

Just Words

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32319433) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32319433>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Categories:	M/M , F/F
Fandom:	Dragon Age: Inquisition
Relationships:	Dorian Pavus/Cullen Rutherford , Briala/Celene Valmont
Characters:	Cullen Rutherford , Dorian Pavus , Celene Valmont , Lady Fleur , Raleigh Samson , The Maker (Dragon Age) , Female Inquisitor (Dragon Age) , Red Templar(s) (Dragon Age) , Gaspard de Chalons , Andraste (Dragon Age)
Additional Tags:	Confident Cullen Rutherford , Sweet Cullen Rutherford , Confident Dorian Pavus , Sweet Dorian Pavus , Laughter , Dancing , Hilarity , Silly , Pre-Relationship , First Kiss , Established Relationship , Intrigue , Skyhold (Dragon Age) , The Winter Palace (Dragon Age) , Halamshiral (Dragon Age) , Dragon Age: Inquisition Quest - Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts , Orlais (Dragon Age) , Friendship/Love , Male Friendship , Developing Relationship , Friends to Lovers , Explicit Language , Original Character(s) , Explicit Sexual Content , Bath Sex , Major character death - Freeform , Major Character Undeath , Magic , Mages (Dragon Age) , Men Crying , Marriage Proposal , True Love , Necklaces , Anal Sex , Boys Kissing , Making Love , I Love You , Love Confessions , Scents & Smells , Water Sex , Escape , Royalty , Red Templars (Dragon Age) , Canon Lesbian Relationship , Canon-Typical Violence , Blood and Violence , Graphic Description , Blood Magic , Miracles , BAMF Celene , Sacrifice , Self-Sacrifice , Bargaining , Temporary Character Death
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-07-02 Completed: 2021-10-28 Words: 18,690 Chapters: 11/11

Just Words

by [TheMoments \(TBs_LMC\)](#)

Summary

Dorian and Cullen have the kind of happy relationship that even makes their own teeth hurt, built on laughter and the way only the two of them can share it. Oh, the dancing, oh, the gliding, oh the kiss...and more! Even an Empress takes notice, leading their lives into a strange, twisting, turning vine of a path that takes them places neither could have foreseen.

Notes

“I don’t want just words. If that’s all you have for me, you’d better go.” – F. Scott Fitzgerald

Oh, the Laughter!

Oh, The Laughter!

Cullen snorted, covered his mouth and nose with his hand, glanced at Dorian across the chess board and just gave in, out-and-out laughing uproariously as the mental images created by Dorian's latest story of his and Felix's grand misadventures back in the days of their misspent youths finally got the better of him.

After all, how could one not look at the Dorian of now and die of mirth imagining him with his breeches around his ears, his silken smalls skewed sideways and his mustache all but vertically inclined up his nose? Not to mention the addition of what may have amounted to several kilos of winterberry spread from toes to elbows.

"Really, Commander," Dorian spluttered and then lost his own shit, mostly out of seeing Cullen's uninhibited and completely uncontrolled response to the story than from his own amusement.

Eventually, gloved fingers wiping tears from his eyes, Cullen managed to calm it down to a few smatterings of snickers and chortles, followed by louder barks of laughter any time his eyes met Dorian's and then whoops, they were off again.

They still hadn't stopped laughing by the time they reached Cullen's office, wherein Dorian was standing by Cullen's desk as the man sat down, shaking his head with a sigh as he got a load of the piles of parchment and scrolls on his desk.

"I could burn it all if you like. You could tell the advisors it was a mage accident."

"Ha," Cullen replied. "You really want Leliana and Josephine after you?"

"If it won me an uninterrupted afternoon full of mirth and wit and charm, I would see my way to enduring it, serah."

Cullen narrowed his eyes at the mage, a smirk upon his face. "Perhaps I shall take you up on that, then, when we haven't a darkspawn magister breathing down our necks wanting to kill us all."

"Ah, that creature is a massive downer, I'll give you that."

"Indeed. So..." Cullen eyeballed the paperwork. "How about you give me four hours and we'll dine."

"Herald's Rest again?"

"I was thinking of something a little further from your quarters," Cullen teased.

Dorian's face lit up. "Oh, *do* tell."

Cullen beckoned the mage with his index finger and Dorian leaned closer conspiratorially. "I would tell you," he breathed near Dorian's ear, "but then I would find myself in the untenable position of having to kill you."

"Ohhh," Dorian rumbled melodramatically, pulling back with his right hand splayed on his chest, "Commander, you *wound* me. Such manners."

"Well, I am just a Fereldan, after all."

"Hmph, as if."

"As if?"

"You are not 'just' anything, lest you go thinking that I, in all my fine taste and desire, would be seen in the company of any man who might be described with the word 'just' anywhere near the adjectives that suit him." Dorian swished his nose into the air and made for the door. "Where shall I meet you, then?"

Cullen laughed. "You've some airs, mage."

"And you've some..." Dorian eyeballed him up and down. "Furs, mundane."

This time the commander's laugh was punched from his belly and his chair creaked at the motion. "All right, all right, you win verbal duels every time. I know when to concede," he admitted, hands up in surrender. Off Dorian's smug wordless reply, he continued, "Meet me in the under-library at seven sharp and not a minute sooner."

"How about a minute later? I do so adore being fashionably late."

"I'll give you five minutes and then I'm gone."

"Sporting lad. Very well. Seven sharp plus five minutes." Dorian gave a crisp salute as he'd been seeing Cullen's soldiers do for the last year of his time at Skyhold, then with a wink and a grin, was off.

Cullen shook his head, chuckling and grateful once more for the most unlikely and yet best friendship he had ever had in the entirety of his nearly thirty-one years. Dorian was just melodramatic and witty enough that his banter had torn Cullen's defenses down months and months ago. Almost from the beginning Dorian had been trying to get him to crack a smile and it'd only taken three weeks for him to find one that he'd not been able to hide from the cheeky mage.

Chess matches had turned into debates in his office. Debates had turned into walks along the battlements and forays into the nether regions of the castle that were much less travelled than the uppers. Walks and forays had turned into Dorian tagging along for troop training and actually participating, helping the soldiers learn how to fight with mages as their far-flung backups in ways that ensured the safety of all. Training had evolved into taking lunches together nearly every day, dinners on most days and sometimes even falling asleep in the

other's rooms on nights when their philosophical, magical and battlefield discussions had sliced into the overnight hours too far for either to want to move.

Cullen didn't think Dorian was ever going to let him live down the fact that he'd crawled on top of his own desk to sleep one night while Dorian had used a chair, several piles of parchment and some sort of threadbare blanket he'd found stuffed into a bookcase shelf. Neither man had walked right for days, and they still laughed about how much wine it'd taken them to get to their respective states.

He couldn't help but grin as he began tackling the paperwork that would keep him buried for the next several hours. Everything always seemed better with a dose of Dorian, and reports that usually bored him were no exception.

Oh, the Dancing!

Chapter Summary

Dorian versus a spider web.

Oh, The Dancing!

Cullen maintained that the single funniest thing he'd ever witnessed was Dorian walking into a giant spider web in the forest. Strung as it was across the path where Dorian, of course, had been gesticulating wildly as he wove his latest tale, Cullen was just the right number of steps behind him as they went in search of a just-so type of wood Dorian wished to use in some upcoming experiments, to witness the event in all its glory.

Nothing. In the entirety of Thedas. Was as thoroughly hilarious as Dorian realizing he'd hit a huge, sticky web and then dancing – because it *was* dancing – like a drunken recruit on a bed of hot coals with his hair and arse on fire.

That the entire scene was punctuated by the highest-pitched *squealing* he'd ever heard outside a nug had the commander of the Inquisition's not-inconsiderable forces rolling about the leaf-strewn forest floor laughing in ways that made his ribs ache to this day.

Dorian still hadn't forgiven him for hooting rather than helping in his time of need. "What, you wanted me tangled in the web as well? How could I have helped you?"

"By not poking fun at me in my hour of desperation," he'd pouted and oh, how beautifully did Dorian pout.

That had been the first time Cullen had crooked his fingers beneath Dorian's chin, forcing him to meet his gaze. "But you looked statuesque in said hour. The dance was rather noble indeed."

Dorian lifted his own chin in a much more regal manner, thanks much, sniffed and closed his eyes. "Well, of course I did. You should expect nothing less while in my company."

Cullen had grinned. Dorian had remained imperious, and they had never spoken of the incident again. But Cullen always kept that vision hidden nearby in his mind to refer to whenever he became cross enough to holler at recruits and runners, for it never failed to bring on a belly laugh no matter how out of sorts he found himself to be at the time.

Oh, the Gliding!

Chapter Summary

Dorian does not dance, thanks much. Dorian glides.

Oh, the Gliding!

Dorian didn't dance. This was a fact. He could not ever do anything as mundane, as positively *boring* as *dancing*, gracious him, no.

Cullen had to find himself agreeing that Dorian in no way danced. Why? Because what Dorian did could be described as nothing less than *gliding* across a dance floor. And Cullen knew this how? Well, the good commander had no idea how to dance and was about to be thrust front and center at the Winter Palace. The thought of being there at all had his stomach in a continual state of "Excuse me, may I please vomit now?" which was counterproductive to his health, or so Leliana had said. The thought of having to *perform* as though he were on an *actual* stage that *wasn't* before a group of his soldiers, made him very nearly faint. Constantly.

