

An Easy Choice

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An Easy Choice

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Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Notes

If you've read my other Iron Bull (A Modern Girl in Thedas epic), these characters are NOT related, nor are the stories tied together in any way. I hope you enjoy this version of our man Bull!

Settling in

Bull sat in the furthest corner of the tavern, back against the wall. No one would be able to get the slip on him here, not even when he was almost falling down drunk.

Krem finished a large mug of ale and let out a long sigh. “So this is the new place, eh?”

Bull smirked. “Yeah. For now, anyway. We'll see what these assholes are like and decide if we want to stick around.”

“Well, at least the Inquisitor is easy on the eyes.”

“And Ruffles, the Seeker, Maryden, and Harding,” said Bull, getting a nod of agreement with each name. “And that new serving girl.”

Krem wrinkled his nose. “Nah. Too much on top.”

Bull scoffed. “No such thing!”

“She'll compete with your pillowy man bosoms. Doesn't that bother you?”

He gave the man a playful scowl. “You know I pay your salary, right?”

“Could do with a raise, actually.”

Bull barked a laugh and gave him a hard clap on the back, making him cough. “We'll talk after we finish this stupid smuggling mission.”

“You're sure the Inquisition is okay working directly with the Qun?”

He nodded and took a long swallow of ale. “Yup. Any chance to get bigger friends in their pocket.”

“Are *you* okay with it?”

Bull paused. Krem had earned his trust, but this was too close to the heart. Was he okay with it? He couldn't decide, and that bothered him more than the prospect of seeing his people again. He put on his most convincing smirk. “It's fine. I'm more curious to see who they send to meet us.”

“Well, as long as you're okay with it.”

The rest of the Chargers came into the tavern, bringing the energy up with just their mere presence. Bull allowed himself the distraction of admiring their progress. They'd all been little better than animals when he found them, but with his guidance, they had become a well-oiled mercenary team. His guys.

The door opened to admit Flint, the newly ordained Inquisitor. She went to the bar and sat in one of the tall stools and spoke to Cabot.

Bull watched her drink alone for a while. It was odd to see her unmolested by throngs of people, but the furor had begun to die down as the residents of Skyhold began the monumental task of cleaning up the ramshackle place.

Her dark hair was in a single thick braid that reached the small of her back. His gut clenched as he recalled wrapping that gleaming plait around his fist and dragging her head back so he could access the delicate skin over her collar bone as she rode him. And how he used it to guide those rosy lips to wrap around his cock.

An elbow jostled him back to present. "You awake, Chief?"

He nodded briskly and rose to his feet. "I'll see you guys later."

Bull crossed the crowded room with care, only going out of his way to bump into the one guy who'd been side-eying him since his arrival. Just a light bump, up close and personal. Enough to make the idiot think twice about trying anything stupid.

He coughed loudly as he approached Flint's back and sat beside her. "Drinking alone?"

She smiled and tapped her mug against his. "Not anymore. How are you settling in?"

"My room has a hole in the roof. I assume it was created by a dragon, based on the size."

She winced. "Sorry about that. I can get you bumped up on the list of repairs."

He motioned for a refill. "Nah. Fix up the important places first."

"Your place *is* important. I decree it so."

He laughed and put a hand on her back. "Don't abuse your power on my behalf."

She leaned into him. "They were stupid enough to bestow me with the power of a queen. Let them learn a lesson on who they trust."

He grinned and wrapped his arm more securely around her. "I have ideas to fix it myself. But thanks boss. Nice to know you care."

Pink washed through her pale cheeks, highlighting the delicate lines of purple tattooing on the upper half of her face. Vallaslin, she called it. A marking to denote her devotion to Sylaise, goddess of the hearth.

Pretty, he called it.

Flint twisted in her seat to face him. "What about you? Aren't you hanging out with the guys?"

There was some jeering and raucous laughter from the back corner. "I drink with them often enough. Let them have a night without the boss breathing down their necks."

She lifted a brow. "Then maybe you and I should get some of the good wine and go somewhere more quiet."

"Your place or mine?"

"Well, mine doesn't have a dragon sized hole in the roof."

He grinned. "That doesn't make the choice any clearer."

Her eyes sparkled with humor. "Fine. Your place it is. I hope it's not too cold."

"With you in the room? Not likely."

Flint mounted the last flight of steps towards the top level room Bull had claimed. He liked the view, or so he said. Having a door leading directly into the tavern probably didn't hurt his feelings either.

She paused at the top to let her aching thigh muscles rest. One thing about a mountain keep she hadn't considered was all the damn climbing. Not for the first time, she missed her nice, flat forest homeland.

Bull leaned on a nearby doorjamb, watching her with that easy half-smile of his. The one that promised nothing but untethered pleasure.

She held up two bottles of wine. "I grabbed the two dirtiest bottles. I figure that means old, which is supposed to mean good."

He squinted at the labels and smirked. "You grabbed dragon piss and pig swill."

Heat swarmed her cheeks. "Well, it's the thought that counts, isn't it?"

"Sure." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and guided her into the room. "We'll still get good and hammered."

She paused and stared at his ceiling. "You really could fly a dragon through that hole."

"Yeah, but check this out." His hand caught hers and he pulled her over to the bed. "Lay on your back."

She lifted a brow. "I thought you'd be much more adventurous than this, Bull."

He gave her a dirty look. "Just do it."

Flint kicked a leg out and let herself tumble to the bed with a twist. As soon as she settled on her back, she understood why he wasn't in a rush to fix anything.

The night sky was filled to bursting with stars, decorating the gap in the roof with their spectacular display.

He scooped her up and set her further onto the bed, then flopped down beside her. “Not bad, eh?”

She nodded wordlessly. They stared in silence for a long while before he scooted closer and began to point out constellations. His hand guided her finger to trail across the stars making up various shapes, and his low voice rumbled in her ears as he explained the lore behind each one they could see.

As he started talking about some ancient ship, Flint rolled over to face him. “Did they teach you about this when you were being trained as Ben-hassrath?”

“No. I didn't learn about them until I came out here.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Stars are neat.”

She shook her head. “No, I mean why did you wait until being out here?”

“Because I wasn't an astronomer. My job was to find secrets and use them to our advantage.”

Flint traced a scar that wrapped over his ribs. “So you weren't allowed hobbies?”

“Well, not that exactly. I just didn't have the time or energy outside of my work to devote to anything else.” He turned onto his hip to face her. “When I was in Seheron, it was like herding cats. We had to constantly be on our guard, even when we slept.”

“No wonder you burned out,” she whispered.

His brow furrowed. “Yeah. I guess.”

Flint poked the deep groove with her index finger. “Okay, we're not here to get *more* wound up. Let's get some wine into us.”

“You're the boss.” He leaned forward and caught her lips with his for a scorching kiss that left her head spinning. Then he whispered, “For now.”

Nicknames and Lessons

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Bull passed the first bottle of wine to Flint and opened the second. After taking a long pull, he returned to his spot on the creaky bed. "So. If we aren't here to get wound up, what are we here for?"

Flint was sitting up and taking her own long swig of wine. She swallowed with a horrible grimace. "Andraste's tits. Remind me never to grab this shit again."

"I'll pick out the wine next time." He took the bottle and set it to the stone floor and turned back to her.

A smile had come to her lips. "You know, most people would be surprised to see how cultured you are."

Bull smirked. "I was trained very well by my tama."

"It shows." She shifted closer and ran a finger over the curve of his horn. "To answer your question, we're here to have crazy sex that leaves us both too tired to think about the morning."

He watched her eyes as she spoke. There was the hunger he hoped to find, but also that same heartbreaking desperation he'd seen that night in the Hinterlands. "You need to forget about the weight on your shoulders."

"And you need to forget about the things you've left behind."

His heart hitched a beat. This little elf was eerily perceptive. He'd have to watch his step around her. "We should talk ground rules."

"Yes, we should."

"Out there, you're in charge. You say jump, I'll ask how high."

There was a flash of distress in her eyes.

He touched her knee lightly. "But not behind closed doors. When it's just you and me, I'm in charge. What I say goes. All you need to do is obey. Or not, and face the consequences."

The distress gave way to the hunger. "What kind of consequences?"

He wanted to kiss her, but held off. This part of the conversation was too important. "You'll see. Just know that I will never hurt you without your permission. If anything is too much for any reason, you say Katoh and it stops. No judgement made. If it's something you're willing to discuss, fine. If not, no arguments here."

"What if I want to be in charge sometimes?"

He gave a low growl. "If you've been a good girl."

Flint pulled a face. "Ugh. Can I call katoh on being called a good girl?"

Bull laughed and nodded. "What would you prefer?"

Her brow creased. "I don't know. Just not that."

"Hm. We'll find something."

She moved closer and reached for him. He caught her hand. "I need to hear you say this is what you want. Explicitly."

"This is what I want. Explicitly," she said, pulling his hand to her lips. She kissed the palm and then took his index finger into her mouth, her sultry grey eyes holding his. She pulled it out slowly, and said, "Tell me this is what you want too."

He was already hard as a rock. "Darlin', I haven't wanted something this badly since I can remember."

"Well, it's yours. What are you going to do about it, big man?"

A smile touched his lips. "Teach you a thing or two about patience."

Before she could say anything, smart or otherwise, he caught both of her wrists and launched off the bed, hauling her to her feet and spinning to pin her against the wall. Her breath caught in a little gasp, and her dark eyes went wide.

He paused. "Last chance."

The shock turned to smolder. "Is that all you've got?"

Bull hoisted her hands higher, forcing her onto her toes. "Oh, we haven't even scratched the surface, pretty one."

She pulled a face.

"We'll find one you like."

“I look forward to it,” she murmured.

Bull bent down and kissed her. Her mouth moved with his eagerly, and opened to his demanding tongue with no resistance. When her chest was heaving and she was squirming on her toes, he broke the kiss.

Flint stayed on her toes, not putting any weight into her wrists. Bull watched as she struggled. “You made a deal,” he said, lowering his voice to a soft rasp. “I’m in control now. So why are you holding back?”

Her face went scarlet. “I’m not.”

He wagged her wrists. “You’re holding yourself up instead of trusting me to carry that weight. Why?”

“I...I don’t know.”

Bull waited, and then felt her weight settling into his grip. When she was nearly hanging from her wrists, she winced and shot back onto her toes.

“What was that?”

“Old shoulder thing. Took a bad fall off a halla when I was a kid.”

He frowned. “Why didn’t you say kato?”

Her cheeks went darker. “Because it’s just a little twinge.”

Bull shook his head. “Little twinges can turn ugly in a blink. This only works if I can trust you’ll tell me when something is too painful to cope with. The last thing I want to do is injure you by mistake.”

“Okay. Okay! I’m sorry,” she said, her voice cracking. “Just...please don’t stop.”

He kissed her until she was squirming again. “After you’ve learned such a valuable lesson? Why would I waste that training?”

Bull hadn’t taken off a stitch of their clothing, but Flint was quivering all the same. Her hands remained trapped in his big paw, while her calves burned from remaining on her tiptoes.

She began to rest her weight in his hand again, but this time, he adjusted his grip, changing the angle of her arms just before her shoulder could give another sharp protest. A delectable burn crept over her shoulder blades instead, while her calves nearly went numb with relief.

“There we go,” he said, his voice a low hum in her ear that made her shiver. His eye roved down the length of her body. “Damn. You are exquisite.”

“You ain’t so bad yourself, big man.”

He hooked a hand under her thigh and hoisted her so that she could wrap her legs around his waist. His hand alone was broad enough to very nearly wrap around her entire upper leg, while her hips were stretched almost to their full extent to reach around the front of his trim waist. Being so dainty compared to his heavily muscled form sent a tingle straight south.

Bull held her in place without showing an ounce of strain. “Do you think about that night in the tent?”

Flint remembered it as though it were yesterday. She'd woken in tears after another terrifying nightmare, and came out of her tent to find Bull sitting near the fire. He'd gotten to his feet as she approached and held out a hand.

“ Let me help, boss. ”

His storm green eye was holding hers now, as steady and calm as it had been that night.

She nodded. “I think about it all the time.”

“It's going to be a little different here,” he said. “I have access to more tools, and we can take more time.”

A whimper escaped before she could stop herself. “You're not going to make me wait, are you?”

His lips crushed against hers, and she reveled in the hasp of his beard stubble where it contacted her skin. His tongue caressed her lips, and she met it with her own, savoring the erotic dance.

When he released her mouth, his fingers tightened on her thigh. “You'll wait until you've earned the fucking you're so desperate for, little slut.”

He paused for her reaction. She gave a half-hearted shrug.

Bull didn't look remotely perturbed. He eased her to stand again. “Don't move.”

He crossed to a small chest and rummaged through it. It was strange to see such a big man with such a small case for his belongings, but then again, she'd come to Haven with literally nothing but a scavenged short sword, and still had next to no clothes or personal effects in her chambers. Travelling light was a necessity throughout her life, and now a natural state of being. A travelling man like Bull likely felt the same.

After a few moments, he deposited a couple small items on the bed and then sat facing her. “Doing as you're told? That's a good start to the evening.”

Flint gave him a wink. “We'll see how long it lasts.”

He smiled and rested his elbows on his knees. “Take your clothes off. Slowly.”

She stepped away from the wall, just out of his reach, and began to release the clasps holding her jacket closed. His eye never left the movements of her fingers, and she could see the

tension in his every muscle ratcheting higher and higher.

Finally the jacket was hanging open. With a shrug and spin, she let the stiff leather fall to the stone floor. The cotton undershirt she wore left next to nothing to the imagination, and as she tugged it over her head, she could hear his breath catch.

Her fingers reached for the tucked strap of her breast band, but he shook his head. "Get those pants off next."

Flint bent forward, making sure he got a peek down the topside of her breast band along her way to untie her tall boots. The knots threatened to confound her shaking fingers, but she managed to get them both loose and kick free.

Then she was pulling free the laces holding up her pants and slowly pushing them down. With every inch she lowered them, she twisted her hips in a slow rotation.

Flint tossed the pants to the side and looked over to Bull. "What next?"

He pointed at the breast band. "I haven't gotten to see you in the light yet. And I've been dying to see these tits since I first laid eyes on you."

She moved further into the light, and tugged the tail of the band loose. With her small breasts, the band was hardly necessary. It simply made wearing her leather armor more comfortable.

As the last of the wrapping fluttered to the floor, Bull let out a low whistle.

