. It might be time to start thinking about our next home, Kadan.”

She gnawed on her lip and rested her head in the crook of his neck. “I don’t have the faintest idea of what our options are, Bull. I’ve only ever known Skyhold here, really. All I care about is keeping you and Kaya safe and happy. I’d live like a hermit if that’s what it took to accomplish that.”

Bull sighed and let the gentle current push them around the pool for a while. “We’ll think of something,” he said. “It’s a big world, and we’ve got lots of friends. Even Kirkwall might be an option.”

“Hawke would love that,” she said.

He grunted. “You’d love that too, Kadan.”

“Your green monster is showing,” she teased.

He growled, “I’ll show you green monster,” and then kissed her hard enough that she couldn’t think straight. They made out like teenagers, all tongues and groping. Bull’s back bumped into one of the rocky walls of the pool, and he anchored himself there before floating her to lay at the surface of the water. Then his mouth was on her pussy, the heat of him shocking in comparison to the cool water. One hand caressed her back, keeping her from sinking while he worked his own brand of magic.

Her entire body was one quivering bundle of nerves. His lips and tongue were relentless, driving her straight past the point of no return. She came hard, her thighs gripping the sides of his head tightly as the shivers and quakes rippled through her body.

And then he was pulling her close and kissing her on the mouth again, urgent and hungry. “You bewitching little she-demon,” he rasped against her lips as she ground against him.

“I want you inside me,” she begged.

“Can do,” he said. And then he was slowly guiding himself inside her, making her head fall back as
she moaned piteously.

“You always feel so good,” she whimpered.

His cock pulsed and twitched inside her while he waited for her body to relax. “Kadan, you’re tight enough to make me come without even moving a muscle,” he whispered.

She made eye contact with him and then undulated her body in the water. The weightless sensation combined with his thick cock impaling her in place was enough to make her head spin. His entire body clenched and a harsh cry ripped past his lips as she repeated the move.

He cupped a hand around the back of her skull and planted the other behind her back before starting to pump his cock inside her. Incoherent Qunlat began falling from his lips as he fucked her, the look in his eye feral and desperate.

She responded as best she could in Qunlat, and his eye rolled into his skull. Another few hard thrusts, and his body stiffened. She writhed against him for a few more strokes and followed his climax, this one hard enough to make her stomach cramp.

He pulled her against his chest as they fought to catch their breath. “Oh fuck,” he panted. “This is a great spot, Kadan.”

She laughed between gasps. “I thought you’d like it.”

The sky was starting to turn color when they dragged themselves out of the water. She got dressed and went to take one last look over the edge. An odd sensation crawled up her spine. She could jump. Right here and now. Fall to the pool below. The desire gnawed at her, but she forced herself to step back from the edge.

Bull gave her an odd look. She shrugged. “L’appel du vide.”

He lifted a brow. “Come again?”

She turned to face him. “The call of the void. You know that feeling you get sometimes, where you’re standing on the edge of somewhere really high?”

He shook his head. Gina helped him buckle up his harness as she explained, “Sometimes I get this funny feeling. Like I could just...throw something off the edge. Or jump. Don’t you ever get that feeling?”

His eye went wide. “No. Because I’m not a crazy person.”

She sneered at him. “I’m not a crazy person.”

He smirked. “Keep telling yourself that,” he said, twirling a finger by his temple.

“Har har. Anyway. I just had the urge to jump over that edge. It’s not that far down.”

Bull scoffed. “Kadan, that’s a long way down. And who knows what’s under that water.”

She rolled her eye. “I wasn’t actually going to do it. I just felt like doing it.”

He wrapped an arm around her. “Okay, crazy lady. Let’s get you out of here before you decide to act on your l’appel du vide.”

***
“It’s not my fault that you can’t think about anyone but yourself!” Gina snapped.

“Well no one else seems to think about me,” retorted Jeremy.

Bull shared an uncomfortable glance with Grim. The siblings had been bickering all morning, and had now devolved into a shouting match. Kaya was clinging to him, uncharacteristically quiet.

“Yes, that’s why you’re all alone in Val Royeaux,” Gina snarled. “Oh wait, you’re not! Because I dragged your sorry ass out here with us. With not so much as a thank you, I might add!”

“Maybe I wanted to be alone,” Jeremy yelled. “Did that ever occur to you?”

“Well keep it up,” she said. “You’ll get there quicker than you think.”

Kaya whimpered and pressed tighter to Bull. He caressed her back and kissed her forehead before clearing his throat loudly. “Alright you two, fight nice.”

“Stay out of it!” they yelled in unison.

Bull bared his teeth and snapped to his feet. “I will not sit here and listen to you two act like children and ruin our vacation. Enough,” he bellowed, and strode out of the cabin, holding a now crying Kaya.

He walked until Kaya’s little cries turned to hiccups and then fell silent. He hummed a little tune, both for her and for himself. She fussed with the leather of his harness before turning her attention to the claw hanging from his neck. “Papa, story.”

Bull and Gina had both told her the story many times, but it was a favorite tale that she asked for again and again. “One day, a long time ago, Papa and Tama fought a dragon. It was big,” he said, waving an arm wide. “It was as red as the sun. And it was angry,” he said, baring his teeth dramatically.

She giggled and settled against him. Bull paced a slow circle. “It fought for a long time until your crazy little Tama jumped on its back, and it flew high into the sky. It tried everything to get her off, but she held on tight.” He squeezed her and kissed her cheek. “Until, finally, it got too tired and fell back to the ground. And that’s when—”

“Papa stopped it from hurting anyone else, even though he could have gotten hurt himself,” finished Gina quietly. She came to their side and gave Kaya’s foot a squeeze. “And then he took one of the dragon’s claws and split it in half so that we could share it. Do you remember why?”

“So part of Tama and part of Papa are always together,” Kaya said.

“That’s right, Imekari. No matter how far apart we are,” said Bull.

Gina took a hold of his hand. “I’m sorry you two. We shouldn’t have been shouting like that.”

Bull slipped his arm around her shoulders and said, “What do you think, little one? Should we forgive Tama?”

Kaya nodded and bent down to give Gina a kiss. Bull pulled them both tight and sighed. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” he said quietly.

Gina looked up. He grimaced. “I need to go to Val Royeaux to meet with Leliana.”

“When?”
“She wants to meet tomorrow. So I’d have to leave today.”

Gina pinched the bridge of her nose. “When did you find this out?”

“One of the morning crows had a note from her.”

An irritated expression passed across her face. “And I’ve been too busy arguing with Jeremy for you to say anything.”

He nodded. “Pretty much.”

“Awesome,” she muttered. “Well, when do you want to hit the road?”

He shook his head. “Just me. I’ll only be gone a night. Leave now, meet her in the morning, and head back. No need to ruin everyone else’s fun.”

Gina crossed her arms. “Maybe you should take Jeremy with you.”

Bull lifted a brow. “Is he welcome to come back?”

She snorted. “Of course he is. I just thought he might want to get away from us and clear his head for a night.”

Bull shrugged. “I’ll offer it.”

An hour later, Gina had a pair of horses ready to go. Sunny nosed Bull curiously as he settled his pack on her back. Gina braided and unbraided a strip of her mane. He sighed and kissed her forehead. “One night, Kadan. We can make it one night.”

She shrugged. “I know. I just don’t want to.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She gave him a dirty look before stepping in and wrapping her arms around his waist. He hugged her tightly and kissed her hard on the mouth before turning to swoop Kaya out of Grim’s arms. “Are you going to be a very good girl for Tama and Grim?”

Kaya shook her head. He laughed and rained kisses on her face. “That’s what Papa likes to hear,” he said.

It took him a few minutes to convince her to return to Grim, but then he was giving Gina one last kiss and swinging aboard Sunny. Jeremy was already mounted and gave them all a half-hearted wave. Gina scowled and turned her attention to Kaya. Bull shook his head. The two were so alike it was painful.

The ride out was quiet. Bull was thinking about everything he needed to discuss with Leliana. What Jeremy was thinking about was a mystery, though he was clearly preoccupied.

The sound of thundering hoofbeats caught Bull’s ear. He frowned and turned back to see Gina flying on Brego. The horse was puffing for air when they caught up, and pranced impatiently as she said in a rush, “You know I love you, right?” Only she wasn’t talking to Bull.

Jeremy gave a short little laugh. “Of course I do, you idiot.”

She guided Brego to his side and threw her arms around him. “I’m sorry I’m being such a bitch lately.”
Jeremy’s voice was muffled into her neck. “Sorry I’m such a selfish prick half the time.” She pulled back and gave him a hard look. He smirked. “Most of the time.”

She laughed, the sound like music to Bull’s ears. “We can be better, right?”

Jeremy nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” Gina turned to Bull. “Love you too.”

He grinned and tapped two fingers over his heart. “Always love you, Kadan.”

She brought Brego to Sunny’s side and gave him a kiss before waving and saying, “Okay, that’s all I wanted to say. Bye!”

And then Brego was thundering back the way he came.

After a beat, Jeremy shook his head. “She’s insane.”

“Barking mad,” Bull confirmed.

***

The wind roared in her ears as Brego galloped at full speed. It was the closest sensation she’d found to taking a good fast drive in a car, so she relished every moment he could give her.

As the cabin came into sight, he finally began to slow his pace. Gina patted his neck and poured compliments into his ear the rest of the ride. He snorted and lifted his head proudly. She’d have sworn he could speak English.

Everything was quiet as she swung out of the saddle. Brego’s sides were steaming, so she decided to go get Kaya. The little girl could sit on the bay while she walked him cool.

Her steps felt light as she jogged to the little wooden structure. The tension between her and her brother had gotten to be unbearable, and letting him leave with that bad blood between them had given her heartburn. It felt like heaven to have that burden lifted from her shoulders.

As she reached the front steps, she noticed a strange crate on the porch. It hadn’t been there when she left the cabin. A twang of warning sparked to life in her gut. A breath later, a massive Qunari stepped onto the porch, holding her little girl. Behind him, an elf came out, holding a knife to a struggling Grim’s throat. Blood poured from the boy’s nose. “Hello,” said the elf pleasantly.

“Who the fuck are you?” she said, fighting the urge to panic.

“My name is Gatt. Well, it’s actually not. But I’m sure that’s the name your Tal-Vashoth called me,” he said.

Ice swept through her veins. The Ben-hassrath that had put Bull between a rock and a hard place.

“What are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he said. “I’m here to take you captive.”

“Not fucking likely,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, it’s happening. Do you really think you can get away?” He smiled coolly. “Now, just to show how civil and reasonable I can be, I’ll let you hold your little girl. Come now, Maaras. Let her go.”
The Qunari set Kaya to her feet gently, and she bolted to Gina. Gina swept her up and hugged her like life itself depended on it. “Are you okay, did they hurt you?”

“Of course he didn’t,” said Gatt, scorn in his tone. “She refused to come to me. Very strange that a child of her kind would prefer him, isn’t it?”

Gina eyed the Qunari. He was incredibly broad across the chest and shoulders, moreso even than Bull. His hair was snow white, though he didn’t appear to be elderly at all. His horns made her eye go even wider. They sprouted from the middle of his forehead, thick at the base and flaring to the side like Bull’s. Where Bull’s had turned up, his swept backward like those of a water buffalo.

Her mind began to race. Bull was miles away. How the hell was she going to stop these two from carrying out their plans?

With a sudden cry, Grim lashed out and kicked the Qunari’s knee out before slamming his elbow into the elf’s nose. “Run Gina!”

The shock of him speaking actual words made her freeze for a second, but then she was running pell mell for Brego. The horse was dozing, but jerked his head up as she approached. Without a second’s hesitation, she tossed Kaya aboard and whipped the reins over his head. As she went to vault aboard, she was slammed to the ground.

She scrambled away and screamed, “Go Brego! Go!”

The horse snorted, but then turned and started to run down the road to Bull. She sobbed in relief. Kaya could hang on; they just had to get away from this place.

A heavy boot flipped her over. Maaras glared after the horse before leaning over to say something to her. Before he could form a word, she hoofed him in the jaw with every ounce of strength she could muster. He toppled to the ground with a curse, but she didn’t stick around to see if he got up.

She ran as hard as she could toward the trees. She just needed to get to the side path and she was free. All too quickly, his feet were pounding the ground in her wake. She poured on the speed, but there was no hope of outrunning the big asshole. As she reached the trees, his hand grabbed the back of her jacket.

Without a second thought, she ripped the front open and squirmed free. Ten yards, five yards, one! Her heart was hammering in her ears as she flew down the path. His giant form was no longer an advantage, and judging by the colourful curses floating through the trees, he knew it. Branches whipped at her face, but she didn’t dare slow down. She lifted her arms protectively and kept moving.

In her panic, the path seemed to take forever to traverse, but she knew logically she was moving like lightning compared to the Qunari at her heels. Finally she leapt into the clearing and ran to the edge of the cliff. Her arms burned and blood dripped from the lash marks of dozens of branches, but she was free.

With a great crash, the Qunari burst out of the woods, blood streaming from his chin and down his chest and arms. It gave her a little zing of pleasure to see that she’d done some real damage. He advanced on her, lip curling. “Enough running, small one.” Like the Vashoth family, his accent was thick and Germanic.

“T’im not going anywhere with you,” she said, stepping closer to the edge.
“Do not do anything foolish,” he said sharply, taking another step toward her.

She peeked over her shoulder. It really was a long way down. Bile rose in her throat, but she swallowed it back down. “Let your friend know his plan failed,” she said.

He rushed at her a second too late. She launched high and hard before dropping like a rock toward the pool below. She windmilled her arms desperately and crossed her ankles. She’d read that somewhere, in another lifetime.

The impact rocked her world entirely. She cut deep into the water, and lost equilibrium almost instantly as the current took hold of her. Her shoulder bashed into a sharp rock, followed by another that slammed into her hip and made her shriek in pain. Except that all she did was take in a lungful of water.

Spots swarmed her vision as she kicked and clawed her way to the surface. And then...nothing.

***

“So they throw this pigskin and push each other around?” said Bull. “And that’s entertainment?”

Jeremy shook his head. “You’d understand if you could see a game.”

Bull gave him a doubtful glance. “Tell me more about these cheerleaders.”

Jeremy opened his mouth to say something when the sound of measured hoofbeats caught Bull’s ear. He furrowed his brow and looked back. Brego came cantering slowly into view. She was coming back again? But they were miles away.

He squinted, and suddenly realized that it wasn’t Gina in the saddle at all. Panic surged through his veins. “Kaya!” he shouted as he kicked Sunny into action.

When he reached her, she was clinging to Brego in silence. He practically fell out of the saddle and tugged her into his arms. “What are you doing, Imekari? He’s too big for you!”

Her little chest jerked and heaved, and then she was wailing at the top of her lungs, hysterical and inconsolable. She clung to his neck and sobbed hard enough that he was surprised she didn’t pass out. Nothing he did helped, not even his lullaby.

Jeremy came to his side and gave Bull a wide-eyed look. He shrugged helplessly. “Imekari, you need to use your words,” he said, fighting to keep his voice level. “Come on, kid I know you can do it.”

Brego shifted from foot to foot nervously and kept looking back down the path with wide eyes. Bull felt the fingers of fear wrapping around his heart. “Come on,” he whispered. “Tell me what’s going on.” She hiccuped and buried her face into his neck. He pulled her away and lifted her chin. “Imekari, Papa can’t help if you don’t talk.”

Her lip trembled and fat tears slid down her cheeks. “Bad ‘nari,” she whispered.

The world froze for a moment. ‘Nari. He met her eye and touched the stub of his horn. “A Qunari?”

She nodded and crumpled into tears again.

His heart was racing so fast he was worried that it would just stop beating altogether. He wrapped
her in a tight hug and forced his breathing to slow. “Imekari, I need you to be brave and go with Uncle Jay. Right now.”

She whimpered, but he couldn’t wait. Jeremy took her and said, “What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know. But you need to get on that horse and ride for Val Royeaux. Get inside your apartment and don’t answer the door to anyone. Not until I get there. Protect her with your life.”

Jeremy nodded slowly. “Be careful, big guy.”

Bull launched onto Sunny’s back and dug his heels into her sides. She reared high and bolted down the road. The road felt endless, even with her ground-eating stride. Bull prayed to every god he’d ever heard of, and even made up a few along the way.

The cabin finally came into sight. Bull pulled the mare to a brisk trot and took a wide path around the side. No matter what approach he chose, he was at a disadvantage. It was part of what he liked about the place so much. Until that moment, when all he wanted was to find his Kadan. To find that he’d misunderstood Kaya.

The place was quiet as he stole toward the porch. If anyone was waiting with a bow and arrow, he’d have already been picked off, so he didn’t bother trying to hide. He strained his hearing, but his ears found nothing. Not even a tiny shuffle of weight. A crate on the porch caught his eye. He crossed toward it and noticed a piece of paper tacked to its top. He tugged it free.

“‡ 2 down.”

The two had been drawn crudely in blood. His palms started to sweat as he stared down at the crate. With a couple hard jerks, he had the top ripped free. To his utter horror, he saw Skinner’s face leering up at him, swollen and distorted in death. He staggered back and fell off the porch, barely managing to turn over and spill his guts onto the ground.

He heaved and fought to compose himself. Two down.

Two.

Someone else had been taken.

His entire body started to shake as he ran inside the house, desperately praying to anyone who would listen. He didn’t care if anyone was waiting for him. He welcomed the confrontation.

The acrid odour of blood filled his nostrils as he stalked through the living room and down the short hall. A trail of blood led under a doorway. His heart was in his throat as he stared at the door to the room he shared with Gina not five hours ago.

“Please,” he whispered, putting a trembling hand on the doorknob. It took a second to build the nerve, but then he twisted the knob and shoved the door open.

Grim lay on the bed, with a knife jammed into the centre of his chest. Bull fell to his knees at the side of the bed and wept until his throat ached. The boy stared lifelessly at the ceiling. His hands and face were brutalized, meaning he’d fought tooth and nail before taking the fatal wound. Probably would have kept fighting if he could have.

Bull reached over and pushed the boy’s lids shut. Tears streamed down his face, but he didn’t bother to wipe them away. The only thing on his mind was to find his Kadan, and then butcher those that dared to attack his family.
The rest of the cabin was empty. He returned to the front porch and averted his eyes from the
grotesque crate. Anger surged through his veins as he started hunting for clues. Kaya had been on
Brego, which meant that somehow she’d gotten to the barn. He began to walk that direction,
searching for footprints.

Halfway there, he found the running steps of Gina. Big booted steps traced along with them. He
hurried along the trail they made. Near the pen, they met with Brego’s prints, but then she was
tossed to the ground, her small form leaving streaks along the dusty ground. A splattering of blood
near a much large disturbance made his heart leap. She was fighting at this point.

Then they were both running. He looked up and saw the forest again. “Yes, Kadan,” he breathed.
She was going for the tight little trail. He ran toward the forest, and felt his heart stop at the sight of
her jacket. Ripped free and discarded. Bull swallowed hard and took off.

The path was no easier to follow this time around, but he could see newly broken branches and trees
littering the path. His breath started to quicken as he rushed through the path, snapping branches out
of his way without any patience. He broke into the clearing and ran toward the pond.

Nothing. There was nothing and no one. He made tight fists and searched the ground for any sign
of them. It wasn’t until he got near the edge that he found bloodied footprints. Tiny ones and
enormous ones. They were both bleeding.

He gazed at the edge, terror and hope filling his heart. If she made it here, she hadn’t stopped. He
knew her. He knew her mind.

She’d taken the leap as sure as there was breath in his lungs.

But what had her enemy done in response? He hadn’t jumped. Had he? No. No one else was
quite so foolishly brave as his Kadan.

Bull paced slowly along the edge. It was so subtle, he almost missed it. A spindly little goat trail,
leading down the face of the cliff. Bloody tracks dotted it.

He growled and took up chase. Time to play catch-up.

Chapter End Notes

...and thus, the start of another wild adventure!

(PS: Maaras = Nothing/Alone)
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The path down the cliff took every last bit of his concentration. More than once a foothold snapped loose, leaving him clinging to some tenacious scrubs.

His quarry wasn't having an easy time of it either. Blood smeared the few decent handholds, all dry and crusty. Several places had already caved from the others weight, forcing Bull to step even more carefully. There still hadn't been a sighting, and with every step, it made Bull feel sicker and sicker.

Another chunk of his narrow path broke away, but this time he didn't catch himself quickly enough. He tried controlling the skid, but then his toe hooked on a rock and he began to tumble out of control. He crashed into a bit of bramble and grabbed a desperate hold.

The force of his body jerking to a halt nearly dislocated his shoulder. Pain lanced through him, from the stinging thorns to the contusions blooming to life all over his body. He mustered all of his strength and hauled himself back onto the path, hissing out a curse when his palms shredded on the thorny branches.

He glared at the damages and then examined the bush. Hopefully it wasn't poisonous. Bull leaned carefully to view the rest of the cliff. To his relief, the bottom was only another ten feet away. He heaved to his feet, and picked his way down.

Everything hurt, but with each bloodstain, new energy sparked to life. They were no longer dry.

He was gaining on them.

***

She blinked and stared up, fighting a woozy sensation that made it hard to think. It was bright. Too
bright.

Somehow she'd gotten to the surface and past the strong currents of the river. Natural buoyancy, perhaps. It was the only thing keeping her face out of the water at the moment.

Her shoulder and hip were useless. If they weren't broken, they might as well be. The chill of the water numbed her to most of the pain, but it screeched to life with a vengeance whenever she bumped into something.

How far down the river she'd floated was impossible to judge. Gina tried to focus on the position of the sun, but it made her head spin and her stomach roil in response.

She wanted to sleep. Desperately. Her eye drooped and a blackness rushed at her, but Bull’s voice shouted at her, snapping her into reality again.

It was all in her head. He wasn't coming. The chances that Brego took Kaya directly to him were so slim it was laughable. But at least the child had a fighting chance to find safety. Maybe Grim managed to fight his way free. But even that hope was a candle in the wind.

No. He'd come back tomorrow to find those two waiting for him, and her gone. They'd probably attack, but Bull was nothing if not a fierce warrior. They would not take him down without a fight.

It wouldn't matter. Every attempt to turn over in the water made her hyperventilate from the agony. She'd never drag herself out of the river in this condition. And not even Bull’s voice would keep her from passing out eventually. There was no miracle that could save her this time.

It killed her that he'd come home to this disaster. She should've fought them there. Shouldn't have taken such a stupid chance on a blind leap. At least if she’d died there, he'd have found her body. Had some means to find closure. Here, her form would tumble lifelessly to the sea, never to be found.

He'd always wonder. And he'd never stop looking for her. The Iron Bull would never find peace again.

Tears leaked out of her eye, hot against the cool water lapping at her cheeks. This was it. Her last moments. What she wouldn't give to see his face one more time.

***

Exhaustion snapped at his heels, but he gritted his teeth and drew on the miserable years of training in Qunandar. As a young man he'd run miles through worse conditions for dumber reasons. He just focused on the next step and the next, even when every breath made his lungs burn.

As rough as he felt, the other guy had to be feeling like death warmed over. How badly wounded he was remained to be seen, but Bull had gained the edge on less.

Gina’s face flashed through his mind. “Survive,” he willed her.

The path began to level and his pace picked up. He scanned desperately, looking for the faintest sign of either his Kadan or the mystery Qunari. A broken branch here and drop of blood there had him changing direction on a dime, and soon enough, he found muddied prints.

One set. Big. Bigger than his. Bull curled his lip. He'd taken down dragons and demons. This guy could be fifteen feet tall. Bull would take him down too.
As he followed the prints, the mud got progressively softer and thicker. His already tired legs were starting to cramp from the force it took to slog even one step.

His knee collapsed under him, sending him elbow deep into the mire. He wanted to weep with frustration. Clouds of steam rolled off of his shoulders as he fought to catch his wind and get his feet back under himself.

How he managed to get back up, he didn't know. His body was one numb hunk of meat, but something inside him kept it moving. He didn't question it.

***

The current slowed to a crawl. Gina tried one last time to kick herself toward a bank, but nothing would obey. A low buzzing filled her ears as her body flirted with passing out.

Someone shouted in alarm, and then warmth surrounded her broken body. A pained moan ripped from her lips as big hands skimmed over her hip and shoulder.

Muted curses cut through the buzzing. Gina tried opening her eye, but it wouldn't obey. She cried out as she was lifted from the water, every jostle like shards of glass in her hip and shoulder.

Her eye slowly began to crack open, her vision blurred and stinging. She could just make out the beautiful face of her Qunari. He was here, holding her. Saving her. She tried to touch his face, but he pushed her hand away.

Then she was whimpering again as he lay her on the ground. Tears soaked her face and it was hard to breathe from the agony.

Gentle hands curved over her hip and shoulder, and then fiery heat swept through her skin. In an instant, everything knitted together, the sensation dragging the wind out of her lungs.

“Breathe, small one,” urged a voice. A strange voice. Not Bull’s. Panic seized her and she began to struggle.

A hand brushed her forehead and he whispered a strange phrase. Against every last ounce of her will, blackness rolled over her mind.

***

He finally cleared the swamp, and found himself running down a gravelly path to the riverbank. Bull almost felt giddy with relief when he found the telltale marks of people coming in and out of the water.

The relief was tempered by the single set of heavy booted tracks leading away from the river, but new urgency propelled him forward. He had to be right on their heels.

He followed the trail as it crested a hill and curved toward the flat plain he'd seen from atop the cliff. His brows furrowed. They should be in sight. No one could move that fast, not if they were wounded and carrying another.

Where the hell were they?

He ran faster, chasing their ghost. Determined to catch up, even if it killed him.

A mile away, he tripped over a rut. He stared and felt the painfully familiar fingers of fear return.
Thin wagon wheel tracks, unmistakably those of a Dalish araval. He spun a circle, hoping he was wrong. Praying for the umpteenth time to gods he didn't believe in.

But he wasn't wrong. The Qunari tracks disappeared. They had boarded the araval.

His head began to throb as he chased along the thin tracks, but as the first mile passed, his absolute worst fear was confirmed. They'd set the little sails, making the little wagon light as a feather and swift as the wind pushing it.

The tracks faded into nothing. “No,” he croaked.

He ran for another mile before the helplessness crashed over him and dropped him to his knees. With no tracks, and no visual, he had no way to find her. Short of a dragon letting him hop aboard for a bird's eye view, they were gone.

He'd failed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note - in my head canon, the Dalish araval does not require any animal to pull it.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bull staggered forward, pure stubbornness the only thing keeping him upright. She couldn't be gone. Not Gina. There was some trick up her sleeve. Any minute now she would come running to him, laughing and asking what was taking him so damn long to catch up.

The daylight dimmed, but he didn't stop. Thirst was starting to override his desire to chase after shadow, but still he kept putting one foot in front of the other.

That was until his toe caught in a nug burrow, sending him crashing to the ground. He hit hard, the force knocking the wind out of him. He writhed and fought to draw air, the effort making his chest burn.

As he lay there, reality started to creep in. She was gone. The inexplicable luck keeping her safe had worn away at long last, and he hadn't been able to save her.

Bull choked back tears and struggled to get back on his feet. His legs refused to cooperate, and his arms shook with the effort of holding up his weight before collapsing outright. “Come on, you useless slab of meat,” he grated, willing the muscles back to work.

It was to no avail. His body was in full mutiny. If a kitten decided he was its next meal, he'd be helpless to stop it from gnawing through his throat. The tears he’d been denying escaped, washing down his cheek and bringing with them gut wrenching sobs that left him curled in a ball like a small child. Every emotion swarmed at him through the cracks in his control, from anger to despair, running wild until his body sank into a dreamless sleep.

Bull woke to stars overhead and a crackling fire at his side. He lurched to his feet and swayed, feeling light-headed and dangerously close to fainting.
“Easy lad,” came a rough voice.

He squinted in the darkness. “Rainier?” he said, his voice thick and coarse.

“Blackwall, actually. If it's all the same to you.” The warden was stirring something in a pot. “There’s a waterskin beside the saddle. Drink up.”

As much as he wanted to snub the offer, logic took firm hold. Slake thirst, then walk away. He took a tentative sip. As the water flowed over his tongue, instinct reared its head and his parched body took control. Before he knew it, the skin was empty.

He let it fall from numb fingers. However long he’d slept, it hadn’t been enough. Everything ached. His hand was swollen and raw, his legs were already shaking, and his eye felt like the entire Western Approach had taken up residence behind his eyelid.

“Sit down before you fall down,” said Blackwall.

“Fuck that,” he growled. After taking a second to check his orientation against the stars, he began his march again.

A heavy sigh sounded at his back, followed by footsteps. Bull gritted his teeth and kept moving. After a few dozen yards, Blackwall said, “You're too heavy to move. So that means I’ll have to pack everything up and drag it where your ass collapses next.”

Bull spun around and nearly toppled over. Blackwall leapt forward and shoved him upright. He batted the assistance away. “What are you doing here?” he snapped.

“I was on my way to find you lot in Val Royeaux when Jay came flying through town like Corypheus himself was chasing at his heels.” Blackwall frowned. “That girl of yours was white as a ghost and silent as the grave. Convinced the man to tell me what was going on, which wasn't easy, let me tell you.”

The word ‘grave’ slapped over him. “How did you find me?”

Blackwall shrugged. “He told me how to get to the cabin. I sent a few crows to scout for you while I rode out.” He paused. “I saw what they did to your people. I'm sorry, the Iron Bull.”

And the same people had his Kadan while they stood talking. The thought agitated him. Bull turned to start walking again, but Blackwall caught his arm and pulled him back around. “You need to eat something and get some sleep.”

He shook off the man's hand. “I'm going to find her,” he rasped.

Blackwall didn't back down. “And what do you think you're going to do if you manage to catch up?”

He bared his teeth. “I will end them if it takes my last breath.”

Blackwall snorted derisively. “Sure. You can barely stay upright as it is.”

Bull snarled and tried to turn again. This time the Warden stepped in front of him. “Get. Out. Of. My. Way,” he said, curling his unwounded hand into a tight fist.

“You're not going to find anything blundering through the countryside in the dark.”

“I'm going to try!” The words echoed across the plain and Bull felt flecks of spittle flying from his
mouth as he bellowed, “I will not abandon her!”

The warden blocked his path again. “You’re not thinking straight, man! Whoever has her could have a dozen men by now. They could be miles in a different direction. Running yourself to death won’t help anyone!”

A fury like he’d never felt in his life roared through his veins. “I will not rest until she's in my arms! I don't expect a coward like you to understand-”

Blackwall shoved him in the chest hard enough to set him back a step. “Yes, I abandoned my family. It was wrong! But that doesn't make you right, either, you obstinate cow!”

He lurched forward and took a swing, but he could feel how weak of a hit it was before the fist connected. Blackwall didn't even bother to dodge. The only thing the effort got him was winded and dizzy.

Blackwall made a disgusted noise and waved a hand. “That girl deserves the best of you, not this pathetic shell.” He stalked forward, drilling his finger at the claw dangling around Bull’s neck. “She needs the Iron Bull.”

Bull stood, knowing the man was right and hating him for it. “I said I'd never stop looking for her,” he said, his voice cracking.

“There's a difference between stopping and regrouping, lad,” said Blackwall. “You need to take care of yourself or you'll be useless to help anyone.”

He couldn't breathe. His teeth began to chatter from the tremors rippling through his body. “I have to find her. I have to. I can't-”

“I know.” Blackwall touched his arm lightly. “We are going to find her. But we're going to do it right, and we're going to make the bastards pay.”

Bull finally allowed the man to herd him back to the fire and shovel some food down his throat. He stared blindly into the flames until exhaustion took over again. His last thought was of her stunning smile, and the crushing fear that he'd ever see it again.

***

The dawn came before he knew it, and with it a cold drizzle. Blackwall was already kicking dirt over the fire and packing up their gear. He sat up and barely restrained a yelp of pain. His entire body was in the throes of agony and telling him in great detail exactly how much he’d abused it the day before. Even the simple act of moving his leg made his breath hitch.

He glanced at his hand, and cursed to himself. It was swollen to the point that he couldn’t bend the fingers anymore. His wrist was starting to puff up as well, making the entire thing next to useless.

Blackwall walked past him and then spun back. “Maker’s breath, why didn’t you show me that last night?”

Bull had to bite his lip to keep from shouting and yanking the hand away while the man plucked thorns and debrided the gouges and punctures. Blackwall lectured and muttered the entire time before finally pulling out a vial and saying, “This is going to hurt.”

Bull snarled. “Do you think it’s been sunshine and rainbows so far? Get on with it, warden.”
Blackwall grimaced and poured the contents over his hand. The already throbbing appendage went fiery hot and then erupted with the sting of a thousand insects, all biting at once. He couldn’t contain himself any longer and cursed a blue streak in three languages while the potion bubbled and frothed in the wounds.

Blackwall sighed. “I warned you.” He grabbed the hand and wrapped it in gauze, the movement quick and efficient.

Bull curled the still-protesting hand to the center of his chest and lumbered to his feet. It was then that he noticed another familiar face.

“Brego!” The horse snorted and trotted over to inspect him. He returned the favor, noting the distinct lack of tack.

“Damn creature jumped out of the pen at Val Royeaux and followed me here,” said Blackwall. “I’ve never seen a horse so willful.”

“He can be as willful as he wants to be,” said Bull as he ran his good hand over the curve of the horse’s neck. Without Brego delivering their baby girl, Bull would have been at least a day behind the events at the cabin. With this rain that delay would have made it impossible to even start tracking his Kadan.

Brego pushed his nose into Bull’s chest and let out a huff. “Thank you, buddy,” he whispered, resting his cheek on the horse’s broad forehead.

Blackwall mounted his horse and said, “We’re a day from Val Royeaux. Best get a move on.”

Bull swallowed past the lump of dread in his throat. “I should go back to the cabin.”

Blackwall shook his head. “No need. I’ve arranged for your people to be transported to the citadel. They should already be in the crypt, waiting for you to decide what you’d like done with their bodies.”

A task he wasn’t looking forward to. Bull let out a heavy breath and patted Brego. “Not going to dump my ass, are you?”

He could’ve sworn the horse gave him a withering look, but it was probably just his overactive imagination running away on him. A crow swooped into view and came to land on Brego’s neck. Bull stared at it for a moment.

Blackwall cleared his throat. “I had some time last night, so I sent out an alert.”


Blackwall rolled his eyes. “Do you think you’re the only one who knows how to track? I traced your prints back a few miles and found the araval ruts. Damned clever of them, the bastards.”

Bull pulled a note from the bird’s leg and gave it an affectionate rub on the beak. It fluffed up and settled into the warmth of the bay’s thick mane.

“ We are coming. They will regret ever putting hand on our family. ”

Cullen’s familiar script was followed by nearly half a dozen signatures from those remaining in Skyhold. Warmth rushed through Bull’s chest, bringing him dangerously close to tears.
“Are you ready?” asked Blackwall after a moment.

He nodded fiercely and leapt aboard Brego. “Enough fucking around,” he growled.

The horses thundered in unison across the plain while crow after crow landed on Bull’s shoulder. Messages of concern and offers to help were stuffing his pockets to overflowing. No one had spotted a strange araval yet, but eyes across Orlais and Ferelden were paying close attention.

The tiniest spark of hope flickered to life.

***

The ride to Val Royeaux felt endless, but they made it shortly before sunset. Blackwall waved him away. “Go to that little one of yours.”

Bull strode through the citadel as briskly as his aching legs would take him. As he hustled up the last flight of stairs to the rented apartments, he heard light steps chasing behind him. He froze and whirled around at the last moment to see Shara running at his back.

“Is it true?” she asked, breathless.

Bull nodded sharply. She pressed a hand to her mouth and squeezed her eye shut briefly. “I had hoped it was a terrible rumour. Do you know who has her?”

“No,” he said. “Not yet.”

“I know you want nothing to do with me. That you’ve been ignoring my reports,” she said. “But I can help. Please, let me help with this.”

Bull crossed his arms. “Why? What’s in it for you?”

She shrugged helplessly. “Nothing.”

He scowled. If he didn’t have so much at stake, he’d have stuck to his resolve. The elf was more trouble than she was worth. But with his Kadan in the hands of strangers, he couldn’t turn away any offers of help. “This means nothing past finding her,” he said.

Shara nodded. “I understand. You won’t regret it, the Iron Bull.”

“See that I don’t,” he said icily as he turned his back on her and headed to Jeremy’s door.

Before he could lift his hand to knock, the door jerked open. Jeremy stared up at him. “What happened? What’s going on? Where is everyone?”

“How did you know it was me out here?”

Jeremy waved a hand impatiently. “I could pick your voice out of a crowd. Answer me. What happened?”

Bull opened his mouth to answer, but then little steps came running from inside the apartment. He shoved past the man and dropped to his knees in time to catch Kaya as she threw herself at him.

She burst into tears and clung tightly to his neck. “It’s okay, Imekari,” he said, not caring when his voice broke. “Papa’s here.”

An hour later, she was curled against his chest and snoring as he sat in an armchair, staring listlessly
into the fire. He struggled not to follow her into dreamland as he savoured the sensation her little heartbeat against his.

Jeremy was in the other chair, his face stricken as he absorbed the news of his sister’s kidnapping. “Why have they taken her?” he whispered hoarsely.

Bull traced a hand over Kaya’s hair and said, “Until we know for sure who took her, no idea.”

“I thought you said you were chasing a Qunari. Doesn’t that make it a little obvious who has her?”

“You mean Par Vollen?” Jeremy nodded. Bull shook his head. “No. I wish it was that easy, Jay. But he could be working for anyone.”

Jeremy scrubbed his face with his palms. “So what are you doing to find her? Why aren’t you out there looking?” As he spoke, he got louder and sharper.

Kaya twitched restlessly. Bull put a protective hand on her back and shot him a warning glare. “I already ran myself half to death out there. If there was any chance of finding her, I’d still be out there, but there isn’t. It’s time to start using the resources at our disposal.”

Jeremy started to pace back and forth, hugging himself tightly. “Why couldn’t she just have a normal fucking life?” he said, his voice shaking.

Bull flinched. “I tried to give her that.”

“Well you fucking failed!” he snapped.

This brought Kaya out of her sleep with a whimper. Bull murmured in her ear soothingly and rubbed her back. When he looked at Jeremy, he was slumped in the armchair, a pained expression on his face. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’ve been worried sick, stuck in this apartment, and now…” A tear chased down his cheek. He dashed it away. “She’s my baby sister, and I’m helpless to do anything for her.”

Bull swallowed hard. “I know the feeling.”

“You’re going to find her, right?”

“If it takes the last breath in my lungs,” he said. “Nothing short of death itself will stop me.”

They sat in silence for a long while, the only sound Kaya’s little snores. Bull let his mind wander idly, picking through the memory of the past few days, hunting any detail that he might have ignored in the panic of the moment.

The bloodstained note was still in his pocket. It shook him to the core that someone was targeting his Chargers. He’d sent out a crow to Krem, just to be on the safe side. Maybe it was just a taunt or a misdirection, but he didn’t want any other trips to the crypt.

The prints scattering the dust around the cabin flicked through his mind. There were only two sets he didn’t recognize. The massive Qunari’s, and a much smaller set. His gut churned as he focused on those marks. They were from an elf, he’d put his entire life-savings on it. An unsettling hunch drifted through his mind, but he firmly shut it down. It was a coincidence, nothing more.

Kaya shifted against his chest and mumbled something before taking tight hold of the claw dangling from his neck and settling back into her rhythmic snores. He put his big mitt over her tiny one and pressed gently.
Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone is enjoying my weird take on this world's events. :)
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Qunlat glossary below.

****I am not quite talented/patient enough to translate all dialogue into Qunlat, so characters speaking the language will be noted to be doing so. :)****

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gina felt her mind slowly coming back to her. Voices murmured in the background, low and urgent. It took a moment to register that they were bickering in Qunlat.

"-wasn't part of the plan-"

"-can't say you did any better-"

"Well at least-"

"-not saying m-"

She tried to focus on the words, but they faded in and out as nausea overwhelmed her. Bile rushed to the back of her throat, making her retch. A breath later, hands were lifting her upright and thrusting a bucket under her face just in time for her guts to unload themselves.

She groaned and spat out the bitter aftertaste, then felt herself wilting. Again, hands guided her, this time turning her onto her side.

As she curled into herself, she became aware of a strangely familiar rhythmic jostling. She would've
sworn they were in a car were it not for the lack of engine noise.

With every moment, the fog in her brain cleared. The leap, her hopeless journey down the river. Shocking heat rushing to her bones. A strange voice telling her to breathe.

She risked a peek, and found that she was inside a cramped cabin of sorts, made even tighter by the presence of the gigantic Qunari who was leaning outside a small opening and dumping the bucket of sick.

Christ, he was huge.

The temptation to shove him while he was overbalanced was nearly impossible to resist, but the cold realization that both her hands and feet were bound stopped her just in time.

Panic started to make her heart pound, but she forced herself to calm. She was already trapped, nothing to do about that. Reacting blindly would only get her into more trouble. She took a deep breath and released it slowly.

The Qunari started to turn her way, so she feigned sleep. He checked her over, his movements brisk and efficient. Then, unexpectedly, he picked up the claw dangling from her neck and tucked it inside her shirt.

Seemingly satisfied, he left her alone again.

Gina wondered at the gesture before turning her focus inward. Her hip and shoulder still ached, but as she shifted and tried them, the difference was night and day. She could see bruises mottling her shoulder, but the joints were perfectly useable. No more shrieking agony with every twitch.

Their conversation started again, and this time she could concentrate a little better.

A familiar voice spoke first. “Everything okay back there?” Her skin prickled as she placed it.

Gatt.

“With rest she will be fine,” said the Qunari, his voice low and rumbling. What was his name?

“I can't believe she jumped all that way and just has some bruising. Lucky little basra.”

Gina frowned. That hadn't been “just” bruising. She'd been rendered black and blue enough times to know the feeling. The Qunari had definitely repaired some fractures. Why didn't he tell Gatt?

“Where are we going?” asked the Qunari.

“My dear Maraas, if I told you that it wouldn't be a surprise.”

“That is not my title,” hissed the Qunari.

“I don't think Isskari is appropriate anymore,” retorted Gatt. “Do you?”

Isskari? Gina frowned. She'd have expected Sarbaas as a title for someone with such powerful magic, but perhaps there were exceptions she didn't know about.

Regardless, according to Bull, these were the bookworms that occasionally left the library to poke around for strange ruins and artifacts before running back to their tomes and scrolls. Which begged the question: why was a relic hunter involved in this kidnapping business? It didn't make any sense.
Maraas made an irritated grunt, interrupting her musing. “I do not like your secrecy,” he said.

“You don’t have a choice,” said Gatt, his tone going icy.

Silence stretched for a while before Gatt said, “Disappointing that the child escaped.”

“I did not expect the small one to be so quick,” said Maraas, a defensive note in his voice.

Gina felt a little thrill of satisfaction. Gatt made a derisive sound. “You big bastards are always slow. I should’ve left you to take care of the boy.”

“You should have followed the plan,” said Maraas pointedly.

“Who’s in charge here? The Tal-Vashoth traitor, or the Ben-hassrath agent giving him a chance at redemption?”

Another silence fell. Gina’s mind raced. So the scholar was Tal-Vashoth. She wondered how that had come to be, and why he was being given a chance to change that status.

Her mind replayed a conversation she’d had with Bull what felt like a lifetime ago.

“But couldn’t you go back and ask forgiveness? Maybe if you explained—”

“No, Kadan,” he interrupted, his voice bitter. “There is no such thing. I have failed, and they will never trust me again.”

She curled into him. “Why are they so harsh?”

He shrugged and dragged his thumb in circles across her hip. “Just the way it is. Ours is not to question.”

“I don’t think I’d do very well there,” she muttered.

A laugh barked from his lips and he gave her an amused look. “That’s putting it mildly.” He shifted and sighed. “Technically, I could return. But if I do, they’ll re-educate me. Hell, I don’t know why they didn’t the last time I went back.”

Her stomach turned. “That’s where they give you the drugs that turn you into a mindless drone, right?”

He nodded. “Quamek.” His arm tightened around her as he turned over, rolling her underneath him. “I have no intention of being turned Viddath-bas. Especially not after tasting these,” he whispered, his lips descending to hers.

Tears burned the back of her eye. Where was her Qunari? She had no idea how much time had passed since being dragged out of the river, but surely by now he’d have returned to find the disaster waiting for him. Would he even know where to begin looking? The thought of how frantic he must be made her heart ache.

Her thoughts drifted to Grim. She had no idea what happened to the boy after he’d given her the precious few seconds head start she needed to get Kaya safely aboard Brego. Where that pair had gone was another gnawing ball of dread in her gut that was making it hard to breathe.

She forced herself back to the present. Wishes and worries could come later. For now she needed to think. Her survival depended on it.
What would the Iron Bull do?

As she lay there, it occurred to her that Tweedledum and Tweedledee wouldn't have any clue that she knew Qunlat. Bull would use that to his advantage and play dumb. She resolved to do the same. Who knew what they might reveal if they thought they were safe to speak a foreign tongue around her?

Having a plan, even one so minor, bolstered her spirit. She took another look around, hunting for anything with an edge that she could use to cut the ropes holding her. There weren’t any in sight, but there were a couple chests against the other side, along with some pots and pans hanging against the wall. If there was cookware, perhaps there were utensils somewhere. She'd even take a butter knife at this point.

The wagon lurched, nearly tossing her to the floor. She shut her eye as the Qunari stuck his head into the cabin. When she heard him retreat, she lifted her head again.

The narrow platform acting as her bed was lined with thick furs. It was surprisingly comfortable, despite the tiny footprint. The rest of the cabin was nondescript. Some dried herbs were tied to the ceiling, mostly elfroot and spindleweed. She turned her gaze to the opening, but from her vantage, all she could see was sky.

Her attention turned to the bindings. She twisted her ankles experimentally, but the ropes were too tight to get any real purchase against them. Running was out of the question, clearly. She gritted her teeth and tried the ropes on her hands, but all she got was chafed skin.

Gina resisted the urge to burst into tears, but only just. Her stomach was starting to act up from the constant motion. She'd been susceptible in her world, but to suffer car sickness in a world without cars? The absurdity of the situation might have made her laugh under better circumstances.

A dry heave assaulted her body, bringing the Qunari in an instant. His brow was furrowed as he directed her face over the bucket again.

She threw up until there was nothing left, making her stomach cramp from the effort. Maraas set the bucket to the side and rummaged in one of the chests for a moment. He turned back with a small cup, into which he splashed water. He offered it to her. “Drink, small one.”

A part of her wanted to spit in his face, but burning thirst overrode the desire. She drained the cup, and then drained it again when he refilled it. He didn’t offer it a third time. “Let that settle,” he said gruffly.

She took the chance to examine him more closely. A nasty shiner blossomed around his left eye, the damage extending all the way down the side of his face in the shape of her footprint. His upper lip was split and swollen. It gave her a twinge of pride. What she didn't understand was why he'd left the wounds. She'd seen Dorian treat himself many times.

Her mind started to whirl again. Maraas had the skill to instantly knit bones back together, yet couldn't heal soft tissue damages? Another piece of the puzzle that didn't make any sense.

His eyes met hers, and she was struck by how similar they were to the stormy green of Bull’s. Almost immediately he looked away, busying himself with wetting a cloth. He held it out to her. “For your face,” he said.

Gina ignored the cloth. “Why are you doing this?” she asked. He flinched and kept his eyes averted. She scooted into his line of sight. “Where are you taking me?” He started to rise, but she
lunged clumsily and grabbed his arm. “Talk to me!”

He hissed a breath and disentangled his arm from her grasp. Gatt’s face popped into view. “Good morning,” he said cheerfully.

She curled her lip. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Ouch.” Gatt lifted a brow and tutted. “That’s not very polite, is it?”

“I’m hogtied in the back of your wagon. Did you expect me to curtsy?”

He laughed. “Fair point.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“See, I could tell you. But where’s the fun in that?”

Gina would’ve given anything to smack the smug little look off his stupid face. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I was ordered to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t question my orders, unlike some.”

Maraas scowled, but didn’t say anything. Gina glared at the elf. “The Iron Bull has been disavowed from the Qun for nearly three years. He’s been respectful and kept his distance. Why can’t you people leave him in peace?”

Gatt’s face twisted, and colour rose in his cheeks. “Peace? He betrayed his people. Peace is the last thing he deserves!”

“He betrayed no one!”

“The two dozen men who died on that Dreadnought would beg to differ,” Gatt said.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have given him shitty intel,” she retorted.

“Is that what he told you?”

“It’s what happened. I’ve read the reports myself.”

“And I’ll just bet they weren’t even slightly biased,” he said, his lip curling.

Gina scoffed. “Who scouted the location? Who gave them the Venatori count?”

“They could’ve sent their own scouts.”

“They didn't because Bull trusted you. And you failed him,” she said. “If anyone is responsible for his separation from the Qun, it's you!”

The elf went scarlet and started forward. “How dare you!”

Maraas moved between them and shook his head sharply. “Control yourself.”

Gina smirked. “Still have anger management issues, Gatt?”
He made a strangled sound and swept outside again. Maraas turned back to her. “Do not provoke him,” he said.

She glared up at him. “He doesn’t scare me.”

“He should.”

A chill crept up her spine. “If he’s so scary, why are you helping him?”

“Because I must,” he said. “Rest, small one.”

She tried asking him more questions, but the Qunari ignored her and moved back outside. Gina laid back on the platform, blowing out a frustrated breath.

***

Night fell, filling her slice of sky with stars. She stared at them, trying to determine their direction of travel. Not that it would do her much good, but at least it kept her mind occupied.

The pair had been quiet for hours. No remarks about their surroundings, no planning. Not even bland conversation about the weather. Gina could feel the awkwardness from her perch in the back of the wagon.

Maraas checked in on her every other hour. Twice he'd given her water, and once he'd handed her a packet of dried meat and fruit. She tried to engage him the first few times, but he remained silent. It was frustrating, but probably for the best if she wanted to keep her Qunlat fluency secret. As clever as she liked to think she was, she had a bad habit of saying the wrong thing and showing her hand too quickly. It was to Bull’s endless amusement, but in this situation, every tiny advantage had to be guarded jealously. So she gave up and let him do his checks in stubborn silence.

They finally stopped when the sky was inky black. Gina sat up and craned her head to watch as they set up camp. While Gatt wandered off to find firewood, Maraas hauled out a few bedrolls and then turned to Gina. “If I untie your feet, you must promise not to run.”

She lifted a brow. “I promise nothing.”

He sighed. “Why must you be difficult?”

A laugh escaped her. “Are you serious? What would you do if strangers attacked your family and then took you prisoner?”

The giant grimaced. “I am sorry, small one.”

She lifted onto an elbow. “Why do you have to help this asshole? You’re fourteen times bigger than him. Squash him like the bug he is and be done with it!”

Maraas shook his head and began working out the knots tying her ankles. “You would not understand.”

“Try me,” she retorted.

The ropes fell free and his shoulders tensed. Gina scowled and sat up. “It’s pitch black outside and I have no idea where your little buddy is. I’m not stupid enough to make a break for it now, Maraas.”

His eye twitched at her use of the title Gatt had given him. “I did not think you were stupid enough to leap fifty feet off a cliff, small one.”
She tossed her head. “You didn’t give me a choice.”

He frowned. “You could have come quietly.”

“That was never an option,” she said harshly.

He looked about to say something else when Gatt’s face came into view. “If you two are done bickering like an old couple, I’d like to get some sleep.”

Gina struggled to her feet and shrugged Maraas away when he moved to help her. It was a less than graceful descent, but then she was on the ground. She took a moment to marvel at how good her hip felt compared to the misery she’d suffered in the water. It was almost completely normal.

Bruising aside, whatever healing spell he’d used on the riverbank made Dorian’s voodoo seem like a bandaid in comparison. Given enough time, the Mage could patch any wound. But he certainly couldn’t heal such catastrophic damage with one murmured command. This was a whole new ballgame, as far as her experience with magic went.

She turned to ask him about it when a colourful bout of curses burst out from behind her. Gatt was dumping wood onto a small fire, and getting nothing but smoke for the trouble. He jammed the end of a stick into the pile, poking and shoving logs around. A few minutes later, the tiny flame was all but extinguished.

Maraas was staring in bemusement. “What are you doing, Viddathari?” he asked.

The elf hissed another string of curses and threw the stick on the ground. “You build it then.”

Gina bit back a laugh as Maraas made a few brief adjustments and the fire perked up almost immediately. The look on Gatt’s face could have melted steel as he watched. “I guess not every Ben-hassrath has an infinite list of skills,” she said snidely.

“You know, that big mouth is going to get you into trouble one day,” he said, a note of warning threading through his voice.

Gina scoffed. “The last guy that told me to watch my mouth wound up with my knife through his throat. You’re going to have to do a lot better if you want to scare me.”

He scowled. “You don't know what I'm capable of, sweetheart.”

“You don't have any idea what I'm capable of,” she snapped. “Untie my hands and we'll see just who kicks whose ass.”

“Big words, little girl.”

“Corypheus said the same thing. I don't see him standing here, do you?”

A sharp intake of breath caught her attention. Maraas was staring at her, horror sweeping across his rugged features. A glance at the elf confirmed her suspicion. “He didn’t say who you were kidnapping, did he?”

The horror was quickly turning into fury. He turned and started ripping into the elf, speaking in rapid Qunlat she could hardly follow. “You didn’t think it was necessary to tell me that we were taking the most important woman in Thedas captive? The entire Inquisition is going to be snapping at our heels for this!” He shot to his feet and towered over the elf. “Why have we taken such a foolish course of action? And do not tell me it has nothing to do with Hissrad! I am not a qalaba,
Gatt crossed his arms and held the Qunari’s eye boldly. “I told you I have a plan. That hasn’t changed.”

Maraas bared his teeth. “I will not be party to this any longer.”

Gatt lifted a brow. “You will, or perhaps I won’t be so forgetful in my next report.”

The effect of those words on the massive Qunari shocked Gina. He went from full apoplectic rage to silent fear in an instant. His hands trembled as he spun on his heel and stalked into the darkness.

What in the ever-loving hell was that elf holding over him?

After a moment, Gina cleared her throat. “I take it he wasn’t happy about my little revelation?”

Gatt shot her a calculating look. “Hissrad hasn’t taught you any Qunlat?”

“No, the Iron Bull hasn’t,” she lied. Then, thanks to a tip from her Qunari, she supplemented the lie with a small amount of truth. “Unless you count cursing and insults. Vashedan katoh-qalaba.”

Gatt smirked. “Your accent is garbage.”

She shrugged. “As long as you know what I’m calling you, I’m good.”

He rolled his eyes and shifted to lie on his bedroll. After a long sigh, he said, “Just so you know, my orders are to take you in. They do not specify in what condition. So if you have any ideas in that pretty little skull about running, do think twice.”

The casual threat made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

***

Gina tossed and turned. The other two were out cold. They were probably given the same training as Bull. Sleep when you can as much as you can. He could sleep on a stone floor and wake up as perky as if he’d been on a feather mattress.

Not her. The cold air and hard ground had her miserable. She curled tightly into herself and shifted closer to the dying fire, but it didn’t help. Even through the thick wool blanket, the chill seeped to her bones.

She couldn’t remember the last night she’d spent without her personal furnace. The thought made a tear spring to her eye, but she bit into her lip hard and battled back the threatening meltdown. Crying showed weakness, and that was something she couldn’t afford.

An hour later, her fingers were numb and her nose frozen. She tried cupping the blanket around her mouth and trapping warm air, but it didn’t help. Her teeth rattled from the force of her shivers.

A sleepy mumble had her on instant high alert. Maraas rose to sitting. “Are you alright?”

“F-f-fine,” she chattered.

He growled. “You are cold. That is not ‘fine’.”

Gina tensed as he got to his feet, but to her great surprise, he simply picked up his blanket and tucked it around her. His residual heat was luxurious as it sank into her skin.
He lowered himself back to the ground and sighed. Gina whispered, “Now you'll be cold.”

“I have felt worse things. Go to sleep, small one.”

She wanted to defy him, but the relief of being warm again was intoxicating. Her eyelid felt heavy already. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“If I had a choice, I would not be involved in this mess. I will not let this circumstance determine my behavior.”

It was almost admirable, if it weren't for his role in the whole kidnapping thing. Gina buried her nose in the covers and let out a long breath. “Well, thank you for making this whole situation slightly less than terrible.”

He was silent for a moment before saying softly, “You are welcome.”

***

The two were back to bickering in Qunlat.

“It is swift and impossible to track. We have not used it near any main roads, so it is doubtful anyone has seen us. Why abandon it now?”

“Because if he's even half as good as he used to be, he'll have tracked your giant ass to the araval tracks. Everyone will be looking for it.”

“Will we be going near any roads or towns?”

“Have you ever been outside of the damn library? People roam wherever they choose in this place. Every minute we spend near it increases the risk of being seen.”

“Then it stands to reason that we could just as easily be seen on foot. Therefore we should continue using the quicker form of transportation.”

Gatt made an impatient sound. “I don't even know why I'm explaining myself to you.”

The sizzle of something being added to a hot pan hit her ears, followed by an intense odour that assaulted her nostrils. She lurched upright as her stomach rebelled, and stumbled away from the campsite.

An infuriated Gatt had her by the base of her hair before she could get three steps. “Are you stupid, basra?” he snarled. “What did I tell you last night?”

She pulled desperately. “Let go!”

He tightened his grip and yanked her around to face him. “Not a chance.”

She fought to swallow it back, but the smell overwhelmed her again. With no other option, she bent forward and threw up, spraying sick all down the front of his pants and boots.

The elf staggered away with a shriek. “What the fuck!”

Gina wiped at her mouth and shook her head. “Not like I didn't try to go elsewhere.”

Maraas wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her back to the bedrolls. His face was creased with worry. “Why are you still sick? I have rehydrated you. Does something else ail you?”
The cooking food made her gut lurch again. “Whatever you're making smells like death.”

He glanced over and frowned. “It is just eggs, small one.”

The sound of splashing water caught their attention. Gatt had his pants and boots off and was pouring water over them as he muttered furiously under his breath.

Gina couldn't stop a little smirk coming to her face. “That'll teach you. Try not assuming the worst of people.”

Maraas nudged her and shook his head. She rolled her eye and gave him an unrepentant look. He sighed and gave her a cup of water. “Drink.”

The smell continued to bother her, but the water eased the rolling in her stomach. Gatt joined them by the fire in his smalls, holding his pants out toward the flames.

“Hang them from that tree,” she said. “The sun will-”

“Shut up,” he snapped.

Gina scowled. “Fine. Waste your time with the fire and wind up in soggy pants all morning. No skin off my back.”

He glared at her for a moment before stomping over to the tree and hanging them. As he turned back, Maraas held out a plate covered in eggs. Gatt snatched it away and ate in icy silence.

Maraas glanced at her, but she raised a palm. “Not a chance.” Bull would have thrown a fit over her refusing sustenance, but there was no way she'd be able to eat something that smelled so foul.

The Qunari shrugged and dug through his pack. He pulled out an apple. It was small and dented, but it was better than the nothing else she'd get.

“Should let you starve,” snarled Gatt.

Maraas rounded on him and barked something in Qunlat she didn't follow. Gatt gave a short laugh and said, “Isn't that just precious? You've got yourself a defender.”

Maraas flushed and dropped his eyes to the fire. Gatt sneered. “Don't fall for it. The only reason he's protecting you is because you're his ticket home.”

“That's not true,” Maraas said sharply.

“Really? Why else would you give a damn about this silly little basra who bashed your face in?”

“Because we are not animals, and should not behave as such.”

Gina fidgeted with the apple and stayed silent. Gatt shook his head. “You didn't keep that in mind when you defied your orders.”

Maraas growled. “The orders were inhumane.”

“Not your call to make!”

Maraas stabbed a finger at himself. “It is when I'm the one who has to live with the consequences!”

Gatt made an irritated sound and returned to his meal. Gina wanted desperately to ask for details, but
didn't want to accidentally reveal that she'd been eavesdropping on their conversations in Qunlat. She took a bite out of her apple and winced at how loud it sounded in the tense silence.

As she munched the apple, she took a closer look at their vehicle. She'd never seen a araval in person before, but Dalish had told her all about them. Gina tilted her head. “Are they all self-propelled?”

Gatt scowled and shook his head. “The elf I took it from said it had been specially charmed by his mother.”

“You took it?”

A defensive look flickered across his face. “He didn't need it anymore.”

She shrugged. “Hey, I'm not judging. It's your karma.”

He tilted his head. “My what?”

“Your karma.”

The pair exchanged a confused look and then turned back to her. She sighed. “It's a belief system of sorts. Do good things, and good things will happen to you. Do bad things? Well…” she gave Gatt a pointed look. “let's just say things won't be pleasant in the long run.”

He frowned. “You don't actually believe that, do you?”

She didn't let her eye contact waver. “I certainly do.”

His cheeks went pink. “What a stupid concept.”

She smirked. “Think what you want.”

“What's your bad karma that this is happening?” he retorted.

She smirked. “I stole some candy when I was five. Maybe this is my comeuppance.”

Maraas shook his head. “Seems a little harsh.”

“Karma's a fickle bitch.” She took another bite of the apple.

The Qunari frowned and said, “You say that like it is a person. Is this Karma a deity?”

Curiosity burned in his eyes. Gina hid a triumphant smile. Finally, a way to get him talking! “Not like the Maker or Andraste. More like the way you might call a sword ‘she’. ”

He chewed in thoughtful silence before nodding. “I have heard stranger.”

Gatt sneered. “Whatever. Let's get a move on.”

***

After another furious bout of bickering, they left the araval and began walking south. Gina scanned the scenery, seeking anything familiar, but in the thick of the trees, nothing else was visible.

Maraas walked in steady silence, his eyes flicking her way every few steps. After letting him stew for a few miles, Gina lifted a brow and said, “Something on your mind?”

He flushed and looked away. Gina sighed and said, “Come on, Maraas. I don’t bite.”
He scowled and rolled his eyes. “I am not afraid that you will bite me, small one.”

“Then ask me a question. Go on,” she prodded.

The Qunari looked clearly conflicted, but finally turned to face her and said, “Is it true that you have physically been to the Fade?”

Gina nodded. “Three times. I do not recommend it as your next vacation site.”

Maraas furrowed his brow. “I do not understand how this is possible.”

“You saw that weird scar, right?” She jutted her chin at her shoulder. He nodded slowly. She sighed and said, “That mark used to be good for something.”

He fidgeted with a loop on his belt. “What is it like?”

“Hell,” she said softly. The memory alone was enough to make her shiver. “Red lyrium glows everywhere you can see. It’s filled with demons and their spawn, and they come running at the slightest taste of fear. And believe me, if you’re there, you’re afraid.”

He swallowed visibly and fell silent for almost a mile. Then he said abruptly, “Did you really fall from the sky?”

A laugh escaped her. “Yes. Is it my turn to ask a question yet?”

His lips clamped together. She nudged him with her elbow. “Come on, it’s more than fair.”

He pulled a face and nodded. “I do not promise to answer,” he said sharply.

Gina sighed. “Fine, spoilsport. What is your role in the Qun? I know that one,” she pointed to Gatt, “is Ben-hassrath.”

The elf scoffed. “Yes, do tell your new friend your role.”

Maraas sighed heavily. “I am Tal-Vashoth.”

Gina nodded. “A term I’m familiar with. May I ask what happened?”

He batted a fly away from his face irritably. “I disobeyed a direct order.”

Gatt turned and walked backwards for a moment, saying, “There’s more to the story. Shall I tell it for you?”

They were interrupted by the sound of an approaching wagon. Maraas stepped in front of Gina, using his bulk to block any view of her. Gatt stepped close and hissed, “You will be silent or they will pay the price.”

The cold look on his face made her skin crawl. She scooted closer to Maraas and nodded silently. A vicious smile slipped over his face. “There’s a good little basra.”

She curled her lip at him, but kept her mouth shut. The wagon came around the corner and pulled to a halt.

“Hello travelers,” said an all-too familiar voice.

Oh, please, no.
Gina’s heart sped up as a peek around Maraas confirmed that it was Kuback.

The Vashoth looked just as wary as he had their first meeting. Gatt stepped forward. “Greetings. We’ve gotten ourselves a bit lost. Could you point us toward Val Royeaux?”

Kuback sat straighter. “You are a long way from there. At least a three day journey, five on foot.”

Gatt pulled a long knife from his belt. “Ah, you see, we won’t be walking.”

Kuback went pale. “We do not wish any trouble.”

“Then you'll give us the wagon without a fight,” said Gatt, the mellow tone of his voice belied by the twitching of the knife at his side.

Oza came out from inside, speaking Qunlat. Gatt brandished the knife her way, making her scream in fright. “You, out!”

Gina’s heart pounded with fear for the family. Bull hadn’t shied away from telling her the less pleasant aspects of his life in the Qun, including the non-negotiable arrest and turning in of Tal-Vashoth.

“Probably a lot of Vashoth, too. I didn't ask questions back then,” he said, shame coloring his voice.

The family quickly climbed down from the wagon. Gatt directed them to stand at the side of the path. “Terribly sorry,” he said. “Urgent business to attend to.”

Maraas made his way to the wagon, hiding her with his bulk. Gina didn't fight him. If the elf figured out that they knew her, who knew what the psycho would do?

A little gasp made her heart stop. Semeka. The little girl was pointing right at her. Gatt stared at her before spinning on his heel and grabbing Gina behind the neck.

“No,” she said, then yelped when he squeezed his fist even tighter. “No!”

“Then why is that child pointing at you?”

Gina stared over at them, pleading with her eye. “Maybe she's not used to seeing humans,” she lied, desperately willing them to play along.

Oza flinched and pulled the child close. “We've only been in Orlais for a few weeks. Most of our roads have taken us far from civilization.”

Good woman, Gina thought.

Gatt curled his lip. “You lie!”

He stormed forward, making the three cry out in fear. Maraas swept smoothly in front of the family. “You will let them be,” he said, a dangerous glow in his stormy green eyes.

For a heart-stopping minute, Gina was terrified that the elf would plunge the knife into the Qunari’s chest. But, blessedly, he let the knife drop to his side. “You're going to take their side? You know the consequences.”

Maraas lifted his chin. “Pashara! Send your report. Innocents will not die on my watch.”
Gatt gave a short laugh. “Meravas. Such a good moral compass. Too bad it wasn’t active when you sent that entire karataam to its doom.”

Maraas didn't flinch. “Get on the wagon.”

Gatt stared him down for a long moment before he finally turned away. The fury in his eyes only went wilder as he glared at Gina, but she didn’t care. Getting on the wagon and away from this family was the only thing that mattered.

Maraas stuck his head inside the wagon and hauled out a large pack. He dumped it on the ground and motioned at Gina. “In,” he commanded.

As she climbed inside, a dangerous gamble sprang to her mind. Maraas was delivering the pack to Kuback, but Oza was staring her way. Gina moved as quickly as she could, wrapping her fingers around the claw dangling from her neck and yanking hard enough to break the leather strand holding it.

Oza gave the barest hint of a nod and Gina dropped the claw to the ground. The loss of its weight around her neck made tears well up in her eye.

Maraas turned back and jogged to the wagon. His eyes dropped to the ground and widened, then met hers for a moment. She held her breath, but other than a tightening around his lips, he didn't respond to the claw that must have been in plain sight. She mouthed ‘thank you’. A pained expression crossed his face as he slammed the door shut.

His weight made the wagon shift to the side, and then it lurched into action. She retreated to a bed along the wall and pulled her knees to her chest, hugging them tight.

Then, in the dark, she finally allowed her tears to escape.

***

Almost a full day and night passed before the wagon stopped again. She sat in utter silence, not daring to make any sound that could draw the attention of Gatt.

He was unhinged. Clearly. Bull laughed when he told her about the elf’s temper, but seeing it in action had been among the most frightening things she'd witnessed. Considering all of the assholes she'd had to deal with in Thedas, that was saying something.

The door swung open to reveal the elf. “Out,” he said flatly.

Gina gritted her teeth and got to her feet. As she climbed down, he caught her by the arm and hauled her off-balance. She crashed to the ground, barely able to break her fall thanks to the ropes around her wrists.

He laughed darkly. “Not so tough now, are you?”

She lurched to her feet and glared at him. Maraas came around the corner and snapped a curse. “It is bad enough we have kidnapped her. We will not torment her.”

Gatt rolled his eyes. “Don’t get all high and mighty because you got your way back there. I’m still in charge and I'll treat this little basra however I choose.”

Maraas squared off with him. “You said we have reached our destination. Get on with it.”
The elf smirked and said, “Wait here.” Then he disappeared into the trees.

Gina rounded on the Qunari. “You need to cut me loose.”

“I cannot.”

Tears of frustration sprang to her eye. “Yes, you can. This isn’t right.”

Another pained look came to his face. “You do not understand.”

“What don’t I understand? Wanting to go home?” She grabbed his arm. “I get it, believe you me.”

Maraas pulled his arm free. “I am doing what I must, small one. Do not make it harder.”

“You know this is wrong, otherwise you would have picked up that claw and shown him,” she said, clenching her teeth.

He turned away.

Despair settled over her heart. “Enjoy your ride home,” she said dully. “The price for it is certainly steep enough.”

His shoulders tightened, but he didn’t respond.

A few minutes later, Gatt returned. With him strode half a dozen burly Qunari in full armor. Gina stared in terror and awe. From behind the pack came a woman, her head tilted regally as she walked gracefully.

Gatt came to stand at Gina’s side. “Ma’am, I present Gina, Saviour of Thedas, and mate to Hissrad.”

At the mention of Bull’s old title, the woman flared her nostrils. “You have done well to bring her to me.”

Gina felt her heart race. A month ago she’d been disappointed not to find Qunari wandering in Val Royeaux. Now she couldn’t get away from them.

The woman turned a sharp gaze at Maraas. He stood at attention. “I understand the Isskari has been a great asset.”

“He has,” said Gatt. “I think he’s earned the reward as discussed.”

Despite her curiosity, Gina kept her attention on the newcomers. One particularly brutish Qunari sauntered forward, boldly examining her from head to toe.

He scoffed and turned to the group. “Hissrad has lost his taste in women.”

They guffawed. Gina struggled to keep her face neutral. He turned back to her and drew a long hissing breath through his nose. Then he made a hungry sound. “Then again, one that smells this sweet—”

The woman cut him off. “Back in line, Baqoun.”

He winked at Gina and feinted a punch at Maraas before obeying. The woman came forward. “I am the Viddasala. You have been brought here on my command.”

Gina stared coolly at her. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to repeat that in Common tongue.”
“Hissrad didn’t bother teaching her Qunlat,” said Gatt, a smug look on his face.

“How far the mighty have fallen,” murmured the woman before switching to flawless Common tongue. “You are here at my command.”

Gina shrugged. “Okay. Why?”

The Viddasala lifted a well-groomed brow. “Do not question me.”

“Under what authority are you taking me prisoner?”

“I said silence,” barked the woman.

“And I asked a reasonable question. Looks like neither of us are getting what we want.”

Without warning, the Viddasala backhanded her across the face. The force spun her around and left her head ringing. “I will not accept your challenge,” said the woman.

Gina turned back and dabbed at the corner of her mouth. Blood stained her fingers. “Not much challenge when your foe has their hands tied.”

The Viddasala looked incensed. Maraas clutched her arm and said harshly, “Do not provoke her.”

Gina jerked her arm free and went toe to toe with the woman. “I demand answers.”

Gatt cleared his throat. “Perhaps you two can finish this conversation in a more private area. We’ll take our reward and our leave.”

The Viddasala turned imperious eyes his way. “Yes. Baqoun, the Isskari’s reward.”

He swaggered forward and handed Maraas a letter. Maraas bowed to him and then the Viddasala. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She smiled coolly. “Of course. Welcome back to the Qun, Salit.”

Maraas stiffened, but too late. In a sudden flurry of motion, Baqoun lashed a hard fist into Maraas’ jaw, dropping him hard to the ground. The giant shouted and moved to retaliate, but with three more decisive hits, he was out for the count.

“Maraas!” Gina screamed and launched at Baqoun, but Gatt caught her around the waist and hauled her back. She kicked his shin with all her might and shouted, "You fucking traitor!"

Gatt pressed the blade of his knife to her throat. "Continue fighting, basra. See what happens."