And so, Dorian, Master of All Things Noble, had offered to teach him how to dance at least some of the more familiar Orlesian dances, droll as he might consider them. Cullen found himself more than passively curious about an allusion Dorian had made to a dance that involved nothing but ten scarves, but that wasn't the type of dance Dorian had in mind.

"Yet," he'd added quickly to the tail end of *that* particular discussion.

If there was one thing that could be stated with certainty regarding Cullen's now-longstanding friendship with the Tevinter mage, it was that they could find the humor in any situation. That they could laugh at themselves, at each other, at anything around them. And the more those anythings wanted them to stop, the harder they'd laugh.

Both were possessed of wicked senses of humor if one could peel back enough layers to find them. Both had engaging laughs that simply made the other's laugh go longer and harder when heard. And both had a very real need to find something besides anger, fear, hatred, temptation, regret and guilt round every corner. They'd done that enough for themselves throughout their lives and in the midst of the chaos of war, where the threat of imminent death loomed over each and every one of them like an inevitable specter of Fate, both chose to let their moments together be those bright spots they so badly needed.

The dancing – er, attempts at gliding – by one Commander Rutherford were no different from any other undertaking which found great mirth in and of itself and the situation at hand. "Oh,

dear me,” Dorian had remarked when he’d asked Cullen precisely where he thought his hands should go.

“I’m sorry, were those the wrong places for my hands?”

“Were we in my bed, perhaps not,” Dorian had quipped.

Cullen had turned red, bordering on purple.

Dorian had snorted in laughter.

Cullen had lost his marbles over the snort.

Fits and giggles saw to it that the first dance lesson ended in real men crying real tears, only of hilarity rather than sorrow.

And thus the *gliding* lessons awaited resumption until the very next day. By the time they all made it to the Winter Palace in those insufferably hot and garish outfits Josephine had the audacity to call stately, Cullen did a mean Quadrille and had largely mastered the Basse.

But there was one dance he was uncertain if he needed to know, and thus he asked of Dorian, “What of the Dark Waltz? Josephine insists it’s all the rage in Celene’s court and I’ve not even a White Waltz in my limited repertoire.” Dorian’s shocked look unnerved Cullen a bit, who sheepishly asked, “What?”

“I’m...simply surprised you would wish to learn any waltz, regardless the color.”

“But what if I am asked to dance?”

“Are you expecting to be asked to dance for a *waltz*?”

“There must be something I’m missing. You seem rather agog.”

“More aghast, darling.”

“Pfft.”

“It’s just...well...I would be expecting, ehm...couples...to dance waltzes. Or...women who wanted to *become* a...couple. With you.”

“Women?” All color drained from Cullen’s face. “Perhaps it is better that I don’t learn any waltz, thereby allowing me to remain truthful as I decline their offers. But why in the name of the Queen’s pet poodle would I be asked to dance by Orlesian women?”

“Surely you jest.”

Cullen’s confusion made it clear that he did not.

Dorian sighed and shook his head. “Because, daft man, you’re rather a catch.”

The commander blinked. “I’m a what, now?”

“Catch. Desirable.” Dorian clucked his tongue at Cullen’s continued bafflement. “Come, my good man, you must know that your position within the Inquisition places you at the very top of the list, barely under the Inquisitor I might add, of people that half the Orlesian court will be trying to bed.” He then frowned at the floor. “*More* than half, if I don’t miss my guess.”

“More than half of the *women*?” Cullen practically squeaked.

“More than half of the *men* and women,” Dorian corrected.

Cullen was turning purple again. “But I don’t want to dance with anyone but you!” he blurted out. Oddly, his face went from purple to red.

“Naturally,” Dorian said with a small bow and a halfway smirk. “There’ll be no one but me nearly good enough to dance with such as yourself, to be sure.”

“It’s...I mean, I...agh.”

“Use your words, Commander, we’ve had this talk already.”

Cullen glared, but the corners of his mouth began to twitch. “I’m nothing to write home about.”

“I cry foul. I’ve written home about you many a time.”

One eyebrow went up. “Magister Halward knows about the man you play chess with?”

Dorian scowled. “You needn’t foul my mood, you cretin.”

Cullen laughed.

“It’s Mae who hears of our exploits.”

Cullen took a step closer, asking cheekily, “And shall you be sharing with her that you taught me to dance?”

“Only if I can teach you the Dark Waltz,” Dorian responded, voice a bit lower than normal.

Cullen rolled his eyes. “Fine, I give in to your charms, as you always predict I will. But I shall declare here and now that this dance will be seen by no one at the Winter Palace.”

Dorian’s almost-smile faded. “No one?”

Cullen cleared his throat. Rubbed the back of his neck. He’d stepped in it now, to be sure. “No one who’s not in the ballroom?”

“Better. Come, let us commence training. You can make up your *lapsus* over a bottle of Agregio Pavali tonight.”

“Your tastes will bankrupt me, I fear,” Cullen whined with a slight frown as he stood there and allowed Dorian to place his hands just-so.

“You’ve been *buying* it? Heavens, why don’t you just *steal* it? You have full access to the wine cellar as one of Her Inquisitiveness’s advisers, after all.”

“That would be dishonest.”

Dorian grinned. “After tonight, so will telling all the randy dowagers that you don’t know how to dance. Which they will all know you lied about if you do end up on the dance floor.”

Cullen shrugged as Dorian lifted his foot. “Then teach me not to dance, but to glide, so that I may be spared speaking untruths to so very many.”

“You throw any more syrup into that voice and we won’t *make* it to the Winter Palace for want of being stuck precisely where we are,” Dorian groused.

Cullen laughed. And kept laughing at all the mistakes he made.

Until he stopped making them and realized what was happening some two hours later. He was gliding.

With Dorian.

Gliding!

And when their eyes met upon the final bows, the way his heart fluttered in his chest made him wonder about a great many things indeed.

Oh, the Kiss!

Chapter Summary

The Winter Palace is insufferable until those practiced dances get put to the test. In front of everyone.

Oh, the Kiss!

The ball. Oh, that wretched, Maker-forsaken Winter Palace with its roomfuls of grasping, clawing idle rich trying to grasp more than they already have and claw the perfection they are not allowed to have and by Andraste's grace if one more person touches his...person...the Commander of the Inquisition was going to go down in the annals of history for unleashing upon these blasted Orlesians a bloodbath of epic proportions.

Which was why he was relieved many, far too many, a *great* many more than he'd hoped, hours later when the Inquisitor saved the Empress and asked for Briala to be spared for romantic reasons, and helped send Gaspard to his death, and they could all relax then and finish enjoying the ball only...Cullen couldn't enjoy it because he could not for the life of him find the man who'd taught him to dance the dances he had yet to dance because he couldn't get away from that crowd of blighted *nobles* who had him pressed against the wall for nearly the entire evening!

Oh, how he hated them all, each and every one of them, Celene included for making a *ball* be the place she thought it might be good to negotiate peace with a man who very clearly didn't *want* peace (or a ball, for that matter) else he never would have challenged ownership of her throne to begin with. How can a simple farm boy have so many more smarts than people born and bred to rule nations?

He was beginning to wonder at the folly of it all when suddenly there was a hand in the middle of his back and he whirled, perfectly ready to break the wrist attached to that hand but coming face-to-face instead with a most welcome sight indeed.

"Maker's breath! It's you! At last!"

"Ow."

Cullen looked down, realized he'd grabbed hold of said wrist rather tightly in his haste to maim yet another groper, and released it with a, "Oh! I'm...so sorry, I didn't...I mean...agh, Dorian, they wouldn't stop *touching* me!"

"You don't *like* to be touched, Commander?" Oh, the devilish look in those sparkling eyes. Oh, the sly grin upon those lips. Those lips, those *lips*, that... "Are you *quite* certain?"

Cullen froze as Dorian's hand, wrist now loosed from his grasp, slid up his left arm to his shoulder.

"Might you be in the mood for the Quadrille? It appears to be the next dance."

Did Dorian just ask him to dance?

Did Dorian just ask him?

Did Dorian just?

Did Dorian?

Cullen felt a bit lost, stuck in the man's eyes, offering nothing but a nod in response. Dorian's face lit up with a smile that put the sun to ever so much shame and tugged the commander toward the dance floor. A murmur ran through the crowd, but Cullen was looking only at Dorian's perfectly coiffed hair. Snatches of conversations here, bits of words there. A familiar voice – the Inquisitor? – muttering, "it's about fucking time" and a twittering sound – Josephine? – followed by a "you owe me a whole sovereign, Tiny" – and a large, deep groan in response.

But then there was a circle of three couples looking desperately round for a fourth to complete it and it was a man-and-woman couple, and another man-and-woman couple, and... two men. As a couple. Cullen's eyes grew large as Dorian bowed and asked them, "Might we humble ourselves before the most exquisite couples on the floor this eve by asking for allowance to join?"

"*Oui, monsieur*," one of the men from the two-men couple nodded with a flourishing bow. "We are only *too* pleased to have two such fine specimens at hand."

Dorian bowed quite melodramatically, then winked at Cullen – who found himself having to suppress a giggle because he'd never *ever* done this in public and most certainly not with three other couples like the dance was meant to be performed and he was the Commander of the Inquisition who'd been fighting off men and women both all night, yet here he was all pale and golden-haired, on the arm of the most beautiful man that had ever existed in all eternity, bar none, all dark and handsome and someone who'd heard him snore and seen him drool and listened to weeping tales about his experiences and who'd lain his head on his shoulder when softly relaying his own misfortunes and...they were here, in a grossly overlit ballroom with the bloody Empress of Orlais overwatching all, *dancing* and they weren't the only male couple doing so!