"I knew they were great," he whispered. "I just didn't think they'd be so fucking perfect."

Heat washed over her face. "They're too small."

"No such thing!"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're telling me you like these better than the set on that new serving girl?"

"Darlin', she ain't got nothing on you."

A pleased smile dragged itself across her face. "You always know the right thing to say."

"That's why you pay me the big coin."

Flint rolled her eyes at him and reached for her smalls.

"Hey, that's *my* job," he said, a sharp note to his voice. "Wait until told, my pet."

She couldn't resist faking a dry heave at the nickname.

He smirked as he rose to his feet and pointed to the wall. "Back in place."

Flint stepped back until her back hit the wall, then lifted both arms overhead, crossing them at the wrist.

Bull traced the back of his fingers from her belly to her sternum to her collarbone, letting the very edge of his finger graze over the swell of her breast. He dipped his head lower and kissed her on the lips, this time as soft as a summer breeze.

“I am going to enjoy taking care of you, my pretty little flower.”

She shook her head at his questioning glance. He shrugged. “Lots of time to find something.”

He touched her right wrist and held his palm out. She laid the wrist in his grasp and he revealed a thick pink ribbon, about five feet long. He wrapped the silky fabric around her wrist and tied a few knots.

“Not too tight?” he murmured.

She had been engrossed in the delicate movement of his thick fingers, and almost missed the question. She shook her head. “S’good.”

The corner of his lips twitched into a smile. He touched her other wrist and held his palm out.

The mark tingled, throwing her out of the moment.

“*Now.*”

His eye held hers as she hesitantly put it into his waiting hand.

“What's wrong, Flint?”

“I don't know what it'll do,” she whispered. “I don't want to hurt you.”

He brought it next to her other hand and slipped the ribbon around it. Then, he did a series of loops and ended with putting the tail of the ribbon into her unmarked hand.

“If it feels like it's going to do something weird, use our word and give this a tug. I'll take a dive and the ribbon will fall loose.”

Flint nodded. “Got it.”

He tipped her chin up. “What should you have said?”

“Katoh.”

He nodded. “Turn around.”

Flint obeyed. The flat of his palm cracked over the flesh of her ass, making her gasp and give a cry. He repeated the smack on her other ass cheek and then took a firm hold with both hands. “Always be honest in here,” he said in her ear. “You are safe with me. I will never ridicule your fears.”

Before she could nod, his arm hooked around her waist and he bodily carried her to the tall corner post of his bed. After setting her lightly to her feet, he pulled out a short length of silk cord. He tied it into the ribbon wrapped around her right wrist, explaining, "Then you can still get your other hand free."

Flint watched him as though drugged. He raised her arms overhead and pulled until she was stretched out on the tips of her toes again.

He touched her shoulder. "Comfortable?"

She nodded.

Bull kissed her forehead. "Good. Because this position has you on perfect display."

The heat was building in her belly as his eye raked over her, burning bright with lust. The man hadn't even touched a single erogenous spot, and she was already near panting from the simple pleasure of being his thing to control.

He moved closer and ran both palms down the length of her arms, pressing firmly into the muscles as he passed, but skimming lightly over her armpits.

She gave an involuntary squeak and giggled. "No tickling!"

He grinned. "Without that safe word, you'll take what I give you."

Despite the playful threat, he moved from the ticklish spot to the sides of her tits, dragging his thumbs across the tight points of her nipples. The cry she made this time was fully voluntary, and deep-throated with desire.

He toyed with each breast in turn, with aching patience that left her squirming for more. "Bull, please," she whimpered.

"That's not my name," he said softly.

Her eyes met his, and she was confused for a moment before recalling one of their first conversations. "The Iron Bull, please," she said, dropping her voice into that husky zone that men seemed to go crazy over.

The Qunari was no exception. He made a hungry sound and brought his mouth to each nipple in turn, his tongue dancing lightly while his hand pinched and rolled the other. The conflicting sensations had her back arched and her head reeling.

Her heart and breath were racing when he drew away.

He caressed the side of her neck and whispered in her ear, "Breathe, darlin'. We haven't even gotten started yet."

Fulfilling Desires

Bull couldn't believe his luck. The Inquisitor had been enthusiastic that first night in the Hinterlands, which left him dying to see how far that eagerness stretched. And here she was, putty in his oversized hands.

He'd barely even done anything to earn such unbridled excitement.

He eased himself down to the floor. His knee complained upon contact with the cold rock, but he ignored it.

Flint's smalls were as plain as it got, made from the same sheer white cotton of her undershirt. Her pussy was so wet it had soaked through, giving him a preview of the dark hair and pink flesh awaiting his eager view. Her scent was already enticing him, beckoning him to feast upon her.

She was looking down at him, her eyes wide and pleading. Bull pressed a kiss to the point of her hip and dragged one finger along the waistband of her smalls. Her stomach clenched as he began to slowly pull them down. The fabric was rougher to the touch than he expected. He made a mental note to treat her to the finest silky under things he could find. As he drew them down both calves, he could feel the bunched muscle straining at the effort of remaining on tiptoe. He left her to struggle for a few more moments. Then he'd push her into trusting his knots.

Once the smalls were free from her feet, he returned his attention to the apex of her legs. A light dusting of dark hair surrounded the pale pink center of her. He set a hand on her hip and took a second to enjoy the stark contrast of his bronze skin against the ivory tone of hers. His cock was going to look fantastic sliding inside her.

He gritted his teeth at the surge of desire in his gut. It had been too long since he had the opportunity for a long build-up, and he intended to take full advantage. This time there was no rush to free her head from the torment of bad dreams, and no reason not to pace himself.

Not that a guy could tell as he watched her wanton reactions to every touch. If only everyone he fucked was so vocal about their enjoyment.

“Easy, little firework. I'm taking my time.” A glance found her shrugging at this pet name as well. No matter. He spoke seven languages. Somewhere in all those words he'd find the pet name for her.

He put a hand on each thigh and pushed her to spread them apart another step. Her muscles shook from the effort of this new position, but she didn't complain.

Bull returned his palm to her hip and slowly stroked down to the soft patch of hair. She rocked forward, probably trying to get some relief from the throbbing pressure sure to be driving her insane. He put his other hand on her hip to still her.

“I’ll get there when I get there,” he said.

She moaned piteously when he ran his thumb along the crease where her thigh met her pussy. He brushed lightly across the slit of her, letting himself moan at how slick she already was, then brought his thumb along that line, avoiding her clit for a little while longer.

The heated musk of her was starting to get into his head, clouding his sense of control. He decided to indulge himself, just a little, and brought her legs to hook over his horns. She hardly hesitated to obey, letting herself hang from the rope and ribbon.

Smart girl.

The new angle brought her pussy at exactly the right height for his mouth to devour her. So he did, dragging his tongue over her from front to back, lapping up every single drop of her honeyed slick. He could have swooned at how sweet she tasted.

Her thighs were already starting to quake when he settled in for the pleasure of bringing her to the edge of coming on his face. She had the tiniest clit he could remember seeing, but that only served to heighten his excitement.

As he swirled his tongue around that delicate button, he looked up to catalogue her responses. A flush had crept across her chest and rose along the line of her throat. She looked like she could barely keep her eyes open under the slow onslaught of his mouth. A tremor coursed through her as he closed his mouth and sucked lightly.

He cupped her ass with one hand and reached up to pinch and tease each rock hard nipple. The lean muscles on her stomach fluttered and clenched, and her breaths came shorter and sharper as he bore down with his mouth, drawing her into one tight string. As her breathless cries went into fever pitch, he stopped, breaking all contact with his mouth.

“No, no please!” she wailed, thrusting her hips toward him.

He gripped both hips and stopped the frantic movement. “You’ll come when old Bull decides you can come.”

When she stilled, Bull gently set each of her feet back to the floor, keeping her steady with a palm on her back. Her breathing was slowing to normal when he heaved himself to his feet, wincing at the dull ache in his knee.

He kissed her, long and hard, letting his hands roam freely over her satin flesh. She rose higher on her toes to meet him.

Bull wanted to throw her on the bed and fuck her more than anything. He could already feel the way she’d clench around him. He dragged a few breaths through his nose, fighting the beast within.

Flint’s dark eyes were no help to his self-control. “You are...” He growled and kissed her again. “Stop tempting me, desire demon.”

Her eyes flew wide and she nodded.

A smile broke free. "Desire demon? You like that?"

"I do," she said.

He reached up and released the knots on the bedpost, letting her arms down slowly as he rubbed each shoulder briskly.

As he guided her to sit, she gave a little shiver and hunched. "It's colder over here," she said.

"I'll warm you up." He sat down and hoisted her onto his lap, her back to his chest. She cuddled into him. He slipped his arms around her and dropped open mouthed kisses along the line of her shoulder.

She whispered something in Elvish and ground her hips against his. The movement dragged tantalizingly along the length of his cock, sending pleasant shivers shooting over his skin.

"Be still," he commanded softly.

Flint writhed her hips yet again, so he gripped the back of her head and pushed forward. "Set that silk cord under my boot."

As she obeyed, he gripped her knees and shifted them backward, forcing her upper body to lay out across his shins. He dragged the rope under his boot out further, leaving her arms stretched almost to their full extent.

Her breathing had gone staccato again. He rubbed both hands over the round swell of each ass cheek. "What did I say would happen if you disobeyed?"

"Consequences."

Bull leaned closer. "I'm sorry, desire demon, did you forget how to use sentences?"

She stuttered and gasped as his hands squeezed and spread her apart. His mouth went dry as the luscious slice between her legs was fully revealed in the firelight.

"I'm waiting," he said, barely managing not to let his voice shake.

"You said there would be consequences."

"Yes I did. This offense earned you ten spanks. You count each one out loud, and if you count wrong, I start over."

She made a helpless moan and squirmed. Bull could feel every pulse in his dick throbbing harder, but he gritted his teeth and pushed the sensation back.

He let the first hand fall with a light swat. Loose fingers to soften the blow.

She gasped and yelped, "One!"

Bull brought down the other hand, also loose palmed.

“Two!”

Then he cupped his hands and brought both down at once, the hand position making the spank sound harder than it felt. She groaned and said, “Three.”

Two stinging slaps in quick succession, then two more.

“Four, five!”

“Six, seven!”

He brought both palms down, stiffening his fingers so that they each landed like tiny whips against her flesh.

She sucked a wobbly breath and whimpered, “Eight.”

The last two strikes landed, leaving her beautiful ass jiggling.

“Nine! Ten!” she cried.

“Good, desire demon.” He rubbed each small globe of firm flesh. Her pale skin had gone rosy and hot to the touch, while her perfect little pussy was dripping again. “So wet already?”

Flint tried to look back at him, but the ropes had her trapped. “Please fuck me,” she said, her voice pitchy.

He picked up a small vial of herbal oil and put a dab in his palm. He rubbed his hands briskly, then spread it across the marks on her ass.

“You are nowhere near ready to be fucked yet.”

She started to protest, but he simply stretched her arms further. “You’ll wait, or you’ll get nothing. Is that clear?”

She went slack and nodded. Bull allowed himself to smile. Flint was checking every last item on his expansive fantasy list.

What a pleasant surprise.

When the oil was fully massaged into her skin and the red had faded to pink, he returned his fingers to the sleek mess between her legs.

Flint arched as he pressed past her silky folds. Her hot wetness let him slide an entire finger inside her with no resistance.

“Oh, gods,” she breathed.

“No gods here,” he growled. “Say my name like *I’m* your god.”

He pulled his finger out and drove it back in as she cried out his name. “The Iron Bull!”

“Yes, my desire demon,” he hissed, curling his finger inside her.

She made a choked cry and said his name again. He added a finger, and twisted against the inner muscles clenching around him.

It hardly took any time for her body to accept a third finger. Her begging got filthier with each stroke, driving him crazy and earning her chosen pet name.

As she reached that peak yet again, he pulled his hand away, leaving her near weeping in frustration. Bull slid his arm under her waist and drew her to sit. He turned her to face him and kissed her, delving deep into her mouth with his tongue.

“I’ve been fantasizing about having this mouth wrapped around my cock again,” he whispered against her lips.

“I can’t wait to taste you on my tongue,” she said, her husky voice making his cock even harder.

He set her on her feet. “Untie my boots.”

Flint dropped to her knees and yelped. “Shit, this floor is hard!”

He leaned forward. “Patience, desire demon. Don’t rush on my behalf.”

She nodded and began to work at his laces. After a moment she paused. “Exactly how many knots do you know?”

“A lot. Why?”

She gave a little laugh. “I’ve never seen any of these and I have no idea how to undo them.”

He grinned. “Then I’ll teach you.”

Bull showed her how to untie the intricate knots on one boot and supervised her efforts on the other. She only missed one loop, but managed to correct herself before he did.

As Flint set the massive boots to the side, his lips pressed into her forehead. “Good job.”

She fought the giddy smile fighting to break free. “What now?”

“Belt. Then pants.”

“Then smalls?”

He smirked. “You think I wear smalls?”

She laughed. “Come to think of it, I recall you telling Viv that the Qun barely requires pants.”

“Exactly.”

He caught her hand and drew her to stand with him. Her knee complained, but she ignored it.

Bull trailed an escaped lock of her hair between his fingers. "Fucking luscious," he murmured.

Flint reached tentatively for his belt. When he didn't correct her, she pulled the thick leather tongue free from the buckle. It fell loose and jerked out of her hands, the belt far heavier than she expected.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Keep going," he said, apparently unconcerned.

Flint brought her bound hands to the waistband of his pants and loosened the laces. With the lightest tug, they came loose and Bull's cock sprang free.

It was even thicker and harder than she remembered, and the tip already glistened with precum. She reached for it, but he caught her hands.

"Pants first. Finish the job."

She grabbed the heavy canvas again and slid it down the tree trunks he called legs. When he stepped free, her eye was dragged to horrific scarring along his ankle.

She massaged the marks and looked up at him. "May I suck your cock yet?"

He sat on the bed and she crawled between his knees, ignoring the rough stone as it dug into her skin. Bull's hand caressed the back of her head and slipped down her long braid. Flint bit back a moan as he looped it around his hand and tightened his grip.

He tilted her head up and traced her mouth with his finger. "You ready?"

She tried to nod, but he held firm. "Use your words."

"Yes, please," she said.

He made a low humming sound of approval. "Very nice, desire demon."