Baqoun turned to them with a leer. “Oh, I like it when they fight back,” he said softly.

A hard look came to the Viddasala’s eyes. “Katoh, Baqoun,” she snapped.

A sick feeling lodged itself in the pit of Gina’s stomach as more commands were barked and Maraas was chained up. A few hung back to load his limp form onto the wagon, and the rest started moving back into the trees as a group.

Salit? She’d never heard the term before. What the hell was going on here? Gina fought the overwhelming panic swelling through her veins, but then they were at the base of crumbling stone stairs. She glanced up and saw a familiar sight. “An Eluvian?” she breathed.
The Viddasala turned to her. “You have seen one of these before?”

Gina clamped her lips shut. The woman smirked. “Your silence is pointless. I already know how to work it.”

Then, with the whisper of strange words, the glass shimmered. The Viddasala smiled broadly. “Come, Gina. Let us show you to your room.”

Chapter End Notes

Maraas - Nothing/Alone
Basra - Rude term for any non-Qunari people
Isskari - A title/rank in the Ben-Hassrath; Duties include the retrieval of magical artifacts
Karataam - An infantry platoon
Meravas - "So shall it be."
Parshaara - "Enough."
Qamek - Substance used by the reeducators to turn those who refuse to convert into mindless laborers, functionally lobotomizing those subjected to it. It's automatically used on captured mages, who are viewed as being beyond salvation.
Saarebas - "Dangerous thing;" the Qunari word and title for their mages
Salit - Meaning unknown; a prominent rank within the Ben-Hassrath
Qalaba - A type of cow that the Qunari breed known for its stupidity
Vashedan katoh-qalaba - Foolish glory animal
Viddasala - "One who converts purpose." A high-ranking member of the Ben-Hassrath. Leader of the "Dangerous Purpose" branch of the Ben-Hassrath triumvirate, which handles the conversion of foreigners, the reeducation of Qunari dissidents, and the collection and quarantine of magic
Viddathari - A convert to the Qun.
Viddath-bas - Person turned into a mindless laborer with qamek.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-loomng threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Bull woke before the sun came up. He hadn't slept in their bed. Couldn't. The thought of reaching for her and finding cold sheets made his stomach twist. Luckily the couch in Jay’s apartment fit his ass. Mostly.

He gingerly tested various body parts. Aside from a crick in his neck and a still tingling hand, he felt almost normal. Amazing how quickly a body could recover with a little rest.

He stared at the ceiling for another few minutes before dragging himself off the couch and creeping to Kaya’s bedside. She was still snoring quietly. Bull watched her and fought the urge to scoop her up and squeeze her tight.

A harsh resolve settled over his heart. This little girl was not going to lose her Tama. He was not going to lose the love of his life. Even if that meant he had to bring Hissrad out of retirement to find her.

In his efforts for the Inquisition, he’d always been careful and respectful. The only time he used a heavy hand was when it was time to shut down another Venatori ring, and even then, his inquiries were always quiet.

No more. He had a far broader skill set that he’d put on the back burner, and it was time to play to those strengths. It wasn't pleasant, and it would not get him any friends. Bull almost wished his association with the Inquisition didn't exist, as they would probably also see a sharp increase in complaints thanks to him.

But in the end, he didn't care. The people that had his Kadan weren't playing around, and he couldn't afford the time it took to be diplomatic. Not if he wanted to track them down in any reasonable time frame. Anyone who couldn't appreciate the urgency of the situation didn't matter.

Kaya turned over in her sleep. Bull’s fingers trembled as he smoothed a lock of her dark hair away
from her forehead and kissed her lightly. She sighed and nestled into her pillow as he rose to his feet. He gazed down at her for one last moment, and then allowed Hisrad to take over.

***

By the time he reached the jail, the sky was getting bright around the edges. A Chevalier guard stood at the door, his entire demeanor that of a guy ready for shift change. Perfect.

“I'm here to borrow Lord Etienne,” he said, his voice and body language making it clear that there was no room for questions or argument.

The Chevalier regarded him for a moment, but as Bull expected, he didn't argue. Too tired. The next guy on shift could deal with the repercussions.

Bull followed close on his heels. Most of the prisoners were asleep, including the little Lord. He woke with a shriek of surprise when Bull grabbed him by the collar and hauled him bodily from his bunk.

“What in the name of Andraste do you think you're doing?” he shouted.

“Chains,” Bull barked, his voice cutting through the rising cacophony of startled prisoners.

The Chevalier stumbled to obey. Etienne writhed, but Bull tightened his grip and snarled, “Do not move.”

The man went slack, staring up at his face in pure terror. “What are you doing?”

Bull spun him to face forward and started marching him to the exit. The closer they got, the more the man began to squirm and protest. The last thread of Bull’s patience snapped, and he jerked the man off his feet, bringing him to his eye level. “You will walk, or you will be dragged by what's left of your hair. Do I make myself clear?”

The man whimpered and nodded. Bull dropped him back to his feet and started shoving him out the door.

He was silent as they marched. Etienne was puffing as he jogged to keep pace with Bull’s long stride, but he found no reprieve. They reached the marketplace in time for merchants to be delivering their wares. The Lord whined, “I can't be seen like this!”

Bull growled in response, and the man cowed, stumbling ahead of him meekly.

The sun was creeping into view as they reached the crypt. Etienne started to hyperventilate. “What's going on? You can't just—”

Bull tossed him through the door. An attendant squeaked in surprise, then paled at the sight of Bull’s enraged face. She swallowed nervously. “The Iron Bull?”

He nodded sharply. She pointed to a door at the end of the room. “They are there.”

The Lord was dry heaving. Bull latched onto the back of his neck and dragged him into the room and slammed the door shut without another word.

The sight of the crate beside Grim as he lay in repose took a minute to absorb. Bull looked down on the kid he’d come to see as a son, and at the face of the friend that risked everything to get him information. He went through a mental prayer for each, and then unleashed his fury on the little
Lord. “These were my people.”

Etienne gagged and tried to turn away. Bull wrapped his hand around the man's skull and forced him to look inside the crate. “They were good kids. My kids. I would have died in their place.”

Tears and snot poured down the Lord's face. “Why are you showing me this?” he sobbed.

“You have a contact with Par Vollen-”

The man started to shake his head, but Bull bellowed in his ear, “Do not test my patience today, you little shitstain!”

A hysterical cry ripped from the man's throat. Bull pointed to Grim. “The people that did this to him have my Kadan. If you think for one second that I will let you leave this room without spilling every last detail you know, you are sorely mistaken.”

Etienne had eyes the size of saucers as he gasped through tears. “But I don't-”

Bull howled with rage and pinned him against the wall. “You will give me your contact from Par Vollen, or your broken body will be added to their pyre!”

Terror didn't describe the look on the Lord's face adequately. Bull didn't take any joy from it. He needed this man’s information, and he would get it one way out another.

“There's a man at the docks,” Etienne said, his tongue tripping through the words.

“What man?”

“I don't know his name! I just get packets from him!” He rattled off a location and description of the mystery man.

Bull leaned in close. “I am going to visit this man. If he is not who you say he is, I will come back to get you. And no Chevalier in Orlais is strong enough to stop me from removing your head from your shoulders with my bare hands.”

The little man flinched and trembled. “Please, that's the only-”

“Stop begging!” Bull shouted, slamming his fist into the stone wall beside the man's face. “You chose to play this game! Now you are reaping the consequences!”

The man cowered away from him. Bull could feel his chest heaving, knew he probably looked deranged. Good. Let the fucking puke see exactly what kind of monster was attached to the tail he tried to tug.

Without another word, he yanked the door open and shoved the Lord out. The attendant was wide-eyed as they walked past her. Bull said quietly, “I will return later.” She nodded wordlessly as he hauled the man outside.

Blackwall was walking toward the crypt and froze in his step. Lord Etienne stumbled to a halt and gawked. Bull curled his lip. “Do me a favor, warden. Take this asshole back to his cell. I'm sure the two of you have much to discuss.”

***

Bull wanted to run down to the docks and beat the information out of the alleged contact, but years of training kept him in check. Barely.
Agents of Par Vollen, when they weren't cocky Lords, tended to take extreme measures to protect their secrets. He'd seen enough impromptu suicides to know. With Gina’s life at stake, there was no way he was taking any unnecessary risks.

After a good, long, moody stare off the high balcony of the aviary, Bull sat with a heavy sigh and dragged a hand over his face. None of his reports had any sightings of either the araval or his girl.

Where the hell had they gone?

A knock sounded at the door. He opened it to find Leliana standing there, fully decked out in her Chantry robes. Two Templars stood at her back, both regarding him with open curiosity.

“Re-” Bull cleared his throat and corrected himself. “Divine Victoria, I wasn't expecting you.”

She pushed past him and motioned for him to shut the door. The two soldiers took up post on either side as he obeyed.

He turned in time to see her yank the silly looking hat from her head and shake her hair out. “Please, the Iron Bull. Red to you, always.”

Bull leaned against the wall. “What brings you here, Red?”

“I have come to offer my assistance. The spy network is large and requires more management than one person can adequately provide during times like these.”

“Particularly if that one person is distracted?” he asked.

She lifted her brow. “I don't believe I said that.”

“You didn't have to,” he said.

Her eyes didn't flicker away from his. “If I've implied it, then my apologies.”

He made a noncommittal sound and brushed past her. “Three days and not a single sighting. I'm not convinced they are looking as hard as they should be.”

She frowned as she swept up the newest stack of reports. “It is a big countryside. Lots of back trails that no one follows any longer.” Her eyes darted from side to side as she read the contents of each piece of paper. “Have you mapped out their most likely destinations?”

Bull nodded and hauled out the big map. He pointed to three roughly pie-shaped quadrants. “They could be anywhere in these areas. Unless there are passable regions I don't know about that run along the coast.”

“No, none that I am aware of either.” She read the last report and then lifted her gaze to his. “I heard there was some commotion at the jail this morning.”

Bull nodded. “Squeezed a puny little Lord for information.”

“You have caused quite a stirring.”

“He needed a good dose of fear and understanding,” Bull said.

Leliana smirked. “I was surprised. You've been so meek as Spymaster.”

“I've been trying not to stomp on people's toes.” A scowl came to his face. “Not an easy line to tread,
as you well know.”

She grimaced. “I did not appreciate how easy I had it. You’ve had an uphill battle from Day One.”

“I’m over it.” Bull sank onto the chair. “What are your thoughts, Red?”

She looked over the map again. “I’ve some people working for me that I think would do wonders in these two areas.” She pointed to the east and west quadrants. “Is there anything you would request of me?”

He stared at the silly hat for a moment. “Actually…”

***

“Monsieur Dacarte, I am most grateful that you could meet me on such short notice!” Leliana kept her hands pressed together in a chaste fashion.

Bull smiled to himself. Red always was a good actress.

The man striding toward her matched the description provided by Etienne. “Your Holiness,” he said smoothly. “I am always eager to be of assistance to the Chantry in her time of need.”

“Oh I'm so glad,” she said. “Please, do sit down.”

The pair sat. Bull kept carefully to the shadowed recess along the wall, waiting for the right moment to come join their little chat.

Leliana leaned toward the man and said conspiratorially, “As you know, there has been much political tension lately. The Chantry has decided to intervene and hold the first Conclave since the Temple of the Ashes.”


“We believe it so,” she said. “It is to be held in a month's time at Halamshiral, and we are in need of a great many supplies.” Leliana gave the man a prim smile. “I am told that you are a capable importer, with a large network of resources at your fingertips.”

Dacarte sat a little straighter. “I can procure any item you might need. Clothing, food, household goods.”

“The items we are most desperately seeking are of a more...sensitive variety.” She squirmed in her seat and flushed. All very convincing, Bull thought.

Dacarte smirked and leaned on the arm of his chair. “How sensitive, Your Holiness?”

“The Inquisitor has been working closely with a Qunari,” she said.

“Tal-Vashoth,” the man interrupted, a little too quickly. It was Bull’s turn to smirk.

Leliana nodded meekly. “Yes, that is the term. Where was I? Ah yes. She has developed a certain proclivity toward Qunari staples. Mashev, maraas-lok, that sort of thing. She's insistent that we have these items on hand for her arrival. Are you able to bring in any of these things? Of course, we would require absolute secrecy.”

“Discretion is my middle name.” The man lifted a brow and skated his eyes up and down Leliana’s
form. “For the right, er, price, I can get you anything. Your Holiness.”

“Oh, that's wonderful!” She gave a little titter. “I'm sorry, I just feel so naughty. Like any moment the Revered Mother is going to walk in and catch me in the act.”

“No Mother can tell you what to do anymore,” said the man softly.

Leliana colored again. Bull rolled his eye as she gave the man a shy little smile. “Sometimes I forget who I am. Thank you for the reminder.”

“Always happy to help a pretty woman,” he said.

A shocked look crossed Leliana’s face before another girlish giggle escaped her lips. “Do behave,” she said flirtatiously.

Dacarte, the damn fool, lead with the brain in his pants. “I'd rather be naughty with the most Holy woman in all of Thedas. Can't blame me, can you?”


Leliana gave a furtive look both ways. “I did not expect this meeting to turn out like this.”

“I didn't expect Divine Victoria to be so lovely,” he said.

She rose to her feet and crossed to his chair. As she lowered to his lap, she leaned toward his ear and whispered something Bull couldn't hear. Then, her lips crushed against his.

Bull stepped quietly out of the shadow and made his way to the happy couple. His hands slammed down on the man's shoulders, locking him tightly in place while Red pulled off the quickest sleight of hand he'd ever witnessed and lashed both of Dacarte’s hands to their respective armrests.

The man squawked indignantly and struggled fruitlessly before looking straight up to see Bull’s furious face glaring down at him. He paled and renewed his struggle tenfold.


The man obeyed and sagged with unadulterated relief when Bull removed his hands. “What the hell is going on here?” he said.

Bull came to the man's front and sat in Leliana’s vacated chair. She stood at his side, her face beaming with triumph. Before he could speak, she held her hand out, palm flat and level with his nose.

He gave her an incredulous look. “Now?”

“You didn't believe I could seduce him in under five minutes. I did.” She flexed her fingers. “Pay up.”

Bull rolled his eye and dug through his pouch before slapping a crown into her waiting palm. “Can I get on with this? It's kind of important.”

She clutched the coin and gave him a smug look. “No bloodstains on my carpet, if you please.” Then she waggled her fingers at Dacarte and strutted away.
Every visible bit of skin on Dacarte’s body was scarlet red. “Bitch,” he hissed.

Bull lifted a finger and tutted. “Now now. Is that any way to talk about Her Holiness?”

The man curled his lips and tested the bonds on his arms. Too tight for escape. Bull smirked. “Not her fault you're an idiot who fell for the oldest trick in the book.”

“Fuck you.”

Bull shrugged. “Sticks and stones, Viddathari.”

The man froze and stared at him. “What did you call me?”

Bull examined his nails. “Don't play coy with me. I don't have the time or patience. How long have you been working for the Qun?”

Silence greeted him. He leaned forward and said softly, “Did I stutter?”

Dacarte glared at him. “I'm not talking to you, Tal-Vashoth.”

“You say that like it's an insult, and at one time I might have agreed,” Bull said. “But I've come to embrace my new title. With it I've accomplished more than I ever did in years as Hissrad. And I get to sleep like a baby at the end of the day.”

“You're a fucking traitor!”

Bull shrugged. “Think what you like. Doesn't change the fact that I've retained all of my skills. Skills that will get me the information I want, one way or the other. Your choice.”

The man sneered and looked away. “I'd rather die.”

“That can be accommodated. I'm sure you've got plenty of hidden leverage. I'll find it all if I have to remove every board from that shack you call an office.”

There was the slightest twitch in the man's cheek. Bull smiled. “Now. Let's talk.”

***

Bull walked into their rented apartment tentatively. He hadn’t been inside the space since returning to Val Royeaux. Why, he couldn’t exactly be sure. Perhaps fear of her ghost haunting his every move.

Kaya was clinging to his neck, still silent aside from the occasional miserable snuffle. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and sighed. “We’re home, sort of.”

She cuddled in tighter and gripped the claw hanging from his neck. Bull sank onto the couch and rubbed her back. In her short life, this little girl had gone through more trauma than most people experienced in a lifetime. It killed him that he hadn’t been there to prevent it from happening to her again.

In the silence, he replayed the day’s events. Etienne’s petrified face gave him fierce satisfaction. As much as he hated using Grim and Skinner that way, the shock factor had certainly gotten through the Lord’s thick skull that he wasn’t playing with puppies or kitties. The people he’d put himself into bed with would eat him alive and leave his corpse in the middle of the marketplace for the fun of it.

In a way, Bull had been kind.
His thoughts shifted to Dacarte. In sharp contrast, this was a man who knew who he was playing with, and was fully prepared for the consequences. However, he was also an intelligent man, so he was perfectly content to continue living if the option existed. Bull actually liked him, even if the moron did let his crotch do the thinking.

Unfortunately, the man was clueless about anything related to Bull’s predicament. “What do you expect? I’m just a merchant, after all. Unless they needed me to smuggle something in or out, there’s no reason to involve me.”

It was logical. And a goddamn dead end, as far as his Kadan went. The man made a hollow offer to dig into the whole affair, but Bull declined. “No, you’re more useful to me alive.”

So he finally had himself a Qunari double agent. Which was good. Just not what he’d been seeking when the day started.

Bull let out a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. Kaya whimpered at the sudden movement. He put a gentle hand on her head. “Easy, little one.”

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. It broke his heart to see her so out of sorts. “We’re a mess without Tama, aren’t we?” he whispered.

One tear escaped. He brushed it away with his thumb and hugged her closer. According to Uncle Jeremy, she hadn’t spoken a word since Bull left them out on the road. Gina would know exactly how to draw her back out of the protective shell, but he was at an entire loss.

Old memories played through his mind. Shadows making demons in the dark, leaving him weeping with terror and too ashamed to call out to his Tama. Somehow she’d known anyway, and pulled him from the dark bedroom in silence. They’d spent an hour carefully polishing the training swords until his mind settled and left him too weary to watch the wicked shadows play their tricks on him.

An idea presented itself. He patted her back and whispered, “Imekari, can you help me with something very important?”

She nodded tremulously. He smiled and kissed the tip of her tiny button nose before sitting up and putting her beside him on the couch. She clutched to his pants with a tight fist and watched as he released the catch on his ankle brace. “Papa’s fingers are too big to clean this properly. Could you help me get it spotless?”

Kaya nodded again, a spark of interest coming into her eyes. He tucked her between his knees and pulled out a few tools. They spent almost an hour picking out dried mud and debris, his big hands holding it perfectly steady while she attacked it with her nimble little fingers. He occasionally pointed to a spot she missed, but otherwise he let her figure it out.

Finally it was clean and almost good as new. Bull dabbed a little bit of oil into the hinge and then pulled her into a tight hug. “You did an excellent job, little one.”

She cozied up against him and let out shaky sigh. “I miss Tama,” she whispered, her voice so quiet he almost didn’t hear it.

Bull’s eye welled up with tears. “Me too, Imekari. But Papa is going to find her, I promise.”

Kaya nodded. “I know.”

Matter of fact. Not a shadow of doubt in that little voice. It was at once overwhelming and invigorating to have someone trust his abilities so implicitly when he doubted every move he made.
He tipped her little chin up and said, “Papa loves you so very much. You know that, right?”

She nodded again and touched the claw hanging from his neck. “Story?”

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Bull jerked awake to screams of pure terror echoing from Kaya’s room. He lurched off of the sofa and ran to her, expecting a horde of demons on the other side of the door.

Instead, he found her staring blindly at the wall and shrieking. He dropped to his knees and gripped her shoulders. “Baby, wake up. Come on,” he said, his heart thumping in his ears.

It took almost a minute to snap her out of the night terror, and then the tears started. She wailed, deep sobs wrenching her little body. Bull pulled her into his arms and let her cry, singing a soft lullaby.

She took nearly an hour to calm, and then refused to lay back in her bed. Bull cuddled her under his chin and paced restlessly in the apartment before giving up any pretense of going back to sleep.

He snagged a tiny blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, then headed out for a long walk. As Gina would have predicted, he soon found himself high along the city walls, gazing up at the night sky.

He paused and pointed to the moon. Kaya looked up in silence. He said, “In Tama’s world, they’ve sent men all the way up to the moon. Can you believe that?”

She shook her head. “How?” she whispered.

“They call them spaceships. I wish I could go to the moon.”

Kaya pointed to a particularly bright star. “I like that one.”

“That’s the tail of Draconis. My favorite.” Bull took gentle hold of her finger and traced the familiar constellation. “See his wings?”

She nodded, then yawned widely and rested her cheek against the side of his neck. Bull snuggled the blanket around her and caressed her little head. “Sleep, Imekari. Papa has you.”

He didn't even need the command. Her breathing was already going soft and steady. He closed his eye and focused on the tiny heartbeat against his skin.

Pervasive thoughts jabbed at him. What if he didn't find Gina? How could he, a former Ben-hassrath agent with no parenting skills to speak of, raise this little darling? With his Kadan at his side, it had been a grand adventure. Alone, it was a fearsome prospect.

He forced himself to stop that train of thought. Opening his eye, he sought Draconis in the sky.

She was out there. He could feel it in his bones. He just had to find her.
Chapter 18

Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

The drama and intrigue continues...

(Also, please forgive anything that isn't exactly accurate or canon. I'm making the facts fit the story and trying to keep true as much as I can, but it isn't always possible!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lush floating islands dotted the sky as far as her eye could see, with dozens of twisting paths and bridges leading to shimmering Eluvian mirrors. This was nothing like the dreary place Morrigan had taken her.

Gina stared in awe until she was prodded forward by a smirking Baqoun. “Easily amused, this one,” he said in laughing Qunlat.

The Viddasala shook her head. “Disappointing that he would choose these kabethari over his people.”

“That mouth might be good for other things. Perhaps he does not bother speaking to her,” said Baqoun suggestively.

Gina felt her hackles rise, but Bull’s voice whispered in her mind. “Ben-hassrath rule number one. Find out what they want, and give it to them.” They seemed pretty damn eager for her to be some idiot foreigner. Fine. That's what they'd get.

They meandered up one of the winding paths and stepped in front of a mirror. The Viddasala was
careful to move away from everyone and murmur only loud enough to activate the mirror. Gina doubted any of the others could hear her either.

Interesting.

One by one, they stepped through. Baqoun suddenly had a firm hold of her upper arm and a sneer on his face. Gina glared at him, but marched forward obediently. No way she'd get further than a few steps if she bolted anyway.

He leaned down and whispered, “Submitting like a good girl already? I see more and more why he chose you.”

She grimaced and flinched away dramatically. “Good god, don’t you people practice oral hygiene?”

His blank stare confirmed that he didn’t know common tongue. The Viddasala, however, gave her a foul look. “Be silent.”

Gina rolled her eye and tugged her arm free of his grasp. “Then tell the Mabari to stop hovering and whispering Qunlat in my ear.”

The woman flushed and barked a command at the burly Qunari. He gave her a bored look, but after a moment backed up one step. The Viddasala turned her attention back to Gina. “At my side,” she barked.

Gina lifted a brow. “Oh, I’m not nearly as well trained as your Mabari. You’ll have to be a little more persuasive than that.”

Gatt made a strangled sound. “Ma’am, I can give her a lesson in obedience, if you’d like.”

“No,” snapped the woman. “Keep to yourself, Viddathari.”

Pink stained the tips of his ears. “Meravas,” he said softly. Gina didn’t question what made the woman restrain him so resolutely, but it certainly didn’t make her feel any better.

After he and Baqoun passed through the mirror, she stepped toward it reluctantly. “Age before beauty,” she muttered.

The Viddasala shoved her through the mirror with a growl. Gina tripped and smacked into the ground hard enough to lose her breath for a moment. Baqoun hauled her upright and dusted her off with a chuckle. “How did one so clumsy ever defeat Corypheus?”

The Viddasala batted his hands away. “Leave her,” she hissed.

A wearied expression came to his face. “Kost, Viddasala.”

Bright red stained her cheeks. “How can I find peace when you can’t keep your hands to yourself?”

He sighed. “The little basra isn’t to my taste, venak hol.”

The Viddasala sucked a breath and grabbed his arm, hauling him to a corner. There she got in his face, speaking in low, harsh tones. He whispered furiously in response, his hands slicing through the air. She jabbed him in the chest and said something that made him go rigid.

“Pashara,” he bellowed. He spun to face the group and jerked his arm away when she grabbed at him again. “I’m fucking the Viddasala. Anyone have anything to say? Anybody give a shit?”
Corypheus himself could have appeared in the room and no one would have looked up from their feet. Gina watched it all unfold, and suddenly enjoyed the fact that she was able to listen in so blatantly.

The Viddasala was staring at him in utter rage. “How dare you,” she said, the words hissing between clenched teeth. “Discretion was my only request!”

He shrugged blandly. “I did not promise to grant your request.”

The Viddasala was shaking. The rest of the room remained in studious silence. Gina took care to appear uninterested, though she was soaking in every bit of information she could get. And this was very good information. Relationships, even those of a purely sexual nature, were highly frowned upon. Such a basic rule would not be ignored in a proper Qunari environment.

What other rules were being bent?

Gina gnawed on her lip. Things had gotten worse, no doubt about it. She hadn't thought it possible, but the events in the clearing had changed everything. She no longer had two people she could try to play against each other, nor did she have any means of potential escape. Not with this many people surrounding her.

Then there was the Eluvian. Its sudden appearance had destroyed her wild gamble unequivocally. Oza would deliver her precious claw to Bull, and he'd come running to find nothing more than a dead end.

Her eye burned with tears, but she shut down the urge. Without any hope of rescue, her only chance to make it out alive was to think and act logically. Emotions were a luxury she couldn't afford.

The mentality was uncomfortably familiar. Nearly her first full year in Thedas had been spent in the same survival mode. She hadn't really spoken to a soul until Bull crossed her path. It had nearly broken her then. Was she capable of surviving it now?

A hand clapping down on her shoulder made her jump out of her skin. The Viddasala was visibly seething as she marched Gina down the hall and around the corner.

“Trouble in paradise?” Gina asked.

“Shut up!”

***

The next mirror took them back to the floating islands. A bit of nerve-wracking navigation over a thin connector between two islands led to a mirror that took them to a flat plain. After a mile of hiking, they found another mirror in a shallow barrow. This led to yet another floating island.

This island’s mirror sent them through a misty swamp. The stench of rotting vegetation nearly did Gina’s stomach in. She breathed through her mouth, blocking her nose as best she could. Baqoun found this amusing, and pointed out her discomfiture to the group. Gatt went red and refused to look her way. Gina wished she could repeat her drive-by vomiting on the asshole Qunari too.

They crossed a mossy stone bridge and found the next Eluvian half sunk in the middle of a mire. The karataam led the way, the muck barely reaching past mid shin on most of them. Gatt followed, and sank well past his knees. Gina hid a little groan at the sight.

Baqoun gave her a poke the back and motioned toward the mucky path. As she stepped into the
slime, her foot slipped and she overbalanced. A sudden hand on her shoulder had her jerked back to
standing. Baqoun was nearly in hysterics. “Are you sure we've got the right woman? This one can't
even walk!”

Without warning, he slung her over his shoulder. She yelped indignantly and writhed, but he just
tightened his arm and stomped through the mire and into the mirror. At the next floating island, he
plunked her down and wiped away tears of mirth.

The Viddasala came storming through the mirror spattered in mud. Gina could practically taste the
fury as the woman shoved past Baqoun. He gave her a hearty slap on the ass. She rounded on him
and shouted, “Touch me again and I’ll have you cleaning latrines for the remainder of the mission!”

He shrugged and gave her an incorrigible grin. “Done worse, Kadan.”

The woman went three shades of red. “Do not think I won't find worse,” she snapped. Too bad
anyone with eyes could see the barely restrained smile trembling on her lips.

“Do your worst,” he said softly, smile still firmly in place.

Good lord, the two were as hot and cold as a couple in Junior High.

They stepped through the next mirror one by one. It took Gina’s shoddy eye a minute to adjust to the
dim light on the other side. The Qunari karataam surrounding her were clustered tightly together,
their jovial manner entirely lost. Even the insufferable Baqoun was looking around nervously.

Gatt came to her side and whispered, “We’re in the Deep Roads. There is no room for error down
here. You move quick and silent. Anything less and one of the Karashok will remove your tongue.
We don’t need darkspawn realizing we’re here.”

Gina felt her skin prickle. No one liked talking about the Deep Roads, not even the affable Hawke. It
made them all tense and nervous. As she understood it, travelling through the area was rare and
highly inadvisable. Varric told her some stories about the former glory of the place, but the way he
drank himself blind afterward made her reluctant to ask for any other information.

And now she was there, live and in person. Oh goodie.

They moved in a hush, packed close together, big grey mitts white knuckled on hilts. She and the
Viddasala were well protected by the group, but that was little comfort when the back of the giant
less than an arm's length away was hardly visible.

Things made sounds in the darkness surrounding them. Gina wasn't at all upset when they broke into
a light jog, even though it was almost a flat-out run for her.

The sight of another Eluvian made her want to weep for joy. They went through in bunches, and
then the Viddasala barked something that caused the mirror to fall dim.

Gina bent forward at the waist, fighting to catch her wind. One of the Karashok pointed and
snickered. She shot him a dirty look and said, “I'd like to see how you'd do if everyone outsized you
by three feet, smart ass.”

Gatt gave her an amused look and translated. A surprised look came to the soldier's face before he
laughed again and said, “She's bold, for a basra.”

Gina waited for Gatt to translate for her before she gave the soldier a smirk and bowed mockingly. A
real smile came to his face as they resumed marching.
She looked around with interest. It was some sort of stone ruin. Massive sconces lined the walls beside them, casting a cheery glow over their path. On the other side, a short wall did little to block a spectacular view of the night sky.

Gina scanned the stars, trying to orient herself. Visus stood directly to her left, which meant she was facing south. Her eye settled on Draconis, and her heart throbbed.

Despite everything, there was still a part of her clinging to the idea that Bull would sweep in from the wings and save her. Foolish hope, probably, but one she clung to anyway.

He just had to find her. Somehow.

***

The ruins were home, apparently. Baqoun and the other Karashok headed to destinations unknown, while Gatt and the Viddasala stepped away and began talking in low voices. She couldn’t quite hear them, but the word Salit floated through the air.

Where had they taken the giant Qunari? Gina felt her stomach twist into knots. Clearly he’d had another game afoot. What was it? And why hadn’t the idiot clued her in sooner?

And what the hell did Salit mean? Bull hadn’t ever used the term in any context, so she didn't even have a starting place to guess. Apparently it was a title. Did that also make it a rank? If so, in which branch?

A pair of soldiers walked past, eyeing her with open curiosity. She returned their gaze, examining them with great interest. Unlike the karataam that had brought them through the labyrinth, these Karashok were young. Like, she would have a hard time really taking anything they might say seriously. Even with their swords that stood almost as tall as she was.

Gatt bobbed his head at the Viddasala and turned to walk back toward the mirror. He gave her a cold look as he passed and said, “Do behave, would you? I’d hate to find that they’ve executed you before I’ve had a chance to have some fun.”

A chill skittered down her spine, but she refused to show him any fear. “I can’t wait for karma to repay you for all of your life choices.”

He sneered. “I think karma has its sights set on you and Hissrad.”

Gina shrugged. “Maybe. But what goes around comes around.”

“Not if you kill what’s coming before it can get to you,” he said. Then he drew closer and added softly, “Just like I killed the filthy Charger at that cabin.”

Shock and grief pounded her, making tears spring from her eyes. She shrieked wordlessly and leapt at him, striking fast and hard. Her fists caught him under the chin and sent him reeling, but then a massive arm wrapped around her throat. She kicked and clawed viciously, but whoever it was just flexed and everything faded to black.

Gatt was gone when she blinked back to reality. Her head pounded from being throttled, but she felt relatively unharmed otherwise. The Viddasala was standing with her arms crossed tightly. “Get her up,” she said impatiently.

Gina found herself launched to her feet. She staggered a step to catch her balance, and then she was being propelled down a long hallway. Tears poured down her face, but she didn’t care. Grim had
died to give her a chance at freedom, and she went and got caught anyway.

***

Gina paced a path around the edges of the cell.

Ten steps, left.

Twelve steps, left.

Ten steps, left, pause.

She looked out the high window and stared at the stars. Draconis stood front and centre, the sight a tiny comfort in the haze of sorrow and rage.

Grim, dead. For what? Because Bull hadn’t been heartless enough to let his people get massacred thanks to someone else’s bad intel? It was bullshit.

The thought of his last moments being so brutal made her eye swim in unshed tears. No one deserved to die like that, especially not someone so selfless and kind. He’d just begun to blossom into himself. The unfairness of it all overwhelmed her.

For the barest moment, she let her thoughts drift to Kaya. Had she found safety? That uncertainty made tears threaten again, so she tucked those thoughts deep into the recesses of her heart. She had to keep faith in something, or she’d fall to pieces.

She resumed her pacing and glanced out of the little window. The two Karashok guarding her cell stood in silence. Neither had answered her demands for information, which meant that they either didn’t speak her language, or they didn’t think she was worth talking to. It was getting harder to hold her tongue in Qunlat with each passing moment.

Gina forced herself to meditate on what Bull would do, again and again. “Use their ignorance as a weapon. Do not get pulled into their narrative. Listen and take advantage of every resource they give you.” It settled the burning pit of anger in her stomach, but only just.

Panicked voices and running footsteps had her stiffening and staring at the door warily. A moment later, the steps faded to nothing, just like the other dozen times it happened so far.

This place, whatever it had been, gave her the jibblies. Straight up. She could sense an unease in the hulking guards as well. Every little noise had them sucking a breath and tensing before returning to stoic duty. And noises there were. The running steps that disappeared. Sobbing in the distance. Cries of fear in the darkness.

Wherever they were, it did not have a happy history.

Gina blew out a long breath and turned her thoughts to her predicament. Locked in a cell, God knows where with an entire Qunari army that thought she was either too selfish or too stupid to learn Bull’s mother tongue. Her wrists were still bound, though the Viddasala had swapped the abrasive ropes out for heavy iron shackles. It meant she had some independent range of motion, so it wasn’t the worst trade-off.

*Think like Bull.*

They hadn’t lopped her head off. Yet. That meant she held some value to them alive. And she was the Saviour of Thedas. That had to count for *something* with these people, if for no other reason
than to dangle her capture in front of everyone else’s face.

In their rush to blindly believe she couldn’t speak Qunlat, it seemed like they also assumed she didn’t know anything about their culture. A foolish assumption, and one she intended to use to bite them in the ass. From military structure, to belief systems, to command hierarchy, she had a solid understanding of their world.

One of the guards coughed and shifted his weight. Another oddity. Every soldier she’d seen, save Baqoun and the other burly escorts, were painfully young. Babies, every one of them. Bull had mentioned in passing that his first missions started when he was fifteen, but without context, it hadn’t been something she thought twice about. Now, she couldn’t help but wonder why these kids weren’t at home trying to get laid or worrying about finals.

Why hadn’t the Viddasala taken a more blended force with her? Surely they had higher ranking soldiers that could assist in such a mission. Whatever the mission was.

No way this was all for her capture. They were well settled, and appeared to be bustling about with purpose. She was the sideshow at best.

Was this place the headliner? Or was Maraas? Whatever his real title was.

Gina paced and worried for what felt like hours before she gave in to the weariness bearing down on her. The thin fur didn’t offer much comfort, but it didn’t stop her from sleeping restlessly anyway. The sky was turning bright when the door was opened. Two young soldiers stepped inside and gestured for her to follow.

She wanted to refuse, but Bull’s voice whispered, “Take everything they'll give you.” A better idea of her surroundings was something.

They climbed the stairs in brisk silence, stealing sidelong glances at her. She had a pretty good idea that neither had seen many basra in their day, let alone one with a missing eye and a fantastical backstory. If she had to guess, they were no more than sixteen, on their first big mission away from home.

Among her most valuable insight was how to appeal to the lowly grunts. Bull took great pride in being able to make friends wherever he went, and told her his strategies at great length. The Karashok tended to be boys who rarely received a kind word, and probably had every conceivable self-doubt that existed. Superiors like the Viddasala would be impossible to sway from their opinions. But the boys? They were the perfect target to sway popular opinion.

She had to take every opportunity to make them see her in a different light. It might not be enough to get a chance at escape, but it would hopefully garner at least a little sympathy that she could leverage.

Gina let memory wash over her.

_Varric sat at the bench across from Gina and Bull. "So, Bull, can I ask you a question?"

_Bull waved his spoon. "Go for it," he mumbled around a mouthful of stew, spraying the table.

"What's with Qunari and their swords? Do they really believe its part of their soul?"

_Bull shook his head and swallowed. "That's just the warriors. All mystical bullshit, if you ask me. A sword is just a tool, and us Ben-hassraths use whatever tool is right for the job." He flicked the spoon and held it like a dagger. "I'd be just as happy to stab you to death with this spoon," he said cheerfully.
Varric hadn’t brought it up again.

It was better than a shot in the dark, but only if they spoke common tongue. Gina tested a few questions, but neither replied. After a few minutes of silence, she decided to just take the chance. Gina eyed their swords and said, “Your swords are glorious, by the way. Excellent craftsmanship.”

Still no response, but judging by the way the one on the left seemed to stand taller and lift his chin, the words hadn’t been entirely lost. At least one other person here spoke common tongue. She logged the mental note as he made a short series of gestures toward the other Karashok. This one went pink with pride too, and flicked a curious glance her way. She plastered a neutral smile on her face.

After her comment, both seemed to naturally slow their strides. Score one for the kabethari, she thought. They led her through a massive room. It stood two stories tall, with a cathedral ceiling. The second floor featured a balcony railing that allowed a bird’s eye view over the floor below. The stairs leading to the dungeon lay almost exactly across the room from a massive stone staircase that lead to the second floor.

They climbed those stairs, and ignored her taking a good long look at how the room was laid out. A massive iron chandelier hung high above the floor, secured with heavy chains. Flames licked brightly, though natural sunlight flooded the room thanks to a partially crumbled ceiling.

Double wooden doors stood at the far end of the room, flanked on either side by two tall guards. More doors came into view as they climbed higher, unguarded except one. An exit, perhaps? Gina noted it and continued behind the soldiers.

They walked through a short hallway and stopped at a closed door. After a second, the pair exchanged startled glances. Gina frowned. “What’s going on?”

She stepped closer and hid a gasp when she heard the unmistakable sound of two people having very enthusiastic sex. Keening and groaning filled the air. Gina barely swallowed a bark of laughter.

The poor soldiers were clearly unsure how to proceed. In their moment of hesitation, she acted. With a quick twist and shove, the door flew wide open, exposing Baqoun and the Viddasala in the throes of passion. She had her ass on the desk, legs hooked over his shoulders, and a desperate look on her face that screamed she was on the edge of an orgasm. He was drilling into her like he was looking for oil, hands firmly latched to her breasts.

At the interruption, the woman screeched and shoved Baqoun away. He staggered and nearly hit the floor, while she scrambled to cover herself. The two soldiers stood in stark terror, both faces pale as ghosts.

Gina sauntered in. “Oh dear. Don't let me interrupt. Finish if you must.”

“Do you not know how to knock?” the Viddasala yelled at the soldiers.

“Oh come now,” said Gina, waving her hands dismissively. “These boys brought me just like they were commanded. Not their fault you couldn’t get your rocks off in time for my arrival.”

She collapsed onto a seat and eyed Baqoun. He stood in stunned silence, his hard-on still raging. She lifted a brow. “Has he gone into shock?”

“Stop it!” The Viddasala snapped, her face scarlet and sweat still glistening on her skin.

Gina smiled. She’d never been in the position of taking the power seat before. It was a bit exhilarating, if she was honest. “Are you going to tell me why I’m here yet?”
“You do not ask the questions!”

Baqoun snapped out of his haze. He curled his lip and said, “Perhaps I can finish with the basra.” He stepped toward Gina, a hungry look coming into his eyes.

The Viddasala cursed and commanded him to stop. Gina laughed softly and said, “Let me guess, he’s threatening to use that little thing on me. Am I supposed to be afraid?”

He glared from her to the Viddasala. Gina smirked. “Go on, translate for the big dummy. Tell him I've fucked bigger.” She hooked her pinkie finger suggestively.

No translation was required. He went ballistic and launched at her. It took both soldiers to hold him back, along with the Viddasala standing between and shouting commands uselessly. Gina waggled her fingers at him and crossed her legs, feigning a complete lack of concern.

He was practically foaming at the mouth by the time they dragged him out of the room. The Viddasala’s chest heaved, her self-control clearly stretched beyond its limits.

“Do you understand exactly what kind of predicament you are in?” the woman snarled.

“I’ve been in worse spots.” She shrugged. “All I know at this point is that you work for Gatt, and anyone who's in bed with that slimy little snake can't be trusted.”

The dig at her rank didn’t go unnoticed. “He works for me, basra. I control that little puppet.”

Gina held her eyes. “You sure about that?”

There was the barest flicker in the woman’s eyes before she straightened her spine. “He answers to me. They all do.”

She thought about driving the needle deeper, but restrained herself. The doubts were already there, now likely compounded. Let that fester, whispered Bull’s voice.

“Why am I here?” she asked. “No one will answer me that. I don't think it's an unfair question.”

“Perhaps it should be obvious,” snapped the Viddasala. “You are here as punishment to Hissrad.”

This was all a personal attack? Gina gritted her teeth. “The Iron Bull has kept a respectful distance. Why does he require punishment?”

“We built him, and he has squandered our efforts. This cannot go unanswered!” The Viddasala bent to Gina’s eye level. “I will not leave his talents to rot in this forsaken land.”

Gina leaned forward. “You people threw him away when he made the choice to save his men in the face of bad intel. Don't blame him for your inability to show compassion.”

“Compassion is weakness!”

“Is it? I guarantee any man he's ever commanded would follow him to their death without question because they know he wouldn't ask it of them if it weren't necessary. Can you say the same?” Gina jabbed the air with her finger. “I'll bet not even Baqoun would follow you to the bitter end.”

The woman tensed as though she might take another swing at Gina’s face, but then soft footsteps shuffled into the room. The Viddasala sneered. “Just in time, Tama.”

Gina turned to see an elderly Qunari woman. Her back was stooped, making her seem short and
frail. Stringy gray hair hung in her face, obscuring the stunning purple of her irises.

The Viddasala started forward and the woman flinched. Gina’s stomach clenched tight. “Who is this woman?”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?” asked the Viddasala, laughing harshly. The woman averted her face, but the Viddasala grabbed her chin and forced her to face forward. “Go on, Tama, tell her who you are!”

Gina squinted and then gaped in horror. Black thread had been punched through her lips, stitching them together tight enough that speaking would probably be agony. “What have you done to her mouth, you fucking animal?”

The woman sneered. “I am teaching her the consequences of her failures.”

“What kind of barbarian does that?” Gina asked, her voice squeaking as she struggled with disbelief.

“The kind who doesn't wish to see her people falter because some can't be bothered to do their job correctly!” The Viddasala pointed to the stitches. “Now her foolish tongue cannot flop on its own accord.”

Gina felt sick to her stomach. These people...knowing Bull and seeing these ones on action made it impossible to reconcile how he’d become the sane person he was. “Who is she?”

“You haven’t figured it out?” A slow smile crossed the Viddasala’s face. “This is Hisrad’s Tama.”

The elderly woman whimpered and cringed away from the Viddasala. Gina’s heart galloped as her mind absorbed the news dumped in her lap. “You did this to her because of Bull?” she said, her voice strangled.

“Not just him,” she said, a hard look in her eyes. “There have been too many failures to overlook.”

The Tamassran kept her eyes low and curled her shoulders inward. Bruising and welts stippled every inch of visible skin. Gina’s stomach wanted to rebel, but she swallowed hard and kept it under control. “I will not let this atrocity go unpunished,” she said harshly. “Mark my words, one way or another, you're going to pay for this.”

“I would enjoy seeing you try,” said the Viddasala. Then she snapped a command and the two soldiers took Gina by either arm and marched her out of the room. She tried frantically to make eye contact with the Tamassran, to signal that it would be okay, but the woman never looked up.

***

The boys took her along a different route. She knew she should be paying attention and memorizing every last nook and cranny, but she was lost in thought. Seeing the woman Bull spoke of so highly in such terrible condition had her reeling.

It was the Viddasala’s comment about multiple failures that had her most perplexed. Of course the bitch would consider Bull a failure. But who else? Had the Tamassran raised more than one child that turned Tal-Vashoth? Was that really a thing they tracked?

This was all beyond the strangest scenarios her mind had considered. There were no political undertones, no mention of her personal status. There wasn’t even a threat of war or attack. Just her connection to Bull.
Had he downplayed his importance in Par Vollen?

They passed an open door as the sound of weapon meeting flesh met her ear. She glanced and saw a behemoth Qunari chained in a kneeling position while Gatt worked him over with a short wooden bat.

"Marass!" Gina cried out and bolted into the room.

The elf spun on his heel and brandished the bat. "Back off, basra bitch. Do not make me disobey my orders."

Maraas groaned and shifted, but the chains pinning his wrists to the floor were looped through rings and across his back, making them dig into his back with every movement. Blood pooled around his knees, dripping from terrible wounds mapping his body.

She lunged at Gatt, but the two soldiers caught her by the arms. "Let go!" she yelled. They held firm through her frantic struggles. "You can't tell me this is acceptable!" Neither said a word. She cried out in frustration. "Stop pretending you don't understand!"

"Calm down, small one," whispered Maraas, the words slurred through swollen lips.

Gatt whirled around and struck the Qunari’s horn hard enough to echo. Maraas yelped in agony, making the elf laugh. "Oh, did that sting?"

Both soldiers flinched at the action, but neither loosened their grip. Gina said, "Does that make you feel like a big tough guy? Huh? Beating a man who can't fight back?"

"You know, I'm getting really tired of that smart mouth of yours." Gatt strolled over and caught her by the base of her braid. "Did you know I've been promised that you'll be my reward? That I'll be allowed to do whatever I choose?"

She sneered. "You don't scare me, you little puke."

He smiled and leaned closer. "After I've butchered every last Charger there is, I'm going to send you home to Hissrad in pieces."

Gina tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip and held her firm. "Maybe I'll send him one little hint," he whispered.

In a flurry of movement, he had her braid hacked off and dangling in his hand. He held it up to her face and said, "Oops. Clumsy me."

The Karashok to her left sucked a breath and started to rebuke the elf. "The Viddasala ordered you to keep your hands away!"

Gatt sneered. "I'm sure the Viddasala won't mind."

While they were busy bickering, Gina snarled and rammed her forehead into his nose. It made a juicy sounding crunch and blood began streaming down his face. Her head rang from the impact, but it was worth the pain. He squawked and staggered back a few steps before lashing out in fury.

The other Karashok caught the elf by the arm. "You've made one mistake. I will not allow a second," he said in Qunlat, his voice shaking.

Gatt yanked free. "Pashara! I outrank you!" he shouted, his voice distorted thanks to the damage to
his nose.

“The Viddasala’s orders cannot be overridden by you,” snapped the other. “She is not to be touched. Not until the objective is achieved.”

The elf howled in rage and slammed the bat into Maraas’ ribs. The Qunari huffed sharply but stayed silent this time.

Before she could react again, the soldiers dragged her out of the room. The sound of the bat striking again and again followed them, along with Gatt’s increasing temper tantrum.

“This isn't right! You know it! Why aren't you stopping him?” she demanded.

They didn't look her way.

***

Darkness fell in the tiny cell. Gina sat with her knees tucked to her chest, her fingers worrying down the new length of her hair.

The real consequences of her outburst were being felt by someone else. It made guilt swell through her gut. She’d never seen someone beaten so badly and remain upright. Gatt was either smart enough to strike non-lethal points, or Maraas was just that damn tough. She leaned toward the latter, and felt sick at the thought that she’d caused him even more pain and suffering.

The sound of several people coming down the stairs barely registered until she realized they weren’t fading into nothing. She got to her feet just as the door opened and her two escorts guided a weak and bloodied Maraas through the door.

They lowered him gently to the floor and onto his back before standing. Then, one looked her in the eye and said very carefully, “Oops, clumsy me.”

Gina’s heart leapt into her throat. She nodded wordlessly and they marched out of the room without backward glances. Score two, she thought, nearly weeping at their unexpected kindness.

Other than pained wheezing that accompanied every labored breath, Maraas lay silently. She fell to her knees at his side and examined him as best she could in the dim moonlight. “Oh god, they've turned you into Qunari hamburger,” she whispered, fighting back tears.

She crawled over to the thin fur acting as her bed and snatched it up. After folding it, she slid a hand under his head and eased the makeshift pillow into place.

His eyes fluttered open, barely more than slits. Gina skimmed her hands lightly over his ribs, earning a pained groan. She leaned over him and said quietly. “If you can understand me, blink once.”

He blinked, slow and deliberate. She said, “You have at least ten broken ribs, and I’m guessing a whole shitload of internal bleeding.”

She paused and he blinked again. Her fingers strayed to the bruising on her shoulder. She brought her mouth to his ear and said, “This was more than just a bruise, wasn't it?”

His eyes widened and he tensed before whimpering in pain. The pieces in her mind fell into place with a resounding clank. Gina squeezed her eye tight before whispering as quietly as she could, “No one knows, do they?”
He stared at her for a long moment, and then blinked.

The air left her lungs in a rush. *Of course.* That was why he left evidence of her fall and bruising on his face. Gina leaned close and said, “You need to do something about this internal damage.”

He tried to shake his head, but another pained noise exploded from his lips. She grimaced. “I’m not going to tell anyone. If we’re going to get out of this alive, you need to help yourself. Do what you did for me.”

Maraas lay in silence for a long moment, and she waited him out. Finally a long sigh released from his chest and he gave a barely perceptible nod. Another moment later, his ruined lips moved in some sort of incantation.

The sound of joints popping made her jump, and then his skin went feverishly hot under her fingers. His hands balled into tight fists and trembles swept over his big body before he went entirely limp.

Gina skimmed over his ribs again and found them whole and undamaged, though angry bruises still mottled him from head to toe. She’d never seen anything like it. Dorian, given enough time and energy, could heal anything. But healing catastrophic damage with one murmured command, and leaving parts of the damage untouched? This was beyond anything she’d witnessed in magic.

His breathing started to ease. Gina left him to lay quietly while she dragged over the bucket of water they’d given her earlier. She dipped the small cloth and started to clean dried blood from his face.

As she did, he watched her. She lifted a brow. “See something interesting?”

“Why are you being nice to me?”

Her own question. A smile tugged at her lips. “Someone told me that their behavior wasn't dictated by their situation. I figured that was a pretty good way to think.” Then she leaned closer and added, “Plus I'm planning to interrogate you about what's *really* going on.”

A soft laugh. ‘Darlin’, there ain't enough time in the world to explain this clusterfuck.”

Gina froze and stared at him. If she didn't know who was there with her in the dark, she would have sworn it was Bull.

Chapter End Notes

Qunlat Glossary:

Kabethari - "Simple person." Term used for those living in recently conquered lands and captives who haven't yet been indoctrinated into the Qun.

Kost - Peace.

Venak hol - "Wearying one." A mild insult.

CONSTELLATION VISUS:
http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Codex_entry:_Constellation:_Visus
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

A nice long one! Again, anything that isn't strictly canon is because I'm bending the storyline to my will. Play along, will ya? :)

Qunlat glossary at the end again.

(Between a dumb dog getting into chocolate and my truck deciding it was time for replacement, it's been tough to get this one completed. Darn this interfering thing called real life!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was the Iron Bull. The Iron fucking Bull. Slayer of dragons, destroyer of demons! He'd take on anyone and anything that came his way, and he'd enjoy every minute of the fight. Probably go chasing for more.

But, apparently, the Iron fucking Bull was also intimidated by a little girl's head of hair.

Their first morning alone hadn't gone terribly. He'd cooked for his girls enough to feel confident that breakfast was edible, but he was worried that Kaya hadn't eaten enough. Or was that too much? Should she really drink that much milk? He could hardly concentrate on his own meal with all the thoughts racing through his mind.

They picked clothes the 'democratic way', as Gina called it. He held up a pair of choices, and she pointed. A pink dress with ruffles, a red woolen sweater, and brown muck boots wound up winners.
Now it was time to do her hair. “Come on, get it together,” he muttered. He tightened his hand and glanced down at the brush. Fuck was it tiny. Barely the length of his thumb. “Are you sure this is the brush Tama uses?” he asked.

Kaya stared at him with her dark eyes and nodded solemnly. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He could do this. He’d braided plenty of leather strapping.

Only strapping wasn’t slippery like satin or attached to a tiny precious head that fit neatly into the palm of his hand, and would rightfully cry if he tugged too hard.

He lifted a brow. “Maybe we can cut your hair like Papa’s,” he said. She lit up, but he quickly laughed and shook his head vigorously. “Just kidding, little one. I can’t even begin to imagine the hell I’d catch from your Tama.”

Another deep breath. “Okay, Imekari. Let’s see what your Papa can do.”

Nearly an hour and one bout of heart aching tears later, Bull sat back and examined his work. Two sad little braids decorated her head, both crooked and sloppy. As he watched, the ribbon holding one of the braids together slipped loose and drifted to the floor.

He buried his face in his hands. Useless, hopeless, worthless excuse of a father, he chided himself. He’d always left the practical aspects of Kaya’s grooming to Gina. Not that he wasn’t willing to help if she asked, but she never did. Now he was kicking himself for not taking the initiative.

Kaya patted him on the knee. “Papa, it’s okay.”

He scoffed softly and pulled her into a hug. “It’s not, baby, but thanks anyway.”

She kissed his cheek. Bull held on for all he was worth and breathed in her scent. He’d get better. He had to.

A knock sounded at the door. Kaya flinched and curled into him. Bull patted her on the back. “Let’s be brave and see who’s there,” he said softly, putting her on the floor and rising to his feet. She walked hesitantly in front of him and opened the door slowly.

Dorian stood there, his face red and a bead of sweat tracking through the stubble coating his cheek. His normally perfect coiffe stood in every direction. Even his mustache lacked its signature curl.

“A month. I was gone a month! What the hell is going on out here?” His eyes dropped to see Kaya and his eyebrows shot up. “Vishante kaffas! What in the name of everything holy have you done to this poor child?”

Bull scowled. “Her hair was trickier than I expected.”

“Not to mention her clothes. Are you colorblind?” Dorian snorted. “You know, now that I think about it, that would explain so much. Come, little one. Let’s get you fixed up.”

Bull watched them depart to her room. He hadn’t seen anything wrong with her clothes, but what did he know?

He sank into the armchair and pinched the bridge of his nose. This was harder than he expected, and it was only his first day solo. A few minutes later, Kaya raced out of her room. “Papa, Papa! Uncle Dor said you could pick!”

She held two ribbons aloft, a fat red one and a thinner pink one. “Which do you like, Imekari?”
“That wasn’t the point,” shouted Dorian from inside the room.

Bull glowered at the open door and tapped the pink ribbon. “I always like pink,” he muttered.

Kaya beamed at him. “Me too!” Then she bolted back to her room.

He couldn’t help a little smile at her enthusiasm. She was still emotionally fragile and easily frightened, but at least she wasn’t cowering in silence anymore.

Ten minutes later, Kaya and Dorian emerged from the room. She still had on the pink dress, but instead of a red sweater, she had on a smart little green overlay. On her feet were tan sandals. Bull had to admit it looked ten times better than his choices.

Her dark hair was artfully braided in a loop that went around her entire head. The thin pink ribbon threaded throughout and ended in a tidy bow at the nape of her neck. He stared and made her turn slowly in a circle. “How the hell did you manage that?” he asked.

“Girls have always liked having me around. I picked up a few skills along the way. If you think I’m talented with a staff, you should see what magic I can do with a few hair pins.” Dorian froze and stared at himself in the mirror, aghast. “I didn’t walk through the market like this, did I?” He sighed and began battling the hair into submission.

Bull hugged Kaya tightly enough to make her giggle and squirm, then sent her to play. “Thanks, pretty boy,” he said softly.

Dorian’s eyes flicked his way and he grimaced. “I haven’t been very kind, have I?” The Mage sat down heavily, his hair still not in its usually pristine condition. “No, of course I haven’t. Still have my damned sealegs from the boat I practically had to buy to get here within any reasonable timeframe. I nearly had a stroke when I got that crow from Amatus.”

So they were back to Amatus. Good for them, Bull thought, burying the hurt that reared its head yet again.

Dorian’s hand touched his knee lightly. “Are you alright, Bull? I know this must be terribly difficult.”

“I just need to find her,” he said hoarsely.

“We will,” said Dorian, his voice resolute.

We have to, Bull’s mind whispered.

***

Bull snarled and slammed his fists on the desk as he fought to rein in his temper.

Not a single sighting. Not a single fucking one! In five days! Five whole fucking days!

Leliana cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, the Iron Bull.”

The temper won out. With a shouted curse, he swiped a hand across the desk, scattering every piece of paper before stalking out onto the balcony. Crows bounced and fluttered out of his path as he stormed over to the railing and stared across the city in seething silence. Only Cedric remained on the ledge, glaring at him balefully. He ignored the bird.

Didn’t these people know what was at stake? Couldn’t they understand how urgent their mission
was? He didn’t give two shits about some noble’s impending nuptials, or how many Venatori were on the move in the Western Approach. None of that mattered, not now!

Voices murmured in the room behind him. Bull scowled and stayed where he was. If he had to talk to one of the spies now, he’d probably lose his mind. They probably already thought he was unfit to hold his position. No need to confirm it.

Whoever it was stepped out onto the balcony. He snarled and spun on his heel. “What the fu-”

Cullen crossed to him, his eyes rimmed red and face creased with worry. “My friend. We came as quickly as we could.”

Bull nodded and battled the emotions trying to run rampant. The General made a tutting sound and pulled him into a tight hug.

Whatever tenuous control he had over himself cracked. Tears washed down his face. “I can't find her,” he said, hardly able to talk through the wrenching sobs.

“We will. You must have faith. She returned from the Fade twice. This will be no different.”

“How?” He scrubbed his face impatiently and pulled free. “The entire spy network is supposed to be looking, and I'm getting more reports about nobleman activity than ever. It's like they don't give a fuck.”

“Maybe they feel that something is better than nothing,” said Cullen. “I get stacks of fluffy reports when nothing interesting is going on.”

“Waste of my time,” growled Bull. “At least when I send my boys out they take a personal interest in their objective. Because they give a shit about things that matter to me.”

“Because you give a shit about what matters to them,” Cullen said quietly. “I can't see that happening for a network 500 spies strong.”

Bull rested his hip on the railing and heaved a sharp breath. The man was right. When he had his little crew, he knew everything. What they liked to drink, who they’d pick to fuck, what their biggest motivators were. He tried to apply the same attitude with the Inquisition network, but he hadn't even met three quarters of them. Probably never would.

“I don't think I’m cut out for this,” he said, misery and shame curling in his gut.

Cullen shrugged. “I disagree. I think you're hard on yourself at the best of times, let alone when you're discouraged.”

He scoffed and shook his head. “I don’t know why you people continually put faith in the likes of me.”

Cullen leaned his elbows on the railing. “Because you always see the best in all of us. Even when we do something foolish like get falling down drunk in a crypt.”

A half smile tugged at his lips. “Who am I to judge? I've gotten drunk in weirder places for dumber reasons.”

“I don't doubt it.” Cullen gripped his elbow. “Look, you don't always have to be the strong one, the Iron Bull. It's my turn. Let me hold your pieces together.”
Tears flooded his eye yet again. His tear ducts hadn't been used so much in his entire fucking life. He was both ashamed and grateful for the General’s steady presence in his moment of weakness.

When he finally mustered some composure, Cullen brought him up to speed. “Cassandra is going with Leliana to the Chantry. They’ve got some ideas to spread the word of Gina’s disappearance. Blackwall is taking Krem and the boys to pay their respects. Dorian and Vivienne are meeting with Josephine to see what pressures can be applied politically to get more boots on the ground.”

Cullen tapped his chest. “You and I are going to go over all of the information you’ve gathered so far and see if fresh eyes can ferret out anything interesting.”

Bull nodded bleakly. “There isn’t much, Templar.”

“We’ve accomplished more on less, Qunari.”

***

They were elbow deep in reports when a throat cleared softly at the door. Bull looked up and hardly recognized Shara. She brushed a hand down her front and plucked at a neat row of buttons nervously. “I bought clothes for my new job. Do you think they’ll work?”

He shrugged. “You look like any assistant I’ve seen.”

She smiled and stepped into the room. “Dacarte wasn’t thrilled when I told him who I was, but he’s coming around. I think he likes not having to do all of his own paperwork.”

Bull smirked. “He’s practical, I’ll give him that. Has he given you anything useful?”

“Not for finding Gina, sadly,” she said. “However, I do have a few reports to show you.” Her eyes flicked to Cullen, an unspoken question in her eyes.

Bull glanced at the blond. “There isn’t a man in Thedas I'd trust more.” Cullen’s ears went pink.

Shara shrugged and handed him a sheaf of papers. Details of shipments, bills of lading, and a few brief memos. Nothing terribly interesting, but worth looking into all the same. “Thanks, Shara.”

She nodded. “I’ll get back to work. Oh, I’m to tell you that Dacarte doesn’t want to see you directly. He thinks it's too risky. Never know who's going to come to the door. Plus, now he's got a babysitter, as he calls me. I'm supposed to ferry messages around.”

Bull grunted. “Tell him no promises.”

The elf dipped her head and exited the room. Bull passed the documents to Cullen. “I finally get me a Qunari double-agent, and he’s nearly useless. Of course.”

Cullen smirked. “They can’t all be superstars like you, can they?”

A much needed smile cracked free. “I missed you, Templar.”

***

Bull avoided it as long as he could, but finally made his way down to the crypt. Cullen offered to walk with him, but he declined. “Go rest. It’s just a viewing. We’ll have the memorial later.”

He was lost in dark thoughts when he ran into Cassandra halfway. Her eyes were just as pink with exhaustion as the General’s. She lifted a hand in greeting. “The Iron Bull, I am pleased to see you.”
“Thank you, Inquisitor,” he said distractedly.

Her face twitched. “I am not here as Inquisitor. I am here as your friend.”

He winced. “Sorry, Cass.”

She waved a hand. “Bull, what happened to Grim and Skinner...you have my sympathy.”

His throat tightened. “They wouldn’t have been in that position were it not for me.”

She touched his arm. Everyone was touching him lately. He didn’t know if he liked it. All it did was make him feel pitied, and he hated feeling pitied. “Bull, they would have done anything for you. The others still would. Do not blame yourself.”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t make this any easier.”

“No. Nothing does,” she said softly. “I know what it costs those who live to see a day without their friends and companions. The Inquisition will honour their memory.”

Bull barely stopped himself from crying again. “I appreciate it. They would too.”

They walked in silence. Bull glanced at her. “Seeker...er...Inquisitor, you don’t need to come for this.”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “They were my friends.”

He hadn’t thought of it that way, but of course they had been. Probably she was worried sick about Krem, too. The bloodstained note still resided in his pocket. Two down. The implication was painfully clear. “I’m going to find who did this and end them,” he said.

“No if I don’t find them first,” she muttered.

He ushered her through the door to the crypt. Krem, Rocky, and Stitches stood together, shoulders stiff. Blackwall stood a few feet away, his eyes averted from Cassandra. She paused to squeeze Krem’s arm before heading over to confront the Warden.


“Hell of a thing, Chief,” said Krem, his voice unusually pitchy.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling like he should have something more to add, but coming up empty.

The attendant approached them, and froze at the sight of Bull. He grimaced. “Sorry about the other day,” he said quietly.

She nodded, but still took a wide berth as she walked to the door to Grim and Skinner. He sighed and accepted her perception with as much grace as he could muster. The three Chargers went in first. Rocky burst into loud sobs almost instantly, and had to be supported by Stitches. Cassandra and Krem wrapped around each other in a teary hug.

Bull stood at the edge of the room and fought the emotions slamming into him. Blackwall came to his side and said softly, “They were good lads.”

“They deserved better than this,” said Bull, his voice strangled.

They stood in silence for a few minutes before Blackwall said, “I’ve asked Alistair to send out
scouts. Nothing to report yet, but I’ll let you know when there is.”

Bull nodded and tried to ignore the fear growing in his heart. Five days and not a single sighting. The last someone to disappear so completely was Solas. Nearly a year later he still hadn’t been seen.

He couldn’t bear it if Gina’s disappearance matched the elf’s.

***

The sky was well past dark when they all emerged from the crypt. Grim and Skinner’s remains were to be burned on a pyre and the ashes delivered to Skyhold for a proper memorial. Bull didn’t know what the hell he could do to top Dalish or Sera’s final farewell, but he was going to damn well try.

After arranging to meet at the Chantry in the morning, they headed their separate ways. The Chargers stayed in a tight group, Bull noted. Good. Last thing he needed was another attack on them.

Bull didn’t know how he managed to get home, but he did. Jeremy was dozing on their couch. He sent the man home to Dorian and looked in on Kaya.

She was out like a light, snoring like a little bear cub. He watched her sleep peacefully and then slipped back into the living room. His eye fell on the door to the room he shared with Gina. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to even look inside. Tonight was no exception.

He cursed his weakness and collapsed onto the couch. Worries began flashing through his mind, one after another. He tried to clear his head, but everything that was wrong in the world kept circling through.

His friends had arrived, but they still didn’t have a lead to follow. He’d played his heavy hand, and gotten nowhere. Not a single sighting so far.

Now what?

With every ounce of his heart he wished Gina was there. She’d have some oddball solution that sounded insane, yet somehow magically worked out in the end. He was good at planning and working strategically toward a goal, but she saw things in ways he’d never think of in a thousand years. He could use that type of thinking right now, but it just wouldn’t come.

Loneliness crushed down on him. He missed her. Missed the way she smelled, the way she felt curled into his side. How she wasn’t afraid to call him on his bullshit. He missed hearing her laugh at his stupid jokes, and hearing the way she said she loved him.

Him. Of all the unworthy people in the world, she chose him.

He’d never find another like her. He didn’t want another like her. He wanted her.

A tear streaked down his cheek. He let out a shuddering breath and bit his lip. “Get it together,” he admonished himself again. Crying wouldn’t solve anything.

He hadn’t heard Kaya get out of bed, but then she was there, crawling into his lap. He dashed away the tears and kissed her cheek. “Papa, are you sad?” she whispered.

A choked sob escaped him. He nodded and buried his face in her hair. “Papa’s missing Tama, Imekari.”
She tugged free of his embrace and ran out of sight, only to return a breath later. In her chubby little hands was the stuffed horse Krem had sewn for her. “You can have Draga,” she said. “Hugging him makes me feel better.”

Bull took the colourful scrap of fabric and felt his heart skip a beat. Selfless little thing, just like her Tama. The likes of him didn’t deserve half their kindness. He kissed her on the forehead and whispered, “Papa would rather hug you, Imekari.”

She threw her arms around his neck.

***

Morning came without much drama. Kaya woke up once, crying from another nightmare. Luckily, this one passed quickly enough that she settled back to sleep almost immediately.

Bull wasn’t so lucky. His dream lingered in his head long after waking. He was in a room full of crates, and ripping each one open. Searching desperately and finding nothing while onlookers jeered and taunted him. He woke feeling panicked and bereft. Sleep didn’t return until close to dawn.

They were busy devouring breakfast when a knock sounded at the door. Kaya automatically clutched at his pants, but with an encouraging pat on the back, she went to the door.

Dagna stood on the other side, her face splitting into a smile. Kaya shrieked in delight and threw herself at the dwarf. After an enthusiastic hugging session, Dagna looked up at Bull. “I didn’t think I’d be much use for something so important, but then I decided I could help with my favorite little girl.”

Bull swallowed hard. “You have no idea how much this means to me, Dagna.”

She flushed and said, “Anything for you and Gina.”

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Cullen and Leliana were bickering, as usual. The General wanted a direct approach with enough manpower to put down any resistance. Red wanted to play a more subtle game involving spies that slit throats and destroyed campsites before anyone knew they were there.

Bull dragged a hand over his eye and said, “I think you’re both forgetting the fact that we don’t even know where to start pointing anyone.”

Both fell silent. Cassandra cleared her throat. “Have we double checked the maps?”

Bull drew a long, slow breath. Did he look like an amateur? He swallowed the nasty retort lingering in his throat and said, “Triple. Quadruple. Whatever the word would be for two hundred. They’ve got an araval. If the winds were right, they could be in the southern Frostbacks by now. That's if they headed south and didn’t double back or change direction entirely.” And if they haven't ditched the damn thing, he added to himself.

Krem paced back and forth. “And we don’t know who took her?”

“A Qunari and an elf,” he said.

His lieutenant paused and gave him a hard look. “Is it who I think it is?”

Bull didn’t want it to be burning in the back of his mind, let alone say it out loud. He shrugged.
“Might be. I don’t know.”

Krem snorted. “I wouldn’t put it past that weaselly little fuckhead.”

An automatic defense leapt to his lips, but he clamped down on it. It wouldn’t be appreciated or even understood by this crowd. The other version of himself had the showdown with Gatt. He still had nothing but fond memories of the elf. Could remember the day he plucked him off of the Slaver’s ship.

“Are you here to buy us?”

Anger simmered under his skin. Hide it. Put it on the shelf. The assholes out there can suffer your wrath in a minute. Keep it under wraps here.

He shook his head. “No little one. We’re here to save you.”

The tiny little elf blinked and stared at him before whispering, “Do you have food?”

“More food than a little wisp like you could ever eat,” Hissrad said.

“I want to go with you,” said the little elf, reaching for his hand.

Shit. How bad had those kids had it that none showed any fear at their first sighting of giant grey skinned beasts? Hunger was the only emotion any of them showed.

A sudden rapping on the door startled him back into reality. Dorian got up and opened the door to reveal Varric and Hawke, both grinning like idiots. “We made it,” said the dwarf.

“And we brought gifts!” announced Hawke.

Bull got to his feet. “Nice of you to join us,” he said, softening the sarcasm with a smile.

“Oh you’ll forgive the delay, I promise you that,” said Hawke.

“Well? Don’t leave us hanging,” said Dorian waspishly.

Hawke moved to the side and beckoned. A Qunari stepped into view, a sour look on his face. Bull stared for a minute, trying to figure out why he seemed so familiar.

“Sten!” cried Leliana delightedly, rushing past him and throwing her arms around the Qunari’s waist. The sour expression slipped for just a second as he patted her head, somewhat awkwardly.

Bull stiffened and suddenly found it hard to breathe. Sten? As in the former Sten, now the Arishok? Here? In Val Royeaux?

He looked over to see an insufferably smug look plastered on Hawke’s face. “I told you so,” he mouthed.

The Arishok, it turned out, wasn’t alone. The Rasaan was lurking in the background, his lips tight and eyes flicking over the gathering with barely disguised disgust.

Bull bowed formally. “Shanedan, Arishok.”

“Shanedan, the Iron Bull,” responded the Arishok.

Respectful use of his chosen name and no mention of his old title? Bull hardly managed to hide his
He turned to repeat the greeting to Rasaan, but the man averted his face deliberately. Ah yes, there it was. The utter disdain he expected from the likes of these two.

The Arishok cleared his throat. “The Iron Bull, I wonder if you would walk with me,” he said.

Bull nodded. “Of course."

The Rasaan stepped forward, but the Arishok shook his head. “We will walk alone.”

The man scowled. “I am to accompany you on your journey.”

“When I require an advisor. I do not,” said the Arishok, his voice taking on an edge of command. “Therefore you will remain.”

“Meravas, Arishok,” said the man, his eyes betraying his real feelings on the matter.

The Arishok tipped his head toward the door. Bull took the hint and lead the way. As he passed Hawke, he clapped the man on the shoulder. “This almost makes up for the time you shot me with an arrow,” he muttered.

Hawke went scarlet. “That was an accident.”

“Sure it was,” Bull said with a smirk.

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He and the Arishok walked together, both silent for several minutes. Bull never had been introduced to the Qunari, only caught sight of him at a few functions before he left Par Vollen for good. Back then he cut an intimidating picture, even moreso without horns.

Up close and in person, he was still intimidating. He wasn’t as tall or well-muscled as Bull, but he had a feeling that looks weren’t everything with this man. He’d heard the rumours of how hard he could hit back in his days as Sten. Maybe he wasn’t quite as fighting fit now, but some things you never truly lost.