His mind was racing racing *racing* as the orchestra began playing. He and Dorian waited across the circle from their male counterparts, and the two male-female couples lined up to left and right, then made their way to the opposite sides of the circles, smiles glowing beneath their masks. They returned to their places, then a short promenade within the circle acknowledging Dorian-Cullen, and their counterparts, and soon it was time for Dorian and Cullen to move and to Cullen's complete and utter surprise, he didn't even *think* about the steps, for all he could see before him and in his mind's eye was Dorian's patience and the joint hilarity of their howling laughter that very first night when Cullen had more left feet

than he had actual feet, and trying to imagine the moves of the other couples had confused Cullen so that he'd stubbornly seated himself on the floor cross-legged and insisted Dorian draw him diagrams. Which he had done. *With magic.*

Oh, the wonder, the amusement, those small, simple, beautiful moments that no one else in all Thedas would ever know, see, hear. Those moments that were private. That were him and Dorian. That were Dorian and him.

Dorian and...and *him*.

Eyes sparkled as they took one another's hands, circled, eyes meeting eyes, smiled, and then Dorian used his middle finger to tickle the middle of Cullen's hand and the commander could barely stifle the laugh that came forth as sort of a gigglesnort and then he muttered, "Stop it!" at the next pass and Dorian's body shook slightly with silent laughter as they returned to their starting positions and he bowed and Dorian did a sort of curtsy-bow mixture still shaking with laughter and as everyone on the floor let loose with applause for the orchestra and for their fellow dancers, Cullen grabbed Dorian's hand and ran up the steps, past the Empress' table where her three trusted ladies were heavily into their cups, and out onto the blissfully empty balcony.

Only then did Cullen let loose with a roar of laughter, followed closely by Dorian, who finally managed to pant, "What's so damned funny, Commander? It was all I could do to maintain my decorum!"

Cullen wiped the tears from his eyes. "I couldn't...ah, Maker...I couldn't stop the pictures in my mind. Imagine if I'd sat myself down on Celene's ballroom floor petulantly refusing to move until you drew me diagrams!"

Dorian burst out a *most* uncouth *pah!* of laughter, then moved to the railing as far from the double doors back into the ballroom as he could. "I cannot take you *anywhere!*" he shook his head, still laughing. "You southern chantry boys are not at all what I expected."

"Well, I'm not like *most* southern chantry boys," Cullen said before he'd stopped to consider it. Before realizing his voice had dropped some as he said it.

Dorian's smile stayed in place as his right eyebrow arched elegantly. "Oh, really? Do tell, Commander," he purred as he turned and started heading back toward Cullen, hips moving in a way that should be illegal south of Tevinter – or anywhere, really.

Cullen's hands automatically moved to rest upon Dorian's waist – perhaps the closeness of the dance bred familiarity? – when he stopped before him. He leaned forward conspiratorially. Their gazes were locked. He had some sort of distant feeling like he was being watched from somewhere else, but didn't give a fig as he replied, "Well for one thing, southern chantry boys aren't usually to be found in the arms of Tevinter mages."

Dorian shivered. "You're not quite in my arms yet."

Then the sounds of a familiar piece of music drifted their way as the small orchestra tuned their instruments. A waltz. The *Dark Waltz*.

Cullen moved so his lips were next to Dorian's ear. "Give it a minute," he whispered, the corner of his mouth moving upward when Dorian gave a *violent* shiver that time. Cullen then backed away, took Dorian's left hand in his right, bowed low with a grand flourish, and asked, "May I have the next dance, Altus Pavus?" He then kissed the back of his hand.

Neither were wearing gloves.

And Dorian *blushed* before replying, "You may."

Cullen righted himself and crooked his arm. Dorian took it, looking incredulously at him, and as they made their way back into the ballroom to the sounds of the strings tuning themselves, trying out the first few strains of the waltz, the commander noted Bull's very wide eye and Varric's gaping wide mouth and the Inquisitor pointing at them while giggling, with Leliana's and Josephine's mouths in very round o shapes.

And no matter what was running through anyone's mind at the moment, all Cullen could feel, hear, see and touch was that the single most perfect man in the room – most perfect person, period – had taken *his* arm. Had agreed to dance this dance with *him*. Was seen to be thought of as the best possible dance partner to the man that all of their scheming, slimy behaviors for endless hours could not get them.

Likewise, Cullen felt like the richest, most royal man in Orlais, Ferelden and the Marches, all. Dorian's beauty went beyond his bronze-brown skin and his tempestuous gray eyes and his strong, noble nose and his impeccably groomed mustache and hair. It went beyond the curve of his bottom and the lean lines of his torso. Past the lithe and yet muscular arms and legs, the beauty of his movements when he cast spells like gliding and dancing were things that flowed through him as easily as the power of the Fade.

No, of all men in attendance, Cullen knew *his* was the luckiest hand of all as they took their place on the dance floor. In the *center* of the dance floor, with other couples forming a ring.

They were to have it all to themselves. Cullen shook slightly, terribly unused to showing himself off in such a way to anyone at all, never mind this lot. His right arm slid around Dorian just beneath his armpit. His left hand clasped Dorian's right and raised them together. Dorian squeezed his hand. Cullen met his eyes. Dorian gave him a small smile. "Don't worry," he whispered so that only Cullen could hear. "I've got you."

Cullen's smile matched his as he replied, "You most certainly have."

Dorian's eyes widened as the first strains of violin permeated their senses. Cullen's eyes closed as he let it flow through him and after the first full stanza he felt his body release. It was time to dance – no, to *glide* – with the man who'd taught him that such impossible feats were, in fact, not.

He dipped Dorian, then turned and flung him away, pulled him halfway back, twirled him three times and allowed Dorian to fall away. But Cullen kept hold of his hand, like a promise, Dorian falling backwards and Cullen catching him. Just like he'd caught him in Haven. The lead's partner symbolically dying and yet still being lovingly held by one who would not, *could* not, let him go.

Dorian's back was now flush against Cullen's front, bodies touching, writhing and yes, Cullen remembered well their practicing of this and how it had awakened so much within him, so much that he'd thought dead but had only been dormant. The dancer holding his beloved close, proving to them that even death cannot separate them, that there is something to live for.

Now, here, surrounded by everyone and no one, hands raking across Dorian's chest, grasping his biceps and twirling him around so they were face-to-face, lips no more than a breath apart as Cullen dipped him low again.

Dorian's eyes were dark, darker than he'd ever seen them, and they never left Cullen's when they were facing each other. Slowly Dorian rose from being dipped, head supported by Cullen's hand, as the music swelled – the moment of his partner returning to life, returning to him as a spirit from dying in the heat of battle, or so the Dark Waltz's story told. Moving back into the familiar standard pose of a waltz, heart hammering against his chest, now. Dorian's head thrown back as though in disaffection, Cullen's eyes never leaving his face as the longing lover.

The moves that had made them laugh so very hard in their stumbling and his fumbling, now etching new emotions into the tiles beneath their feet, into the armor surrounding their souls. Holding him as he pulled closer, lifting him into the air effortlessly, swirling in two full circles forward and back and then the move that made his heart pound in his chest and his blood rush in his ears as Dorian slid nearly perpendicular to him and Cullen twisted them round and round at a dizzying pace until slowing the revolutions as Dorian lowered his feet to retake the floor with a grace that should have been impossible for any normal man. A whirlwind of emotion, convincing his lover to not leave him, the spirit to remain, promises of more and better and wonder if only he would.

As Cullen whirled Dorian around one last time to pull the mage's back against his torso, Dorian laid his head upon Cullen's shoulder and looked up. Their eyes met and Cullen's breath was stolen away, for this move was not one he had been taught. This was real. This was him and this was Dorian and when the music softly closed upon the fall of his dance partner into the darkness of the waltz's death, Cullen closed that hair's-breadth of distance to Dorian's lips and there, in front of the entire Court of Orlais, and in front of the Inquisitor and her advisers and most of her inner circle, Cullen Rutherford of Ferelden and Dorian Pavus of Tevinter kissed for the very first time.

Oh, the Touch!

Chapter Summary

An invitation comes on the heels of an erotic dance and first kiss. Intrigue follows as Cullen and Dorian are led to a room adjacent to Empress Celene's and left with strange instructions, which they follow before baring themselves to each other at last.

Oh, the Touch!

Silence enveloped the moment. As Cullen supported Dorian back to standing solely upon his own two feet, eyes locked with eyes in a magical bubble that meant nothing existed but the two of them. A singular moment in time, one that would never come again. A pinpoint of Destiny before which nothing was as it had just become. After which nothing was ever going to be the same again. For them. For those around them.

Cullen swallowed and then smiled. Dorian's grin was a ray of sun, blinding his overflowing heart and surrounding him in a supple cocoon of *knowing*. He *knew* how he felt. He *knew* what this urge to be near him had been all along. He *knew* the mage from Tevinter had become the center of the microcosmic world of Cullen Rutherford within Skyhold and now, without. He *knew* Dorian felt the same. He *knew* how soft his lips were. He *knew* how the man felt in his arms fully clothed in front of others.

Now, he wanted to know how the man felt in his arms fully naked, alone in a moment of perfection he desperately wished could happen right then and there.