With that, his hand guided her face to his cock. She went to use her hands and got a sharp tug on her braid.

"Mouth only."

When his cock was finally in reach, he loosened his grip just enough that she could maneuver it between her lips. He was hard enough to break rocks, but his skin was satiny and smooth. She took her time suckling the broad head of him clean, his fluid salty against her tongue.

His palm kneaded the back of her neck as she took him more fully into her mouth. The girth and length was far beyond the capacity of her jaw, but she could make up for it with her hands.

Before they made contact, he had the silk cord trapped beneath his foot and shortened until she could hardly move.

“No. Hands.”

She looked up at him. “I just want to make you feel good.”

A growl rumbled in his chest. “Don't you worry about it. I've got this under control.”

Bull brought her mouth back to his cock. She took it eagerly, and watched his eye to see if she was hitting his favorite spots. His lip had begun to curl already, and he shivered when she made a low humming sound.

His hand pressed against her head and she let her jaw go slack. Even that only got her another inch of cock in her mouth. Maybe if she wasn't so small she'd be able to show off her hard-earned deepthroating skills.

The Qunari didn't seem to care, however. Every thrust had him whispering in Qunlat, and his hand tightened on her braid, urging her faster.

Flint rolled her tongue around his cock as he fucked her face, alternating between hard sucking and a loose jaw. The ache between her legs had returned to its full throbbing roar. She kept her eyes locked on his, hoping he could see how much she enjoyed watching him come undone.

Then he was pulling her back and clamping a hand around the head of his cock

Hard breaths jerked his chest. “Oh, fuck,” he rasped.

Flint turned her face to press kisses to his inner arm. “Will you fuck me now?”

She found herself launched onto the bed and pinned on her back fast enough to make her head spin.

Bull kissed her, his tongue demanding and his teeth sharp as they nipped the edges of her lips. “Fuck that mark. This mouth is your real gift.”

Her response was swallowed by another filthy kiss that had every hair on her body standing at attention. Vaguely she could feel him fussing with the rope and ribbon around her wrists, and then he began to lick, and kiss, and bite his way down her body.

Flint tested her hands and felt them hold fast. His mouth reached her pussy and laved over the length of it, leaving her every nerve on fire and Elvish pouring past her lips, beyond any of her control. When he plunged his fingers inside her, it was almost enough to throw her beyond the edge. But no, not with Bull. Right as she came close to peaking, the sadistic ass left her writhing and panting.

This time, however, he was almost as out of control as she was. He stroked her ample juices over the head of his cock and met her eyes. “You ready?”

She nodded and earned a sharp slap to the inner thigh.

“Words, demon!”

“Yes!” she cried. “Please, fuck, yes!”

He slid himself along her pussy, and pressed forward. Her eyes snapped wide at the sheer girth of him. Surely he hadn't been this thick that first night.

But no matter. All of his hard work paid off in one delicious thrust. Her body accepted him eagerly, with only the barest sting when he was fully seated.

He paused, letting her focus on the way he impaled her, and the way their pulses had begun to synchronize.

“Better than I remembered,” he said hoarsely.

She nodded. “So much better.”

Bull eased himself out and then thrust forward. The nerves that had been humming broke into full song. She bore down on the ribbons binding her hands and groaned.

Each new thrust hit every last inch, leaving her babbling incoherent Elvish at how fucking *good* he felt inside her. He added to the word salad with his own broken stream of Qunlat.

He alternated hard, jolting thrusts with utter stillness. Flint found herself waiting breathlessly for those motionless moments, waiting for that intense flutter of pulsing that brought her closer to the edge every time.

When her thighs had begun to shake, he shifted on his knees and began to drive his cock with purpose. He switched to Elvish, whispering with an almost perfect accent that she had earned the right to come. The rasp of his voice in her ear and the steady thrusts made it impossible to think, so she didn't try. She just let her body take the lead. It felt like he was filling her entire body with impossible heat, and then, like a snapped bowstring, everything released.

“Yes, desire demon! Come on that cock!”

The waves kept coming, renewed with every stroke of his cock. Then he groaned and bucked into her, and trembled through his own climax. She could feel the heat of his seed filling her.

He collapsed onto his forearms and puffed sharply. “I meant to wait, but this pussy...men would start fuckin’ wars for this pussy.”

His mouth met hers, all soft and sweet in the aftermath. As they slowly tangled their tongues together, he reached up and tugged her hands completely loose.

She immediately traced her hands over every inch of him within reach. “I think men would start wars for this incredible cock of yours,” she whispered in his ear.

His cheeks darkened and he gave a shy grin. “I doubt that.”

Flint felt her heart squeeze tight at how adorable he was when he blushed. “You sell yourself short, The Iron Bull.”

He slipped a hand under her back and rolled over so that she was laid on top of him. “Ain't nothing short here, boss.”

She snickered. “And we return to our standard level of maturity.”

He grinned. “You expect nothing less.”

Flint shifted and settled against his chest, letting her ear rest on top of his heart. He traced circles over her back, and let out a long breath. The steady thump and warm pressure quickly lulled her to sleep and, for the first time in a long time, she didn't fight it.

It had taken incredible care to detangle himself from Flint's sleeping body without waking her. Bull stole to the chest and pulled out a small towel to clean himself off, then grabbed another clean towel and slipped onto the bed.

She stirred and mumbled something he couldn't quite pick out. He hummed the lullaby his mama used to sing when he was a kid, and gently daubed her clean.

Already she had mitt-shaped bruising on her hips. He ignored the instinctive thrill of pleasure and hunted down the vial of oil. It had gotten kicked off the bed at some point, but he finally spotted an odd sparkle against the wall.

Bull worked the oil into any marks on her skin as gingerly as possible, trying not to move her unless necessary.

It seemed his worries were for naught. She stayed dead to the world, even snoring a little.

He smiled. Success, yet again.

After rubbing oil into the raw marks on her wrist, he ditched everything into a pile at the foot of the bed and crawled beside her.

As he drew his quilt up and curled around her, she shifted and burrowed into his chest. An unexpected pang of desire hit him in the gut.

He wanted her to stay, and to wake up to her hogging the bed and stealing the blankets. To taste her morning breath and hear her cry his name as he woke her with his own brand of magic. To watch her dress in the morning light, and send her out with a kiss that left her lips stinging.

And he wanted a lifetime of that. An entirely foreign concept that had never even crossed his mind with a hundred other playmates.

Bull battled the emotions down and slammed the lid on the hatch. He wasn't here to find anything more than information. Flint was just a distraction during off-time. They would seek

and find pleasure from one another, and that would be enough.

That would be enough.

It had to be enough.

Desks and Swords

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Cullen gave one last shove and the desk was exactly center. He gazed around the room. It wasn't fancy, not by any stretch. But it had a small loft he could use as a sleeping space, and plenty of light pouring through the windows. And the roof was whole, which was more than could be said for most places in this keep. However Solas had come to know of the place, Cullen was grateful for it.

A knock sounded at the door. "Come in," he called.

Flint walked into the room. He found himself standing at stiff attention without intending to.

"Inquisitor, I did not anticipate a visit so soon. My apologies for the mess."

She lifted a brow. "There's literally nothing in this room but a desk."

"And a filthy floor. And dirty windows. And a pile of construction debris."

"You mean like everywhere else in this dump," she said, a slight edge to her voice.

"Maker, no. I did not intend to imply-"

She shook her head. "You implied nothing. I said it. This place is a disaster."

He frowned. "We do not have much choice. Our last base of operation was destroyed."

Flint sat on his desk and sighed heavily. "I know."

The muscle under his eye twitched. "Is there something you need, Inquisitor?"

"A way to turn back the clock?"

He tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

She gave a short laugh. "I mean I'd love to go back in time. Back to when the biggest problem I had was who to marry for political purposes."

Heat climbed up his neck. The elf had always been overly familiar, and he never quite knew how to respond to her. "I see. Well, that isn't possible. So perhaps we should get to work instead."

Her eyes slid over to him, deep grey and far too serious. "Do you ever stray from duty?"

He tried to smile. "Only when appropriate."

"Do Templars take vows of chastity?"

His entire body jolted in shock at the bold question. "No. I mean some do, but not all."

She rose to her feet and crossed to him. "Did you?"

Every inch of his skin was scalding hot with embarrassment. His face probably matched his cloak. "Maker, I... no, Inquisitor." Why was he even answering? "Could we please speak of anything else?"

"You are too easy to fluster, Commander."

He found his eyes locked on the curving tilt of her lips. "Is that why you delight in tormenting me?"

She stepped closer and smoothed a hand over the bear fur of his mantle. "Is it torment to have a woman pursue you?"

"Maker's breath," he muttered. "Inquisitor, I-"

"Flint. Please," she whispered.

He took one step back. "Inquisitor. I do have things to do, so if you don't require anything further, I'd like to get back to them."

Flint followed his step, her eyes never leaving his. "You've got to be the most buttoned-up man I've ever encountered."

He looked away. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Her finger touched his chin and guided him to look her way again. "I'm practically throwing myself at you, and all you can think about is work. It's not natural."

Cullen could feel his pulse racing. The Inquisitor was achingly beautiful, he wouldn't deny it. But his heart was not made for the type of relationship promised in those stunning eyes. "I do not wish to have casual sex. Perhaps you should see the Qunari again. I hear he's far more liberal with his affections."

Her head snapped back almost as though he'd slapped her, then a slow smile came to her face. "I underestimated you, Commander. I won't do that again."

She pressed her lips to his cheek and left the room, her hips swaying seductively with each step.

He'd never felt more bewildered in his life.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Flint sat on the high wall, watching the bustle of people below. There were gardeners tilling a massive patch of earth, and healers moving from cot to cot. A few large carts rolled through, loaded with building materials.

Bull was training his guys. Even in this relaxed mode, he was a fearsome sight, all bronze and leather and muscle.

As he bellowed some command or other, Flint found herself wishing she could give him That Look and meet him in her room for a fuck so intense they both couldn't speak properly.

But no, she couldn't. Not if she wanted anything to happen with her ongoing obsession.

Said obsession came out of his office and leaned on the wall facing the mountains. She could see from her spot how weary Cullen was, but no amount of ordering and cajoling could convince him to stop burning the candle at both ends.

Brisk footsteps approached her back. "Ser, Vivienne and Josephine have requested an audience with you in the War Room."

She smiled at the soldier. "Alright. Let them know I'll be there in a short while."

He bowed briefly and then marched off toward the Great Hall.

"No rest for the wicked," she muttered to herself.

Cullen turned away from the mountains and spotted her across the courtyard. Flint gave him a wave, to which he blushed and saluted before skittering inside his office.

She sighed and turned her eyes to Bull. He was too busy shouting at Krem to realize he had an audience, but she knew that if he did catch her spying on him, he'd make sure to show off his ass followed by a goofy full-body flex.

Flint watched him a moment longer. She did adore him, truly and deeply. The bold and brash qunari was clearly the better match, so why couldn't she shake her longing for prim and

genteel Cullen?

Cullen signed three requisition forms and turned his attention to Scout Harding. "What is your report?"

"Crestwood is overrun with undead. I have a request from the mayor for our assistance. But there's something strange there."

"Stranger than undead walking about?"

She grimaced. "They say the rift is below the water of the lake."

It took him a moment to comprehend. "How on earth is that possible?"

Harding shrugged. "How are any of them possible?"

"Fair point."

"What word should I send to my people?"

Cullen shook his head. "This requires that I speak with the Inquisitor. She will have to set which locations are our priority."

"Okay, let me know."

He nodded and waved as she left the room. Weariness overwhelmed him, and as it did, the craving to dose himself with lyrium spiked. He pulled a familiar wooden box out of his drawer and stared at it.

It practically sang to him, enticing him to take just one taste. Just a bit, what could it hurt?

He clenched his fists tightly and paced, fighting to move his mind from that tantalizing desire. It didn't work, and his adrenaline was rising with every step, leaving him nervy and tense.

A knock at his door made him jolt. "What do you want?" he snapped.

Cassandra peeked into the room. "Am I interrupting?"

His chest heaved. "I'm... no, it's fine."

She lifted a brow. "Are you alright, Commander?"

Sweat was starting to bead on his upper lip. "I don't think I'm strong enough for this."

She looked at the box. Understanding dawned in her dark eyes. "You have come this far. You can go a little further."

"It's *relentless*. I can't even go a day..."

Her lips tightened. "You give yourself too little credit."

"And should I fail, then all of this is for naught. You should remove me from this post."

"I did review your request. It is denied. I cannot think of a better man for this job."

He turned to face her. "Would you rather save face than admit I'm not the man for this job?"

"If you think I'm interested in saving face, you think wrong, commander."

Cullen cursed and whipped the box away. The contents exploded on contact with the door, the lyrium spraying all up Flint's front.

He wanted to throw himself off the wall. "Maker's breath. I didn't hear you come in."

Flint shook herself off and gave him a wry smile. "So long as you weren't actually aiming for me."

Cassandra put a hand on his shoulder. "I will not change my mind, so you'd better get used to being here."

Flint's eyes went wide. "Wait, what am I missing here?"

Cassandra headed for the door. "Ask him."

The elf turned to him. "Well?"

He turned away. "I asked Cassandra to find my replacement."

"But why?"

"Because I lack the self control to manage my addiction to lyrium," he said, the admission painful to voice.

"Has it affected your job?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. But it's only a matter of time."

She crossed the room and stood in front of him. "How can you say that?"

Cullen pointed at the destroyed box. "I'd say that's evidence enough."

Flint scoffed. "I'd say smashing your drugs into nothingness shows control, of a kind."

"You should be more critical. How many lives depend on our success, and yet my mind drifts to lyrium given the slightest chance." He wound up and punched a shelf hard enough to crack the wood. "I should be taking it, should be putting my focus into furthering our cause."

Flint's hand wrapped over his shoulder and tugged him around. "Fuck the Inquisition." She tapped the center of his breastplate. "Do *you* want to take lyrium?"

His shoulders slumped and he shook his head. "No. I walked away from that life for a reason."

"Then don't take it."

"It's not that simple. These thoughts...they haunt my every step."

"Then ask for help. Not one person would turn you away if you did."

His chest constricted. "But what if I fail?"

"Then you fail." Flint shrugged. "We'll pick up the pieces and try again."

"How can you be so certain?"

She smirked. "I've come to learn that life is not black or white. And failure does not mean that everything is over."

"But it could mean that."