They reached a high wall overlooking the city. The Arishok leaned on the wall and gazed around with interest. “The architects back home could learn from the design of this city. It is every bit as beautiful as it is secure.”

Bull nodded. “The only weak point is the harbour. Too many comings and goings to monitor.”

The Arishok nodded. “I thought the same, though it is not susceptible to naval attacks. This is a city vulnerable to spies and smugglers.”

Bull agreed. It made his job easier at times. The Arishok lifted a brow. “Is there a shop here selling cookies? It has been an age since I was last able to obtain a batch.”

Cookies? Seriously? Bull cleared his throat. “I can get Josephine to pick some up for you. There’s a shop in the market she likes to frequent.”

The Arishok smiled. “I tried to convince one of the bakers in Par Vollen to try making some, but they looked at me like I sprouted horns.”

It might have been funny if they were in a tavern swapping war stories, but out here with Bull fully in the dark, he wasn’t in the mood. “Apologies for my bluntness, Arishok, but why have you come to Val Royeaux?”
The man sighed and nodded. “I apologize for my tangent. What I must tell you is not easy to say, and if I am honest, I do not look forward to it.”

His gut churned. “Speak freely, please.”

“I have some information regarding the disappearance of your mate.”

Bull felt his knees go weak. “Tell me,” he demanded, trying not to shout in his eagerness.

The Arishok shook his head. “I must give you context before I can do that.”

Instant anger boiled over. “Then be quick about it,” he said through gritted teeth.

A pained look came to his face. “I cannot promise that either.”

Bull wanted to strangle him, but decided that strangling the most powerful man in Par Vollen would only cause him more grief down the road. “Do your best,” he grated, clenching his fists tightly.

“The political climate in Par Vollen has changed dramatically in the thirteen years since you've left,” said the Arishok. “Corruption like you cannot imagine is running rampant, and public opinion is starting to take a turn.”

Bull felt his eye twitch. If this was going to turn into a lesson in politics, he was going to scream. “This was a problem when I was a kid too. What's your point?”

“There has been an increase in our people choosing the Tal-Vashoth way.” The Arishok waved at hand at him. “You are not the first, nor are you the last. The Triumvirate decided it was time to investigate the root cause of these defections.”

“And what did you find?”

“A story beyond anything you could imagine.” The Arishok began to walk slowly. Bull followed along. “You, of course, are aware of the Salit?”

Bull nodded. The Ben-hassrath investigated the people. The Salit investigated the Ben-hassrath. Most preferred to believe they didn't exist, but they were there. Always scrutinizing and questioning. It had been their judgement that found him sent to play the Iron Bull in Orlais. “Was the issue confined to the Ben-hassrath?”

The Arishok shook his head. “No. Not in the slightest.”

“Then why is the Salit involved?”

“Happenstance. I met a talented young Isskari many years ago while out securing an old Elvish site. It is thanks to his work that we were able to find and secure the Tome of Koslun.”

Also where the Sten and Hawke crossed paths, if Bull remembered correctly.

The Arishok continued. “In the years since, he was promoted to Salit. As of late, I've found it nearly impossible to find someone in Par Vollen I consider trustworthy. He has always managed to surprise me with his honesty and candor, so I personally requested that he do some research into the Tal-Vashoth problem.”

“Did he find anything?”

“The Salit discovered that the bulk were normal citizens who suffered Asala-taar and did not receive
appropriate treatment. This has been addressed, and has significantly decreased the amount of defectors. However, he also found that there was a subset of individuals who did not suffer from Asala-taar.” The man took a deep breath. “This is where it gets strange.”

Bull frowned. “What's strange about it?”

The Arishok pulled a face. “I do not wish to patronize you, but I am also unsure of a better way to explain.”

Bull waved a hand impatiently. “I do not offend easily. Just spit it out.”

“As you know, all breeding is controlled by the Tamassrans. What you might not know is how those pairings are selected.”

Bull shrugged. “Seems simple enough. Choose two well matched individuals with strong characteristics you'd like passed forward.”

“You are correct. Most pairings are simple choices. Any two people can create a decent laborer.” The man paused again. “If you wish to deliberately craft a citizen with higher than average skills and talents, then the choices aren't so simple. You must carefully consider all aspects of each potential breeding partner, and even then, the chances of birthing a child with the best qualities of both is not assured.”

Elementary stuff, Bull thought. Why on earth did they have to talk about this before he could get information about his Kadan?

The Arishok continued, apparently unconcerned about Bull's confusion. “When you've created your talented individual, you must broach the next challenge. Typically, they tend to have a higher level of intelligence. This makes them prone to free-thinking.”


“Indeed,” said the Arishok, clearly missing the sarcasm. “Therefore, a long running experiment was devised. They took a narrow selection of parents and a limited amount of Tamassrans. They wanted to see if different child rearing techniques would override this basic drive to question everything.”

Now this was something new. Despite his impatience, he was intrigued. “How long did this carry on?”

“The breeding program ran for two decades, though the experiment itself lasted nearly 35 years.”

“Was it successful?”

The Arishok hesitated. “In some respects. In others, it is considered an abysmal failure.”

“How did this whole thing work?”

“Initially there were six adults chosen. Two males and four females. All high ranking people with high levels of intelligence and physical prowess. In two short years, they added another male and tripled the females. As the women aged, they were replaced to preserve their physical health.”

Bull lifted a brow. “How many children were produced?”

“Almost 250.”

“Busy little brothel,” he said.
The Arishok cleared his throat. “The Iron Bull, you were one of those offspring.”

Bull felt his eye snap wide open. “What?”

“You were born in the fifth year of the program.”

He always knew about his origins, but to learn he was part of a specialized breeding program was weird and unsettling. Bull had to stop and take a minute to absorb the information. “Wait a minute, that means I have dozens of blood relatives.”

The Arishok nodded and said, “One of whom is the Salit. In a twist no one could have predicted, he was also borne of this program. He shares your paternal genetics.”

Bull could tell that little tidbit was intended to make him feel better, but it didn’t. He only felt more strange. “Okay, so they made a few fancy babies. What next?”

The Arishok looked uncomfortable. “The children were placed with one of twelve homes at random.”

“Let me guess. Each home was designed to teach under special instruction.”

“Yes.” The Arishok grimaced. “Four homes raised the children per usual. Four homes raised the children under strict discipline. And the final four sought to harness the free-thinking tendencies.”

Bull frowned. “Which was I raised in?”

“The third group, as was the Salit.”

Based on he and his half-brother alone, the program had a 50-50 shot at the kid going Tal-Vashoth. Not good. “So what was the result of the entire experiment?”

“In the years since the program ended, nearly 80% of the children became as talented as their parents. And of that 80%, more than half have gone Tal-Vashoth.”

Damn. Over a third. “Is there a correlation to the manner in which they were raised?”

“Some, yes. Those raised in the stricter homes were least likely to stray from their teachings, though they did suffer from psychological issues as they aged. Those that were taught to embrace their abilities tended to show the strongest talents, but they were the most likely to choose their action based on their personal morality rather than their teachings.”

Bull lifted a brow. “I’m guessing that’s probably not the results they wanted.”

“Not at all.” The Arishok sighed. “Unfortunately, the teachings were not the only factor. It would have been simpler that way, but the Ashkaari were not done with their meddling.”

Bull scowled. “How so?”

“Each child was subject to testing as they aged. Once they were firmly set in their career, those who showed higher level of ability were given additional challenges.”

He thought back and didn’t recall anything that felt unusual. “What kind of challenges?”

The Arishok looked away for a minute. “They were unique to the individual, but the goal was to shake their foundations and see how they reacted. Some tests were more...vigorous than others.”
Bull felt a twist of nausea. “What was my test?” The man shifted his weight and wouldn't look his way. Bull pressed him. “Kost, Arishok. What was my test?”

The Arishok squeezed his eyes tight before reluctantly looking at Bull. “Whilst in Seheron, you were were given a morality test to see how far you would go to right the wrongs done to innocents.”

Cold sweat broke out on his brow and his hands started to shake. “Please tell me it wasn't the fucking orphanage.”

The Arishok winced. “I cannot do that.”

Fury washed over him. “They killed those babies to see how I would react?”

“It seems that they had become more zealous at that stage in the experiment.”

“Zealous?” Bull had to stop and force himself not to shout. “They committed crimes in the name of some fucking experiment!”

The Arishok didn't look away. “I'm sure it is no comfort to you, but the program was ended shortly after this test was executed. The Ariqun was disturbed by how far some of their people had taken the experiment. Everyone involved was shifted into new career paths.”

He wanted to throw up. To hit things. To run until his legs wouldn't work. “They should've been charged with murder, every last one of them,” he snarled. With a flash of clarity, he suddenly understood exactly why he'd been given a free pass after Seheron rather than being turned Viddath-bas. “They dare judge people for choosing to become Tal-Vashoth in the face of such action? Unbelievable.”

The Arishok gave him a weary look. “I have not finished.”

“There's more?” Bull asked, incredulous. “Just how much worse can it get?”

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The short answer? A lot. It got a lot worse. Bull gave up on walking and took up residence on a bench while the Arishok relayed the extent of the manipulation that had gone on without his knowledge.

The experiment being officially shut down hadn't stopped a few of the Ashkaari from going rogue and carrying out further testing on he and several other children. Those who failed often found themselves being executed on the spot or forced to commit criminal acts as a form of attrition. Most would wind up killed before their redemption was complete.

That fateful mission on the Storm Coast had been entirely manufactured. He had been fed incorrect information, which left him no alternative but to leave his Chargers to die or leave the Qun. “Only your association with the Inquisition saved your life that day,” said the Arishok quietly.

Not long after, the Triumvirate began their investigation. That the program was still being acted upon distressed them greatly, but it was unclear just who was still involved or what they hoped to achieve. Without any solid proof, it was impossible to confront any of the perpetrators, let alone punish them.

After several months of frustrating dead ends, the Salit offered himself as bait. With the assistance of a Sten that owed the Arishok a favour, they manufactured an opportunity for him to fail in his adherence to the Qun. Acting as Isskari, he was to test-fire a newly designed gaatlok weapon at a small Tal-Vashoth fortress filled with women and children, as well as a small defense force.
Of course, he didn’t go through with it, and the Sten had him put under arrest. The carefully crafted story that circulated throughout Par Vollen was that his failure lead the rushing karataam to meet with a force much larger than anticipated. According to rumour, most did not survive the assault attempt.

It was pre-arranged that he'd escape custody and go on the run before being officially declared Tal-Vashoth. He came to Orlais under an assumed name and waited to see if anyone would come hunting for him.

It took less than six weeks for Gatt to sniff him out and offer him the chance to redeem himself. ‘To choose more wisely’. According to the reports, the elf hadn't given him any detail other than promising to have a high ranked official give him the all-clear to go home safely.

That so-called redemption had involved kidnapping Gina. The Arishok was quick to say, “Entirely unsanctioned, I assure you.”

Bull switched between feeling sick to his stomach to being incensed with rage. After everything he'd done for the elf, this was his thanks? He tried to calm his jangled nerves, but nothing helped. “You people have been snapping at my family's heels for months. Why should I believe this tale?”

The Arishok frowned. “There have been no orders sent out regarding you or your family.”

“I've seen the orders myself.”

“Then they were not official,” said the Arishok.

With sickening dread, he forced himself to confront the deepest fear haunting the back of his mind. It killed him to even think that Gatt could be involved. That he was likely the instigator of everything that had happened. But if he put his emotions aside, the logic stood true. His failure on the Storm Coast, regardless of how or why, hadn’t looked good for either of them. He’d left the Qun and hadn’t suffered any real repercussions. Gatt probably hadn’t fared so well.

It stood to reason that the elf would be angry at him. But was he angry enough to threaten everything Bull loved? Could the little thing he’d snatched from the jaws of slavery really be so cruel?

Then again, maybe Gatt’s hand was being forced. With such nefarious deeds afoot, was that so far fetched?

Bull swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Where are they now?”

Red began to climb up the Arishok’s neck. “I don't know.”

Bull shot to his feet. “What do you mean, you don't know? You've got a man on the ground with them right now!”

He was handed a small bundle of notes, all written in the same hurried scrawl.

“Contact made. The Ben-hassrath known as Gatt has asked me to join him on a mission. Absolution to be rewarded if we are successful. ‘A high ranking official’ will order my safe return to Par Vollen.”

“No further details have been revealed to me. We are heading north of Val Royeaux.”

“I have taken prisoner the mate of former Ben-hassrath Hisrad. Known now as the Iron Bull. Unsure why this particular Tal-Vashoth has been targeted at this time.”
“She is the Saviour of Thedas. The Viddathari refuses to explain his actions to me. Would not have carried out this plan had I known.”

“Heading south. Set to meet the Viddathari’s contact within the next day. Gatt’s behaviour becomes more erratic as we travel further.”

Bull read them again. “When did you get the last message?”

“Three days ago. Nothing else has come since its arrival. When I received a request from Hawke for assistance, I took advantage of the opportunity to come to Orlais myself.” The Arishok scowled. “Corruption is spreading through Qunandar like a virus and I did not know who to trust.”

Bull’s fingers trembled. “Are you sure you can trust this Salit?”

“I cannot be sure of anything, the Iron Bull. All I can promise is that once this is done, we will make this right for you.”

Bull curled his lip. “That's assuming it can be made right.”

The man flinched. “We will respect whatever decision you make.”

Bull snorted. “Sure. And I'm the King of England.”

He ignored the mystified look on the man's face as he stormed away.

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Hawke intercepted him as he marched toward the Chantry. “You wouldn't believe the strings I had to pull to arrange all of this. Please tell me it wasn't a waste.”

Bull scowled. “It just raised more questions.”

Hawke sighed. “Damn. I had hoped he'd be able to give you something concrete.”

“Three days ago they were still moving south and looking to meet up with some mystery contact. It’s the only solid piece of information I could get.”

“That's...something,” said Hawke, worry filling his dark eyes. ‘Heading south’ was about as vague as it got.

They’d just turned to climb the stairs when Bull heard his name being called frantically. He spun to see a hooded Qunari rushing his way.

Hawke hissed a breath and reached for his sword, but Bull shook his head sharply. “Oza,” he called, and headed toward her.

She clutched his arm. “The Iron Bull, I must speak with you.”

His skin was practically vibrating with impatience, but with great effort, he forced himself to remain pleasant. “What do you need, Oza?”

She grabbed his hand and pressed something into it. He frowned and looked down.

Gina’s half of the claw lay in his palm.

The air sucked out of the atmosphere and his vision dimmed. A moment later he heard Hawke shout
and felt the man grabbing at him frantically. Through the haze he realized his legs had given way and barely caught himself in time to avoid cracking his knee open on the cobblestones.

“Where? When?” he rasped, accepting Hawke’s assistance to regain his balance.

“Day before last,” she said. “South of here, not far from Halamshiral.”

“A day's ride on a fast horse,” said Hawke breathlessly.

Bull nodded. “Tell me everything!”

Oza nodded and spoke rapidly. “She was with two others, an elf and a Qunari. The elf appeared to be in charge. They asked Kuback the way to Val Royeaux and then stole our cart and druffalo.”

Bull caught his breath. “They weren't in an araval?”

She frowned. “No, they were on foot.”

Damn elf! “How did she look?” he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“She was bound, but appeared healthy,” said the woman. “We nearly did not see her. She was hidden behind the Qunari.”

Bull tilted his head. “Why didn’t she run to you?”

The woman cringed. “That elf. I believe he threatened her. She pretended not to know us and I played along.”

“Good girl,” murmured Hawke approvingly.

Fear filled her eyes. “He did not believe me. If that Qunari hadn't stepped in, I don't think I'd be here now.”

“How did you get the claw?” asked Hawke.

“She pulled it off when neither were looking and dropped it.” The woman hesitated. “I believe the Qunari saw after.”

Bull felt a little tingle of relief. Perhaps the Salit was as trustworthy as advertised. “Where are Kuback and Semaka?”

“They are safe. We ran for half a day. When it was clear that no one was following, I insisted on rushing here.”

Gratitude swelled through every inch of his body. “Thank you, Oza. I don't know how I'll ever repay you.”

Her violet eyes flashed. “I cannot imagine how I would feel if anyone touched my family. I had to do something to help.”

“You’ve certainly done that, you marvel of a woman,” said Hawke.

Her cheek went pink and she lifted her chin defiantly. “The Iron Bull, I had to steal a horse to get here.”

Bull couldn’t stop a smile stretching across his face. The things his Kadan inspired people to do.
“I’ll take care of it, Oza.” His mind switched into planning mode. “We need to get everyone together,” he said to Hawke.

Hawke whistled sharply. A minute later, Cedric landed on his shoulder. Bull narrowed his eye. “If you’re planning to send a message using that bird, you’re better off crumpling the note and throwing it on the ground.”

Hawke gave him an affronted glare. “Cedric is an incredibly talented corvid. Just you watch.” He finished scribbling a note and said to the crow, “Would you mind delivering this message? It’s terribly urgent.”

Cedric puffed up and snatched the note in his beak before launching high and hard into the sky. Bull watched as he streaked out of view. When he glanced over at Hawke, the man looked thoughtful. “Did I forget to mention he was specially trained?”

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Bull rode an impatient Brego. Astride Sunny was the Arishok, much to his great surprise. The man had insisted on coming along, even to the point of getting into a shouting match with the now pouting Rasaan.

He glanced over his shoulder and felt his heart swell. The entire Inquisition circle was present. Even Madame de Fer, though she was inside a lovely little cart instead of riding. The Chargers rode at his shoulder, faces filled with determination. At the last minute, Shara and her Red Jenny group had mustered, ready to help anyway they could.

The only missing people were Josephine, Dagna, and Kaya. Leliana had them safely ensconced in her Chantry quarters with round the clock Templar guards. He wasn't happy about leaving his baby anywhere, but he didn't have much choice. There was no telling who was at the other end of their long chase, or what kind of fight would be on their hands.

They rode hard through the rest of their daylight. Only when it was too dark to safely continue did they stop, and even that was with reluctance.

Krem whipped up a quick pot of stew, and everyone ate in weary silence. The Arishok sat next to Hawke across the fire from Bull. The Rasaan was whispering something in his ear yet again.

Finally the Qunari lifted a hand. “Shanedan, pashaara. Ebost antir vantaam vasheb-sa karatoh.”

The Rasaan sneered. “We should turn back and leave them to their fate. This is not our problem.”

The Arishok ate another mouthful before saying, “We must do our part to right this wrong.”

The Rasaan clenched his fists and said in harsh Qunlat, “Why are you risking your life for this basra? She is not worth your time.”

Bull stilled and examined the Rasaan more closely. He wasn’t small, not by any stretch of the imagination. But he was soft and clearly hadn’t picked up a weapon for years. For a man slated to act as emissary for the Qun, he hadn’t shown much decorum. He hadn’t even acknowledged Cassandra when she introduced herself to him. If he was this terrible at the core of his position, how on earth would he perform when his time came to replace the Ariqun?

At any rate, Bull didn't trust him. Blind loyalty to anything was dangerous at the best of times. Back this asshole into a corner and he’d probably go for the jugular. If it were up to Bull, the man would've been dumped onto the first boat to Par Vollen, not sitting next to the fire.

The Arishok ate another mouthful before saying, “We must do our part to right this wrong.”

The Rasaan sneered. “We should turn back and leave them to their fate. This is not our problem.”
“I am not going back. You are welcome to, Rasaan,” snapped the Arishok, looking as though he hoped the man would accept the chance to run away.

“I would not abandon you, even if I disagree with your actions. Though I will include this in my reports to the Triumvirate.”

It was likely intended as a threat, but the Arishok didn't respond. The blessed silence didn’t last long. The Rasaan huffed and said, “This Tal-Vashoth filth chose to turn his back on the Qun. And now that his basra mate is in trouble, we should step in?”

Bull sighed and said, “Look, if you've got something to say, I'm right here.”

The Rasaan glared at him and snapped, “I did not address you. Have you forgotten the chain of command so quickly?”

Bull refused to respond in Qunlat. He took a spoonful of stew and spoke around it. “See, the thing is, I don't follow your chain of command anymore. So I talk to whoever the fuck I want whenever the fuck I want. And if you don't like it, you can kick rocks.”

The Rasaan puffed his chest and pointed at him. “You would risk your life for this ingrate?” he hissed to the Arishok.

“Still right here,” Bull said, waving the spoon. “You afraid to talk to me? Worried my freedom might be contagious?”


Bull licked his spoon. “Better than being an arrogant prick like you.”

“At least I know where my loyalty lies, Tal-Vashoth!”

Bull shrugged. “At least I have a brain in my head, viddath-bas.”

The Rasaan shot to his feet. “You watch your tongue, filth!”

“Or else what? You’ll shout at me some more?” Bull mimed a yawn. “Wake me when you have something interesting to say.”

Cursing at the top of his lungs, the man launched across the circle. With practiced ease, Bull deposited his bowl in Varric’s lap and stood in time to step behind and loop an arm around the Rasaan’s neck. As a final insult, he jammed the tip of his spoon into the side of his throat.

The Rasaan kicked and squirmed, but Bull just tightened his arm and lifted him off his feet, pressing the spoon hard enough to make the man squeak. “Careful,” Bull said calmly. “There’s this artery, right about here. It’s under high pressure, so if you dig in enough, it’ll just…pop. Feel that?” He dragged the spoon over the artery, making it twang under the man’s skin.

The Rasaan sucked a panicked breath and started to claw. Bull laughed. “Easy, Rasaan. I’m not pushing nearly hard enough to do anything.” He put his lips next to the man’s ear and said softly, “But I could.”

“Release me,” the man demanded breathlessly.

Bull made a low humming sound and said, “No, I don’t think I will.”
The man made another pathetic attempt at escape, but with his toes barely touching the ground, he couldn’t get any leverage. “Put me down, or face the consequences!” he shouted, his voice going shrill with frustration.

“Consequences? What consequences? You have no power here, Rasaan. I suppose you could ask the Arishok to make the request, but I don’t follow his orders either.” He glanced at the Arishok. His face remained utterly stoic as he watched the drama unfolding.

Bull laughed softly. “I get the feeling he wouldn’t mind if I gutted you like a fish, right here and now. In fact, I think the only person around here that might get upset is the pretty Mage boy. Hates it when I get blood on his robes.”

Dorian gave him a foul look. “Just because you wouldn't know fashion if it bit you in that giant grey arse,” he muttered. Bull grinned widely.

The Rasaan renewed his struggle. “I will not submit quietly to your brutality!”

Bull rolled his eye and tightened his arm again. “You know, I have an idea. You apologize for calling my girl basra, and I’ll let you go. What do you say?”

“Ebadim vashedan Tal-Vashoth, ebra-hissal eva-lok defransdim!”

Bull tutted. “Come now, that’s not very nice. I’m giving you a reasonable chance at getting out of this with only a bruise to your pride. Least you could do is consider it.”

“I will never apologize to the likes of you!”

The Arishok made a low growling sound. “Pashaara! Enough, the both of you!”

“He started it,” Bull said.

“And I’m ending it!” The Arishok pointed at the Rasaan. “You will apologize.”

“Never!”

The Arishok’s calm demeanor finally broke. “Maraas imekari! You embarrass us both!”

Bull could feel the Rasaan getting more tense with each moment. He understood the internal struggle. No one wanted to lose face in front of a crowd of strangers. When his mentor had schooled him in front of an entire karataam for being a cocky asshole, he’d hated the man for a day. But he never forgot the lesson either.

After a long silence, the man finally muttered a half-hearted apology. Bull considered pushing the man to make it louder and more specific, but figured he’d just piss everyone off with his arrogance. It was enough that the Rasaan relented. He let go abruptly and didn’t bother catching the man when he stumbled off-balance.

As the Rasaan stormed into the darkness cursing loud enough to wake the dead, Bull sat and retrieved his bowl from Varric. The dwarf was staring at him with an open mouth. “I thought you were bullshitting me when you said you’d kill me with a spoon.”

Bull wiped his spoon clean and gave him a dirty look. “Ben-hassrath. Why must I keep reminding you?”

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They were up and moving before the sun fully rose. Bull could sense the exhaustion in the crowd, but it was outweighed by a palpable excitement. Leliana and Hawke sent crows ahead, and within two hours, responses came back. Most were useless fluff, but then there was a startled cry from Leliana. “They’ve found the araval!”

It wasn’t far, but it might as well have been days away in Bull’s mind. Brego kept a hard pace that none of the other horses could match, but Bull didn’t pull him up. If something jumped out at them, it would regret the decision.

They met with a scout who led them through a patch of trees and into a clearing. The araval stood untouched. Bull nearly fell in his rush to dismount.

It was frustratingly empty, and no significant tracks marred the grass around it. Too much time had passed. Even Blackwall came up empty. Bull cursed.

Hawke had a map pulled out. “Your darling Oza thought they met up down here,” he said, pointing to a spot not far away. “A cart would leave deeper tracks.”

“That’s practically spitting distance from Halamshiral,” said Varric.

“I don’t get it. How could they get past every last one of my spies? How can there be this all this activity and not a single damn report about it?” Bull shook his head. With every flawed mission he wished he could go back to his small crew of vagabonds. At least there would be some actual accountability.

They rode down a path in the trees until a whistled signal caught their ears. Another scout came into view. “We’ve found something, Sers.”

They followed to another clearing. Deep tracks that only a druffalo could make were followed by deep grooves that scored the ground. It was practically a road map.

Bull’s heart raced in time with the fall of Brego’s steps. They were only two days behind, maybe closer. “Come on, buddy,” he whispered to the bay.

Brego kept the pace far longer than he would have expected. Gina probably would have shouted at him miles ago, but the horse plowed on relentlessly. When he finally did slow, it was just in time for the tracks to take a turn off the main path.

Bull dropped to the ground and gave Brego a vigorous ear rub. “You’ll never run out of cookies as long as I live,” he promised.

The horse snorted and let his head droop. Bull gave him one last scratching and then started following the tracks on foot.

He hadn't gotten far before a breathless Cullen and Hawke joined him, quickly followed by the rest of the crew. No one complained about their fatigue except the Rasaan, but even he seemed to get caught up in the thrill of the hunt.

A clearing opened in front of them and the tracks started to change. No longer just druffalo and cart wheels. Dozens of Qunari sized tracks of varying sizes began dotting the ground.

The Arishok cursed. “I do not recall sending a force out to this area.”

Cassandra frowned. “Would anyone else have the authority?”
He shrugged. “Perhaps a Kithshok, but they would have sent a report. Any movement into sovereign territory is closely monitored.”

“Not closely enough,” muttered Dorian.

Bull ignored them and followed the tracks. They filed through the trees, occasionally swapping paths when a better trail was found. Bull knelt and touched one of the boot prints. It was dry on the surface, but when he dug in an inch, the soil was damp.

His heart quickened. “If they are on foot, they aren't more than a day ahead,” he said, rising to his feet and breaking into a jog.

They came to another clearing. Bull froze. A stone staircase stood front and centre. As he let his eye travel up, despair washed through him. “No,” he whispered.

“An Eluvian,” whispered Vivienne, the surprise plain in her voice.

“No!” he yelled. Someone touched him but he jerked away and bolted up the stairs. “No no no no,” he shouted, every nerve in his body on fire.

Steps chased behind him, but he was too far into the desperate rage. He slammed a fist into the mirror's surface, cursing and praying in the same breath. All he accomplished was making his fist ache. He yanked his axe free. As he hauled back for a swing at full force, a sudden gust of wind snapped around him and launched him back a step. He stumbled and then stiffened as a raven flew past his face. A breath later, it transformed with a sizzling flash of light.

“Morrigan,” breathed Leliana.

“It wouldn't do to break the mirror, you foolish man,” said the Witch calmly, flicking a stray feather from her hair.

Bull blinked and said dumbly, “What?”

The Arishok sighed heavily. “No one told me she would be involved.”

Morrigan smirked. “Sten. You look much smaller than you did ten years ago.”

He sputtered indignantly. Bull waved a hand sharply, his senses coming back to him. “We haven’t seen you in months. What are you doing here now?”

“I’m here to save the day,” she said. “What else?”

He was on the verge of an actual breakdown and she was being flippant. It took every ounce of his very shaky self-control not to throttle her then and there. “No double speak,” he snapped. “No riddles, no innuendo. Answers, now.”

She sighed and patted his arm. “Always with the demands.” Her odd yellow eyes flicked around the group. “I’ve been exploring the Eluvian labyrinth. Imagine my great surprise when a great lot of Qunari start wandering around the place too.”

The Arishok found his tongue as well. “When?”

“Oh, going on six months by now. Didn't you know about this? I thought they put you in charge.”

He curled his lip. “Clearly not.”
“You should probably look into that,” she said. “The Qunari are fiddling with magic. To what end, I'm not sure, but I do not like it. I also know they have Gina.”

Bull felt his entire body jolt. “Who? Where?”

“The same people making my Eluvian world much too crowded. I don't have the foggiest idea who they are, but I do have a token for you.” Morrigan reached into a leather satchel and pulled out a small bundle. She handed it over and said, “Courtesy of a particularly vile elf.”

He stared. Tears threatened to flood down his cheeks. Hawke pulled his hand over for a look and caught his breath. “The bastard!” he hissed.

Gina’s braid lay in his palm, all smoky grey mixed with chocolate brown. Bull would know it anywhere. It had been hacked off and the ends tied to keep it together. A note was attached in the same rough script as the one in his pocket.

“More to come. Are you excited yet?”

Belatedly he realized his breathing had gone stilted and harsh. Morrigan’s eyes softened. “She's doing rather well, you know. I can't say the same for the other prisoners.”

Other prisoners? Bull shook himself and said, “Who else?”

She shook her head. “Don't know.”

Cassandra sighed. “Well what do you know?”

“I know where they are keeping her. And before you ask, it's a long way from here. Luckily for all of you, I have a map and the lock code.” She tapped the side of her head and pointed to the Eluvian.

Bull stared at the mirror. “Then why the fuck are we still standing here? Let's get moving!”

A smile spread across the Witch's face. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter End Notes

QUNLAT GLOSSARY:

Ariqun - One of the Triumvirate; male or female, leader of the priesthood. They are responsible for pushing scientific progress and ensuring the Qun is taught.

Asala-taar - "Soul sickness;” a Qunari combat ailment that seems analogous to a combat stress reaction, or even post-traumatic stress disorder. It is an epidemic in Seheron, where statistically two soldiers contract it for every one casualty. Sufferers are usually removed from combat and reassigned among the priesthood and workers.

Ashkaari - "One who seeks," or "one who thinks;" scientists, philosophers, or those who have found enlightenment.

Kithshok - Leaders of the Qunari army of Seheron; a general; They also are in charge of negotiating trade between the Qunari and foreign traders at ports.
Rasaan - "Emissary," or "chosen heir;" the Ariqun's successor, and as such, acts as their representative abroad. Also serves as the spiritual adviser to the Arishok, and accompanies him on expeditions.

Shanedan - Literally, "I'll hear you." A respectful greeting.

Sten - Infantry platoon commander.

FULL PHRASES:

Shanedan, pashaara. Ebost antir vantaam vasheb-sa karatoh - I hear you. Enough. You're tired of the excrement your superior has been giving you. (More colloquially: "Give it a rest, why don't you?")

Ebadim vashedan Tal-Vashoth, ebra-hissal eva-lok defransdim - Those excremental Tal-Vashoth can go do something explicit with my intimate friends.

Maraas imekari - "A child bleating without meaning."
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

A shorter one with more to come this week!

Posting via mobile, so forgive any formatting or other errors please!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gina sat with her knees drawn tight to her chest and watched the monstrous Qunari as he slept. By the time she'd finished dabbing away the worst of the dried gore, he'd been crashed out.

She stared at him, picking out features that matched Bull. Even with the brutal contusions and abrasions decorating his face she could see that he had the same jawline, the same lips, the same purring snore. As she scanned the rest of him, she recalled his shockingly similar stormy green eyes. They even sounded identical when he wasn’t pretending to have an accent.

What were the chances he was Bull’s son? The conversation with her Qunari played clearly in her mind. He'd been called to breed twice. Once before Seheron, once after. She did the math. The youngest child would be 13 at most. The eldest would be around 23, give or take a year.

Gina still had trouble judging the age of Qunari. Even after three years she wasn't sure how old Bull was. He had smile lines and crow’s feet, but thanks to his extensive scarring and habitual buzzcuts on an almost daily basis, it was impossible to judge any further. She'd guessed anything from 30 to 60, which got her nothing more than laughs or dirty looks. Seeing as the stubborn ass wouldn't confirm or deny her guesses, she was left wondering.

That said, she had the feeling this guy wasn't young enough to be one of Bull’s kids. The Karashoks
wandering around the place had a distinctly youthful appearance he lacked. So what options did that leave? Was he a sibling? Cousin? Nephew?

Which begged a whole new question. Was that even a thing? Would the Tamassrans ever put the same parents together more than once? If nothing else, Qunari were practical. If a pairing made a beautiful, talented baby, wouldn't it be logical to try again? Surely relatives existed, even if they weren't aware of their genetic connection.

Gina wanted to prod him awake and satisfy her curiosity, but restrained herself. He'd already taken an extra battering thanks to her big mouth. Best to let the poor guy rest and recover some strength. So she sat and watched over him as her mind raced.

***

Bull resisted the urge to itch himself all over. The strange sensation of passing through the mirror lingered on his skin. And now they were gods knew where at the full mercy of the most evasive creature he'd ever had the misfortune to meet.

He looked around again and shivered. They were on floating islands that filled the sky. The Mages were all clearly enthralled by the place. Bull was not. Floating cloud islands weren't beautiful. They were fucking creepy. What was holding them up? And what if that something failed?

The Arishok’s expression mirrored his consternation. “We should not linger,” he muttered.

Cullen scowled and rubbed at his ear. “Does anyone else hear that incessant ringing?”

Hawke and Varric lifted their hands. Morrigan made a disgusted sound. “How can you not appreciate the marvel of this place? We were near Halamshiral moments ago. Moments from now, we'll be in a far away land.”

“Where?” asked Cassandra suspiciously.

“An ancient fortress in rural northern Ferelden. Currently unoccupied, but in truly excellent condition.”

Bull growled. “We're not buying the place. Just get us out of here.”

She rolled her eyes, but then turned her attention to the mirror facing them. “Maraas nehraa.”

Bull watched as the mirror went shimmery and the group began to step through. After Cassandra and Cullen, he followed. A hallway in an old castle came into focus, layered in grime and cobwebs except where boot prints scuffed through the dust on the floor. Qunari sized, and lots of them. He crouched low to look closer, trying to calm his suddenly racing pulse.

Morrigan stepped through and shot him a knowing look. “Believe me now?”

He lifted a brow and rose back to his full height. “We wouldn't have followed you this far if I had a shadow of doubt, Witch.”

A smirk came to her face. “Ever so pragmatic.”

They followed the tracks around a corner and up some stairs. Bull peered out of a window and tried to get his bearings. If he was to guess, he’d say they were somewhere along the Storm Coast.

Leliana’s voice, soft and lilting, caught his ear from the bottom of the stairs. “I remember when we
first met, you know.”

“Oh? What do you remember?” asked the Arishok.

“That little grey kitten. And you, trying to pretend you weren't playing with it.” She giggled. Leliana actually giggled. Bull never would have guessed she could make such a sound. “I called you a softie,” she stage-whispered.

“A term I still don't appreciate,” said the Arishok, the embarrassment clear in his voice.

“I thought it was adorable,” she said wistfully.

“You did? I thought it was a weakness you were mocking.”

“A big strong man taking the time to be kind to animals?” Her voice dropped an octave. “There is nothing weak about such a thing.”

Bull quickly moved out of earshot and quelled the rising temptation to tease them both mercilessly. On any other day with any other pairing he'd have had a field day with such comments. Cockblocking the Arishok? He wasn't confident he'd survive the consequences.

They got to the top of the tower and found another mirror, already glowing. Bull steeled his nerve and stepped through.

***

It took hours for her to fall asleep, but as the sky started to brighten around the edges, her stomach decided it was time for her to be awake. Now.

She almost didn’t make it to the hole in the floor acting as latrine before the few scraps she’d been fed for supper came up. The force of the convulsive heaving brought her to her knees.

Maraas was lifting onto an elbow as she crawled away from the hole and curled into a miserable ball.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “Probably not the most pleasant wake-up call.”

He shook his head. “You okay?”

She shifted into a tighter ball. “I'm fine. Must be nerves,” she whispered. He made a noncommittal noise. She glanced over. “How are you feeling?”

A smirk came to his face. “Rainbows and sunshine, darlin’.”

She rolled her eye. “Besides the obvious, smart ass.”

He started moving toward the wall, each movement making his face contort. “I’ve had better days,” he said, wheezing from the effort.

“I'm sorry,” she said, keeping her voice as quiet as possible.

He gave her an odd look. “For what?”

“For running my mouth. I made it worse for you.”

“He'd have found another excuse,” he said, tapping his temple gently. “There are a few screws loose in that elf’s skull.”
It was uncanny how much he sounded like her Qunari. Gina stared at him. “Why do you sound like the Iron Bull?”

His eyes widened. “Do I?” She nodded. His brow furrowed. “He's my half-brother. Paternally.”

So it was a thing. “That would explain it,” she whispered.

He sighed heavily and rested the back of his head against the wall. “This is a fucking mess. I'm the one who should be sorry, darlin’.”

“Why is this happening?”

Another sigh. “It's a really long story.”

She lifted a brow. “I don't have any other plans. Do you?”

A half smile came to his face. Bull's half smile. “Better get comfy, little one.”

***

A new island filled his vision. He tried to pretend the islands were floating on the sea rather than in the middle of the sky. Seeing as his imagination sucked, it didn't help much.

“Where will we go next?” asked Cullen.

Morrigan pointed to a mirror just across a narrow bridge. “Near Denerim, this time.”

Varric lifted a brow. “Didn't you grow up near there, Curly?”

He nodded. “My sister still lives there.”

“Want to pop in for a visit?” asked Hawke. “I'm sure Bull won't mind.”

Cullen shook his head sharply. “No.”

Varric and Hawke exchanged a glance, but the look on Cullen’s face was enough to keep them both silent.

They reached the mirror and Morrigan said her voodoo phrase. The surface shimmered and went all blue and purple. Almost pretty, if it wasn't creepy.

Everything she did was creepy.

Bull held his breath and stepped through the thing. The island melted away and before him was a sweeping plain. Cullen was already there, standing on the crest of a hill, staring at Denerim. It was miles away, but still seemed massive as it loomed on the horizon.

The General turned away slowly. Bull could see the longing look in his eye, but decided against intruding on the moment. Whatever he was hiding, this wasn't the time to pry it out of him. That would happen later over copious helpings of alcohol. Gina would help. The thought put a new spring in his step, taking the edge off the exhaustion seeping to his bones.

They walked in silence across the plain and came to a small barrow. Morrigan led them down a well worn set of stairs. At the bottom stood another mirror.

It was back to the islands and then into a gooey swamp. They reached a slime pit with a mirror and
began slogging through it. As Leliana stepped forward, the Arishok cleared his throat. “May I offer assistance, Leliana?”

“I'd be most grateful, Sten.” She paused and went pink. “I mean the Arishok. I'm sorry.”

“You may call me Sten,” he said softly as he swept her off her feet. “I still command.”

She leaned closer to his ear and whispered, “I'd prefer softie.” It was the Arishok’s turn to go pink.

Bull averted his eyes from their blatant flirting. He'd never have guessed the little redhead had the ability to blush. As for the Arishok, that was just...well, he wasn't sure what it was. Weird, at the very least.

Varric huffed. “Why does she get a ride?”

“Because she's a pretty redhead. You're a foul mouthed dwarf,” said Dorian. His nose wrinkled. “Not that I don't agree with you.”

Bull grinned and made a big show of flexing both arms. “I could carry you. One over each shoulder, just like sacks of flour.”

The pair pulled faces at him while the Rasaan made a scandalized sound. “We are not pack animals for their convenience!”

Bull rolled his eye and ignored the use of Qunlat. “It's called having fun. You should try it sometime.”

He scowled and crossed his arms. “We are not here to have fun. Do you not recall our mission?”

Irritation flickered through his veins. Bull tilted his head, and stepped forward. “What do you think, venak-hol?”

The Qunari flinched away from him. “Stay back,” he hissed, his hand coming up to touch a crescent shaped mark on his throat, there courtesy of Bull’s spoon.

Bull curled his lip. “We did this song and dance last night. It bores me. If you're half as smart as I think you are, you'll shut up and stay out of my way. Is that clear?”

The Rasaan huffed, but finally dropped his gaze. Bull stared him down just long enough to make his cheeks turn scarlet and then spun on his heel to stomp through the mire.

Another damn island. Krem came to stand at his side. “Krem Brulee,” he said, trying to shake off the lingering waves of anger rippling under his skin.

The Lieutenant grimaced at the nickname and said, “Pretty clear by now who's involved in this shit show, isn't it?”

Gatt. Thoughts of the elf did nothing to settle his nerves. Bull shrugged. “I guess.”

Krem scoffed. “Don't tell me you're still having doubts.”

He didn't answer. Krem pulled a face. “I can't believe you aren't frothing at the mouth with rage over that little creep.”

Gina’s braid was tucked carefully into his pouch. The thought of what she must be going through made his hands shake, but something held him back from hating the elf. He swallowed hard. “It's
just hard to accept that he's turned into something so-"

“Psychotic?”

Bull shot him a hard look. “Why are you pushing this?”

“Because he murdered Grim and Skinner. Don't you care about that?”

“Of course I care,” he snapped, giving Krem an affronted look. “I just also find it difficult to believe that he's acting on his own accord.”

“And that would make it okay?”

He had to take a steadying breath to control his temper. Bull put a finger in the centre of Krem’s chest. “You need to drop this.”

He turned to walk away, but Krem darted in front of him. “That little shit put us directly in the line of fire and tried to force you to leave us there to die.”

Bull clenched his hands so tightly the knuckles popped. “What's your fucking point?”

Krem lifted his chin. “Would you choose us again?”

Cassandra gasped. “Cremisius Aclassi, what are you doing?”

It was like being punched straight in the solar plexus. Bull stared at him in shocked silence.

Krem’s lip curled. “I'll take your silence as answer. Nice to see where your true loyalty lies, Hissrad.”

Having his title thrown in his face as an insult shook loose the words stuck in his throat. “I don't have to explain myself to anyone, least of all you. If you don't like it, you can march your little Vint ass back home. And find new employment while you're at it.”

The man went red from the scalp down. “Oh I'm not leaving. I'm going to find that elf, and I'm going to kill him for what he did to my friends. And I'll butcher anyone who gets in my way.”

“Well you have fun with that,” Bull said icily. He marched away, his mind swirling with emotions he was having a hard time keeping under wraps. Is that what his guys thought? That he'd pick being part of the Qun over their very lives?

The hurt turned to anger. Hadn't he done enough to prove himself? Bled enough? Put his life on the line enough? For fuck’s sake, he'd lost the memory of choosing them and still thought it was the right call. What more did these people want from him?

Someone touched his arm, making him jerk away. “Are you alright?” asked Blackwall, his face creased with worry.

The man’s words in the interrogation room rang through his mind clear as a bell. Bull lashed out at him. “Been busy spreading your poison to my people?”

The warden recoiled. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” Bull curled his lip. “Stay away from me.”

With that he stormed over to the mirror. “Enough fucking around. Let's get this shit over with,” he
barked.

***

Gina stared at the Salit as he told his story. With every word she found herself with more questions. At least she finally knew what the word Salit meant.

He shrugged. “And that’s it. The very condensed version of what’s going on here.”

“That’s it?” She scoffed. “You just told me an entire novel’s worth of happenings.”

A smile flickered over his face. “There’s a lot more where that came from.”

Gina listed the revelations. “So you’re Bull’s half brother thanks to some pseudo eugenics program that you stumbled onto while you were investigating why people turn Tal-Vashoth for your buddy the Arishok because you two go way back and he trusts you.” She dragged a breath and added, “Not to mention he actually knows about your little accidental voodoo secret.”

The mention of his magic made him twitch and glance nervously at the door. “Keeping it secret was his idea to begin with,” he said softly.

Gina nodded and pinched the bridge of her nose. “And this is all some giant conspiracy that involves me...how?”

He squirmed. “I don’t know. Not yet.”

“Oy vey,” she said with a sigh. “If it helps, this all feels very personal. The Viddasala hates the Iron Bull.”

“She hates a lot of people. I wouldn’t read into it too much.”

Gina pulled a face at him. “I don’t see you coming up with any ideas, hot shot.”

He laughed softly. “I see why he likes you.”

Heat rose to her cheeks. “Who, Bull? Oh yeah, the man can’t get enough of my smart mouth.”

“It’s nice to meet a human that isn’t afraid to speak her mind. So many stare at the horns and clam up.”

Gina shrugged. “You’re just people. Big, grey, horny people.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “Phrasing, darlin’.”

She gave him the finger and got to her feet, ignoring his curious expression. “Okay, let’s get serious. Why is this happening? What’s their end goal?” She began to pace, chewing her lip as she did. “What is this place?”

The Salit sighed. “It’s the Darvaarad.”

“The who-ver-ad?”

“The Darvaarad. The Ben-hassrath quarantine any magical items we find and put them here.”

“How do you know?”
“I used to work here.” His voice went melancholic. “Feels like a lifetime ago.”

Gina lifted her brow. “Why bring us here, of all places?”

“Because the Viddasala runs this place. She has little to no oversight. So long as she keeps the magical artifacts under control, it doesn’t matter what she does.”

Gina scowled. “Hence her overblown sense of confidence.”

“And hence no one would ever question her real activity.” He shook his head. “I knew that the corruption went up the ladder, but this far? It’s unthinkable.”

“How high is she in the chain of command?”

“She’s one of the three top Ben-hassrath. The only people of higher rank are the Triumvirate.”

Gina knew the term. The three pillars of Qunari society. The Arishok, body. The Arigena, mind. The Ariqun, soul. “Would any of them be involved?”

The Salit shook his head. “I’d like to say no, but I can’t. If the Viddasala is involved, anyone could be.” He growled. “There’s something I’m forgetting. Something I’ve missed.”

“Like what?”

He rubbed at his forehead. “I don’t know. I can’t think straight.”

Gina winced. “I can’t imagine how much you’re hurting.”

He shrugged and let his hand drop to his lap. “I’ve been through worse.”

She laughed. “I find that really hard to believe.”

“My Besrathari was a real sadistic fuck,” he said, a smile twitching at his lips.

Gina shook her head. At least he still had a sense of humour. “Speaking of sadistic,” she said. “What’s the elf’s involvement?”

He scowled. “I think he just likes being able to hurt people without repercussion.”

“He killed Grim,” she whispered.

The Salit’s eyes fluttered closed. He nodded slowly. “I know.”

“Grim was the kindest, most selfless person I’ve met. He was like Kaya’s big brother.” She barely resisted the urge to burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice almost too quiet to hear.

“So am I.” She scrubbed at her eye and shook her head. “I don’t think it was related. To all of this nonsense, I mean.”

He frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“He said he plans to kill all of the Chargers.” She turned to face him. “I think it’s some twisted revenge plot against Bull.”

The Salit was silent for a moment, his brow furrowing more deeply with every moment. “You could
be right. It wasn’t part of our plan to kill anyone. We were to capture everyone and bring them to meet Gatt’s mystery contact.”

Gina shot him a glare. “Why would you involve yourself in kidnapping your half-brother’s mate?”

He held her eye. “Because I needed to see who the was pulling the elf’s strings behind the curtain.”

“Really?” She took an exaggerated look around the cell. “How has that worked out for you?”

“I got my answer,” he muttered. Then he lifted a brow. “To be fair, you didn’t exactly give me the chance to explain.”

She scoffed. “I showed up to two strangers holding my family hostage. What the fuck did you think I would do? Sit down for tea and crumpets?”

He grimaced. “No. But I also didn’t expect you to jump off a cliff.”

She could feel herself blushing. “I admit it wasn’t the best idea, but you had me cornered.”

He shook his head. “Nothing went right that day, but believe me when I say I tried my damnedest to minimize the damage.”

Gina rolled her eye. “Yeah, I'm sure.”

He leaned forward. “Do you really think you can run faster than me? Darlin’, you're quick, but those legs are barely longer than my calves. I can out-walk your sprint.”

“Oh.” She curled into herself, feeling very small and stupid.

He lifted a big paw and ticked off finger after finger as he continued. “I got hold of your kid before Gatt could get anywhere near her, and took the fall when your guy kicked me. I made sure you got that little girl out of there, because no way was I risking him getting his hands on her again. Then I made damn sure you reached that forest. I thought I’d catch you in the cover of the woods and explain so you could play along.”

“Except I had a trick up my sleeve,” she said softly.

He smirked. “Taking that little trail was clever. Slowed my gigantic ass down.”

She shifted from foot to foot. “Why didn't you tell me at the clifftop?”

“You jumped before I could,” he retorted. “Then I had to chase you down in the river so that you wouldn't drown. I tried to wait at the river long enough for you to come around or the Iron Bull to catch up, but the elf was there too quickly.”

Gina sank to the floor and buried her face in her hands. “You can say it. I fucked up.”

“No. I fucked up. I shouldn't have been so focused on my mission.” He looked miserable. “You did what you needed to survive. No one would fault you for that.”

They sat in silence for a long while. As the sun began to shine through their tiny window, she whispered, “How are we going to get out of this?”

“We?”

“Of course we,” she said.
He lifted a brow. “After everything that's happened?”

She gave him a half smile. “You're family. Family sticks together.”

A bemused look crossed his face, but he didn't say anything.

Steps came to the door, and a little hatch on the bottom of their cell door opened. A flat tray with eggs and toast was shoved through a little slot at the bottom of the door.

The sulfuric smell of the eggs sent her gagging to the hole in the floor again. With all of the foul odours wafting her way, her stomach brutally emptied itself, leaving her winded and shaking.

She crawled away from the hole and leaned into the wall, hugging herself. “What the hell do you people put in your eggs?”

“Nothing.”

She lifted her head to find her companion eyeing her carefully. “Sorry,” she muttered.

The Qunari cleared his throat. “Look, you can tell me to mind my own business,” he said. “I won't be offended, I promise.”

She sighed. “Oh, just spit it out.”

He squirmed and began turning color. “When I was first looking into that breeding program, I spent a lot of time reading the journals the Ashkaari kept on each subject. Male and female.”

Gina stared at him dully. “Uh huh. And?”

The colour spread to the tips of his ears. “I learned an uncomfortable amount about how the female body works.”

She pretended to gag. “Ugh. Can we not go into detail? My guts are already unhappy.”

He gave her an apologetic look. “I just want you to think about timing, darlin’.”

“Timing?”

He sighed. “Your cycle.”

Gina wanted nothing more than to curl up on a feather bed and sleep away the lingering nausea. “My cycle?”

His face twitched. “Are you really going to make me say it?”

She waved a hand. “I'm too tired for guessing games.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “I would bet my life savings that you're pregnant.”

A laugh barked past her lips. “Get real,” she said, shooting him an amused look.

He didn't laugh. If anything, he went more solemn. Good commitment to a joke, she thought.

Pregnant. Her? What a laugh.

Only...her heart skipped a beat as she calculated her cycle.
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 weeks.

Her breath caught and she counted again.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 weeks. No, wait. They weren't in Val Royeaux during her last cycle. That made it 9 weeks.

9?

“No,” she whispered. She counted again.

9 weeks.

Her eye lifted to meet his as tears washed down her cheek. “I can't be,” she said, her voice going shrill.

He was there, gripping her shoulders. “Take it easy,” he commanded softly. “You have a meltdown, they'll come looking. We don't want that.”

A wave of joy washed through her, followed almost instantly by the purest sense of terror she could ever remember feeling. She clamped both hands over her mouth and fought to control the sobs wracking her body.

The Qunari pulled her tight to his chest. “Just breathe. It's going to be okay. You just need to keep breathing.”

Her whole body was shaking with the effort of not screaming at the top of her lungs. Not now. Not here!

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe...maybe she was overthinking it. Her mind flashed back to her early days with Bull.

“So, here's an awkward question.”

“Lay it on me, Kadan.”

*She traced a hand across his chest. “What are the chances that I could get pregnant?”*

*He went pink from the top of his head to the base of his throat. “None. Elves and humans don't cross with Qunari. I asked, before coming out here.” He turned to face her, his cheeks stilladorably pink. “Not a lot of Qunari kicking around these parts and a guy has needs. Figured it was better to be safe than sorry.”*

*She snuggled in tighter. “What if you could knock up a human or elf?”*

*He shrugged. “I'd stick to guys, mostly. Zero chance of it then,” he said, rolling her under him. He nipped the side of her neck and whispered, “Luckily for me, I still get to have my wicked way with this sweet little body.”*

She dragged herself back to the present and pushed away from Maraas. “He said we don't cross. He said he asked. How is this possible?”

He shrugged. “They didn't lie, if that's what you're thinking. They just wouldn't have dreamed he'd choose a human as a mate.”

“What difference does that make?”
“Just so you know, this is beyond awkward for me.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “On average, the couples in the program had sex twenty times before the woman caught. I can't imagine you two are celibate, so...”

She waved both hands and groaned. “I am not discussing our bedroom habits with you.”

He cringed. “I'm just saying. No Tamassran would guess that he'd regularly mate with the same human or elf more than once or twice. It's just not done, culturally speaking. But if you mate often enough, these things happen. It's rare back home and there are consequences, but you aren't the first human-Qunari crossbreeders.”

She curved her hands over her stomach and pressed gently. Was she really carrying Bull's child?

Her eye met his. “They can't find out.”

“You've got that fucking right, darlin’,” he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

...do you hate me yet?
Chapter 21

Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

More sinister plot revealed...

Krem and Cassandra were bickering in fierce whispers, Dorian and Varric were trying to convince Hawke to stop shooting his mouth off at the lieutenant, and the other two Chargers were standing with Shara and her crew. The only person on that island who appeared happy was the Rasaan.

Bull ignored it all and stared straight ahead, waiting for Morrigan to activate the next mirror. Cullen stood at his side, doing his best to appear casual, but he was clearly tense. Probably worried that there might be a brawl.

If there was, Bull had no intention of joining. He was stinging from the accusations lobbed his way, but it wasn't worth fighting over. If that's how Krem felt, that's how he felt.

There was no denying how much he ached over the man's words. He sometimes felt out of his depths in his role as spymaster, but he'd never had a single doubt about his Chargers. They were more than just a crew to him. They were family.

That they apparently didn't feel the same made it hard to breathe. He really didn't know what more he could do to prove his loyalty. Reticence about Gatt’s role in this mess wasn't something he could help feeling. If the elf was guilty, he'd deliver the punishment himself. But until it was proven, he couldn't help hold back his judgement.

It wasn't like he enjoyed having blank patches in his memory, or even that he didn’t believe their version of events. But it was still their story. Not his. That Bull didn't exist anymore. He sounded
like a stand-up guy, and Bull hoped he measured up that version of himself. But their experience was entirely different. They had clearly known a different version of Gatt too.

In the end, Bull had no interest in trying to change anyone’s minds. If his actions hadn't been enough thus far, there wasn't anything he could say to prove himself anyway. Nothing else mattered but finding his girl and taking her home.

“So little, so angry. What did they do to him?” whispered a childlike voice.

He shot a glare at Cole. “Please don't do your thing right now, kid.”

“Fear inside the rage. Clear as day. He hurts them before they get a chance.” Cole shook his head. “They don't know him like you did.”

Bull let out his breath slowly. “Kid, I'm really not in the mood.”

“She hurts too.”

He stiffened. “Who?”

“Agents with hushed tones. Eyes stinging, more forms to fill out, course corrections, reduce risk of similar losses. I remember the little boy, too wise, eager to help. Words break in small, secret spaces. He got away. He got away.” Cole suddenly flinched, which made Bull jolt in turn. “They are coming. I did my job, did what they asked! Hurt. Hurt!”

Bull could feel his pulse racing with dread. “What the fuck are you on about, kid?”

“Her hurt touches yours.”

“Who's?” he barked.

Cole blinked and shivered. “Too late, too many.”

Bull snarled and stalked away. Nonsense, like always. “What are we waiting for?”

Morrigan stood facing the mirror, her expression concerned. “I must wait a moment longer.”

“What? Why?”

“Mythal wills it,” she said.

“Can't anyone around here give me a straight answer? Am I really asking for too much?”

She sighed and spoke like he was a small child. “My will is bound to Mythal. This is the price we paid for the gift of the vir’abelasan. Sometimes it is frustrating, but I cannot disobey her. No matter how urgent my cause.”

He made a disgusted sound and stomped to the edge of the island. He just wanted this journey to end so he could kick some ass and get his Kadan in his arms.

Finally Morrigan called out, “We may proceed. I must warn you all. On the other side of this particular Eluvian is a secret place within the Deep Roads.”

Instinctive fear washed over his skin, quelling his irritation. They had to pass through that literal hellhole?
The day stretched, long and painful. Gina fought to rein in her emotions, but there were too many.

Pregnant.

The possibility hadn’t ever occurred to her, not after talking to Bull about it. Probably hadn’t crossed his mind once either. He had no reason not to trust the word of those who ran the breeding operation back home.

She scowled. They had to be smart enough to realize that there was a chance, whether or not they approved. Why not err on the side of caution and warn the man? At least he would have been able to make conscious choices based on real information.

Her fingers strayed to her stomach. Aside from being annoyed over the arrogance of a Tamassran who probably didn't even remember the Iron Bull, the very idea of carrying his child made her warm and fuzzy. The adorable face of Semeka flitted through her mind. How beautiful would their child be? She wanted desperately to marvel and daydream at the possibility of life growing within her.

Until reality intruded yet again, of course.

A situation that had already felt completely helpless now had a ringing sense of urgency. It wasn’t just her survival at stake anymore, a thought that brought a lump to her throat.

She'd always leapt into trouble with both feet, a tendency that had always worked out until lately. Mouthy, impetuous, reckless, irreverent. All labels that had been thrown her way. Most of them by Bull.

That mentality didn't feel tenable anymore. She wasn’t afraid to take a hit, but with this precious cargo, the idea was terrifying. That she'd risked Bull’s child in her mad leap from the clifftop made her angry with herself.

She slid a hand across her stomach and concentrated on keeping her breath even and measured. The Salit watched her in silence.

A new worry leapt into her mind. What if they held her hostage long enough for her to show? She ran the numbers again and again, and realized she could easily be half a dozen weeks along, if not further. Couple her slim build and the fact that Papa was a behemoth, she could start showing far earlier than a standard pregnancy. What then?

Her fingers trembled as she pressed lightly at her stomach. Of all the awful timing in the world, this was about as bad as it got.

The dark thought broke her heart anew. This should be a joyous occasion. A celebration of new life, a time of Bull enthusiastically stripping the entire market clean of all baby related items. Not this hollow realization in a dank dungeon cell.

The Qunari caught her wrist as she paced past him again. “Darlin’, you’re making me tired.”

She tugged free and hugged herself. “I can’t stop. If I do, I’m going to fall apart.” Tears welled up in her eye.

“Don’t do that,” he said softly. “They’re going to start wondering.”

Gina swallowed hard. “This isn’t fair,” she whispered, her voice strangled.
“Wait, what are you saying?” he said. “Isn’t it every girl’s dream to find out this sort of news while locked in a cell with her mate’s previously unknown brother?”

A wet laugh escaped her. “I know it’s hard to believe, but this isn’t exactly ideal.”

He gave her a half smile. “Women. You just want the world, don’t you?”

She pulled a face at him and resumed pacing. After a moment she gave him an odd look. “What’s your real name?”

His brow lifted. “We went through this. I’m the Salit.”


“Oh.” He shifted and furrowed his brow. “Maybe in his line of work. I’m alone most of the time. The rest of the Ben-hassrath tend to avoid me at all costs.”

“No one has ever given you a nickname?”

“My Tama used to call me Ash.”


“It means ‘to seek’.” A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “I was always running off on my own to solve one mystery or another, or sneaking out of bed in the middle of the night to read. Drove her up the wall more often than not. But they knew before I was five that I’d be an Isskari.”

Gina frowned. “But you aren’t an Isskari.”

“Not anymore,” he said. “But I was. A damn good one, too.”

She smirked. “If you do say so yourself.”

He laughed. “It’s not bragging when it’s true.”

“So what changed?”

“This.” He lifted his hand and wagged his fingers. A tiny lick of flames chased between the digits. “I spoke with the Arishok, and he suggested changing my career to something internal. Something where I was less likely to accidentally reveal my new gifts.”

Gina chewed her lip. Bull, in his blunt way, told her that in Par Vollen magic was considered dangerous. Anyone with those abilities was put under rigid control. They submitted or they were summarily turned Viddath-bas. A kid could train his entire life to be a baker, light something on fire with his brain one day, and find himself hornless, lips sewn together, and leashed to a handler for the rest of his life. Not surprisingly, many made a run for it. And Bull rounded them up. In his early days, anyway.

“I always felt sorry for them. It’s a burden no one chooses. Who wouldn’t at least think about running away?”

Having made the choice to avoid her own unique gift for nearly a year, she agreed. With such devastating consequences, why not hide those abilities if you had the choice? It did make her wonder. Just how good was Ash as an Isskari if the Arishok himself recommended such action? “And no one has ever figured it out?”
He shook his head. “I am very careful about when and where I'll use it.”

“You’ll have to tell me how that happened sometime.”

“Someday,” he said softly. “We need to get out of here first.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.” He met her eye. “But I promise I’ll do what I can to protect you. Both of you.”

She felt tears rising again. “I’ll hold you to it, Ash.”

A sudden rush of steps headed for their door. “There has been another breach!”

“Where?” barked one of the guards.

“Near the mine,” responded the newcomer. “Asaaranda has fallen.”

“Damn that Fen’Harel,” hissed the guard.

Gina barely hid her true reaction to the words. She had considered confessing her ability to speak Qunlat, but decided to keep up the ruse, just in case. She shot a questioning look over at Ash. He whispered a quick translation.

“I thought I heard them say Fen’Harel,” she muttered.


She nodded. “I know. I saw his statue at the Temple of Mythal.”

His eyes widened. “You were actually there? In person?”

Gina almost laughed at the eagerness in his voice. “Yeah. A lifetime ago. You should ask them what's going on. Maybe Fen’Harel is code for something.”

Ash nodded and raised his voice in Qunlat. “What is happening out there?”

“Be silent, Salit,” commanded the guard. His voice squeaked with fear.

Ash whispered another translation, but Gina’s mind was already racing miles ahead of him.

Who or what had these strapping young men so deathly afraid?

***

Bull stared down at the body. A young Qunari Karashok. Too young to be broken on the ground. To be dead. Grim’s face flashed through Bull’s mind, making him flinch. He forced himself to focus on the body at his feet.

Whoever killed him had beaten him mercilessly. His side was entirely caved in, while his arms were both bent at painfully unnatural angles. The boy’s battered face was twisted with unmistakable terror. It made the hair on the back of his neck lift.


“I didn't do it, if that's what you're thinking,” he said testily.
She shook her head. “It wasn’t.”

He scowled. Now he was being all sensitive over nothing. Grow up, he chastised himself. After muttering an apology, he pointed to the kid. “I don’t know who killed him, but whatever happened, he looks scared shitless.”

“Indeed,” murmured the Arishok. He knelt to examine the corpse. “The body is still warm. He’s been dead less than an hour.”

Bull scanned the area carefully, but in the darkness all he accomplished was setting his nerves on edge. Shapes began to play tricks on his eye, so he brought his gaze back to the Arishok.

The commander was still crouched, and now murmuring a soft blessing over the boy. Then he rummaged through the his pockets. After a moment, he passed a slip of paper to Leliana.

She read it out loud in stilted Qunlat.

“Remain vigilant! Spirit agents of Fen’Harel roam our paths, and attack without any discretion. If you come across walls of blue flame, do not go near them. They have been made to hamper us, and they bring only death!”

The Arishok stood and gave her an admiring look. “You can read Qunlat?”

“Thanks to the Iron Bull’s teachings, yes,” she said, a pleased smile coming to her face.

“Her accent is still atrocious, despite my best efforts,” Bull teased, nudging her gently. She flushed a pretty shade of pink.

“It is the effort that is meaningful,” said the Arishok.

Bull smirked. This dude had it bad if he could compliment anything less than mastery of his mother tongue. He snagged the note from her fingers and reread it. “Fen’Harel? Why is that ringing a bell?”

“That statue at the Temple of Mythal, remember?” said Hawke.

Bull nodded. “Right. The wolf looking thing. Wasn’t he some sort of betrayer?”

Morrigan shook her head. “Some say he murdered the ancient Evanuris, but it’s not true.”

Bull wanted to ask more, but Cassandra spoke first. “Wouldn’t he be long dead?”

“That’s what we thought about Mythal as well,” said Morrigan meaningfully.

Cassandra frowned. “But why would he be stalking their course?”

“I do not know. Perhaps he is concerned about the Qunari interfering in matters they don’t understand.”

The Rasaan huffed. “We understand more than you, kabethari.”

The Witch turned her odd yellow eyes toward the Rasaan and said softly, “You cannot begin to comprehend the knowledge I have been given. You are a child in infancy compared to me.”

He curled his lip. “Do not speak to me, basra.”

“Watch yourself,” Bull said quietly. “Any one of these Mages can and will turn you into a grease
Spot. Things aren’t so simple out here. You’d know that if you looked past the end of your nose once in awhile.”

Dorian shrugged and examined his nails. “I prefer using tic. Isn’t that what you people call the freezing spells?”

Bull rolled his eye. “Whatever. Where are we going next?”

Morrigan hesitated. “Might I make a suggestion?”

“What kind of suggestion?” he said.

“A detour.” She lifted her palms as his chest puffed with the air he needed to lose his mind at her. “A short one. I promise you’ll find it most edifying.”

“Oh sure,” he said snidely. “It’s only the love of my life in the hands of hostile strangers. What’s another few hours?”

She ignored his blatant sarcasm. “I knew you’d see reason.”

He cursed and stepped toward her. The Witch gave him an irritating smirk and strutted down the path. “I thought you were worried about us Mages turning you into a grease spot?”

Dorian patted his chest as he walked past. “Don’t mind him. He’s bluffing.”

“The poor darling is under a great deal of stress,” simpered Vivienne as she followed them.

Bull glared at their backs. “Cocky assholes,” he muttered.

“We’re in the Deep Roads,” said Varric, his voice tight. “A deviation down here isn’t the greatest idea.”

“Probably almost as bad as firing Skinner and leaving her to fend for herself,” said Krem.

Bull felt the air rush out of his lungs. He'd forgotten all about that scene. Was that why they doubted his true feelings? He turned slowly. “I didn't actually fire her.”

Krem scoffed. “Sure looked like you did.”

Bull huffed a breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Krem, I thought you were smarter than that.”

“What are you talking about?”

He lifted his eye to meet the lieutenant’s. “It was all an act. All of it.”

“Why?” asked Stitches.

He sighed. “She offered to be my eyes and ears in Par Vollen. The spies in Skyhold would have raised red flags if she left under normal circumstances. So we picked a fight.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” asked Krem.

His lips tightened. “Maybe if I could trust you guys to keep your yaps shut I would have.”

Krem stiffened. “We would never betray your trust.”
“Unless there's something funny or interesting or if one of you think it'll help you pick up a new fuck. Or when you tell Cassandra all the details of our escapades.”

“You tell Gina everything,” Krem retorted.

“Not everything,” Bull said. “And she understands why I keep certain information to myself.”

Cassandra scowled. “Gina is not the Inquisitor. She does not need all of the details.”

“No, she isn’t. But there are things the Inquisitor doesn’t need to know either. Plausible deniability and all that.” Bull shook his head. “Look, this wasn’t a personal decision. There was a one-time shot at getting Skinner in tight with the Ben-hassrath. I wasn’t about to add to the risk she was already undertaking.”

“She wound up dead anyway,” hissed Krem.

“Yeah, she did.” Bull swallowed hard. “There was always a danger of that. I tried to dissuade her.”

“It should’ve been a group decision!”

Bull rounded on the lieutenant. “When did this become a fucking democracy?”

“I'm supposed to be your second in command,” he snarled.

“And my word is still final. Got a problem with that?”

The lieutenant crossed his arms and looked away. Hawke cleared his throat. “We moving or what?”

The place was as spooky and skin-crawling as advertised. Bull found himself jumping at every skitter or breath in the blackness outside their meager torches. The last thing he wanted was to attract a horde of Darkspawn, but he seriously wished one of the Mages would turn their staff into a spotlight.

They went down a few flights of stairs, and an odd glow began to illuminate their path. Bull heard a sharp curse from Cullen and turned to see him frozen in place. “What's going on?” he whispered.

Cullen began to breathe harder. “Lyrium.”

Bull frowned. “What, here?”

The General nodded and started to back away. Bull caught his arm. “No way you're going anywhere alone in this place.” He dug into his pack and found a clean handkerchief. Then he called to the Rasaan. “Got any horn balm?”

The Rasaan lifted a brow. “Now?”

Bull shot him a dirty look. “Just hand it over.”

The Arishok looked amused at the exchange. A tiny vial of the balm was slapped into Bull’s palm. He dabbed some of the spicy ointment onto the handkerchief and gave it to Cullen. “Should mask some of the scent at least. Tie this around your face.”

Cullen obeyed with shaking fingers. Bull checked the integrity of the knot and gave him a questioning look. The General nodded. “It's better.”

Bull took position behind his shoulder as they caught up to the group. At the bottom of the stairs,
they came to the edge of a small quarry. A man was already pinned to the wall by Cassandra and Leliana.

“A lyrium mine?” Varric stared at it in wonder. “I didn’t think we were anywhere near Orzammar.”

Bull crossed to their new prisoner. “What's his story?”

The young man pulled free and said earnestly, “Please, we don’t have much time.”

Cassandra cut him off. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jerran. Ser Jerran, once.”

“Were you a Templar?” asked Hawke.

He nodded. “In Kirkwall. Until I joined the Qun.”

“And now you are Qunari?” asked Cassandra, doubt clear in her voice.

“Viddathari,” said the Arishok. “A convert.”

The man nodded. “Kirkwall was...madness, chaos. The Qunari were like the eye of the storm. I stand for order. Discipline. Protecting the innocent from magic.” He squirmed. “But lately? It’s as mad as Kirkwall ever was.”

“What do you mean? What's going on?” asked Bull.

“The Viddasala. We have to stop her!”

The Viddasala? Bull stared at the man in shock. “What exactly is she doing that you disagree with?”

“Who is this Viddisela?” asked Cassandra.


“Not anymore. I don’t care whether you serve Fen’Harel or not. Someone has to stop her.”

Bull tilted his head. “Why would you think we serve Fen’Harel?”

“I dunno. The Viddasala said it and...well, it made as much sense as anything. We’ve had his agents causing trouble all over the Crossroads. Sabotage, causing spirits to attack us. I assumed that the Inquisition was their army, and that you came here because he told you to.”

“Never mind that.” The Arishok stepped forward. “What did you mean, not anymore? Is the Viddasala no longer doing her duties?”

“Almost a complete reversal actually.”

The Arishok straightened. “Explain.”

“This place is a lyrium mining and processing centre.” He paused. “Obviously you know what the saarebas are?”

Bull translated for the group. “Dangerous thing. That’s what they call the Mages back in Par
“Dangerous thing?” asked Dorian, distaste clear in his voice.

“I rather like it,” whispered Vivienne.

“Indeed,” murmured Morrigan.

Jerran scoffed. “Listen, as a Templar, I’ve never seen the kind of power that a saarebas can unleash. And now the Viddasala is planning to feed them lyrium. A lot of lyrium.”

A strange look crossed the Arishok’s face. “What would that do?”

Cullen sucked a ragged breath. “If it didn’t kill them, it would turn them into killing machines,” he whispered. The Arishok furrowed his brow, his eyes filling with concern.

“Please. It’s a load of crap,” Bull snapped. “There’s no way the Viddasala would let any saarebas within a thousand feet of lyrium.”

The Arishok didn't look any less worried, which made Bull worry. What was the man thinking about? Was there something Bull didn't know?

Jerran lifted a hand. “There’s more to it than that. Some kind of twisted experiment going on further along the lines. All I could find out was that she’s planning to incorporate it into some mission she’s calling the Dragon’s Breath.”