Sound, applause, cat-calls came rushing back into the vacuum with a whoosh that left both men breathless, half-chuckling, half-giggling, grinning at each other before coming fully upright and acknowledging their friends, the strangers, nodding and bowing, flushing with heat and adoration and from being a focal point and both preening and shying away, the cascading newness of a *them* prickling head to toe as they stole glances, endured back slaps, answered none of the hundred questions peppering them while they tried and failed to take the staircase upward. And then a regal voice spared them the struggle when it spoke from on high.

“Commander Rutherford, Altus Pavus, we do hope you will both indulge our curiosity by breaking fast with us upon the morn.” The men looked up at the royal balcony to find Empress Celene shining in her brilliant, gem-like blue dress, mask in place, hair arranged just-so, smile wide beneath her pert nose. Hands held in that Orlesian way that bespoke royalty as she bent her knee in homage. “Prior to the sad occasion of your departure, we would very much enjoy getting to know the men who will be leading our soldiers – and our mages – into battle against the evil we all face.”

“A fine idea, indeed,” they heard the Inquisitor say with great appreciation from somewhere nearby.

“Your Majesty,” Cullen bowed. Dorian moved with him back to the floor of the ballroom just beneath her dais from which they could better address her. “You humble and honor us both.”

He looked to Dorian, who appeared surprised for a fraction of a second before adding, “Her Majesty is too kind to her humble servants. It shall be the greatest of honors to attend you.”

With a gentle curtsy and acknowledging nod, Celene turned and spoke to her three ladies-in-waiting – who it appeared were not at all into their cups – as Cullen and Dorian linked arms and headed back up the staircase, glancing at each other with all manner of questions and promises written on their faces, only for one of the ladies to meet them at the top while Celene moved away for parts unknown. One of the other two ladies went to the Inquisitor and Leliana, while the third moved to intercept Josephine.

The lady-in-waiting facing Cullen and Dorian curtsied regally. “Lady Fleur at your service. *Si messieurs avaient la gentillesse de m'accompagner à la demande de Madame?*”

Cullen recognized a couple of Orlesian words but was in no way able to parse that question out. But Dorian nodded in complete comprehension and he followed the mage’s lead, making their way after Lady Fleur all the way out of the ballroom, the crowd parting in her wake, murmurs and exclamations landing upon them like drizzling rain. Cullen opened and held the door for Lady Fleur, then they followed her to a blue door Dorian recognized all too well. A slight frown creased his brow.

“If ze gentlemen would be so kind as to accompany me to ze room that has been assigned you for ze duration of your enjoyment of the Empress’ hospitality,” she offered in Trade this time, nodding toward the door. Dorian opened it, escorting her through as Cullen looked furtively about. Every military sense he had was wary and he could tell from the stiffness in Dorian’s carriage of his upper body that his magical senses were tingling as well.

Having been with the Inquisitor for all the scouring of the Winter Palace, Dorian knew when they passed Celene’s rooms and that the door Lady Fleur stopped in front of was not only right next to them but had an adjoining door between them. He gave Cullen a meaningful glance. Cullen nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Gentlemen, here is the key to ziss room and to a door which you will find inside. Please do not hesitate to enjoy one another but we ask that you unlock the door within prior to your nightcap.”

“What’s going on?” Cullen asked so quietly that Dorian could barely hear him.

Lady Fleur smiled. “I am so pleased that you will be enjoying such exquisite rooms for rarely do zese suites see much use zese days. Your belongings have already been placed within.” Her eyes were serious, belying the benign nature of her countenance. “Please do enjoy ze rest of your stay here in our beautiful home, Commander. Altus.” With a deep curtsy and a short hold of gazes with first Dorian and then Cullen, Lady Fleur retreated the way they had come.

Without a word the men unlocked the door, opened it and Dorian entered first, fireball in hand just in case. They searched the sitting room, the multi-seat privy chamber, the bedroom containing a massive canopy bed and a large room with an inset bath already filled with water, rose petals and scented oils that set the senses alight. Cullen looked under the bed while Dorian checked the wardrobe. There was a set of double doors from the sitting room out to a balcony that overlooked the harbor leading to the river, whereupon many boats floated as their owners continued celebrating.

“It appears clear,” Dorian finally said, fireball schwinging back into nothingness as he spoke. Cullen startled slightly as the weight of their waltz interlaced with every word coming from the mage’s mouth. “Here’s the other door.”

Cullen moved to it and used Lady Fleur’s key to unlock it. “Where d’you suppose it leads?” he asked.

“I know where it leads,” Dorian replied, folding his arms over his chest. “That’s the Empress’ rooms on the other side of that door. We managed to get in there earlier this evening to gather evidence.”

“Why in the name of the Maker’s –?” His words were halted by the feel of fingertips against his cheek. He looked over at Dorian, feeling his face go soft and his entire body relax as the mage’s fingertips turned into his flattened palm. Cullen hummed and smiled as he nuzzled into the touch.

The touch. Oh, how it burned. How it soothed. How it excited. How it raised questions. How it answered so many more than it raised. Cullen’s eyelids fluttered closed, jaw dropping a bit. Chest rising and falling as Dorian’s thumb smoothed along his cheekbone, then all fingers moved up over his ear, one of his fingers tracing the shell of it before they all buried themselves in his styled hair.

“Cullen,” Dorian breathed seconds before their lips met for only the second time.

Something like a whine meeting a groan reverberated through Cullen’s chest as his hands settled on Dorian’s shoulders, Dorian’s hands both cradling his face now. Noses bumping together, lips planting kisses upon lips, repeating, soft, sure, tender, no hesitation.

And then Dorian’s arms were wound round his neck and Cullen’s were slid round his back and they held each other at no distance and *the touch* could feel each other’s hardness trouser-to-trouser and *the feel* foreheads pressing together and “Dorian, Dorian,” whispered like a prayer to the Maker between them and “Cullen” in response like penitence.

They swayed together, heads moving so lips could press together again, so chests could heave breaths when this time Dorian didn’t pull back but licked the seam of Cullen’s lips and Cullen parted for him, a creaking, long-closed door opening for the only man – the only person of any type or gender – who *got* him, who *accepted* him, who *wanted* him.

“Oh,” Dorian breathed like every naughty dream he’d ever had was coming true as Cullen slowly unbuttoned the garish red jacket that Dorian made look so good. His fingers worked adeptly at Cullen’s as well and soon they were shucked and forgotten. Sleeveless white tunics

then also fell away, baring muscled arms, chests, stomachs to hungry eyes and for so many moments they simply stood and looked.

So much had just been revealed. So much that both wanted. Almost afraid to break the spell that the Winter Palace had become for them both, and Cullen breathed, "Oh," in response, as if just realizing that what he had craved deep within his bones was being offered here and now with no fears or doubts between them. He gasped when Dorian's strong yet delicate fingers traced across his chest and caught first one nipple and then the other in their gentle touch. Cullen smoothed his hands down Dorian's bare arms and his eyes followed them onto Dorian's chest and down the center line of his body to the beginnings of dark hair just beneath his umbilicus. Cullen's hands then moved up Dorian's sides upon a sigh from the mage, whose own slid around the commander's body to flatten against his spine.

An embrace. A first touch of skin to skin. And oh, that touch, that *touch*, the sensations, zinging and prickling, arousing and yet feeling like the safest port to weather any storm. Dorian knew in those moments as their lips met again and kisses grew more probing with tongues tracing teeth and caressing each other, he knew he knew he *knew* that no matter what happened, he would never be parted from this man before him, for he could not bear such for any reason.

The realization punched a whimpered sob from him, and he launched himself up, arms around Cullen's neck, feet off the ground. The commander caught him because of course he caught him, and always would and oh, the feel of being wanted by such a beautiful man and not having to hide, not having to lie, not having to pretend that Cullen didn't hold his heart forever and for always in those two strong, rough and yet capable and gentle hands that felt as though they dwarfed his features at the same time as they promised to protect him always.

"Dorian," Cullen breathed as they parted, panting into one another.

"Come," Dorian said softly. "They prepared a bath for us. Shall we wash the intrigue and groping hands away?"

Nodding once, Cullen smiled as Dorian took his hand and led him to the bathing room where floral scents engulfed him as surely as his mage's arms did.

His mage.

His Dorian.

His *Dorian* who unfastened his trousers and slowly pushed them and his smalls down. Removed his shoes and socks. Helped him step out of the remaining clothing. Returned to standing. His Dorian who allowed Cullen to unfasten his trousers. Who stood watching with a look of such tenderness that it made Cullen's chest ache in ways he couldn't define. He removed Dorian's shoes and socks. Pulled his trousers and smalls away.

They stood there next to the in-ground bath that was easily large enough to hold six grown men comfortably and just looked for long, long moments. And then Dorian was in Cullen's arms and Cullen was in Dorian's arms and there was he and he and that became *them* and then came the touch.

Oh, the *touch*.

Oh, the Words!

Chapter Summary

Dorian and Cullen make love for the first time.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have an announcement to make: We have finally reached the chapter that justifies the E rating on this story. As such, please be well aware that due to explicit sexual content, this chapter is Not Safe For Work or Children.

Chapter Notes

Once more, with feeling: NSFW. Sex. Explicit. Do not proceed without due consideration of such. Thank you.

Oh, the Words!

Dorian finally parted himself from his heart's desire, turned, and stepped carefully, elegantly, gracefully up the three steps leading to the top of the wall surrounding the in-ground bathing pool, and then down many steps until he reached the smooth tiled floor of it, water and rose petals parting before him like courtiers and guards and men-in-waiting and everyone who wanted to adore a prince or a king moving in deference away from the vision of perfection to which all others must submit.