"But it could also mean that tomorrow is a new day with new chances to be better."

Her countenance glowed in the light of the fire. Cullen couldn't stop staring, trying to soak in this fantastical hope she preached. "I will try to remember that."

She smiled. "That's all I ask."

He forced a smile. "Thank you, Inquisitor."

Flint dipped her head, and then headed for the door. "When you're available, we're in need of your expertise in the war room."

He nodded. "Yes. Right. To work."

"Boss, you are wound up tighter than Ruffles' pajamas. You know I could take care of that for you."

Flint dragged her forearm across her brow and readied the training sword again. "And how would you do that, Bull?"

He grinned, his teeth sparkling white in contrast to his bronze skin. "So you want me to talk dirty, is that it?"

She lunged forward with her blade, aiming for his blind side. He parried with an unhurried swipe of his two-handed sword.

"What did I say about the blind side?" He wagged a finger at her. "I've trained to compensate, just like anyone else in my boots would. Don't go for the easy target."

She bared her teeth. “Nothing on you is an easy target.”

Bull laughed. “Aw, I think you're getting sweet on me, boss.”

Flint hissed a curse and swept forward with an overhand blow at his bare shoulder. He blocked it with a heavy side strike of his blade and drove his shoulder into her chest. The impact knocked her on her back, leaving her wheezing.

He bent over her. “You gonna live?”

She finally sucked a full breath and nodded.

He smiled. “Good. Now, about all this restless energy...”

Flint rolled her eyes and snagged a hold on his chest strap. He straightened, lifting her to her feet as though she weighed nothing.

Bull dusted her off and lifted a brow. “So what do you say, boss? Come up to that wind tunnel I call a room, hop on board old Iron Bull. Do your little dance, and we'll both wind up feeling better for it.”

Her traitorous body throbbed with desire. “I wish,” she said through gritted teeth.

He frowned. “Explain.”

She looked away. “I'm saving myself.”

He barked a laugh. “You're not serious, are you?”

She was, painful as it was. Bull was perfection, taking the lead and making her forget about everything but the way he was playing her body like an instrument. Even thinking about it was getting her hot and bothered.

She let out a slow breath. “There's someone I'm interested in. And he doesn't seem to like my loose ways, so I'm refraining.”

He crossed his arms. “Do I know this someone? Maybe I can give you some extra insight.”

Flint glared at him. “Are you going to report this to the bosses back home?”

“Only if it's *really* juicy.”

She pulled a face at him, but decided he'd figure it out on his own anyway. “Cullen.”

“The *Templar*?” Bull shook his head and pulled her into a hug. “Oh boy. That man's issues have issues.”

Flint sighed and leaned into the embrace. “You know they have a bathhouse here, right?”

“And neutralize these pheromones?” Bull chuckled and released her. “Maker forbid.”

Flint pulled a face at him. "One more round. I feel like this is my time."

Bull didn't even lift his blade. He stood at ease, watching her with an amused smirk. She carved out with the sword, aiming at his blindside again.

Impossibly quick, he had his sword cracked against hers hard enough to knock it out of her grip, and the tip of his blade at her throat. His smile never flickered.

"*Feint* at his blindside, and then go low. He leaves himself wide open. Despite our many talks."

Flint craned her head around Bull's bulk and saw Cullen standing next to the ring entrance, his blond hair glittering in the sunlight.

She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, come again?"

Bull snickered, and she shot him a murderous glare.

Cullen stepped into the ring and picked up her fallen blade. "Watch. Learn."

He faced Bull squarely, clearly unconcerned about their size difference. They began a slow circle, each reading every twitch of muscle like it was a picture book.

Cullen moved first, jabbing right. Bull blocked it and used the momentum to strike at Cullen's ribs. The Templar pivoted out of striking range, and then made a move at the hip on Bull's blindside.

The Qunari whipped his sword around to block, but Cullen made a clever spin and batted the flat of the wooden blade against the fleshy part of his right knee.

The powerhouses bowed their heads at one another.

Cullen jammed the tip of the blade into the soft sand. "Like that, Inquisitor." Then, without a backward glance, he marched off.

Flint stared after him, unable to quell the longing in her belly.

Bull leaned an elbow on her shoulder. "You are gonna have to work long and hard for this one, boss."

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was well after midnight, and Cullen couldn't sleep. As per usual.

He gazed at his copy of the war table, cataloging every marker and fussing with the placement of some. They needed a stronger front in Crestwood, and definitely needed to put more focus on the civil war in Orlais.

How the Inquisition could possibly hope to manage all of the plates currently in the air was beyond him. He'd been working at it for nearly two weeks, but it all came down to a lack of manpower. If they had even 20% more troops, there was a chance of success.

A soft knock sounded at his door, startling him.

What now?

He crossed and flung it open to find Flint. "Oh, I... you... uh..."

A smile touched her lips. "Can I come in?"

"Maker's breath, yes, of course. I apologize, Inquisitor."

Flint brushed past him and said, "I'm not interrupting you, am I?"

He closed the door and scurried to the desk, shuffling his mess of papers into a neat stack and tidying the tangle of quills and wax stamps. "No, it's alright. I just didn't expect anyone to come by so late."

She eased into his other chair with a wince. "I know, I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep and I didn't want to be alone. Bull and company are out chasing down Venatori. Varric and Dorian are still out at Redcliffe. The only other person I could think of that might be up is Solas, and I can't bear to listen to him ramble on about the failures of my people yet again."

Cullen frowned and sat down. "I would hardly think that is an appropriate way to speak to you. I'll have a word with him."

"Oh no, please." She smiled and shook her head. "He's more polite about it than most people I meet, actually. I've just misplaced my social filter again, it seems."

There were dark smudges beneath her eyes, and her movement was stiff. Cullen had read the reports following her visit to the Storm Coast to rendezvous with the Qunari.

"How is your recovery progressing?" he asked.

She shrugged. "My back still feels like it has an arrow embedded in it, but Dorian promises they got it all out. I'm sure I'll feel better after a good night's sleep. If I can ever manage one."

They gave each other rueful smiles. "Don't I know that feeling," he murmured.

"I owe you an apology, commander."

Cullen felt both of his brows shoot straight up. "Whatever for?"

"For the day I cornered you in this office. I had no right to invade your personal space, and I certainly had no right to hit on you when you clearly didn't want me to."

Heat flourished up his neck and over his scalp. "You do not need to apologize, Inquisitor."

"Oh, but I do." She shifted in her seat. "I damaged our working relationship, and I made it impossible to become friends. I'd like a chance to change that."

Her eyes held his, glowing softly in the candlelight. The curve of her lips and the dark shine of her hair left him tongue-tied as always, but her bald honesty left him determined to return the favor.

"I will confess that it made me uncomfortable," he said softly. "But I regret my harsh response."

A smile came to her face. "That was one of the best verbal jabs I've ever received in my life."

He squirmed in his seat. "What you do in your... in your...Maker's breath...it's none of my business."

Flint leaned forward. "May I explain myself anyway?"

Cullen didn't know if he wanted an explanation, but he nodded.

"In Redcliffe there was some bizarre time magic at play. Specifically the kind that sent me a year into the future."

"Yes, I read the reports."

She grimaced. "The reports don't show everything. I saw...I saw all of you infected through and through with red lyrium. Bull, Cassandra, Varric. You. *Everyone*."

Revulsion curled in his gut. "Maker..."

"I watched all of you die to give Dorian and I the chance to escape that future. And I didn't cope well with it." Her eyes dropped to the floor. "The Iron Bull was kind enough to offer me some reprieve from the nightmares. Without his help, I don't know that I could have moved forward with the Inquisition. That pressure would have been too much."

Guilt blossomed in his belly. "I am sorry for having passed any judgement on you."

"To be fair, my standard mentality about sex is far more in line with the Qunari than it is with yours." A smile touched her lips. "But I've come to appreciate your way of thinking as well. I've endeavored to change my ways, even if I find temptation nearly impossible to resist."

Cullen swallowed past a sudden lump in his throat. "I am glad to have given you a different perspective, Inquisitor. And I am grateful to have seen things from your point of view as well."

Flint smiled and rose stiffly to her feet. "Maybe one day you'll be comfortable calling me Flint again."

A smile eked its way to freedom. "Perhaps."

"Good night, Cullen. Don't stay up until dawn."

"I won't. Good night, Inquisitor."

She shuffled out of his quarters and into the inky blackness of night.

Cullen closed the door and stood staring at it for a long while, absorbing the unexpected conversation.

Bull tipped his chin at her mug. "Drink. The second one isn't as bad."

Flint gave him a wary look. "If you're lying to me..."

"Me? *Lie*? I resent the accusation."

She shook her head. "Your entire job was to lie and they considered you one of the best. Don't play coy with me, Hissrad."

His jaw clenched, and Flint felt it like a punch to the gut. "Oh shit. I'm sorry, Bull."

His hand tightened on his mug and he took a large gulp. "It's fine," he said after the coughing ended.

Flint tossed back another mouthful of the foul liquid he called booze and found he was right. It still burned, but it wasn't nearly as harsh.

“See? The first shot burns all the nerves in your throat.”

She wiped her mouth. “Bull, I really am sorry. You've just lost a huge part of your life. It was really thoughtless of me to say that.”

“You're fine, boss. I'm just not used to it yet.” He shook his head. “Tal Va-fucking-shoth. My Tama is probably beyond pissed.”

“Listen to me, Bull.” She reached over and grabbed his horn, pulling him closer to her eye level. “You are a good man. You don't need to be part of the Qun to prove it.”

He rested his forehead against hers, the weight of it almost too much to hold up. “Thanks, boss. Just...do me a favor, would you?”

“Of course.”

“If I start to go...you know...” He twirled a finger by his temple. “Take me out, okay? I don't want to live in that madness.”

The worry burning behind his green eye made her chest ache. She wrapped her arms around his thick neck and held tight. “You won't go crazy. I won't let you. None of us will. Do you hear me?”

He curled an arm around her and nodded. “Yeah. I hear you.”

They stayed wound together for a few minutes before he cleared his throat roughly and pulled free. Flint pretended not to see him scrub away a tear before he slammed the rest of his drink.

She took another big swallow and let out a long sigh. The alcohol was already starting to fuzz the edges of reality. “This stuff isn't half bad once you get over the taste of it.”

He laughed. “Yeah! Puts some chest on your chest.”

Flint poked his pec and said, “I don't think you need more chest.”

“Hey, easy now. I had to earn these. Unlike you, I wasn't blessed with an incredible rack from birth.”

Heat flooded across her face. “Aw. That's so sweet. In a roundabout kind of way.”

He smiled and leaned closer. “I'm serious. I don't get to tell you this when we're out there, but you got great tits.”

She was just tipsy enough that normally all he'd really need to do was take her hand and lead her up the stairs. A groan escaped her. “Why did I have to fall for Cullen? Why couldn't I have fallen for you instead?”

“Good question.” Bull flagged down Cabot for another round and returned his eye to hers. “Maybe it's because you want what you can't have.”

Flint shrugged and took another swallow. “Maybe.”

“Or maybe you just like the way his hair blows in the wind. I should grow mine out. It's even curlier than his, you know.”

Flint giggled and tried to picture the Qunari with curly locks. “You'd make this even harder if you did, I'm sure.”

His eye softened and he brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. “If anything ever changes, boss. You just let me know.”

She curved a hand over his cheek. “Of course I will.”

“Good. Now, did you see that new barmaid? I think I might have a shot with her tonight. Maybe a good word from the Inquisitor herself would help seal the deal.”

“You mean that redhead?”

He gave her a wry look. “When *don't* I mean the redhead?”

Flint crossed her eyes at him. “I'll do this for you, but only because you're always so nice to me.”

“And because I have a great ass. Admit it!”

Flint swatted him playfully and got to her feet. The room wobbled under her feet, sending her stumbling into the Qunari with a laugh. “Holy shit, Bull. What's in that stuff?”

Chapter End Notes

Stay safe out there, everyone! I'm holed up with my kitties and puppy, and we're riding this thing out best we can. If you can stay home, please do so - the more we limit the spread of this asshole disease, the better!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Flint shifted restlessly, then sat up with that wild look in her eyes. Bull put the bucket under her chin and scooped her hair into his free hand just as she retched up another half a drink worth of booze and bile.

She groaned in the aftermath. He set the bucket aside and snagged the damp cloth he'd left on her night table. As he cleaned her face, she drooped forward, out cold again.

Bull held her up long enough to finish the job, then arranged her comfortably on her side, facing him.

She began to snore immediately. He smoothed the hair from her forehead and watched her sleep for a moment before getting up to dispose of the third bucket of sick.

He would have to watch her more closely the next time they went after maaras-lok. No more going drink for drink unless she had water or Cabot's piss ale every other cup.

After cleaning out the bucket, he returned to her side and sat on the wooden chair. It creaked in protest of his weight, the sound pissing him off. Was it too much to ask that furniture makers allow for bigger people to use their wares too?

He grimaced and shook his head. It wasn't the craftsmen he was angry at, and he knew it. A lifetime of shitty furniture was the least of his future problems after the debacle that was the Storm Coast mission.

But it had been the right choice. He was sure of it. No way could he have watched *his guys* fall when there would just be more smugglers in a week. It was the height of stupidity to sacrifice so much for so little gain.

Except it had been a test. Looking back, he could see it clearly. Gatt hadn't given him half the intel he needed to make tactical decisions, but he'd blindly accepted it as the full truth. Why? Why hadn't he caught on sooner? Maybe if he had...

No. No point thinking about it. All he was doing was making it hurt worse.

Flint mumbled something he couldn't understand, and reached out, her small pale hand searching the bed. Bull put his hand over hers and she took hold, her grip surprisingly firm.

He swallowed hard. It killed him that she'd pulled away in favour of chasing down the commander. But who was he to say anything? They'd barely allowed him into the Inquisition to begin with, and she saw him as a means to information. Their relationship, if he could even call it that, was based purely on what he could do for her, both in and out of bed.

But as she held onto him for dear life, he couldn't stop wishing she'd turn her eyes his way again. That she'd see something in him worthy of her full affection.

If there was anything.

Flint woke to pain and suffering. Her eyes had spikes driven through them, and someone had poured hot sand into her brain.

Her stomach rebelled. She went to launch herself out of bed, only to have her movement redirected. A bucket appeared under her face, and someone held her hair back.