The Arishok shook his head. “No such mission exists.”

“How would you know?” asked Jerran.

“I am the Arishok. I am to be informed of all foreign missions prior to deployment.”


Bull stared at the man. “Do you realize what you’re implying?”

He nodded. “Treason.”

“Is that so surprising?” asked Leliana.

“Almost as surprising as finding out the original Inquisitor had a demon hiding inside her head,” said Bull. The Arishok and the Rasaan both spun to stare at him. He winced. “Uh, you didn’t hear that from me.”

Cassandra gave him a dirty look before turning to the prisoner. “Say we believe you. Why would the Qunari station you here?”

“They wanted me to teach them everything I knew about lyrium. Where it comes from, everything it can do, how we put it to use.”

“And you just told them?” asked Cullen, his voice raspy. The General had begun to sway on his feet. Bull stepped closer.

“Had no reason not to. I knew enough from my time in the order. But they found out more. I don’t know how.”
Varric stepped forward. “The only people that can mine lyrium are dwarves. Anyone else will die. How are they managing to mine it here?”

“Many did die. But Qunari workers have a discipline I’ve only ever seen from the Tranquil. They are quick learners and figured it out. They use gaatlok to blast the rock, saving them from handling raw lyrium. Clever bastards.”

“They can’t really be using ‘Dragon’s Breath’ as their plan name,” said Hawke. “It’s like something Varric would use in his shitty books.”

The dwarf elbowed him. Jerran sighed sharply. “You know that dragon’s breath destroys everything in its path, right? The Viddasala says that her plan will ‘save the south’.”

Bull and the Arishok exchanged a glance. “That usually only means one thing,” said Bull.

“Invasion,” said Jerran.

Krem scoffed. “Right. How are they planning to pull that off?”


Morrigan made a strangled sound. “What they are doing. It isn’t right.”

The Rasaan gave her a scornful look. “You can only wish to be as enlightened as we are.”

Bull scowled. “Give it a rest. Feeding lyrium to saarebas? An invasion? It’s all bad for everyone involved. No one here will go down without a fight. They’ll fight down to the last man, and then some. It’ll be a bloodbath on both sides.”

“Ayreed,” said the Arishok.

“We must spread the glory of the Qun,” said the Rasaan, his voice taking on a strange urgency.

“Not at this cost,” said the Arishok.

“And you call yourself our leader,” said the Rasaan, disdain ringing clearly in his voice.

The Arishok glared at the man who cowered away after a moment.

Bull eyed the creep carefully. He didn’t like him, and now he really didn’t trust him. He caught Hawke’s eye and saw the agreement burning in his eyes.

“I have an idea,” said Jerran.

“Oh good. The traitor has a plan.” said Bull.

The man’s cheeks went pink, but he stood tall. “The gaatlok. If you set off the reserves, it will destroy this place.”

“Will that stop this Viddasala?” asked Hawke.

“No. But it will slow her down enough to make a difference. Maybe you lot can get to her in time to stop her plan from being put into action.”

Cullen snarled, his eyes glazed and red. “And where will you go?”
The man shrugged. “Leg it. No one will have me I'm sure, but I don't mind being a hermit.”

Bull frowned. “You think we're going to let you go?”

“I suppose you might have some objection. But it's that or the Qunari due back any moment will find you trying to ruin all their hard work.”

“Sounds like extortion to me,” muttered Blackwall.

Cullen sagged against Bull’s arm, his entire body trembling. Bull casually hooked a hand under his elbow, keeping him on his feet. “I say we let him take his chances getting out of here,” he said. “Between the Darkspawn and the Qunari patrol, I doubt he'll escape anyway.”

“Darkspawn are the least of my worries right now.” Jerran reached into his pocket. Before he could pull his hand back out, Varric and Dorian had their weapons trained on his throat. He flinched. “I wanted to give you this memo.” He displayed a slip of paper.

Bull snatched it away.

“Two hours ago, an unknown intruder penetrated our defenses. Masked and cloaked, likely a Mage. Used magic to awaken spirits and turn them against us. Intruder moved as if they knew this place. Asaaranda dead. Spirits keep attacking. Engagement not recommended. Flee should you encounter any. Repeat, do not engage.”

“The casualty is probably the kid we found at the top of this pit.” He passed it to the Arishok and said, “Exactly how many troops are stationed here?”

“I've counted at least two full karataam. There might be more, but I can’t be sure.”

Bull adjusted his grip on the weakening Cullen. “No one would question the Viddasala if she asked for troops, would they?” he asked the Arishok.

The Arishok sighed. “No. Not even I.”

“The plot thickens,” said Varric.

“Where do they keep the gaatlok charges?” asked Rocky.

“In Central Supply.” He pointed down a dark hallway. “Should be a stockpile down there big enough to bring this place down.”

“Let's move before we run into that patrol,” said Hawke.

They hustled down the hall. “Should have executed that traitor,” said Cullen, his voice barely audible.

Bull shrugged. “I don't think he'll get far. If he does, I'll put a spy onto him. See what he gets up to.”

The further they got, the more steady Cullen’s steps became. “Feeling a little less woozy?” asked Bull.

“Getting there. Thank you for the assistance.”

“Anytime,” he said.

Hawke came to Cullen’s other side. “What you said back there, about the lyrium. I thought Mages
could use some.”

Cullen nodded. “They used it in the Harrowing exercises at the Circle. Somehow it strengthens their connection to the Fade.”

“It sounds like this Viddasala is going to overdose her saarebas,” said Vivienne. “Direct consumption is too dangerous for even a very talented Mage. It would likely kill most of them.”

Bull frowned. The Qunari didn't waste resources. That was why most people weren't executed for their crimes. Only the big stuff, and usually only to make a point. A bit of Quamek got you a nice viddath-bas who would never fight back, and could perform menial labor for decades. Why waste such potential? The mentality used to apply to Qunari Mages. They were a tool to be used as appropriate. Not something to be used and discarded like trash.

What the hell was going on back home? A surreptitious glance at the Arishok showed his jaw still clenched and eyes filled with worry.

*Shit.*

They reached a large cavern. A pile of gaatlok charges stood in the center of the room. “Let's blast this place and move on,” he said. “No more delays.”

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Gina jerked awake with a gasp. More feet coming, this time accompanied by the sharp tone of Gatt. “Bloody useless fools! We cannot house the prisoners together!”

She made to stand up, but Ash gripped her shoulder. “Do not,” he hissed.

The command made her hackles rise, but she listened. Moments later the door wrenched open. “Having a nice little chat, are we?” asked Gatt as he stormed through. His nose was twisted and both eyes were blackened. Gina took no small amount of satisfaction from the sight.

Ash groaned and whispered something unintelligible. Gatt smirked and leaned closer. “What’s that? Someone damage your voicebox?”

She couldn't help it. “Leave him alone.”

The elf shot her a dismissive look. “Nice hair.”

Her chin lifted. “Nice face.”

He raised a hand threateningly, but the Karashoks at his back both stepped forward. He growled at her. “Soon enough you will be my toy to play with as I choose. You'd do well to keep that in mind, basra.”

Her stomach flipped with dread, but she held his eye defiantly.

After a moment he gestured at Ash and spoke in Qunlat. “Get this useless sod onto his feet. We have a special treat for him today.”

Both men moved toward him. Gina moved to block them, but Ash gave her a hard look. “Do not interfere, small one,” he said, speaking like he had a mouthful of marbles. “Learn for once.”

The rebuke set her on her heels, but a glance at him found his face twisting with desperation. It was like he was willing her to play along. Gina swallowed hard and nodded. “Fine, see if I try to help
you ever again.”

He gave her the barest ghost of a wink as he lumbered upright. He gasped with pain, not entirely fake, and leaned heavily on the two men.

As they shuffled toward the door, Baqoun stepped inside. He tilted his head and lifted a brow. “The elf did that much damage?”

Gatt sneered. “I'm stronger than I look.”

Baqoun looked amused. “When you have a stick, sure.”

The elf sputtered in rage, but the Qunari ignored him. He sent Gina a lingering leer and said, “I heard she got a haircut. Too bad. I like getting a good grip when I fuck them.”

Ash stiffened. “You will not touch her.”

In response, Baqoun simply slammed a hard fist into his jaw. It cracked on impact and the massive Qunari went limp.

Gina cried out, but Baqoun just laughed. “Let's get him to his appointment. She does hate waiting.”

And then they were all gone, leaving her alone in her cell. Panic swept through her veins. Where were they taking him? Who was waiting? What was this so-called “treat”? None of this felt right.

Steps shuffled outside and a voice said, “Inside, Tamassran.”

Gina lunged to the door and peered out in time to see Bull’s Tama creep into the cell across from hers. The woman was unnaturally stooped and sported fresh bruising. It made Gina’s heart ache.

The Karashok closed the door and shook his head. As he turned away, he caught Gina’s eye and flushed. “Leave that window,” he snapped.

She pretended not to understand, so he stomped over and took up post in such a way that his broad back blocked 99% of her view.

Gina sighed and resumed her anxious pacing.

***

They reassembled at the mouth of the cave. A ledge looked over the mine and it's equipment. Carefully placed charges were ready to light.

Leliana lifted her bow and readied. The Arishok stood at her shoulder. He leaned forward, too close not to be touching her, and lit the arrow on fire with his torch.

Bull felt a stab of jealousy and stamped it out viciously. He'd have Gina in his arms soon enough. No sense getting bent out of shape because other people were finding happiness together.

After a breath, she launched the arrow. It landed true, igniting the first in a chain of charges. Bull couldn't help the idiotic grin that swept across his face. Explosions were always cool in his book.

A panicked cry from Cassandra interrupted his moment of joy. He turned to see the edge of their platform crumbling under Krem’s feet. The man windmilled his arms desperately, but it was too sudden. He tumbled.
Cassandra ran toward the crumbling edge. Cullen caught her around the waist and jerked her to a stop. “Krem!” she screeched.

Bull leapt into action. He bolted forward and skidded over over the ledge. Shouts and cursing reached his ears, but it was too late. He was committed.

He slid down the face of the cliff, barely managing to keep any sense of control. The dust and choking debris made it hard to see much more than a yard ahead, forcing him to make last second dodges that hardly passed muster. He finally reached the bottom and ran into the chaos, searching for the lieutenant.

“Krem! Fuck, where are you?” he yelled.

They probably had less than a minute before the flames reached the next charge. He swept dust out of his irritated eye and scanned frantically.

He tripped and nearly slammed face first into a pile of rubble. He bellowed a curse and launched back to his feet, only to see a familiar foot sticking out of the debris.

He clawed away rocks and chunks of wood, moving faster than he thought possible. The man's bloodied face came into sight. Bull swept away a final layer and checked his vital signs.

Breathing.

Heart beat.

Bull almost wept in relief. He quickly gathered him up and began running for a little crevasse he'd seen earlier. It would shield them long enough to avoid the blast. Then he could climb free.

The explosion made the entire place shake. He gripped the man tightly and waited for the cacophony to settle.

Instead, a terrifying crack snapped through the air. Big. Too big.

He risked a peek and saw what had been a tiny waterfall. Not anymore. Water was spraying at high pressure from a massive new fissure, quickly filling the tight cavern.

Bull ran out of hiding, barely dodging falling rocks and structures. He traced the path, hunting for the little tunnel they'd taken earlier, hoping beyond reason that it hadn't collapsed yet.

A sharp call caught his ear. He looked up to see Cullen and Blackwall toss down a length of rope. He grabbed on and they started hauling them up.

Too slow! He shifted and twisted the rope around his wrist before starting to walk up the precarious surface. He glanced up to see Jeremy, Hawke and Varric joining the effort.

They were nearing the top when the whole place started coming apart at the seams. With a horrifying shudder, the fissure opened and the water surged free, sweeping Bull off the face of the cliff and nearly yanking the still-limp Krem from his arm.

He clung to the rope, but at Jeremy’s shout, he turned to see a massive wooden structure bearing down on them. “Let go!” he screamed at them.

They released the rope just in time for him to kick across the channel and narrowly avoid what used to be some sort of lift.
Bull and Krem were caught in the current. He spun in the water, kicking away from jutting rocks and debris when he could, but he was still slammed achingly hard into walls. His back took the worst of it, but it was only a matter of time before his head would take a hit.

Occasional flashes from the corner of his eye found the group chasing along their wild path. Be couldn't hear anything above the howl of the water. He twisted to see the massive lift drop out of sight.

“Fuck!”

The rope was still wrapped around his wrist. He hauled on it and caught up some of the length. Damn thing hadn't caught on anything!

With his entire being, he launched the rope high to the side. For ten heart-stopping seconds nothing. But then it caught on something and jerked them both to a stop, nearly pulling his shoulder out of its socket.

He gasped in pain as he swam to the side of the newly formed river. Crates and barrels bobbed past him, and then the lifeless body of Jerran. The former Templar had his throat slashed. Bull swallowed hard. He didn't always hate being right, but this was one of those times.

“Bull!”

He looked up to see the Arishok reaching over the edge. He shifted and tried to heave the lieutenant up, but couldn't manage his armoured dead weight. Fear rippled through him. He couldn’t let go of the rope, but he needed the second hand to get the height he needed.

He glanced at Krem’s unconscious face and hugged him tight. “I will always choose your life over mine,” he whispered into the man's ear.

Then, with a desperate roar, he released the rope and lifted the man as high as he could. As he was ripped into the current, he felt the Arishok catch up the weight and haul Krem to safety.

Tears welled up in his eye as he turned to face his fate. It was worth everything. Every second of grief. He hoped they'd remember him for that.

As the water began to drop out from under him, he squeezed his eye tight. And then something slammed into him from the side.

Not something. Someone! He shouted in surprise and grabbed tightly to whoever it was. “You fucking idiot!” hissed Cullen’s voice in his ear.

Bull couldn't help laughing as they dangled over a yawning pit of nothing.

***

It was nearly morning again when they came to haul her out of the cell. Two new Karashok, not quite as young as her two friends, but still far younger than Bull or Ash. They looked irritated to be on guard duty, and walked at a brisk pace.

She followed along, pretending to be meek. For their part, they ignored her. She might as well have been a ghost in their wake.

They were headed toward the Viddasala’s room again, only this time there were easily twice the soldiers roaming the halls. Every last one looked tense and had a tight hold on the hilt of their sword.
The door to her room stood open this time. Gina walked inside to see both the Viddasala and Baqoun standing at her desk, fully clothed this time.

“Learned your lesson, I see,” she said.

They ignored her. “Leave us,” commanded the Viddasala.

The Karashoks spun on their heels and left without hesitation, closing the door behind them. Gina stood awkwardly, waiting to be spoken to or acknowledged.

They resumed whatever conversation had been interrupted, speaking in Qunlat. Baqoun was examining a note on the table. “I must admit, I did not think our plan would work so well, Kadan.”

The Viddasala lifted her chin proudly. “Everything is in place, and our biggest obstacle has left his safety net. It could not have gone better.”

Baqoun said, “The Rasaan has done better than I thought he might. Has he killed the Ariqun yet?”

“No. We must wait until the Arishok falls and act decisively.”

Gina stood mutely, forcing herself to keep her expression neutral and dull. They weren’t that fucking arrogant were they? Discussing their assassination plot right in front of her as casually as she and Bull discussed the morning weather?

Bull would have an absolute fit over such stupidity in Skyhold. “Never assume that the people you’re in front of can’t understand what you’re saying. Wait, scratch that. Assume nothing! Benhassrath rule number two.” That the Viddasala showed no concern about her presence in the room proved just how far out of reach she felt from any consequence.

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Gina pressed her lips together tightly and listened carefully.

“What of the Arigena?”

The Viddasala scoffed. “She will be thrilled to have more land to cultivate. We need not worry about her loyalty.”

Baqoun leaned closer to her and said into her ear softly, “We will conquer all of these kabathari. They will all fall.”

“Asit tal-eb,” whispered the Viddasala, her voice taking on a breathy quality.

“And you will make me the new Arishok,” he said, tracing the back of his hand down the line of her throat and across her collarbone. The woman whimpered softly and nodded.

Him? The Arishok? In charge of the entire military in Par Vollen? Gina choked and coughed, making them both jump and stare at her suspiciously. She laughed, a little too quickly. “Just wondering if you two have a thing for fucking in front of audiences. I mean, why else would you drag me all the way up here?”

The Viddasala hissed and stepped away from the hulking Qunari. He scowled at them both and crossed his arms. Gina lifted a brow. “Seriously? Why am I here now?”

A sneer came to the woman’s face. “I have questions for you.”

“What questions?”
“Tell me of Fen’Harel.”

The second time that name had been mentioned. Gina frowned. “I don’t know much. He’s some trickster god from ancient Elvehnan times. Somehow he tricked all the other gods and killed them or something. Why?”

“I do not mean the legend, I mean the man.” The Viddasala crossed to stand in front of her. “Where does he hideout?”

Gina shook her head, only to be caught by the throat and pinned to the door behind her. “Do not lie to me, basra!”

Gina flinched. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! Fen’Harel is nothing more than a story the Dalish tell their kids to give them nightmares!”

The Viddasala leaned close, her teeth bared. “I have lost patience with you. Answer me, or face my full wrath.”

Gina’s heart pounded in her ears. “I’m not lying! I don’t know what else you could possibly be talking about!”

The woman wound up to hit her in the stomach. Instinctively she twisted and blocked any hit, shrieking in fear. The Viddasala froze and stared at her. “Why are you protecting like so?”

Gina wanted to throw up. To run, to blast this entire room to smithereens with the power of the anchor. None of those were options. “It’s called self-preservation,” she said, injecting all the bravado she could muster.

“No,” whispered the woman, her eyes taking on a dangerous glow.

As the woman reached to grip a hand over her stomach, the doors were flung open, nearly dumping Gina on her ass. Gatt stood there, panting and scarlet-faced. “The Inquisition has destroyed the lyrium mines!”

Baqoun bellowed a string of curses and ran forward. “Where were our people?”

“Jerran betrayed us,” said the elf, his face twisted with disgust. “We executed him on the spot, but it was too little, too late.”

“Damn that Viddathari!” Baqoun snapped.

A flicker of rage crossed the elf’s face, but he didn’t retort. “It stands to reason that they are on their way here.”

“How have they managed to get through the Eluvians?” demanded the Viddasala.

“No idea. Maybe they are working for Fen’Harel after all.”

The woman turned with a dagger-like glare at Gina. “I knew you were lying to me. Well, we shall see who wins in the end. Let them come. They will not achieve their objective.”

Gina didn’t hear any of it. Bull was coming. Somehow, by some crazy miracle, he was defying all roadblocks and coming for her. She just needed to survive long enough for him to get there.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Cullen lectured him for the entire two minute haul back onto solid land. Bull tried hard not to grin like a fool, but he couldn’t help it. When the General stopped to take a breath, he said, “It’s nice to know you care, Templar.”

“Of course I care, you Qunari asshole!” shouted the man, right in his ear.

A beefy hand gripped the back of his shoulder harness and hoisted him like he was a child, a sensation he hadn’t felt since he actually was a child. He staggered as the Arishok set his feet onto the ground.

Before he could really balance, Hawke shoved him, hard. “We needed ten more seconds, you moron! Who do you think you are, Gina?”

Bull caught himself and peered over the edge. The water was less than ten feet down. Heat rose into his cheeks. “I couldn’t exactly see what was above me,” he muttered. “And I didn’t know how long that rope would hold.”

“Yes, well. Stop trying to be a damn hero,” snapped Hawke. “How the hell would I even begin to explain-” His voice caught and the man went silent.

Bull pulled him into a hug and ruffled his hair. “I’ll try not to get myself killed again, okay?”

“You better not,” said a new voice.

Bull turned to see Krem standing there, holding his side. He cleared his throat. “Glad to see you on your feet,” he said.

Krem hobbled toward him and threw his arms around his waist before bursting into tears. “You idiotic grey arse,” he blubered. “Why would you do that for me? You have a family.”
“And you call me the idiot?” He lifted the man’s chin. “You are my family, Cremisius Aclassi. Every last one of you Chargers. I picked you. You’re my guys. That means something to me.”

The lieutenant’s shoulders bowed as he began to sob in earnest. Bull felt tears welling up in his eye. “Hey, come on,” he said gruffly. “We don’t do this feelings stuff.”

The man sucked wind and scrubbed at his face. “Right. Chief.”

Bull turned to see Rocky and Stitches standing at arm’s length. “That goes for you too,” he said softly, giving them both a fond squeeze on the shoulder.

Someone snorted behind him. He turned to see a scornful look on the Rasaan’s face. “Sacrificing yourself for an underling? Fool,” sneered the man.

Bull stood taller. “Why? Because I give a shit about someone other than myself?”

“A true leader would accept their loss and move on.”

“Then I guess I’m a shitty leader,” said Bull.

“Oh yeah, the worst,” said Rocky. “Couldn't lead us out of a paper bag.”

Stitches smirked. “Couldn't lead a platoon of infantrymen to a tavern.”

Krem nodded seriously. “I mean, we follow him, but it's out of morbid curiosity more than anything.”

Bull glared at the three remaining Chargers. “Real nice, assholes.”

They grinned widely, and with that, the lingering tension in the group broke. Bull swatted at the guys playfully, ignoring the disgusted look on the Rasaan’s face. He could push the issue, back the man into a corner. But he couldn’t think of a damn reason to bother. He was tired of trying to justify himself to a person who refused to see the world in any other light than the Qun. His life was his own, and he was the happiest he’d ever been, outside the current drama. If the Rasaan didn’t approve, the Rasaan could go fuck himself. Bull wouldn’t lose sleep over it.

As they began to muster along the path, jokes and laughter filled the air around him. Bull slid his arm around Cullen’s shoulders and leaned on the Templar as they marched. “Thanks for catching my stupid ass,” he said.

“I had to,” Cullen said. Then he smirked and whispered in a sotto voice, “I was afraid of what Gina would do to me if I failed.” Bull laughed.

They reached another Eluvian. Bull looked over at Morrigan. “How much farther?”

“We are at the last Crossroad.”

“How’s on the other side?”

She frowned. “I do not know what the place is called, but it appears to be a fortress in Par Vollen.”

Bull shared a look with the Arishok. “Bet you two Crowns it’s the Darvaarad.”

The Arishok grunted. “Nothing would surprise me at this point.”

“How do we get in?” asked Leliana. “I can’t imagine the Eluvian on the other side isn’t guarded.”
Morrigan activated the Eluvian and they all began to pass through. “I’ll get us in,” said Morrigan. “You’ll just have to wait for my signal.”

Passing through the mirror still felt odd, but he no longer felt itchy all over. As the islands faded into view, Bull said, “I saw Jerran’s body go past me in the river. They executed him. I don’t think we have the advantage of surprise any longer.”

“He’s right,” said the Arishok. “We must be prepared to fight.”

“Are you sure you can manage alone, Morrigan?” asked Cassandra.

Morrigan smirked. “Oh ye of little faith,” she said softly.

Then, with a whispered phrase, she transfigured into a crow and flew to an island floating on its own. If Bull squinted, he could just make out a mirror standing at its centre. The Morrigan bird flitted through its glimmering surface and disappeared.

Bull swallowed hard and crossed all his crossables that the Witch wouldn’t betray their trust.

***

Gina tried to keep herself calm, but her nerves were utterly shot. That was too close. Way too close. For once she was grateful for the elf’s sudden appearance.

Gatt strode alongside her as Baqoun marched her toward the main hall. “I’ve been doing some research on you, Saviour,” he said, putting subtle emphasis on the label she hated.

“That must’ve been dull reading,” she muttered.

“They say your mark is responsible for closing the Breach,” he said.

She lifted a brow. “Well yeah. That was kind of the point of the stupid thing.”

He shot her a hard look. “I also hear it was quite the weapon.”

Gina shrugged. “It had its moments.”

“Had? Does it no longer work?” asked the Viddasala.

Gina gave her a scornful look. “I’ve been your prisoner nearly a week, and you’re just asking that now? Have you ever worked in the field?”

The woman scowled. “Answer the question.”

Gina scoffed. “No, it doesn’t. Obviously.”

“Why obviously?”

Gina stopped short, ignoring Baqoun’s muffled curse as he bumped into her. “If it worked, the elf wouldn’t have had the chance to kill my boy. He’d be nothing more than a pile of ashes.”

Gatt smirked. “I don’t think I believe you. People exaggerate. It couldn’t have been that powerful.”

“You could ask the archdemon.” She sneered at him. “Oh wait, you can’t. Because he’s dead.” Then she shot a glance at each of the three in turn. “Just like you’ll all be when Bull gets his hands on you.”
The Viddasala made a derisive noise. “Hissrad will not-”


The woman went scarlet. “Hissrad-”


The Viddasala turned to face her. “Hissr-”

“The Iron fucking Bull,” shouted Gina. “Get it right, bitch!”

Faster than she expected, the woman swung and caught her with a hard backhand. She tasted blood as she tumbled to the stone floor. Baqoun laughed heartily and gripped the back of her neck to set her on her feet again.

Gina’s jaw felt like it had been smashed with a baseball bat. She tested the joint and nearly cried out in pain. A tentative exploration with her tongue found a few loosened teeth. Clearly the woman had been holding back the first time she took a swing.

Christ. Just how hard could Bull hit if he wound up?

Baqoun reached out and patted the Viddasala on the rear. “Nice one, Kadan.”

***

Bull stood and stared at the mirror, his hands clenching and unclenching. If Gina was there, she’d poke him in the ribs and say, “A watched pot never boils, you know.”

He couldn’t help it. It felt like hours since the Witch had flitted off. Really it had been less than half an hour, but it wasn’t like he was known for his patience to begin with.

The Arishok and Leliana were talking in low voices, reminiscing. The Qunari towered over the redhead, but she didn’t seem to be intimidated by their size difference. The Rasaan, in turn, was glowering at the pair. Bull had to admit he was surprised to see one of the Triumvirate behaving like a lovesick teenage boy, but who was he to judge? He was mush for his own little human.

She was close. He could feel it in his bones.

They’d had such a long journey to get this far. Fatigue was burning bright in everyone’s eyes, including his own. What were they about to find on the other side of this Eluvian?

Fighting through two platoons wasn’t going to be easy, but between the Inquisition and Red Jenny forces, they numbered almost a full platoon themselves. It would be hard won, but he had faith in his team. They’d fought worse enemies in bigger numbers. At least there wouldn’t be any creepy demons.

A glimmer swept over the mirror, and then the body of a Karashok flew through. Bull barely leapt out of his flight path. The man slammed into the ground and skidded twenty feet before coming to a halt at Hawke’s feet. He cautiously bent over the body and then looked up. “Out cold.”

Morrigan stepped through and brushed a lock of hair away from her forehead. She gave them all a smug look and said, “Believe in me now?”

Bull shook his head. “I keep telling you. We wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe you.” As he passed her, he muttered, “Nice one, Morrigan.”
The pain in her jaw made it hard to think straight. They were gathered in a room just off the main hall. It appeared to be some sort of mess hall, filled with tables and chairs. Some loaded plates still sat on the table.

For some bizarre reason, the Viddasala and Baqoun had recalled every last soldier in the fortress. They stood in neat rows, shoulders square. The majority were less than twenty years old, but the occasional veteran dotted the crowd.

Why on earth would they call a meeting now? It didn't make any sense. The Inquisition was coming! Shouldn't these boys be out there getting in place for the fight? That seemed to be the most logical course of action.

Gina stood beside Gatt as the Viddasala paced in front of all the soldiers. He murmured a translation as she began speaking.

“The Inquisition is coming. They destroyed our mine. It will take weeks to repair the damage they've caused. But that isn't what concerns me. What I want to know is how they gained access to begin with.” She paused. “Which of you betrayed us?”

Shock and anger rippled across the faces of all the Qunari gathered there. Not one came forward with a confession of betrayal.

After a moment, she snarled. “I will discover the traitor among us.”

Again, silence greeted her. Not one of the Karashoks so much as glanced at their compatriots. Not a single suspiciously narrowed eye. Gina swallowed hard. The person responsible wasn't in this room. She'd stake her life on it.

Baqoun stalked forward and grabbed a young soldier by the arm. He dragged the boy forward and shoved him to his knees. “You come forward or he dies.”

The boy looked no older than eighteen, but he remained stoic. Baqoun cursed and pulled out a knife. “Last chance,” he said.

No one came forward. Gina watched in horror as the monstrous Qunari jammed the knife under the soldier's ear. The boy twitched and then went limp. Baqoun ripped the knife free and let the body topple to the floor.

The rest of the karataam stared straight ahead, unblinking in the face of their fellow soldier's death. Baqoun howled with rage and bellowed, “Do you think we're fucking around?”

As he surged forward to grab another soldier an explosion rocked the place. The Viddasala shrieked and rounded on the soldiers. “Inquisition! Nehraa ataashi-asaastra meravas adim kata!”

“If we lose the Darvaarad, I will personally execute every last one of you,” shouted Baqoun as the Karashoks leapt into action.

Gina found herself being hauled to the Great Hall. Baqoun didn't slow to accommodate her, forcing her to run to keep on her feet. His hand gripped into her hair tightly.

They reached the top of the stairs as the massive doors toppled to the floor. Her heart skipped a beat as Bull stepped into sight, axe in hand.
She nearly wept when he was followed by Cassandra, Jeremy, and everyone else that had ever mattered to her.

***

Bull had his axe at the ready, but they hadn't run into a single member of the antaam. He furrowed his brow and said, “We should've run into a patrol at the very least.”

The Arishok nodded. “Yes. This is unsettling.”

Everyone stayed on their guard as they approached the main hall of the building. Bull had only been to the place once before, but he'd never forgotten the crumbling building. From the rambling disrepair to the overall eerie sensation of being watched wherever you went, it was a place no one would forget. It hadn't changed, except to decay further.

They reached the big doors and found them locked. He gestured at Rocky. “No way we can kick these in. Do what you do.”

The dwarf grinned maniacally as he produced a couple gaatlok charges. “Best get to cover everyone!”

In less than two minutes, the place was rigged and Rocky was whispering a countdown. This explosion was spectacular. As they moved cautiously out of their cover, one of the heavy doors crashed to the floor.

Bull walked through, axe still ready. The dust settled to reveal the majority of the soldiers in ranks in the centre of the hall, weapons aimed their way. Barely a whole karataam. Where were the rest of the Karashoks? Was there a force ready to swoop in at their backs? Tingles of fear crawled down his spine.

“You have come far enough,” shouted a woman's voice. “No more!”

He looked to the top of a set of stairs and nearly fell over. Gina stood there, hands chained in front of her, and a hulking Qunari at her shoulder. His hand gripped the back of her head, holding her tight. As Bull gazed at her, the Qunari smirked and leaned in to sniff her hair.

His knuckles cracked from the force of tightening his fist. He was going to kill that asshole extra hard.

“The Viddasala, I presume?” Cassandra stepped forward boldly. “You've attacked sovereign soil, and kidnapped a member of the Inquisition. If you wish to invite war inside your borders, this is a good way to do it.”

“Dear Inquisitor,” said the woman snidely. “I have watched your efforts from afar, and found you lacking.”

Cassandra curled her lip. “Lucky for me your opinion matters not.”

“Magic remains wildly out of control and you concern yourself with the likes of this one?” The Viddasala waved a hand toward Gina.

Bull growled. Cassandra crossed her arms. “She is the reason we defeated Corypheus and closed the Breach. I am surprised you do not appreciate her more.”

A sharp laugh came from the Qunari woman. “She can no longer perform the most basic of her
function. We would have given her Quamek months ago.”


“What is there to explain?” She sneered. “Look at the state of this place. You ask us to contain and control magic, yet none have come to care for our facility. Our research is hampered at every turn. Our army has not taken any action to control the madness in the south.”

The Arishok shook his head. “The only madness is your own.”

“I alone have had the courage to take action,” she said. Then she pointed at Bull. “What have you done, aside from consorting with this Tal-Vashoth traitor?”

The Arishok waved a hand sharply. “Enough of this! Your actions are not sanctioned. They end here. You are under arrest. I command every soldier here to lay down arms.”

Bull could see the mixed reaction in the crowd of soldiers. The Viddasala shouted, “Do not listen to him! This is but a trick Fen’Harel is playing on us!”

The faces before them all twisted with anger. The Arishok lifted a palm and then reached for his sword. “None can imitate the sword of the Arishok,” he said.

A furious shriek echoed from the Viddasala. “Rasaan! Now, please! Vinek kathas!”

Bull spun, ready for anything, but the Rasaan was already mid-swing at the Arishok, dagger in hand. He swiped viciously, but with speed that Bull hardly believed, the Arishok whipped his sword out and slashed upward.

The Rasaan froze in place and dragged a ragged breath. Then, the entire left side of his body from the hip up fell to the floor, blood and gore spilling out as the rest of his form toppled over.

As the light dimmed in the traitor’s eyes, the Arishok shook his arm out. There was a gash on his forearm that hadn’t been there moments before, so he wasn’t entirely unscathed. Considering how close he’d been to his would-be killer, he was damn lucky.

He turned to face the Viddasala, and in that moment, Bull saw exactly why the man had been chosen to lead the Antaam. Glorious fury burned bright in his countenance as he shouted, “If you wish to assassinate me, you'll need to try a lot harder!”

***

The Viddasala cursed, and began shrieking a diatribe the likes of which Gina hadn't heard before. The woman was clearly unhinged, blaming an old elvhenan legend for her current woes and insisting that it was Fen’Harel’s fault she was forced to take the path of blades.

Gina kept her eyes on Bull. He looked almost as terrified as he was enraged. Baqoun leaned closer to her and whispered, “See that Tal-Vashoth filth?” He tightened his grip on her neck. “He will never touch you again. I will personally break his spine and chain him up. Then, as he watches helplessly, I will violate every orifice of his precious Tama.”

Gina sucked a breath, but he wasn't done. He brought his lips close enough to brush her ear and said, “I’m planning to save your sweet little body for last. I bet he cries as I rape you to death.” Baqoun laughed softly and ran his tongue leisurely up the side of her face.

The Viddasala stammered to a halt and stared at Baqoun, hurt and fury clear in her eyes. Gina
decided that enough was enough. Looking him dead in the eyes and ignoring the agonizing pain in her jaw, she said in very clear Qunlat, “I don't think your girlfriend likes the way you're talking to me.”

Time seemed to stand still as they registered not only what she said, but how she said it. She sneered. “That's right, you arrogant fucks. I speak Qunlat fluently.”

The horror filling their faces bordered on comical, but Gina wasn't sticking around for a laugh. Taking advantage of their shock, she lashed out with a hard elbow to Baqoun’s gut. He grunted and doubled over, automatically releasing her just enough that she could twist free and bolt for the balcony rail.

She leapt just as Baqoun’s hand brushed her back, aiming for the heavy chain holding up the massive chandelier. She nearly missed, but managed to get a grip on one of the links.

The sound of bolts chipping into stone caught her ear. Gina spun awkwardly to see Varric firing Bianca at the base of the chain. She tightened her hold just as the stone snapped and the chandelier dropped to the ground, a column of flames shooting straight up in its wake. The gathered Karashoks cried out and scattered.

The speed of her ascent took her breath away. Too fast! Her body was going to slam into the ceiling! She let go with a shriek and found herself tumbling wildly.
Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Courtesy notice: this chapter contains violence of a sexual nature.

They were all forced to dive back as the huge bowl shaped chandelier slammed into the ground, spilling its oil and rolling flames across the floor. Bull couldn’t breathe for the terror gripping him. She’d been standing there, and then she wasn’t. She was free!

Only...now she was careening through the air, completely out of control. Her body was going to slam into the wall, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

From behind him, Dorian bellowed a strange phrase and swept his arms in a wide arc. The mad flipping of her body stopped and she swooped cleanly to the second floor balcony. Bull nearly fell over with relief.

Hawke laughed in delight. “She's got you lot thinking like she does! I love it!”

Dorian made an exasperated sound, but accepted Bull’s grateful look with a pleased smile.

The fire abated, leaving the stone floor smoking. Soldiers began to holler and rush them. The Arishok called for surrender again, but his voice was lost in the pandemonium.

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How it happened, she didn't know, but suddenly she was flying straight between two columns and skidding across the floor of the second storey before bumping into the wall. She'd barely caught her breath when a familiar face loomed above her.
Shara looked terrified. “Nan, are you alright?”

Gina stared up at her. “What are you—”

From behind the elf came a volley of cursing followed by the sound of arrows being loosed. Shara gripped her under the elbow and dragged her upright. “I had to help,” said the woman briskly.

Gina watched in stunned silence as the elf picked the locks on her manacled wrists. As the chains fell to the floor, she said thickly, “Thank you.”

Shara gave her an apologetic look. “I regret my actions. I have regretted them everyday since.”

Gina nodded and whispered, "Me too."

The woman smiled at her and presented two wickedly curved daggers, hilt first. “Shall we join this fight?”

***

They were all kids. Too young to have the experience of true battle. And too young to question orders, thought Bull. Killing any one of them would be a shame and a waste of good men. He shouted to the others to use non-lethal measures when possible.

Despite their youth, the Karashoks fought valiantly. Bull slammed a fist into the jaw of one, knocking him out cold, but another boldly took his place.

He fought to get to the stairs, but the bulk of the forces seemed to be congregating there. He cursed and whacked the flat of his axe across the face of another soldier. He'd live, but he'd have a flat nose until the healers got a hold of him.

When he finally got a foot on the first step, Gina came flying back into view. Her eye scanned the room, met his, and then caught sight of something beyond him.

She shouted and bolted forward. As she reached the first landing she launched over the rail and dropped into the fray.

His heart slammed in his chest. “Kadan!”

***

She ducked and dodged her way across the hall, racing desperately for the stairs leading to the dungeons and praying that Bull was on her heels.

Baqoun had already disappeared down them. It didn't make sense until she remembered who was down there. Bull's Tama!

Her feet barely touched the stairs as she flew down them. The sound of wood splintering and terrified cries of the woman filled her ears, spurring her through the pain and fatigue.

The cell door was off its hinges. Gina raced toward it, only to find herself caught around the neck and slammed bodily against the wall. In the chaos she lost one of the daggers. Baqoun laughed darkly in her ear.

“Dirty little trick, basra,” he said as he lifted her feet off the floor. “Time for you to pay for that.”

She swung the other dagger, but it bounced harmlessly off his armor and clattered to the floor. He
laughed and traced his tongue along her cheek again. “So sweet,” he said with a groan.

Gina kicked as hard as she could, catching him on the inner thigh. He yelped and dropped her, but before she could scramble away, he was on top of her. “Yes, make it hurt,” he moaned, grinding his crotch against hers.

She kneed him, but only got a split second of reprieve. He pressed a hand onto her throat. As black spots swam in her vision, Baqoun gripped his other hand over her breast and said, “Shame your Tal-Vashoth can’t be here to watch.”

She scrabbled frantically, fighting to get air. He made another hungry sound and said, “Yes, sweet thing, hurt me!”

The world started to dim. All she could see was his leering face as he strangled her.

***

Bull didn't care about the fight. Anyone in his way got bowled over as he followed Gina’s path. His bulk seemed to make him the target of choice. He howled in frustration and swung the axe in a vicious circle. “I will butcher every last one of you! Move!”

It seemed to dawn on the Karashoks that he'd been playing nice with them. One lowered his sword, and then the rest followed. The path ahead started to clear as the Arishok came to his side, sword held high. “You will stand down,” he commanded, his voice echoing in the massive space.

Bull didn't stay to see if the command finally ended the fight. He ran hard down the stairs and into a row of cells.

The big Qunari was on top of Gina. She clawed desperately at his arms, her eye bulging as the man squeezed her throat. “Yes, sweet thing, hurt me!”

With every ounce of fear and rage inside him, he kicked the man in the face. The force sent him flying into the wall as teeth and blood exploded out of his mouth. Bull dropped the axe and strode across the room.

The Qunari was dazed and whimpering with pain. Bull leaned close and snarled, “Did that hurt enough?”

***

Gina gagged for air as she struggled to her feet. Bull was beating Baqoun mercilessly. The big Qunari was a lump of hamburger on the floor when she finally succeeded in rising. Bull reached down and gripped Baqoun’s horns, making to twist the man's neck sharply.

“Katoh,” she wheezed, stumbling into Bull.

He caught her before she fell. His chest heaved and his eye was overbright in fury. She gripped his arm. “Need to talk to him,” she said hoarsely.

Bull’s breaths came short and hard, but after a moment, he nodded. More steps clattered down the stairs. Hawke and Cullen burst into sight. “Maker's breath,” said Cullen. “You did that with your fists?”

***
It took a few more hands, but they dragged the big Qunari out of the room to be chained and later interrogated. Hawke and Cullen gave her quick hugs, but seemed to sense they were intruding. Before he knew it, they had all disappeared up the stairs, giving him his first moment alone with his Kadan in so long it ached.

Bull's entire body was one trembling nerve as he turned to face Gina.

A hand print was blossoming around her throat. The sight made anger flare to life again, but he quashed it. He'd have his revenge soon enough.

She stood less than a pace away from him. Her hair was short and standing in every direction. She was filthy and covered in bruises. Something about the alignment of her jaw didn't look right, and the cheek puffed out twice its normal size.

He couldn't remember a more glorious sight.

Gina cleared her throat and winced. “Kaya?” she whispered, fear plain in her eyes.

Bull nodded. “That crazy horse brought her straight to me.”

Tears washed down her face. “Oh thank god,” she said, her voice cracking.

Bull closed the gap between them and pulled her into his arms. The sensation of her little body curving against him was nearly enough to knock him to his knees. Words failed him as he caressed her and held as tightly as he dared.

***

Surely this was a cruel dream. She was going to wake any moment, alone and cold in a dark dungeon cell.

Gina opened her eye cautiously, but the moment didn’t fade into the ether. Bull was holding her, his heart thumping beneath her ear. She touched him tentatively, and then traced both hands over him more boldly. “I knew you’d come for me,” she whispered, wincing at the shooting pain in her jaw at every word.

His fingers trembled as he traced the curve of her neck. “I’m sorry it took me so long, Kadan.”

She wanted desperately to kiss him, but the pain was starting to spread. Instead, she cuddled against his chest and savoured the sensation of his skin against hers. His big paw cradled the back of her head, and they stood together for a long moment.

Bull started to him his song softly, which brought her sharply out of her moment. His brow furrowed as she pulled away. Gina shook her head and mumbled, “Have to show you something.”

He nodded slowly. “Okay Kadan.”

She took hold of his hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry, Bull,” she whispered. His brow furrowed in confusion, but he followed obediently.

***

She lead him to the battered door. He followed her inside and waited for his eye to adjust to the darkness. His ear caught the muffled sobs before he spotted the figure cowering into a corner. He frowned. “Who is-”
Gina stepped forward and crouched low. “Kost, Tamassran,” she said softly, the words slurring somewhat. Her jaw had to be killing her.

The figure curled more tightly and whimpered. Bull squinted and made out the delicate sweep of horns. Familiar horns. His breath caught.

Gina crept closer and whispered, “Rethsaam, Tamassran. Baqoun is gone. Your son stopped him.”

As the form revealed her face, Bull fell to his knees and clamped both hands over his mouth to stop the cry of shock from ringing through the tiny space. His breaths came faster until he was almost hyperventilating.

Gina put a hand on his arm. “Breathe, tough guy.”

Bull crawled forward, feeling like a small child. “Tama,” he said, unable to stem the tears that flooded free.

His Tamassran gazed at him, terror in her face. He reached toward her and she flinched away. His heart broke as he examined her and saw the bruising that mottled every inch of visible skin.

“You’re safe now, Tama,” he said softly. “I will never let anyone harm you again.”

Bull started to sing her lullaby. She watched him with fear in her eyes, but didn’t move away as he slowly moved forward again. As he got closer he could see stitches binding her lips shut. A fresh wave of fury crackled through him, but he kept his face neutral. He pulled her into his arms and she began to weep into his shoulder.

He gathered her carefully and rose to his feet. Gina walked at his side as he carried his Tama upstairs. The beautiful woman who had always seemed so big in his mind was painfully light in his arms. She clung to him like a child and cried. Bull accepted the role reversal and hugged her closer. “I’ve got you,” he murmured.

They reached the main floor and found that most of the soldiers were on their knees, weapons on the ground in front of them. The Arishok stood with his arms crossed tightly. He acknowledged Bull with a short nod.

Gina waved an arm at Dorian. The Mage rushed over and threw his arms around her before holding her at arm’s length and cursing. “What have they done to you?” he said, examining her cheek and jaw closely.

She shook her head and pointed at Bull’s passenger. “Her first,” she whispered.

Dorian frowned and moved toward them. Tama tensed in Bull’s arms. The Mage froze in his step and held both hands in full view. “Kost,” he said softly.

Bull gave him a grateful look. The man didn’t know much Qunlat, but he sure as hell knew the right time to use it. He kissed her temple and said softly, “He’ll help, Tama. I trust him with my life.”

She eyed the Tervinter suspiciously, but finally nodded. Dorian stepped forward and looked her over carefully. He shot Bull a dismayed look, and then slowly moved his hands toward her. She sucked a breath, but didn’t struggle or move away as he tilted her chin and probed at her lips. She whimpered in pain, but held still.

He said quietly, “The thread has been in her lips for weeks. Months, maybe. I can’t just cut it. I’ll need to put her out and get Jeremy to help me.”
Bull nodded. “She won’t let you if you ask permission. Just do it.”

Dorian nodded and gently slid his hand over her forehead. With a whispered phrase she slumped in Bull’s arms. The sensation alarmed him, irrationally, but he could feel her heart still beating steadily.

Dorian shook his head as Bull laid her on the floor. “Who is she?” he asked as he knelt at her side.

“My Tama,” whispered Bull. Gina’s arms slid around his shoulders. He gripped her tightly and let out a long breath. The state of the Qunari woman disturbed him beyond anything he’d ever experienced in his life. Why the hell was she here? And what had the male Qunari threatened that Gina hadn’t hesitated to chase him down those stairs?

Gina rested her forehead just above his ear, leaning into him. He wanted to carry her off to a quiet room and hold her until the end of time, but for the moment, having her touching him would have to suffice.

Dorian called Jay over. The man was attending to the kid with a flattened nose. He glanced over and then cried out as he broke into a run, catching Gina up in a tight, spinning hug. She yelped, likely from an unintentional collision with her jaw.

Bull frowned. “Take a look at that,” he said to Dorian quietly.

The Mage nodded and rose to his feet. “Come, my little darling. My voodoo fingers are itching to work on you.”

***

Dorian’s spell didn’t work quite as instantly as Ash’s, but with a few extra minutes, she felt almost good as new, minus some residual swelling and a couple wiggly teeth.

No one knew where the Viddasala had gone, nor had anyone from the Inquisition seen Gatt. Gina scanned her memory, and realized that he had disappeared during the chaos of the explosion. Coward.

Bull had wandered off to gather make-shift bedding for his Tama. Gina could see the mixed emotions on his face as he returned with an armload of furs and bedrolls. She hated that their reunion had to be ruined so quickly, but at least the woman was going to get the help she sorely needed.

He shifted the Tamassran’s limp form onto the soft pile and gazed down on her for a moment before rising back to his feet. “Who did this?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Gina shook her head. “I think they all had a part in it.”

He gave her a pained look. “Why?”

She frowned. “The Viddasala said something about too many failures. I don’t know what she meant by that.”

His hands shook. Gina reached out and touched his arm gently. “Hey, we’re going to get to the bottom of it. I promise.”

He nodded and pulled her into a hug. “I missed you, Kadan,” he whispered.

“Not nearly as much as I missed you,” she said, lifting on her toes and kissing his cheek softly.
His hand curled around the back of her neck as he bent lower and kissed her on the lips. Lightly at first, but then like he might never kiss her again.

***

After everyone had a turn hugging Gina until she couldn’t breathe, they gathered in a disjointed group and took a moment to rest. The stone floor might as well have been an overstuffed armchair for how weary Bull was. Gina curled against his chest and listened as they described their journey through the Crossroads to get to her.

“And then there was the lyrium mine,” said Hawke.

Varric nodded. “Hadn’t been near one of those in a long time.”

“Who was mining it?”

“The Qunari,” said Hawke.

She tilted her head. “But why?”

Bull traced a hand up and down her spine gently. “Some experiment. The Viddasala plans to give it to saarebas.”

Gina stiffened. “Wait. What would that do?”

“It'll either kill them or make them wildly powerful,” said Dorian. “And apparently Qunari Mages are already powerful beyond comprehension.”

Her heart started to race beneath his fingers. “Kadan?”

She looked over at the Arishok. “Have you told them yet?”

The man frowned deeply. She surged to her feet. “Now isn't the time to be coy. Do they know?”

The man sighed and shook his head. “I did not reveal the secret. It did not seem appropriate.”

She gave a bitter little laugh. “Well the cat’s out of the bag now. The Salit is a Mage.”

The Arishok carefully avoided eye contact with anyone. Bull scowled and said, “Since when do saarebas get promoted to Salit?”

Gina began to pace slowly. “It isn't a natural skill, not like most Mages. But I don't know how, and it's not really important right now. What is important is that they hauled him away this morning with the promise of some sort of treat.”

Bull caught on immediately. “Lyrium. He's the experiment.”

“No,” said the Arishok. “We kept the secret between ourselves. No one else knew.”

Gina scoffed. “Right. And no one would ever try to assassinate the Arishok, would they?” The man went red and didn't reply.

She began to recount a conversation she'd overheard between the Viddasala and Baqoun. Bull had to marvel at her clever ploy to fool them into believing she didn't know Qunlat. He had to shake his head at the amateurish actions of someone who was his superior at one point. How in the world had the Viddasala been so gullible?
The Arishok squeezed his eyes tight. “I fell straight into her trap like a fool.”

“You said it, not me,” muttered Gina.

Bull frowned. “Wait, who's Ash?”

Gina said, “The Salit. That's what his Tama called him, anyway.”

A memory leapt to the front of his mind.

“Ash! Oh, that boy!”

Eighteen year old Bull walked onto the back porch of his childhood home. He’d just returned from his first long term assignment and couldn't resist stopping in for a short visit.

Tama stood with her hand shading her eyes. She turned and cried out in delight. “Hisrad! What a surprise!”

Bull hugged his Tama tight and spun her. She laughed and patted his back. “Hard to believe you were ever small enough to sit on my lap,” she said.

He grinned and set her on her feet. “Got a runaway?”

She sighed. “Ash. He's off hunting down a nest of kittens. That boy will be the death of me.”

“I seem to remember you telling me that when I was little too.” Bull wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Some say I turned out okay in the end.”

Tama shook her head. “Ash is almost as bad as you,” she said. Then she gripped his horn and gave it a fond shake. “The brightest boys do come at a price.”

He laughed and kissed her cheek. “I'll track him down. I learned a few tricks over the past few years.”

In the end, he found the little boy in the barn, curled around a little box filled with squeaking kittens. Mama Cat was laying on the boy's hip. Bull came to sit with him. Green eyes gazed at him with curiosity. “Who are you?”

“Your big brother, Imekari.” Bull brushed the back of a knuckle lightly over the tiny belly of a kitten. “Tama asked me to find you.”

The boy's breath caught. “I'll catch it good this time!”

Bull grinned. “You earned it.”

A determined look came to his face. “I wanted to see the babies. Hissera wouldn't show me, so I had to follow her in secret.”

His little horns were just starting to peek through the skin of his forehead. Bull ruffled his hair. “Stealth is an important skill, Ash. Just use it with permission.”

They found a safe spot for the babies and left Hissera to feed them. Bull walked back to the house and found himself subject to interrogation.

“Do the Ben-hassrath really know when I've disobeyed Tama?”
“Are those real scars?”

“How fast do the boats sail?”

“Have you ever been to Orlais?”

“Are you big because you ate all your vegetables when you were little like me?”

He was having a hard time holding back laughter. “Yes, every bite.”

Tama stepped into view and lifted a brow. “Did you?”

Bull cleared his throat and stammered. “Uh, almost every bite.”

Tama shooed Ash off to dinner and tucked her hand at Bull’s elbow. “You may be taller and have years of training, but your Tama will always have your number.”

Bull shook himself back to present. That little boy, no more than five. Had he gone on to become Salit? Same breeding program, same father, same childrearing group. Too many coincidences to ignore.

He glowered at the Arishok. “Couldn't have mentioned that we were raised by the same Tamassran?”

The man's eyebrows shot up. “I was not aware of the fact.”

Bull made a doubtful sound and got to his feet. “Where did they take him?”

She frowned and turned to the remaining karataam, scanning over the crowd before striding briskly toward them. Bull fell in step at her shoulder.

She marched up to a young Qunari and said, “Where does the guarded door lead?”

He didn't meet her eye. She jabbed him in the middle of the chest and said in Qunlat, “I don't have time to play games. Answer the question.

He grimaced and said in stilted common tongue, “Another mirror. I do not know where it leads.”

Gina nodded. “What's the key?”

He shook his head. “I do not know. Truly. We were stationed only at the door. Baqoun and the Viddasala are the only ones who went past it.”

“What about the Salit? Did they take him through?”

He frowned. “Yes. This morning.”

She nodded thoughtfully before patting him on the shoulder. “You're a good kid. You and your buddy. I'll make sure the Arishok knows that.”

The boy stared after her in awe as she spun back to the group. Bull hustled in her wake, wondering what brought on the compliment.

“We need to get a move on,” she was saying. “There's another Eluvian, but I don't know the key.”

“That's where I come in,” said Morrigan.
Gina stared at her mutely for a moment. “Wait, when did you get back?”

“She met us at the first Eluvian, Kadan.”

Gina’s shoulders dropped. “So that's how you got through,” she whispered.

Bull caressed her gently. “What's wrong?”

She shook her head. “They thought one of the soldiers betrayed them. Killed one of them to try and force a confession.”

The Arishok stiffened. “This will not go unpunished.”

Gina turned to walk up the stairs. “There's a hell of a lot more than that they need to pay for.”

***

Her jaw didn't hurt anymore, but she was beyond tired. Bull kept shooting little worried looks her way, but there wasn't time to rest or gather courage. Ash was in danger.

Or had he become the danger? The thought made her skin crawl.

They reached the Eluvian. Gina waited for the rest to slip through and caught Bull’s hand before he could follow. Her stomach flipped with nerves as she met his beautiful green eye. “I have something I need to tell you.”

He traced a finger down her cheek and said, "Anything, Kadan."

She swallowed hard and put her hand over his heart, just below the claw laying against his chest. After a moment, she shook her head. "Not here. After. When we're far away from anything to do with this place."

Bull nodded slowly and lowered his lips to catch hers. After kissing her breathless, he whispered, “We'll have all the time in the world, Kadan.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

A shorty before the weekend...posting via mobile, so forgive any weird formatting!

They stayed for one more lingering kiss. Gina leaned into his chest and sighed contentedly. His fingers trailed through her hair, picking out tangles as he went.

"I haven't seen my hair yet." She frowned. "It feels weird."

He dropped a kiss on top of her head. "You look as beautiful as the day I met you." He paused, and then added, "I assume. Still can't remember."

A little laugh escaped her. "You really know how to make a girl feel good, tough guy."

His chest vibrated with soft laughter. "You can always count on me."

The sentiment strummed across the tightly wound strings of her emotions, bringing sudden tears. She said thickly, "I know I can, the Iron Bull. I'm so grateful you found me."

"I had to find you." He tipped her chin up and stroked an escapee tear from her cheek. "I was fuckin' lost without you, Kadan," he whispered.

A little sob broke free. "I almost fell apart without you."

"But you didn’t," he said softly. "You used your head and your wits and you survived. I’ve never been more amazed by you, not even after seeing you close the breach."
A shaky smile came to her lips. “I kept asking myself what the Iron Bull would do. How would he react?”

"Hmm. And just how would I react?"

"I knew you'd keep your mouth shut and listen. I did a whole lot of listening this week."

He chuckled. “That's even more miraculous.”

She gave him a playful swat on the rear. “Already with the smart remarks, eh?”

“You expect nothing less, and I dare not disappoint,” he said grandly. Bull kissed her forehead and said, “Let's get going so I can get you out of this place.”

She wiped at her eye and nodded. As she turned to the mirror, he caught her hand and pulled her back around. “One for the road,” he murmured as his lips brushed against hers.

She stole a second.

They stepped through the Eluvian together. This time it didn't lead to a floating island, but a sprawling ruin. “Why is this place so different now?” she asked Morrigan as they approached another mirror.

“The renewed use of the portals brings them back to life.” The Witch paused and then whispered, “Maraas nehraa.” Nothing happened. Her yellow eyes narrowed. “Why isn't it working?”

Bull caressed Gina’s shoulder and said, “Because you're butchering my poor language.” He repeated the phrase, emphasizing the proper enunciation. The mirror flashed to life.

Morrigan gave him a withering look. “I cannot be perfect all the time.”

He smirked. “Keeping that bar of expectations low, Morrigan?”

Her face turned pink and she flounced through the Eluvian.

Gina pressed into Bull’s side. “She can turn into a dragon, remember? Should you really provoke her?”

“Bah.” He waved a hand dismissively. “It's good for her. Keeps her grounded.”

“Uh huh.” Her stomach tightened as sudden nausea bloomed through her gut. She pulled away and bent at the waist, breathing long and slow, willing the sensation to pass. Not now, baby.

Bull slid his hand over her lower back. “Kadan? You okay?”

After a dry heave or two, the need to vomit eased. She accepted the waterskin offered and said, “Just overtired, that's all.” It wasn't entirely untrue.

His brow was crinkled with worry, but he didn't argue.

***

They stepped through to find the group scattered and shouting in breathless panic. Morrigan lay limp against a tree while Dorian and Jeremy worked to revive her. Vivienne was shrieking as she manifested a glimmering shield from thin air.
Bull stepped in front of Gina protectively and whipped his axe out. A menacing laugh echoed around the place. “Just in time, Hisssrad,” called the Viddasala.

A Qunari bigger than any Bull had ever seen dropped into sight. He rose to full height, and bands of electrical energy wreathed his body before pooling onto the ground and sweeping outward. Bull cursed and stepped back.

Gina cried out in dismay. “Ash!”

The Qunari flinched and looked her way. “Run,” he grated. A breath later he was bellowing in pain and grasping at a band wrapped around his throat.

“No talking,” the Viddasala said calmly. “The Salit has been given a promotion. His new title is Saartath.”

She walked into plain sight, her manner overly casual. Varric shot a round of bolts her way, but they bounced harmlessly in mid air. She smirked. “Finally one of my projects comes in handy.”

Bull shot a look at the Arishok and saw the same truth dawning on the man. *The Viddasala.* She had been in charge of the breeding program and, despite her career change, carried on her work without permission or sanction. And who the hell would have ever suspected her? It was diabolical.

“You've all been such disappointments to me,” she continued. “Especially you, Hisssrad. Such potential thrown away.”

Bull laughed, which seemed to catch her off-guard. “You and the Rasaan have zero clue about all we could ever be. You blind yourself on principle and refuse to see that not everything the Qun dictates is right.”

“Heresy!” she shrieked, pointing his way. The monstrous Qunari yelped as another wave of power skittered across his skin. Bull eyed him nervously. Saarebas traditionally had an Arvaarad who could control them via a leash of sorts. That was how they could control the Mages during battle.

He didn’t understand the mechanics except to know that they had absolute control of the creatures, even to the degree of being able to euthanize them via instant-immolation. He’d seen the results of escape attempts after being leashed. It wasn’t pretty.

If the Salit was under the Viddasala’s control, there was no telling what he would do to them at her bidding. Bull wasn't particularly knowledgeable about magic, but even he could feel the immense power rippling through the air. The Salit could probably vaporize the entire place if commanded.

“Did you feed him lyrium?” he called, crossing everything that she was the type to boast.

The woman gave him a cold smile. “I no longer have time to tell you about my latest work, thanks to your Fen’Harel.”

Latest work? What other horrible experiments was the woman running?

“Saartath! Meravas adim kata!” she commanded as she disappeared behind a wall of rock. The Qunari made twin fists and a burst of energy swept forward.

A streak of red light met the surge of power. The two forces sizzled on contact. Morrigan staggered forward, a cut from her forehead still oozing blood. “Any big ideas?” she rasped.

The Arishok said, “We need to get out of here!”
Bull started to nod, but Gina stepped forward. “We can help him!”

The Arishok stared at her like she had two heads. Bull shook his head vigorously. “He’s under her control. There’s nothing we can do, Kadan.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said. “His power isn’t like a typical Mage. It works differently.”

“All Qunari saarebas are different from the weak creatures you’ve known,” said the Arishok. “No more of this foolish notion. We find an escape and that’s final.”

Bull sighed and counted inside his head. He didn’t even get to ‘2’ before she rounded on the commander. “Listen, buddy, you don’t command me. I’ve taken on a lot bigger assholes than this, and they wanted to hurt me. This isn’t Ash’s nature,” she said. “Besides which, it’s your fault he started the investigation. The least you could do is try to help him!”

The Arishok lifted both brows and shot a disbelieving look at Bull. He shrugged blandly. The Arishok was dumb enough to challenge her. He could deal with the consequences. The man turned to her and squared his shoulders. “You would dare speak—”

She waved a hand sharply, cutting him off. “Yeah, yeah. You’re the big cheese. We’re all impressed.” He sputtered indignantly, but she ignored him, turning to Bull. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do. It’s him I don’t trust,” he said.

“Because of his part in my kidnapping?”

Bull gritted his teeth. “It certainly doesn't give me any warm, fuzzy feelings about him.”

“We don’t have time to discuss all the details. I know he isn't innocent, but there are a lot of things he did for me that you don’t know about,” she said, gripping his arm. “Bull, I don't expect you to be friends, but I know he doesn't want to harm us. Let me try to help him stop that bitch. Please.”

Bull's skin tingled. He shot a look at the monster Qunari. Between Dorian and Vivienne, none of his attacks were reaching them, but it certainly didn't seem to be for lack of trying.

Bull swallowed hard. “He isn’t in control of himself, Kadan. She holds his leash. There's no breaking that hold without her permission. Taking the collar off would be suicide. There's nothing anyone can do.”

“He's holding back. I can feel it!” She waved a hand in the Salit’s direction. “You need to understand how strong his magic is, Bull. He healed my broken bones in an instant, yet left the bruising so that Gatt wouldn't know about his abilities.”

Morrigan frowned. “I wonder at the source of his power.”

Gina shook her head. “I don’t know, but what I’ve seen him do makes other Mages look like children.”

Bull expected the Witch to be offended, but she only grew more thoughtful. “The Viddasala said to kill us all, yet not one of his attacks have reached us. If the Iron Bull is correct, he should have instantly wiped us off the map. I can feel how much power he has. We shouldn't be able stand against him, and yet we are. I'm inclined to take Gina’s side.”

Damn. He'd hoped Morrigan would take the side of caution. Bull cast a questioning glance at Cullen and Cassandra. They both shrugged. “It is worth a try,” said Cassandra.
Turncoats, the lot of them!

Bull sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He could see the desperation in his Kadan’s eye. He trusted her judgement. And the Salit had saved Oza and her family. Something that might have gotten him killed if they hadn't had further plans for the big man.

Neither of these thoughts made him feel better about having her approach the Qunari maelstrom. Bull reached out and caressed her cheek. “Kadan, I just got you back,” he whispered, letting her hear the fear in his voice.

Her face twitched and she stepped closer, putting her hand into his. “I know, tough guy. But like him or lump him, he's family. And we don’t leave family behind.”

Bull scowled. “Unfair tactic, Kadan.” He pulled her into his arms and took a deep breath before releasing her and stepping back. “Go. But be ready to get yanked out of there if it doesn’t go well.”

She nodded and turned on her heel, sprinting toward the massive Mage.

“You’re letting her do this?” asked the Arishok, his voice sharp.

“Letting her?” Bull gave him an odd look. “I’m not her commanding officer.”

“The Salit is not himself,” said the Arishok urgently. “We will not survive if we stay.”

Bull felt his hands trembling. “You don’t know her the way I do. She’s pulled off bigger miracles than this.”

The man and stared at her retreating form, his brow furrowing deeply. “I hope you’re right, for all our sakes.”
Chapter 25

Chapter by jinbaittai

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

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The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gina bolted before Bull could change his mind. She crossed to Ash, moving with determined strides.

Ash stumbled away, his white hair a halo thanks to the static electricity coursing through the air. “I can’t restrain my attacks on them and keep you safe too, little one! Go back!” Every word caused a sharp sizzle around his neck, making him grit his teeth.

She shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere. We’re going to stop her, you and I.”

Flames burst forth, but he swept his hands and they swirled around her harmlessly. “There’s nothing you can do! She’s got absolute control.”

“You just said you’re restraining your power.”

“I can’t sustain it, Gina! Run, please!” Every muscle in his neck was corded tight, and Gina could smell his skin scorching.

She stepped forward boldly. “The Viddasala doesn’t have as much control as she’d have you believe.”

His eyes squeezed shut and he howled as ice materialized in the air around him and slashed toward her. Another wild sweep of his hands had the ice melting and raining harmlessly to the ground. “I'm losing control,” he shouted, then dropped to his knees and groaned in pain.

Gina crossed the last gap between them and took hold of the leather strap around his neck. It felt like simple leather to her fingers, but the soft skin around his throat was already blistering from the power punishing him almost constantly.
She tugged him closer. “You are not an animal. Your circumstances do not dictate your actions, remember? Hold onto that.”

More energy crackled across his skin, but none touched her. He was gasping at the effort. She pulled out one of the curved daggers and lifted the blade toward the collar.

Ash’s monstrous mitt caught hers. “You can’t remove it.” His green eyes met hers, terror filling them. “It'll kill us all, darlin’.”

She shook her head and slipped free. “The Ash I know won't let it.”

Then, before he could protest, she sliced the leather.

***

Bull tried to get close, but flames and ice confounded every effort.

He yanked a shard of ice bigger than a fork from his shoulder and threw it to the ground. “Meravas katara,” he shouted as he surged forward again. That bitch Viddasala was going to pay for her sins if he had to haunt her steps from the afterlife.

As he ran, the Salit fell to his knees. Gina stood heart-stoppingly close and grabbed the collar around the man’s neck before slipping a dagger from her belt.

“No!” he shouted. Removing the collar without permission of the Arvaarad would result in a fireball at the best of times. With this guy? Disaster!

She didn't hear him. With a swift movement, she slashed the collar free.

In an instant, the air pressure in the place skyrocketed, making Bull grip his head in agony. Everyone fell to the ground, curling in on themselves and crying out.

Just as Bull’s skull felt like it might collapse on itself, the pressure released with a clapping boom, knocking him off his feet. The dust on the ground puffed into the air from the shock wave, and incredible heat saturated his body. He was burning from the inside!

As he opened his mouth to scream, the Salit leapt to his feet and bellowed words in ancient Elven that Bull couldn't even pronounce. The shouted words echoed through the space as the air stilled and the heat dissipated instantly. Steam clouded from his skin and the ground, obscuring Bull’s view of the pair.

He was struggling to his feet when she walked through the fog. Gina had the leather collar clutched in her fist, and not a single new mark marred her beautiful body. How she managed it he didn’t know or care. She walked straight up to the Arishok and tossed the heavy strap at his feet.

He lunged at her. “You could have destroyed us all!”

Bull frowned and started moving toward them. Gina squared her shoulders and said, “But I didn’t. And I saved your friend.”

“Do you think that fucking matters?” he screamed, the spittle spraying from his mouth visible from Bull’s forty foot distance. He started to run as the Qunari took a wild swing at her head.

She ducked and threw a hard fist into his ribs, but it barely fazed the man. He screamed incomprehensible nonsense as Hawke and Cullen launched into action. The Arishok ripped out his
sword and swung it in a hard circle. All three fell back, shouts of confusion filling the air.

Bull sprinted through the last fifteen feet and ducked low, catching the Arishok around the waist and tackling him to the ground. The big sword clattered to the ground and the Arishok shrieked like a wild animal. Bull tried to pin him to the ground, but the beastly man was a tornado of clawed fingers and kicking feet.

Another body piled onto him. Cullen shouted a breathless curse as he took a hard fist to the chin, but he finally managed to get a grip on the Arishok’s arm. Bull did the same with the other arm, and realized that both Hawke and Jeremy were fighting a leg each. As the Arishok screeched and writhed, he got a look at the man’s arm.

The Rasaan’s gash was still livid on his forearm, but that didn’t worry him. The blackened veins surrounding the wound and spreading out of sight under his armour? That freaked him the hell out. He swore. “Stitches! Saar-qamek!”

Without warning the Arishok went utterly still. They all held their breath. Then the convulsions started, hard enough to unseat all four of them. Bull barely managed to keep hold of the arm, trying to at least keep the man from flailing out of control. The Qunari’s eyes rolled back into his skull as his body tried to tear itself apart.

Stitches skidded to his knees beside Bull. “I don’t have any antidote left,” he said breathlessly.

The convulsions stopped without warning, which was even more terrifying than the sudden rage. Bull dug frantically through his pack, but his vial of the antidote was empty. He’d used his latest dose earlier in the day just in case the Rasaan tried something stupid. Bull would have expected the Arishok to be prepared as well, but apparently not.

An impossibly deep voice bellowed, “Move!”

Before he could even flinch, hands the size of a frying pan caught his shoulder and threw him head over heels. He tumbled well over ten feet before he skidded to a stop. Gina ran to him and helped haul him to his feet.

He spun to see the Salit bowed over the Arishok, one hand on the man’s forehead and the other over his arm. He said something in beautiful lilting Elven that Bull could barely understand, and blue light washed over the Arishok from head to toe.

A breath later, the Arishok’s body arched with a great gasp and he sat bolt upright. He was panting like he’d run a race, but he was alive! Bull stared from him to the Salit. The enormous Qunari was brusquely checking the Arishok’s vitals and ignoring the stunned silence surrounding him.

Finally he stopped and sank back onto his heels, breathing hard. “I think I’ve got it all.”

Bull stepped toward them cautiously and looked at the Arishok’s forearm. It was perfect. Bull’s breath caught and he snatched up the arm and stared at the place he’d just seen the gouge. Well over five inches long, at least a half inch deep, still oozing blood in its centre. It had been there! Now there was nothing, not even a hint of a scar or blackened vein. It was like the damage hadn’t even occurred.

His eye met the Salit’s. “Just how much power do you have?”

“I don’t know,” the man muttered.

The Arishok tugged free and staggered to his feet. Leliana came to his side and he leaned on her for
support. Bull snapped to his feet and turned his attention to something a lot more important. “Why
the hell weren’t you dosing yourself for saar-qamek?”

The man looked dazed. “I was dosing myself.”

Bull lifted both brows. “The little show you just put on would contradict that statement, pal.”

The Arishok jammed his hand in his pocket and retrieved a small brown vial. He tossed it to Bull.
“I dosed myself at the lyrium mine.”

“He did,” said Leliana. “I watched him.”

Bull popped the cork and sniffed the contents. He frowned and tasted a drop. “The antidote is in
there, but it’s so faint you might as well have taken sugar water.”

The man’s cheeks darkened. “I dislike the taste, so I take it with fruit juice.”

“Let me guess, you complained about having to use it to the Rasaan.” The Arishok wouldn’t meet
his eyes. Bull sighed heavily. “So you basically told him he could poison you anytime he wanted.
Rookie move, Arishok.”

His shoulders sagged. “I did not think anyone would be so bold as to actually attempt an
assassination, least of all him.”

The Salit rose to his feet and cleared his throat. “I think there are a great many things that will need
to change upon your return to Par Vollen, old friend.”

The Arishok sighed and nodded. “Shanedan. Later.”

Bull nodded firmly. “Yes, later. For now we have ourselves a Viddasala to hunt.”

Fury rippled across the Salit’s face. “Yes. That we certainly do.”

***

Bull took a few minutes to check Gina for damages and scold her for being so bold. The affection in
his voice took all the sting out of the words, but she tried her best to appear chastened. Really, she
was just basking in the comfort of his touch.

Finally he heaved a breath and kissed her lightly. “Better get a move on, Kadan.”

Gina nodded and let him guide her in the wake of the rest of the group. She was exhausted. A week
of hardly eating or sleeping was catching up a lot quicker than she anticipated. Having the Arishok
attack her without warning didn’t help matters. The spike of adrenaline had worn away most of her
reserved energy.