Cullen gaped as Dorian's cupped hands lifted oil-infused water and petals alike, and with dripping fingers, spread it onto first one shoulder and then the other. His skin began to glisten in the candlelight, then, as Dorian rubbed the oils more thoroughly into every inch. Slowly, sensually, he began to glow.

"Come." Dorian motioned with his hand, the word barely above a whisper as Cullen's feet obeyed. He could deny this vision nothing. Not his mind. Not his heart. Not his body. Not even his very soul, Maker take him. If demons filled the room at this very moment and the horror of truth struck him speechless, he would give in, for he was lost. Lost in dark skin. Forever wishing to sail stormy grey eyes. Desperate to touch dark hair and succumb to strength. Lost in dazzling lavenders, glowing lilacs, vivid violets; magic in more shades of purple than the commander had ever known existed. Delve into the slightly upturned mouth, taste the plump lips begging to be kissed.

It stunned Cullen to speechlessness how badly he wished to lose himself for all eternity in Altus Dorian Pavus. Willingly. Happily.

He made his way up and over the edge of the pool into its heavenly depths, the scent of roses and sandalwood permeating his every inhalation. He took Dorian's outstretched hand, stood stock still in wonder and awe as the mage circled him, performing the same ministrations upon his arms and hands, upon his sides and chest, upon his upper back and neck, as he had done upon his own exposed flesh.

"You're like a god fashioned from the sun itself," Dorian purred as he embraced Cullen from behind, lips against the shell of his ear. Cullen shivered violently at the multiple sensations, not the least of which was a very hard dick pressing against the cleft of his arse. He gasped as Dorian's hands caressed slowly down his arms until his palms stopped against the backs of Cullen's hands and the mage intertwined their fingers. "I have longed for this, to be burned by the sun, Commander, for longer than I should admit."

Cullen's hands squeezed the fingers held between his. Words were lost to him in the moment, and now was not the time for mirth. He turned in Dorian's arms, hands releasing hands, palming Dorian's face like it was a precious, breakable thing he needed to carefully cradle lest it come to ruin before him, not unlike so many dreams featuring this face before him, so close to his, that had always shattered upon waking.

"And you, my dark and deadly and handsome nobleman, caring to look at a lad from the low country, a barbarian, one who sees you descend from a purple sky with the storms of a thousand magical nights lighting your every move."

Dorian hitched in a breath. "And you say you have no gift for words." He ducked his head shyly. "The things you say." He ended on a voice so light and airy it floated between them for many seconds until Cullen pressed into the sound, waded through it, pulled his mage *his* mage his *Dorian* against his body and claimed his lips with such force of possession that to avoid sinking beneath the surface from weak knees, Dorian clung to him like a desperate man.

Desperate for love.

Desperate for *Cullen*.

"I will take you," Cullen murmured against his lips, "for I can withhold from you no longer."

"Yes." Dorian's single word response breathlessly spoken against the soft curves of Cullen's flawless lips, the scar an enhancement that titillated and allured.

"I will bury myself within you, claim you, mark you as mine, for you will belong never to another from this moment forward."

"Ohhhh," Dorian breathed, capturing Cullen's eyes with a teary gaze. "Yes."

Cullen's hands gripped his head, thumbs stroking his cheekbones, rubbed the tips of their noses together. "By the Maker, Dorian, you don't just own my heart, you...*are* my heart."

Dorian levered himself up into Cullen's embrace, arms winding round his neck as his legs wrapped round his waist. His mouth claimed the commander's, soon moving from lips to

chin, from chin to jaw, jaw to neck, tongue licking and teeth nipping and Cullen sighed and growled, moaned and panted as he moved to the edge of the bathing pool's deep wall, reached beneath Dorian's arse with his right hand and held him round his back with the other.

His index finger pressed into Dorian's tight hole, made easier by the rose oil in the water. The mage's jaw dropped open, their gazes locked, a thrill running through Dorian like he had never before known. He knew sex and being turned on by the act thereof, but this? This was different, it was...it was...

"I love you," Cullen whispered as he slipped a second finger inside the eager opening.

Love? It was...is...*is*...

"Is...that what this is?" Dorian asked, a look of wonder on his face. Had it been just words with nothing more come before or after, Dorian would have blinked and disbelieved and accused and walked away, but this was Cullen and the words this man spoke were never flippant or hurtful and he was kind and gentle and...they weren't just words. Dorian *knew* they weren't.

"Well," Cullen smiled, shoving his index and tall fingers into Dorian as far as he could make them go, causing a loud gasp to come from the man who would soon very concretely be his lover, "it is for me. Your laughter, Dorian, it made me whole."

Cullen captured Dorian's lips, slowly pulling his fingers away and pushing them back in as he chased the moan that floated from Dorian's throat, licking his way into the heat of his mouth and kissing him deeply as his fingers picked up speed and oil with every thrust.

"Your willingness to look beyond all that I had been and see only what I could become, made he hope." With these words, Cullen slid a third finger into the man who was indeed his heart, his *whole* heart with no piece left behind and Dorian arched in his one-armed embrace, back bowed. Cullen bent forward, licking a stripe up the center of his chest to the hollow of his neck, which he tongued with a teasing tickle before mouthing along his collar bone as the mage's legs squeezed hard around his waist, heels digging into his hips.

"Your presence made me feel wanted," Cullen said as he pulled his face back enough that he could meet Dorian's eyes.

"Oh, you exquisite man," Dorian choked out, soft words punctuated by emotions being born within the sparkling tears that filled his eyes.

"Your body made me yearn."

"Do you have any idea how perfect you are?"

"Your wit and brilliance made me pine for more and longer conversations."

"*Kaffas*, my heart, it's..." Dorian bowed his head as Cullen's three fingers began pulling out. "Too much," the mage whispered on a sob. "*So much.*"

“I want to belong to you as I want you to belong to me,” Cullen finished, fingers moving faster now, Dorian’s muscles going taut, his thick, dark, rigid dick leaking where the glans peeked above the water against Cullen’s pale skin.

Words fell unbidden, known, believed, *felt* from Dorian’s lips as Cullen pulled his fingers away and lined the head of his dick up to replace them. “My every dream come to life,” he panted as the glans pressed into his loosened hole. “*Amatus*, beloved of my heart, ahhhhh, Cullen, *please*.”

Cullen kept pressing, further...further...against a tidal wave of sounds that were like none he’d ever heard his best friend make before: staccato grunts, half-formed words in Tevene, Antivan, Trade, Anderfellan. Sighs that whispered his name as Cullen seated himself to the root and held on tight, held Dorian aloft in the water with both arms. He sat upon a bench that ran along one of the pool’s long sides and one of its short sides, Dorian’s knees coming to rest either side of Cullen’s thighs. Listened as simple words of gratitude, of pleasure, of atonement, of fire and desire, moved Dorian’s lips, contorted his face with expressions of lust and disbelief and emotion the likes of which he had never let Cullen see.

“When you kissed me on the ballroom floor,” Dorian whispered, pulling himself up until he was almost off Cullen’s dick completely, “time stopped and the moment was perfect and you, *you* were perfect and I wanted more. More of you, more of that, more of *everything*.”

“*We’re* perfect, Dorian,” Cullen said, looking into his eyes, smoothing hair from his forehead as Dorian hovered like an expectation anticipating the outcome. “And this? What we are? What we will become? This is more. *This*,” he stated, hands squeezing Dorian’s waist as he urged him to descend on his shaft, “*this is* more.”

Dorian’s lips met his and he made his own song to their union, then, hums in his throat, words describing everything he felt, saw, heard, flowing from his lips like water flowed along their skin in rivulets and rivers as his body moved down, and then up, droplets falling as quickly along the slick, oiled, shining body in Cullen’s lap as rain from a cloud-filled sky. Dorian moved faster and faster until Cullen grasped just under his thighs to hold him still, leaned back against the smooth tile wall and levered his hips in upward thrusts that nearly dislodged Dorian from his lap altogether.

Dorian cried out, head thrown back as Cullen drove into him from beneath, filling him so completely that his usually sharp-focused mind, his logic, every word of naysay that always filled him in these moments, all started rushing down, down, doubts fleeing into the cleansing embrace of the water surrounding them, hope rising from the ashes of a life spent without the comfort of knowing there would always be one person who would hold you and love you no matter what you said, or did, or how far afield you wandered, and...

Love.

Now Dorian slammed down as Cullen thrustured up and the water sloshed and splashed and their bodies moved of their own accord, cries of ecstasy and desperation for completion filling the steamed air around them, hair matted into golden curls and wavy raven tresses and eyes squeezed shut in the agony of blissful union that tore everything open and reformed it with every squeeze of fingers, nip of teeth, kiss of lips, pinch of nipples, rub of skin. Faster

and faster and grunts and groans replaced hums and moans, shouts replaced sighs, a burst of escaped air as Cullen thrust up one last time deep into Dorian's body, orgasm rolling through him in wave after wave after wave of the most extreme pleasure his body had ever known.

Dorian clenched around him, hand moving down to take hold of his own thick, dusky cock. Pumping once, twice, then leaning forward to stifle a near-scream of sexual frenzy against the spot where Cullen's thick, strong neck met his large, muscled shoulder. Dorian's body took control of his spasms, gyrating him against Cullen's, within the encirclement of his protective arms, every crashing wave of pleasure causing him to clench harder and harder around Cullen, whose responding gasps and near-whines culminated in hands on Dorian's face, lips meeting lips, kisses at first sloppy and wet and unable to find coordination. Giving way to softness, gentleness, racing hearts over minutes that stretched before them like miles, finally slowing enough to let them breathe.