After unloading her guts to the point of cramping, she whimpered. A damp cloth worked over her face, then a cup of water came into her line of vision.

"Swish and spit," Bull commanded.

She obeyed with three small mouthfuls, then swallowed a few sips. The cool water soothed her aching throat.

"What did you do to me?" she croaked.

Bull guided her to sit against the pillows and held a foul smelling concoction toward her. "Drink. It'll help, I promise."

She gagged twice, but managed to down the whole thing before wilting. "Why does the light hurt?"

He smiled. "It'll get better. Close your eyes."

Flint tried to obey, but it ached too much. "I'm never drinking again."

"Sure you will. This will just make you tougher next time."

She moaned. "Why aren't *you* suffering?"

"Because hangovers got nothing on this big bastard."

A squawking sound pierced her ears, making her whole body tense. "What was that?"

"My heavy ass sitting on your shitty chair." He leaned on the bed. "Do I need to tell you a bedtime story to get you to go back to sleep?"

She glared at him. "I'm not tired."

He was clearly unmoved by her ferocious expression. "Okay, you're the boss."

"Don't remind me," she muttered.

They sat in silence for a long while, and slowly the pain ebbed into something she could tolerate. "Was it really bad? Last night, I mean."

He shook his head. "Had to carry your drunk ass home, and hold a bucket a couple times. Not the worst I've dealt with."

"What was the worst?"

"Once had to shove my fingers down Krem's throat to force him to throw up. Barely got it to happen. That was the worst."

"Papa Bull," she whispered.

"Hey, I gave up my eye for that asshole. Wasn't gonna let him die of alcohol poisoning, of all fucking things."

Flint smiled. "Told you."

He tilted his head. "Told me what?"

She pointed at his chest. "Good person."

Bull shrugged. "If you say so."

As the pain continued to ease, a new sensation slid through her. The Qunari was right there, and she'd been without any skin on skin contact for almost a month. A familiar throb came to life between her legs.

"Bull?"

"Hmm?"

She sat up and opened the covers. "You could join me."

His eye went dark and lustful in a second, but he didn't move. "No."

The rejection stung. Before she could curl into herself or retaliate, he sighed heavily.

"It ain't for lack of wanting, Boss."

"Then why? I'm right here. And I want you."

His teeth ground together. "I know. But you're still tipsy, and you're going to regret all of it when you sober up."

Flint scoffed. "How do you know?"

"Because you want the Templar. And being with me now might ruin your chances at him."

She wanted to throw herself onto his lap and push him past this impressive display of self-control. But if she did, it was as good as deciding she didn't want Cullen.

"Do you know I hate when you're pragmatic?"

A rueful smile came to his lips. "I'm hating myself right now."

Flint sighed. It really would be as easy as crawling onto his lap and grinding into his beautiful cock while she ravaged his mouth with hers. He'd cave and fuck the life back into her. No one else in the Keep would have to know.

Except...Bull would. And she respected him far too much to put him in that position. He deserved better than being her dirty little secret.

"You're a good friend, the Iron Bull."

He smirked. "Tell that to my downstairs."

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Cullen glared at the report on his desk, not really seeing any of the words.

The scene kept playing in his head, over and over. Bull carrying a giggly Flint to her room, and Flint planting sloppy kisses on everything her beautiful mouth could reach.

So much for changing her ways.

He scowled and tried reading the report again. What the Inquisitor did on her own time wasn't his business or concern.

But it *bothered* him. Why have that conversation at all if she didn't mean it?

Enough! To work, his ultimate distraction. He read the report aloud. "Commander, your instincts were correct. We've found the source of Samson's red lyrium in Emprise du Lion."

A jolt shot through his entire body. They found it!

He rushed around the walls of the Keep, intent on reaching the War Room. Along the way he called for a scout to gather the others.

As he rounded a corner, he collided head-on with Bull. The Qunari caught his shoulders to prevent him going head over heels.

"Easy, Templar. Where's the fire?"

Irritation crackled through him. He shoved away. "Not your concern, Qunari."

He left a befuddled Bull and mounted the steps to the War Room. Cassandra and Josephine arrived as he did. Leliana was already in the room. Flint, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Is the Inquisitor going to grace us with her presence?" he asked, unable to hide his caustic undertone.

"No," said Leliana. "The Iron Bull informs me that she requires further rest."

The women all exchanged knowing smirks, and he wanted to throw something. "Fine. Let's discuss this vital correspondence. Without our leader."

Cassandra lifted a brow. "Are you feeling alright, Cullen?"

"Never better." He slapped the note on the table and pointed on the map to Sahrnia in Emprise du Lion. "We've been tracking down Samson's source of red lyrium. I suspected it would be in this region due to reports of heavy Red Templar presence. Turns out I was correct."

Josephine scribbled a note and said, "My associate Baron Edouard Desjardins reports a strange red crystal that is flourishing near the area."

"Probably the same red lyrium. We must not delay in acting. This may lead to a chance to stop Samson before he gets further out of control."

Leliana frowned. "What do you intend to do if we capture him?"

Cullen froze. He hadn't thought that far ahead. "I don't...know. He was a decent man at one point, and felt that the Chantry took advantage of the Templars. Perhaps there are ways to help him. I don't know."

Her brow remained furrowed, but she didn't say anything in response.

"When the Inquisitor has rested, we will meet again. I agree that this requires direct attention, Cullen." Cassandra leaned over the map. "See how the rivers pass through this area? He could smuggle it all the way to Tervinter should he get the notion."

Cullen nodded. "I will prepare a more thorough report. Please send word immediately once our leader finishes her nap."

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Flint woke alone to a dim-lit room. Bull had hung around long enough to make sure she wasn't going to throw up again, then instructed her to stay in bed until her head felt better.

She'd obeyed far longer than she intended, judging by how low the sun had gotten.

After a quick wash in her private bath, she headed to the kitchens to beg for a meal. The cooks admonished her as they threw together a quick stew, but one tweaked her ear fondly, taking out all sting from the lectures.

A cleared throat at the doorway caught her attention. She turned to see a nervous looking scout.

"Out with it," she said around a mouthful.

"You've been requested to meet with the others in the war room."

"Anything pressing?"

He nodded. "Several issues."

She sighed and bolted the last few mouthfuls. "I'd stay longer, but duty calls."

The cooks both waved her away and returned to their duties.

Flint headed straight to the war room. The scout followed until they reached the Great Hall, then he bustled off to parts unknown.

Cassandra was sitting at the table when she arrived.

"Did I miss much?"

The Seeker grimaced. "Cullen has discovered the source of Samson's red lyrium."

"That's huge. Have we made preparations to leave?"

"You do not know the destination."

"Does it matter?"

"Knowing the location matters a great deal," said Cullen as he marched in ahead of Leliana, his expression harried. "You'd know this if you paid attention during any of our other meetings." His voice dripped with acid.

Flint crossed her arms and fought the urge to say something sarcastic. "Well? Out with it then."

He slammed a marker on Emprise du Lion. The other markers on the table jumped and skittered in place from the force of it. "We've reports from Sahrnia that red lyrium is taking over. Red Templars also swarm the area. The logic follows that Samson is there as well."

"Do we know the location of his base?"

"Not specifically," said Leliana. "I have people in the area. We should know more in two days' time."

"Good enough. I'll get my team ready. We'll head out at sunrise."

Cullen scoffed sharply. "Without an army, you won't get anywhere near him."

"So we should just sit around waiting?" She drew a slow breath. "While you get the location and ready the troops, we'll clear the area of rifts. And maybe a little scouting of our own."

He scowled. "You're running off without a single plan."

"You're acting like that's news." Flint held both arms to the side. "We're always reacting. Until we get ahead of Corypheus, we're stuck running on half-assed plans."

"Who will you take?" asked Cassandra.

"My usual. Varric, Dorian, Bull."

Cullen made another ugly sound and tossed papers on the table. "Of course. Why would you put any further thought into it?"

She could feel her crush disintegrating with every harsh word. "What exactly is your problem, commander?"

"We have several people that are experienced and able to provide better assistance, but you take your favorites instead of considering anyone else."

"I take them because we've worked together enough to become a solid team. We've succeeded at everything else we tackled. Why the complaints now?"

Cassandra opened her mouth, but Flint held up a hand. "No, let him explain. What is this *really* about, commander?"

His cheeks had gone scarlet. "If you would think beyond your own desires for once, you'd see that there are people better suited for particular missions. This job is difficult enough without you running amok with your little friends."

Her pulse spiked along with her temper. "Beyond my own desires?"

"Yes, Inquisitor. There are other factors to consider besides what you personally want."

"I think I've done an admirable job of putting what I personally want second."

"Oh really?" Cullen said, a scornful undercurrent in his voice.

"Seeing as what I really want is to ditch this shithole and never look back? Yeah, pretty fuckin' good."

Cassandra stepped between them. "Tempers are high right now..."

Flint spat on the ground and headed for the door. "Don't waste your breath. Me and my 'little friends' have to go figure this shit out. Gods know why I'm even bothering if this is the thanks I get."

Josephine was at the door when she yanked it open.

"Are you alright?" asked Josephine, her eyes wide.

"Ask the commander," she hissed as she stormed down the hall.

Bull could practically taste the tension rolling off of Flint, but he knew better than to ask after the root cause. In this mood, she'd rip his head off and beat his body to mush with it if he dared.

So he stuck with harassing Dorian for his pretty clothes and Varric for fondling Bianca too much. Both took it in good humor, despite giving their own sidelong glances at the Inquisitor.

He buckled one last strap onto his saddle and led his horse to the gate. Cullen stomped by, his face as sour as ever. His little tantrum yesterday clearly hadn't been resolved.

"You know, I've got a great dancing girl that could take the starch out of your uniform," he said, unable to resist needling the uptight Templar.

Cullen rounded on him. "I know you think this is one big joke, but for once, could you at least *try* take this seriously?"

Bull stiffened. "If this is a joke, it's pretty fucking terrible, if you ask me."

"No one did."

He lifted a brow. "I do something to offend you, Templar?"

Cullen snarled and marched through the gate. Bull shot Varric a questioning glance, but the dwarf shrugged helplessly.

Rising voices from just beyond the gate caught his ear. He hustled forward just in time for Flint to shove her marked hand in Cullen's face and scream, "Is that enough sacrifice for you?"

Without waiting to hear any response, she leapt onto her horse and spurred the creature across the bridge at top speed.

Dorian rode hot on her heels, but sent an incredulous look Cullen's way as he passed. Varric trotted after them without remark.

"Maybe you should get a healer to pull that stick out of your ass." Bull swung onto his horse and bumped the animal's shoulder into Cullen as he rode forward. "Just a suggestion."

Cullen hissed a curse and stalked away. Bull shook his head and followed in the wake of his companions.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Flint Lavellan has not been coping well with the weight on her shoulders. The Iron Bull has been more than happy to help take that burden from her, one night at a time. It should be the perfect scenario for the flighty Dalish Inquisitor, but she can't stop wondering what's behind the armored shell of Cullen Rutherford. Is it wanting what she can't have, or does she just need to work harder?

Flint woke shivering. She had never been so damn cold that she could remember.

She tried to tuck under the covers, but gave up when her shivering started to make her body ache. The fire crackled outside, beckoning her to its warmth.

Bull was sitting at the fire with one of the scouts. They were silent as they stared into the flames.

She collapsed onto the log beside Bull and held her hands toward the heat. Her teeth chattered beyond her control.

He slipped an arm around her and drew her close, wrapping the edge of his cloak around her. His body heat sunk into her skin, leaving her near limp with relief.

"Come," he said softly.

Flint followed him without question as he led the way back to her tent. They both climbed under the covers and he curled around her.

"Sleep," he whispered, before humming a lullaby that had become familiar to her, though she didn't know the words.

It took a little while, but as the heat from his body soaked through to her bones, exhaustion dragged her eyes shut without argument.

When she woke, it was still dark. Bull was a blazing furnace of heat. After freezing all day, she couldn't get enough. She pressed closer to his side and let out a contented hum.

"Too early, Kadan," he mumbled, before tightening his arm around her and letting out a low, rumbling snore.

Flint rested her cheek against his ribs. His heart was slow and steady, and soothed her rising nerves.

They'd been on the road to Emprise for nearly a week. That week had been largely silent on her part, thanks to her blowout with Cullen. Bull had been watching her, and she could feel his desire to get her talking again, but he seemed to sense that she needed to sort things out for herself.

Namely what, in all that was holy, had crawled up Cullen's ass? They'd been perfectly civil. Friendly even! And then that display of dickish behaviour that made her doubt everything she thought she knew about the man.

"Quit thinking so loud," whispered Bull.

Flint felt herself blush. "Sorry."

He began to rub her hip. "Wanna talk about it?"

"No." She found a scar on his side and traced it. "It's just...do you think I'm goofing around too much?"

Bull snorted. "Not enough, if you ask me."

She sat up. "Right? I bust my ass every day, barely taking time to eat, or sleep. But take one day off and I might as well be back in the stocks."

Bull shifted to face her. "I don't think the Templar knows how to relax. Can't remember seeing him take a single night off since we met. I suspect a lot of this anger stems from being wound up too tight. Kinda like you."

She swatted him, but he caught her hand and tugged her back to his side. "Just lay here for a little while longer. It's not even light out yet."

Flint huffed and fussed as she draped herself around him for maximum heat transfer, and let out a long breath.

His arm curled around her, his palm settling in the curve of her waist. Without really intending to, she found his other hand and laced her fingers through his.

They drifted to sleep like that until the sun was past the horizon.

Cullen glared out over the Frostbacks, their beauty entirely lost on him.

"Commander?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Seeker?"

"Is it the lyrium? Do you find it that hard to cope?"

His eyes snapped open and he whirled to face her. "What? No. I've been managing fine, actually. Why?"

"Because you are acting like an ass. I have received more than one complaint about it."

"Maybe if people did their--"

"I have witnessed it myself, Cullen," Cassandra interrupted, her voice soft. "And I am concerned."

He winced. Maybe he had let his anger run too far. "Well, don't be. I'll be fine."

Her eyes narrowed. "I think you need to take some time off. Everyone needs a break."

"But I have *work to do* ."

"We all do, Commander. Yet you will still see Leliana out training her nugs. And Josephine has a beautiful tapestry almost completed. I myself am nearly done reading my latest novel." She moved closer and put a hand on his arm. "It would do you good to take time away from your office to relax and focus on something else."