She could feel the exhaustion wearing on Bull too. His step was a little less certain, his hands a little
less steady. They needed to find the Viddasala and end this nonsense so they could rest. All of
them.

Hawke came to join them. “Never a dull moment with you two,” he said cheerfully. “I’m tempted
to move back to Skyhold.”

Varric turned and scoffed. “I just became Viscount. You’re staying in Kirkwall if I have to put you
under lock and key.”
“Why me?” whined Hawke.

“Because it was your big idea that I should repair the harbour!”

“Well I didn’t think they’d bloody well make you Viscount!”

“Well they did!”

Gina grinned at their bickering. “When are you two going to give up the charade and get married already?”

Hawke and Varric both gave her a foul look. “Are you kidding? We’d kill each other in a week,” said Hawke.

Varric rolled his eyes. “Like you could ever tie all this down,” he said, indicating himself with a long sweeping gesture.

Bull and Gina snorted with laughter, earning another pair of dirty looks, but then they laughed too. Gina wiped at her eye and sighed in contentment. “It is so good to be with everyone again.”

A throat cleared on her blind side. Bull tensed before she could completely turn her head. She squeezed his hand gently and said, “Ash, I’d like to officially introduce you to the Iron Bull.”

The brothers eyed each other warily. Ash said quietly, “It is an honor.”


An awkward silence stretched until Gina sighed and said, “While I’m playing hostess, I’d like to also introduce Hawke and Varric. Members of the Inquisition, even if they did abandon us and run away to Kirkwall.”

He dipped his head to them and said, “I haven’t been to Kirkwall in an age. Last time I was there I was tracking down the last known location of the Tome of Koslun.”

Hawke’s eyes widened. “You were that Isskari?”

Ash smiled. “Yeah. First time I worked with the Arishok. Proved my worth in spades that mission.”

Hawke whistled low. “I’ll say. They hadn’t seen that thing in close to two centuries, and you figured it out because you found a change in dialect in some old report. The Arishok was terribly impressed.”

Ash gave her a smug look. Gina rolled her eye. “Alright, so you were a good Isskari.”

He grinned. “Damn straight.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at her cheek. “What's with the bruising? Wasn't there this morning.”

She touched at the spot. It was still a bit tender, but at least she could function. “Took a slap to the face.”

“Who did you mouth off this time?”

Bull coughed to hide a laugh. Gina gave him a dirty look before turning to Ash. “I just saved your ass. Remember that?”
He smirked and said, “And only risked everyone else’s life in the meantime. No big deal.” He took a step closer, then paused and met Bull’s eye, silently asking permission to approach. Bull nodded brusquely. Ash tipped her chin up so he could examine the damages more closely.

“I had faith in you.” She scowled and grumbled, “Won’t make that mistake again.”

He laughed as he probed gently at her cheek. His eyes softened. “Seriously, little one. Are you okay?”

The meaning was clear. She nodded. “I’m good, Ash. Really.”

“You scared the shit out of me.”

Hawke scoffed. “Don’t go feeling all special. She scares everyone half to death every time we go adventuring. I’m amazed that our poor Bull hasn’t keeled over from a heart attack already.”

Gina glowered at Hawke. “Yeah, har har. You’re all a bunch of comedians.”

Ash smiled and tapped the end of her nose. “Well, you’re mostly healed. Whoever did this did good work. Jaw is a bit wonky. Want me to fix it?”

“No, please leave me damaged,” she said dryly.

He grinned and put his palm over her cheek. As he whispered a strange phrase, her jaw popped, and heat flooded her entire face. She gasped and jerked away. Bull went stiff, but she quickly put a soothing hand on his arm. “I’m okay, tough guy.”

After testing the joint and finding it good as new, teeth fully locked in place, she said, “Why does your healing spell create so much heat?”

Ash shrugged and looked at his hand. “I don’t know. I’ve never really researched it. Or really used the power. It feels incredibly strange to use it openly.”

“It’s because he doesn’t use the Fade. Not directly, anyway,” said Dorian, who’d come to watch the Qunari in action, apparently. His expression was unreadable as he repeated the palpations of her face. He frowned. “How did you manage to get those teeth fixed? I couldn’t get them to cooperate.”

Ash looked uncomfortable. “Uh, I really don’t know. I just kind of...do it.”

Dorian harrumphed. “I want to see it in action again.” He scanned the now gathered audience and found Bull standing with clenched fists. He grabbed a big hand and dragged him over. Bull’s expression was easy to read. Annoyed beyond reason.

Dorian ignored his fierce glare and said, “Fix his hands.”

Bull jerked his hands back and said, “They’re fine.”

Dorian scoffed. “Yes, yes. You’re very tough. No one else has visible wounds to heal, so do stop being such a prat.”

Ash stood silently. Gina watched the flurry of emotions cross Bull’s face before he held the hands out. “Fine,” he spat.

Ash lifted a brow and reached toward him. Before he made contact, Bull snatched the hands away. “Just the new damage. Leave my other scars alone.”
He replaced the hands, only to yank them back again. “Don’t regrow the finger.”

Ash nodded patiently. “Any other requests?”

“Leave new scars,” Bull said, his eye sliding over to meet Gina’s. “I earned them.”

The memory of him saving her from certain death made her spine tingle.

Ash reached out and stacked his hands around one of Bull’s. It was strange to see her love's big mitts dwarfed by someone else's. The look on his face seemed to agree with that sentiment.

A murmured phrase later had Bull jumping back and shaking the hand with an offended look on his face. Then he looked at his knuckles and swore softly. As he manipulated all of the digits, he murmured, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Gina took a look. The formerly raw knuckles were healed over, leaving pale grey scars in their place. It was fascinating to see such instant results. Dorian examined the new scars and furrowed his brow. “What are you thinking about when you perform the spell?”

Ash shrugged. “What the Iron Bull said. The words I speak are always some variant of ‘let it be’ or ‘make it whole’. It seems to work.”

Dorian muttered under his breath before saying, “Do the other.”

Bull sighed sharply. “Do I have a say in this? Maybe I like my hand wounded. Did that ever occur to you?”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “Vishante kaffas! You're always such a child about magic.”


“Just shut up and let him heal you.”

Bull held the paw out, but glowered directly at Dorian. Ash lifted a brow. “Is he always that bossy?”

“The Vint?” Bull grunted. “He's always got something to say.”

“Oh please. Your aversion to healing borders on ridiculous.” Dorian crossed his arms. “Ask if you can heal his ankle. Go on.”

Ash didn't even get the chance. “Oh, for the love of...”Bull’s face contorted with irritation and he shouted, “No!”

The big Qunari put both palms up. “Whoa. Okay, no problem.”

Bull huffed and held out the hand again. “Just get it over with.”

Ash repeated the spell. As Bull hissed and shook the hand, Ash said, “Can I ask why you'd rather wear an ankle brace?”

“Memory. Laughing, drinking. Truth or Dare. Who would choose truth? Should be Dare or Bigger Dare!” said Cole, nearly tripping over the words.

“Aw, kid,” Bull protested.

Too late. “The first time he had fun. The real kind that makes your face hurt for laughing. No one
could stop him.”

Gina knew the story, but hadn't really known the depth of his attachment to the memory. Bull went almost purple with embarrassment. “It wasn't that big a deal,” he muttered.

Cole whispered, “You hadn't laughed in almost two years. Not since Vasaad...” Then his cheeks went red. “Oh. You didn't want to remember that. I shouldn't have said.”

Bull shook his head. “It's fine, kid.” Gina took hold of his hand and felt the tremors betraying his true emotions. He pulled her close and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Ash stared at Cole like he was an interesting science experiment. “What is your story, boy?”

Cole went mute, and stared shyly at the oversized Qunari. Varric clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Used to be a spirit.”

“Demon,” Vivienne corrected, her voice sharp.

Cole and Varric glared at her. The dwarf said, “Either way, Cole chose to become a real boy again. Still does the head reading thing. Creeps everybody out, but he's kind of cute, so we let it slide.”

Cole went pink at the compliment. "I like to help," he said defensively.

Ash gave a soft laugh. “You really are the oddest assortment of people.”

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Bull trailed behind the bulk of the group, letting them surround Gina and have more time with her. He wanted her all to himself, but if there was one thing he’d learned on this journey, it was how much she meant to the entire Inquisition. Without her, they fell apart. She might not be their leader, but she was the glue keeping them together. They could take their time with her, now. In this spooky ass ruin.

He’d have her all to himself back in the real world.

His eye caught sight of the Arishok. He was walking at Leliana’s side, listening with rapt attention to whatever words she spoke while his fingers itched at the healed spot on his forearm. The Qunari had a horseshoe stuck up his ass that the Salit had the ability to save his stupid ass from the effects of saar-qamek.

The heavy step of the Salit at his side weirded him out. More than a little, if he was honest. He peeked from the corner of his eye and had to tilt his chin up to see the man’s face. He swallowed hard. Beyond weird. He hadn’t had to do such a thing since leaving Par Vollen.

The Salit was silent, though the muscles in his cheek twitched rhythmically. “Got something on your mind?” asked Bull.

He cursed and jumped, which made Bull’s hand automatically dart toward his sword. Everyone in the group turned to stare. The man put a hand to his chest and waved the other. “Sorry everyone.”

Bull nodded slowly and pulled his hand away from the sword. “Everything okay?”

The Salit shook his head. “You asked if she gave me lyrium.”

“Did she?”
He nodded and grimaced. “Earlier today. After she attached her damn leash.”

Dorian gasped. “She didn’t!”

The Salit lifted a brow. “Oh, she did.” He scowled and shivered. “I didn’t have any choice but to submit.”

Vivienne shook her head. “And you survived? Amazing.”

Bull frowned. “What does this shit do, exactly?”

Cullen fell into step on his blind side. “I don’t know what it does to a Mage, but as a Templar, it makes you a better version of yourself. At first anyway. You’re sharper, more in tune with what’s going on around you. And strong.” The General sighed softly. “I miss the feeling of infinite strength the most.”

“Yeah, I didn’t get that effect,” said the Salit. “It feels like bugs are crawling under my skin.”

Cullen shook his head. “That feeling doesn’t last. It’s the second dose. That second dose brings you back to life.” He sounded almost wistful.

The Salit shook his head vigorously. “Fuck that. Never again.”

Bull had always heard that lyrium was intensely addictive. Somehow he doubted it was as simple as the Salit thought, especially with the shit still coursing through his veins. A glance at Cullen seemed to confirm his thoughts.

“So how does it affect a Mage?” asked Gina.

“A Mage would use a small amount to focus during certain spells,” said Dorian. “It strengthens our connection to the Fade.”

“Creepy,” muttered Bull.

“It’s rather beautiful, actually.”

Jeremy and Gina scoffed in unison. “I find that hard to believe,” she said.

Dorian chucked her under the chin lightly. “Well, no one other than you and your darling brother have physically gone to the Fade and returned. My version is like a dream. I create it, to some extent.”

“So why is using more lyrium dangerous?” asked Bull. “Wouldn't it make you stronger?”

“Because it would begin to override our sense of control. There’s a significant amount of restraint involved in keeping our abilities in check until we choose to utilize them,” said Vivienne.

“Then there’s the whole ‘become an abomination and explode’ problem,” muttered Dorian.

“That too, dear,” said Vivienne softly.

Gina looked up at the Salit and said, “So why did Ash survive?”

Morrigan spoke quietly, “Perhaps because his power does not come directly from the Fade. Rather, he is tapping into the powers of Sylaise.”
The Qunari stumbled a step and stared at her. “How the hell do you know that?”

She gave him a coy smile. “You’d be surprised at the things I know.”

Gina rolled her eye. “Morrigan likes to be vague. Remember I mentioned the Temple of Mythal?”
Ash nodded eagerly. She waved a hand at Morrigan. “She was able to absorb all the knowledge in the Vir’Abelasan.”

Morrigan sniffed daintily. “I was the logical choice.”

“You were pretty much the only choice,” muttered Cassandra.

Bull remembered the panic of that day. It was nothing in comparison to the hell he’d gone through without Gina at his side, but it was damn unpleasant to think about. She slipped under his arm and tucked tight to his side, her heart a beat too fast. Apparently her memories weren’t any nicer than his.

Morrigan didn’t acknowledge Cassandra. She turned to Ash and said, “Because the power you use comes from Sylaise, it is effortless, just as it was for her. You use the words as a crutch. I suspect you don’t need them at all.”

Ash nodded slowly. “That makes sense. How did you know about her?”

Morrigan shrugged. “I could feel it, and the voices of the past confirmed it. That and the heat you cast with your healing spell. Dead giveaway.”

Ash lifted a brow. “You and I should have a conversation,” he said, curiosity oozing from his voice.

“Perhaps.” She gave him a sultry smile. “If you can keep up.”

The big Qunari’s eyes lit up at the challenging tone. ’I’d be happy to try, darlin’."

***

They passed through another Eluvian. As they walked across a large plain, Gina glanced at Ash. “Who is Sylaise?”

“Ancient Elven goddess,” said Ash. “They called her the goddess of the Hearth. She was said to have taught the Elves how to use herbs and magic to heal, among other things.”

She tilted her head. “How on earth are you channeling her powers?”

He sighed. “A moment of foolishness.”

“A non-answer, if I’ve ever heard one,” said Varric pointedly.

Ash grimaced. “It’s pretty embarrassing, actually.”

“Well now you have to tell us,” said Hawke.

Another heavy sigh. “I got cocky. I found the Tome of Koslun, and they started to let me choose my missions. Of course, I chose only the most interesting ones. I travelled all over, picking through ruins from Ferelden to Antiva. One day I stumbled across a little mystery in a cave in Seheron.”

The group was silent as they marched, waiting for the rest of the story. “It turns out, the Elves had spread to that region before they all disappeared. There was a carving that indicated a temple nearby.”
I decided it was worth looking into.” He paused and said softly, “Alone.”

“Never a good idea,” muttered Varric.

Ash scoffed. “Yeah, that was my first mistake.”

“What was the second?” asked Bull.

Ash looked at him. “Did they ever warn you against speaking strange languages? Back in training, I mean.”

Bull shook his head. “I learned plenty of languages, but never got warned away from using them.”

“Well, in my particular line of work, you have to be careful. Sometimes the phrases carved in stone aren’t just meaningless drivel. From as far back as I can remember, they’ve always said not to say things out loud when you’re reading them. Not until you can confirm they are harmless.” Ash shook his head. “And, like an idiot, I ignored those instructions when I found an ancient statue at the top of some stairs in this little ruin.”

“A statue of Sylaise?” asked Gina.

He tapped the side of his nose and pointed her way. “You got it. There she was, all lovely and holding a torch aloft. Naked as the day she was born. Not going to lie, she was smoking hot.”

This got him a laugh. He grinned briefly, and then continued. “There was a carving at her feet. I knelt down and read it out loud. To this day, I can remember the words.” He spoke, the words soft and musical, and completely foreign to Gina’s ear. Then he translated,

*Sylaise, whose heat rivals Elgar’nan’s light.*

*Sylaise, whose temples rival Mythal’s cities.*

*Sylaise, whose breath rivals Andruil’s spear.*

*Sylaise, whose skill rivals June’s craft.*

*Sylaise, whose fire cannot be quenched.*

*I give myself gladly to your service.*

He frowned. “I was kneeling and touching her foot as I leaned closer. I hadn’t noticed, but I was on a unique tile covered in runes. When I said the supplication, her power transferred to me. Knocked me out cold. When I woke up, I was surrounded by deepstalkers.” He paused and lifted a hand. Flames rippled into being and coated his fingers. “And this was suddenly a thing I could do, among about a thousand others. I wiped the bastards out of existence with little more than a thought.”

“Then what did you do?” asked Hawke, his voice hushed.

“Ran,” he said. “I ran until my legs wouldn’t carry me, and then I crawled until my body quit. But I couldn’t get away from it. The mistake had been made, and everything was different.”

Gina could empathize with the Qunari. Waking up and having an incredible new power was disconcerting to say the least. She could remember the sheer panic at seeing the mark on her shoulder for the first time. “So you told someone you could trust what happened,” she said.

The Arishok cleared his throat. “He was right to come to me.”
Ash frowned. “I almost didn’t. I almost went into hiding, figuring people would think I finally got myself killed in some forsaken tunnel and never come looking. But I didn’t want to be Tal Vashoth.”

“Why was this new skill hidden?” asked Bull. “Surely it should have been studied.”

The Arishok frowned. “They would have leashed and silenced him like any other saarebas. It would have been an immense waste of talent.”

Gina could see that Bull resented the answer, but he didn’t say anything.

Ash scowled. “It was stupid to think no one would figure it out, in hindsight. I went from world traveller to desk jockey overnight. The Viddasala had my last missions traced, and discovered the statue. Apparently it’s been moved to the Darvaarad, though no one else has managed to activate the powers for themselves. Not for lack of trying, either. She was quite put out that she hadn’t thought to bring the rune tile with the statue.”

They reached another Eluvian. Morrigan glanced at Ash. “So she fed you lyrium and set you on the warpath?”

Ash shuddered and touched his throat. “Yes. This was to be a test of my true ability. She had big plans for me. Still has big plans for the rest of the saarebas.”

“Lucky we interfered,” said Hawke.

He nodded. “Yes. If she had been successful today, she'd have taken over Ferelden and Orlais in the course of a week.”


Ash swallowed. “In part. There is a second phase, but she wouldn't go into detail. Dragon’s Breath, she calls it.”

“That name again,” muttered Hawke. “Terrible!”

Bull scowled. “Well, let's get hustling. I don't intend to let her get Phase Two underway.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone is having as much fun reading this as I am writing it!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bull found himself walking beside the Salit again. The man appeared casual, but Bull could sense the desperation to talk. To explain himself, maybe try to clear the air. Being this close was about as unintentional as Dorian's perfectly twisted mustache.

For a while he remained silent. Maybe he was waiting for Bull to start the conversation. If that was the case, he'd be waiting a long time because that was a can of worms Bull didn't plan to open. Not in the foreseeable future, anyway.

Finally a soft sigh came from the big Qunari. "You can say it, you know."

"Say what?" he said irritably.

The Salit lifted a brow. "That you hate me."

Bull snorted. "I don’t know you enough to hate you."

The man shrugged. "I wouldn’t blame you."

Bull didn't answer. They walked in silence for a moment before the Salit said, "Look, I know there probably isn’t anything I can say to justify my actions or make things right, but I’d like to try."

Bull grunted. "For what purpose?"

The Salit frowned. "I would like to get to know you."

Bull stopped to face him full on. "Why?"
The big Qunari looked awkward. “I thought…” He paused and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Bull frowned and turned away. This man had been part of nearly shattering his family. He didn’t know if he had the capacity to have any form of relationship with him in the wake of everything that had happened.

He was good at compartmentalizing. Always had been. In the logical portion of his brain, Bull knew the guy was doing his job. The same as Bull had done too many times to count. The Salit hadn’t gone out with the intentions of kidnapping his Kadan.

So why was he having such a hard time warming up to the man?

As he mulled everything over, Bull came to realize it wasn’t just the abduction making him sour. He resented the Salit. Deeply. He couldn’t help it. The dude got cocky and had himself turned into an unintentional saarebas. Anyone else would’ve been turned over to the Arvaarads. Or fed qamek and sent to break rocks.

But not the Salit. Nope. He wound up being concealed in a whole new department thanks to the motherfucking Arishok himself. And as a guy that investigated corruption in the ranks of the Benhassrath, no less! Surely he felt the irony of his position.

He wondered why the Salit got an exception. What made him so fucking special? It was petty, and it made Bull hate himself a bit, but he couldn’t stop wondering why he hadn’t been worthy of such a second chance. Weren’t his ten years in Seheron enough for the powers that be? Did all of his successful missions count for nothing?

He’d given them nearly everything, including his sanity. And they dropped him like a rock the moment he rebelled against unjust orders! As Gina would say, “Qu’est ce que fuck?”

There were some in Par Vollen that would say his second chance had been coming out to Orlais to work undercover. Bull barely stopped a scowl from twisting his face. If being exiled from your home and everyone you ever loved counted as a kindness, he’d hate to see what they would have done as punishment.

He glanced up in time to see Gina look back at him. Damn she took his breath away. Even with her hair all a mess, her eye patch askew, and grime coating most of her visible skin, she was stunningly beautiful. She smiled and turned back to the conversation she was having with Jeremy. The pair finally had the chance to truly make up after their fight.

The sight gave him pause. The two had a habit of shouting horrible things at one another on a regular basis. But even after their ugliest fights, they somehow managed to come back together, just as strong as they were prior to their spat. Because ‘you never give up on family’.

It made him wonder. Did that mean his half-brother deserved a chance based on blood alone? He’d never had a blood relative before. It was strange to see someone who looked so much like him, give or take a few pieces. Beyond that, Bull simply didn’t know what to think or how to feel.

Family wasn’t an entirely foreign concept to him. His Tama and the kids he grew up with were people he considered family. He hadn’t seen or contacted most of them in over a decade, but he still thought of them fondly and wished them well in life. If any of them ever asked for help, he’d do whatever he could, no questions asked.

Then there was his own tiny family, a unit he’d come to cherish more than anything in the world. He couldn’t imagine life without them, which was the biggest and best surprise. Kaya and his Kadan had
swept into his world and turned it on its head. The very idea of going back to the way he was before made him feel hollow.

Gina glanced back at the Salit, then shot him a questioning look. Bull frowned. He had never known her to fight tooth and nail for someone she considered unworthy. Hell, she even stuck by his sorry ass through thick and thin. Maybe he needed to trust her judgement over his biased point of view. Until proven otherwise, anyway.

He gave her a slow nod and turned to face the giant who now walked several paces behind him and looked utterly dejected. “Alright fine. You want to talk? Let's talk.”

The man started at the sudden confrontation, but nodded eagerly. “Okay.”

“I need to know why you involved yourself in the kidnapping.”

To the man's credit, he didn't flinch away from the accusation. “I was trying to trace a line to the top of the command chain. I hadn’t been able to find any records of the Ashkaari or Tamassrans involved in the breeding program. Someone had the files thoroughly sterilized.”

“The Viddasala,” Bull muttered.

“Presumably. She had the means and the opportunity.” The Salit shook his head. “When the elf approached me and offered me the chance to ‘make a better choice’, I took it. I would have done almost anything to get closer to the top, short of assassination or murder.”

The elf. “How did Gatt find you?”

The Salit frowned. “I don't know. I was surprised when he of all people appeared at my little hut in the woods.”

“He of all people?”

A heavy sigh. “I grew up with him.”

The long forgotten memory slammed into Bull like a ton of bricks.

“I have a confession.”

Tama pinched his cheek lightly. “I'm not surprised. You hardly touched your food.”

He smirked. “Am I really that obvious?”

”To your Tama? Always.”

He sighed. “I came to ask you for a favour.”

She tilted her head. “I'd be happy to help if I'm able.”

Young Bull fidgeted with his fork. “We were tasked with taking down a slaver’s ship. Caught him just off the coast of Seheron. Cargo hold filled with people of all ages. Elves, mostly.”

“That must have been distressing.”

He nodded. “I had to stop myself from breaking everything in the room.”

Tama stroked the back of his hand. “Did your mediation help?”
He shook his head. “I saved the anger for the captain of the ship.”

She frowned at him. “We must not act on our anger, Hissrad.”

Bull swallowed hard. “There were kids down there, Tama. And he begged to keep the little boys.”
He made a tight fist. “Because the boys were already spoken for.”

Her eyes softened. “I'm sorry. I should not judge without knowing the full story.”

He waved off the apology. "Anyway, about the favour."

She nodded and said, “What is it, my boy?”

“There's this kid. Elf. Tiny little thing. I promised I would save him.” He shifted in his seat. “I don't know what the hell they did to him, but he's so...broken. I've never seen such anger.”

“How can I help?”

“He needs someone kind and patient, someone who won't discard him when things get difficult. To teach him and help him grow in the ways of the Qun.” He looked in her eyes and said, “I can't put in any requests for particular homes, but you could. You know the Tamassrans. You could find him a safe place to heal.” He could hear the desperation in his voice. “Please Tama.”

Her arm circled his shoulders and pulled him close, making him feel almost childlike again. He closed his eyes and let himself relax in the safety of her embrace. After a long moment, she kissed his forehead and said, “I know of a wonderful home that has an empty bed. I'll do what I can to have this child transferred first thing tomorrow.”

Bull swallowed hard. “Thank you, Tama.”

A pat on his cheek. “Of course, Hissrad. I will always help you when you ask.”

He helped her clean up, but then it was time to go to his quarters. It was getting close to curfew. As he stepped onto the porch, he asked, “Which home will you send him to?”

Tama smiled. “Here. Is there a better place?”

There was a challenge sparkling in her eyes. Bull laughed and pulled her into a hug. "Nice try, Tama. I'm not stupid enough to fall into that trap."

She cuffed the back of his head and sent him away with a promise to update him on the elf when she had him settled.

Bull did his best to hide the expression on his face, but the deep-rooted worry still came through. The Salit lifted a brow. “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” he said shortly.

The man looked doubtful, but continued. “Anyway, I'm not sure how he tracked me down. Hadn't talked to him in years. But there he was, ready to offer me salvation.”

“Probably he had been keeping tabs on you and moved the second he had the chance to strike.” It's what Bull would've done. It was what he'd taught the elf too.

The man’s cheeks coloured. “You're probably right.”
Of course he was right. “Why didn’t you ask me to help? I’m good at this shit. I have resources. I would have gladly helped you flush out the people responsible.” Bull shrugged helplessly. “At the very least, why not give me a head’s up?”

“Because Gatt didn’t give me a second of privacy. I couldn’t even take a piss in peace. I barely managed to get a message to the Arishok.” The Salit scowled and rubbed at a dent on his horn. “That elf has a sickness of the mind that no amount of magic or medicine could fix. By the time I realized how deranged he had become, it was too late. He would have killed me and carried out his plans anyway.”

Bull winced at the harsh statement, but he didn’t argue. Couldn’t argue. Between Oza, the Chargers, Gina, and the Salit, he’d been given too many corroborating stories to deny. As much as it hurt to admit, the Gatt of his memory no longer existed. That little boy had grown into a creature capable of cruelty beyond Bull’s imagining. He’d kept his promise and done everything he could to save him, but that wasn’t enough, apparently.

Had the elf been involved in taking their Tama prisoner? In her torture? The very idea made him hot inside.

He forced himself to focus on the conversation at hand. “So what was your big plan? Meet the Head Honcho and put him or her under arrest?”

The man shook his head. “No. I was going to report my findings to the Arishok and await further orders. I just didn’t have any inkling that the Viddasala herself was involved. She covered her tracks well.”

They walked in silence again for a while, then Bull asked quietly, “Do you remember me?”

The man tilted his head. “No, should I?”

Bull nodded slowly. “I tracked you down when you were in the barn with Hissera. I think you were five.”

After a moment, the Salit’s eyes fluttered closed. “You were the Ben-hassrath in the barn! I was fascinated by you as a child. I wanted to be you when I got older. Adventuring and riding on ships. Tama didn’t know who I meant when I asked after you.” His eyes opened, the same stormy green as his own, Bull noted. “I did not recognize your name as one of my house brothers.”

“Surprise,” said Bull quietly.

“Then I regret my part in this disaster ten-fold.”

Bull sighed and shook his head. “Look, I get it. You were doing your job. If my Kadan didn’t think you were redeemable, she wouldn’t have risked her life to save yours. That says a lot to me.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice colouring with hope.

“Don’t get too excited,” said Bull, lifting a palm. “You took a terrible chance with the life of my Kadan, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to look past it. This is just me not shutting the door in your face. Nothing more.”

The Salit dipped his head. “It’s better than a kick in the ass with a frozen mertam, the Iron Bull. I’ll take it.”

Bull switched topics abruptly. “Were you aware that Tama was being held captive at the
Darvaarad?"

The Qunari puffed up with rage. He was already an intimidating sight, but in his fury he made even Bull a little nervous. “What? Why? Talk!”

Bull frowned. “To punish her, and by extension, us. For her failure to raise us with blind obedience to the Qun.”

The Salit was breathing hard and going purple. “Did they harm her?”

The memory of the terror in her beautiful eyes made him feel sick. “Yes.” He described the damages he’d seen, from the marks to the stitched lips.

Flames rippled from the Salit’s shoulders and down his arms. “I’ll kill them all,” he hissed.

Gina came to Bull’s side. “Everything okay?”

Bull shook his head. “I told him about our Tama.”

Her eye went bright with anger. “I'm sorry, Ash.”

He shook his head. “Not as sorry as I am. I was blind to everything outside my own investigation. How could I let that happen to her?”

Any lingering doubts Bull had regarding the man's decency were instantly quashed.

Gina stepped closer. As her hand reached toward him, the flames died away. “She's safe now. Dorian and Jeremy treated her. She's resting quietly. I have two good men standing watch. We're going to make it right. All of us.”

The Salit pressed his lips tight, but finally nodded. Gina squeezed his forearm and then turned to Bull. She lifted on her toes to kiss him. “I'll leave you boys to talk,” she murmured against his lips.

Bull nodded and watched as she walked back to Hawke’s side. The Salit said softly, “She's really something else.”

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Don't I know it.”

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Gina’s heart ached for the brothers. They hardly knew each other, and already the gulf between them seemed insurmountable. She hoped the mutual love for their Tamassran would help bring them closer, but there was no telling with the two stubborn Qunari.

Hawke was walking beside her. “Have I mentioned how absolutely breathtaking you are today?” he asked.

She pulled a face at him. He laughed and slipped an arm around her shoulders. “I’m serious. You’ve got this glow about you.”

Heat washed to her cheeks and her stomach fluttered. Keeping the potential pregnancy a secret from Bull was killing her, but she didn’t want him find out the way she did. This was happy news, and she wanted the memory of telling him to override her own painful realization. Was that so selfish?

Entirely, whispered the voice inside her head.
“I suppose prison suits me. I’m hardcore like that,” she said flippantly, before her thoughts could drift too far down that path.

He grinned and squeezed her tight to his side. “I really do miss you. Kirkwall is terrifically boring.”

“I heard you and Varric were stirring up your own brand of trouble.”

He waved a hand. “Nah. We’ve got nothing on the fun you create.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Trust me, I’m all funned out.”

“You promise?” asked Dorian, a twinkle in his eyes.

“I won’t be letting her out of my sight for an age,” said Bull as he plucked Hawke’s arm from her shoulders and replaced it with his own.

Dorian scoffed. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Bull leered at the Vint. “You like saving my ass. It makes you feel important.”

“It gives me heartburn,” retorted the Mage.

Bull grinned. “Uh huh. Hey, why didn’t you use that floaty spell on me when I was in the river?”

“Floaty spell?” the Mage repeated, his nose wrinkling in confusion.

“The one you used on Gina when she forgot she didn't have wings.”

Gina poked his ribs, making him flinch and laugh softly. Dorian rolled his eyes. “It's called a Levitating Charm. And how exactly do you think Cullen was able to catch you?”

Cullen smiled and shrugged. “I never was able to jump all that far.”

Bull grunted. “Oh.”

They reached another mirror. Morrigan went tense. “They are not far.”

The smile slipped from Bull’s face in an instant. “How do you know?”

She frowned. “The spirits whisper in my ear.”

Goosebumps swept across Gina’s skin. “Let’s get this over with.”

Ash came to the front of the line. “I’ll go first. If the Viddasala thinks she's going to ambush us again, I can put a quick end to that notion.”

Bull nodded sharply. “Agreed. It’s time to end this nonsense.”

Morrigan shifted from foot to foot, her expression going more worried by the moment. Gina frowned. “You okay, Morrigan?”

The woman twitched. “Something doesn't feel right.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ash.

The Witch shook her head. “Mythal. Her voice is changing.” Her breathing rate increased.
Ash touched her shoulder lightly. “It will be okay, Morrigan.”

“I wouldn't be so sure,” Morrigan whispered.

A sense of impending doom lodged itself in Gina’s belly. “Well, we don't have a choice but to move forward,” she said, feeling as though she was trying to convince herself.

Bull settled a hand on the back of her neck, the heat soothing her jangled nerves. “We've gone against worse,” he said. “Let's get moving.”

***

Gina, with Bull’s very reluctant blessing, stepped through the mirror on the Salit’s heels. He could feel the buzz of his protective shield as they stepped out of sight. Bull and Cullen crept through a moment later, unsure what they'd find on the other side.

As his sight cleared, he could hear the Viddasala crow in triumph. “I knew you'd succeed!”

The Salit bowed his head. “I had my doubts, but it appears you were right, ma'am. The lyrium did give me extra strength.”

With that, he reached up and removed the collar Gina had slipped around his neck in a last second bid to distract the Qunari woman. Bull bit back a laugh at the Viddasala’s horrified cry. “Fool! You'll kill us all!”

Gina stepped out from behind the giant. “No, he won't.”

For the second time that day, the woman was speechless with rage. Bull followed her, along with the rest of the crew.

The Arishok was last. He walked in front of the Salit, his chin high and the authority ringing clearly in his voice. “You have been defeated. It is time to end this!”

The Viddasala shouted a hoarse command and the remainder of her troops popped into sight behind her. They raised their weapons defensively, but faltered when the Salit responded by unleashing a visible wave of energy.

The Arishok sighed. “Stand down, Viddasala. I will not warn you again.”

The Viddasala snickered. “You idiot. You will not live to see the end of the day. Do you really think I would use someone as weak as the Rasaan to kill you with a knife alone?”

The Arishok tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“He thought he would be the Ariqun. The fool. It is I that will take that position and lead our people to save the South.” She smirked. “But I needed you out of my way. So why not use his hatred for everything you stand for to encourage him to act? The poison was his idea. I knew you would kill him. And I would be rid of both problems in one fell swoop.”

A broad smile came to her face, as though she was ready for him to panic and curse her name helplessly. Gina snorted. “You mean the poison your ‘pet’ already cleared from his system?”

The woman went scarlet. “No!” she hissed.

The Salit put a hand to his lips and gasped dramatically. “Oops, was I not supposed to do that?”
She cursed him viciously, but the big Qunari faked a yawn. Bull nearly smiled at the display of sass until he remembered he was supposed to be stand-offish to the man.

The Arishok shook his head. “I don’t understand,” he said. For the first time, Bull saw something other than anger or stoicism in his eyes. “You had the ability to become something truly legendary. Yet you chose this deception. Why?”

“Because no one is willing to make the hard choices these days. We coddle those who are weak. We treat those who betray us like friends. We allow the kabethari in the south to run rampant when we should end their madness.”

He stood rigidly. “It is in the way we treat those weaker than us that we show our true strength. It is tragic you cannot see that.”

The Viddasala glared at him scornfully. “You are like the basra, Arishok. Soft and pathetic. It is I who will lead the Qun into the future, more powerful than ever.”

Gina stepped forward. “Yeah, speaking of pathetic,” she said. “I have a question, you insufferable cow.”

Bull moved with her. The Viddasala sneered at them both. Gina lifted her chin and said, “You planned this and worked so carefully for years.” She switched to Qunlat. “How does it feel to see all of that planning go down the drain? To know that you've failed so miserably?”

The Viddasala giggled, which made hair rise on the back of Bull’s neck. “I have not failed. You will know that to be true sooner than you think.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” asked Gina.

“Wouldn't you like to know, basra?” Then, with a shouted command, the karataam spun and marched through the glowing Eluvian at her heels.

Gina cursed and bolted toward them. “Don't listen to her!” she cried.

It took Bull a breath to react, but then he was running too. “Kadan, wait!” he shouted breathlessly.

The Viddasala laughed as she walked backward. “When will you ever learn?” Then she slipped through the mirror.

Gina leapt at the surface and disappeared. Bull cursed and sprinted.

CRACK!

Rather than passing through the mirror in her wake, he smashed face first into a solid surface with bone shattering force. The impact knocked him flat on his back, unbearable pain searing through his skull.

As the world wobbled and dimmed, the Salit’s frantic face appeared above him, shouting something Bull couldn't hear over the ringing in his ears.

Then he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes
"Better than a kick in the ass with a frozen mertam" = for those that aren't aware, there's a saying in Canada (and maybe other places) when something less than ideal happens. “Well, it's better than a kick in the ass with a frozen mukluk!” It's a favourite of mine - was glad to be able to incorporate it! Such an "Ash" thing to say, right??
Chapter Summary

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Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A sudden rush of heat in his skull jerked him back to consciousness. Bull groaned and tried to sit up, only to find himself planted to the ground by an unusually broad palm. “Easy,” said a voice, worry oozing from its edges.

Bull tried to push the hand away, but it didn't move. He tentatively opened his eye, and winced at the brightness. The heat receded, leaving his head feeling like it was stuffed with cotton. “How long was I out?”

The Salit’s form blocked out most of the surrounding view. A shouted argument was going on in the background, but Bull couldn't focus on it. “Less than two minutes,” said the Salit.

The mirror! Bull’s eyes snapped wide and then he cringed from an unexpected shot of pain in his left eye socket. He tried to focus on the Salit, but couldn't get the double vision to recede.

*Double vision?* He hadn't experienced such a thing since…since...

“I didn't mean to,” said the Salit, clearly seeing the pieces falling into place.

Bull jerked out from under his hand and palmed his own face. Shock froze him in position when he felt the foreign sensation of a fucking *eyeball* in the formerly empty left eye socket. He moved the hand away and realized he could see it. From both eyes! He started to hyperventilate.

The Salit stayed where he was, his face twisted with regret. “I haven't used the power very much. I went overboard. I'm sorry.”

"What the fuck?" he rasped.
Dorian moved into sight, his eyes bright with concern. He touched his knee lightly. “You hit that mirror hard enough to split your skull open like a melon. It's a miracle you're alive, let alone coherent. I'm not sure we could have done anything to save you without the Salit’s help.”

Bull turned his head slowly and stared around the clearing. The new perspective made him woozy, adding to the turmoil assaulting his guts. He fought the urge to puke. The Salit watched him, his brow pinched with worry.

“I cannot! What don't you understand?” shouted Morrigan.

“I don't believe you!” shouted Hawke, the man’s voice shaking.

“Then that is your choice! It does not change the reality,” snapped Morrigan.

Gina. Everything else ceased to matter. She was somewhere out there chasing the Viddasala and an entire karataam. Why the hell wasn't he at her side?

Bull tried to get to his feet, but toppled sideways. A big hand caught him under the elbow. He wanted to pull away, but a wave of dizziness hit him. He wilted to the ground with a curse.

The Salit’s hand covered his forehead. Bull hissed and ducked away, but the man followed. “There was a shitload of damage to repair, so I might not have gotten it all.”

“Spent all your time fixing what wasn't broken?” said Bull, going for snide but feeling it come across as whiny.

The Salit ignored him. “If I've left you concussed, you'll be in serious trouble,” said the man firmly. “Stay still.”

The heat returned, swelling through his head and making tears spring to his eyes. As it faded, the bulk of the dizziness eased. Bull made another attempt to get on his feet, and managed it successfully. “The fuck is going on?” he bellowed.

Morrigan jumped and lifted her staff defensively. “The Eluvian is locked,” she said, fear ringing clearly. She was surrounded on three sides by furious faces. “If I could unlock it, I would,” she said, desperation colouring her voice.

Bull couldn't get both eyes to focus, so he squeezed the left shut. He'd worry about that later. For now his only concern was Gina. “Is it that Mythal bullshit?” he demanded.

The Witch nodded tentatively. “Something has changed,” she said. "The Mythal I knew is different."

He stared at the mirror. It remained flat and unyielding. “Morrigan, she's alone over there,” he said softly, pleading.

A tear washed down her cheek. “No, she isn't,” she whispered.

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Gina tripped as she cleared the mirror, nearly sprawling onto her face. She caught herself only to suddenly see that she was at the massive booted feet of a Karashok.

She gasped and ducked, but nothing happened. She looked up to see him locked in place, his sword swinging high and his lips peeled back in a cry of rage. His eyes were wide, but dull.

Gina touched his arm tentatively. It was hard as stone. She stepped back, only to bump into another
soldier, likewise locked in place. She touched his inner wrist, but no pulse bounced against her fingers.

Her heart started to pound as she scanned the clearing. No one was alive. Every last Karashok was petrified into position. She spun to dive back through the mirror, but it was impassive.

Fear thrilled down her spine. What the hell had these Qunari stumbled upon that could create this much damage in the ten odd seconds since she last saw them?

Shouting and cursing on the path above her caught her attention. The Viddasala! The bitch was still alive? Gina gritted her teeth and took off in pursuit.

She was winded a lot quicker than she liked, but she didn't have much further to go. The Viddasala was stumbling up the road ahead of her, screeching nonsense and waving a spear erratically.

Gina whipped out her daggers. “You stupid bitch! What have you done? All these boys!” Her voice cracked over the last sentence, and she had to swallow tears on their behalf. They didn't deserve this fate. No one did.

The woman spun and staggered away from her. “This is Fen’harel’s doing! Your agent did this!”

Gina howled in rage and swiped at her with one of the knives. “Fen’harel is a fucking myth! Myths don't kill people!”

The Viddasala ducked and curled her lip. “Then explain his presence when you closed the Breach!”

Gina sneered. “No Elvish gods were present, I can promise you that.”

“That's because I'm not a god. Not technically, anyway,” said a familiar voice. "The Enuvaris would never have allowed it."

Gina nearly dropped her daggers in shock. “Solas?”

He bowed his head. “It has been a long time, Virginia Carter.”

“You traitor!” shrieked the Viddasala. She lunged at him, only to be sent tumbling as he flicked a finger.

Gina’s skin prickled in alarm. “You did this, didn't you?” She swept an arm to indicate the frozen karataam.

He nodded. “I did.”

“Why?” she cried. “Most of them were babies! They were following the orders of an idiot!”

“They were irredeemable.”

“Who died and made you god?” she shouted.

He gave her an odd look. “All of them.”

Gina trembled with repressed anger. “More fucking riddles?”

“It is always thus with him. The elf is not to be trusted!” rasped the Viddasala. She heaved to her feet. “We had a deal, Fen’harel. You betrayed me!”
“I could not, in good conscience, stand at the side of a woman who planned to force feed lyrium to the Mages under her protection.”

Gina scoffed. “Oh, you're fine killing all these boys, but *that* crosses a line with you?”

Solas lifted his chin. “I'm biased. I make no qualms about that.”

“I brought her to you! You were to aid my efforts in conquering the South!”

Gina flinched. “What is she talking about?”

A demented laugh ripped from the woman's lips. “He needed my help to capture you.”

Gina stared at Solas in horror. He lifted a palm. “The Iron Bull would never have let me within sight of you again. Especially after the Breach.”

The trembles had escalated to full blown shakes. He took a step her way, but she dodged back. “Stay away,” she hissed.

“If you won't help me, you'll not have her!” screamed the Viddasala. She lifted the spear in preparation to throw it at Gina, but with one sharp look from Solas, her body went limp and tumbled to the ground.

“My apologies. Her voice was getting on my nerves.” Solas smiled, but it flickered as he took in her renewed horror. “Oh, I haven't killed this one. There would be too many questions left unanswered. I'll be talking to her shortly.”

He strolled toward her. Gina lifted her daggers defensively. “I don't know what you want, but I'm not going down without a fight.”

He smiled and clasped his hands behind his back. “I only wish to talk.”

Gina stared at him. “All this so you could talk to me?”

“It was a little over the top, I agree.” He shrugged elegantly, making the wolf fur decorating his shoulder rustle. “At any rate, you are here. I suspect you have questions.”

She shook her head. “Why bother? You've never been honest in the past.”

A frown ticked at his lips. “I could not reveal myself then. I wasn't at full strength.”

“And now you are?”

“Mostly. There is a final piece I require, but it shall be mine soon enough.”

Gina licked her lips nervously. “What's your deal? Really?”

“Over a thousand years ago, the Elves ruled these lands, from Ferelden to Orlais, and up into Tervinter and Seheron. They existed as one with nature, and magic came to them all as naturally as breathing. It was a beautiful time.”

Gina eyed him dubiously. “You say that like you were there.”

“I was. At its beginning. In its prime.” He paused and looked into the distance. “During its fall.”

Gina barked a laugh. “That's crazy talk. You can't be that old.”
“Elves were immortal then. I would be considered young by those standards.”

Gina looked at him. Really looked at him. His skin didn't look a day past twenty, but when she looked closer, his dark eyes gave her a sense of infinite sorrow. “What caused their downfall?” she whispered.

“Not what. Who.”

Gina barely stopped herself from rolling her eye. "Who, Solas?"

"Me."

Gina blinked. “What?”

He sighed. “The gods of the time began to act like tyrants. I disagreed with their ways and fought against their oppression. They called me the Dread Wolf in hopes of causing fear in those that might follow me.”

“Fen’Harel,” she whispered.

Solas nodded. “Yes. It was supposed to be an insult, but I turned it into a source of strength.”

"So what happened?"

"In a bid to end their rule, I crafted the Veil."

“The Veil? As in the thing keeping us separate from the Fade?” He nodded. “How?”

He shook his head. “It's complicated.”

“Wait,” she lifted a palm. “You said this caused their downfall?”

His voice dropped low. “I did not realize that it would separate us from the source of our magic.” A pained look came to his thin face. “The effort to create the Veil knocked me out for nearly a thousand years. When I awoke, I found my people lost and shiftless.”

Gina tilted her head. “But doesn't magic still exist?”

“It is a cheap facsimile. In our glory days, magic was a part of our lives, not these paltry tricks.” Solas shook his head. “I intend to make it right.”

Gina felt her stomach lurch. “How?”

“By tearing down the Veil I created.”

It was suddenly hard to breathe. “Isn't that what we stopped Corypheus from doing?”

He nodded slowly.

In that moment, everything became clear. ‘Not like this’.

She jabbed a finger at him. “You conniving bastard! You gave him the anchor! This whole situation is you doing!”

Solas lifted both palms. “I thought he would die from the force of the anchor. I certainly didn't plan on you or Alita. I will do it myself this time. Do it properly.”
She exploded with all the fear and rage that she'd repressed during her captivity. “Properly? Do you know what waits on the other side of the Veil? What horrors will descend on our worlds if they get the chance?”

He didn't appear moved by her shouts. “I am prepared.”

Memory of the Nightmare demon and his ilk swarmed over her, making her heart speed in panic. “You'll be the death of everyone, including your precious fucking elves!”

“They will survive with my guidance.”

She lashed out at him, but he blocked the blow with a glance. “You would have killed us all!” she shrieked.

Solas didn't look away. “It was the price for my mistake.”

“You're a fucking monster!”

“In your eyes. To my people, I am their hope. I will return to them what they've lost.”

“You mean what you took from them,” she spat.

He looked uncomfortable. “I did what I thought was right. It was a mistake.”

The horrible realizations kept coming. “Solas, if you succeed, billions will die. You'll destroy both of our worlds.”

“A price that breaks my heart,” he said softly. “But one that must be paid.”

“Because you fucked up?”

"Because if I'd known the results, I would never have created the Veil in the first place."

“You don't get a do-over! Not like this!” she yelled, the words tearing out of her throat.

A sudden cramp in her stomach had her gasping and falling to her knees. Solas caught her before she hit the ground. He gasped and met her eye. “You are with child,” he breathed.

She gripped his arm. “You can't do this, Solas. I won't let you. I'll never stop fighting you.”

He touched her cheek gently, his eyes getting that sad look again. “Why do you think I had you brought to me? If anyone could stop me, it would be you.” He leaned close and whispered, “I can't have that. I'm sorry, vhenan.”

He was going to petrify her. Bull would find her stone form staring blindly into the distance, never to speak again. He'd never know they were to have a child together.

A child that had no future if this insane elf had anything to do with it. Her heart broke as she thought of its fate, and of Kaya's. Of everyone she loved and held dear. Of two entire worlds living in blissful ignorance.

“Solas, please,” she begged. “There has to be a better way! You don't have to do this.”

"You have no idea how badly I wish there was,” he said as his eyes flashed brilliant green.

She expected the world to go blank, for her body to turn solid. Instead, a familiar buzz flared under
her skin. She lifted her eye to his, forehead creased in confusion.

He rose to his feet. "I will not see you again, Virginia Carter. Despite everything between us, I always respected and admired you. I want you to know that."

"Solas-" she started. And then, with pain beyond her worst nightmares, the mark roared back to life.

Chapter End Notes

...I never liked Solas. Shifty bastard.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bull paced back and forth. His eyepatch was back in place, which helped keep the dizziness at bay. For now.

It was mind blowing how much raw power the Salit was able to use. He was unconscious for less than two minutes. How the fuck had the Salit managed to rebuild an entire eye in less than two minutes? And not just his eye. If Cullen was to be believed, the man had essentially rebuilt his entire skull with one whispered phrase.

Was there a limit to the magic he wielded?

The Salit stood in tense silence next to the mirror. It was still locked, with no indication of when or how they'd get through. It had been ten minutes. Ten agonizing minutes.

“Wisdom knows enduring is pain. He hurts for her, another of many he couldn't save. He carries necessary deaths.”

Bull shot a sidelong glance at Cole, carefully avoiding full eye contact. The kid looked almost as freaked out as Bull felt. He'd been muttering all sorts of weird shit, including a few whispers of ‘Fen’harel’. Bull had no intention of opening a conversation with the kid. It was unnerving enough that he'd felt the emotions of his Tama from so far in the Deep Roads.

Stranger yet, Morrigan seemed to shrink with every passing minute. He'd never seen the cocksure woman so upset. It was almost touching, if her inability to act wasn't preventing him from saving his Kadan. Again.

The Salit touched the glass. “Can you tell me what locks them?”
The Witch shrugged dully. “Knowledge or power.”

“What kind of knowledge?”

“It depends on the mirror. Every last one is different.”

Bull frowned. “But you’ve used the same key for each mirror out here.”

Morrigan sighed. “Because the Qunari took control and changed the locks to match one another. Endlessly practical, you creatures.”

If it was intended as an insult, it went unnoticed. Both Bull and the Salit were deep in thought. After a few minutes, Bull looked over at the Salit. “Maybe your magic will work on these things too.”

The big Qunari nodded slowly. “Is there anything special about the magic used to make these things?”

She shook her head. “The source of the magic has been long lost. Not even the spirits of the Vir know how the Eluvians were created.”

The Salit lifted a palm and set it against the surface. A flare of light spread from his splayed fingers, but nothing happened. He shook his head. “I am not sure if I know what to do.”

Bull looked the thing up and down. “Does he need to invoke the name of Sylaise?”

Morrigan frowned. “I cannot say.”

The Salit sucked a breath. “You can’t?”

Her brow puckered in confusion, but Bull caught on in an instant. “If she can’t say, then we must be on the right path.”

Morrigan’s brow didn’t relax, but she didn’t argue. The Salit squared his shoulders and said, “By the will of Sylaise, open!” in booming Elven.

The mirror fizzled, but didn’t fully activate. The Salit sagged. “Damn,” he whispered.

Bull gritted his teeth. Every minute that mirror spent locked was another that his Kadan had to survive on her own. She was crafty, but the odds were not stacked in her favour. He pinched his brow and paced back and forth more quickly. It was a maddening puzzle, but it had to have a solution. They were so close it hurt.

He paused. “Is it Sylaise, or the gods themselves?” he asked Morrigan.

Her eyes widened. “I cannot say,” she whispered.

The Salit and Bull both turned to the mirror. “Mirror, the gods command you to open!” said the big Qunari.

Nothing.

Bull caught his arm. “Wait, they didn't just call them gods. And I don't think they were big on commands.”

The man squeezed his eyes shut. "Shit. I'm drawing a blank."

"Evanuris," muttered the Salit. He lost the commanding stance, adopting one of deference. “Eluvian, the Evanuris bid you let us pass.”

With a snap, the mirror swirled and activated. Bull clapped him on the back. “Good work, Ash!”

The big Qunari grinned broadly. “Couldn't have done it without you, big brother!”

Their little moment was interrupted by a suddenly frantic Morrigan. “Go! Before it’s too late!” she cried.

Bull didn't hesitate. He dove through, Ash on his heels. His heart almost stopped at the sight of a soldier mid swing, but revulsion replaced the fear. The Karashok was dead, held up by some gruesome spell. As he looked around, it became clear that they were all dead. All had been turned into statues that made Bull’s skin crawl. The Arishok stepped through and whispered a vicious curse as he took in the sight.

Cullen, Dorian, Cole, and Hawke leapt through, and then the mirror locked with a sharp crack that made all of them jump out of their skin.

Bull shook away the lingering nerves and scanned the area, hunting for anything that might lead him to Gina. A bloodcurdling shriek set his teeth on edge. His eye shot to the top of a hill. It took a moment before he fully realized what he was seeing. The familiar glow of the mark lit the darkening sky.

“No!” He bolted up the hill. “Kadan!”

He and the others crested the hill in time to see Gina collapse and her body start to seize violently. The mark’s power crackled dangerously across her skin and shot outward.

She was foaming at the mouth as her eyes rolled back. Bull ran to her, shouting wordlessly. As his hand touched her, a surge of power launched him a good twenty feet, his own body twitching from the aftershock. It hurt like hell, nothing like the mild shock he'd felt when she lassoed his ass out of thin air.

It was only getting worse. Hawke tried to get closer and got hit with a wild beam. He crumpled to the ground, out cold. “We can't approach!” cried Dorian.

“She'll tear herself apart!” Cole sobbed.

Ash clamped a hand on Bull’s shoulder. Heat washed over him, taking away the sting from the mark. The man looked him in the eye and said, “I wish we could have known each other longer, brother.”

Then, without a backward glance, the Qunari sprinted to his Kadan and threw himself into the middle of the electrifying storm.

Bull moved to dive right behind him, but Cullen tackled him back, followed by the Arishok. Bull fought, but they held firm. “Kaya can't lose both of you,” he heard Cullen say.

Sobs ripped from his throat as the light intensified, too bright for him to look at any longer. He'd come so close to bringing Kaya’s Tama back to her. To having the love of his life back. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fucking fair!
There was a terrible sizzle and pained cries, then silence fell. Painful, agonizing silence. Bull buried his face in Cullen’s neck, unable to bring himself to look at the scorched mark on the earth. To see the ashes of his love scatter in the wind. Cullen clutched tight, his own sobs nearly in rhythm with Bull’s.

Then, a voice. Low and lilting, singing Tama's old lullaby in Elven.

*Elgara vallas, da’len, (Sun sets, little one)*  
*Melava somniar (Time to dream)*  
*Mala taren aravas (Your mind journeys)*  
*Ara ma’desen melar (But I will hold you here)*

*Iras ma ghilas, da’len (Where will you go, little one)*  
*Ara ma’nefan ashir? (Lost to me in sleep?)*  
*Dirthara lothlenan’as (Seek truth in a forgotten land)*  
*Bal emma mala dir (Deep within your heart)*

*Tel’enfenim, da’len (Never fear, little one)*  
*Iressal ma ghilas (Wherever you shall go)*  
*Ma garas mir renan (Follow my voice)*  
*Ara ma’athlan vhenas (I will call you home)*  
*Ara ma’athlan vhenas (I will call you home)*

He hardly dared to hope. Cullen and the Arishok moved to the side, and he saw Ash crouched low and singing. With Gina cradled against his chest. Her body was utterly motionless, making his mouth go dry with fear.

Bull pulled free and crawled over to the big Qunari. His face was raw and blackened, as was his chest, but even as Bull watched, the skin began to knit itself back to normal. Their eyes met, and Ash gave him a weary smile. “She lives,” he whispered. The words made Bull weak with relief. He had to struggle to keep from breaking into hysteria.

The Qunari laid her on the ground gently and put a hand over her forehead before doing a cursory check from head to toe. Bull could feel himself writhing with impatience. “She's not the only one I'm worried about,” murmured Ash.

It was an odd thing to say, but Bull could see the renewed glow of the mark on her shoulder. It was a fucking miracle that she hadn't killed them all, let alone burnt herself to a crisp. How the Qunari had gotten it back under control and saved her, he didn't know. Didn’t care either.

Ash finally sat back. “She needs to rest,” he said softly.

Bull wasn’t listening. He reached out with shaky hands and brushed the hair away from her face. She was so tiny and still, but as he traced the line of her jaw, her pulse leapt strongly against the pads of his fingers.

Fresh tears washed down his face. He reached out and gripped Ash’s hand tightly. “Thank you,” he said, his voice choked.

Ash stared at their hands before turning his over and taking careful hold. “She’s family. I had to help.”

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They all made the walk back to the Darvaarad in silence. Morrigan was a nervous wreck. Cole was
no better, glancing fearfully over his shoulder every other minute. Bull was too tired to worry about anything but putting one foot in front of the other.

The Viddasala, by some stroke of luck, had survived. Ash scooped up her unconscious body and threw her over his shoulder unceremoniously. Bull couldn’t help but notice the man cutting corners and being none too careful as he slipped through doors and narrow passages, catching her horns more than once. It was a fuck of a lot kinder than he would’ve been, so he kept his mouth shut.

Bull carried Gina’s limp form. She was breathing softly, but hadn't made a single twitch since Ash worked his magic to stop the mark from eating her alive. It glowed eerily but, as it had before, remained harmlessly buried under her skin. Would it remain that way? Only time would tell.

Upon reentry to the fortress, the big Qunari dumped the Viddasala on the floor and demanded to be taken to their Tama.

They came to the quiet room guarded by two young Karashok. Ash slipped through and lowered to his knees. “Oh god,” he whispered.

She was still sleeping. The worst of the bruising had begun to fade, but her lips looked as though they'd been dragged over a cheese grater.

As they watched, her eyes flickered open. Tension rifled through her form as she realized there was an audience. After a moment, she seemed to recognize them both and wilted into tears.

Ash scooted closer. “Come, Tama,” he said softly. “Let me look at you.”

He did a thorough examination of her, leaving the lips for last. When he started to probe gently, she winced. Ash’s face contorted. “Tama, can you open your mouth?”

She hesitated. Bull carefully settled Gina onto another small bed and joined the pair. He stroked her hair behind her ear. “Let's take a look,” he said, smiling encouragingly.

With apparent reluctance, she parted her lips. Ash tipped her chin up and peered inside, only to go pale and rigid. More tears came down her cheeks, but he used his thumbs to smooth them away before pulling her into a hug and caressing her head.

He shot a hard look at Bull. “Someone took her tongue.”

Bull hid the rage that boiled in his guts. “Can you fix it?”

Ash nodded slowly. “If she'll let me.”

Bull rubbed her back gently. “Tama, Ash would like to help you. Will you let him?”

She frowned, confusion lighting her violet eyes. Ash sighed. “It's a long story, but you were right. I got myself in over my head one time too many.”

She gasped and pulled back, putting both hands to his face and looking for damages. Ash went scarlet at the look on her face. Bull smothered a laugh. It was so like her to make even the biggest Qunari feel like a naughty Imekari.

Bull squeezed her hand lightly. “What do you say? Will you let him try?”

She nodded slowly, though the look of concern didn't ease. Ash put both palms over her cheeks and said, “You'll feel heat, Tama.”
A cry of surprise yelped past her lips a second later. She gripped Bull’s hand hard enough to hurt, but he just gritted his teeth and bore it. Ash hummed tunelessly as he traced his hands over the rest of her bruises and abrasions. They quickly disappeared, leaving her almost completely whole.

Tama stared at him in wonder, but still didn't speak. Habit, perhaps? Ash smiled ruefully. “I'm still getting used to the power myself, Tama.”

The new eye twitched. Bull still didn't know how to feel about it. Missing an eye wasn't ideal, but he'd earned it. He was proud to have held that badge of courage. Hell, it had become a part of his identity. His entire fighting style had been adapted to work with one eye. It going to take a damn long time to adjust to the sudden change.

Ash seemed to read his mind. “I really am sorry,” he said.


Tama tilted her head. Bull reached out to touch Gina’s arm. “Her,” he said softly. “I wish she could see you looking so much better.”

The concern for her boys switched to the pale girl lying so motionless. Tama crept over, looking as though she were afraid to be disciplined. Or worse. Bull kept a smile locked on his face, but it wasn't holding as well as he hoped. Her big grey hand took hold of Gina’s little one, and she started to hum her lullaby. Bull almost lost it. Such a selfless woman. Even in her pain and fear, she looked to care for others, even a little human she’d never met. How could Gatt involve himself with anyone that would wish to harm her?

He had to leave the room for a moment to muster some semblance of composure. Ash joined him. “You good?”

Bull shook his head. “I put him in that home. The elf would never have known of her if I hadn’t.”

Ash crossed his arms. “You can’t know that. The Viddasala might have put him on her path anyway.”

Bull wanted to hit something. “We need to have a chat with that bitch.”

“That we do. But it can wait, brother.” Ash gripped his shoulder. “Get your girl home first. She needs to rest more than we need to interrogate these assholes.”

The man was right. He sighed and peeked through the door. Tama had settled in beside Gina, fussing with covers and gently cleaning her face with a cloth. His heart squeezed. Ash sniffled and started to walk away. Bull glanced back, but pretended not to see the Qunari dashing away tears as he marched away.

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Her mind was coming back to her. A sense of deja vu swarmed over her as she felt a familiar light jostling. Was she still in the araval? Had she imagined the whole mess?

She shifted and realized that she was curled against a warm chest whose heart thumped slowly. She hardly dared to open her eye, lest it was a beautiful dream. But then he sighed in his sleep and curled tighter around her.

Bull. He'd gotten to her. Saved her.
Again.

She put a hand tentatively over his heart. The light touch stirred him awake. He sucked a breath and tightened his hold. “Kadan,” he said, his voice rough with sleep.

She wanted to silence him with a kiss, but then her stomach rebelled. She lurched upright, clapping a hand over her mouth and seeking the door, a bucket, anything!

At the very last second, she hit the door latch and emptied her guts. There wasn't much to come up, but her body wasn't taking chances apparently. She was out of breath and exhausted by the time the cramping heaves eased.

Bull's hands guided her back to the makeshift bed. He offered her a drink and then splashed water on a cloth. As he was wiping her face clean, Ash’s face peeked through the doorway. “Everything good?”

Bull gave her a questioning look. She nodded weakly.

Ash reached in and gripped her foot. Heat washed over her, making the lingering ache in her throat ease. He whispered, “Just in case,” and then closed the door, leaving them in relative privacy.

Gina’s mind skated over her last memories. Solas, stepping toward the Viddasala, only to spin and curse, looking toward the exit mirror with a stunned expression. Then...nothing but debilitating pain.

“And what did you catch him?” she asked, her voice gravelly.

Bull tilted his head. “Catch who, Kadan?”

That was a no. Fuck. “Solas,” she whispered.

Bull stiffened. “He was there?”

“He’s Fen’harel.”

“Some nickname,” Bull growled.

She shook her head. “No, Bull. He's actually Fen'harel. Like, from a thousand years ago.” Gina explained his story and his insane plan.

Bull shook his head. “Crazy bastard,” he growled.

“He expected the mark to kill me,” she said. “Why didn't it?”

“Ash,” he said softly.

“That's awfully convenient,” she whispered.

Bull nodded slowly and then let out a long breath. “Kadan, I have something to show you.”

He reached up and tugged his eye patch free. Gina stared in shock. “Bull, is that real?”

He nodded again. “I broke my face. Ash fixed everything in one fell swoop. The eye was unintentional. Or so he says, anyway.”

She reached out to touch the newly healed eyebrow. “Bull, it’s beautiful,” she whispered. Where he'd been ruggedly handsome before, now he was straight up gorgeous. “You won't be able to keep
the ladies away,” she teased.

He turned red. “It's weird is what it is.”

“I'm sure it is,” she said softly. The thought of having her eye back made her feel strange. She'd gotten used to functioning with a single eye in six short months. Bull had been living with one eye for nearly a decade. How much stranger would it be for him?

He traced a finger down the side of her face. “I thought I lost you again,” he whispered.

Gina turned her lips to his palm and kissed it softly. “I was so afraid he'd petrify me like the others. That you'd come across a statue of me. That I wouldn’t be able to tell you...” Tears threatened, making it hard to speak.

He pulled her close. “Tell me what, Kadan?”

She caught his big paw and kissed the knuckles before guiding it to curve against her belly. His brow furrowed, but he remained quiet. “The Iron Bull, I'm pregnant.”

His fingers jerked before smoothing over the swell of her stomach. “Pregnant?” he repeated hoarsely.

She nodded, watching his face as the news ran through his brain. A look of wonder followed by a delirious little laugh, and then he was kissing her like he'd never tasted anything so sweet in his life.

When they broke the kiss, his brow furrowed. “But how? I asked...the Tamassrans said it wasn’t a possibility.”

“Ash says-”

“Ash knows?”

Gina gave him a wry smile. “He figured it all out. I thought I was just sick or stressed out. I'm impressed that he didn't tell you already.”

He shook his head. “At least he's smarter than he looks,” he muttered.

Bull put his hand against her again. She smiled and slid her hand over his. “Nothing much to feel yet. Won't be long, I'm sure.”

His eyes widened. “He's going to be big, Kadan.”

Gina eyed Bull’s breadth and laughed softly. “Yes, he is.”

His face creased with worry. “Is that safe for you?”

She frowned. The thought hadn't really occurred to her. “I don't know, tough guy.”

He started to shake. “Kadan, I want this. More than anything. But…” Tears filled his eyes. “I can't lose you. I can't.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held tight. “Hey now, no one's losing anyone. We'll talk to people who know better. I'm sure the Arishok owes us that, at the very least.” Gina caressed his back and added, “Plus you've got a brother with weird super magic. I'm sure if we ask nicely, he'll help too.”

A little sob escaped him. "I need you, Kadan," he said, his voice cracking. "I can't do this without
Tears welled up in her eye at the brokenness of his voice. It wasn't like him to be so emotional, but after nearly three days of pushing hard, he was probably strung tighter than a bow. How he was still functioning was a mystery to her. "Come, sweetheart," she whispered, coaxing him to lay with her. He obeyed, ignoring the tears staining his cheeks. She gently wiped them away and began to hum his lullaby.

As he drifted to sleep, Bull slipped one arm around her, and curled his other hand protectively over their tiny new lifeform. Gina stroked the silky skin behind his ears and let herself enjoy the sensation of being safe in his arms as she followed him into dreamland. They were together. That's all she needed.

They had the rest of their lives to figure the rest out.

Chapter End Notes

Such a bittersweet moment for them. Poor Bull - I think he's going to need therapy after all this stress!!
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Some more aftermath!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Bull woke, the sky was dark and the cart carrying them was still and silent. His head was a little fuzzy from sleep, but that didn't stop shame from giving him a whole-body cringe.

She'd given him the best news he never expected to receive, and what was his response? Instant meltdown. They hadn't even been able to enjoy the discovery together. What kind of asshole did that?

She sighed and nestled closer. “Quit beating yourself up,” she mumbled into his chest.

A smile tugged at his lips. “Quit getting into my head.”

“Stop thinking so loud,” she retorted.

Bull slid a hand down her back. “I ruined your surprise.”

“You were overtired and strung out. And you brought up a legitimate concern.”

“I was a drama queen.”

Gina shook her head. “No, you weren't. There might be some health issues we need to sort out if we want to have a successful pregnancy.”
He brushed his knuckles lightly over the curve of her belly. “I don't want you to think I don't want this baby, Kadan.”

Her fingers caught his. “I know. But if it's not safe…” She paused and pressed her lips to the back of his hand. “Until we confirm that this is okay, can we keep it to ourselves?”

He swallowed hard. “Are you that worried?”

“I'm more worried that the mark might hurt the baby.” Her eye squeezed shut. “I'm amazed I didn't lose him after Solas pulled that stunt.”

That was a thing? Bull suddenly realized he was woefully uninformed when it came to pregnancy. All he'd ever needed to do was show up, pump his hips a couple times, and wipe himself clean afterward. The Tamassrans took care of the rest. He'd have to remedy that. And damn quick!

She laid her cheek against his chest. “My aunt miscarried once. It was after she announced the pregnancy to everyone. I remember hearing her weep behind closed doors after another well-wisher asked after the baby. I don't think I could go through that.”

Bull's skin tightened at the thought of having to take back such a happy announcement. “It'll be our little secret, Kadan. Until we're sure.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I just want you safe. That's all that matters to me, Kadan.”

She reached up and cupped a hand over his cheek. “I've never been safer than I am in your arms, tough guy.”

He kissed her gently. “I'll never let go.”

They lay in cozy silence for a while, and then heavy steps outside the cart caught Bull’s ear. At first he thought Ash was coming to bug them. After a minute, he realized the man was pacing and whispering nonsense to himself.

He was about to sit up and check on the guy when a soft voice said, “How bad are they?”

Ash audibly jumped and barked a curse. “You trying to get your neck wrung?”

Cullen scoffed. “You don't scare me. I spar with your brother for fun.”

Ash grunted and resumed pacing. “What do you want?”

“I can see the shakes are worse. How about the dreams?”

Ash muttered something under his breath. Cullen sighed. “This is the hardest part. Right here and now. Your body wants that stuff more than life itself.”

“Maybe if I-”

“No.” There was a finality to the Templar’s voice. “Having more will only make it worse. Because you'll just need a little more again and again. There is no weaning from lyrium.”

Ash made a pained sound. “It was one dose.”

“One is all it takes.”
Ash resumed pacing. “I am weak. Pathetic.”

“You're not. It's just further proof that no matter how mighty, lyrium will beat its victims into submission.”

“You were singing its praises before,” snapped the big Qunari.

“It was a warning,” Cullen said. “I've seen firsthand the devastation this stuff causes, and yet I can't help but recall how good it felt when I used it. I wake up desperate for a fix every morning. It will lure you back time and time again.”

“Why do you idiots take it then?”

“Lyrium has its benefit. What it doesn't have is mercy.” Cullen sighed. “You will always want more. Need more. Crave more. And it will give you less and less return with every dose.”

“What made you stop?” whispered Ash.

“I watched my mentor lose all sense of reality. He was the most powerful man I've ever known, but he faded into a gaunt shell of a person. At the end, he couldn't remember if he ate, or had a shit, or saw a friend. He had violent nightmares every time he tried to sleep. They had to babysit him constantly in his last days.”

Cullen paused. “He was only forty five when the Maker finally showed him the mercy of death. I didn't want that fate.”

Gina was clinging to Bull as they listened in silence. Bull knew the tale well. It never ceased to dismay him that the Chantry fed that stuff to the Templars like it was candy. He couldn't think of a worse cruelty. No wonder Corypheus was able to tempt the Templars so easily.

“What can I do?” asked Ash. “I tried to make it stop, but it just won't go away.”

“It won't.” Cullen sounded infinitely sad. “You will likely always struggle with the addiction, as the Templars in my program have struggled. As I do.”

“I'm not addicted,” said Ash, his voice harsh.

“Aren't you?”

There was a long moment of silence before Ash let out a long shaky sigh. “I don't know if I can do this.”

Cullen’s voice moved closer to the Qunari. “I say that every morning.”

“What helps you get through?”

“My work. Too much depends on me. I cannot fail the Inquisition. That helps me focus.” Cullen paused. “And good friends. Friends who don't judge. Who support me, even at my weakest. They make the effort worthwhile.”

Bull almost misted up at the sentiment. Gina sniffled and wiped at her cheeks.

After another long pause, Ash spoke, his voice small and broken. “What if I needed help?”

“All you need to do is ask,” said Cullen softly.
Bull and Gina stayed in their little cocoon, drifting in and out of sleep until the sun was bright in the sky and Bull’s stomach was complaining almost constantly about a lack of food.

As they stepped out of the door, her fingers strayed toward her stomach. Bull caught the gesture and smiled. She could see the worry lingering in his eyes, but the initial excitement was coming back too.

He turned to face forward and wobbled a step. Almost automatically, he reached up to tug his eyepatch back into place. Gina stopped him before he could, placing the hand on her shoulder.

“Follow my lead, tough guy,” she said.

He smirked and slipped the arm around her shoulders. “The half blind leading the fully sighted?”

She grinned. “Stranger things have happened.”

Ash, Cullen, and Jeremy were standing together, but her brother bolted over to sweep her into a tight hug. “Ginny-binny, stop scaring me like that,” he whispered in her ear.

She hugged him hard and said, “I’ll try really hard.”

They all moved to the crackling campfire where Varric and Dorian bickered fiercely. They both gave her a quick greeting, but went straight back to their argument. “The key to good soup is in the bones,” said Varric. “You don’t need anything else.”

“Without herbs and spices, your bones are bland and lifeless. You might as well drink water,” said Dorian.