Breathe.

Just *breathe*.

Dorian opened his eyes to find amber ones trained upon him. He traced with his thumb the commander's lips, oh, those lips, *summa, perfectus*. Lips that he had seen stretch in a smile, curve in a smirk, open widely for a laugh, turn downward in sorrow, purse in anger. Lips which were soft and pliant against his own, a state that no one else would ever feel them in but Dorian.

"I..." Dorian hesitated, shyness leeching years from his features, eyes looking down to the soft blond hair covering Cullen's chest thickly enough to be comfortable, soft, madness-inducing. Cullen's own thumb traced along Dorian's bottom lip, stroking back and forth across the cleft of it. The mage's eyes rose again. "If everything I'm feeling right now is what love feels like," he finally found the courage to say, "then I love you, Cullen Rutherford."

A tender smile was his response as Cullen remained buried in him, allowing his fingertips to feel as much of every inch of Dorian's body as he could while their lips met in a kiss that spoke of laughter and dancing and gliding in equal measure in the history of their time since the beginning. For they had laughed their way into friendship, danced their way into each other's lives and glided into love so naturally, so seamlessly, that they had not even seen it coming until it had consumed them both.

Only then, after all of what had passed ensured there was no other that could possibly stand measured to what each held already in their hands and hearts, had the words been spoken. And what words they had been *I love you*, so sincerely spoken, *then I love you*.

Oh, the words.

Oh, the Intrigue!

Chapter Summary

Bloody Orlesians and their royal intrigue.

Oh, the Intrigue!

One or maybe two or maybe nobody's counting hours later, after the vanity had been debauched and laughter over tipping the wardrobe and having to right it had urged them into taking each other against one of the bed's four posts, and after finding out that Orlesian rugs leave knee burns just as badly as those in Tevinter – Dorian's contribution – and after Cullen discovers that yes, Dorian does wear jewels in places nobody but him will ever *ever* see, bless the Maker's bride, and later still when they'd fallen into the freshly made sheets of Orlesian silk *well it wouldn't be Antivan considering where we are* two men lay in a sated, smiling, exhausted embrace, mouths still unable to cease the movements of kissing, of joy, of rapture in newfound love, in newly confessed passion, in the satisfaction of knowing that the physicality of expressing it all exceeded every dream, every hope, every expectation, by miles.

And it was thusly, when star-filled skies and moon-bathed balconies found the north and the south locked in the tightest of embraces, that a rapid series of knocks startled Cullen and Dorian from their hazy, lazy post-coital stupor.

"Gentlemen," came a woman's voice accented in Orlesian with the g sound soft and drawn-out, "forgive me but I must quickly enter."

Both men sat bolt upright, a flick of Dorian's wrist lighting the candles in four wall sconces around the room. Cullen flushed bright red when the face of the person came into view. "Empress Celene?" he blurted, pulling the sheet and quilt tightly to his waist as Dorian did the same for himself.

"Forgive me, Commander. Altus," she nodded.

The men looked at her state of...less-than-regal dress, then at each other almost comically, for Cullen thought perhaps this was an occasion where a laugh had to be better than reality since reality currently made no sense whatsoever.

"You're wearing...what are you *wearing*?" Dorian asked, the end of his question elevating itself nearer the ceiling.

"A disguise."

Dorian's fingertips touched his bare chest in faux shock. "Clearly. I believe your dressmaker just fainted somewhere."

"Gentlemen, I beg of you, do not turn me away, for my very life may depend on what happens in the next ten minutes."

"You have us at a bit of a disadvantage," Dorian stated with a flap of his hand, red tinging even his cheekbones, "purely from the standpoint of states of dress, you see."

"Ah, yes, apologies," she acknowledged, turning back to face the adjoining door whilst simultaneously locking it. "Please dress in traveling clothes and hurry, and I shall explain as you do so."

"Ah," Cullen hesitated, shooting a confused look followed by a shrug in his lover's direction. Dorian responded in kind and clambered across the bed – and Cullen – to the wardrobe, where he quickly pulled out Cullen's traveling attire and tossed it to him, then took his own leathers and smallclothes and so forth and began shucking them on.

A smile was contained within the Empress' voice when she lilted, "Trust me when I say that even should I turn now to witness your states of undress, you would find that it holds no titillation for me."

"Ah, of course," Dorian replied with a quick snap of his fingers. "Female elf. Right." He winked at Cullen, who rolled his eyes as he finally slid off the almost-too-high bed and began to don his own clothing.

"As pleased as we are to see you again, Your Highness," Cullen said with a hitch in his breath as he fell back against the bed while putting one of his legs into his smalls, "I fear such an uncharacteristic lack of decorum is not something with which I have familiarity."

The Empress laughed lightly. "Fear not, Commander, for if I live to see the dawn, there will be no words of impropriety, only those which laud you saving my life."

Dorian slid one boot on and then the other, then grabbed his undertunic. "I don't suppose you're willing to explain now."

"Indeed," Celene nodded, turning, getting a yelp from a half-dressed Cullen, whose face grew redder by the moment. But in all her royal perfection, she did not even acknowledge him, instead locking gazes with the man who was just finishing buckling up the straps and belts on what Cullen always referred to as his 'buckle shirt' whenever the topic of impossibly silly clothing arose.

"I am here to ask a favor of you both, and I chose you specifically because I need someone who can wield magic and someone who can cancel it."

Cullen exchanged a worried look with Dorian, for he wasn't entirely certain he *could* cancel magic anymore, but he doubted the Empress was aware that he was technically no longer a templar in every sense of the word. He wisely kept quiet, using the slipping on of his traveling tunic to keep from speaking.

“Altus Pavus, I know you participated fully with the Inquisitor as she gathered evidence against all of those of us vying for the throne of Orlais tonight.”

“Indeed,” Dorian nodded as he handed Cullen his sword belt, then reached for his staff and seated it into its clamps against his own back. It wasn’t lost on the mage or the ex-templar that Celene was no longer using the royal ‘we’ in her speech.

“Florianne meant to kill me tonight at the behest of Corypheus, as you both also know. But in addition to the spies I had operating here within the palace, Briala and I both had others stationed throughout Halamshiral and the surrounding area, all the way to the Waking Sea.”

“Wait,” Cullen said as he settled his sword into balance at his hip and placed his hand upon the pommel, his ‘resting bitch stance’ as Dorian called it. Which usually made him howl laughing and things devolving from there. But not tonight. “You and Briala were working together the whole time? I thought she was as much suspect in the attempted *coup* as Gaspard.”

“We wanted everyone to think that,” Celene nodded with a wistful smile. “Gaspard had the one thing that Florianne did not have, for although she had been directly tapped by Corypheus to assassinate me, since she was fully expected to be by my side for the ball that *she* technically threw, it was Gaspard who brought the truly dangerous elements into play.”

“What dangerous elements?” Dorian asked, folding his arms over his chest as he and Cullen came to stand before her shoulder-to-shoulder with one another.

“A man I believe you to be quite familiar with, Commander,” Celene stated as she met Cullen’s eyes.

“Samson,” he breathed without hesitation.

“Indeed,” she nodded. “Florianne was expected to act on her own, with those of the chevaliers that she had managed to coerce away from Gaspard. But Gaspard was always the secondary plan, for it was he who plotted to allow Samson and his red templars access to the Winter Palace.”

Alarmed, both Dorian and Cullen looked into each other’s eyes and then back at Celene again, Cullen asking, “Here? Are they here *now*? Does the Inquisitor know?”

With several nods, Celene stayed them, hands raised in placation. “The Inquisitor, your Qunari friend, the dwarven author and Seeker Pentaghast are working with Leliana, Briala and their spies and scouts, as well as the soldiers of my true allies, which Josephine is coordinating with the Dowager and other close families.”

“Why are they not guarding you instead?” Dorian asked, brow furrowed. “For that matter, where are your guards? Your Ladies in Waiting? Your personal escorts?”

“Briala found evidence that at least three of those surrounding me had been paid off by Florianne, and two more by Gaspard. The rest sit in our dungeons awaiting questioning save

my Ladies who are beyond reproach, but the agreement was that my care would fall to the two of you.”

“Without even warning us?” Cullen asked. “And the Inquisitor agreed to this? What in the name of the Void was she thinking?”

“No, no, this makes perfect sense,” Dorian said with a nod, and Celene’s face softened as she realized he understood.

“How? There is no plan for getting the Empress safely out of the palace, never mind Halamshiral itself if we manage to get that far, and with just the two of us to defend her?”

“Nobody suspects the two men who flaunted their fledgling relationship so openly as to scandalize the entire court with a Black Waltz that ended in a kiss right under the nose of the Empress,” Dorian explained, warming to his thoughts regardless the very skeptical look on Cullen’s face. “Everyone present assumes we went off behind closed doors to finish what that waltz started and that we’d probably be all night about it. No one would suspect we’d be off to spirit away a woman that outwardly we’d saved from the only danger she was in tonight.”

“Precisely,” Celene nodded. “As I watched you dance I realized it was not just a dance, but a true partnership before me, much like the one I had before and still *do* have, with my Briala.”

Color rose high on Cullen’s and Dorian’s cheeks both, them ducking their heads and giving each other awkward, bashful smiles.

“And that is important, for I know you will move as one in all you do, and though it may sound like the stuff of fairy tales, believe me when I say to you that there is no greater force in the face of all they stand against, than two who are deeply in love. Seeing Briala some month past for the first time in...well, we are only parted now because we both believe she is better suited to keeping this Samson away from me than by my side spiriting *me* away.” She shook her head, quickly swiping fingers under her right eye and away. “Forgive such a display; I am not usually so unreserved before strangers.”