He sighed. "If you insist."

"I do. Once a day. For at least an hour."

Cullen wanted to roll his eyes, but years of training forbade the insolence. "Fine. One hour a day."

A smile came to her face. "Good."

He gave her an awkward smile and headed for his office. "Alright then."

She pulled him to a stop. "No time like the present, Commander."

His fists tightened. "I'm about to send the orders to march out and meet the Inquisitor."

"An hour will not change the outcome of those orders. Come. Let us play a game of chess."

Chapter 11

They crested a hill to find the host of Inquisition forces camped out. Bull hid his displeasure at the sight.

Flint had taken nearly their entire journey to come back to her normal self. He hated that she was about to come face to face with the cause of all that anxiety and stress. She had a big enough burden without a moody asshole adding to the load.

He resolved to confront the Templar if things went sideways again. She'd resent him if he made his move too early, but he wouldn't forgive himself if she wound up hurt in her distraction.

A pavilion had been set up for her use. Inside was a large fire, which meant she wouldn't need his body heat that night. The crushing disappointment at the realization caught him off-guard. Somehow he'd come to cherish drifting off with her curled into his side as they traveled through the winter wonderland that was Emprise.

Bull scowled and shook his head. A few weeks without the Qun and he was already going soft as bread dough.

Dorian sat beside him with a muttered curse.

Bull latched onto the distraction. "What's the matter? Not enough slaves to rub your footsies?"

"My footsies *are* freezing, thank you."

He smirked. "You know, it might help if you wrapped both arms in your cloak."

Dorian rolled his eyes. "Don't you have raw meat to devour somewhere?"

Varric sat on his other side. "Anyone else get a weird vibe about this place?"

Bull grunted. "Ain't Dumat some old Vint deity?"

"Of course it is," Dorian said with a sigh. "Old Tervinter seems to be the running theme with these brutes."

"It's too quiet," groused Varric. "We haven't run into a single patrol all day."

Bull frowned. "We're going based on Cullen's reports. There must be something we don't know."

"Either there are a shitload of Templars hiding in that tower, or we're being led on a wild goose chase to distract us from something else." Varric shook his head and jabbed at the fire with a long stick. "I don't like it either way."

"I think the Qunari's paranoia is rubbing off on you," said Dorian.

Bull smirked. "Well, when you're as charming as me, you make a lot of friends you need to keep tabs on."

"Maybe you should take more care with your friendship."

"Hm. Maybe you're right. I'm friends with you, after all."

Dorian scowled. "That's not true, and how dare you imply differently."

"Aw. See, I'm pretty sure we're friends, otherwise I wouldn't get away with this." Bull ruffled his hair, laughing at the mage's indignant squawk, and auspiciously absent retaliation.

"Anyway, I'm off to bed. Put on another pair of socks, Vint. And Varric, you just...keep being you."

He waved to both and headed for his tent. Once inside he counted to 100. As he did, he set two extra knives on his belt, as well as a small handaxe. Then he slipped between the flaps on the back wall, taking extra care to check for any prying eyes.

When he didn't see anyone watching him, he began sneaking through the shadows of the camp, intent on making his way to the tower to investigate it.

It took ten minutes to edge his way through the small tent city, and then he was in the woods. He crouched low behind some thick bushes to get a good look at the tower itself.

"See anything?" whispered Flint in his ear, nearly making him yelp.

"That's a damn good way to get a knife buried in your chest," he hissed.

"You've got too much self control for that," she said. "So? Anything?"

"Why are you here?"

"Heard you boys talking, then saw you pretend to go to bed. Figured you were up to something."

Bull shook his head. "You shouldn't eavesdrop."

She smirked. "You shouldn't be so obvious."

He wanted to kiss that smirk away. To drag her back to that ridiculous pavilion of hers and teach her a lesson about being too smart for her own good. To fuck her until they both forgot about their realities for a little while.

But he couldn't, and *that* reality was a real kick in the junk.

Bull forced himself to look at the tower again. "Not much light."

"We're not exactly the picture of discretion. Maybe they're trying to hide their numbers."

He shrugged. "Or maybe there aren't any numbers. Samson isn't stupid. He must've seen the Inquisition forces coming for miles."

"Exactly what I was thinking," hissed Varric, creeping up beside them.

Bull clenched his teeth to hide his surprised reaction. "How the hell am I supposed to sneak with you tagging along?"

"Oh, come now. Did you really think we wouldn't catch on?" asked Dorian.

"Buncha busybody assholes," Bull muttered.

Flint squeezed his shoulder. "You like it."

He grumbled under his breath, but had to admit she was right. It had taken him years to teach his guys how to read him, but this little team had him figured out in less than six months. It was impressive as hell, and he did like it, deep down.

"Well? Shall we?" asked Varric.

"Yup."

"Not gonna get permission from the Templar first?" Bull asked, half dreading the answer.

Her lips twisted. "No. He'll just lecture me for going off without a plan again."

"You kids talk it out yet?"

"He's not talking to me, so I'm not talking to him."

Bull shrugged. "Alright then. Let's go. Slow and steady."

Cullen squinted in the dim firelight, trying and failing to read the tangled ink of a scout's report. He tossed the papers onto the table and sat back, rubbing his eyes.

He ached all over from riding for three weeks straight. It never used to bother him as much, but apparently he'd gotten used to his stationary life in Skyhold.

A gentle cough announced Cassandra's presence outside his tent. A smile touched his lips. "Come in, Seeker."

She came through the flaps, chessboard and sack of chess pieces in hand.

"You never miss a day, do you?"

Cassandra set the board down. "Not when it is important."

He took the sack of chess pieces and began to arrange them on the board. "How was your last day of travel?"

"Tolerable. Does your back still bother you?"

"A little. Should feel better after a night's rest."

"You have been saying that since we left."

He could feel his face go hot. "Well, it does help. By morning I usually feel quite normal."

She smiled. "I know. I am just teasing."

Cullen caught himself staring at the glow of her eyes, and forced himself to look at the board instead. "Shall we?"

"Indeed."

They moved pieces in silence for a while before she cleared her throat. "Did you speak with the Inquisitor tonight?"

Cullen shook his head. "No. She would barely look my way."

The Seeker sighed. "Unfortunately, I cannot blame her."

"I know."

Her eyes met his. "You still have not told me why you held such venom for her."

He squirmed in his seat and looked away. "Does it matter?"

"Perhaps. Was it something very foolish?"

Cullen drew a long breath and tried to forget the image of Flint pressing kisses on the Qunari's throat and chest. "You could say that," he whispered hoarsely.

Cassandra took one of his Templars. "I understand. I have been foolish in the past as well."

He leaned forward. "Do tell."

She laughed and, wonder of wonders, blushed. "There was a man for whom I developed a silly infatuation. Completely unrequited, but as a fifteen year old girl, I was certain he would confess his love one day."

"And? Did he?"

"In a manner of speaking. He told me he would always love me like a sister." She covered her face with her hand. "On the day he married my older sister."

Cullen barked a laugh. "That must have stung."

She shrugged. "It was not ideal, but now I look back and wonder what I ever saw in him."

Cullen ran a hand through his hair. Apparently he hadn't been as subtle about his feelings as he might've hoped. "You knew?"

"Not at first, but I deduced the reason eventually."

He felt hot and cold at the same time. "You must think I'm pathetic."

Cassandra shook her head. "We work in close concert with one another. It is reasonable that feelings will grow."

"Have yours?"

"Yes."

"And? Were you more successful than me?"

She shook her head. "I am afraid not."

"Aren't we a pitiful pair."

Cassandra slid her queen forward. "Checkmate."

Cullen stared at the board. "Well played."

She didn't smile. "You are worthy of love, Commander. I hope you know that."

He frowned and tipped his king piece on its side. "I don't know that I am."

Her hand covered his. "Then you will have to take my word for it."

Cullen looked at their hands, and felt a frisson down his spine. "I will do my best to continue trusting your judgment, Seeker."

Chapter 12

It took almost an hour to zigzag through the trees leading to the tower. As they approached, the forest thinned out. In the light of the full moon, their cover wasn't great, but it was enough.

Flint watched the tower like a hawk, and nothing changed on their approach. The closer they got, the tighter her nerves stretched.

Bull touched her shoulder. She glanced over to see him lift two fingers and point at a high window.

It took her a second to pick it out, but there were two shadows moving slowly past a dim source of light. Looked like a torch that was burning low, but she couldn't tell. How Bull spotted it with one eye while she'd been watching as best as she could and missed it was beyond her.

"Good catch," she mouthed.

They got within fifty feet of the tower. "How we getting in?" whispered Varric.

"Wait, *what*?" Bull hissed.

Dorian pointed to a window that was just out of Bull's reach. "Could we climb through there?"

"Flint's the only one that would fit. We're all too big in the shoulder," said Varric.

Flint stepped forward. "I'll go. Bull, gimme a boost."

"Since when were we going inside the fuckin' thing?"

"What's the alternative? Knock on the front door?"

"Just saying. We've established that there is life inside the tower. Who knows what's behind that window."

"Exactly why we need to go in."

Bull still looked uneasy. "Big risk, Boss."

Flint shrugged. "Either I go in, or we wait until morning and go in with the army."

Varric shook his head. "No, we gotta do this. Something ain't right."

Flint tipped her chin at Varric. "Hate to say it, but I agree with him."

Bull pinched the bridge of his nose. "And what is the goal once you're inside?"

"Getting an enemy count, and getting you guys in the tower."

Dorian frowned. "I'm with Bull. I don't much like it. What if something goes wrong?"

"Then my dream team will burst through the front door, just like every other time we've taken stupid risks."

"Kadan, we have nothing to prove to anyone. You know that, right?"

There was a soft urgency to Bull's voice, one that begged her to back down. But this was the perfect chance to show Cullen that they were the right people for any job. She couldn't turn down the opportunity to throw another success in his face.

"If we don't go in, what was the point of all this? Why did you come out here?"

"To gather intel, not to go inside the tower itself. But," Bull sighed, "You're the boss."

"Yes I am, and I say I'm going in," she said, then darted to the next bit of cover. Bull and company followed on her heels.

It took another five minutes to get to the wall. Bull pressed tight to it. "Be careful," he whispered as she came close.

"I'm always careful."

He caressed her cheek, his hand large enough to curl around the back of her head. "I know. It's just...I can't protect you once you're inside."

Flint squeezed his hand gently. "I'll be careful."

There was something in his eye that gave her pause, a look like he wanted to say more, but he merely cupped his hands together. "Good. Okay, up you get."

She stepped into his palm, and he hoisted her, hardly showing any strain. Flint crouched beneath the window ledge, listening with all her might. When nothing caught her ear, she carefully peeked into the room. Nothing and no one greeted her eye.

Taking great care to move quietly, she pulled herself onto the narrow window ledge and dropped inside.

She was in a stairwell, with stairs spiraling up and down. A soft glow danced on the walls going up, while the stairs going down were entirely dark.

Flint bit her lip. She was in leathers that allowed her to move with decent stealth, but that would only get her so far. Going upstairs would allow her a preview of the fight to come, but if anyone spotted her, it was game over. And she'd promised to be careful.

With some reluctance, she started down the stairs, tucking tight to the wall and straining her ears. Her night vision was fairly good, but it still wasn't much help in this utter darkness.

Her feet hit a level floor, and she spied the thinnest slit of moonlight. She moved slowly, testing each step before settling her weight on the foot. She reached out as the light came closer, and felt the rough wooden exterior door.

As she explored it with her hands, she found the heavy draw bar securing the door. Her stomach dropped. No way in hell could she lift this thing to let her team inside. Not even Bull could lift it without help. *What the hell are they trying to keep out?*

Her heart started to pump a little faster as she eased her way back to the stairs. The glow overhead helped her locate them without much issue, but the floor was littered with scraps of rock and wood that would skitter loudly if she stepped wrong.

She finally got across the floor and started up the stone steps, moving as fast as she dared, her danger sense squawking wildly in her ears.

The arrow slit finally came into sight. Flint was about to breathe a sigh of relief when her toe caught on a step and she sprawled forward with an echoing clatter.

Howls of surprise sounded from above followed by running steps. Flint scrambled for the opening, but arrows plinked off the wall, forcing her to duck back.

Three Templars rushed downward, all heavily armored. Flint squeezed her fist, activating the anchor. While they froze in time, she bolted pell mell down the stairs, nearly falling in her rush to get to the darkness below.

As she reached the level floor, she heard bellowing from the other side and heavy pounding on the wood. Bull!

"There are at least three!" she yelled, doing a rapid version of her earlier exploration, running her hands along the walls in desperate hope of finding somewhere to hide. Near the stairs, she found another door that she yanked open just as Templars reached the main floor.

Flint closed the door as silently as possible, hoping the pounding outside would keep their attention. Fear kept her moving away from the door. Four steps in, her foot met air. She was thrown off balance and tumbled down two stone steps before she could catch herself. The impact knocked the wind out of her, and sharp pain flared along her ribs.

She struggled to breathe as she forced herself to get up and proceed downward. The rank odor of decay filled her nostrils, compounding her terror and making it even harder to catch her breath.

Her feet finally hit flat ground. It was so dark she couldn't see her hand as she walked with it outstretched, seeking contact with a wall or door, or anything solid.

Then, from the pitch blackness ahead, she heard a low, menacing growl.

Chapter 13

Between Bull's hand axe and Dorian's magic, it took a panicky three minutes to hack through the door. When it finally flew open, five Templars rushed at them.

Bull slammed into them headlong, scattering them like chessmen. "Kadan!" he yelled, seeking any sign of the fiery little elf.

A monstrous shriek echoed from below, making his hair stand on end. The tower interior was too dark to see properly, except in the flashes of magic coming from Dorian's staff. He spotted a door and ran for it.

He almost went ass over tea kettle as he burst through the door. Only a split second of light revealed stairs that he clattered down noisily.

It was even darker at the bottom of the stairs, and not even the magic above was enough to break it. Steps pounded his way, bringing with them the fetid stench of gore.

Bull hefted the small axe, but a hulking form smashed into him before he could fully react, taking him to the floor with a crunch. Whatever it was screeched and pounded a fist into his face and slammed the back of his head into the ground hard enough to make sparkles fly in his vision.

He could feel the thing rear back for another heavy hit, and shoved upward with all his might. It toppled and Bull followed the sound with a vicious swing of the axe. It found purchase, but the thing kept moving, coming back for another tackle.