Varric made a dismissive noise as Gina settled down beside Hawke. He winked at her. “It was my turn to cook. Got these two fighting over who makes the better soup, and suddenly they were doing it for me,” he whispered softly.

She swatted him playfully. “Very clever,” she whispered.

He took hold of her hand. “I’m relieved to see you doing so well. You really had me worried for a minute there.”

She looked at his arm and noticed a strange new scar pattern. It appeared as though he had pink lightning coursing up the length of his arm.

“What’s this?” she asked.

He touched her shoulder lightly. “That mark of yours has some bite, darling.”

Bull had told her about his and Hawke’s mishap with her mark. To know that it had gotten so out of control scared the living daylights out of her. She’d been trying to ignore it’s renewed presence, but hadn’t been successful yet.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Hawke shook his head. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Which begs the question,” said Varric meaningfully.

All eyes were on her. Gina squirmed under their scrutiny. “Solas came out of hiding,” she said, and then explained the events leading to the mark’s revival.
The group was in stunned silence when she finished talking. Then Cole whispered, “He broke the dreams to stop the old dreams from waking. The wolf chews its leg off to escape the trap.”

Varric scowled. “He fucked everything up, and now he thinks he can just put it back the way it was. Do you understand what that means Cole?”

Cole nodded. “He hurts, an old pain from before, when everything sang the same. You're real, and it means everyone could be real. It changes everything, but it can't.”

Hawke shook his head. “Everything already has changed. That's what he doesn't get. This world doesn't deserve to end because he doesn't like the way things turned out.”

Cole shook his head fiercely. “He's not that kind of wolf. Solas doesn't want to hurt people!”

“Unless you're a Qunari soldier, guilty of nothing more than following orders,” Gina said flatly. With a rough movement she revealed the mark. “Or he thinks you might get in his way.”

“He's my friend. Whispers in the night, he knows me. Sees me. Understands.”

Gina bit back an angry response. The kid didn't think on the same wavelength as others. She'd heard Solas refer to him as a spirit of compassion in the past. Even now, as a real boy, he looked eagerly for the good in those around him.

She said stiffly, “He needs to stop. If you're truly his friend, you'll do whatever you can to stop him from carrying out this insanity. Because if I get to him first, I will stop at nothing to bring him down.”

Cole’s face turned pink. He glared at her and said, “Your shoulder hurts. A heartbeat. Not yours. Hammering the beat of a song in its final verse.” Then he shot to his feet and stormed away.

Gina flinched. Bull's hand settled against her back, steadying her. Ash cleared his throat. “On that note, what is the plan? This Solas slipped away before any of us could see him.”

Gina shook off the eerie feeling the boy’s cryptic words planted under her skin. “I don't know. He wanted to talk to the Viddasala more, but you guys showed up and interrupted him.”

“Thankfully,” said Bull in her ear, sending a tingle down her spine. She brushed her lips over the line of his jaw and slipped closer to his side.

They talked quietly among themselves as they ate. Gina could barely stomach the smell, but she forced herself to choke down at least half a bowl before offering it to Bull.

He took it without question, but Ash gave her a worried look. “That's all you're eating?”

Gina shrugged and leaned against Bull’s bicep. She'd slept for hours, but she felt like she could curl right up for another long nap. The warmth of his skin only made her sleepier.

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After she nodded off for the third time, Bull scooped her up, ignoring her half-hearted protests. By the time he took three steps, she was passed out.

He tucked her into their makeshift bed and watched as she slept like a rock. Her misadventure had taken a lot out of her, leaving her pale and wan.

Ash’s footfalls approached his back. “How is she?”
Bull frowned. “Tired. The mark was draining her before she closed the breach. I don't know if it's worse now, or if she's just worn too thin.” Or was the baby was leaching her energy? Another thing to ask whatever experts they found, he decided.

Ash came closer. “May I?”

He nodded and shifted out of the way. The Qunari leaned inside the cart and took hold of her hand. Light flashed, but she stayed asleep. He sighed as he straightened. “It's been a long journey for her.”

“For both of them,” Bull said quietly.

A questioning look came to Ash’s face. Bull nodded. “Thanks for keeping your mouth shut, by the way. She's got a thing about surprises, and I’ve come to like it when she throws one my way.”

The Qunari gave him a half smile. “No shortage of surprises with this one, that's for sure.”

Bull laughed. “Never. She always keeps me on my toes.”

Ash shook his head. “As foolhardy as she is clever. I've never met anyone like her.”

An apt description, Bull thought. Curiosity poked at him. “Did you really believe her when she said she didn't speak Qunlat?”

Ash made a scoffing sound. “No!” But he wouldn't meet Bull’s eyes.

Bull smirked. “Sucker.”

Ash gave a startled laugh. “She played us all for fools, and we fell for it. I did think it odd that you hadn't taught her, but I also didn't want to give Gatt anything to latch onto. So I left it alone.”

The mention of the elf put a damper on his sense of humor. “Well, thanks for that too,” he said quietly.

Ash nodded and tipped his head toward the rest of the group. “I'll give you some privacy.”

Bull watched the giant walk away and wondered why his half-brother was so much bigger. He tried to pretend he wasn't jealous, but he'd never been good at lying to himself.

As he turned to join her, he came face to face with a pale and agitated Cole. He jolted and cursed. “Do you have to be so quiet?”

“I blend behind, daggers in darkness, one-two-three.”

Bull lifted a brow. Did that mean what he thought it did? Probably best not to think about it too hard. “What do you want?”

“I feel strange. Sad, but hot and itchy.” Cole shuffled his feet.

Bull took tight control of his protective instincts. “It's called anger, Cole. You don't want to believe your friend could change like that.”

Cole shook his head. “Not change.”

It clicked after a minute. “You're mad you didn't see him for who he really was.”

“He hid from me,” he said sadly.
Bull sighed. “Yeah, he hid from all of us.”

“I wanted her to sting, in her memories.” Cole’s lip trembled. “I don't like that feeling.”

Bull patted his shoulder. “You didn't like her pointing out the truth. It's called being human, kid.”

Cole looked ready to cry. “I'm sorry, Iron Bull.”

He lifted a hand. “Tell her. She'll appreciate hearing it from you personally.”

The boy nodded and then gave the cart a strange look. “Two hearts beating together,” he whispered, and then his watery eyes went big and bright.

Before he could say anything else, Bull gripped his arm tight. “Listen to me. You keep this one to yourself, kid.” He jerked him closer, going nearly nose to nose. “Promise me!”

“I promise,” Cole said. Then he narrowed his eyes. “You are scared, Iron Bull.”

Bull didn’t want to admit it, but the kid likely knew his thoughts better than he did. “Another one of those human things.” He paused and gave himself a wry glance. “Well, you know what I mean.”

The boy nodded eagerly. “It sparkles and plays in your head, making things soft and pretty again.”

Bull released him slowly. “Uh. Yeah. Well, I'm gonna go now. You go...do whatever it is you do. And don't forget your promise.”

Cole practically buzzed away. As Bull closed the door, he heard the boy exclaim to Dorian, “The Iron Bull made a joke!”

Bull snorted. “Yeah, a real funny one,” he muttered to himself.

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The cart dipped to the side as Bull climbed inside, dragging Gina out of her nap. He grimaced. “Sorry, Kadan. Too damn fat to be stealthy.”

A sleepy smile came to her face as she snuggled into him. After a second he poked her gently and said, “Hey, come on. You're supposed to say ‘Oh The Iron Bull, you're not too fat!’” His voice went surprisingly high pitched as he imitated her.

She put a hand on his heart and said solemnly, “But The Iron Bull, you don't like it when I lie to you.”

His beautiful eyes went round. “You little brat,” he breathed before tickling her ferociously. She squeaked with laughter and tried to get away, but the sheer bulk of him blocked every avenue of escape.

Without warning, the mark sizzled and a sudden whip of energy slapped across Bull. He hit the wall of the cart with a crack and yelped in pain.

Gina wasn’t spared from consequence. It was like being kicked in the shoulder by a mule, the force of it taking her breath away. She fought for her wind and rasped, “Bull! Oh god, are you okay?”

His hands found hers. “I'm good, Kadan.”

The tremor in his fingers betrayed the truth. She burst into tears.
He made a worried little sound and wrapped her in his arms. “Breathe, Kadan,” he said, rubbing her back.

Feet were running their way. The door wrenched open. Both Dorian and Ash jammed their faces into the doorway. “Are you alright?” said Dorian between panting breaths.

Terror seized her. The mark acted on its own. She wasn't in control! Had she ever been in control? What the hell had Solas done? What in the everloving fuck had he done?

“What is the commotion?” called Cassandra as she and Krem hustled toward the cart.

Gina wanted to burrow inside Bull and hide. He held tight and waved them off. “Just an accident.”

Ash reached out his hand, but Bull flinched them both away. “We're fine,” he barked. The big Qunari jerked his hand away like he'd been stung. The gesture made Bull soften. “We just need some time, guys. Please.”

With that, he closed the door in their faces. Gina curled into herself, her body clenched tight with fear. Bull traced both hands over her back and kissed her forehead. “Just a reminder, the safe word is katoh,” he said dryly.

She trembled. “It's not funny, Bull. You could've been killed.”

“But I wasn't.”

She lifted her eye to meet his. “I didn't have control. What if that happens again?”

He began a methodical massage, starting at her calves. “I don't have that answer, Kadan.”

Gina felt like crying. How could she ever carry this baby to term? No matter how hard she tried to think positively, the dark clouds swirled right back in place.

She was a ticking time bomb.

“What if that was Kaya?” Tears spilled free, hot on her cheek. “I'm not safe to be around.”

Bull’s face twisted. “Don't do this. It was an accident. One we'll learn to avoid.” He brushed the tears away with gentle thumbs. “We've gone through harder, Kadan.”

It took almost an hour for him to ply her out of her rigid ball form. He spooned her against his chest, and slid his hand in slow circles over her belly as he sung his lullaby to her.

She took slow breaths and tried to focus on his heartbeat against her back. He nuzzled the crook of her neck and continued to hum as his hand began to wander over the length of her body.

As his hand brushed over her breasts, Gina pulled herself out of her mope. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

He guided her to face him. “Enjoying the way you feel, all warm and soft. All pressed against me.” His hand splayed across her back and his lips found hers. After breaking the kiss, he growled softly. “Better than I remembered, Kadan.”

Her pulse leapt. Mostly with a rush of desire, but partially from fear. “Bull, what if-”

His hand tangled into her hair and he kissed her again, cutting off any further protest. She couldn’t stop herself from smoothing both hands over the plates of his chest.
The mark buzzed ever so slightly, and she jerked away with a gasp. Bull allowed her a breath, but then he followed, getting more bold with his mouth and hands. “It's not safe,” she whispered.

He reached under her shirt and dragged a thumb over the point of one breast. She arched and whimpered. “It could hit you again.”

“Kinky,” he murmured as he nipped at the base of her throat.

Fear warred with desire. “Bull, be serious. I don't want you to get hurt.”

“Uh huh,” he said, his focus clearly on the way her shirt was blocking the view.

As he slipped it over her head, the mark brightened the space. Her stomach clenched. “Bull…” she pleaded, their word trembling at the edge of her lips.

As the hard K sounded, his teeth dragged over her nipple, making her shudder and lose train of thought.

“Hmm?” he whispered, licking and nipping his way to the laces of her pants.

“This isn't safe,” she repeated.

He tilted his head. “For the baby?”

“For you, jackass!”

He shrugged and tugged the laces loose. “I'll take my chances, Kadan. Unless you make me stop.”

His fingers dipped between her legs and circled tantalizingly over her clit. The breath left her lungs on a whoosh as he moaned. “Kadan, you're already wet.”

The desire to have his hands working their practical magic over her body was quickly drowning out the pangs of fear. He tugged her pants down her legs and then looked up at her, left eye squeezed tightly shut.

A giggle escaped her. “Why are you closing your eye like that?”

He skimmed a hand over the length of her leg. “It's too weird.”

Gina shook her head. “You know, most people would be thrilled to regain a lost eye.”

He crawled over her and traced the patch covering her eye with a gentle finger. “Including you?”

She hadn't thought about it. “Would you think less of me?”

Bull scowled. “Fuck no. I was okay with my missing eye because the price was fair. This was a cheap shot from a shitty demon in the Fade.”

She reached up to touch the left side of his face. It was still strange to see his skin so whole and smooth. Even his lips had lost most of their scarring. “I couldn't figure out how old you were before. Now I don't have a snowball’s chance in hell,” she whispered.

“Too bad for you,” he teased.

She caught the stub of his horn and pulled his face to hers, kissing him with abandon. They were like teenagers that had discovered making out for the first time, only Bull was no fumbling amateur. His
hands found every sensitive spot and played her like an instrument. She was mindless by the time his lips left hers to drift downward.

He trailed a finger over her hip. “I missed you, love of my life. But I never realized how badly I missed this,” Bull said as he lowered his mouth to her, taking a long, leisurely taste. His eyes fluttered shut as he made a hungry sound and delved more deeply, his tongue making its mark along every last part of her.

If there was any worry lingering in her head, it was instantly forgotten. All she could do was writhe and whimper his name as he took his sweet time working her into a lather. Shivers cascaded over her entire body as he teased the outer folds of her pussy.

Then it was his face that turned uncertain. “Kadan, is this actually safe? For the baby, I mean.”

“The only thing I know for sure is that if you stop right now, you're going to be missing a lot more than just an eye,” she said, her every nerve straining and demanding to be connected to him completely.

A hesitant smile touched his lips. “Easy, little Desire-demon.”

She lifted her hips impatiently. “Please, the Iron Bull.”

He took another slow taste, making her ache with need. Then, finally he pushed one finger inside her, growling in unison with her helpless moan. “You're beyond tight today. It's been so long,” he said hoarsely.

“It's been a week,” she said, hardly able to form the words with her trembling lips.

He curled the finger and sent waves of pleasure rippling through her. “It was a lifetime,” he said, pressing a kiss to the soft flesh along her inner thigh. “An experience I never intend to repeat.”

And then there were no more words, just the Iron Bull driving her to the point of no return time and time again. It wasn't until he was able to slide three fingers inside her that he finally reared back to let her release his cock.

Gina pawed at his pants eagerly, though not effectively. He laughed softly and gave her a helping hand, freeing the stubborn knots and kicking loose. Before he could get the pants over his ankles, she had both hands wrapped around the hardness of him and her lips and tongue making his entire body twitch with every lick and suckle.

He gripped her hair, apparently unaffected by the loss of length. “Hungry little thing,” he hissed, a feral snarl ripping from his throat as she plunged her mouth over him, taking him as deep as her jaw would allow and then some.

His thighs were quivering and he was short of breath a minute later, as she made up for lost time, taking long sucking pulls at him and fondling his balls. His hips bucked as he came, shouting wordlessly.

She was hardly done swallowing his seed before he had her pinned to the floor, his mouth hard against hers. The mark fizzled, but her mind clamped down, cutting off any further reaction.

He pulled back and smiled fiercely. “Yes, put that thing back in its place.” His fingers strummed over her clit, making her entire body arch.

Gina couldn't think past the desperate need to have him inside her. “Please,” she whispered, reaching
down to stroke his cock, delighted to find it already going hard.

“You always ask so nicely,” he rasped as he shifted his hips in alignment with hers.

They both dragged ragged gasps as he moved, sinking the head of his cock deep within her body. Bull snarled and bit into her shoulder as he pulled back and thrust more firmly.

She clawed her hands into his shoulders and back as he fucked her, low Qunlat streaming past his beautiful lips. Her body was strung tight, trembling on the cusp of yet another climax. Bull lifted her hips and drilled into her with smooth strokes. “You better come for me,” he commanded.

She didn't dare disobey. Another few hard thrusts and she was quaking with a mind-numbing orgasm. Bull clutched her tight and groaned ferociously as he came with her.

They were beyond winded. Bull rested his forehead against hers. “Damn,” he said, huffing as he caught his breath.

She couldn't think, let alone speak. Bull managed to arrange them into a comfortable pile, and they lapsed into a muzzy haze. His hand curled over her belly, his thumb stroking lightly across her skin.

After a long while, he kissed her loudly on the cheek and stretched. “Nothing like getting off a time or two to clear your head,” he said cheerfully.

Gina rolled her eye at him. “You're ridiculous.”

“Got you out of your funk, didn't it?”

She opened her mouth to say something sarcastic, but stopped herself. He was right. It had. She still didn't know what to do about the mark, but the hopelessness surrounding thoughts of it had vanished.

And she'd stopped the mark from reacting without cause. How was a mystery, but it was a start.

She glanced at him and pulled a face at his smug expression. “You're going to hold this over my head, aren't you?”

He put a hand over his heart and widened his eyes. “Who, me?”

She planted a kiss on the back of his hand. “It's lucky you're so damn adorable, you know that?”

Bull laughed softly and pulled her closer. Gina touched the claw hanging from his neck and sighed longingly. Her half had been a terrible loss, and seemingly for no point.

He suddenly cursed and sat bolt upright. “What an idiot,” he muttered as he turned away.

Gina slowly sat up, watching him rummage through his pack. “What's-”

He spun to face her. “I've been so stupid, Kadan.” His hand caught hers and tugged her closer. “This should've been the first thing I did,” he said, a grimace twisting his face.

Bull's other hand opened to reveal her claw. She cried out in delight. “How did you find it?”

“Oza,” he said softly as he draped the leather strand around her neck and tied it in place. “She gave it to me in Val Royeaux. I didn't have time to fix it yet.”

The familiar weight of the claw settled against her heart, bringing tears of joy to her eye. “It's
perfect,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

Getting back to normal, and it feels so good!
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

A long LONG time coming. Been busy with my own world building and life in general. Just a short chapter today, hope you all enjoy!

Gina pulled on her pants and wrinkled her nose. Bull tilted his head. “You okay?”

“I think these pants could walk away on their own at this point.”

He smirked as he tugged his pants up and worked at tying the laces. “I've smelled worse.”

She poked his ribs. “You ain't much better, tough guy.”

Bull laughed and sniffed himself theatrically. “At least I don't smell like pork that's been left in the sun too long.”

Gina stared at him in horror. “Am I that bad?”

He grinned and kissed the end of her nose. “No worse than any other human.”

She gave him a withering glare and slipped into her shirt. “Look who thinks he's real funny.”

“I'm a laugh a minute, Kadan.” He cupped the back of her head and drew her into a kiss. At first she refused to respond, leaving her lips pressed tight. But the Qunari wasn't deterred.

His lips caressed hers as one hand trailed possessively down her spine and the other moved to trace the line of her jaw. He took the tiniest, most gentle nibble at her lower lip, leaving it tingling and her
swooning into his embrace with a little whimper.

He growled and took a victory kiss that left her heart pounding. When they parted, he whispered, “You taste as sweet as ever, Kadan.” Then he straightened and said, “Even if you are a little overripe.”

He didn't see the pillow flung at his head in time to duck.

***

Cedric landed on Bull’s shoulder as they crossed to the fire pit. Bull plucked a thick square of paper from his foot and said, “Thanks, Bird Brain.”

Gina lifted a brow. “Since when do you talk to Cedric so nicely?”

Bull shrugged. “Seems to respond better. Hasn't tried to take a chunk out of my ear in a few days.” The bird cawed at top volume in Bull’s ear, making him flinch. He scowled at Gina’s swallowed giggle and swatted the crow away from him.

Bull unfolded the paper and found two thinner slips tucked inside. The first was a note from Josephine. The second was a brightly coloured drawing from Kaya. It took him a few seconds to figure it out, but then he realized it was a red dragon being ridden by Gina and chased by him.

Gina’s breath caught when he passed it to her. Bull smiled and slipped his arm around her shoulders. “It's a good likeness. Look, she made me bigger than the dragon!”

She gave a wet little laugh and wiped away a tear. “She's going to be a talented artist.”

He nodded and kissed her temple. “Her Tama is a good artist too.”

She made a dismissive sound, but he caught the pleased look flicker across her face. After planting another kiss on her cheek he turned his attention to the note.

After scanning over it a few times he sighed heavily and handed it to Gina. “Waste of time,” he muttered.

Her eye flicked over the words quickly. “A whole Conclave at Halamshiral?” She frowned. “They must have been planning this for a while.”

Bull nodded. “It started before...you know.” His throat tightened and he had to clear it a couple times. “This was always going to happen. I just don't think there's any point.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I think it's a whole lot of unnecessary fuss. If they're that determined to get rid of us, why fight it?”

Gina reached up and smoothed her thumb over her newly returned claw. “I think it's a shame how quickly they forget how much we've done to stabilize the region.”

Bull grunted and brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. “You nearly died in the effort of saving their asses. If that isn't enough, then they can go fuck themselves.”

She lifted an eyebrow and said dryly, “I'm not sure I understand how you feel.”

He didn't smile. The image of her tumbling limply through the night sky and laying lifeless on the
ground before him was forever seared in his brain. Her little body pressed close to his side. He squeezed her tight and blew out a breath. “We'll go. I don't like it, but it appears I don't have any other option.”

Gina nodded and rubbed his back. “I'm with you. And not just because you have a nice butt.” She waggled her eyebrow at him and giggled when he pulled a face at her. “Okay, okay. Mostly because of the butt. But also because you have a really good point. We didn't just stop Corypheus. We put a stop to both civil wars, and without raising a sword against either side. If anything, we're a peacekeeping mission.”

Bull shook his head. “They see a soldier and think fighter, even if he just rescued an entire orphanage of kids from a pack of wild dogs. We'll never convince them.”

She sighed. “Then they can figure the rest out on their own.”

They walked in silence for a moment, and then her fingers trailed through her hair. “If we're going to the Winter Palace, I really should at least take a dip in a steam.”

Bull shook his head. “Nah. We'll use one of their fancy marble tubs with hot water.”

She made a seductive little coo. “You know how to woo a girl, tough guy.”

He squared his shoulders and swaggered a few steps. “Shut up, baby. I know it.”

Gina burst into laughter. “Very good! You sure you've never watched television?”

Bull shook his head. “Just had someone teach me a few funny things.”

Cassandra stepped in front of them, her face tense and her fingers twisting together. “I wondered if I might have a word with you, Gina,” she said stiffly.

Bull stole a quick kiss and slipped away, leaving the two women to chat.

***

Gina stared at the Inquisitor. The woman was restless like a cat on a hot tin roof. Cassandra said, “I hope you are feeling well.”

“I'm okay. Thank you,” she said.

“Good. Good,” said the Seeker, bobbing her head. There was an awkward pause and then Cassandra said, “Gina, I wanted to apologize.”

Gina opened her mouth to respond, but the woman lifted a hand. “I will not ask you to forgive me. I know I do not deserve to ask that much of you. I only wanted to tell you how deeply I regret saying what I did. No one has given more to our cause than you, and it was unworthy of me to imply otherwise.”

The memory played in Gina’s head, and with it came the certainty that it didn't matter. Angry drunken rants meant nothing in the face of everything to come. Without a word, she threw her arms around Cassandra and hugged tight enough to make her arms hurt.

After a moment, Cassandra returned the hug and said tearfully, “I've written three times, and burned every attempt because nothing excuses my behavior.”

Gina pulled back and shook her head. “We've all said and done things that we didn't mean. I'm
certainly no angel in that department.”

Cassandra curled in on herself. “I am a disaster, Gina. I have alienated every one of our allies, and now they want to disband our organization.”

Gina guided the woman to sit on a fallen log with her. “You're doing better than I ever could.”

“There would not be a conclave if you were the Inquisitor.”

“I doubt we would have existed half as long without your leadership. You kept us focused. It's because of you that we even have the chance to defend the Inquisition. They would have razed us to the ground a long time ago if I were in your shoes.”

“You are kinder than I deserve.”

Gina shrugged. “And you're too hard on yourself. Bull told me once that the Qunari don't choose a leader because they are the best, brightest, or strongest. They choose leaders that can make the hard decisions and live with the consequences.” She touched Cassandra’s arm. “I don't think we could've chosen better than you if we tried.”

The woman shook her head slowly. “I disagree, but I appreciate you saying it anyway.”

Gina nodded and rose to her feet. “There are bigger problems coming. We'll all have to work together to get through it.”

A new look came to Cassandra’s face. “I did not see him for what he was. I should have executed him when I had the chance.”

“He fooled everyone.”

“Not you.”

“Yes, me. I thought he was just a whiny asshole. Not a wannabe elven god bent on ending the world.”

They wandered to the fire. Ash and Varric were in the midst of a lively discussion about the dwarven ruins scattered throughout Thedas. Ash peppered the dwarf for details about various legends while the rest of the group listened in bored silence.

To his left sat their Tama. Gina felt her breath catch as she took in the woman's appearance. Her hair had been wound into an intricate braid that only a certain Tervinter could pull off. The stitches in her lips were long gone, and so were any marks or bruises. Probably Ash’s doing.

He stuffed his mouth with food as Varric relayed a story told to him by his father. A smear of stew stained his face, but he was too intent on interrogating the dwarf to notice apparently.

Tama shook her head and pulled a handkerchief from a pouch at her waist. After wetting it with her tongue, she dabbed the food from his cheek.

A painful rush of memories swirled over Gina. The motherly gesture that made Ash laugh and playfully bat his Tama away was something her mother would have done, no matter where they were or who was watching.

Tears stormed her eye. Before she could make a fool of herself, she bolted from the fire. Harsh sobs escaped her, almost taking her to her knees.
She didn't allow herself to think about the life and people she'd lost. It was too painful. But those thoughts refused to vacate her mind. Circling, jabbing, taunting. And she was too strung out to fight the thoughts back into their locked box inside the deepest recesses of her heart.

Arms wrapped around her, holding tight as the body attached to them shook with tears. Jeremy stroked a hand over her head. “God I miss her,” he said, his voice thick with tears.

She nodded, too overwhelmed to respond. They stood together until the sun disappeared entirely. Neither spoke. They didn't need to.

When they finally regained control over their emotions, they wandered back to the fire. A few worried looks pointed their way, but she ignored them and slipped onto Bull’s lap.

***

Bull rubbed her back as she dozed against his chest. He didn't know exactly what had set her off, but judging by her brother's nearly identical reaction, it was something beyond this planet.

She was stretched too thin. He could feel it as clearly as he could feel her breath against his skin. He always worried about her safety, but now he was terrified on her behalf.

Ash returned, having taken their Tama back to her tent. He took a long pull from a mug of ale and stared into the fire.

“You okay?” asked Bull.

He flinched and lifted startled eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Just worried.”

Bull waited a minute before prodding. “About?”

Ash sighed. “She hasn't said a word yet.”

“She will. Just give her time.”

The big Qunari nodded, but didn't look any happier. Bull wanted to ask about the lyrium, but held his tongue. If Ash wanted him to know, he'd say something.

Quiet conversation murmured around Bull. Gina’s warmth and rhythmic breathing lulled him into a cozy daze. He settled in his seat and let his eyes drift shut.

***

Gina didn't know where she was. A small fortress in the mountains? A Chantry stood high on the hill behind her, but it wasn't a place she knew.

“It's Haven. Before Corypheus destroyed it.”

The familiar voice made her skin prickle all over. She turned to see Solas less than a step away. She screamed and jolted away from him. He didn't react. “It was a lovely place,” he said softly.

Gina turned to run, but he simply appeared in front of her, no matter where she ran. When she couldn't breathe anymore, she tried to yank out a knife. It wouldn't come, no matter how she pulled.

“What the hell is going on? Where are we?”

“The Fade, of course.” Solas stood at arm's length, his body standing in the middle of a desk like a
ghost might. It was unnatural and made Gina’s heart pound harder.

Her gut churned. He’d taken her dream walking before. “Of course, silly me,” she snarled. “Here I thought I was safe in my dreams.”

He gave her an odd look. “I must confess I did not expect to see you alive again.”

“No thanks to you.”

“I didn't want to kill you,” he said.

Gina tried to hit him, but her fist wouldn't gather any momentum. “Could've fooled me,” she said.

He stepped closer and pointed at her shoulder. “This will not stop growing until it consumes you. I tried to make your death quick and merciful.”

The mark burned under her skin. “If that was your version of mercy, I'd hate to see what you do to someone you don't like.”

Solas scowled. “You need to understand why I've taken this course of action.”

“I understand perfectly,” she said. “You're a genocidal maniac.”

“I'm doing this for my people!”

“Yeah, that's what Hitler said.”

The elf tilted his head. Gina sneered. “You like snooping around in history. Why not check out my world, circa 1940. A little place called Auschwitz. I'm sure there are plenty of spirits hanging around you could talk to while you're there. Ask them what it's like to be hated and exterminated for little more than being born with the wrong heritage. You're going to make that guy look like an amateur.”

“I do not do this because I dislike anyone,” retorted Solas. “I just don't wish to see my people marginalized when they could be so much more. I can fix it. Return the Elves to their former glory.”

Gina snorted derisively. “As I recall, the last time you decided you knew just what to do, you crafted the Veil and created this world you hate so much. Or was I imagining things?”

His cheeks went dull red. “It was a mistake I must correct.”

“What makes you so damn sure this isn't another colossal mistake?”

Solas went even redder. “I cannot be sure. But I must try.”

Gina wanted to shake the skinny elf until his teeth rattled. “Never mind the thousand years of history you've chosen to ignore, or all the lives you'll destroy. Ickle Solas needs things his way.”

His thin face twisted with restrained anger. “You don't know-”

Her frayed temper snapped. “No, you don't know!” She was screaming loud enough her throat hurt. “You haven't been on the other side! I have, and it's no pretty mountain village! Every demon we've vanquished is waiting for us! The Desire demon that possessed Alita! Imshael! Corypheus!” She dragged a breath. “You don't have a fucking clue what horrors will be unleashed on the world!”

His eyes narrowed. “I had hoped to reason with you, but I see now that was a foolish notion.”
“You plotted with the Qunari to have me captured and then tried to kill me. And now you're hijacking my dreams. Not to mention your ridiculous plan to end the world. What the hell did you expect?”

Solas lifted his arm, but Gina was faster. She unleashed the full force of the mark.

***

One minute he was about to start sawing logs, the next he was tumbling across the ground, his teeth clenched tight and his entire body crackling with pain. The metallic taste of his own blood filled his mouth, making him gag.

Shouts and cries filled the air, and then the heat of a healing spell washed over him. Bull lay motionless for a minute, sucking wind and trying to make his brain catch up with his body.

Gina skidded to her knees beside him, shrieking incomprehensibly. He tried to say he was okay, but he couldn't form the words.

Ash’s face joined Gina’s petrified one. Monster hands skimmed over him briskly. After a moment, the Qunari’s shoulders sagged. “He's okay, little one.”

Gina started to sob. Bull rose carefully and pulled her into his arms. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” she babbled, almost too fast to understand.

Bull tried to comfort her, but he was completely befuddled. “What happened?” he mumbled.

Everyone was circling them. Varric eyed Gina warily. “You were both sleeping, and then she woke up screaming and blasting the mark. You got the worst of it, but Vivienne and Cassandra took a hit too.”

Gina physically cringed in his arms. “I didn't mean to.”

Varric softened. “I know. We all know. But...what happened?”

She was silent for a long moment before letting out a long, shaky breath. “Solas took me into the Fade as I dreamed,” she said.

“That's a thing?” asked Ash, his face showing nearly as much revulsion as Bull felt.

Dorian grimaced. “Yes. And it's damned nuisance to guard against.” He crouched low and lifted Gina’s chin. “What happened during your dream?”

Her lips opened to speak when she suddenly jerked away from Dorian’s fingers, cursing and clutching at her head. Dorian furrowed his brow and shot a worried look toward Cassandra and Cullen. “That’s a problem,” he said quietly.

Bull clenched his teeth. “What’s a problem?” he grated.

The Tervinter looked troubled. “I was able to access her mind without any trouble at all. Solas is more talented than any Mage I’ve known, so taking control of her dreams will be like child’s play to him.”

Bull’s head was starting to throb. Gina was still tense, her face burrowed into the crook of his arm. Cassandra stepped forward, looking remarkably composed for a woman that was now missing half an eyebrow. “We will need to put her through the same training I took to become a Seeker.”
“Immediately.”

“That or perform the Rite of Tranquility,” said Cullen quietly.

Bull stiffened. “No. You are not fucking with her head like that.”

Cassandra said, “I agree with Iron Bull.”

“We don’t have the time for her to go through the training of a Seeker,” said Cullen. “I know it isn’t ideal, but performing the Rite will protect her immediately.”

“At what cost?” asked Cassandra.

Gina curled more tightly against him. “But if that will protect everyone…” she whispered.

“No,” said Bull. “It’ll turn you into a shell of yourself. You’ve seen the Tranquil wandering around. Shiftless. Emotionless. Passionless. Might as well feed you Qamek and have you break rocks.” He put a broad palm over the curve of her skull. “I will die before I let that happen to you,” he said harshly.

“Easy, brother. No one is dying for anything,” said Ash.

“I should think not,” Morrigan said drily. “Particularly when one among us has the powers of a goddess.”

Ash looked at his hands. “Will I be able to guard her mind?”

“I’m not sure. Will you?” she asked.

Ash scowled. “Is this really the time for riddles?”

“I thought you enjoyed riddles,” she retorted. Then, without another word, she turned and strutted toward the tents.

The big Qunari shook his head and muttered under his breath for a moment before turning to Bull.

“I don’t know how, but I’m willing to try.”

Cassandra cleared her throat. “If it works, perhaps Ash can safeguard her mind while she trains. Would that be acceptable to you, the Iron Bull?”

Bull swallowed hard and lifted Gina’s chin. Her eye was dark with fear and tears stained her cheek. He brushed away the damp marks and said, “This is beyond me, Kadan.”

She nodded and caught hold of his hand. “I just want to keep you safe.”

He shook his head. “That’s my line, Kadan.”

She kissed his palm and turned to Ash. “I say you give it a try. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Ash gave her a pained look. “I could accidentally grow back your eye.”

Bull grunted. “It’s worth the risk if you can safeguard her dreams.”

Gina gripped Bull’s harness to haul herself upright. He moved to copy her, and felt Ash grip under his elbow, assisting his effort. His instinct knee-jerk reaction was to pull away, but his knees felt a lot
more wobbly than he anticipated.

Ash waited until Bull was balanced and then turned to Gina. He grimaced. “Any ideas? Come on, I'm an amateur here.”

Dorian and Vivienne clustered around the pair and started talking rapidly. It was too much for Bull’s head to follow, so he turned to walk back to the fire. Cullen came to his side. Bull clenched his fists tight.

Cullen sighed. “I didn't intend to offend you, Qunari.”

“You didn't offend me,” Bull said, his words clipped. “You suggested changing her mind. Fundamentally. She wouldn't be my Kadan or Kaya’s Tama anymore. She might as well have stayed kidnapped.”

Bull yanked his chair upright and sat with a huff. After a moment, Cullen stepped in front of him. “My friend, I regret that I upset you, but the fact remains that she is dangerous. If Ash cannot protect her, Solas could take control again. Next time we might not be so lucky. I only wish to avoid another accident like tonight.”

The words cycled through Bull’s mind as the General walked away. It was bullshit. Break her mind? Turn her into a mindless zombie? Never!

Yet, as much as he hated to even think it, what other logical option did they have?
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

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Chapter Notes

After a painfully long time, here's a new chapter, with more to follow!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gina woke to the sound of laughter and the smell of sizzling bacon. Her stomach protested at the very thought of staying in bed. She slipped into a warm robe and walked down the sunlit hall.

Bull and Kaya were at the stove cooking breakfast. Kaya was standing on a chair while Bull towered over her. His fingers were as delicate as a watchmaker’s as he helped her crack eggs into a hot pan. He glanced over and smiled. “There’s our pretty Tama.”

Kaya shrieked and dashed across the room to throw herself around Gina’s legs. Gina rained kisses on her face and hugged tight enough that neither of them could breathe.

Bull joined the hug and swept them into his arms. After depositing them both at the table, he brought a platter heaped with food from the stove.

Breakfast was laughter and talking. Gina couldn’t remember feeling so at peace. Bull caressed her cheek. “Have I mentioned how much I love you today?”

She smiled and kissed his fingers. “Not yet.”

“Well, I do. Every. Last. Bit.” He punctuated each word with a kiss on her lips.

Gina stole one more kiss, and then he was up and off to the sink with their dirty dishes. She lingered over her last few sips of coffee. She hadn’t had coffee, real coffee, since….when had she last drunk
A knock sounded at the door. Kaya raced over and twisted the knob. As the door swung wide, the little girl cried out.

Bull spun with a shout, cooking knife in hand. A bolt of lightning struck him in the forehead before he could take another step. The Qunari crashed to the floor hard enough to shake the room. His head lolled to the side, eye wide and glazed over.

Gina screamed and scrambled to his side, only to see Solas stroll into the house, Kaya’s throat trapped in one of his slender hands.

“Let her go,” Gina said, her voice caught somewhere between a shriek and a whimper.

Solas shook his head. “No, vhenan. You need to see the truth.”

Bull hadn't moved. Kaya was silent as tears poured down her little cheeks. “You don't have to do this,” Gina said, her voice catching.

“Yes. I do.”

A bolt of lightning coursed through Kaya, dropping her like a sack of potatoes, as lifeless as her father.

An agonized wail ripped from her throat. “No! No, my baby, no!”

Solas stepped closer and lifted her chin. “You have nothing left to fight for. Let go, vhenan.”

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Bull shook Gina desperately as she screamed, the sound ripping through the quiet night and shattering whatever peace anyone might have found. Her eye was boring straight through him, locked in some terror that he couldn't break. Garbled words occasionally broke past her lips, but nothing he could make out.

The mark started to glow ominously. A tendril flicked past his face, close enough it lifted the stubble coating his cheeks. Bull flinched and renewed his efforts to wake her.

“Come on, Kadan,” he begged, slapping her face hard enough to sting.

The mark flared bright and crackled, sending him scurrying out of reach. Her voice reached a fever pitch as the mark swirled around her form, lacing her in green light. Bull slammed his shoulder into the narrow cart door and tumbled to the ground just as the mark released in an explosion that obliterated the cart. The force sent him tumbling. By the time he skidded to a stop, the wind was knocked out of him.

A massive form leapt over him and toward the disaster at his heels. Bull fought for air and staggered to his feet.

“Vishante kaffas! Sit down, sit down!” Dorian pushed on his chest. The slight pressure was enough to knock him over.
“Lemme go,” he mumbled.

Dorian slapped away his hands. “You’ve been impaled, you giant idiot. Hold still!”

Bull blinked and tried to look, but hands gripped his face and turned him away. Jay held firm. “Don’t look, big dude.”

The horrifying sensation of something thick and jagged being dragged through the meat of his shoulder made him retch and curl his fingers into the earth. Whatever it was, it finally released with a sickening ‘thuck’, leaving nothing but an agonizing burn in its wake.

Heat swelled across the area and eased the pain. Jay released his face. “Holy shit, that was close.”

Bull risked a peek. A puncture marred his chest, just below the collar bone, still weeping blood as it knitted itself together. His eyes drifted lower to see the offending hunk of wood. A piece thicker than his wrist, with hunks of his flesh still clinging to its rough edges.

The contents of his stomach expelled themselves forcefully enough that it ached. Jay and Dorian fuss ed over him between anxious glances at the ruins of the cart. Bull groaned and tried climbing to his feet again. Both men assisted, each taking an arm.

Ash was rising to his feet as they turned. He picked his way through the debris gingerly, cradling the limp form of Gina.

“Kadan,” Bull croaked.

Ash lay her on a cleared patch of grass and pressed a hand on her belly and forehead in turn. Blue light washed over her, making the entire area glow for a moment. The big Qunari let out a long breath and stretched his back. Blackened wounds on his hands were clearing as they watched.

Bull couldn’t move. He wasn’t sure if his eyes could get any wider, or if his heart could sustain the frantic pace it was keeping.

Ash turned and frowned. “Brother? Are you alright?”

Something deep inside of him cracked. He jerked free and took off running, ignoring the frantic shouts behind him.

He ran, and he ran, and he ran. When his legs wouldn’t hold him up any longer, he crawled. And when he couldn’t move another inch, the fear caught up and left him sobbing.

Impossibly big hands righted him and swept away the tears staining his face. Ash pulled him into a hug, one that surrounded him in warmth. He almost felt childlike in the embrace. Bull leaned into him and squeezed his eyes tight.

More footsteps filled the air. Bull forced his breathing to slow and pulled away. Ash gave him a worried look, but released him without argument.

Cassandra crouched low in front of Bull. “We need to address this. Now.”

Anger sparkled to life, cutting through the despair trying to take root in his chest. “We do not,” he said shortly.
As he lumbered to his feet, she came closer. “The Iron Bull-”

“So help me, Seeker, if you suggest Tranquility again...”

Her eyes burned bright in the moonlight. “So long as Solas can access her mind through the Fade, she is a danger to everyone around her. You cannot dispute this.”

Bull straightened to his full height and glowered down at the imposing woman. “She is not yours to take. I will die before I allow anything to happen to her!”

Ash stepped between them and pushed him back a step. “Breathe, brother.”

Bull cursed and jabbed a finger toward Cassandra. “Gina has given enough! You will not take her spirit too!”

Cassandra shoved around Ash. “She could have killed us all! Be reasonable!”

Ash tried to push Cassandra away, but she slapped his hand. “Do not touch me!”

“For pity’s sake, can this not wait?” asked Ash, his voice sharp.

The Seeker spun and dug a finger into Ash’s chest. “You were to watch over her!”

His cheeks went scarlet. “It was not intentional. I have not slept-”

“There is no excuse!” Cassandra snapped.

A bitter laugh echoed through the clearing. It took Bull a second to realize it had come from him. “Don't bother, Ash. She's made up her mind. Typical Seeker.”

Cassandra flinched. “Bull, if there was another way-”

Bull squared his shoulders. “I did not exaggerate. If you so much as breathe in her direction, I will fight you until the death. There is no discussion.”

To her credit, the woman didn't back down. “What of Solas? What will you do about him?” Cassandra asked.

He hesitated.

She crossed her arms and lifted her brows expectantly. “Well?”

“Nothing.” Gina stepped out of the shadows.

Bull took in the sight of her. She looked more pale and exhausted than ever. His stomach churned. “Kadan, please,” he whispered.

Her hands wrapped around his. “My love, Solas has won. There is nothing you can do.”

His knees shook so badly he was surprised he didn’t collapse. Gina’s face streaked with tears as she curled into him. “He’s going to break me, one way or another, Bull. I’m not strong enough to fight
him off. We aren’t.”

The meaning, in all its layers, sunk in, leaving him on the verge of tears again. “We can try,” he said, his voice cracking.

Ash put a hand on his back. “She is right, brother. There is nothing you can do.” He paused. “There is, however, something I can do.”

***

Gina rested against Bull’s chest as Cullen and Hawke rebuilt the camp fire. Solas’s horrifying vision tried to play through her head, but she refused to allow it. ‘It was a dream,’ she told herself. ‘Just a dream.’

Bull’s arms tightened around her and his lips pressed to her temple. “I’ve got you,” he murmured, his voice warm in her ear. She curved a palm over his cheek and anchored herself to him.

The entire crew settled around the fire, watching Ash expectantly. He rubbed a palm on his knee. “I won’t dance around it. I can take the mark for myself.”

Bull’s chest heaved. “What?” he rasped, just as Gina shook her head sharply and shouted, “No!”

Bull turned startled eyes to her. Gina’s heart raced as she lurched to her feet. “There’s no way I’m putting this burden on anyone else!”

Ash held her gaze calmly. “I can think of three very good reasons for you to consider it. One of them is sitting at your back.”

Tremors ratcheted through her body, making it hard to breathe. Bull’s hands guided her to curl into him again. A tear snaked free and coursed down her cheek.

“It won’t work,” said Dorian, his voice hard.

“How do you know?” asked Ash.

The Mage crossed his arms. “I watched Corypheus trying to remove the mark from Alita in Haven. He failed.”

Bull caressed her back. “I remember that. He said the anchor had embedded itself throughout her being. That it was too intertwined to separate.”

Ash nodded. “He tried to force it bend to his will. And it fought back, as is its nature.”

Cullen frowned. “You speak as though the mark is a creature.”

“I’d say that’s accurate,” said Gina, her voice hoarser than she liked.

The Templar turned his eyes to the big Qunari. “How did you learn this?”

Ash let out a slow breath. “On occasion, Sylaise speaks to me in my dreams. I believe it is part of the supplication. Some sort of connection.”
“What else does this Sylaise tell you to do?” asked Cassandra, her tone laced with suspicion.

Bull’s hands clenched into tight fists as he glared daggers toward the woman. Gina caressed both hands, wishing she could absorb all of his tension.

Ash shrugged. “Not much of anything, usually. I’ve been ignoring her.”

“But you decided to listen last night?” asked Dorian.

Ash squirmed in his seat. “I didn’t choose to. I was exhausted. When I fell asleep, she appeared in my dream, and I had no choice but to pay attention.”

*Like Solas.* Gina shivered and nestled closer to Bull.

Bull’s eyes were narrowed. “Can you be sure it’s not a trick?”

Ash shook his head.

“Hot and dangerous, tempered to an edge that won’t keep. She is trapped and he could free her. Free them all.” Everyone turned to stare at Cole. He flushed. “She’s real,” he muttered.

Ash cleared his throat. “Uh huh. Well, there you have it.”

“So what’s the catch?” asked Jeremy.

Ash rubbed the back of his neck and stared studiously into the fire. “We must enter the Fade.”

A chorus of curses and groans filled the air. Gina stared at him, unsure whether to laugh or to cry. “Just...enter the Fade?” she said.

He gave her an apologetic smile. “Fourth time’s a charm, right?”

Bull shook all over. “She nearly died every other visit. Why the hell would I willingly allow this to happen?”

Ash didn’t flinch at the harsh tone in Bull’s voice. “Because the alternative is Tranquility.”

***

Bull sat on the hilltop, holding Gina and staring at the sun as it peeked over the horizon. They hadn’t spoken a word, just sat in utter silence.

He didn’t want her to go. But his brother was correct. The alternative was a certain loss of everything he adored. Her wits, her impulsivity. Her indomitable sass. She’d lose all of it if they performed the rites.

*Tranquility.*

The word made bile rise in his throat. He hated everything about it. At least qamek took away everything. The Viddath-bas moved peacefully from menial job to menial job, no recollection of themselves or the reality around them. Mindless creatures with no will of their own. As Tranquil, she’d still be Gina, just...not. It would kill him to see her like that.
She worked her fingers into the groove of a scar that marked his forearm. Bull turned her to face him and kissed her, trying to memorize the sensation. She returned the kiss with fervor, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing so tight to him that he could feel every curve and swell of her body.

The nature of the kiss changed to one of desperation. Their tongues danced and tangled as their hands roamed freely. Bull gasped as her teeth sank into his bottom lip. The sting ignited the flames burning low in his belly.

Without speaking, they slipped free of the barriers between their skin. Goose bumps pebbled on her skin in the chill of the morning air. Bull wrapped himself around her as she lifted her hips and hovered over the tip of his cock.

Their eyes met as she rocked over him, her pussy slowly sinking down the length of him with each roll of her hips. Bull’s eyes fluttered shut as she finally took his cock to the hilt.

Her lips feathered across his, soft and delicate. Bull trailed his hand down her spine and deepened the kiss until she was whimpering and her hips began to writhe on their own accord. They moaned and began to grind in unison.

“You feel so fucking good, Kadan,” he whispered in her ear.

“So do you,” she said, crying out when he rose on his knees and took control of their thrusting.

Bull didn’t want it to end. His perfect little lover matched him stroke for stroke, her hips moving in harmony with his. He left one arm supporting her back and head and moved the other to tease at her hard nipples and caress the still-flat belly that was carrying his child.

The thought of them both in the Fade nearly broke his rhythm, but then her nails clawed across his shoulders and dragged him right back into the moment. Bull growled and upped his pace as his fingers homed in on her clit and made her entire body clench in anticipation.

“Please,” she begged.

Bull could feel the tremors surrounding his cock. He slammed himself into her, fighting to reach climax in time with hers. His name poured from her lips with each hard thrust, her voice going higher and higher until a shuddering moan broke free and she came.

The hard pulsation of her body was enough to send him over the edge. Black spots danced at the edges of his vision as he came, filling her with his seed.

They clung to each other as their heartbeats slowed. Bull pressed open mouthed kisses along her neck and jaw before claiming her lips with his own.

They lingered, unconcerned that someone might see them. It didn't matter. Not with everything at stake.

The sun had brightened the sky considerably before they slowly moved apart and dressed. Bull assisted when the marked shoulder ached too much for her to pull on her shirt. Before slipping it into place, he stole one last feel of her tits.

The mark fizzled, breaking them apart with a gasp. Gina dragged both hands over her face and cursed, a low hissing string of foul words that would’ve had Bull amused on any other day.

“I’m going to strangle Solas to death with my bare hands,” he muttered.
A shaky breath escaped her. “He’s not the same person that left, Bull. There’s this empty cruelty to him now.”

Bull cupped a hand over the nape of her neck and squeezed lightly. “What happened in the dream?”

Her face crumpled and she shook her head. “I can’t...you were...”

He pulled her into a hug and stroked her hair as she wept. Hatred toward the elf boiled within him. Bull wasn’t naive enough to believe life could ever be just and equal, but it wasn’t fair that the fate of their world rested on her again. She’d given more than enough of herself. Why couldn’t she live her days out in peace?

It wasn’t until the sky’s fantastical pinks and orange faded to the pale blue of daylight that they moved. Bull slipped an arm around her shoulders and held her close. “Kadan, we need to make a choice.”

Her brow furrowed. “You know how I feel.”

He nodded. “I know.” His fingers traced over her belly and he pictured the swell of his child within her. Bull kissed her temple. “We need our Tama,” he whispered. “All of us, Kadan.”

Her hand moved to cover his. He waited her out, waited through the storm of emotions raging in her beautiful eye. Finally she met his eyes and nodded. A rush of relief swept through him. He restrained himself from crushing her into his chest. “Thank you, Kadan,” he whispered as he bent to cover her mouth with his.

***

“There’s no way you’re going into the Fade without assistance!” snapped Dorian.

Ash scowled. “It is risky enough with two of us.”

Dorian crossed his arms. “I see. Exactly how long have you been dreaming in the Fade?”

The big Qunari tightened his lips, but didn’t say anything. Dorian smirked. “Exactly.”

Jeremy had an arm around Gina’s shoulders. “So I could lose you both?” he said, his voice strained.

Dorian sighed and squeezed Jeremy’s hand. “I can’t let your sister take this risk alone. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

Her brother didn’t respond. Gina gave the Mage a tremulous smile. “Thank you, Dorian.”

Bull was sitting at her side, his face taut. “I should be going too.”

“No,” said Dorian and Vivienne together.

“Darling, the Fade is more dangerous than anything you can imagine,” said Vivienne. “They will have enough to manage without making sure you’re safe.”

The look on Bull’s face could have melted rock. Gina put a hand on his arm. “Someone needs to stay here for Kaya,” she said softly.

His face twisted with emotion she couldn’t quite read. “I hate this,” he whispered thickly.

“I’ll protect her with my life, brother,” said Ash.
“As will I,” said Dorian.

“And I,” said Morrigan.

Gina stiffened and shot a hard look at the woman. “Who said you're coming?”

“My dear, I’ve spent more time in the Fade and its layers than all of you combined. If anyone should be along on this foolish mission, it should be me.”

Gina clamped her lips together. Bull did not. “What exactly are you saying, Witch?”

Morrigan gave him a bored look. “I’m saying they’ll need all the help they can get.”

Gina wrapped her arms around Bull and buried her face in the crook of his neck. His hand slipped into her hair and held tight.

“Be safe, Kadan. Please,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

She nodded and started to pull free. Before she got half a step he hauled her back and kissed her like it might be the last time.

***

Bull watched the green light envelop the group. It fizzled and blinked out of existence, leaving him staring at nothing.

Before any emotion could rush him, Cullen and the Arishok each grabbed an arm and started hauling him toward the trees.

“What the-”

Hawke joined their march, beefy training sword in hand. He lifted a brow and asked, “You want us to hit you, don’t you?”

Chapter End Notes

Until next time...which will be within the next two weeks!

RE: The Big Bad Delay - I’ve been crazy busy with my own original creations and, get this, MY OWN WEBSITE! It'll be live by the next time I post a chapter! Stay posted for that - in the meantime, I'm also on the Twitters (@LexiBanner), Facebook (@authorlexibanner), and Instagram (@LexiBanner)! I'd love to connect with everyone, so if you follow, drop me a note so I can say hi!
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Chapter Notes

Another journey in the Fade...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gina didn’t bother screaming when the ground fell out from under their feet and they tumbled through the air. Why waste the energy? They halted before bumping to the ground with a puff, the odd sensation of being upside down all-too familiar. She lay there in silence for a moment.

*Why me? What the hell did I do in a former life to deserve this?*

The others weren’t quite so calm. Before the dust could settle, all three were on their feet, spinning back and forth. Ash babbled incoherently.

Gina reached out and caught his ankle. “Calm down.”

He looked down at her with an expression bordering on hysterical. “Where the hell are we?”

She hauled herself to her feet and looked around with a weary eye. *Yup. Still weird.* “The Fade. Obviously.”

“This is not at all what I expected,” said Dorian, his eyes wide as he turned a slow circle. “In my dream, it’s a rather pleasant place.”

“Told you,” muttered Gina.

Morrigan came to Ash’s side. His breath came in strangled heaves. The witch gripped his arm tight.
“Do you wish for demons to flock over?” He shook his head frantically, white hair flying haphazardly around his face. She shook his arm. “Then perhaps you should try to calm yourself. They feed on fear, you know.”

He swallowed visibly and made tight fists. Odd skittering sounds filled the air in the distance, but they didn’t come closer, for the time being. “How the hell do we get out of here?”

Gina shrugged as she tried to pick out a familiar landmark. After finding nothing, she turned to the group. “The other times I’ve stepped into an existing Rift. I’ve never tried to pass through in the opposite direction.”

They began walking down the path toward a small rise. At the bottom lay a pile of skeletons. Gina guessed at least thirty. She had to pull her shirt over her face and cover her nose to avoid retching at the foul odors wafting from the gruesome sight. Most of the bones were still moist, with strips of flesh clinging here and there. Where they came from wasn’t certain, but she would’ve sworn the shield she saw at the bottom of the pile was Roman.

Are there any rules of physics or time governing this godforsaken place?

Ash was still on the verge of hyperventilation, and itching himself all over. “Why does it feel so strange?”

“Don’t ask me, Isskari. Didn’t you ever research the Fade?”

His eyes darted around. “Only in the broadest sense of the place. It wasn’t my specialty.”

“Right. You were the rockstar.”

He shot her a glare. “The what?”


He scowled. “I don’t know what any of that means.”

“No one does,” muttered Morrigan.

“It means you were too cool to be stuck in a library.”

“I spent time in a library. A great many libraries, actually,” he said, an affronted note in his voice.

“Is there something wrong with spending time in a library?” asked Dorian, his voice flat.

She smirked. Men. So easily distracted. “Morrigan, can you answer Ash’s questions?”

“Perhaps. First, I believe we should choose our destination. Did Sylaise offer any direction?”

“No,” said Ash. They reached crest of the hill and stared at the horizon stretching around them. “She told me that I could take the mark with her assistance.”

“And you didn’t think to ask how to find her?” asked Dorian.

Ash shook his head. “I was woken before we got that far.”

Gina shivered and hugged herself. Dorian slipped an arm around her shoulders. “You’re alright,” he said softly.
She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“You’re the expert,” said Ash. “Where would you go?”

Gina sighed and glanced at her shoulder. The mark was oddly meek at the moment. How long would that last? She pointed to a tower of stone in the distance. It jutted straight up, black and ominous. “We can head there first. See if we can climb and get a better vantage, at least.”

They walked in near silence. Gina due to weariness. The others? She didn’t ask.

Poor Bull. Her heart squeezed at the thought of how he’d be feeling. Not even three days and she was gone again. If they didn’t have shitty luck, they wouldn’t have any at all.

This time it was her stomach that interrupted her mope session. It was in full rebellion. No matter how much she covered her nose, the rancid odor of the swampy ground seeped through, leaving her constantly on the verge of throwing up. Ash brushed his hand over her occasionally, but the reprieve of his healing spell was so brief it didn’t matter.

He started to mutter under his breath and paw at his ears. Morrigan eyed him. “What are you doing?”

His eyes flicked her way before darting over the surrounding area. “Can’t you hear that?”

They all paused. Gina could hear the same vague noises as every other visit fill the air around her. Skittering in the far distance. Odd crackles and hisses. A low hum that pervaded everything. “What in particular?”

Ash shivered. “Singing.”

Gina frowned and listened again. After a few minutes she shook her head. “No, I don’t hear anything I would describe as singing.”

“Me either,” said Dorian.

He itched his arms again. “How can you miss it?”

Gina looked around and caught sight of a spike of red lyrium thrusting through the ground. The memory of Bull telling Jeremy not to listen to the red lyrium singing at Suledin Keep ran through her head, making her mouth go dry. “Have you heard of red lyrium?”

Ash furrowed his brow. “Everyone has. The Red Templars were a big cause of concern in Par Vollen.”

“It’s all around us here,” said Morrigan.

“Indeed,” said Dorian. “That was part of the problem when the Breach was open. It allowed the corrupted lyrium to spread into Thedas from the Fade.”

Gina hesitated before touching Ash’s arm lightly. “What if it’s affecting you because of the lyrium the Viddasala fed you?”

His teeth snapped together and he cursed under his breath. “You are probably correct,” he said after a moment.

“One of few times I’m not happy to be right,” she said.
They rounded the final bend in their rocky path, leaving nothing but a short jaunt across a flat plain. From this vantage, a path of sorts was visible along the side of the tower. How treacherous it was remained to be seen.

As they crossed the plain, the skittering returned, loud and getting louder. Gina found herself surrounded by her three companions. Ash bellowed a curse as dozens of massive spiders stampeded into sight.

A howling shriek filled the air, setting Gina’s teeth on edge. The creatures chasing their way froze in place for a breath before they turned and hightailed it the way they came without a backward glance. The howl broke into raucous laughter.

Gina’s breath caught as two familiar beings swirled to the ground.

“Vishante kaffas,” whispered Dorian.

Sera and Dalish high fived and cheered each other before turning their way. “Oi, you lot shouldn’t be wand-” started Sera.

“Gina!” shrieked Dalish, zipping her way. Sera followed on her heels.

Ash shouted and burst into flames as he lunged forward. Gina barely got in front of him in time to stop his attack. “Katoh! They’re friends!”

His chest heaved as the pair whipped a circle around him. “Maker’s balls, he’s a biggun,” Dalish said. “Bigger than the Chief!”

Sera tilted her head and mimed a frame with her hands. “Kinda looks like old Horns, though.”

Gina grinned. “Because he’s Bull’s younger half-brother.”

Ash hissed a breath and said, “Should you be telling these creatures anything?”

Gina pointed to each in turn. “Dalish was one of the Chargers. Sera was a member of the Inquisition.”

Ash swallowed visibly. “Was?”

She nodded meaningfully. His eyes softened as the flames coating him from head to toe flickered and died away. “My apologies. I’m a little on edge.”

Dorian patted his arm as he strode over to the pair of spirits. “I thought you did rather well. The Iron Bull would be crying.”

Dalish giggled. “He would not. He'd be screaming like a little girl.”

Dorian smiled. “It is lovely to see you, darling Dalish.”

“And you, Master Parvus,” she said, drawing herself up and looking self-important. Sera made a gagging noise and the three of them began to laugh.

Gina wondered if this was a dream induced by delirium. “What are you two doing here?”

Sera flipped lazily. “We patrol to amuse ourselves. Chase off the little nasties when we find them. Lucky for you, yeah?”
Gina nodded. Dalish swept closer and hovered in front of her. “At least we belong. What are you doing here?”

“She missed us, obviously,” said Sera. She was floating upside down at Ash’s eye level. “You’ve got his nose,” she declared.

Ash gave her a weak smile. “Good old genetics.”

Gina looked around. “Wait, where’s Alita?”

The pair exchanged an odd look. “She...left.”

“What does that mean?” asked Gina.

Sera floated closer to Dalish. “There are Mages...on your side, yeah? They call to spirits like us. Dalish and me, we’re okay. We can keep each other from being tempted.” The two spirits whisped together at the arm and turned pink.

“But Alita refused to stay with us,” said Dalish. “I think she wanted to go back. Haven’t seen her for a while.”

Morrigan stepped forward and tilted her head. “How long is a while?”

The pair exchanged a glance before shrugging as one. “Time doesn’t mean much here,” said Sera. Ash frowned. “Why are they calling you?”

“Because some Mages can’t help but mess around with Spirits,” said Dorian. “I used to be one of them.”

Ash shook his head and crossed his arms. “For what purpose?”

“Because they have powers to be used,” said Morrigan. “Why else?”

“Damn Mages,” muttered Ash.

Gina rolled her eyes. “Says the Super Mage.”

“I am not a Super Mage,” he said.

Gina ignored his protest. Dalish flitted over. “You look exhausted.”

“Thanks,” she muttered.

Sera did a little spin around her. “Wait a minute, what happened to your hair?”

Gina shook her head. “It’s a long story.” A cramp gripped her lower back, making her wince and bend forward. Ash was there in a blink, washing her in the warmth of his healing spell. “Easy, little one,” he murmured.

Dalish stared at him with wide eyes. “That’s old magic,” she whispered.

Dorian lifted a brow. “How do you know?”

Dalish shot him a glance. “I just do. You can feel it here.” She floated closer to Ash, who looked ready to dance out of reach if she made one funny move.
Sera joined her. “Think they can help?”

“They?” asked Ash.

Dalish frowned. “If anyone could, it’d be them.”

Morrigan sighed. “Care to be more vague?”

Sera scoffed. “Are you one to talk?”

Dalish rolled her eyes at the pair and said, “The old gods. Or so they say.”

Gina’s pulse picked up speed. “Old gods?”

Dalish nodded. “The Evanuris.”

Dorian and Ash spoke in unison. “Take us there.”

***

Gina walked in silence behind the group, listening to their chatter. Ash gave Dorian an odd look as they picked their way through another sticky swamp. “Why do you carry a staff?”

Dorian lifted a brow. “To focus my spells.”

Ash frowned. “I thought your powers were natural. Why do you need to do this?”

“Why do you need a knife to cut vegetables? The staff is a tool to make using magic better and easier.” Dorian pulled his staff from its holster on his back and gave it a spin. Ash tensed and looked at it warily. Dorian smirked. “It can't act on its own. Only if I apply magic to it.”

“Oh huh.”

Dorian tilted his head. “How do you focus your spells?”

Ash shrugged. “I don't know.”

Dorian pointed to a small boulder. “Hit that with a spell.”

Ash glanced over and muttered something. A massive fireball burst from him and smashed into the boulder, turning it into rubble. Dorian blinked. “Can you do it again, but softer?”

Ash repeated his actions, and another massive fireball smashed into another boulder. Dorian shook his head. “No, you need to control the spell. Like so,” he said, pointing the staff, which ejected a small fireball that washed over a boulder. “Try that.”

The big Qunari’s brow furrowed as he glared at the boulder. Another monster sized fireball burst forth, and he cursed. “I do not understand.”

Dorian sighed. “Do you think Morrigan and I were born knowing how to control magic? Of course not. It took years of study and dedication to hone our craft. You might have an immense source of power, but that doesn't mean you have the necessary knowledge to apply it.”

Ash grimaced. “How do I learn to control the power?”

“The same way we all do,” said Dorian. “With a teacher's assistance.”
The group walked in silence for a few minutes before Ash cleared his throat. “Would you teach me?”

Dorian lifted both brows. “Me? Teach you?”

Ash flushed and looked away. “You're right, it's stupid. Never mind.”

“No no,” said Dorian quickly, putting a hand on Ash’s beefy forearm. “It's not stupid. I just thought you'd be going home when we returned to Thedas.”

Ash glanced at Gina meaningfully. “I'll be around for awhile. If I'm welcome.”

A flutter came to life in her lower belly. Gina barely resisted the urge to caress the tiny life form. “I think we can try to tolerate you.”

“A ringing endorsement, if ever I've heard,” said Morrigan drily.

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The path felt endless as they skirted piles of rubble and swamp. Gina tripped and would've sprawled face first into the boggy soil if not for Ash’s quick reaction. He supported her weight while she fought off a wave of dizziness.

“Let me carry you.”

It wasn't the first such request. Gina shook her head. “No. I hate being carried. It makes me feel like a useless princess.”

He sighed sharply. “You would let the Iron Bull carry you.”

She pulled free. “That's different.”

“I fail to see your logic.”

Gina gave him an exasperated look. “Do I really need to explain this to you?”

He looked baffled. “Yes.”

“Because she’s his princess,” said Dorian, as though it should be perfectly obvious.

Ash frowned. “I still do not understand.”

Gina pinched the bridge of her nose. “It's just...it's different. Okay?”

They fell into silence as they walked, headed toward an outcropping on the horizon. Sera and Dalish were scouting ahead, little lightning dashes to and fro in the sky. Ash and Dorian were close at Gina’s shoulder, apparently ready to move at the blink of an eye. Morrigan was silent as she trailed a few yards behind the group.

“How did it happen?” Ash asked abruptly.

“How did what happen?”

“You and my brother.”

She glared at him, but the confusion in his eyes made her reconsider the harsh words about to leave
her mouth. “Same as anyone else. Plus or minus a few life and death situations.”

“Classic romance, really,” muttered Dorian as he tiptoed around a slimy patch on the road.

The expression on Bull’s face as they slipped into the Fade played through her mind. She hated being away from him on the best of days, yet here she was. Separated by an entire dimension. It was enough to make her teary.

Sera and Dalish whipped around them, laughing to themselves. Gina watched their antics and the unfairness of it all crashed over her.

It wasn't fair that those two had to die. It wasn't fair that she was away from her love, or that she hadn't even gotten to see Kaya before she had to return to this hellhole. Hell, she'd barely even seen Brego, thanks to the overwhelming exhaustion. Life was just a big bowl of cherry pits, and she was sick of it.

Tears washed down her face, and a sob choked free.

Ash made a worried sound. “I did not intend to upset you.”

She scrubbed the tears away. “I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine, little one.”

“Just leave it alone,” she said through gritted teeth, fighting to quell the over-reaction. Damn hormones!

“I'm just trying to help-” started Ash.

Dorian tutted loudly and slid an arm around her. “There, there. Ignore the big, dumb boy. No matter the species, they never understand.”

Ash opened his mouth to reply, but the spirit pair swooped to a stop in front of them. “Not far,” said Sera.

“Just beyond these rocks,” said Dalish, pointing to the strange tower of boulders. They twisted lazily in the air in a neat formation.

Ash shook his head. “This place is creepy.”

Gina agreed. “Let’s get to these gods and see if they can break us out.”

***

Dorian looked up and sighed heavily. “Better and better,” he muttered.


Dalish and Sera hovered in front of them. “Guess we didn’t think this one through,” said Sera, not sounding at all apologetic.

A monster sized rock wall faced them. It rose easily fifty feet, with no discernable path. They would have to climb, or try to find a better way up. The spirits zoomed off and returned in just over a blink.

“Nothing. You’d have to go through canyons to get to anything accessible,” said Dalish. At least she sounded somewhat sorry.
Ash muttered a curse and said, “What do you think we should do?”

“I think we should strangle Solas,” said Gina.

“Before that.”

“Have a hot bath?”

He grimaced. "Before that."

“Do we really have a choice?”

Ash looked up again. “Doesn’t sound like it.”

“Then let’s just get going. This place is getting on my nerves.”

Ten minutes later she was miserable. Twenty minutes after that, she really was ready to quit. Except that she was now clinging to the wall twenty feet up. The only option was to keep climbing, even though every inch of her body burned with fatigue.

Ash was just below her, waiting patiently for her to pick her next holds. “Are you su-”

“If you ask to carry me one more time, I will kick you off this wall,” she grated.

He laughed, the cheeky bastard! She shot a furious glare at him. “How can you have a sense of humor now? Of all times!”

“Because you amuse me. All sweet and cuddly until you’re under stress. Then the claws come out.”

_Sweet and cud-?!_

She growled and hoisted herself another painful step. “Good to know I have entertainment value.”

“Darling, you’ve always been entertaining,” said Dorian. His smile didn’t flicker when she shot a filthy look in his direction.

“Could we get moving?” asked Morrigan. “I’d rather not spend the entire day in the Fade.”

They made it another five feet before her arms started to scream in protest. “Get a good foothold and take a breather,” said Ash.

She was fighting to catch her breath, and he was hardly breaking a sweat. “You’re a thousand pounds heavier than I am, why isn’t this harder for you?”

He pulled a face. “I’m not that heavy. And this isn’t that hard. You’re using your arms too much.”

Ash stretched out and climbed beside her. After planting a hand against her back, he said, “Put your weight into your feet.”

Gina obeyed, and fought the lurching sensation in her stomach at losing the tight hold with her hands. Ash pressed tighter against her back. “Good. Shake your arms out and let the feeling come back. When you’re ready, we’ll keep going.”

Tears of frustration prickled at her eyes. Gina bit them back, but apparently Ash was just as observant as Bull. “Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he said softly.

“How?” she asked, hating the break in her voice.
“I don’t know. I’m still waiting for that famous luck of yours to kick in,” he said, giving her a tiny nudge.

She gave a short laugh. “Yeah, I’m real lucky. I mean, look at me,” she said, gesturing toward her empty eye socket.

Ash narrowed his eyes. “I could fix that, you know.”

Gina frowned and touched the patch covering the left side of her face. “You mean like you fixed Bull?”

His cheeks went dark. “That wasn't intentional.”

“Well, I'm sure someday he'll forgive you. For now it's all, ‘I earned that scar’ and ‘it's not natural’.”

Ash snorted. “I agree with that one. This magic still weirds me out.”

Dorian made a scornful sound as he kept climbing. “The world did not need two of you.”

Ash shot a dirty look at the Mage before glancing up. “It’s only twenty more feet. We're more than halfway. Just follow my lead.”

They resumed climbing, picking their way upward and stopping every five feet to let Gina’s arms rest. Ash was starting to sweat, but he remained cheerful. “You know, once you get used to the place, it’s not that bad.”

Gina scoffed. “There haven’t been demons on our tail at every turn. Bet you’d think differently if there were.”

He shrugged and braced her back as she stretched for her next hold. “Probably. I try not to think about how much worse it could be.”

“Very glass half full of you,” she said once she was set.

He grunted as he hauled himself up another step. “Sometime we need to sit down together and write out all of your strange sayings and what they mean.”

Gina shot him a grin as she shifted her weight to one foot. Without warning, the rock beneath that foot cracked and split from the wall. A scream stuck in her throat as she grabbed desperately with her hands and barely caught hold.

Ash shouted and tried to reach down, but his holds groaned and threatened to cave. “Just hold on,” he said, his voice shaking.

Her arms were too far gone. “Ash,” she cried, her voice thin and high.

He put a palm out, but suddenly they were all launching up the last of the steep wall. Ash cursed and barked in Elvhen, but to no effect. They were stuck hanging in mid-air, revolving slowly.

Gina craned her head around and saw a cluster of elves standing beneath them. Disapproving frowns creased all but one of their faces. A woman on the edge was staring at Ash, her eyes wide and her mouth the shape of an ‘O’.

“I think we found the Evanuris,” said Dorian.

Sera and Dalish zipped into sight. “Oi, these are them,” said Sera.
One of the elves, a tall male, shot a hard look at the pair. “We do not wish to receive outsiders.”

“They need your help,” said Dalish.

“We do not help outsiders.”

Gina could feel her gorge rising. “Guys,” she said.

The elves and the spirits began to bicker. Gina swallowed, but the bile kept rising. “Guys,” she called, louder.

Dorian kicked and shouted incantations, but nothing happened. Ash hissed and squirmed, but being strung up in the air, could do nothing. He reached for her, but they had him too far away.

Gina dry-heaved and shouted, “Guys!”

It wasn’t until her stomach was unloading itself that anyone below paid any attention. Gina was almost disappointed that none of it spattered on their heads. The elves dumped them unceremoniously, and stood in a circle around them, faces hard with irritation.

Gina accepted a helping hand from Ash. “Thank you,” she said to the elves. “You didn't have to save us.”

“I should think not,” said the woman from the edge of the group. “You have the means to help yourselves.”