Cullen moved forward and held his hand out. Surprised, Celene quickly took it, and he squeezed her fingers gently. “Your Highness, your life is in danger. Should we see you alive to the dawn, there will be no words of impropriety, only those which laud you as having proven yourself the rightful ruler of Orlais.”

Dorian melted and Celene smiled softly. “I can see why you are so taken with him, Altus.”

“Me too,” Dorian grinned as Cullen ducked his head and released the Empress’ hand.

The commander then cleared his throat. “Only I don’t understand how we are meant to get you safely to any destination away from here if there is so much question as to whom within the palace walls you can trust.”

“There is a secret exit that Briala found during her...time here with me, before...before.” Celene moved to the privy chamber. There were three seats next to one another against the wall. At the end of it all was a bench that the men had assumed was for people to seat

themselves as they completed cleansing rituals, ablutions, dressing themselves and so forth. But Celene pointed to it and said to Dorian, “This is the entrance. It appears to be a plain bench, yes?”

Both Cullen and Dorian nodded.

“It isn’t,” Celene revealed. “It’s a magically sealed trap door. There is a ladder beyond that leads behind the walls all the way down to the garden.” She looked at Dorian. “Do you recall the trellis either side of the fountain where you were standing most of the evening?”

“Indeed,” Dorian nodded. “The Inquisitor climbed up and down that very trellis several times.”

“She did. Behind those trellises is where this exit leads. You walk four steps and there is another door hidden that must also be opened with magic, and this one leads down into a cavern system that eventually opens into the Deep Roads just west of Orzammar.”

“The Deep Roads!” Cullen repeated. “You want us to take you *there*?”

“There is a contingent of our Orlais-based Grey Wardens that will be there to take me on to Orzammar, where I shall be safe until you do away with Samson, Corypheus and the threat that looms over all Thedas.”

“I don’t understand,” Dorian interrupted with a shake of his head. “How can you ensure Orlais remains strong and united from Orzammar?”

“My Ladies in Waiting represent me to the people of Orlais most of the time,” Celene admitted, “for my life has been at risk from the moment I took the throne as a mere girl. We are adept at running our beautiful country without the people seeing very much of their ruler.”

Cullen and Dorian exchanged looks. “Well,” Dorian finally said as he moved to check his visage in the bathing room wall’s looking glass, “I have to admit this isn’t entirely how I thought today would end, but it can’t hurt, I suppose, to affirm my status as The Good Tevinter in Orlais as well as Ferelden by helping this matter along, mm?”

Celene smiled as Cullen ran a hand through his hair, her gaze turning to him. “Commander, I know this is highly unusual at best, but it was agreed that fewer people traveling with me made it much more likely that I would live. Not telling you was essential to ensuring no one would suspect and therefore watch you. Plus the Inquisitor gave me her two best. Or...so she said.”

Dorian was back by Cullen’s side in a flash, taking Celene’s hand and bowing, then kissing the back of it and she grinned. “*Nous serions ravis de vous accompagner, Impératrice,*” he opined, voice as smooth as velvet, “*puisque vous nous avez d’abord permis notre... badinage... avant que vous ne le demandiez.*”

The Empress laughed out loud. Cullen gave Dorian the stink eye.

“What?” Dorian asked innocently as he gathered the Fade round him there in the privy chamber.

“What did you say to her, exactly?” Cullen asked suspiciously.

“Only that it would be our pleasure to escort her,” Dorian replied imperiously. “Honestly, Cullen, one would think you didn’t trust me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You used too many words for having said just that. And she laughed.”

“*She* is the Empress of Orlais, you ruffian!”

Celene chuckled. “Fear not, Commander. Your paramour’s generosity knows no bounds. A favor for a favor, you see.” She glanced, from her position just outside the privy room, toward the bathing room.

Cullen’s eyes widened. He blushed as Dorian completed the spell and the seat of the bench popped open. Dorian looked at him and batted his eyelashes.

“I hate you so much right now,” Cullen groused.

“No, you don’t. You love me and you know it. Now,” Dorian said matter-of-factly as he lifted the trap door and sent a few magelights into the darkness beyond, and Cullen rolled his eyes. “Do be a very good escort and go first?”

“What are you afraid of?” Cullen asked teasingly. “Spiders?”

“You have no idea how many dark places the Inquisitor takes us into with spiders large enough to eat a man whole,” Dorian stated with a shiver.

“Besides, there’s nowhere for you to dance here if you run into a web.”

“Now it’s my turn to hate you.”

“Fine. Just keep those lights with me,” Cullen said, waggling eyebrows showing he knew darn well he’d won *that* round as he hiked himself over the edge of the bench and onto the wood-and-iron ladder that waited against the wall.

“Yes, *sir*!” Dorian said with a salute.

“Have I mentioned how much I hate you?” became more of an echo as Cullen descended.

“Only once, but feel free to add in how brilliant I am and perhaps I won’t hate you for dredging up webbing.”

Cullen growled and then snorted out a laugh as Dorian helped Celene over the edge of the bench and onto the ladder. She began to descend, and he waited a bit before climbing over himself. Trodding on a royal one’s fingers did not a healthy attachment between head and body keep, in his experience.

Dorian lodged himself against the wall opposite that which the ladder clung to; the quarters were close enough that it was barely wide enough for his body as it was, and for a moment he was struck by the absurdity of it all if Bull had been the one asked to do this. He'd have gotten stuck sure as a sweep in a chimney oft did.

Then, as he was working up to casting the spell that would see the bench lid sealed behind them, he heard a knock at his own door, followed by a pounding. His heart began to race. "Hurry!" he called down. "I think they've figured out something's amiss!"

Dorian rushed to cast the spell and tested the trap door for good measure. It didn't move, which meant he'd done it right. As he looked down to be sure he wasn't about to step on Celene's fingers during their rapid descent, he could hear people tearing the room apart above him.

And he'd just gotten that beautiful burgundy silk scarf with the tiny gold six-point mullets from the heraldry of Janstricht, once an ancient city of Tevinter now fallen to ruin in the Anderfels. Oh, those bastards were going to pay.

For a new scarf, at the very least. It had looked divine against his skin.

Bloody Orlesians.

Oh, the Horror!

Chapter Summary

All is going well as Cullen and Dorian escort Empress Celene to safety.

Until it's not.

Chapter Notes

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

Oh, the Horror!

Everything was going swimmingly, right up until it wasn't. Oh, the trio made it quite easily through dark, web-infested passageways that'd lain unused since Briala's exploration of them some year past. Cullen teased Dorian about cobwebs rather mercilessly until he reminded the commander that he'd catch more flies with honey. Cullen advised that spiders probably caught more flies with their webs than he would with honey and it devolved from there.

Both men were graced with being the first to hear Empress Celene Valmont belly laugh for the first time since she was fifteen. They called it a win and moved on, eager to be done with the ferrying of royalty through deep, dark, dank and unspeakable places, and get back to the earlier activities they'd been enjoying when so rudely interrupted by the unthinkable.

It took nearly three hours by foot through caves that did indeed have not-normal-sized spiders, which Dorian so often complained of whenever the Inquisitor led her companions into caves and tunnels and abandoned ruins and the like, but eventually the ruler of Orlais, the commander of the Inquisition's forces and a runaway Tevinter altus made it to a large, weathered wooden door that was runed to only be able to be unlocked by a particular magical spell that they had to hunt for thirty-five minutes to piece together from various and sundry clues scored into the walls around them. Dorian loved puzzles. Cullen loved helping him solve them. Celene stood by and watched with half a smile on her face conveying her firm belief that she and the Inquisitor had chosen her protectors well.

Dorian cast the spell. The door swung open.

There stood Gaspard, a smile evident beneath his mask.

Celene, Cullen and Dorian froze for a fraction of a second until Gaspard breathed out, "Well, well, well, cousin. We meet at last away from the wagging tongues and prying eyes of those who would make you their hamstrung puppet." His eyes flicked to Cullen and Dorian as the former unsheathed his sword and unseated his shield, and the latter grasped his staff.

“That will not be necessary, gentlemen,” Gaspard de Chalons advised, voice dripping with the sort of fake kindness Dorian was used to and Cullen detested. “For you see, no matter how hard you fight, it will be of no consequence to the outcome. Celene will die, you will be framed and come the dawn, Orlais’ rightful Emperor will sit upon her throne at last.”

Dorian cut his eye at Cullen, who said, “Time to earn our pay, mage?”

Dorian made a face. “You get *paid* for this shite?”

They heard two daggers unsheathe behind them and grinned at the idea of prim and proper Celene royally fucking the usurper with a couple of undoubtedly expensive daggers. “How did you even get away?” Cullen asked to distract the Duke. “You were supposed to be bound over for a death sentence.” He saw Celene scoot unobtrusively up behind them, her shoulders touching his left and Dorian’s right.

“It’s very easy to bribe those my cousin relies on for security if you know where all the skeletons are buried,” Gaspard bragged.

“There will soon be another in this very spot to join them,” Dorian remarked, immediately casting a barrier around himself, Cullen and Celene, who parried forward and slid between Gaspard’s spread-planted legs, bouncing up behind him and riposting his upper spine while Cullen’s sword drove straight into his gut.