This time Bull was ready and caught the form, twisting sharply to take it to the ground first. It struggled, but two decisive chops later, he hit something vital enough to keep it down.

He staggered to his feet. His vision had adjusted only slightly, leaving nothing but looming dark shapes.

"Kadan!"

The barest whisper of a whimper caught his ears. He moved toward it. "Come on, Kadan, tell me where you are."

His foot found her first, thankfully only nudging her thanks to his gliding shuffled step. He crouched and felt her prone form. Shallow, ragged breaths jerked her body, and the alarming scent of fresh blood filled the air. Hers, judging by the slick coating his fingers as he skimmed over her.

As gentle as he could, he tried to lift her into his arms. Flint gave a strangled sob, and writhed in what he could only assume was pain. Bull stopped his efforts and found her tiny hand instead. Her grip as she clung to him was a shadow of her normal strength.

"Dorian!" His voice echoed through the space, adding another layer to the panic ringing through his entire body.

It was probably seconds, but it felt like hours before a brilliant blue glow started flying down the stairs, blindingly bright.

Dorian, smartass supreme who *always* had something to say, said nothing as he rushed over and examined her. Then, whispering strange words, a soft glow began to spread across her head and chest.

Bull's eye finally adjusted, revealing devastating damages to her torso and face, along with disturbing amounts of carnage scattered on the floor. He squinted and found the lifeless form of a creature so defiled by red lyrium that it was barely recognizable as a humanoid.

Dorian muttered a few curses, then gave him a sharp pat on the arm. "We need a proper healer, but she should be comfortable enough for you to carry her."

Bull lifted her as though she were glass, and moved to the stairs. Varric arrived at the top holding a torch.

"Five Templars in this whole place," he said, his voice acidic with disgust.

Bull didn't care, not while Flint was struggling to breathe. "Let's go."

As they headed for the battered front door, a host of Inquisition soldiers met them, shouting and aiming arrows their way.

"It's us, you idiots," snapped Dorian, flicking a hand dismissively when an arrow was loosed. A shimmering arcane shield flashed, snapping the arrow on impact.

"What the everloving hell is going on here?" came Cullen's voice from the darkness.

"Your big bust is a bust," said Varric. "Nothing here but a skeleton crew."

Bull charged forward. "I need a healer."

"Maker's breath. What have you done?"

Guilt crushed him. "Shut up and get me a healer!"

Chapter 14

Cullen prowled through the top room of the tower, his stomach riddled with anxiety. Varric hadn't been speaking hyperbole at all. Nothing remained here but an abomination in the basement, dead Red Templars, and useless papers.

How the hell had the scouts missed seeing an entire company of Red Templars leave this place?

Cassandra let a book fall back onto a table. "I do not think we will find anything, Commander."

"Why weren't we alerted by Leliana's people?"

She frowned. "I do not know."

He dragged a hand over his face. This was the most important site he'd discovered in his hunt for Samson, and it amounted to nothing. Worse yet, it had led to near fatal injuries to the Inquisitor.

And it was *his fault*. The only reason they were here was because of his interpretation of a single report. His hands trembled. She'd been so pale and tiny in the Qunari's arms.

Maker preserve her.

Cassandra said something soft and touched his shoulder. He jerked away as though stung.

"This," he hissed. " *This* is the incompetence you have invited into the Inquisition." He jabbed a thumb at his chest. "I have told you time and time again that I am not fit for this duty, and yet you insist. Now look what's happened!"

Cassandra's delicate features flinched, then fell into a hard expression he was all too familiar with. She said stiffly, "I am sorry you feel that way, Commander."

"What does sorry amount to? Nothing!"

Cassandra marched to the exit. As she reached the threshold, she paused. "Perhaps I am a foolish woman after all."

Without another backwards glance, she left the room. Cullen wasn't prepared for the gut wrenching pain that threatened to double him over, or the way he instinctively wanted to rush after her. To stop her. Apologize. Grovel at her feet.

I have gone insane.

His mind skipped to Flint's blood soaked form cradled in the big Qunari's mitts. The memory alone was enough to kill thoughts of the Seeker and make his blood boil again.

What were they thinking? An entire army at their disposal, and they went off like thieves in the night! They could've gotten the Inquisitor killed!

They still might've. No word had come of her condition. She'd been so pale.

Fear clutched at his belly. Without her, there was no hope of stopping Corypheus. They were barely catching up to the Archmage. This little disaster could set them back weeks. Maybe months.

His face twisted as he tried to repress the swelling rage. They should've known better, should've waited until dawn. But no, this was all some grand adventure for the idiot dwarf and pompous mage. And the Qunari, well, who was to say this wasn't a convenient accident?

After all, Flint claimed to have pulled away from their sordid affair. Perhaps Bull saw this mission as a means to make a fool out of Cullen, and to exact revenge on the Inquisitor.

The more that thought cycled in his head, the more his ire raised. Cullen wanted to break something. To howl at the sky and run until his legs stopped working. To bury a sword in the Qunari's belly and watch as he bled out.

He might've gotten her to the base of the tower, but the Iron Bull put her inside it.

And he was going to pay.

Bull sat in silence, staring at the dried blood on his hands. Her blood. It stained his entire front. So much blood...

The others were still at the tower, digging through the ancient structure for any clue as to why Samson had used the place, or where he might be headed.

He couldn't care less. Tears burned the back of his eye. His lack of conviction had very nearly gotten Flint killed. Might still, if the healers weren't able to knit her back together. She'd gone so still in his arms.

Bile washed up his throat. He swallowed it back and gripped his hands into fists tight enough to ache.

Why the hell hadn't he sacked up and put a stop to the nonsense? He knew full well that Varric and Dorian had their heads in the clouds, and that Flint was only concerned about showing up Cullen. Stupidity, and he'd gone along with it.

Armored feet stomped his way. "I hope you're proud of yourself," said Cullen, a hard edge to his voice.

Bull didn't reply. There was no excuse. Nothing he could say would take it back or make it better.

Cullen got in his face. "What were you thinking?"

He looked away.

"Answer a man!"

He met Cullen's cold blue eyes. "What do you want me to say, Templar?"

"Why?" The Templar waved a hand to indicate the surrounding army. "We had all of these soldiers at the ready. Why the hell would you go to that place in the dead of the night?"

"My intention--"

"It wasn't enough to get her drunk and take advantage of her? You had to try and get her killed?"

Bull rose slowly to his feet, clutching tightly to the reins of his temper. "I don't have the foggiest idea what you're talking about. When *exactly* did I take advantage of her?"

Cullen scoffed. "You think you're so clever. You think I haven't realized what you're playing at?"

"When?" he barked, making a pair of passing soldiers jump and give them both an even wider berth.

"Oh like you don't know."

Something clicked in his head, and his breath exploded from his chest. "If you're referring to the night before we left Skyhold, nothing happened."

"I saw you carrying your prize up the stairs, like the barbarian you are!"

Bull dragged a hand down his face and hissed a curse. "Where I sat at her bedside and made sure she didn't choke on her own vomit."

Cullen gave him a scornful glare. "Unlikely, considering the affection she was showing you."

"That's why..." Bull gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "That's why you've been treating her like she killed your puppy."

The Templar's face flushed. "I know what I saw."

This? This was what his Kadan had to look forward to? A lifetime of with a petty manchild and passive aggressive bullshit over imagined slights?

"You didn't even have the balls to talk to her about it, you fucking coward."

"What was there to say?"

"Anything! You could have just asked her what happened!"

"I'd rather not listen to her lies, thank you."

Ever since Flint mentioned her intentions toward Cullen, Bull had been convincing himself that the Commander was a better choice as a mate. A respectable man in good standing with everyone he met, and capable of caring for her in a way that Bull wasn't capable of doing.

Except Cullen didn't care about Flint. His every word and action was proof. He would see her indomitable spirit broken before he would give her the time of day.

The very thought cracked something in Bull's chest. He adored Flint exactly as she was. Her boldness and tenacity impressed him at every turn. He respected her wisdom, and he valued her advice. She made him want to be a better man.

And a better man wouldn't stand by and let the woman he loved be treated no better than a common thief. *Not on my fucking watch.*

Bull leaned closer, bringing his face within an inch from Cullen's. "You're not worthy of her."

Cullen didn't flinch away. In fact, the little shithead sneered. Bull didn't think he had it in him.

"Yet she still prefers my company to yours, Qunari. Galls you, doesn't it?"

It did, but he wasn't going to give the little dickhead the satisfaction of admitting to it. "We'll see how much longer that lasts, Templar."

"Why? Still hoping your little stunt succeeds in killing her?"

Bull's control slipped, just for a second, and when the red faded, he had Cullen pinned against a tree with a furious howl ripping from his throat.

The Templar swung a gauntleted fist, connecting hard enough to ring his bell and break his grip. Cullen had his sword out the second his feet hit earth, and took a wild swing that Bull barely dodged.

He retaliated with a brutal jab to the ribs, ignoring the crunch of his own finger breaking against the edge of Cullen's armor.

Cullen collapsed forward, wheezing as he whipped the sword at Bull's blind side. Bull dodged, but the little asshole spun and went low. It was too late; he was going to take a full slash right to the vitals because his anger clouded his thinking.

What a time to finally learn that fucking lesson.

A flash of magic flared between them, ricocheting the blow hard enough to knock the sword to the ground.

"What the blazes is all this about?" asked Dorian, he and Varric coming to Bull's side. Both stood in a defensive stance. Soldiers were starting to surround them as well, all of them looking fully alarmed.

Cullen started shouting at the same time as Bull, which quickly devolved to them trading a few more punches before Varric and several soldiers got them separated.

His jaw hurt and his hand was on fire. Cullen's right eye was quickly swelling shut and he looked as though he'd been thrown down a set of stairs.

"He's a traitor! I've said it from day one!" Cullen pointed at him. "Par Vollen is directing his every deed!"

The soldiers holding Bull looked panicked as he shrugged loose and paced back and forth, his teeth bared. Probably he looked like a lunatic. He didn't care. The accusations being levelled his way were beyond absurd, but he knew his position with the Inquisition had always been tenuous. The only surprise was that it took this long for someone to say it out loud.

Dorian made a scornful sound. "If you believe that, I have a fantastic deal on beachfront property in the Wastes."

Cullen jabbed a finger at Dorian's chest. "You're no better, *Vint*."

The mage's staff began to glow, and his lips tightened. "Tread lightly, Commander."

"What in the name of the Maker is going on here?" cried Cassandra, her eyes wide as she rushed over.

"Enough!" Mother Giselle came into the midst of the gathered crowd, her eyes burning with fury. "You will take this nonsense elsewhere, and stop disturbing the peaceful rest of my patients!"

Cullen was still spitting tacks, but weariness washed over Bull. There was nothing more he could say or do to prove his loyalty at this point. If they didn't trust him after everything he'd sacrificed, then his efforts were wasted. He'd wait long enough to make sure Flint would recover, and then he'd take his Chargers back to Orlais. The nobles paid better than the Inquisition anyway.

He returned to the bench and sat, willing the adrenaline burning through his veins to subside.

"If anyone cares, Varric and I found something very interesting in a shack nearby."

"Does anyone look like they care?" snapped Cullen.

Varric gave a heavy sigh. "Get the bunch outta your smalls, Curly. You'll wanna hear this."

"Then speak it!"

Dorian gave him a hard look. "We've found several bodies hidden away. It appears they were all scouts."

Bull lifted his head. "Our scouts?"

Varric nodded. "Found their real reports, too. Looks like they weren't quite as subtle as they could've been, and Samson used that to his advantage."

"What did the real reports say?" Bull asked.

Dorian handed him a sheaf of papers. As his fingers closed on the bundle, Cullen snatched them away.

"This does not concern you, Qunari."

Bull gave a short laugh. "Gonna let that ego carry you into the Deep Roads, huh?"

Cullen puffed up. "As Commander of the Inquisition--"

Bull rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Read your reports. Maybe while you're at it, confirm these ones are real so we don't wind up on another one of your wild goose chases."

Dorian made an impatient noise, but Varric elbowed him. "Ain't seen a good squabble in months. Let it play out," he stage-whispered.

Bull clenched his teeth. The dwarf's mouth was going to get him into trouble one of these days.

Cullen went scarlet, and started to walk toward the main tent. "Everything is a joke to you idiots."

"Takes one to know one," muttered Bull. He didn't really *mean* to say it out loud, but exhaustion seemed to have cracked his filter.

Cullen spun as though to attack again, but Cassandra stepped between them.

"Enough!" she snapped, her Nevarran accent heavier than usual. "Everyone to their tents!"

"Aw, but I'm not tired yet," said Varric, his voice laced with dry mockery.

She gave him a murderous glare, but her rebuke was interrupted by a soft cough at the healers tent.

"Stop it. All of you."

Flint's chest ached, and exhaustion weighed her down like a druffalo on her shoulders.

She hadn't heard the entire argument between Bull and Cullen. At least, she didn't think she had. But she'd heard more than enough to know she had to step in and end the issue.

Bull turned to face her, distress clear in every line on his face. "Kadan," he said hoarsely.

She kept meaning to ask what that word meant. Maybe later tonight. If he even gave her the time of day.

Cullen didn't instantly look her way, but when he did, his jaw bulged with tension.

"Commander, I need to see you, please."

Bull stepped forward. "I just--"

She held up a palm. "Not now."

Bull's entire body stiffened, but she couldn't look him in the eye. Not yet.

Without waiting to see if Cullen followed, she returned to the healers' tent.

A long minute later, he snapped through the canvas flaps. One eye was barely a slit, and he was favoring his left side. His normally impeccable uniform was skewed, and his bear mantle was hanging by a single strap. A ragged, bloodstained stack of papers was clutched in his hand.

She eased onto a cot and pointed to the one beside it. "Sit. We need to talk."

He looked as though he was going to defy her, but finally sat, his posture stiff. "What would you like to discuss?"

Flint stared at him. He was still handsome, even when he was disheveled and trembling with anger. But the mysterious element that had drawn her to him was missing.

"I've made a real mess of things," she said after a moment. Then, lifting her eyes to meet his, she asked, "Why have you been so angry at me?"

His lips twisted into a scowl and he looked away.

Flint didn't want to drag it out, or air anyone's laundry, least of all her own. But she needed to know the truth. "Commander. I overheard your argument. Answer me."