Ash’s breath caught. “Sylaise?”

The woman drew closer and walked a slow circle around Ash. “So you are my supplicant,” she murmured.

“Surely there is some mistake,” said one of the men.

“You can feel it as well as I,” Sylaise said dismissively. She gave Ash a once over. “You are not what I expected.”

He grimaced. “I did not intend to become anyone’s supplicant.”

She nodded slowly. “Perhaps that is for the best.”

Gina cleared her throat. “I apologize for our intrusion. My name is Gina, and this is Ash, Dorian, and Morr—” She paused and looked around. “Wait, where’s Morrigan?”

Dorian frowned. “She was behind us.”

One of the Elvish men stepped forward. He was tall and slim, much like Solas. Unlike Solas, however, he possessed a full head of dark hair that nearly reached his waist. He stopped just outside of arm’s reach. “What do you want?”

Gina put on her best customer service smile. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

His eyes widened fractionally. “They call me Elgar’nan.”

“It’s nice to meet you Elgar’nan,” she said, taking care to pronounce his name as close to correct as possible. “We came in hopes that you might help us.”
His lips turned down at the ends. “Why would we help you?”

She forced herself to keep the smile. “Because it’s a nice thing to do?”

He snorted. “You have done nothing to earn our favour.”

Gina held his eye. “I did not realize kindness came at a price.”

Sylaise laughed softly. “You’ll have to forgive Elgar. He hasn’t been himself for quite some time.”

Elgar’nan shot a hard look at Sylaise and walked away without another word. The rest of the elves followed in his wake, shooting a mix of curious and scathing glances their way.

Gina muttered a curse and sank onto a stone. Ash was at her side before her weight could settle. “Are you alright?”

She patted his arm. “Just tired, don’t worry.”

He frowned. “The Iron Bull will skin me if I do not care for you in the manner that he would.”

Gina smirked. “He’d butcher you if you cared for me in the manner he would.”

Dorian hid a laugh in a cough and Ash flushed a deep shade of crimson. “That’s not what I meant,” he said.

Gina gave him a tired smile. “I know, big guy. Just trying not to have a meltdown here.”

His eyes darkened. “We’ll find a way, with or without these pricks.”

Sylaise cleared her throat pointedly. Gina lifted a brow. “Are you trying to say they don’t deserve the label?”

The elf gave her a rueful smile. “Perhaps not. But it has been an age since we were last faced with outsiders.”

“Still a bunch of snots. Just like Flops,” said Sera, scorn coloring her voice.

“What is this...Flops?”

“Solas,” said Sera, the word sounding bitter and sour.

“Fen’Harel,” corrected Gina quietly.

Sylaise stiffened. “What did you just say?”

“We apparently have a mutual friend,” said Dorian.

Ash waved a hand. “That can wait. Sylaise, in my dream you told me that I could take the Anchor. Is that true?”

The elf tilted her head. "What?"

Ash tapped his temple. "When I fell asleep last night you came to me in a dream."

She frowned. "I do not know anything about this."

Ash shook his head and pointed at her. "No, it was you. I saw you as clear as I see you now."
Gina and Dorian exchanged a glance. The Tervinter cleared his throat. "Perhaps it was just a dream. You did see her statue, after all. I know my dreams are incredibly realistic when I'm exhausted."

The Qunari didn't look comforted. "I would swear on any holy book."

"What Anchor are you referring to?" asked Sylaise.

"The one intended to destroy the Veil, apparently," said Gina.

The elf lifted a brow. "Why would you need my assistance to take the Anchor?"

Gina stared at her for a moment. "Are you aware of anything happening outside of the Fade?"

When the elf shook her head in the negative, she sighed heavily. "Well, it's a long story. But when the Anchor was activated by an arch-demon, it embedded itself in me and left a mark. And now it's trying to kill me."

“I'm amazed that you survived at all,” said Sylaise.

Gina heaved to her feet. “Some would say it's pure stubbornness.”

Dorian smirked. “Bull does have a knack for pointing out the obvious.”

Gina sneered at him. The elven woman looked her up and down. “May I see this mark?”

Before Gina could slip her shirt over, the mark fizzled sharply. Pain rocked her, knocking her to her knees. Dorian caught her before she could hit the ground, while Ash flooded her with the warmth of a healing spell. "Breathe, little one,” said Ash.

Sylaise stepped closer. “How did you come to possess such a thing?”

“It's a really, really long story,” said Gina.

The elf woman frowned as she examined the mark. “It is thoroughly embedded within you.”

A familiar diagnosis. "Can someone remove it from me and take it for themselves?"

The elf glanced at Ash. "It is possible, but I do not hold the necessary power."

"Why?" asked Ash.

"I left the entirety of myself in that altar," she said softly.

Ash rubbed the back of his neck. “Oh. Does that mean you can't help me?”

Sylaise shook her head. “I can help you. It will not be easy, but it can be done.”

Dorian came to Gina’s side. “Will she survive?”

The elf gave Gina a sad look. “I do not know, but if someone doesn’t take the mark from her, she will die. She does not have the strength to keep it.”

Gina’s heart thudded in her ears. It wasn’t news, but it was uncomfortable to hear the honest truth of the matter.

Dorian’s arm wrapped around her. “Darling, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”
She hugged him tight. “I know, but I don’t think I really have a choice,” she whispered.

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Ash stood with Sylaise, deep in discussion. Gina and Dorian stayed at their boulder, both pretending not to see the other elves hovering just beyond the clearing. Sera and Dalish flitted through on occasion, but seemed entirely bored by the situation.

Finally Ash approached them. “Sylaise has a scroll that might help us with the mark,” he said softly.

Dorian tightened his arm around Gina. “Does she realize you have next to no control over the power she bestowed upon you?”

The Qunari nodded. “It was the first thing I said. She has offered to accompany us.”

“Accompany? Are we going somewhere?” asked Gina, dreading the answer.

“There are some ruins nearby. Sylaise tells me that magic is easier to control there.”

Gina sighed and hauled herself to her feet. “Let’s get this over with. I want to go home.”

“We’ll need to find Morrigan as well,” said Dorian.

“Do we?” asked Gina. The Mage gave her a hard look, but she ignored him. Disappearing in the Fade was stupid enough. Doing it just before meeting the people they’d come to see was just bizarre. Classic Morrigan.

They moved along a narrow path through the rocks and spindly trees surrounding the clearing. She couldn’t see anyone, but the sensation of being watched prickled along her spine. Ash and Dorian stayed tight at her shoulders, while Sylaise led the way. Sera and Dalish floated just above their heads. Gina just focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

It felt like hours, but it was probably closer to fifteen minutes when the path widened and led inside a massive stone building. Gina eyed the place warily. Dorian muttered something to himself as they passed a row of statuary and then nudged her as they approached the doors. “Do you know what this place is?” he whispered in her ear.

Gina shook her head. He pointed at a carving above the massive door. “It’s their old library. The Imperium has been searching for this place for centuries, and never found a single brick.”

“And now we know why,” she said.

He nodded and stared wide-eyed as they crossed through a massive vestibule and into a cavernous hallway lined with shelves. Every last one was loaded with tomes and scrolls. Gina noted a lack of dust on most of the surfaces. “Are you still using this place?” he whispered in her ear.

Gina shook her head. He pointed at a carving above the massive door. “It’s their old library. The Imperium has been searching for this place for centuries, and never found a single brick.”

“And now we know why,” she said.

He nodded and stared wide-eyed as they crossed through a massive vestibule and into a cavernous hallway lined with shelves. Every last one was loaded with tomes and scrolls. Gina noted a lack of dust on most of the surfaces. “Are you still using this place?”

“It is in use daily,” said Sylaise quietly. “Not much else to occupy our time.”


Ash was silent as he stood at Gina’s side. She frowned. “I thought you’d be like a little kid in a place like this.”

He glanced around, but didn’t move away from her. “My mind is elsewhere,” he replied, his hands twisting into tight fists.
Sylaise headed toward a stairway. “There is a scroll up here that will help us,” she said.

They followed her up the stairs. At the top they found another massive hallway lined with books and scrolls. Sylaise led them halfway down the hall and selected a massive scroll from a shelf near the floor. She laid it out on a massive table that stood at the end of the hall. Gina looked it over, but found the glyphs indecipherable. “What is it?”

Ash bent over the scroll and read slowly in ancient Elvhen before translating. “It’s a history lesson. The anchors were crafted before the fall of the Elvhenan society. Fen’Harel claimed it was intended to strengthen the relationship between the Elves and magic, but when he activated the first, a veil was created. The veil separated the Elves from their source of power. Because magic was so innately entwined throughout their world, everything crumbled almost immediately. Only small portions survived thanks to the Evanuris, but they have been trapped in the Fade since.”

“How is this supposed to help us?” asked Gina.

Ash traced a finger over the page and tapped a small section. “Here. It is a tricky bit of magic, and it was never intended for anything other than destroying the Veil. If Corypheus hadn’t been interrupted, it would’ve burned itself away.”

“Except we did interrupt,” said Gina.

“We?” said Sylaise.

“There was another,” said Dorian. “She has long since passed away.”

*A nice way to say starved to death by demon possession,* thought Gina.

Sylaise shook her head. “The anchor will draw her back to the other side of the veil. It is inevitable.”

Sera and Dalish were floating near a massive window, but turned in unison. “Maybe that’s why she kept listening.”

“Listening?” asked Sylaise.

Sera shrugged. “To the people on the other side. I never thought it was hard to ignore them, but it was almost impossible for her.”

Dalish nodded. Sylaise frowned and turned back to the scroll. “I did not know there were two.”

“What difference does it make?” asked Gina.

“I’m not sure,” muttered the woman.

“It means Gina alone does not have the power to destroy the veil. Only if both parts are together will anyone be able to rip it asunder,” came a new voice.

They spun to find Morrigan standing at the doorway. She had a vacant look in her eye as she stepped forward and spoke in a calm voice. “I intend to reunite the halves.”

Gina stared at the witch. “Morrigan, what's going on?”

A soft smile came to her face. “You’re smarter than that, vhenan.”

Her skin went icy cold. “What did you just say?”
Morrigan ignored her and ambled forward, her eyes still dreamily unfocused. “I did not think I’d live to see the Library again.”

Sylaise narrowed her eyes. “You could not have seen the library. Not unless…”

“I have seen it. In its best days. It is a shadow of that former self.”

Ash and Dorian edged in front of Gina. “Morrigan, darling, you're being a bit creepy,” said Dorian. The witch turned slowly. “I am performing my duties as the vessel for Mythal.”

Sylaise gasped and staggered back a step. “It cannot be.”

Morrigan spun back, suddenly moving full speed. “Yes, it can. You did not destroy her. Nor did you destroy me.”

“Who are you?” whispered Sylaise.

Gina’s hands shook. “Fen’Harel.”

The witch dipped her head in a manner so reminiscent of Solas it was eerie. “Always so clever,” said Morrigan. “Your most admirable trait, Virginia Carter.”

“How?” demanded Gina. “Morrigan is the agent of Mythal, not you.”

“Our mutual purposes aligned. Mythal saw fit to join me.”

The hair on Gina’s arms lifted. They’d been in the company of a spy, and not one of them had any idea. If it wasn’t so horrifying, she’d be impressed at the elf’s ingenuity.

Ash kept her tucked behind his bulk. “I don’t know who you are, but you’ll not harm anyone here.”

“Ah yes, the supplicant of Sylaise. Could've chosen a little more wisely, my dear,” said Morrigan to the elf, her voice taking on the silky tone of Solas. Her reyes returned to Ash. “You forget that I know you’ve barely got any control of all this power.”

Ash snarled and stepped forward. "I have enough control to stop you."

Morrigan rolled her eyes and flicked a hand. Ash made a strangled sound and hit his knees, clawing at his throat. Morrigan tilted her head and strolled toward him. "Magic is as much a part of me as the air I breathe. You treat it as a weapon you can swing around. There is no hope of you doing anything to stop me."

The Qunari’s eyes were bulging as his face went purple. A cold smile came to Morrigan’s face as she leaned toward him to say something else. As her lips formed the words, Ash swung a fist that connected with the side of her face hard enough to crack bone. The witch fell limp and Ash sucked a ragged breath and collapsed to his side, heaving for air.

Gina and Dorian scrambled to Ash’s side. His eyes were bloodshot and his throat was brilliant purple, but as they watched, the damages reversed themselves. Dorian muttered a curse and stared at the prone form of Morrigan. "That was uncomfortably close.”

Ash staggered to his feet and waved off Gina’s attempt to assist him. "Not close enough,” he rasped. "Cocky asshole."

Gina shook her head. "He's been watching us through her eyes for God knows how long. We need
to get away from her."

"He used us to get here," said Dorian quietly.

"What do you mean?" asked Gina.

He scowled. "Why else wait? He could have blasted us all to smithereens at the camp."

Gina swallowed hard. "But he couldn't get into the Fade."

"Not without your help," said Dorian.

Ash cursed and slammed a fist on the table. "He was in my dream. He manipulated me into requesting the Fade."

Sylaise was cowered against the far wall. "You led that monster directly to us," she said, her voice high pitched with fear.

"Not intentionally," said Gina.

"Intention or not, he knows where we are! He could destroy everything we've worked so hard to protect!"

Dorian was crouched at Morrigan's side. The witch was still and silent. He touched her throat and sighed heavily. "She's alive. Poor thing."

Ash scoffed. "Yeah, poor thing."

The Mage rose to his feet. "She drank from the Well so that she could tap into the knowledge of the ages, not so she could be manipulated into being a part of destroying the world. Say what you will, Morrigan has always chosen to do the right thing."

Sera flitted to Ash's side. "I'm with the Big Guy. I remember how hard she fought for that stupid thing."

"A choice she would not have made if she knew the true consequences. Just like Alita," argued Dorian.

The name rang a dull bell, but Gina couldn't focus on it. She wanted nothing more than to lay down and sleep for a week. "We need to figure out what the hell is going on."

"No, first I need to take the mark," said Ash. He was poring over the scroll again.

Gina shook her head. "There's no point if he's just going to sneak into your dreams too."

The Qunari turned to face her. "I am not worried about him. I am worried about you. Neither of you can withstand the force of the mark, and you know it."

Dorian gave them an odd look, but Gina spoke before he could ask the question burning in his eyes. "And you think you'll be able to handle it better?"

"I don't know. But I'm willing and able to take the chance."

Sylaise shuffled closer. "How do you intend to take the mark?"

"Yes, do tell," said Dorian.
Ash touched a line near the bottom of the scroll. "There's a note here that the mark only bends to the will of the Evanuris. Perhaps that is why Corypheus failed."

Sylaise came to the table and traced a finger over the thick paper. "You are likely correct. But taking the mark may pose problems of its own."

"Such as?" asked Ash.

"It may release entirely," she said.

"Which will take out the Veil, just as Solas intended anyway," said Gina.

Dorian shook his head. "No, it won't. He said it himself. The Anchor is incomplete. Your portion is not enough to destroy the Veil."

"It might be enough to destroy us," Gina said.

Dorian dipped his head in agreement. "But it would force Solas to find a different way to achieve his plan for world domination."

Gina gnawed on her lip. Either way, death was a risk. A big one. If she was honest with herself, the thought of dying terrified her, no matter how close brushes she had with death. She wished Bull was there. He had a knack for cutting through the emotion and into the heart of a situation.

Ash touched her shoulder. "What do you want to do?"

Gina looked at him, at his stormy green eyes so much like his brother's. And she knew just what Bull would do. A peaceful sense of acceptance settled over her. "Let's do it," she said softly.

He nodded sharply and turned to the others. "You should leave for your own protection."

Dorian snorted and came to Gina's side. "You forget that I have the ability to shield myself and others. I will protect us," he said.

Morrigan's voice reached their ears. "Your protection comes too late."

Too late, Gina felt the tendrils of Solas's mind control. The mark flared brilliant and hot, leaving her screaming in agony as the world around her exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Check me out on Twitter (@lexibanner), Instagram (@lexibanner), and Facebook (@authorlexibanner)! I post dumb stuff, funny stuff, sexy stuff, and other stuff to check out, plus a few exciting new projects! :)
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Look me up on Twitter/Insta (@lexibanner), or FB (@authorlexibanner). I post funny, sexy, dumb, and writery stuff! Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

Some quality time with our man the Iron Bull...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Bull and the guys were done hitting each other with sticks, they returned to find the rest of the group packing up. There was no point in hanging around in the forest and waiting for Gina and company to return. She'd never returned in the same spot anyway, so they started the last leg to the Winter Palace.

Bull rode in a wagon with his Tama. She fussed over him, oiling the slow-growing stumps of his horns, applying ointment to his new welts, and polishing his harness. When she finally relaxed on the bench beside him, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and rested his chin on top of her head. As the wagon bumped along in silence, he worried about Gina and their baby.

The palace was one last mile away when a small convoy rounded the corner. Bull's every last dark thought fled at the sound of Kaya shrieking 'Papa' at the top of her lungs.

"Kaya!" he shouted. Tama squeaked when he lurched to his feet, but he didn’t look back. Everything inside him was propelling his legs at top speed to get to his little girl.

The distance was gone in a blink and then she was there, jumping out of a fancy Orlesian carriage and into his waiting arms. He hugged her with everything he had and covered her with kisses while
she squealed and giggled.

“Papa missed you,” he said, over and over. Her arms clung tight to his neck as he spun them both and hugged her again.

“I missed you,” said the little girl. She kissed him on the cheek and then gave a cry. “Your eye, Papa!”

He grinned and winked at her. “Do you like it?”

She nodded and touched his cheek. “It’s pretty.”

He caught her little fingers and kissed them. “Aww, thanks kid.”

Josephine leaned out of the carriage, her eyes bright as she watched the reunion. “She was too excited to wait in the courtyard,” she said.

“Where’s Tama?” asked Kaya, looking over his shoulder eagerly.

His stomach clenched. This was news he’d been dreading to deliver. Bull shifted her so they were face to face. “Tama needed to do something very important, so she’ll be coming home later.”

Kaya’s dark eyes welled up with tears. “But…”

He pulled her into another hug. “I’m sorry, Imekari. She wanted to be here so much, but this was too important to wait.”

She snuffled and buried her face in the crook of his neck. Bull could feel dampness of her escaped tears against his skin, and it nearly broke his heart.

The rest of the Inquisition pulled up to the convoy. Bull turned to see his Tama staring at them, her violet eyes the size of saucers. He gently tipped up Kaya’s chin and stroked away her tears. “I want you to meet someone very special. Is that okay?”

She nodded and wiped her nose with her sleeve. Bull made his way over to the wagon. By the time he reached it, Tama was on the ground.

Bull stopped just in front of her and spoke in slow Qunlat so Kaya could follow. “Tama, this is our daughter, Kaya. Kaya, this is my Tama.”

Kaya and Tama gazed at each other in silence. Bull poked Kaya in the belly. “Can you say hello to Tama?”

“Shanedan,” whispered Kaya, waving her little hand.

Tama’s eyes went bright with tears. “Shanedan, Imekari,” she said in a rusty voice.

***

After a long overdue bath and change of clothes, Bull made his way to the common area outside of the Inquisition quarters. Kaya and his Tama were in a chair, looking at a colorful picture book. Kaya pointed and chattered animatedly, switching between Qunlat and Common tongue. Tama was still mostly silent, but she positively glowed as she cuddled the little girl. Bull watched for a few minutes before turning his attention to the rest of the room.

Varric and Hawke were sitting at the fire, the dwarf scribbling in a notebook while Hawke’s head
drooped toward his chest in sleep. Cole was sitting at a table and talking to the Arishok. Bull winced, but the Qunari didn't appear to be irritated by the conversation, so he left them to it. The Chargers were playing cards against some of Shara's Red Jennies.

Cassandra, Cullen, and Josephine were in discussion in the opposite corner. The General glanced over and tilted his head in invitation. Bull briefly considered turning his back on them and joining his family, but his sense of duty overrode his sense of outrage.

He crossed to them and sat down. “What are we talking about?”

Cassandra gave him a wary glance. “We need to discuss our strategy going before the council.”

“Makes sense. What’s the consensus?”

She shuffled a stack of papers on the table before meeting his eyes. “Are you sure you would like to participate?”

He frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Cassandra shrugged and looked away. “I thought perhaps you would prefer to distance yourself from the Inquisition.”

He looked to Cullen and Josephine before returning his gaze to her. “Why? Because I have a problem with your insistence on erasing my girl’s personality?”

Cassandra went scarlet. “It was a suggestion, and only because she nearly killed you in her sleep. Twice.” She cleared her throat. “Regardless, we need to present a united front. If you cannot or will not do so, then it is in our best interest that you do not participate.”

Cullen’s brows lifted. “Inquisitor, I don’t think this is neces—”

“It is not your decision to make,” cut in Cassandra. She let out a heavy breath and met Bull’s eyes. “And I do not mean to insult or offend you. I just need to know that you remain dedicated to our cause.”

Bull leaned toward her. “What, exactly, is our cause these days?”

Her mouth opened and closed, and then she looked away and drummed her fingers on the tabletop.

Bull shook his head. “That’s what I thought. How the hell can you strategize if you can’t even answer that basic question?”

“Our cause remains the same,” said Cullen. “Find and root out Venatori and Red Templars.”

Bull tilted his head. “Last count there were maybe two hundred stragglers throughout Thedas. Why do we need to have an entire army at our disposal? Seems to me a small peacekeeping force should be enough to rout their numbers.”

Josephine made a note and then lifted a finger. “We must not forget our diplomatic missions. It has not been easy to keep the peace in Orlais and Ferelden, despite ending the civil wars.”

“An effort that has not been appreciated,” muttered Cullen.

Bull nodded and tapped the side of his nose. “My thoughts exactly. I can understand continuing to make an effort on their behalf, but if they don’t want our help, who are we to say different?”

Cassandra made an irritated noise. “They do not realize how much we do for them. We need to
demonstrate our worth.”

Bull scoffed. “What better way than to disband and leave them to take care of their own problems?”

She stared at him with wide eyes. “What if everything falls apart?”


She sputtered indignantly before hissing, “Just walk away? How can you even suggest such a thing?”

“Easily. I find it harder to think of reasons to continue putting my people at risk for two empires that resent our involvement.”

“I wouldn’t say Orlais resents us,” said Josephine.

“That’s not what I hear on the street,” retorted Bull.

Her cheeks went pink. “The ambassador from Orlais was very positive when I spoke to him today.”

Bull leaned an elbow on the table. “Don’t get me wrong, Ruffles. We have value. They want to absorb the Inquisition so they can slip a leash on us.”

“The Iron Bull is right,” said Cullen. “The only reason they’ve agreed to be here is so they can use political maneuvering to get us under their banner.”

The table fell silent for a few minutes before Bull heaved a long breath and spoke the truth hovering at the back of his mind. “If that’s the direction we take, I won’t play any role in it. And neither will my Chargers.”

***

Bull reclined on the couch and cradled Kaya to his chest as she slept. He didn't have the heart to carry her to bed. Not tonight.

His Tama was sleeping in the next room over. It was technically his room, but he wasn't going to be using it. The bed was too big to sleep in alone.

There hadn't been any word from the crew on the Fade. Every hour that passed made the knots in his guts go tighter. He’d been able to keep it together for Kaya’s sake, but the fear for his Kadan was making it hard to think straight. He tried to focus on the positives. For once, Gina wasn't travelling in the creepy place alone. Dorian, he knew, would die to protect her. Ash had the most powerful magic anyone had ever witnessed. And there was Morrigan. For some reason.

Despite everything good, his fears returned. The mark was volatile in this world. Would it be worse in the Fade? His Kadan was threadbare as it was. It was a terrible risk to her health and to their new baby.

But what real choice did they have? None. His hands tightened into fists as his heart rate spiked. What he wouldn't give to find Solas and deliver some justice, starting with a hard punch to the face.

Kaya mumbled and shifted restlessly in her sleep. Bull forced himself to simmer down, and smoothed a hand over her back while humming their lullaby. In no time, the little girl was back to snoring.

He was almost jealous. The journey had sapped him off almost all of his energy, but he couldn't stop
the endless loop of thoughts long enough to drift to sleep.

A knock at the door made him jump. He muttered a curse and got to his feet, careful not to disturb his sleeping passenger. He opened the door to find Cullen standing there. “What do you want?” he asked, his tone a little harsher than he intended.

“I wanted to apologize,” said Cullen.

Bull stared at him impassively. “For what?”

The General sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “For my knee-jerk reaction the other night. I was afraid, and I didn’t think of the long-term implication of such a decision. Considering what I witnessed in the Circle and in Kirkwall, I should have taken more care with such a suggestion.”

Kaya gave a sleepy snort and nestled tighter to Bull’s chest. The Templar watched and Bull almost taste the man’s deep sense of longing. Cullen lifted his eyes to meet Bull’s. “I really am sorry,” he said softly.

Bull sighed and nodded. “I appreciate it,” he said gruffly.

The General didn’t leave. Bull lifted a brow. “Something else on your mind?”

Cullen scrubbed a hand over his face. “This Exalted Council. It’s driving me crazy that we’re subjected to their scrutiny at all.”

Bull shrugged. “It’s like you said. They don’t like us because they can’t control us. It’s been that way from day one, but they didn’t have enough power or stability to turn away our assistance. Seems they feel differently now.”

Cullen scoffed. “Apparently so.”

“On the bright side, I hear you have marriage proposals,” said Bull.

Every inch of the Templar’s face went red. “More like alliance proposals.”

Bull smirked. “Come on, what’s not to love about it? You point at the prettiest prospect, and she’s yours. Perfect for a guy like you.”

“A guy like me?”

“Cullen, come on. When’s the last time you had a date?”

The General scowled. “I’ve been busy.”

“Uh huh. Whatever you say.” A yawn broke loose, nearly big enough to make his jaw crack.

Cullen did the same and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I suppose we should try to get some sleep.”

Bull nodded. “Thanks again for coming by. It means a lot.”

The Templar waved and wandered through the courtyard to a room near the entrance. Bull watched for a moment before returning inside to collapse onto the couch. His eyes drifted shut, and sleep washed finally washed over him.

***
He woke to the sound of a hot pan sizzling. The delicious aroma of sausages frying hit his nose next, making his stomach growl. He sat up and winced at the crick in his neck.

Kaya giggled and ran across the room. “Papa’s up!”

He hugged her and got to his feet. Tama was at the stove, watching over a pair of hot pans. He crossed and made to snag a slice of cheese from the counter beside her, only to have his fingers whacked with a cooking spoon. He yelped and shook his hand. “Christ on a stick,” he muttered.

“You wait,” she said firmly.

Nothing like having your Tama put you in your place. He kissed her cheek. “Yes ma’am.”

She smiled and pointed to the table. Bull didn’t need to be told twice. He grabbed a stack of plates and headed over to set the table. Kaya joined him with a mittful of silverware. A crow swept into the room from an open window and landed on the back of a chair. Bull pulled the note from its leg while Kaya gave it a grape.

Please join us at the first Council meeting this morning.

Bull scowled as he re-read the unsigned note. Good thing he recognized Cassandra’s messy script. She actually wanted him there? After his abrupt announcement the day before, he thought he’d be persona non grata.

Tama set a platter of sausage and eggs on the table and snatched the note from his fingers. “Eat.”

He couldn’t help grinning like an idiot at the commanding tone in her voice. Every day she was getting stronger. Soon enough, she’d be back to her old self and bossing everyone around. For now, Bull dug into his plate of food with gusto. After all, who was he to disobey his Tama?

***

The proceedings were painful. Bull sat in his stupid uniform, feeling itchy and constricted, and listened to the idiot representative of Ferelden complain about the hard work the Inquisition had done to save their asses. The Orlesian hadn’t done anything but simper and suck up, which was almost as irritating as the bitching.

“You outright seized Caer Bronach in Crestwood!” shouted the Arl of Redcliffe.

They’d lost good people to protect the interests of Ferelden, and this ingrate had the audacity to bitch at them about it. It was like a slap to the face. Bull bit back a vicious curse. “From bandits. Want us to give it back to them? Because that can be arranged.”

Josephine elbowed him while the Arl glowered in fury. “Is this a joke to you, Qunari?” he snarled.

Bull glared back at him. “Do you want me to be honest?”

“Bull, stop it,” hissed Josephine.

He scowled at her, but shut his mouth.

The ambassador turned her gaze to the council with an awkward laugh. “Our apologies. We’ve had a long journey. Not all of us have recovered our good graces.”

The Orlesian representative, Duke Someone-or-Other, spoke up. “We have heard of your troubles. I did hope to meet with the Saviour of Thedas while at the palace. When will she arrive?”
The only thing that kept Bull’s last shred of temper in check was Vivienne’s hand on his arm. He felt the sizzle of impending magic and heeded the warning. Cassandra gave him a hard look before turning to face the council. “Gina will be along soon. For now, let’s focus on our work here.”

The Arl returned to his bitter complaining, and the Duke kept kissing the Inquisition’s ass. Leliana sat quietly between them. Bull hated every minute of it, and hated every second that passed without word from his Kadan. It had been two days. She hadn’t ever spent so much time in the Fade.

“Ser,” came a soft voice at his shoulder.

Bull turned to see Shara standing at his shoulder, a pinched expression on her face. “What do you want?” he whispered.

“There is something you need to see,” she whispered in his ear.

He scoffed and muttered, “Kinda busy.”

She gripped his shoulder. “You need to see this.”

Bull gritted his teeth. It was wildly out of protocol to walk out of a hearing with this level of importance. If Cassandra had doubts about his sincerity, she’d consider them confirmed. “It will have to wait,” he said quietly before facing forward again.

Shara caught under his arm and pulled. “Trust me. This requires your immediate attention.”

He jerked his arm free, but got to his feet. Better to lay into the woman outside of listening ears. He gave Josephine an apologetic look as he followed the elf out of the massive hall.

The Arl sputtered and said, “Is this the level of respect your organization has for this council?”

Bull winced and slipped out of the massive doors. Once they closed, he rounded on the elf. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Follow me,” she said. “I promise it’s worth the interruption.”

He hesitated for a long moment, but decided the damage was already done and followed the elf. Shara lead him down a long path winding past the courtyard. Near the marketplace, she nudged him and pointed to a group of people were squabbling near a small stack of crates. “This is what you need to see,” she said.

An elf was on the ground, and appeared dishevelled. Two Inquisition soldiers stood to one side, and an Orlesian soldier stood between them and the elf on the ground.

Bull shot her a dirty look. “Seems like something the soldiers have well in hand.”

“Just go talk to them,” she said, giving him a shove.

After giving her another foul look, he walked over. “What’s going on here?” Bull asked.

One of the Inquisition soldiers, a heavy set man with a Ferelden accent, lifted a hand in greeting. “Just trying to sort out some trouble.”

“This is the Winter Palace. It is not your place to sort anything,” hissed the Orlesian soldier.

The man rolled his eyes and said, “If one of our people is involved, it does. Don’t worry, if some noble commits a crime of fashion, I’ll let you take charge.”
“You people are out of control,” said the Orlesian. “How dare you attack one of our servants!”

“I only asked what he was doing,” said the other Inquisition soldier, a slight elven woman.

“And when I refused to bow down to the Inquisition’s dogs, you attacked me!” said the elf on the ground.

“How would you like us to handle this situation, Ser?” asked the human soldier.

Bull glanced back at Shara, who beckoned for him to continue. He bit back a growl of exasperation and turned to the pair of elves. He was about to tell them all to fuck off when his eyes fell on the stack of crates. A frighteningly familiar stack of crates. He’d been seated next to one just like it on the docks at Val Royeaux. “Where did these crates come from?”

The elf on the ground lumbered to his feet and dusted his pants off. “I was ordered to bring wine for the guests,” he said, his tone implying that Bull was an idiot to have asked the question.

The elven soldier snorted. “You’re lying.”

“What did I say? Out of control,” said the Orlesian soldier.

Bull's gut was going bonkers. He narrowed his eyes. “Take him into custody.”

"I beg your pardon?" The Orlesian soldier stepped closer. “Under what authority do you speak?”

“I speak on behalf of the Inquisitor,” said Bull, drawing himself to full height and glaring down at the man. “You’ll get a full report later, but for now, hold him for questioning.”

To his credit, the man didn’t shrink away. “My Lord will hear of this.”

Bull waved a hand dismissively. "Yeah, yeah. I'm shaking in my boots. Get him out of here."

They led the servant away. He was snivelling and whining about the arrest, but Bull wasn’t interested in him for the moment. He moved closer to the crates and examined the markings on them. They were identical to the crates Etienne had brought in from Par Vollen.

The elven soldier approached him and held out an envelope with a broken seal. “Ser, I also found this by the crates. I can’t read what it says.”

Shara joined them. “Do you see what I see?” she asked.

He nodded as he opened the envelope. “Good catch.” Bull unfolded the sheet of paper inside and felt his blood go icy at the sight of neatly printed Qunlat.

_The crates are to be placed in the hallways of the royal quarters and the guest wing housing the nobility. When the duty has been performed, report to the Viddasala through the mirror marked by the bookcase._

It was dated just over a week ago. The Viddasala’s words echoed through his head. ‘_I have not failed. You will know that to be true sooner than you think._’

“Well, shit,” he whispered.

***

Bull burst through the door and hustled down the stairs to the Inquisition’s private conference room.
Cassandra rushed to meet him, her face bright red. “Do you know what that little stunt cost us?”

He shoved past her and set one of the crates on the table. “A hell of a lot less than this could have cost us,” he said.

She lifted her hands to the side. “Wine? Really?”

Bull ripped the lid off. “Not wine, Inquisitor.”

Cullen looked and jolted a step away. “Maker’s breath! Gaatlok? Are you crazy? Why would you bring that in here?”

Bull pulled the primer out of his pocket. “I have all of the primers safe and sound.”

“All of them?” asked Cassandra.

“Yes, all of them. There was a stack of twenty crates near the marketplace. The servant bringing them to the “guests” confessed to working for the Qunari.”

Cassandra put a hand to her heart. “An Orlesian servant did this?”

Bull nodded and filled them in on the confrontation near the marketplace. “I doubt he’s the only one. I’ve sent word to a few other cities and holds.”

“We should alert the ambassadors. It will remind them of our value,” said Josephine, a note of relief in her musical voice.

Bull shook his head. “It’s not that easy.”

Cassandra crossed her arms. “How so?”

A hunch had taken Bull to the castle’s main receiver, who was posted at the docks. The man had confirmed his findings, and pointed him in the right direction to obtain the original shipment manifest.

Bull pulled it out of his pocket and passed it to Cassandra. “The shipment came in with the rest of the Inquisition’s supplies.”

Everyone in the room hissed a sharp breath. “Andraste preserve us,” Cullen muttered. “We can’t even trust our own people anymore.”

Cassandra was poring over the manifest. “How the hell did they get the crates onto our shipment?”

Bull shook his head. “I don’t have that answer right now.”

“Well, what good are you then?” she snapped.

Bull curled his lip. “You mean besides finding the crates before they could be set in place and blown to smithereens?”

She pointed in his face. “They should never have gotten this close!”

Bull batted her hand away. “I agree. What the hell kind of watch were you running in Skyhold? I had everything battened down tight and secure before I left for Val Royeaux, especially in the shipping area.”
Cassandra went scarlet. “I don’t have time to manage those details. I thought you left people in charge.”

“I did. Krem. And he tells me that you requested more men to snoop around at Caer Oswin. A request that he fulfilled at the expense of our people in the shipping area.”

The colour started to drain from her face. “I...we’ve not yet been able to locate the missing Seekers. I thought…”

“You thought you’d hunt down some clues,” said Bull quietly. “I don’t blame you. But that request should have come directly to me. I had people available in other regions that wouldn’t have left our back door wide open, Inquisitor.”

Her hands started to shake. “I have failed us.”

Cullen shook his head. “No. This could have happened regardless of the Iron Bull’s safeguards. We’ve gotten too big to keep an eye on every facet. If it wasn’t in our shipping area, it would have been on the journey while we slept.”

Bull nodded. “The time for in-fighting is over. The Viddasala was a single order away from executing a plan that would have seen the destruction of the Winter Palace, and who knows where else. I wouldn’t be surprised if she has a hidden second-in-command to take over the reins in case of her demise.”

Cullen nodded briskly. “What’s done is done. We must get to the bottom of this.”

“We should warn the ambassadors of the Qunari plan,” said Josephine.

“No,” said Bull. “We don't have enough intel. All we'll do is send them into a panic and tip our hand.”

Cassandra had been standing with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, but she nodded at Bull's statement. “When we have more, we will provide the information. For now, let’s investigate quietly.”

“And what of the council?” asked Josephine, her voice high pitched. “I fought to protect the Inquisition. To gain every ounce of political advantage and leverage possible. And for what? So we could lie to those we claim to protect?”

Bull turned to her. “Josephine, this isn’t about being political advantage right now. Lives are at stake, and if we run our mouths-”

“You mean ‘inform our allies of the impending danger’?” she interrupted hotly.

He shook his head. “Until we know who can be trusted, we’re taking too big of a gamble. If the wrong person finds out, they could have the orders to set off any other gaatlok early. When all of the gaatlok caches are found, you can tell them everything, I promise. Until then, you need to keep it quiet.”

Her lips trembled. “Do you know how badly this will be taken? We could lose everything if they succeed in their plan to dismantle us.”

“I know. But if the Viddasala’s plan succeeds, we’ll have more chaos in Thedas than when the Temple of the Ashes went up.” Bull shook his head. “They’ll flood through the mirrors and along all of the coasts. Ferelden and Orlais will be conquered in less than a week.”
“It’s what Corypheus should have done,” said Cullen.

Bull lifted a brow. “Easy, Templar.”

He rolled his eyes. “Please. You know it’s true. This plan is ingenious.”

Josephine cleared her throat. “What of the Arishok?”

Cassandra scowled. “What of him?”

“Perhaps he can preempt any military forces being deployed.”

Bull shrugged. “Maybe. But he’s been pretty vocal about not being able to trust anyone. Could be that any commands in his absence will fall on deaf ears.”

“Can’t hurt to try,” said Cullen.

“I agree,” said Cassandra. “Let’s get moving on this. Our welcome is already wearing thin.”

Bull nodded sharply and spun on his heel. If he wanted a home for his Kadan to return to, there was no time to waste.

Chapter End Notes

The action is picking up yet again...will the Inquisition ever catch a break?
Chapter 34

Chapter by Lexi Banner (jinbaitai)

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-lingering threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Look me up on Twitter/Insta (@lexibanner), or FB (@authorlexibanner). I post funny, sexy, dumb, and writery stuff! Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mark was flooding free with full force, leaving her entire body in agony. Gina screamed as she tried to rein it back, but her efforts were in vain. Whatever had been protecting her from the Anchor in the past was long gone, and she was going to burn away, along with her friends.

A thunderous voice shouted out, clear even through the dull edges of her reality. And then, the mark fizzled out and the pain was gone. Gina sagged to the floor in a heap, unable to process anything other than breathing.

More cries and booming responses filled the air around her, and the ground shook so hard she thought the entire place was going to crumble. A body skidded past her, one she vaguely recognized as Dorian. It was enough to yank her out of her stupor.

Gina scrambled to his side. Wisps of smoke were curling away from the collar of his cloak, which was still smoldering. As Gina scrubbed out the lingering embers with her fingers, she saw in horror that his face had been hit with a spell of some sort, causing terrible damage. Welts were already raising along his cheek and jaw, and the skin along his throat was raw and oozing. The Mage was out cold, which was probably the only reason he wasn’t screaming.

Another thunderous shout came, and with it, chunks of ceiling began to rain down. A piece the size of a toaster slammed to the floor, missing them by mere inches. Gina looked around frantically, seeking any type of coverage. Her eyes landed on the massive table still holding the scroll.

Without a second thought, she hooked her arm around Dorian and dragged him across the floor.
More chunks fell, some hitting them. They were small, but that luck wasn’t going to last. Gina doubled her efforts, and made it under just as a hunk of ceiling the size of a Volkswagen slammed to the ground beside the table. The floor cracked and tilted from the force, but didn’t disintegrate.

Gina tried to peek out from under the table, but all she could see were legs. Two the size of tree trunks, clearly Ash. And an indeterminate number of legs obscured by robes of varying lengths. Morrigan’s voice called out sharply and the room went scarlet, but twin shouts from Ash and another voice overwhelmed whatever spell she was trying to create.

The table shuddered as something massive landed on it. Gina flinched, but it held. How much longer it could was hard to say.

Shouts in Elvhen filled the room. First the booming voice Gina couldn't place, then Morrigan. Their tones were unmistakably bickering, with the air of two people unleashing years of pent-up anger.

It was Morrigan who broke into common tongue first. “The one comfort I held was believing you’d met your demise during the creation of the veil. The way the elves spoke of the silence of the gods confirmed it. And then I returned to our home and found the Librarians hovering in wait. It was they who told me of your escape into the Fade.”

Streaks of light clashed as the booming voice shouted, “You created this madness! We had no choice but to protect ourselves!”

“You could’ve stood by your people,” hissed Morrigan. “Instead you chose to live as cowards!”

The room went blindingly bright and trembled from the force of another round of howling spells. Gina cringed closer to Dorian, and wished desperately that she had proper control of the mark. Anything to defend herself from the maelstrom.

A yelp of pain came from Morrigan, followed by the sound of a slumping body. Gina was about to crawl out for a better view, but the sensation of icy fingers crawling up the back of her neck grabbed all of her attention. She clamped down every mental faculty onto the mark, fighting to keep it from the control of Solas. Despite her effort, the mark started to burn again.

“Stop it,” she cried out, unsure if he could hear her, but saying it anyway.

Ash dropped to the floor, nearly flat on his belly. “We need to do the ritual now,” he said, his voice and eyes urgent.

“How?”

His hand stretched toward her. “Just trust me, little one!”

Gina hesitated less than a breath, but then slapped her hand into his monster-sized palm. The world exploded around her one more time.

***

Bull found the Arishok in Leliana’s private quarters. Neither of them had the flush of shame, so he was reasonably confident that he hadn’t interrupted a tryst, but he felt awkward all the same. “Shanedan, Arishok. My apologies for the intrusion.”

The Arishok shook his head. “You are welcome, the Iron Bull. Shanedan.”

Bull grimaced. “You say that now, but I’m about to ruin your day.” He set the crate on Leliana’s
table and laid out the Qunlat note and shipping manifest. “I believe we’ve stumbled into the second half of the Viddasala’s plan.”

The Arishok looked over the note and the manifest with a grim expression before examining the crate and its contents. Leliana mimicked him, her face going pale as she translated the note. “How did you find this?” she asked.

“Completely by chance. One of our soldiers saw a servant struggling to load up the crates, so she offered a hand and asked what he was doing. The man nearly came unglued, and that caught the attention of Shara.”


Bull nodded. “She recognized the crates and pulled me away from the council.”

Leliana lifted a brow. “I was wondering what could have possibly been so important.”

“Yeah, me too. Damn good thing she insisted. I was able to question the servant, and he cracked like an egg. Spilled everything he knew.” Bull tapped the crate. “One of these was headed for your quarters.”

The Arishok sucked a sharp breath and came to Leliana’s side. “Are you sure all of the crates have been found?”

“The ones in Halamshiral, yes. But I doubt this is the only place they’ve shipped the crates.”

“I expect you’ve sent out notice to check everywhere else of any importance?” asked Leliana.

“Yup. Hoping to start getting word from places in Orlais by nightfall. It’ll probably take a few days before we can be confident we’ve gotten them all.”

The Arishok reached to touch Leliana, but stopped short and snapped the hand back to his side. Bull gave him a wry look. “No need to hide it. I don’t particularly care, and I’m not going to spread the word.”

Leliana’s cheeks went pink and the Arishok’s mouth opened and closed like a fish before he spoke in a strangled voice. “I did not realize we were so obvious.”

Bull shrugged. “Ben-hassrath. You used to pay me to notice shit like that, remember?”

“Indeed,” said the Arishok in a flat tone.

Leliana cleared her throat. “Is there anything either of us can do to assist with this situation, Iron Bull?”

He nodded. “I’ve been asked to approach the Arishok.”

The Arishok lifted a brow. “How can I help?”

“We believe that the Viddasala intended to invade through the mirrors and possibly the coasts.”

“That’s what Corypheus should have done,” muttered Leliana.

“Cullen said the same thing,” said Bull before returning his attention to the Arishok. “I know it might be difficult in absentia, but are you able to get a report on all troops that have been deployed in the past few months?”
The Qunari frowned. “It is possible, but will take some time.”

“Don’t you think the Viddasala would have hidden her deployments?” asked Leliana.

The Arishok nodded. “Yes, she would have. But it should be simple enough to do the math. I know how many troops are deployed in Seheron, and our overall troop totals. If the numbers don’t add up, then we know to look for rogue orders.”

Leliana frowned and turned to Bull. “Is there something I can help with?”

“Yes. You can distract the council. Until we know what’s going on, I’m going to be running around like a chicken with its head cut off,” he said, ignoring their puzzled looks at Gina’s idiom. “I need at least two days.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I think I know just the thing.”

He dipped his head. “Thanks. Both of you.”

***

Gina slowly returned to reality. It was a lot quieter. Was that a good thing?

She cracked her eye open and peeked up at the worried faces of Ash, Sylaise, and Dorian. Another face hovered in the background, but he didn’t look worried. If anything, he was angry. Gina focused on him for a minute before remembering Elgar’nan, the cranky elf. The thought almost made her giggle.

A voice was speaking. She squinted and realized it was Ash. “Wha?” she slurred.

“Are you alright, Gina?” Ash’s big mitt shook her shoulder. “Talk to me.”

Her mouth was dry and the world was fuzzy, but she didn’t hurt. Gina blinked rapidly and the blurriness started to recede. “What happened?” she asked.

Ash opened his other hand. The sight of a glowing green mark gouging the centre of his palm brought her back to life with a jolt. “It worked?” she breathed, not daring to look at her shoulder.

Dorian scooted closer. She could see that his face had been healed, but half of his mustache was gone. He gave her a rueful smile. "I'm still beautiful, right?"

Gina nodded. Dorian tipped his head toward her shoulder. "Let's look, shall we?"

She nodded again, unable to make her voice work. As he slipped her shirt over, his eyes went wide. She gripped his arm tight enough that her fingers ached.

“Look,” he said softly.

Gina glanced down to see a broad scar grooving the skin over her collarbone. It was ridged and pink, and ached like an old fracture, but the light inside of it was gone. The mark was gone!

Tears burst free. Dorian made a tutting noise and pulled her into a hug. “It’s over,” he whispered in her ear, over and over. Gina held tight to him, hardly able to believe he was telling her the truth.

It took an embarrassingly long time to regain her composure, at which point she turned her attention
to Ash. She took hold of his hand and looked at the mark. “Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

He shrugged and wiggled his fingers before opening and closing the hand several times. “It tingles.”

“It can’t be this easy,” she whispered, peering closely at the mark. It glittered, but remained embedded in his hand.

Ash tipped her chin up. “Maybe Karma decided to repay you for all the good you’ve done.”

Gina’s chest ached from the effort of suppressing her emotions. She couldn’t find the words to express the depth of her gratitude. He’d given her the gift of life. Literally. How did you repay something so significant? Tears welled up in her eye as she threw her arms around the Qunari. He wrapped his arms around her in return, and they stood in silence for a long moment.

Their moment was interrupted by a sharp sigh. “Are you done?”

Gina shot a hard look at Elgar’nan. “Oh, I’m sorry. Are we interrupting something?”

The elf gave her a foul look. “You people are responsible for leading Fen’harel to our haven.”

“Haven?” said Sylaise, a sharp tone to her voice. “You mean prison.”

“Whatever the name, we are no longer safe here, thanks to them.”

Gina looked around the library. It had taken significant damage in the battle. A hole had opened in the ceiling, the walls and floor were cracked, and papers littered every visible surface. It looked as though a bomb had gone off.

“Where’s Morrigan?”

“We don’t know,” said Dorian. “She disappeared just as Ash took the Anchor successfully.”

She shivered and hugged herself as she replayed Morrigan’s entrance in her memory. “I can’t believe he’s been possessing her this entire time.”

There was a scoffing sound from above. Gina looked up to see Sera pulling a face. “Bet she regrets drinking from that stupid well.”

Sylaise narrowed her eyes. “You said this before. To what well do you refer?”

“You know, the Veer- Abby-labby,” said Sera.

“Vir-abelasan, vhenan,” said Dalish.

“What she said,” said Sera.

The Evanuris were both staring at the spirits in horror. “A human drank from the well?” whispered Sylaise, her voice strangled.

Dorian and Gina exchanged a glance before the Tervinter faced them. “It’s a rather long story, but there wasn’t much choice in the matter. It was Morrigan or an Archdemon.”

“No choice at all, really,” muttered Gina.

The two elves looked as though a feather could knock them over. “What have you done to our world?” asked Elgar’nan.
Gina frowned. “It’s not what we’ve done. As far as I’m concerned, you’re all responsible for this mess. We’re just cleaning it up for you.”

“Fen’harel is responsible, not us,” hissed the elf. His eyes glittered with malice. “We had everything, and he ruined it all.”

Gina’s knees felt wobbly. She leaned on Ash for balance. “Look, I don’t particularly care what happened in the past at the moment. I’m far more concerned about the fact that Fen’harel plans to rip down the veil and destroy two worlds in the process.”

Elgar’nan barked a laugh. “After all of this, he wants to destroy the damn thing? Why?”

Gina shook her head. “I don’t really understand it, but he says that the elves have lost connection to the source of their magic, and he wants to fix it.”

“But he can’t do so anymore,” said Dorian. He pointed at Ash’s hand. “Not without access to this portion of the Anchor.”

Gina looked at the hand and frowned. “Doesn’t he need access to both portions? Alita has the other half, and we haven’t seen her.”

“True,” muttered the Mage.

The realization hit her like a bolt of lightning. She sucked a sharp breath and clapped a hand over her forehead. “Oh god!”

The group looked at her expectantly. Gina waved a hand at the pair of spirits floating around them. “The Mage calling to Alita from the other side.”

Dorian’s eyes fluttered closed. “Solas.”

***

Bull patted Brego on the nose. “You need to wait here in case your owner comes back.”

The horse gave an indignant snort and shoved Bull’s arm. Bull shook his head. “Don't beg. She'll want you fresh.”

With that he turned to Sunny and flicked the reins over her head. A little sob caught his ear, making him wince.

Kaya was in his Tama’s arms, fat tears sliding down her cheeks. It felt like his heart would tear itself in two. “Baby, I need to stop the bad guys. I'll be back tomorrow.”

She held her arms out to him. He ignored the disapproving glare of his Tama as he wrapped Kaya in a tight hug. “Someday we'll be together all the time, I promise Imekari.”

“But I still miss you,” she whispered in his ear.

“Me too,” he whispered.

After one last kiss, he transferred her back to his Tama. The woman hugged the little girl but gave him a hard look. “Soft.”

He nodded and kissed her cheek. “For her.”
Her eyes softened. Krem shouted from outside, “Can you please stop being a sap and get a move on?”

He rolled his eyes. “Duty calls. Be a good kid,” he said to Kaya as he swung aboard Sunny.

Krem, Hawke, and Varric waited outside. ‘‘Bout time, Chief,” said Krem, a smile on his face.

Bull ignored the dig. “Rocky and Stitches know to stay together, right?”

“Until we capture Gatt, yes.” Krem led the way down the trail. “Still no sightings, by the way.”

Bull knew. He’d been poring over every report in hopes of a shred of news. “He'll make a mistake. And I'll be ready.”

They rode hard for Val Royeaux. Bull had already gotten word of gaatlok stashes in three noble houses. One had been listed as a shipment from the Inquisition, one from Denerim, and one from Redcliff. It seemed the Viddasala hoped to turn everyone on everyone, not just against the Inquisition. And in the chaos, she’d sweep in from the shadows.

He almost wished he was smart enough to think of such an intricate plot.

His plan was to inspect the crates for evidence, and then a series of visits. Bull would visit Etienne, Krem and Varric would visit Lady Mantillon, and Hawke would drop in on Dacarte.

As they left the stables, Bull started to review everything with them only to get a long chorus of groans and ‘we know mothers’. He scowled. “Then don't fuck it up. We can't be here any later than lunch time tomorrow.”

Varric clapped him on the arm. “Don't worry, Tiny. We'll get it right.”

Hawke grinned. “How hard could it be, really?”

Three hours later, Bull was staring at Dacarte’s office. The flames shooting out of the roof rose twenty feet, making it impossible to go any closer. He turned to Hawke, barely repressing the urge to beat him into a pulp. “Explain,” he hissed.

Hawke shrugged and gestured both arms wildly. The man’s clothes were coated in soot. “Fucked if I know. I walked in, said hello. He asked what I wanted, I said your name and he knocked me out. I barely got out of there.”

“And the fire?”

“Intended to kill me, I assume.”

Bull groaned and scrubbed his face with his hands. He should’ve visited the slippery double agent himself, but the idea of seeing Etienne’s face again had been too enticing. “Did he say anything else? Did you see anything?”

“The place was normal,” said Hawke. “Papers everywhere. It was like any other merchant’s office I’ve been in.”

Bull shook his head and watched the team of people battling the fire. It was another devastating blow to the harbor. The docks were still in repair from Etienne’s stunt with the gaatlok. Who knew how far these flames would spread.

Varric scoffed. “Really Hawke? I'm going to take away your key to Kirkwall.”

Hawke gave the dwarf a dirty look. “That's not a key to the city. It controls the nets in the harbor.”

Varric lifted both brows. “Really? So that's why the Viscount was so pissed off at me.”

“Provisional viscount,” said Hawke. “I can't believe they put you in charge.”

“Wanna do it yourself?”

Hawke smirked. “No. I just like criticising you.”

Bull shook his head. Gina was right. The two should just fuck and get it over with. “We have problems. Real problems. Dacarte was my link to the seedy underbelly of Par Vollen. I needed his intel.”

Varric grumbled something under his breath before saying, “Where would he go? Back to Par Vollen?”

Bull shook his head. “No. My guess is that he intended our friend Hawke to be a stand-in for his crispy fried body.”

“He faked his death?” asked Krem.

Bull jerked his chin toward Hawke, standing alive and well. “Tried to, anyway. All he's accomplished is burning down his own office.”

Varric grunted. “Which still begs the question. Where was he headed? And why now?”

Bull frowned. It was weird. Dacarte wasn't prone to dramatics. According to all reports, the man was mild mannered, and had been settled in Val Royeaux for close to a decade. Every file Bull received from him was concise and never hinted at scandal. He was the perfect double agent. And now...this? It didn’t make any sense.

A crow landed on his shoulder. Bull plucked a note free and opened it.

Cover blown. I had to get away.

His hands started to shake. Krem tugged the note from his fingers and sucked a breath. Bull clamped a hand tight on the man’s shoulder before he spoke a word. “We need to go back to our quarters,” he said loudly.

Krem gave him a quizzical look, but Bull just smiled as wide as he could. “Lady Mantillon sent over some maraas-lok. I'm dying to crack into it.”

***

“I'll give him credit. That mother fucker is crazy smart,” said Ash.

Gina shook her head. “This was his plan from the start. I guarantee it. He wanted to get to the Evanuris, and he played us all perfectly.”

“What do you mean?” asked Dorian.

She pointed to Ash. “He saw the supplicant of Sylaise through Morrigan’s eyes. I'm guessing he led her actions enough to get Bull and company to the Darvaarad to stop the Viddasala from destroying
Ash.”

Gina crossed her arms tightly as the realizations kept making themselves clear. “Then he reactivated the anchor and allowed Ash to stop it from destroying me. Since then he’s been tormenting Bull and I enough to make us desperate for a fix. When the time was right, he presented Ash with the perfect solution.”

Ash winced. “And I fell for it.”

Dorian touched the Qunari’s arm. “We all fell for it. How could we not?”

Gina sank onto the Volkswagen sized boulder and buried her face in her hands. Given the chance, she probably could’ve fallen asleep right then and there. Ash’s broad palm pressed into her back, and warmth spread through her body. She shot him a grateful smile before turning her attention to the two elves. “How do we get out of here?”

Elgar’nan sneered at her. “Why would we help those who led our enemy straight to our doorstep?”

Her gut tightened. “It wasn’t deliberate.”

“So you say,” he said, his voice soft, yet somehow menacing.

Ash stepped forward. “Our actions prove it.”

“Your actions prove nothing. The woman escaped, leaving her free to return later and cause more destruction.”

Gina rose to her feet. “Are you holding us prisoner?”

The elf gave her a scornful glance. “What else do you do with enemy spies?”

***

“Cover blown? By who?” asked Hawke as he read Dacarte’s hurried scrawl.

Bull shook his head and stoked the fire. “I have no idea.”

Varric took the note and squinted as he read it. “So why drag us back here? Shouldn’t we be down there looking for clues?”

“Because he’s going to come here.”

Hawke lifted a brow. “You sound awfully confident.”

“He needs my protection. Otherwise he would have slit your throat to ensure you died in his place.”

"You mean he'd try," retorted Hawke.

Bull smirked at him. "Whatever helps you sleep tonight."

The man scowled and rubbed at the back of his head. “He’s lucky I’m not concussed.”

Bull drained a glass of wine and sank onto a chair. He couldn’t remember the last time something was easy or simply went as planned. Everything had to be complicated. It was so beyond getting old it was practically mummified.
Krem sat beside him. “Are you going to protect him? It could be a ploy.”

Bull shrugged. “Could be. Won’t know until I see him.”

Varric passed the note back to Bull. “One thing is for sure. He didn’t do any half-measures. There’s no way he can show his face in Val Royeaux again.”

“No, I can’t,” said Dacarte.

Krem jumped and both Hawke and Varric cursed as they spun around to face the man. Bull smirked and lifted a hand in greeting. “Took you long enough to come out.”

“Didn’t know if I’d have a head if I came out.” Dacarte walked over to the table and poured himself a generous glass of wine. After drinking most of it, he glared at Bull. “It’s because you came back. Everything was fine until this morning.”

“What happened this morning?” asked Varric.

“An agent came to my door. Asked me a bunch of questions about Etienne, and looked through my shipping records.” Dacarte finished his wine and poured another glass. “Then he asked how my work with you was going.”

Bull watched him fidget with the glass. “And?”

“And I told him I didn’t know what he was talking about.” The man dragged his collar over, exposing an angry red gash on the side of his throat. “Got this for my trouble. Told me I’d cooperate, or I’d learn what it was like to have extra holes to breathe from.”

Bull didn’t want to ask, but did it anyway. “Who was it?”

“Don’t know. Never met him before.”

“Did he say his name?” asked Krem.

Dacarte gave him a withering look. “Qunari don’t use names. They use titles. He called himself Ben-hassrath.”

Krem rolled his eyes. “Fine. What did he look like?”

“Skinny little elf.”

Bull’s entire body went hot and cold in turn. Without turning his head, he asked, “What kind of cooperation did he want?”

“Your head. Preferably still attached so he could do the honors of removing it himself.” Dacarte shuddered and said, “I’m not one to get my hands quite that dirty.”

“How lucky for me,” muttered Bull.

“Not above smacking a fellow upside the head though,” said Hawke.

Dacarte let out a stiff laugh. “You went down like a rock. I almost thought you were playing along at first.”

Hawke grumbled under his breath, but Bull wasn’t listening. Not really. He stared into the fireplace, letting the flickering flames take his entire focus as a memory played through his mind.
“I want to stay with you,” argued the little elf.

Young Bull shook his head. “No, Imekari. This life is not suitable for a little boy.”

“I am not little!” shouted the elf.

It took all of his training to keep the laughter from his voice. “You’re right. But you are still a boy, and a boy needs to be with other boys his age. He needs to learn how to be a man before he can leave his home.”

Silence fell, and Bull clued into his faux pas. “I mean your new home,” he said softly.

The elf curled into himself. “I don’t want to be in a new home. You said you’d save me.”

“I did save you. And I found you a home where you will always be safe and cared for.”

The wagon they were riding in came to a halt. Bull opened the door and guided the boy to walk ahead of him.

“They’ll make fun of me.”

“Your Tama won’t let them.”

“I don’t want a stupid Tama!”

Bull caught his thin shoulder and spun him around. “This is your new home, and she is the master within. You will always treat her with respect and honor. Always. Do you understand?”

The elf hit his hand away with surprising force. “You can’t tell me what to do!”

Good thing Bull wasn’t in charge of raising the children. They’d be one short already. The front door to the home opened, and his Tama stepped outside. “Hissrad! So lovely to see you, my boy!”

Bull hugged her and relished the feeling of being a little boy again, if only for ten seconds. Then he turned to introduce the elf kid. Who had vanished into thin air.

It took him an hour to spot his tiny form hiding high in the branches of a leafy tree. Bull glared up at him, but before he could shout anything, his Tama patted his shoulder. “Leave it to me, Hissrad,” she said softly.

She turned to the elf. “Until you’ve come to greet me properly, you’ll get no food and no sympathy. You choose.” Then she tucked her hand into the crook of Bull’s arm and led him to the porch.

Long after dark, the boy finally moved a muscle. Bull was watching, but Tama put her hand on his arm to stop him lunging for the catch. “He’s hungry and frightened. He will come to the light,” she whispered.

Sure enough, he crept toward them and into the little pool of light. “Are you ready to be polite now?” asked Tama crisply.

The boy nodded, his eyes wide in his narrow face. Tama nudged Bull, who suddenly realized that he didn’t know the kid’s name. “What is your name?” he asked.

A painful silence stretched before the elf whispered, “I can’t remember.”

The anger that had fueled his rage against the ship’s captain burned hot in his chest again. After
taking a few deep breaths, he focused on his Tama. “Tama, this is...is...” He squeezed his eyes shut in thought before it came to him. He smiled at the kid. “This is Gatt. Your newest ward.”

Bull cursed and surged to his feet, making everyone jump. He waved them all off and stomped out of the apartment, intent on getting fresh air and clearing his head. Krem protested, but he ignored the man.

If Gatt wanted his head, he was welcome to try taking it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm super excited to say that my website is live! I'm posting a weekly romance serial there that is totally free - I'd love for you to check it out! Go to http://www.lexibanner.com.

Hope you're still enjoying my Dragon Age soap opera!
Chapter 35

Chapter by Lexi Banner (jinbaitai)

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever- looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Look me up on Twitter/Insta (@lexibanner), or FB (@authorlexibanner). I post funny, sexy, dumb, and writery stuff! Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

Winding down to the end of this tale, at long last! A few more chapters and it's over - plus or minus a few short stories in the future!

Gina stared at the doorway. Elgar'nan’s enchantment glowed and flickered, and lashed out if anyone tried to go near it or apply their own magic.

“Unbelievable,” hissed Dorian as he paced the room behind her.

Gina agreed. The rest of the elves had descended on them so quickly that none of them had a chance to run or fight back. Their only option had been to surrender and allow themselves to be held in the makeshift prison.

Ash sighed heavily from his seat on the floor. “Hard to blame them. No one from their old world shows up for centuries, and when they do, their old enemy is embedded in their midst. It would set off alarm bells with anyone.”

If she didn’t look, she would almost have sworn it was Bull talking. Far from making her feel better, it brought her frazzled emotions to the surface. First Corypheus. Then Gatt. Then the Viddasala. Solas. Morrigan. And now the fucking Evanuris. “Just once I’d like something to go right. Just once. Is that asking too much? Are my expectations too high?”
Dorian made a sympathetic noise, but the thin thread of control she had on her temper snapped. "I'm serious! Ever since I fell into that fucking rift, my life has been one disaster after another!" She flung her arms wide, fists clenched tight. "I want to be with my family and feel safe again! I want to sleep in a real bed with Bull. I want…” Tears started falling from her eye. "I want to read Kaya a bedtime story and tuck her in!” A sob caught in her throat.

The Mage wrapped his arms around her. Gina buried her face into his shoulder and let the flood of emotion run away from her. He rubbed her back. "Have faith, darling. We’re going to get out of here."

“How?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“I don’t know. But I won’t stop doing everything in my power to make your wishes come true,” he said, his voice soft.

“I want to go home,” she whispered.

“Oi.”

Gina looked up to see Dalish and Sera hovering at the doorway. Sera slipped through the enchantment. “I know where one of those mirror thingies are. Maybe you can use that.”

“We have to get out first, Spirit.” Ash heaved to his feet with a grunt.

“And you'll need the key word,” came the musical voice of Sylaise.

Gina glared at the woman as she stepped into sight. “Eavesdropping? Real classy.”

“I would like to go home too,” said Sylaise.

“You are home.”

Sylaise stood just back from the enchanted doorway, her arms crossed tight. “This is not our home. Our home was stolen from us.”

Gina gave a bitter laugh as she scrubbed her face with her palms. “Seems to me like you idiots might have deserved it.”

There was a long silence before Sylaise whispered, “Perhaps we did.”

Dorian released Gina and stalked around the perimeter of the room. “There must be a way out,” he muttered.

“Maybe I can use the mark,” Ash said, looking at the green mark with an apprehensive expression. “I could create a rift back to Thedas.”

Sylaise stepped closer. “You cannot.”

“Says who?” asked Ash.

“The Veil is too thick to pierce, and even if you could, there is no telling where you will end up.”

Gina’s knees went wobbly and she sank to the floor. Ash was at her side before her weight fully settled. “Are you alright?”

She shook her head as a wave of nausea hit her. He put his hand on her shoulder, but the soothing
warmth washing over her lasted barely a breath. Ash cursed. “We need to get her out of here. This place is dangerous to her health.”

Sylaise bit her lip and glanced both ways. “If I aid your escape, will you take me with you?”

Ash and Dorian exchanged looks. “We're listening,” said the Qunari.

The elf squeezed her eyes shut before letting out a sharp breath. “We cannot use the Anchor. But if we can reach the Eluvian, we can escape through the mirrors. I can get us there.”

“How far is the Eluvian?” asked Dorian.

Dalish hooked a thumb over her shoulder. “In the library.”

Ash frowned. “Long way to sneak. Won't they be watching the path?”

Gina rested her forehead against Ash’s broad bicep as the conversation started to blur. She didn't snap out of it until she was being lifted as easily as a child. “What's happening?” she asked, the words slurring together.

“We're going to make a break for it.”

***

Bull watched as Krem loaded the last cask of gaatlok onto their cart. Lady Mantillon stood beside him with a sour look on her face. “Here I thought I might have something special for my next party, but everyone in the citadel appears to have had a cask.”

He smirked. “If you want maraas-lok that badly, I'll get you a boatload.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You're sure you've got everyone's?”

“Krem, do you still know how to count?”

The man in question scoffed as he threaded heavy ropes over the load. “Always count your money right, don't I?”

Lady Mantillon lifted her nose. “Good. I'll expect the replacement by the end of the month. Don't you dare order for anyone else.”

And then she was gone. Bull chuckled at her imperious tone. Varric tossed a satchel under the driver seat and climbed up. “Need help getting anything, Tiny?”

Dacarte swung onto the seat beside the dwarf. “Surely you don't think you can beat my prices?”

Varric lifted a brow. “I have an entire merchant's guild. I just might be able to.”

Dacarte was silent for a moment before asking, “Are you accepting new members?”

Hawke arrived with Sunny and another horse in tow. “We should get on the road. I'd rather not be out there after dark.”

Bull agreed. His morning reports had all shown massive stockpiles throughout Thedas. He didn't know why they waited to detonate the casks, and that made him nervous. The Qunari didn't act rashly. They planned. Was this a distraction from the real attack?
The only saving grace was that the Viddasala appeared to have acted on her own. The Arishok’s communications with the rest of the Triumvirate confirmed it. If there were more conspirators, they weren’t in high government positions. Without that access to power, moving massive troops was nearly impossible. Any forces ready to attack would be relatively easy to rout.

Bull hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Gatt hadn't made an appearance yet. Not that he was surprised. The elf seemed to prefer making roundabout attacks. *Probably doesn't want to get blood under his nails.*

Bull cut the thoughts short and climbed onto Sunny. “Let’s go.”

***

Sylaise touched a hand to the enchantment. The sizzling screen faded. “Move. *Quickly,*” she hissed.

Gina could feel the power making her hair stand on end as Ash barely squeezed through. Dorian was right on his heels. She tried to muster the energy to walk herself, but the heavy exhaustion weighed her down and made it impossible to even lift her head.

Not that Ash noticed. His eyes were focused straight ahead, and he was moving fast. The only ones ahead of him on the path were the two spirits.

Before she knew it, they were climbing stairs. Rough ones, judging from the choppiness of his long stride. She squinted at the walls flashing by. The library, which hadn't taken quite as much damage as she thought. Or had it been long enough for them to repair it? Did time mean anything in this place?

“If you have an Eluvian, why do you not enter it?” asked Dorian.

Sylaise sounded short of breath. “There is a barrier, much like the Veil. We have not been permitted to pass it.”

Ash lurched to a stop and spun around. Gina heaved, but managed to keep from throwing up. He winced. “Sorry, little one.” His eyes turned to the elf. “What makes you think we’re going to get past the barrier now?”

Sylaise pointed at his hand. “I am hoping this will be sufficient.”

“You hope?” Ash cursed and turned to follow Sera and Dalish again, muttering under his breath about planning to fail.

Gina’s faculties were finally coming back to her. When they came into a massive room that appeared to have been a lecture hall at one point, she tapped Ash on the arm. “I’m good.”

He gave her a doubtful look, but set her down anyway. Gina gripped his arm for a moment to balance. “Where's the mirror?”

Sera flitted to a heavy set of drapes and tugged them loose. A dull mirror stood behind it, the surface pitted and grimy.

Ash started to cross the room. “Wait,” Sylaise cried.

A sharp buzz hit at the same moment and Ash was launched twenty feet. He landed hard and skidded into a wall with a thud. Dorian raced over. “Vishante kaffas! Are you alright?”
The Qunari groaned and sat up. “What the hell…”

“That is the barrier.”

Dorian assisted Ash in getting to his feet. “You couldn't have warned us sooner? That could have killed him. And then where would we be?”

“You would be trapped in the Fade. Just as you are now.” Elgar’nan stepped into sight from behind a bookshelf.

Sylaise went pale. “Elgar, please. This isn't right of us. They came for help.”

“They came to destroy us.”

Dorian’s lip curled. “We did no such thing. As you'll recall-”

“Be silent.” Elgar sneered at the group. “Did you truly think escape would come so easily?”

As his palm raised, Sylaise barged in between them. “This stubborn pride is what Fen’harel spoke of! It was our downfall once. Don’t do this again!”

The elf’s dark eyes flashed her way, and his entire body began to glow with unnatural power. “You have taken their side. So be it. You shall die with them as well.”

Before anyone could react, a bolt of energy shot from his hand and into her forehead. Her body stiffened and toppled to the ground in what felt like slow motion. Her head lolled to the side, eyes wide and dull.

Gina screamed and pandemonium erupted. The rest of the Evanuris burst into view with hands high and voices calling out spells. Ash and Dorian responded in kind, lashing out with spells and casting shields.

Sera and Dalish joined the assault, losing their humanoid forms as they darted through the group of elves and hit them with their own brand of energy. It was like watching a lightning quick round of pinball. Elves cursed and tumbled in their wake.

Gina couldn't do anything. She didn't have a weapon, she didn't have the mark. All she could do was cower behind Ash and Dorian.

Another voice joined the fray. Morrigan! The witch raced into the room, staff spinning and slashing as she went. She battled her way between them and the Evanuris. “Get through the mirror, you fools!”

Ash spun without argument, marked palm brandished. A thread of green light zipped from it to the invisible barrier, slicing a hole just big enough for him to get through. “Go!” he bellowed.

Dorian and Gina dove through and out of the way. Ash leapt through and turned back. “Come on!”

Morrigan flicked her hand and the barrier sealed itself. Ash jolted forward. “No! What are you doing?”

“I am not like Hitler,” said Morrigan, in a voice not quite her own.

Gina’s breath caught. The witch held her eye for a moment and then she pointed at the mirror. “Go!”

Ash lifted his palm to reopen the barrier, but Morrigan shook her head and shouted, “Go, damn
you!

Dorian caught hold of the Qunari’s arm and pulled him along as they bolted to the mirror. “The key,” said Gina, her breath coming in gasps. “We didn't get it.”

Ash shook his head. “I know precisely what it is.”

Gina and Dorian watched as he approached the mirror and whispered one word in Elvhen.

“Revasan.”