He glared at the bedside table as though it held the secrets of the universe. "I saw what I saw," he said through clenched teeth. "And you made your choice."

Disappointment washed through her belly. She'd always thought so highly of the methodical Commander and his stoic image. Finding out it wasn't who he really was felt like finding out Wintersend was just another winter day.

"If you had just asked instead of assuming the worst, you'd already know nothing happened. I'd swear it on any holy book you wanted."

Cullen turned cold eyes her way. "You don't believe in holy books, so what difference would that make?"

The final layer of her rose-colored glasses shattered. "You're right. It makes no difference. Nothing I do will ever be good enough, or the right decision. I will always say the wrong thing, and you'll always think the very worst of me. And I'm tired of lying to myself that you'll ever change."

Cullen's face went scarlet and his eyes dropped to the floor.

"Whatever this is...or was...or might have been...it's over." Flint sighed and rubbed her brow. "I don't have the energy to dance around the subject. Going forward, if we can't have a civil relationship, you need to leave the Inquisition."

His eyes snapped to hers. "Inquisitor, I--"

"Let me be clear, Commander." She paused to take a careful breath, which still made her ribs protest sharply. "The only reason I'm pretending your exchange with the Iron Bull didn't happen is because of my part in this. I created this tension between us, and it is partially my fault that things have festered to this degree."

His face went through several emotions and colors as she spoke.

Flint held up a palm to interrupt him as he opened his mouth to speak. "I do not want you to leave, but make no mistake. If you cannot remain civil, I don't see any other option. I respect your tactical mind, and I trust that you are working toward the best interests of the Inquisition. But you *cannot* continue to speak to me the way you have been." She paused, then added, "Nor can you continue to treat the Iron Bull as though he has a dagger aimed at your back."

Cullen launched to his feet. "But he nearly got you killed!"

"By doing exactly as *I* ordered," she snapped, then nearly yelped from the shooting pain in her chest. She continued more quietly, "He tried to stop me, and I refused to listen to his counsel."

Red climbed up Cullen's neck as he slowly lowered back to the cot. Flint waited, letting him collect his thoughts. Finally, he spoke haltingly, "I shall do my utmost to remain cordial."

"See that you do." She rose to her feet. "You should probably have that eye looked at."

With that, she left him sitting on the cot and headed out of the tent.

Mother Giselle huffed impatiently and followed. "Your Grace, you must rest."

Flint wrapped a hand over her ribs. "I don't need an escort."

The woman made a soft intonation to the Maker, and hurried to her side. "You are nowhere near well enough to wander the encampment."

"I know where I'm going." She tried moving at her normal brisk pace, and found herself winded almost immediately.

An arm wrapped around her. "Where do you wish to go?" asked Mother Giselle, resignation clear in her voice.

"The Iron Bull's tent."

Chapter 15

Cullen sat in the main tent, staring blindly into the fire. The rebuke from Flint had set him on his heels. He wanted to rage and deny every charge she'd leveled his way, but as he reflected on his behavior over the time he'd known her, he was ashamed to realize that everything she said was true. He'd been unfair to her at every turn, and had chosen to think the worst of her without even having the decency to talk to her about his concerns. In the fog of negative emotions after watching the Iron Bull carry her drunken form to her quarters, Cullen had destroyed his own chances with her.

What a bloody fool.

As the flames burned lower, it soon wasn't Flint's fine features that stared back in his imagination. Instead, a certain Seeker stared back impassively, the wounded look in her beautiful eyes piercing his soul.

Cullen dragged a hand down his face and winced as his hand passed over his eye. The healer promised it would be good as new by morning, but the flesh was still tender to the touch. The pain was but a momentary distraction from his true turmoil. His sharp words in the tower rang through his mind, making his entire body cringe in shame.

Damaging his relationship with Flint was disappointing. Damaging his relationship with Cassandra was *gutting*. How had this snuck up on him?

His stomach ached. It should have been obvious long ago that she cared more deeply about him than was strictly professional. If he wasn't so blinded by his confusing feelings for Flint, perhaps he wouldn't have missed the signs that were now crystal clear in hindsight.

How did he feel in return? Certainly he thought she was brilliant, with a kind heart hidden behind a stern facade. She'd never shown him anything but warmth and support, even at his lowest points. Without her unwavering support, he doubted that his lyrium addiction would have faded in the slightest.

Cullen let her take shape in his mind's eye. Her dark eyes danced as she laughed at one of his terrible stories, and then those stunning eyes glowed in triumph as she trounced him soundly at cards yet again. Then she was knelt in solemn devotion to Andraste, and to rooting out the evils that would harm their people.

He could picture helping her rise to her feet, and pledging himself to her cause. Standing at her side was an honor, second only to being the man she chose to love.

Love. He scoffed. He didn't deserve her love. His behavior had been appalling tonight, on every level. Through fear his temper had gotten the best of him, and he'd nearly killed the Iron Bull for something the Qunari hadn't done. Cullen shuddered to think of the consequences he'd have faced had Dorian not blocked that lethal blow.

And for what? For someone who would never have suited him as a long-term mate. Flint was too brash. Too forward. Too headstrong. All things that made her an excellent leader, but made him shy away on a personal level. She made him feel off-balance and unsteady. The Iron Bull was right; she deserved better. She deserved someone who appreciated her for those bold qualities.

And he needed a woman who made him feel safe. Perhaps it was weak, but a lifetime of traumatic experiences had left him shaken. A dauntless woman like Flint would be too much, and would leave him feeling as though he wasn't enough. She'd demand everything when he felt he had nothing left to give.

Cullen paused. Would she? Or were those still his own negative assumptions? It didn't matter now, not really, but it made him feel a little ill to realize how quickly he had dismissed her again, and how poorly he instinctively thought of her. She hadn't done anything to earn such vitriol.

There was a familiar gentle cough outside the tent. Cullen lurched to his feet and spun to face the entrance. "Yes?" he said, his voice pitchy and strained.

"Might I come in?" asked Cassandra.

"Please. Yes. Of course." He clamped his mouth shut.

Her lithe form slipped through the heavy cloth, now in heavy nighttime robes and a warm fur wrap. "Are you alright, Commander?"

He stepped toward her, then stopped himself. "I...have had better nights."

Her eyes were holding his, but had lost the glow he'd come to adore. Why hadn't he realized how much he loved that look until now?

"I am glad," she said. "Good night, Commander."

Perhaps I am a foolish woman after all.

As she turned to leave, he caught her by the arm. "Cassandra. Wait. Please."

She didn't turn. "What do you require, Commander?"

"I know I cannot apologize sufficiently for my behavior today." Cullen guided her to face him. "But I'd like the chance to try."

There was a pinch between her brows that wasn't normally there. She pulled free. "That will not be necessary, Commander."

"Cullen." His fingers ached to touch her again. "It's Cullen. Please."

The pinch deepened. "Commander, I--"

"You aren't a fool. I am. I know I am because only a fool would have been so blind to what treasure stood in front of him." He reached toward her and, when she didn't move away, caressed her cheek. "I only pray you'll find it in your heart to forgive me one day."

Cassandra pressed into his touch for a breath, then moved back a step. "Cullen, what of Flint?"

"What of her?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Do not dance about the question."

Cullen shook his head. "I am not dancing. There is simply nothing to say. Nothing but curiosity existed between us."

"Is that truly how you feel?"

He nodded. "It distracted me for too long."

Her beautiful eyes darkened. "Distracted you from what?"

"You."

She was silent for a long moment, then said softly, "And now?"

Cullen stepped forward and drew her close. "Now I wish to make up for lost time."

She was a *distraction*.

She was a plaything to scratch his itch.

She was *his*.

Except she wasn't. No, he'd gone and fucked it all up.

Bull wanted to break everything. To bolt and never look back.

Never see her face again.

He growled and slammed his pack on the ground, wincing as something cracked. A life on the road again. That's what he had to look forward to. Great. Fucking *great*.

That incredible night with Flint never should have happened. He should've taken the new serving girl to her quarters that night and let her have her filthy way with him. He'd have gotten what he wanted without toying with fire. But no. Bull let his heart take the lead, and now feelings were involved. *His* feelings.

What did it matter? The wettest dishrag in the world had her in his clutches. Bull had lost her to *him*.

Did he ever even have her?

Fucking idiot. Worthless, useless shell of a man.

Bull wanted to leave immediately, but daylight wouldn't come for a few more hours. His desperation to escape didn't override his common sense. Emprise was crawling with monsters he couldn't avoid in the dark. So he sat on the bed, willing time to go faster.

From the depths of his turmoil, his ears suddenly caught a soft sound. Shuffled steps, very slow, followed by other steps, these ones more confident, but cautious. Following the shuffler. Coming his way. His hands tensed as he listened and waited.

Then, a weakened but still beautiful voice said, "Bull?"

His heart and body reacted before his brain could interfere. He flung the heavy tent flaps aside and saw Flint standing there, still a shade too pale, and holding her ribs gingerly. Mother Giselle hovered two steps behind, her face grim with worry.

"Flint, you shouldn't be...I mean...you don't..." He stopped. The words fairly oozed with undisguised worry.

Flint waved a hand at the sister. "Please leave us."

Mother Giselle scowled. "You must rest--"

Flint glared at her. "Good night, Mother Giselle."

With a frustrated exclamation, the woman bustled into the darkness. As her steps faded, Flint gave Bull a tentative smile. "May I come in?"

He nodded. She shuffled past him, then stopped at his traveling bag.

"You're leaving?" Dismay squeaked in her voice.

Bull forced his expression into neutrality, something he normally found easy to achieve. Tonight, however, it took great effort not to reveal the emotions roiling beneath the surface of his skin. "After tonight, how can I possibly stay?"

Tears filled her eyes, but she nodded. "I can't say I blame you."

The disappointment threatened to crush him. He gave a curt nod. "Best of luck with everything."

She held up a hand. "Before you go, I have something to tell you. If you've got time."

Bull felt sick. "Go on."

"I hope it goes without saying, but you and the Chargers are an invaluable asset to the Inquisition. There is no doubt that your assistance has made us better in every regard."

He fought to keep his face still, even as the words boiled in his guts. "Is that everything?"

"No." Her voice shook as a tear spilled free. "You should also know that I need you. More than that, I *love* you."

His carefully honed neutral expression was long gone, replaced by a slack jaw and a wide eye. Words failed him in the shock of the moment.

Flint scrubbed away the tear and said, "I'm too late. I get it. I just needed you to know."

Bull was still silent, but his chest had started to heave with sharper breaths he couldn't repress.

"Please say something."

He blinked and stammered, "I can't."

Flint whispered, "I understand," even as more tears flooded free.

The tears broke him out of the spell that was locking him in place. "No, you don't." He brushed her tears away with a gentle thumb. "I'm...I'm afraid if I say something, I'll wake up from what is clearly a beautiful dream."

Flint broke into a full sob, and then cried out in pain. Bull just about died at the sound. He guided her to sit on the bed and knelt in front of her.

"Easy Kadan," he murmured. "Breathe."

She bowed forward and rested her forehead against his chest. He pulled a heavy, fur lined blanket around her and fussed with it while she continued to weep, her entire body trembling.

After a long while, she finally seemed to quell the tears. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice still strained.

He stroked her hair. "No, I'm the one who's sorry. It's my fault you're in this state to begin with."

She shook her head and caressed his cheek. "No. It's mine. I should've listened to you instead of trying to prove a stupid point."

Bull settled himself on the bed before lifting her onto his lap. She curled into him with a soft sigh.

He swallowed hard. Love was foreign to him, but so were the emotions that had been hounding him for weeks. The only thing certain was his desire for Flint in every capacity, and that he didn't want to share her affections with anyone else.

His heart started to pound with dread as he gently lifted her chin.

"What about Cullen?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

Flint held his eye. "Cullen is my military advisor. Nothing more. And he has been instructed to play nice, or to find new employment."

"No more feelings for him?"

Flint shook her head and lay one of his hands against her chest. "I don't know if I ever really had feelings for him. I think it was all about what he represented."

Bull silently counted each beat of her heart.

Flint ran her fingers along a scar grooving his forearm. "Bull, I need to say something."

"I'm all ears."

Her fingers shook slightly. "I know now that I mistook a schoolgirl crush as something more meaningful than it was, and ignored how much better you were for me. I've been so callous toward you in my pursuit of something that was never meant to be. I'm so sorry. You deserved better than that."

"Not gonna lie, it killed me a little when you decided you wanted the pretty boy Templar." Bull covered her hand with his big mitt. "But I shouldn't have stayed passive. I should have used my fucking yap and told you how I felt."

Her cheeks flared pink. "How you felt?"

"Thought I was going crazy at first. Never been the kind to get attached, or to want more. But you..." He squeezed gently. "You got under my skin like you were meant to be there."

Flint gazed at their interlocked fingers. "And now?"

"Now I know I'm crazy. How could I *ever* consider letting that Templar have you?"

Shame darkened her eyes as she looked away. "I was so foolish about him."

"It doesn't matter." He tipped her chin up. "Because now I'm claiming you for myself."

The shame vanished, bringing back that boldness he'd come to adore. "I don't think anything could make me happier."

Bull wrapped her in a hug, taking care not to squeeze too tight. "I just about went insane with regret tonight."

"You're not leaving, are you? Because I'm gonna have to follow if you are, and that might leave the Inquisition in a tight spot."

He laughed softly and kissed her forehead. "Wild horses couldn't drag my sorry ass away from your side."

She pressed a soft kiss to his lips and whispered, "I love you."

Bull paused, his chest bright and hot as the words played in his head again and again. "Flint, I can't promise that I really understand love," he said slowly. "All I can say is that I look forward to learning from your example every day."

"No. You won't." A tear shimmered at the edge of her eye.

He dabbed it before it could fall. "What do you mean?"

She kissed his knuckles. "I'll be the one learning from *you*, The Iron Bull. You've shown me nothing but love in its purest form. I am so grateful that you're giving me a chance to make up for putting you second when you have always put me first."

His chest ached with emotions he didn't have words to express. Instead, he kissed her softly, and moved them under the covers. "We'll debate who's the lucky one after you've had some sleep, Kadan."

Flint adjusted herself against him, then whispered, "Bull? What does Kadan mean?"

He put one of her delicate hands against his sternum. "Kadan is a pet name. It means 'my heart'."

Her face crumpled with more tears, and she whispered, "Oh. Oh, I like that one the best. Please call me that."

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