The mirror shimmered to life as Elgar’nan shrieked, “No!”

With one last look toward Morrigan, Ash herded them through the shimmering surface.

***

The walls of the Winter Palace were starting to peek over the trees. Bull looked up at them and wondered what Gina thought of the massive complex. No doubt she had very different memories of the place than his.

Where are you, Kadan?

They reached the stables just before the nightly feeding. Bull stripped Sunny’s tack and stowed it, then checked in on Brego. Both horses were more concerned with the coming meal, so he headed into the palace proper to update the rest of the advisors.

As he left their meeting room, a crow landed on his shoulder. He picked the note from its leg and it nestled into the curve of his neck, the creature’s tiny heart racing.

“Where did you come from?” he murmured.

He unfolded the slip of paper.

“Hi. So, we're in Kirkwall, I guess.”

Bull jolted and whooped at the top of his lungs, sending his feathered passenger tumbling. It gave an indignant squawk and flew toward the aviary. “Oh shit, sorry buddy!” Bull called, watching long enough to see it land safely. Then he scanned the rest of the note with the fervor of a teenage boy.

“We made our way to Hawke’s place. His servants are taking care of us. Staying over a night, and then Dorian says he'll charter us a boat. Can't wait to see you.”

A tiny heart stood in place of a signature. Bull traced it with his finger before tucking the note away and hustling home to share the good news.

It took three days. Three days in which every flap of wing had him jerking to his feet with deranged eagerness. All of the crows on the aviary had begun to avoid him. Even Cedric was giving him the side-eye. But finally, finally Bull got word that their ship was due for arrival.

The entire Inquisition and then some gathered at the docks. Bull had Kaya on his shoulders as he paced back and forth, his patience wearing thinner and thinner with every passing minute.

Come on, come on. Put the sails up and go!

A brilliant blue sail crested the horizon. Bull squinted. The sigil of Kirkwall was just visible. He
caught Kaya off his shoulders and gave her a hug. “Papa is going to go get Tama, okay?”

The little girl squealed and nodded. He kissed her tiny nose and handed her to Jeremy. Then he spun on his heel and bolted down the length of the pier. When he reached the end, he dove into the water and kicked with all his might.

Five hard minutes of swimming later, he was at the side of the ship. Sailors cried out as he caught hold of the ropes and launched himself onto the deck. His knees were like jelly when he stood up, but he gritted his teeth and strode forward with purpose. “Where is she?”

“The Iron Bull, I presume?” A woman with dark hair and deep olive skin stood on the upper deck. Her dark eyes were dancing with amusement.

He nodded. “Where?”

The woman tilted her head toward a door. “Captain's quarters.”

Bull took the stairs two at a time and wrenched the door open just in time to see the love of his life snatch up a bucket and empty her guts into it.

She spat and gave him a feeble wave. “So sexy, right?”

Her face was pale and wan, her hair was damp with sweat, and she looked as though she'd been dragged through hell and back.

Bull crossed the room and traced his thumb over her eyebrow. “I've never seen anyone or anything more perfect, Kadan.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. Bull tutted and set the bucket of sick to the side. As he sat on the bed and gathered her into his lap, Dorian and Ash entered the room.

Dorian’s hair was a disaster, and he had dark smudges under both eyes. His mustache was missing, as was the warm sparkle that usually resided in his eyes. “You are the most ridiculous person I've ever met in my entire life,” said the Mage. “We were fifteen minutes away.”

Ash had a haunted look in his bloodshot eyes. A telltale glow from his palm made Bull’s stomach clench. He wanted to look at her shoulder, to confirm that the nightmare was over, but restrained himself.

Bull looked from one to the other and asked, “Do I want to know?”

Dorian shook his head. “Not now.”

He nodded. The Mage passed him a bowl with water and a clean cloth. Both men exited the room. Bull soaked the cloth and began to gently wipe at Gina’s face. She cuddled into him and accepted the ministrations meekly.

“Is it the baby?” he asked.

She shook her head and croaked, “I get seasick.”

A soft laugh escaped him. “Really? I had no idea.”

Loud calls from outside signaled that they were at the docks. Gina sat a little straighter and fussed with her hair. “Be honest. Do I look like a disaster?”
Bull touched her chin. “No one here is going to judge your appearance.”

She nodded, but more tears slipped free. “I'm sorry,” she said around a hiccuping sob.

Bull shook his head and wrapped her in his arms. “It's okay, Kadan. You're safe now.”

***

Her Qunari carried her like she weighed nothing. Gina pressed closer and savored the feeling of his skin against her cheek. He was warm and silky soft. She could wrap herself up in him and sleep for days.

Her stomach still roiled in protest as he walked down a steep ramp and onto something hollow and wooden sounding. As awful as the Fade was, she’d take another week there over another day on that damn tub. The entire journey across the sea had been hellacious. It was lucky it hadn't stormed.

Ash and Dorian were walking just ahead, both dragging their feet. The two had been so kind and generous in their care it made her want to cry. Then again, everything made her want to cry lately.

“You don't get it. I get to live a normal life because of you,” Gina said, her voice shaking from the irrepressible sobs. “How can I ever repay you?”

Ash looked pained. “I dunno. Name the kid after me?”

“Kid?”

Ash went scarlet as Dorian realized exactly what the Qunari meant. “You're pregnant?” he cried, catching Gina by the shoulders.

She nodded. “Surprise?”

The Mage swept her into a hard hug before gasping. “And we took you into the Fade? Are you insane? Is Bull insane? Wait, does Bull know?”

A smile snuck over her face as the prolonged lecture that followed played through her mind. Bull kissed her forehead. “Feeling any better?”

She shook her head and nestled closer. “No. You'll need to carry me a little longer.”

He tightened his arms. “Like I'd ever let you go,” he whispered in her ear.

A joyful cheer came from down the dock. Gina lifted her head to look, and saw a tiny form racing toward them. She lurched upright and Bull gave a laughing yelp. “Easy, Kadan.”

He dropped to his knees and held one massive arm out. Kaya launched into him and scrambled to throw her arms around Gina’s neck.

Gina burst into tears and clung to the girl for all she was worth. Words were coming out of her mouth, but she couldn’t have guessed what they were. Bull held them both tight and rained kisses on both faces as they all had a good cry. A happy cry.

Gina stroked hair from Kaya’s forehead. “You've gotten so big, my beautiful girl.”

“Tama, I missed you.”

Gina dissolved into tears at the title. Her family was back together. Finally *something* had gone right.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Look me up on Twitter/Insta (@lexibanner), or FB (@authorlexibanner). I post funny, sexy, dumb, and writery stuff! Enjoy!

Bull lay on his side. Gina was passed out, had been from the moment he lay her in their bed. She'd clung to his fingers for a long while, but eventually fell into a deep enough sleep to go completely slack. A low snore accompanied her every breath.

He examined her from head to toe, lingering on the thick pink scar marring her shoulder. No green glow. No eerie blackness. Just a regular scar; one that was well-earned.

His fingers took control and traced that ragged line before traveling over her body. She had lost all of the weight she'd gained before they left Skyhold, plus about ten pounds. Maybe more. Her ribs were far too easy to palpate as he skimmed over them.

He settled his palm against her belly. She remained flat, but under the surface he could feel the slightest bulge forming. If he wasn’t so intent on cataloging every detail, he might have missed it. Their tiny life was getting bigger already. Bull wondered how the baby was doing. Wondered if she'd be safe to carry the child to term.

A shaky sigh escaped him as he shifted closer and wrapped himself around her. Worries were for another night. Tonight he would take solace in having her in his arms.

***

Gina stood at the altar inside a beautiful Chantry. Stone walls surrounded her, along with stunning stained glass windows. The afternoon sun cast a warm glow through the space, and dust motes hung in the air.

“Haven was almost as old as the Elvhen. It’s a shame it was lost in the avalanche.”

She turned to see Solas standing a few paces away. His hands were behind his back as he gazed at her. “I am sorry, vhenan,” he said, his voice soft.
She lifted her chin. “Where's Morrigan?”

“The witch is safe. I have left her at peace for now.”

Gina gave a bitter scoff. “How generous.”

“It was her choice to drink from the well and become the servant of Mythal. I tried to stop her, you'll recall.”

Gina reached out to touch the altar but her fingers slipped through the surface. “What about Alita?”

“She is safe and comfortable.”

She scowled. “You once told me that spirits can't exist in this realm. That it corrupts them.”

A soft smile touched his lips. “She is not in this realm.”

Gina lifted a palm. “You know what, I don't want to know. I don't have the mark. Leave my dreams alone.”

Solas nodded. “I shall. I just wanted to speak with you. To tell you that I understand better now.”

The ‘Hitler’ comment flashed into her mind. “Took my advice, did you?”

“I never intended to become a monster. I only intended to save my people. You saw what they were like. It was worse in the days before the Veil.”

Solas drifted through the heavy wooden doors without opening them. Gina followed, and found herself in the former village's small square. He turned to face her. “I must commend you. My plans have been forced to drastically alter thanks to you. The Qunari shows remarkable shielding ability.”

She rubbed at her forehead, fighting the urge to yawn. “Solas, you played god twice and both times you nearly destroyed the world. Don't you think it's time to stop looking for some magic bullet to solve the world's problems?”

Solas frowned. “My people are shadows moving in a world of color. I must do something.”

“You were smart enough to craft the Veil. I have no doubt that you're smart enough to undo it in such a way that won't end the world for the people I love.” Gina turned to the elf. “I only wish I could believe that you'll choose to do right by everyone.”

“Someone always loses, vhenan.”

“If I have anything to do with it, the only loser will be you.”

A sad smile came to his face. “I expect nothing less. Enjoy your peace while it lasts, Virginia Carter.”

He lifted a palm and vanished. Gina hugged herself tightly against the frisson caused by the elf's final statement, and blew out a sharp breath. She let herself fret for just a moment before turning her eye to the stars, seeking Draconis. In a heartbeat, the warm presence of her love surrounded her, whispering lore from centuries past and pulling her deep into the realm of sleep.

***

Bull could practically feel her staring at him as he dozed. “Tha’s rude, Kadan,” he slurred on a jaw-
cracking yawn.

She ran her palms over his chest and shoulders before curving them behind his neck and pressing closer. Her nose brushed against his as she whispered, “I'm sorry. You just looked so beautiful in the morning light.”

His face went hot. “Flattery will get you everywhere,” he murmured as he closed the gap between their mouths.

In a breath, it was not a patient or romantic kiss. It was hungry and desperate. The kind of kiss that left them both breathless and starving for more. He ravaged her petal soft lips, making her whimper with delight.

Bull flipped her to lie beneath him. The abrupt movement had her clutching at her head and moaning. A burst of fear clutched at the base of his spine. “Kadan?”

She took a few short breaths and gripped his shoulder. “Slower. Just a little slower.”

The worry eased slightly. “Slow? Hmm.” He tipped her chin up and took a long taste along the delicate skin covering her throat. “I think I can do slow,” he whispered.

Bull kissed a trail over her collarbone and along the scar left by the Anchor. He met her lips with his before moving down to each hard nipple. She arched into the sensation and groaned. He used both tongue and teeth to get her fully trembling before drifting lower along the taut lines of her body.

By the time he slid a palm over her pussy, she was hot and wet. A shuddering cry ripped from her lips as she thrust against his hand. Bull laid his other hand over her belly, trapping her to the bed. “I thought you said slow, Kadan?”

Her eyes were fever bright as she watched him lower his face between her legs. He pressed open-mouth kisses on both inner thighs before nipping the crease of her hip. When his tongue finally slid along the sweet line of her, they both moaned. Bull guided both of her legs to hook over his shoulders as he took a deeper taste of her and settled in for the pleasure of making her come on his face.

His wanton little slut was begging him in three languages before he finally pushed her over the edge of climax. She was still quivering when he began to trace his finger around her pussy. As he pushed it past her sleek folds, she gave a ragged gasp. A smile touched his lips. “Slow, remember?”

Her head fell back as he continued his painfully patient ministrations. “Fuck me,” she groaned.

“All in good time, Kadan,” he whispered.

Time lost all meaning as he played her like an instrument. Her every whimper and plea was like a drug, and he couldn’t get enough. Nothing was ever as addictive as his Kadan, and he couldn’t fathom a day when he’d be sated of his desire for her.

As she trembled through another climax, Bull finally rose above her. “You delicious thing,” he murmured against her lips.

After a lingering kiss, he guided the head of his cock to slide against her pussy. Her breath caught as he pressed forward. The silken wetness of her was nearly enough to undo his self-control, but he bit his lip and maintained his steady pace. When he was buried to the hilt, he paused to savour the sensation of being surrounded by the heat of her impossibly tight flesh. Gina’s pulse was through the roof, and as he eased himself out of her and thrust back in, her eye rolled back in her skull.
“You feel so good inside me,” she whimpered.

Bull glided forward, filling her with every inch of his cock. “You’ve told me that before,” he rasped.

“Because it’s the fucking truth,” she said, her hands caressing his shoulders and chest.

With every thrust, his nerves lit aflame. It was getting harder to keep his promise of staying slow and steady, but judging by her filthy words of encouragement, he would probably find forgiveness for his failure. He shifted on his knees and started to drive into her, letting the wild beast within claim control, just for a little while.

Her body started to clench around him, so he picked up the pace and stroked his thumb over her clit. Gina arched and sucked a long breath before everything released and she was shivering and twitching beneath him. The sensation was enough to shove him over the edge, a hoarse cry forcing its way free as he stiffened and quaked.

Tingles flooded over his body in the aftermath, leaving him boneless. Her nails scratched lightly across his skin, extending the shivery feeling. He kissed her forehead. “A man could die from pussy this good, you know.”

She shook her head and caressed his cheeks. “No dying. I need you to do that to me again, and again, and again.”

***

Gina lost track of time as she drifted in and out of sleep. At one point Bull and Kaya prodded her awake long enough to have a drink and eat a slice of toast with jam, but for the most part, they let her sleep.

The sky was dark when she woke again. Bull was tucked in beside her, his brow furrowed as he read from reports and a heavy tome. A lamp cast a dim glow in the room. She turned to curl into his side. “What’s all this?”

He grimaced. “We have another hearing in a few days. I’m trying to prepare.”

Gina nuzzled in closer. “What’s the hearing about?”

“Final decision whether to disband the Inquisition or not.”

Her eye widened. “That sounds pretty important.”

Bull scoffed and slipped his arm around her. “They just don’t like seeing an independent force doing better work than they do.”

She tapped the thick book. “What's this?”

“Legal text. Basically lays out the laws which allow the Chantry to create and run an Inquisition. It's why this whole thing got started.”

Gina sat up. A rush of blood to her head made her woozy, which in turn made her stomach flip. Bull laid a hand on her back. “Easy, Kadan. You okay?”

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. “A little thirsty.”

He dumped the books and reports onto the bedside table and left the room long enough to grab a pitcher and a pair of glasses.
After taking a few sips, she pointed to the book. “Does the Chantry still have the power to disband us?”

“And the power to keep us intact. If Leliana decided to keep us operational, Ferelden and Orlais would have no choice but to allow it.”

“They have no recourse? Sounds awfully tyrannical.”

“There’s always war. I’m not confident we’d win if they combined forces. Not even with Chantry support.”

“What would you like to see happen?”

“If not a full withdrawal, a significant reduction of forces. It would let us focus on more important things.”

“Like what?”

Bull kissed her shoulder. “Like the Qunari’s plan to invade. And Solas. We could find him if Ferelden and Orlais had to pick up their own slack.”

Gina drew up her knees and rested her chin on them. “He has to figure out a new plan.”

Bull lifted a brow. “How do you know that?” She squirmed and looked away. He muttered a curse. “Still butting into your dreams?”

“He said he won’t anymore. Just wanted to chat one last time.”

Bull grunted and placed both glasses on the table. “I still owe him a punch in the face.”

“You may get your chance.”

He bent forward and kissed her, lingering for a moment before drawing away and saying, “I look forward to it.”

Gina traced her fingers across his heavily muscled thigh. “In the meantime, I have an idea to occupy those big paws of yours.”

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest. “I’m supposed to be working, little desire demon.”

She moved her hand higher. “Just so I’m clear, you’re saying I shouldn’t distract you?”

“Too late, naughty little thing.” His hands guided her to lay flat on her back. He rolled over top and kissed her until she could hardly breathe. “I hope you’re ready to explain to the Inquisitor why my reports aren’t complete.”

She lifted her hips and ground against him, taking fierce pride in the hunger filling his expression. “The Inquisitor can kick rocks. You’re mine tonight.”

“Every night,” he whispered. “Always, for as long as you’ll have me.”

Her heart felt like it might explode from joy. “Forever sounds like a good start.”

***

Bull sat with Dorian and Ash, listening as they recounted the misadventure in the Fade. Learning
about Morrigan’s possession-induced betrayal was a kick in the teeth.

Ash furrowed his brow. “She gave her life to save ours.”

“According to Gina, the Witch is safe.”


Bull agreed, but at least his Kadan was no longer a living weapon. He glanced at Ash’s hand.

“Thank you, brother.”

The big Qunari shrugged. “That was our purpose, was it not?”

“Has the elf invaded your dreams too?”

Ash smirked. “He tries on occasion.”

Gina and Kaya came out of the bedroom, giggling and holding hands. As they moved closer, Kaya froze. Tears welled up in her dark eyes and a hysterical little sound escaped her lips. Bull straightened with a frown. “What is it, Imekari?”

“Bad ‘nari, bad ‘nari!” she whimpered, taking a few steps back.

Ash winced. “It’s me. I’ll go.”

Gina held up a hand. “Hang on.” She crouched low and took hold of both of Kaya’s hands. “Baby, I need you to find just a little bit of bravery. Can you do that?”

The girl’s breathing remained shallow and rapid, but she nodded. Gina pointed to Ash. “That’s papa’s little brother, your Uncle Ash. I know meeting him was really scary, but I’d like it if you’d let him explain his side. Is that okay?”

Kaya squirmed closer and nodded, her eyes as big as saucers. Ash cleared his throat and lifted the marked hand before realizing and jerking it back to his lap. “Imekari, in my job I have to make choices. Sometimes I make the wrong ones, and the day we met is one I regret the most. I am sorry beyond any words. I hope someday you can forgive me, but I understand if you don’t.”

The little girl looked to Bull. He nodded. “You’re doing good, kid.”

Gina gave the girl a hug. “Thank you for listening, Kaya. That was very kind of you.”

Kaya clung to her neck. A knock on the door preceded Jeremy. He and Dorian exchanged an awkward glance before the man held a hand toward Kaya. “Are we still going to visit the horses today?”

Kaya nodded and ran over to take his hand. As they walked to the door, Bull cleared his throat loudly. “Aren’t you forgetting something, Imekari?”

The little girl skidded to a stop and ran back to give him a hug and a kiss on each cheek. He added one more to her forehead and gave her a push toward the door. “Be good!”

Gina crept over and eased onto the chair beside Bull. He caressed her knee. “How you doing, Kadan?”

She leaned against him with a long sigh. “I could sleep for another week.”
Dorian lifted a brow. “Could it have anything to do with growing a whole new life form?”

Bull frowned. “You told him?”

Gina pointed at Ash, who gave an apologetic smile. “Not on purpose.”

Bull shook his head. “And they hired you as Salit?”

“Have you consulted with a doctor?” asked Dorian.

Bull wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I have two coming. One from Par Vollen, and one from Kirkwall. Should be here in the next couple days.”

Ash raised both brows. “Par Vollen as well? How did you manage that?”

“Turns out that they owe me a few favors,” said Bull, unable to keep the acid from his voice.

Gina rubbed his knee. “I’d like it if both of you were there after the exam to discuss the plans going forward. And if you can both keep your mouths shut.”

Dorian frowned. “Are you worried?”

Gina shifted in her seat. “I don’t know. I just don’t want it to be common knowledge yet.”

Pangs of worry flared to life in his gut. “For more reason than one.” Gatt still hadn’t been spotted, but it was a matter of ‘when’ not ‘if’. He had no intention of giving the elf yet another target. Bull gave Ash a hard look. “Promise me this will not leave your lips.”

The Qunari nodded. “I will guard it with my life.”

A knock sounded at the door. Bull started to rise, but Ash waved him off and headed over. “I’ll get it.”

“Oh! Maker…” came the musical voice of Josephine, an unusual squeak in her tone.

“Eloquent, my dear,” said Vivienne as she strode into the room.

Bull twisted to see Ash dipping his head in greeting as the Ambassador came into the room. “Good morning.”

She was wide eyed as she tripped over her words. “Yes, good morning. My apologies. You must be the Iron Bull’s brother. I am Josephine, the Inquisition’s ambassador.”

“You guessed correctly. Is that an Antivan accent?”

Josephine nodded. Ash grinned and said in Antivan, “My favorite language. It’s almost as lovely as you.”

The woman tittered and went crimson. “Thank you. Your accent is quite good.”

He shrugged. “Lots of practice.”

Bull mimed a gag at Dorian, who rolled his eyes and nodded. Gina swatted his arm.

“If you two are done being teenagers, we have an appointment to keep,” said Vivienne. She turned to Gina. “Come, my dear. We’re having a spa day.”
Gina shot Bull a Look. He had perfected a bland expression when he was training as Ben-hassrath, and he had it firmly in place. She scowled anyway. “You knew about this?”

“Maybe.”

She huffed and turned back to Vivienne. “Couldn't we rebook? I had plans to cuddle with my babies this afternoon.”

“The Iron Bull hardly counts as a baby,” said Dorian, a laugh coloring the words. Bull shot him a dirty look.

Vivienne looked scandalized. “Rebook? We were lucky to get a spot at all. Come now. Cuddling can wait.”

"Fine." Gina sighed and got to her feet. “Give me a minute to change.”

“Nonsense. What you're wearing is fine.”

“I'm in a ratty robe and slippers.”

The woman arched a brow. “And? What's your point, darling?”

Gina narrowed her eye. “You'll be seen in public with me dressed like this.”

Josephine stepped forward and waved her hands. “Oh, it will be fine. Your robe matches your eyes perfectly.”

Gina crossed her arms. “Uh huh. What gives?”

Vivienne sighed sharply. “Honestly. We don't have time for this. Let's go, or I'll take Cassandra in your stead.”

Gina glared at Bull, but he just smiled back. “Have fun.”

“You are terrible at surprises,” she muttered as she bent forward to kiss him. And then they were gone.

***

Gina lay back with a frown. “Okay, I give up. What's with the cheese wheels?”

Vivienne tutted. “It pains me that you even have to ask. You’ve clearly been living too long in barely civilized conditions.”

Gina shook her head and nearly lost the wheel covering her eyelid. “I get the gist, but we always used cucumber slices.”

“What is this cucumber?” asked Josephine, pronouncing the word oddly.

“A vegetable. High water content. Reduces puffiness. And it's tasty.”

Vivienne scoffed. “Using vegetables? What kind of barbarity is that?”

Gina bit her tongue and let her body relax. “So. Josephine. What do you think of Bull’s little brother?”
“Oh yes, do tell,” said Vivienne.

Gina could picture the redness flooding over Josephine’s face as she made flustered noises. “He is quite friendly.”

Gina smirked. “Uh huh. And?”

“And...tall.”

Vivienne snorted. “Maker preserve us. Do you think he's handsome?”

“Why! You! I!” Josephine cleared her throat and said stiffly, “May we have a change of subject?”

Gina decided to take mercy on her. “Fine. Viv? Any hot dates?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?”

“Would I have asked otherwise?”

“Touche, darling. No. I have not been on any dates. I haven't had time or desire. How about you? Are things still going swimmingly with the Iron Bull?”

Gina’s belly fluttered. “Very much.”

“I'm delighted to hear it,” said Vivienne. “Good to see things work out for once. You two deserve it.”

Gina fought the tears threatening at the back of her eyelid. “Thank you, Viv.”

A soft cough interrupted. “We're ready for you in the salon.”

Gina plucked the cheese off her eye. “Salon?”

“Of course.” Vivienne stood and Josephine followed. “My stylist is going to work magic with that rat’s nest of yours.”

An hour later, Gina stared at her reflection in shock. Hilo, the stylist, really had worked magic with a razor and set of shears. Gone was Gatt’s handiwork of uneven choppy ends. In their place was a sleek and oddly modern bob. He'd even accounted for her eye patch, allowing the strap to blend more effortlessly. She almost felt pretty as she leaned closer to the mirror. “Hilo, you're a miracle worker!”

The man beamed at her. “It should grow out nicely. But if you ever need a trim, don't you dare hesitate to send a crow.” With that, he bustled off to his next client.

Vivienne smoothed her fingers over her freshly clipped scalp, while Josephine preened and admired her bouncy curls. Gina took one last look and felt a smile slip over her lips. She looked human again. Maybe she'd put on a touch of makeup and ask Bull to take her out to dinner.

The three got up. Vivienne turned to leave and said, “What a lovely day. Always puts me right again.”

Gina agreed. “Thank you, ladies. This was really nice.”

Josephine rubbed her back. “Anytime.”
They walked out of the spa and into the main square to find Bull sitting in wait, Kaya on the bench beside him. He got to his feet as Gina approached. A low whistle reached her ears. “You look stunning,” he said.

Gina smiled and did a runway turn. “Thanks. Let me guess. You’re here for a surprise lunch date?”

A smile twitched at his lips. “Not quite.”

Gina frowned. “Then what-”

His eyes held hers as he said, “I had to ask your brother how this works, so if I do it wrong, it's his fault.”

She was about to demand clarification when Bull took her hand and eased to one knee, wincing when it contacted the hard cobblestones. Gina’s whole world froze.

He kissed her palm before pulling a box from his satchel. It was toy like in his broad fingers. Bull opened a tiny hinged top to reveal a silver ring with an artfully carved piece of greenstone that matched the stormy green of his eyes. “Virginia Carver, Advisor to the Empress Celene, Gina, Tamassran, Kadan. No matter the name or title, you are the source of light and joy of my life. Will you do me the immense honor of marrying me, and staying by my side for the rest of our days?”

Gina couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. After a strangling moment she managed a nod before bursting into tears and throwing her arms around his neck. Bull wrapped around her and held tight for a long moment before pulling away and taking her hand again. He fumbled only once as he pushed the ring onto her finger.

Cheers erupted around them as she caught his face in both hands and kissed him until her head was spinning. Then, someone was grabbing her and pulling. She turned to see the beaming smiles of both Josephine and Vivienne. “We’re not quite done with you.”

Gina turned back to find Bull and Kaya standing together. A smile was plastered across his entire face. “I'm locking you down today, Kadan.” He slipped closer and added, “Surprise.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aside from Vivienne playing her hand far too strongly and Josephine nearly spoiling the surprise, everything had gone perfectly to plan. The shocked delight on Gina’s face was a sight he’d never forget in his life. He couldn’t wait to see what she thought of the rest of his plans.

Bull, Cullen, and Leliana stood on a slightly raised platform at the end of a private courtyard. Bull initially planned to have less than ten people attend, but the giddy reactions from everyone he told convinced him that this wedding would be a welcome reprieve from the political happenings. Less than ten people somehow ballooned to standing room only. Even the nobility from Orlais and Ferelden were watching from balconies just above the courtyard. Of course, mixed throughout was a sprinkling of agents handpicked by him and Leliana. Just in case.

A few rows of seats stood before them. Sitting front and center and looking baffled was his Tama. He’d tried to explain his reasoning, but she didn’t understand the need for any ceremony. “You are or you aren’t,” she’d said before turning her full attention to braiding Kaya’s hair.

The Arishok and Ash sat on either side of her, the latter speaking softly to her. It appeared to be translations, but Bull couldn’t keep focused long enough to confirm. He shook his hands at the wrists, willing his mind and body to relax.

His harness felt tight and constrictive, making it hard to breathe. He fussed with it until Cullen batted his hands away and adjusted the strapping to lie flat. Bull shifted from foot to foot and revealed the tremor in his hand. “Why the hell am I nervous?”

“Because she might come to her senses?”
Bull scowled. “Don’t even say it, Templar.”

Cullen laughed softly and put a hand on Bull’s shoulder. “I didn’t expect that I’d ever witness a Qunari getting married, let alone the Iron Bull. I am honored to stand at your side.”

Bull swallowed hard. “Thank you. I can’t imagine anyone else standing in your place.”

They shared a smile, and then soft string music began to play. Bull’s heart skipped several beats as he watched the arch that would reveal his girls.

Cassandra and Kaya came through the doorway first. His baby was throwing handfuls of flower petals in a haphazard manner. Bull had no clue what kind, but they were pink so he liked them. She stopped halfway to shout hello to him and wave vigorously enough to dump most of the petals on the ground in a pile. Laughing cut through the tension crackling up his spine.

And then Gina was there, her delicate form framed by the stone archway.

He went weak at the knees. Cullen’s hand catching under his arm was the only thing that kept him upright. He gripped the man’s shoulder and whispered, “Look at her.”

Thanks to Vivienne, the white dress she loved so much in Val Royeaux was perfectly fitted. The fuschia ribbon at the waist and lace trim highlighted her slim curves, while dainty silver heels made her about three inches taller. Her half of their shared claw was prominently displayed by the square neckline of the dress. The claw was strung on a new chain that matched the silverite of the ring Dagna crafted for them.

Jeremy walked at her side, his eyes bright with unshed tears. Gina had one hand tucked in at the crook of his elbow, while the other held a little spray of flowers that matched Kaya’s petals.

Cassandra and Kaya stepped onto the platform and moved to the side. As Jeremy and Gina halted at the base of the platform, Leliana began to speak. “Welcome, everyone, to this joyous occasion. At this time, I would ask that Gina join the Iron Bull.”

His heart was racing as she stepped up and took hold of his hand. Her hand was vibrating just as badly as his, but her smile was radiant. “Hi,” she whispered.

He pulled her into a hug. “Hi.”

They turned to face Leliana who recited a pretty speech about honor and love. Bull hardly heard a word of it over the rushing of blood inside his skull. Then she said, “I’m told that the couple would like to recite their own vows to one another.”

“We would? News to me;” quipped Gina, earning a laugh from the crowd.

She turned to face him and placed a hand over his heart. “Mind if I go first?”

Bull smiled and shook his head. She took a deep breath and said, “One time you told me that Qunari don’t fall in love. I would like the record to show that as the biggest pile of crap you’ve ever tried to unload on me.”

More laughter rippled through the crowd. Gina waited for them to settle, then continued. “I know that you love me. I feel it when I catch you watching me across a crowded room. I feel it when you hold me in your arms. I feel it when we disagree and you interrupt your own argument to kiss me.

Bull’s entire body glowed as he listened. She was talking about him? He was this lucky? It felt
almost surreal.

She caught his hand and lifted it to her lips. After kissing his knuckles, she laid his palm against her heart. “What we share is so far beyond anything I ever dreamed. When I come home to you and our daughter snoring in front of the fire, it makes me feel complete. I wouldn't trade our lives for anything in any world, and I promise that every day I will do everything in my power to be a person that is worthy of a person so selfless and wonderful as you. Calling you my husband is a privilege, one I will cherish and safeguard for the rest of my life.”

His lips trembled from the effort of repressing the tears straining for release. A shaky laugh escaped him. “Talk about a tough act to follow, Kadan.”

The crowd’s laughter was a little more subdued this time around. Probably because everyone else had let their tears fall freely. Bull took hold of her hand and said, “You've always known the right things to say, so I shouldn't be surprised that you could speak so beautifully with almost no notice. But I am. You still find ways to surprise me everyday, whether it's having a last second speech, or learning that you don't do so well on boats.”

He squeezed her fingers lightly. “When I said Qunari didn't fall in love, I didn't know what love meant. I had no idea that it could give you the strength to conquer the world while at the same time dropping you to your knees in awe. I didn't know it meant growing together and finding completion in another person. You taught me that, and it's because of you that my world has changed so dramatically.”

A tear was hovering at the corner of her eye. He dabbed it lightly with his fingertip. “I still find it hard to believe that someone as incredible as you gave me a second glance, let alone the gift of your love and our family. I don't know that I deserve any of it, but I'll spend the rest of my days busting my ass to earn it.” His control cracked and tears rushed free. “I promise you that.”

She slipped her arms around him and held tight. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and rubbed her back. “I love you,” she whispered.

“Not half as much as I love you.”

***

Gina could hardly see straight she was shaking so hard. Leliana gave them both a serene smile. “I consider myself lucky to have witnessed the growth of your relationship, and of you both personally. It is my greatest honor to bestow the blessing of Andraste and the Maker upon this union, and pronounce you husband and wife. The Iron Bull, you may kiss your bride.”

“You don't have to tell me twice.” Bull slipped his hand around the back of her neck and lowered his face to hers. Gina cupped his cheeks as their lips met in a kiss sweeter than anything she'd ever tasted in her life.

When they broke apart, Varric shouted, “That's it?”

Bull traced his thumb over her lower lip. “I'm just getting started,” he murmured, dipping her low and kissing her so thoroughly, she forgot there was an audience.

When he brought them both up for air, she was startled to realize they had a standing ovation from all of their friends and family. Even the Arishok was on his feet and clapping.

“How'd I do?”
She turned to see Bull’s smug smile. Gina poked him lightly in the belly. “Not bad, Qunari.”

He kissed her forehead. “Good.”

Kaya slammed into his legs. He made a fierce sound and launched her high in the air, making her screech with laughter. Gina’s belly fluttered. Soon there would be two babies to love. Lucky for them all, their papa had plenty to spare.

“Aaw, Kadan, don’t cry. I won’t drop her.”

Gina laughed and dabbed at her cheeks. “I know. Just hormones.”

Any response her Qunari might have made was lost as the crowds swept around them. After a few friends hugged her, Bull's hand wrapped around hers and drew her closer. People shouted and cheered, their voices high with excitement. Gina could hardly hear any of the kind wishes and congratulations coming at them from every direction, but she responded as best as she could. Thankfully it wasn't too long before Cullen and Hawke began to shoo people away, sending them off to the main ballroom, where a meal awaited, courtesy of the Orlesian Trifecta. "A gift," explained Bull.

Kaya went with Jeremy, leaving Bull and Gina alone. He collapsed onto one of the stone benches littering the beautiful topiary garden and beckoned to her. "Weddings are hard work," he said as she slipped onto his lap.

She kissed him lightly and nodded. "That's why we should only do this once."

Bull brought his lips to hers for a lingering kiss before whispering, "I dunno. I'd do it again if it meant seeing you walk toward me like my personal fantasy come to life."

Gina glanced down at the dress. "It's a great dress, isn't it?"

Bull hooked a finger into the neckline and tugged it out lightly. "I'd say its the contents that are great."

She laughed and kissed him again. "Did Jeremy tell you about the other wedding tradition?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't know. What else is there?"

A grin spread across her face. "We call it a Honeymoon."

**Chapter End Notes**

Not done yet - a few things to clear up before this series comes to a close! Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn’t the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can’t.

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Chapter Notes

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Bull sat on the edge of his seat, clutching Gina’s hand as tight as he dared.

The pair of doctors facing them couldn’t have been more different. Ren, a human from Kirkwall, was thin and unassuming. His dark hair was sparse and wispy. He had a nervous air about him, as though he was on trial. Everything he said came with a long hesitation, and he refused to meet Bull’s gaze directly.

Aadar, a Tamassaran from Par Vollen, stood almost as tall as Bull. Even if his horns were at full growth instead of half, hers put his to shame. Her white hair was in a thick braid that fell to her waist. In stark contrast to the human, she had a disapproving note to her voice. Bull suspected the only thing keeping her from expressing herself outright was the fact that she’d come due to a direct command from the Arishok himself.

Ren cleared his throat. “First of all, this pregnancy is not as unique as you think. During the Qunari occupation of Kirkwall, there were several women who...indulged...with Qunari soldiers.”

Gina narrowed her eye. “Is that what we’re doing? Indulging?”

A red flush crept up his neck. “Maker, no. I just...I wanted to illustrate that this type of child has been born.”

Bull cupped a hand over the back of her neck and massaged into the tension he found there. “Have they been born successfully?”
“Yes,” said Aadar. “We ran experiments with the female Viddathari, to see what type of child such a 
union would produce.”

Bull flinched. Gina squeezed his hand gently. “What was the result?”

Aadar wrinkled her nose and stayed silent. The scorn rolling off the woman was strong enough to 

Her lips tightened, but the reminder was enough to get her talking again. “The human women are far 
weaker and less capable than Qunari women. 85% required early bed rest, and 95% required 
cesarean sections in order to deliver the child.” She paused and sighed. “However, they were not 
wholly unsuccessful. Of the two dozen women, 75% carried to term, and of those 75%, 80% 
survived the labor. They fared far better than the elves chosen for the same experimentation. Only 
40% of those women were able to carry to term.”

Ren consulted a book. “I would say this is consistent with our findings. The children were larger 
than average, but their mother’s bodies adapted to carrying them. Labor proved too much for them to 
overcome, so surgical intervention was necessary. With that comes an increased risk of infection, but 
we can do much to minimize that risk.”

Gina glanced at Bull. “What about the children? Were they healthy?”

“They were weaker than their full blooded Qunari compatriots,” said Aadar.

“That wasn't the question,” said Gina, her voice sharp.

The Qunari woman didn't react outwardly. “They had no notable health problems.”

“We found the same,” said Ren.

Bull swallowed hard. “So what’s the consensus? Is it safe for Gina to carry this child to term?”

Ren fussed with his papers and cleared his throat several times. “I believe her chances of success are 
fair.”

“She is thin and weak.” Aadar sniffed disdainfully, and examined her nails. “I suspect she will have 
trouble with birthing your child.”

His gut churned. “Is there anyway to help her?”

Ash spoke from the seats behind them. “I'll personally make sure she remains safe.”

“As will I,” added Dorian.

Bull shot a grateful look over his shoulder and turned to Gina. “What do you think, Kadan?”

She was a shade paler than usual, but met his eyes, a trembling smile on her lips. “I think we need to 
make a plan with our medical team.”

Two hours later, he and Gina were alone. She was staring straight ahead, her hands white knuckled 
on the arms of her chair. Bull wasn’t in much better shape.

“We're having a baby,” she whispered.

He nodded. “Yeah.”
“We're having a baby, Bull!” A wild sounding laugh escaped her. “Bull, we're having a baby!”

A grin fought its way free. “We're having a baby!”

She scrambled out of her seat and threw herself onto his lap. He met her with a giddy hug. Tears streamed down both of their faces, mingling together as they kissed.

“Is this really real?”

Bull pinched her bottom just hard enough to make her squeak. “Feels real to me, Kadan.”

***

After a bedtime story with extra hugs and kisses, Gina and Bull slipped out of Kaya’s room. Bull’s Tama stood in the kitchen, her hands moving too fast for Gina to follow. Rows of a twisted pastry like substance were quickly growing on a baking pan.

The woman wasn't quite frosty toward Gina, but she hadn't exactly warmed up to her either. Bull and Gina had revealed their happy news to Jeremy, Kaya, and Tama earlier in the night. While Jeremy and Kaya both cheered and asked endless questions, the Qunari woman almost immediately got up to clean the kitchen, hardly showing any reaction. Gina wasn't sure how to handle the woman's reticence.

Bull kissed his Tama on the temple. “Sure you're okay to stay with Kaya?” he asked in rumbling Qunlat.

She nodded. “Go go.”

Gina dipped her head. “Thank you, Tama.”

Before they could walk to the door, Tama made a sharp sound. As they turned to face her, she shrugged and said in halting Common tongue, “My boy is happy. So I am happy. Thank you, Gina.”

Gina’s eye instantly watered. Bull laughed and pulled them both into a hug. “Our big, weird, happy family.”

They finally left, making their way to the Inquisition headquarters for a game of Wicked Grace. Along the way, Bull made meaningful eye contact with several people, most of whom she wouldn't be able to recognize a moment after meeting. He'd increased the security around their quarters, all in defense against Gatt, who hadn't yet shown his miserable face.

They slipped down the last flight of steps to a raucous greeting from a party already well underway. Hawke and the Arishok were having some sort of grappling duel. The Chargers were camped around this match, cheering for both sides. Varric was surrounded by people as he regaled them with some tall tale or other. Cassandra and Leliana were in deep discussion, tucked away in a corner.

Gina waved at Ash. He waggled a monstrous tankard of ale her way. Dorian was at his side, while Josephine hovered nearby, plainly looking for an excuse to take up the empty seat on his other side. Bull wandered off to chat with Krem and procure a drink.

Varric gave a sharp whistle and pointed to a massive table on the other end of the room. Chairs lined it, along with an endless array of hors d'oeuvres.

A familiar hand slid down her back. Gina melted into the contact. Bull kissed her on the temple.
Varric called out for a toast.

“Oh Gina, you don’t have a drink,” said Josephine.

Gina lifted a palm. “It’s okay, I’m not drinking tonight.”

“We made your favorite,” said Krem, holding out a tankard that smelled of chocolate and spice.

She met Bull’s eyes with a smile and said loudly, “Thanks, but it's bad for the baby.”

There was a collective moment of murmured acceptance, and then silence.

Then, a shriek. “A baby!” cried Cassandra.

Gina laughed as Cassandra ran across the room and flung her arms around her. Josephine and Leliana piled on, making Bull laugh as he braced their swaying group. Cheers filled the room, and everyone came to marvel over Gina and shake hands with Bull.

When everyone was settled, Varric stood again. “As I was saying,” he said, pointedly, “Here's to the weirdest, most unlikely crew of people, and to saving the world. May they stay saved. For once.”

Guffaws and laughter erupted, and Hawke shouted, “Like that’ll bloody happen!”

***

Bull lost another hand. It wasn't surprising, seeing as he could hardly focus enough to bet.

A flash of light at one of the high windows caught his attention. Finally. He pressed a kiss to Gina’s temple. “I'm going for some fresh air.”

She lifted a brow. “How much fresh air?”

He grimaced. In the week since their wedding, she had caught up on her sleep, bringing back his perceptive Kadan. Hiding anything from her was difficult, let alone something like this.

Before he could say anything, she shook her head. “Just be careful. Please.”

He nodded and pulled her in for a lingering kiss. “Yes, darling wife.”

A smile touched her lips. “There's a good husband.”

He smirked and kissed her again before getting to his feet and heading for the exit. At the top of the stairs he glanced back to find her watching with a worried expression. He wanted to do something to reassure her, but the truth was that tonight he was talking a terrible risk. One that could very well blow up in his face.

Bull walked, letting his instincts guide him. As with every other walk he took, the trail ended at the highest point he could safely reach. The wind was blowing in from the West, bringing with it the salty tang of the sea. He drew a deep breath, and released it slowly.

“Do you remember that night?” he asked, his voice as soft as the footsteps creeping toward his back.

The steps paused. “How could I forget?”

A sad smile came to his face. “You could have fit in the palm of my hand, you were so tiny.” Bull turned to face Gatt. “It's hard to believe you're the same person.” A lump caught in his throat, but he
swallowed it hard. “What was the price of your loyalty?”

Gatt sneered. “About the same as yours, I expect.”

There was every chance the elf had people posted out of sight, arrows at the ready. Bull kept his posture open and relaxed. “You know, most would say the disgraced spy is less of a pariah than the failed assassin.”

Gatt crossed his arms. “Oh, I'm no assassin.”

“Not for lack of trying.”

“You failed to serve the Qun. Of anyone we ever tested, I was sure Hisrad the Great would stand with the Qun, no hesitation. But I was wrong. Time with these foul people made you soft. Cavorting with Vints, even.” Gatt’s eyes filled with hate. “The same assholes that would have enslaved me are now in the rank of those you call friends. It's disgusting. Death is too good for the likes of you.”

“What's disgusting is the vile worm who delivered his Tama to a torturer on a silver platter. If that's what the Qun stands for, I'll take all the decadent Vints in Tervinter. At least you know they have a knife aimed at your back.”

“She failed in her duties.”

“She took you into her home!” Bull’s shout echoed in the chilly air. “She loved you as though you were her own, and you handed her to those who would have destroyed her!”

Gatt scoffed and looked away. Bull took a steadying breath. “I don’t understand why you would do this to your country. The Viddasala would have started a war of attrition. No one would have won.”

“She does not see us as weak as you, Hisrad.” Gatt curled his lip. “Not everyone wants a soft life in a mountain palace.”

“It is a far stretch from a soft life in a palace to treason against your Arishok.”

“An Arishok that could not see value in striking the enemy when they were weak,” said Gatt scornfully. “Yet another failing we must remedy!”

“Do you hear yourself? The Arishok spent years on the field of battle. Of any Qunari, he is one who understands the true cost of war. He clearly did not think it was feasible to start a full scale war against Ferelden and Orlais.”

“Because he refused to acknowledge the research performed. We would have swept in like a terrible tide, and—” Gatt cut himself short and laughed. “I had forgotten how talented you were at interrogation.”

“You have forgotten a great many things about me,” said Bull, giving a flicker with his fingers.

An archer rose into sight, bow tight and trained on the elf. Within a second, another archer burst into sight and shot at the first. The arrow struck true, toppling Bull’s archer.

Gatt grinned maniacally. “You never did have enough patience, old man.”

An archer from a different location popped up and shot Gatt’s man. The archer’s yelp and gurgle echoed, and three more of Gatt’s archers popped into sight. They, too, were cut down with pained cries when the rest of Shara’s archers appeared. The original archer was raised again, this time
clearly showing its lack of limbs. An arrow decorated the front of the straw dummy, intended to draw out Gatt’s people.

Bull crossed his arms. “You never had enough foresight, little one.”

Gatt’s face had gone pale and stonelike. “This isn’t over.”

“Yes. It is.” Bull waved a hand, and Shara’s crew disappeared. “Enough games. You have committed murder and high treason. The Arishok has requested that I place you into his custody so that the Re-Educators could have a word with you.”

“You’re going to arrest me? Is that how this ends?”

“That depends on you.”

"The Hissrad I knew would already have had my head on a pike."

"That Hissrad knew nothing but rage and vengeance." Bull kept his hands at his sides. "It got him nowhere but alone in a strange land. Anger alone does not change anything. I would have thought you'd learned this by now."

Gatt spat at Bull's feet. "Your people bleated less than this when they died."

Bull ignored the bait and stepped closer. "I regret that it has come to this, Gatt. But you're too far gone."

As he reached for the handcuffs on his belt, Gatt suddenly lunged forward, slashing at him with a wickedly curved dagger. "I will die before I submit to a weak fool like you!"

He dodged easily enough, the ache in his gut sinking even deeper. “Don’t do this.”

The elf came at him with his knife again, hard and fast. Bull stepped out of its path. A furious curse exploded from Gatt as he rounded with the knife and took another swing. Bull blocked it with his forearm, and felt the keen edge of the blade slice into his flesh. The burn that followed confirmed his suspicion that it was poisoned.

"You will die screaming, just like the boy in the cabin!"

As he drove forward with the blade again, Bull caught his hand and spun him. As he stepped closer and pinned the elf to his chest, he could feel the blade sinking into his palm. He ignored the pain. “Don’t make me do this,” he whispered.

Gatt thrashed. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, and that fucking bitch you married, and I’ll-”

Bull clamped his hand tight around the elf’s throat, cutting off any further threats. As the shock of suddenly not being able to breathe hit him, the elf’s struggles increased tenfold, his dagger swinging madly as he fought to free himself from Bull’s grapple. With each bite of the blade, Bull simply tensed and held tight, squeezing his eyes shut.

As a young Ben-hassrath, it had taken him by surprise to learn just how long it took to strangle someone to death. Most would lose consciousness within a minute, followed by full brain and body death in three minutes.

Three agonizing minutes.

Gatt’s wild motions slowed and stopped. The knife clattered to the ground a few moments later.
Bull followed it, lowering to his knees as he maintained the iron grip closing the elf’s windpipe and blocking the blood supply to his brain. He buried his face in the elf’s hair and waited for the last vestiges of life to leave the thin body.

***

Gina had been worried since Bull slipped out of the party, though the fear eased slightly when Ash followed suit not long after. Neither had returned in two hours.

The rest of the guests were keen enough not to question the absences. They all knew something was happening, and did their best to distract her. Hawke told terrible jokes and tried out his most ridiculous pick-up lines. Josephine and Cullen were in a fierce betting war. Varric was in the middle of yet another tall tale.

She did her best to remain focused on them. Bull knew what his job was, and knew what was at stake. He would never take a foolish risk, not when they had so much to lose. She curved her palms over the growing swell of their baby and took long, calming breaths.

The third hour was nearly gone when Ash finally appeared in the doorway. His grim expression made her heart leap into her throat, but then Bull appeared at his shoulder, face carved from granite. Without looking to the left or right, he marched down the stairs and straight to the bar.

As he slammed back three large flagons of ale in succession, Ash came to her side. “It is done.”

She nodded and looked Bull over from across the room. He was tense and still, aside from picking up yet another mug of ale and chugging it. Blood coated his arms and hands, and splashed on his chest and pants. It was impossible to tell if it was his blood, or someone else’s. His eyes stared unseeingly on the wall behind the bar. She contemplated getting up to join him, but decided to give him some space to come back from whatever hell he was locked in at the moment.

The game lasted another hour before petering out. Bull was still at the bar, pounding back whatever booze the bartender put in front of him. A human would have been a drunken pile of ooze, but the Qunari was still upright and mostly lucid, it appeared.

Gina made her way over to sit beside him. He had a mug halfway to his mouth, but paused and glanced her way. She shook her head. “You have to drink for the both of us.”

He nodded wordlessly and drained the mug in one long swallow. When he set it down, she tapped the bar for another. The keep spoke in a lowered voice, “Ma’am, I’m running out.”

The man gave an exasperated growl. “It’s going to take weeks to restock,” he muttered as he walked away.

Bull had his bloodstained hands on the bar, clenched in fists so tight they shook. Gina caressed both hands before leaning her cheek against his shoulder.

He let out a shuddering breath and took hold of her hand. “Could’ve fit in the palm of my hand,” he whispered.

Gina felt tears welling up in the back of her eye. “I know, sweetheart.”

Whatever gave him his rigid control finally cracked, leaving him bent forward and heaving sobs that made the bar vibrate. The bartender looked alarmed, but scurried away when he caught Gina’s
vicious glare.

She held him and waited out the storm, humming his lullaby. The Qunari wept until passing out facedown on the bar-top, at which point Ash and Hawke reappeared. Between the three of them, they managed to get him back to their quarters and tucked safely into bed.

Gina stayed up as Bull dozed fitfully. She wiped him down with a damp rag, and counted nearly a dozen new scars on his hands, arms, and upper body, some deep and narrow, others long and jagged. If Ash hadn't been involved, some of the new wounds might have proven fatal. She shuddered and pressed a kiss to his now clean palms.

He woke twice to throw up and cry some more, but finally fell into a deep sleep around sunrise. She watched him a while longer, and then curled against his broad back and drifted to sleep herself, whispering a prayer that her Qunari would be able to somehow find peace after everything life had thrown his way.

When she woke, he was out of bed. Quiet voices in the living room drew her attention. As she stepped out of the room, she found Bull and his Tama sitting with Kaya, and her Qunari taking instruction as Tama taught him to braid the little girl’s hair. He glanced her way and gave her a ghost of a smile. Both eyes were bloodshot and puffy, but his hands were steady as he delicately weaved Kaya’s hair into a passable French braid. “Good morning, darling wife,” he said, his voice husky.

“Good morning, darling husband.”

“Papa’s learning how to braid my hair!” said Kaya, turning her head with a bright smile. The movement pulled her hair free of his big fingers and sent the locks tumbling loose.

Bull laughed and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “And Kaya is learning to stay still.”

Gina crossed over and kissed both of them. “Luckily, you both have lots of time to improve.”

He stole another lingering kiss. “That we do, Kadan.”

After a leisurely breakfast, Tama and Kaya went on an adventure with Ash and Jeremy. As the door closed behind them, Bull took hold of Gina’s hand and led her onto the broad terrace. They curled up on the settee and dozed on and off in the warm morning sun.

After a long while, Gina caressed Bull’s forearm. "Are you okay?"

He pulled her tighter to his chest. "I will be, Kadan." They sat in silence for another long while before he whispered, "It had to be done."

Her heart ached. "I don’t think he would have ever stopped, Bull."

A shaky sigh escaped him. "No, he wouldn’t have, and we would have been looking over our shoulder the rest of our lives. If it was just me..." He paused and traced a finger over their baby. "If it was just me, I would have lived with that shadow. But I couldn't let that danger hang over our family. Not when I could do something to stop it."

She rolled to face him and pressed a kiss to his heart. "Thank you for protecting us."

He tipped her chin up. "I would die for all of you, Kadan."

A lump stuck in her throat. "I pray every night that it never comes to that."
His eyes softened. "Me too."

She lifted a brow. "I thought you didn't believe in the gods."

He stroked a hand down the length of her back. "I didn't, but they keep giving you back to me. I figure it can't hurt to keep asking for favors if they are in such generous moods."

Chapter End Notes

Another emotional bender for poor Bull.

Only one more chapter to come, and this series will come to a close - it's been a long time coming, but to be honest, I'm dreading it a little. I love these characters, and sharing their story with all of you readers. Thank you for taking the time to comment and for paying any sort of attention to my ramblings! <3
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Corypheus is dead, and Thedas must carry on. Peace has come, but at a steep and painful price. Beloved friends have paid the ultimate price, and the survivors carry more than just scars.

Gina is struggling to come to terms with her role in this new world. They call her the Saviour of Thedas, but the title sticks in her throat. Shouldn't the Saviour still have the ability that allowed her to save the world to begin with? At the very least, the Saviour should be able to say with certainty that their enemy is gone forever. And she can't.

The Iron Bull has problems of his own. Mainly that no one outside the Inquisition trusts a former Ben-hassrath, no matter how often he puts his life on the line to prove his worth. Not to mention the ever-looming threat of Par Vollen against his family. Didn't he have a simple life at one point?

Look me up on Twitter/Insta (@lexibanner), or FB (@authorlexibanner). I post funny, sexy, dumb, and writery stuff! Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gina hid in a private balcony, watching the final proceedings below. Being the so-called Savior of Thedas came with too much celebrity - every day she fielded questions from nobles she didn't recognize, regarding issues she had no real insight toward. At this final hearing, the last thing she wanted was to put any unnecessary focus on the past. The future was what truly mattered.

Thanks to Josie's clever negotiating and a few obscure rules found during Bull's research, they were all but set to become a peacekeeping mission under the purview of the Chantry. It wasn't completely ideal, but it was a step forward. So long as Leliana remained in control of the Chantry, their role would not change.

In a twist that surprised all of the nobles, the Arishok had placed his full support behind their potential role as peacekeepers. Gina had no doubt that Leliana had done some clever negotiating of her own, but however the deal was reached, it had every chance of cementing the new agreement. An alliance with Par Vollen was a carrot that no one could afford to ignore.

At least, that was the hope. It all came down to today. Had they done enough to convince the nobles to let them continue their existence in peace?

Behind closed doors, there was a tacit agreement that if the council did not reach this conclusion, the Inquisition was going to announce their intention to work under the watch of the Chantry regardless, and the nobles could stuff their disagreement where the sun doesn't shine.

Which would almost certainly mean war, said Bull, when they were alone. A shiver ran down her spine.
A man's voice called for silence, and Empress Celine rose to her feet. "There are many sides to this issue, but it cannot be denied that our nations would not exist if not for the actions of the Inquisition. It has been proven again and again that they are capable of achieving peace in dire circumstances. This council sees no reason they cannot be formally legitimized as a peacekeeping force under the guiding hand of the Chantry."

The Empress kept talking, but Gina found herself sagging into her chair in relief. Peace. At long last.

There were a few more speeches, some less graceful than others, but it was finally over. They could move on with their lives and continue their work to help rebuild and protect the people of Ferelden and Orlais. It was the best they could have hoped for.

She watched as Bull spoke with Ash and the Arishok, then left the massive hall below. In private, the Arishok had offered Bull full reinstatement to the Ben-hassrath. Almost immediately, he had declined the offer. Gina agreed with him. There was simply too much bad blood to truly overcome, even with the full backing of the Arishok himself. After everything, Bull would never trust them, and they'd probably never truly trust him. All it would take was a change in power, and his life would be in jeopardy again.

A soft knock sounded at the door behind her. “Come in,” she called.

The door opened and Bull angled inside. He kissed her forehead and sat. “Well, that's that.”

She leaned into him. “About the best we could have hoped for.”

He nodded. “Which means we can fully settle in Skyhold. If that's what you want.”

She shrugged and kissed him. “I want you, wherever that may be.”

“That makes two of us.” He sighed and stretched. “I dunno about you, but this politics bullshit is exhausting.”

“You need a vacation.”

Bull smiled. “Funny you should say that. Remember Lady Mantillon?”

“How could I forget her?”

He tugged a paper out of his pocket. “Turns out that giving the woman exotic booze is the way to her heart. As thanks for my last shipment of maraas-lok, she has offered to let us use her private island.”

“She owns an entire island?”

He nodded. “What if we went there in a few days? Just you, me, and Kaya.”

“So soon?”

“I have a few loose ends to tie up, but after that it’s up to the others to clear up this new agreement. We could take advantage of being so close.”

"Does it mean going on a boat?"

"Damn. I didn't think of that.” He examined the paper. "It'll be an hour at least."

Gina took the paper and looked it over. The island was part of a small cluster of land masses, each no
bigger than a few square miles. “Maybe Ash could come on the boat ride. He should be able to help.”

Bull nodded. "I'll ask."

Gina leaned forward and kissed his cheek "Then why not?"

“Good. I have plans.”

“What kind of plans?”

A smile curved his lips. He traced a finger over her collar bone. “A pretty someone told me about a thing called a honeymoon.”

Heat flushed through her face. “Did you say it's an entire island?”

He nodded slowly and drew her in for a lingering kiss.

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Bull was completely lost in thought as he sat in their courtyard reviewing his plans. Gina had laughed at his already extensive supply list, but he had no intention of being caught underprepared for staying on an island for a week.

Dorian joined him. “What are you working on?”

Bull scowled and scribbled down ‘cord of wood’. “Making a list. Where's your shadow?”

“My shadow?”

“Jay.”

Dorian squirmed. “Oh. I have no idea.”

Bull lifted a brow. “What's going on with you two?”

“I'm sure I don't know what you mean.”

“Come on. You two used to be joined at the hip, and now I can't remember the last time I saw you together.”

"What kind of list are you making?"

"Don't change the subject."

Dorian rolled his eyes. "Let me see that list."

“No.”

“Give it here.” The Mage made a grab for it, but Bull snatched it out of reach and snarled at him. Dorian mimicked him, doing a very poor imitation.

Bull was about to retaliate when Ash came into the courtyard. “Play nice, you two.”

“Tell your brother he's being ridiculous.”

Ash shrugged. “Bull, you're being ridiculous. Wait, what's he doing?”
Bull ignored them both as they settled into an easy banter and mocked him. They were in full swing when a crow flitted in and dropped a note in front of Dorian.

“Shouldn't you be able to survive with nothing more than your wits and a bottle of booze?” asked Ash as he read over Bull’s shoulder.

Bull glared at him. “I can. I just don't want Gina and Kaya to be uncomfortable.”


The man's normally ruddy cheeks had gone pale. Dorian waved a hand. “It's fine,” he said, but his voice cracked and faltered.

Bull lifted a brow. “What's wrong?”

A tear snaked down Dorian’s face. “Nothing. It's fine. I promise.”

Alarm clanged him in the gut. “Dorian, what's going on?”

More tears chased down his cheeks, and tremors started wracking his body. A slip of paper clutched in his grip fluttered free.

Bull took it and read. The note announced his father's death and Dorian’s subsequent promotion to the Magisterium. Effective immediately.

A sick feeling assaulted him. “I'm sorry, Dorian.”

“It's fine. I'm fine.”

Ash snatched the note away and cursed as he read the intricate script. He then pulled Dorian into a hug, the Qunari’s huge frame engulfing the Mage, who broke into aching sobs.

Bull read the note again, and cringed at the perversely cheerful tone. Like anyone should be happy to receive such news. The Mage hadn't always had an easy relationship with his father, but there had always been hope they'd find some way to connect. It was gut wrenching to see that possibility torn away so abruptly.

Jeremy, Gina, and Kaya rounded the corner and stopped short. Jeremy hissed a curse and stormed into their quarters before Bull could say or do anything. Gina crossed to them. “What's going on?”

Bull gave her the note. A moment later she was in tears and dragging Dorian to her for a hug. “I'm so sorry,” she said, over and over.

Kaya climbed onto Bull’s lap and clung to him. “Uncle Dor is sad,” she whispered in his ear.

“I know,” he said. “We need to be very kind to him today.”

Jeremy did not return. Bull frowned and tapped the table, debating whether or not he should interfere, but finally decided that he'd want to know. He kissed Kaya on the cheek and said, “Papa will be right back. Sit here and wait quietly.” She nodded and he planted her in a chair.

He knocked on the door before trying the knob. It twisted, so he opened it and went inside. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he found Jeremy slamming clothing into a satchel.

“What the hell are you doing?”
“What does it look like?”

“It looks like a tantrum. Do you even know what's going on?”

“Why should I even care?”

Bull scowled. “Look, I don't know your personal drama, and I don't particularly care. But you should know that Dorian’s father has died.”

Jeremy froze mid toss. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

The man sat heavily. “I don't believe it. He was just there. He said everything seemed fine!”

“Apparently it wasn't.”

Jeremy stared at the door. “When did he find out?”

“Why don't you ask him yourself? He's right outside.”

“Because I don't want to!”

“What the hell is going on with you two?”

Jeremy sighed and dragged a hand down his face. “If you must know, we broke up. Right after he got back.”

The sneaking suspicion that had been plaguing him for over a week was finally confirmed. “Why didn't either of you say anything?”

“Things have been hectic.”

Bull shook his head. “Nothing is that hectic.”

“Look, it's fine. The couch in this place is pretty comfortable, and things have been pretty amicable. We were going to part ways once we got to Skyhold. Until today, neither of us wanted a scene.”

“Until today? What suddenly changed?”

“I thought he would at least try to hide his new toy, but I guess I was wrong. He thinks the world of that fucking Qunari, so he can have him.”

“Qunari? You mean Ash?”

A bitter scoff echoed from Jay’s lips. “Who else? They couldn’t be more blatant.”

It took Bull a minute to form a coherent word. “Are you fucking serious? There was nothing more to it than sympathy. Ash has been chasing after Josie’s skirts ever since he met her. Are you that clueless?” How could someone so opposite of his Kadan be her flesh and blood?

Jeremy stood and returned to his packing. “Whatever. He's done with me. That's been made perfectly clear.”

“His father died! How can you be so cold?”

Jeremy’s jaw clenched and unclenched. “If you'll excuse me…”
Bull bit back another curse. “Fine. Good to know what to expect from you when the chips fall.”

Before Jeremy could respond, Bull left the room. The initial outrage at the selfish response quickly faded to sadness on their behalf. Their highs together had been the kind that should have forged a lifetime bond, but it seemed they couldn’t overcome their differences after all. It was a shame.

As he looked over to the cluster of people surrounding Dorian, the Mage sat straighter and scrubbed his face. A hard look came into his eyes. “Well. That was unexpected.”

Bull sat and scooted his chair closer to Gina, who was still teary eyed. Dread settled in the pit of his stomach. That note held an unspoken demand for Dorian to return to the pit of vipers that was Tervinter. “When are you leaving?”

Gina gasped. “No! You can’t!”

Bull rubbed her back. He didn't want the Mage to go either, but it was Dorian’s duty, and it was a chance to direct the path of the Imperium. No matter the risk, he would throw his heart and soul into bettering the world for his people. It was one of the things Bull admired about him.

Dorian sighed and leaned on the table. “I have to, my dear. Someone has killed my father, and I need to kill them back.”

Bull leaned forward. “Assassination?”

The Mage nodded grimly. “He didn't say it in so many words, but he had concerns. Besides which, there are far too many people running amok and giving Tervinter a bad name. I need to kill them too.”

Ash cleared his throat. “Sounds like you've got plans. Need any help?”

Dorian shook his head. “No. I've been in contact with others who feel the same way.” He grimaced and took hold of Gina’s hand. “I planned to go back after the baby. But now…”

Bull waved a hand. “Ash will take care of us. You have things you need to do.”

Dorian nodded and looked to Gina. Tears welled up in his eyes. “Oh darling, you're going to make me cry again.”

Gina’s shoulders shook. “I c-c-can't help it!” she wailed.

Bull wrapped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “We’ll be fine. But you need to be careful. Ask for help when you need it. Promise.”

Kaya pulled free and crossed to Dorian. He set her on his lap and buried his face in her hair for a long moment before dabbing his eyes. “I will. I promise.”

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It had been a busy week for Bull, and it was still busy for the rest of the advisers. Cassandra and Josephine hadn’t left the negotiation table for much more than to sleep. They had at least another week before the final signatures could be signed and the deal ratified.

But finally Bull was done, the boat was loaded, and they were making their way down to the harbor to set sail.

Gina was still overly sensitive to smells, and the boat ride from Kirkwall had been so awful, the
thought of getting on another boat made her instinctively nauseous. Despite Ash's agreement to come on the boat to repress the notion sickness, she was dreading it like a dog dreaded a bath. Gina took a deep breath and continued her slow march in the wake of a very excited Kaya and Bull.

She'd already waved them away three times when Cullen appeared at her side and offered his arm. “I understand you're leaving for the island today.”

She nodded and tucked her hand at the crook of his elbow. “Have I mentioned that you look good in your dress uniform?”

The tips of his ears went pink as they began to walk. “Thank you.”

“I hear you have prospects forming a line for a chance at your hand in marriage.”

He rolled his eyes. “More like their fathers forming a line for a chance at Josephine and Leliana’s political alliances. Goody for me.”

Gina frowned and gripped his forearm. “Do you want me to tell them all to fuck off? Because I will.”

He shook his head. “I appreciate the offer, but perhaps this is a better way for me to find a partner.”

She grimaced. “You're such a catch. I wish you could see that for yourself.”

He shrugged and planted a ghost of a kiss on her cheek. “Perhaps one day.”

The docks came into sight. As they crossed the last small square of merchants, a brindle colored dog woofed and bounded over. The creature was massive, bigger than any mastiff Gina could remember from her world.

Cullen laughed and gave the dog a hearty pat on the flank. “There you are!”

The dog rubbed against him and then rolled to his back. Cullen crouched low and rubbed the big dog’s belly. Gina smiled. “You found a dog?”

“Not just any dog. A Mabari.”

“A what?”

A sheepish smile came to his face. “You know, I sometimes forget that you aren't from this world. A Mabari is a Ferelden war dog. They are incredibly rare in Orlais.”

Gina sat on a bench and watched as Cullen wrassled with the dog. “What is he doing all the way out here?”

The General produced a small ball. The dog scrambled to his feet with an excited bark. “I'm told he was abandoned here. Perhaps his Orlesian owners grew tired of the novelty.”

The dog’s comical expression made her laugh. “Who could get tired of a face like that?”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” He tossed the ball toward the dog. It snatched it from the air and Cullen groaned. “No, no. You're supposed to dodge, not catch!”

Gina matched the dog's head tilt. “Why dodge?”

“Well, what if that was a fireball?”
“Why would it be a fireball?”

Cullen went red from his forehead down to the collar of his uniform. “You never know. It's best to be prepared.”

“Uh huh. What's his name?”

“I haven't decided yet. I need to get to know him better.”

The dog barked and jumped in place. Cullen threw the ball, this time away from the dog. As the dog raced across the square, Gina asked, “So, will your new friend be joining us in Skyhold?”

He nodded. “I couldn't leave a fellow Ferelden trapped in the Winter Palace. Besides, I think he likes me.”

“Cullen making friends at a political convention? How things have changed!”

He laughed. “Indeed.”

Gina got to her feet and pulled Cullen into a hug before gripping his chin. “I meant what I said. If you don't want to marry someone for political purposes, don't do it. You'll find someone that's perfect for you.”

Cullen gave her another hug. “I'll think on it. Regardless of anything, I'll be going home to visit my sister for some time. No wedding could happen until after that anyway.”

“You're going back home? Wow. Hasn't it been years?”

“Too many.” He rubbed the back of his neck and gave an awkward laugh. "I'm actually looking forward to it. Can you believe it?”

The dog woofed again, loud enough to echo. Cullen threw the ball and watched as the dog chased after it. “I just hope she doesn't win over his affections.”

From behind, Bull's heavy arms wrapped around him in a crushing hug that lifted him off his feet. “No one could outdo you, Templar.”

When he was back on his feet, Cullen wheezed, “Thanks. I think.”

Bull laughed and ruffled his hair before holding a hand out to Gina. “Ready to go, Kadan?”

Gina looked into his beautiful green eyes and nodded. “As long as I'm with you.”

***

Cullen watched the Qunari lead the human toward the waiting boat. Kaya ran up to meet them, making both laugh. Bull picked her up and set her on one broad shoulder. Gina held his hand and looked up at them both with a beaming smile.

Cullen tried to soothe the jealous tendrils wrapping around his core. He was happy for them. Truly. He just couldn't stop wondering when it would be his turn to find someone who looked at him the way Gina looked at Bull.

He had thought Tulta would be the one he married, someday. There were times he regretted turning down the opportunity. They'd probably already be wed and expecting a child if he hadn't, but the ultimatum to marry her and leave the Inquisition had changed his feelings irrevocably. He couldn't
just walk away from his job. Not then, and not now. Anyone who chose him as their mate needed to understand his need for duty. Without it, the temptation to fall back into a lyrium stupor would be impossible to resist.

But now, for the first time since he could remember, there would be time for things outside of duty. There would be changes, now that the conclave was completed.

Some had already happened. Dorian was on a boat to Tervinter. Varric and Hawke were leaving for Kirkwall in the morning. There were a few more meetings to arrange a shift in control of certain regions and finalize the agreement. And then, when Bull and Gina returned, they'd all begin the long road back to Skyhold.

Once there, he'd have every chance to do the things he'd been putting off. In the decades since he left home to join the Templars, he hadn't truly taken any time for his own pursuits. Now he could more fully focus on helping other ex-Templars recover from their addiction to lyrium, and take Dagna up on her offer to teach him how to craft his own armor. Perhaps he could even put effort into finding a wife and building a family of his own.

He sighed and kicked at a loose stone. Who was he kidding? On his best day he couldn't talk to women. He'd barely managed to secure the affections of Tulta. Maybe Josephine and Leliana were right. A political alliance would certainly help to insulate the Inquisition from noble influence. And it would be an easier solution to the loneliness that plagued him every night.

The Mabari barked, making him jump. Cullen looked down to see the dog pawing his ball and bouncing eagerly. He really needed to choose a name for the animal.

“Well, Mr. No-Name, do you want to play chase again?”

The dog's entire body wagged with delight. Cullen picked up the ball and said, “Let's make it count then!”

As he whipped the ball across the courtyard with all his might, a woman crossed paths with it. “Andraste!” was all he had time to gasp before the sprinting dog collided headlong into her, sending her and her wares tumbling to the ground.

He ran over. “Maker preserve us, I'm sorry! I should have been more careful!”

The dog was licking the woman's face as she gasped and flailed. A basket full of knitted goods had scattered around her, and loose yarn webbed both her and the dog. Cullen dropped to his knees and pushed the Mabari aside. “Allow me to help you.”

The woman brushed the cloud of fiery red hair back from her face, and Cullen felt his gut clench tight at the sight of delicate elven features, with wide set blue eyes and freckles dusting both high cheekbones. She was beautiful, from the tips of her pointed ears to the scar on her left cheek.

“Mercy me, I'm fine, I'm fine,” she said, her voice musical and lilting. “It would take more than that silly dog to do any lasting damage.”

His face felt as though it were on fire. *Clumsy idiot!* “I should still have shown more care.”

She looked him up and down, and a smile came to her lips. “Well, if you feel that badly, you could make it up to me. Dinner, perhaps.”

Cullen very nearly fell over. “Dinner? But I... you...” He gazed into her shining eyes, and felt a part of him that had been dormant fizzle to life. “I mean, yes. Dinner would be wonderful. Nothing
would make me happier.”

Chapter End Notes

The end - and a mostly happy one, too!

Thank you to everyone who read through the entire journey - I am so touched by all of the positive comments and thoughts, and am so happy it got such a positive reception!

Never fear - there will be further stories of Bull and Gina - they have a baby on the way, after all! They will just be slightly less epic in length, that's all! :)

End Notes

Stay tuned!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!