“Why do I think,” Cullen asked as he yanked his sword away from the Duke, whose body thumped several times as several different parts of him hit the stone floor in an uneven pattern, “that he wasn’t the one we need worry about?”

“Because you’re right, as you have often been, Ser *Knight-Captain*,” replied an all-too-familiar voice.

Celene whirled around, but a shield slammed against the side of her head mid-movement. She fell unconscious to the floor.

The sounds of melee further behind the voice which had spoken echoed round the cavern and tunnels that lay beyond this entrance to the Deep Roads, but Dorian was paying it little mind, for his eyes were on Cullen, who roared like the Fereldan lion he was, and charged at their newly-appeared and well-known foe.

Samson made to separate Cullen’s head from his person, but Dorian screamed, “No!” and sent a bolt of electricity through the red templar from head to toe, electrocuting him where he stood. This allowed Cullen to attempt the same maneuver on his one-time friend, but Samson’s red lyrium-infused strength and resilience saw him recover much more quickly from the magic hit even as Dorian called a spirit into Gaspard’s body and reanimated him to stab Samson with his longsword.

Samson ducked Cullen’s swipe. Dorian cast a horror spell upon Samson that didn’t affect him at all. He wove the Fade round and round his hands, calling forth nearly every bit of mana he had, and shoved it forward just as Cullen leapt into the air to make a killing blow at the spot

where he calculated Samson would be felled by Dorian's gale force wind slam. Cullen was never wrong with his calculations, and Dorian's spells were never miscast.

But Samson knew Cullen way, way better than Dorian did. And he had been told what'd transpired on the ballroom floor between his former roommate and the disgusting Tevinter mage. So Samson threw a red lyrium dagger right at Dorian's face, at the very moment when Gaspard's corpse shoved its sword through Samson's right thigh.

But Dorian saw the dagger headed for his eye too late to duck.

Cullen, however, saw it in time to intercept. He twisted his body midair like a rogue performing the most unbelievable acrobatic feats, head coming within an inch of the lyrium dagger's blade, and reached out with his nearest hand, the one that held his longsword. The dagger glanced off its pommel and in the blink of an eye had embedded itself in Cullen's jugular as his shoulders headed for the floor beneath it, shoving it even further into his neck.

By the time he hit the ground, bounced once, twice and then came to a complete rest, he'd already lost half his blood volume.

Dorian yelled out a spell he had never before cast but knew would work as surely as he knew his own name and as certainly as he knew how much he loved the man whose life force was pooling beneath him faster than the Tevinter knew could be stopped. He called forth the power of that pure, knightly blood, swirling it round and round him and continuing to yell words in Tevene that no one present could understand.

Celene, just coming to, scrambled to Samson, trying to pull the sword from his leg even as Gaspard's corpse died a second time, and everyone fighting around them stopped and stared in abject horror at the spectacle of six rage demons, six shades and six abominations courtesy of six of Samson's red templars being corrupted by demons, rising from the floor. The entire complement of Inquisition and loyal-to-Celene soldiers laid into every last one of the men Samson had brought with him to kill both Gaspard and Celene.

And Cullen.

Dorian fell to his knees at Cullen's side, knowing full well that every dead body was rising skeletonized as soon as it fell, to take up the fight on the Inquisition's behalf. Hearing very clearly Cassandra's curses and the Inquisitor's cries of "Cullen!" and "Dorian!" as she frantically searched for them.

Samson got down on one knee and sneered at him. "You see, mage, Knight-Commander Meredith was right after all. Any one of you magickers can fall to blood magic if your reasoning is good enough. You just proved it." He nodded down at Cullen, whose very last breaths were shuddering from between his lips. "Good thing 'e's not 'ere to witness such a betrayal, innit?"

Dorian looked up and he wasn't altogether certain what face he was wearing, but whatever it was must've terrified the General of Corypheus' forces, for Samson's eyes widened as Dorian laughed long, low and with so much venom that he could almost smell the putridity of hatred leaking from his every pore.

“You won’t be living long enough to tell him anyway,” Dorian growled.

Just as Samson made to stand again, a lightning bolt appeared in Dorian’s left hand as solidly as a sword and in one swift move he sliced it horizontally across Samson’s body.

At first, Samson sneered at him, thinking nothing had happened. Then, slowly, everything above his waist slid right and everything below it slid left, and with a look of disbelief etched upon his face as a final epitaph, both halves fell to the floor dead.

Dorian laid his right hand upon Cullen’s hair and dipped all five fingertips of his left hand into the blood surrounding him. “Maker, hear me now and take me to his spirit.” Then he lowered his head and kissed Cullen’s temple, murmuring, *“Iudicione tuo redamat et unitas corporis et vinilim fecit benedictione mea voluntasore fiatalus.”*

Just like that, Dorian – and Cullen’s body – were gone.

Cullen stood with his back to him, arms folded over his chest, looking out from the cliff upon which they stood to the place Dorian knew he loved best in the Hinterlands. A private spot frequented by few where the view of three waterfalls could be seen from this very rise. A place fortified on three sides by mountains tall enough to afford complete protection save from a single pass leading into this untouched, pristine land good for farming and grazing alike.

He knew Cullen wanted to spend his post-Inquisition years helping his fellow templars break what Cassandra had so appropriately once called their lyrium leashes. He knew that Cullen wanted to do it in the Hinterlands, and he knew this was the place Cullen dreamed of one day building the lodge that would accommodate as many templars as needed. A place that would give honest, paying, safe work to mages and the common mundane alike.

The number of lives he could help salvage, he’d often remarked, was nearly innumerable.

Except he was dead now, and thus it would never come to pass.

Cullen didn’t turn and look at him. He didn’t speak. Simply watched his waterfalls as Dorian looked round and saw a distant orb of light. He knew at once who and what that orb was, as though some inner knowledge was suddenly being released and so very many things were being made clear. “Maker! This man has done no wrong. I offer an exchange!”

The orb drew closer. Cullen did not move.

A booming voice came from everywhere at once when it spoke thus, “You offer yourself that he should live.”

“I do.”

“You have resorted to means that you cursed your own father for, in order to bring justice to the one who slew this, my own Champion of Righteousness.”

“I have, Maker, and it brings my life to forfeit even so.”

“What makes you think he wishes to return, when he could have a life free of the torment of nightmares and memories, headaches and pain, here by my side as you see with your own eyes, necromancer?”

“I call upon the dead to suffer the pains of evil no longer,” Dorian protested. “I call across the smallest whispers of spirits barely formed to see ended any who seek to stop the Inquisitor fulfilling her duty to bring peace to all Thedas.”

“You think to convince me of a Tevinter’s righteousness? When one of your own who originally broke through the veil and turned me away from my own children, shadows your Inquisition like the Dread Wolf shadows the souls of elvhen departed?”

“I am not my countrymen, past, present or future. And I wish for nothing but this man’s goodness returned to the Inquisition, for he is irreplaceable and you know it as well as I.”

“Which means you have pre-judged your own life to be just the opposite.”

“What am I, but an abomination in every sense of the word save possession? I corrupt, I falter, I tempt others, I give in to temptation myself – even to blood magic – when it is my sworn oath to never bring a drop of blood to bear upon my magic. Even in that I fail.”

“You think to call sacrificing everything you believe, have sworn fealty to and love, failure, Altus?”

“The chantry would say yes.”

“The chantry speaks with their own demons of pride and power at the forefront of their thoughts. It speaks not for me and has not done since its inception. Have you not spoken of this very same subject with the Inquisitor?”

The orb circled round him. It then zoomed across some twenty, thirty feet to circle round Cullen, who still did not move or even acknowledge whether he knew anyone else was present. Then it returned, light so blinding that Dorian had to close his eyes and look away, using his forearm to shield himself from its brightness.

“You made him happy, as he made you.”

Tears sprang to Dorian’s eyes. “I have never laughed so much in all my nearly thirty-one years as I did in the past many months with him by my side.”

“You made his fight against lyrium bearable. Healed him. Helped him. Showed him he was worthy of love.”

“I did what little I could. I would do anything. *Give* anything. He deserves to be worshiped, all respect to yourself, of course.”

Dorian looked up in surprise as the blinding white orb shifted and then coalesced into the most beautiful man he had ever seen. He stood at least one foot taller than Dorian, if not more, and wore very little, showcasing the most perfect musculature, the softest-looking

shoulder-length wavy blond hair and brightest, bluest sparkling eyes and forbidden-to-touch plump lips that could possibly exist on anyone.

“The temptation you fear is not come to pass, for you see me but think only of him.” The human-looking, glowing creature identifying itself as the Maker reached out and cupped Dorian’s face. “You feel me, but you think only of him laying his own hand in this very place just before he leaned in to kiss you not a handful of hours before.”

Tears leaked from Dorian’s eyes, sliding down his cheeks, chest heaving, almost spasming in grief. “Take me, Maker. Please. Allow me to give him this last thing that I can, and I shall do all that you require as payment in return.”

“There is so much that Cullen has left to do in my name, for his own nature to heal,” the Maker stated, looking over at what Dorian realized was actually flesh-and-blood Cullen already restored, simply held in some sort of timeless stasis, as best he could gather. Then the impossibly tall and beautiful creator of all that existed looked back at him and asked, “You would give *anything* for me to restore he whose life has been ended too soon?”

“Anything. My life. More, if possible.”

“Without hesitation, I see.”

“Gladly. With all my heart.” Dorian knelt before him. “He means everything to me. To so many people he hasn’t even met yet.”

“Indeed, you see his path clearly, Altus. And what of yours?”

Dorian looked up and met the Maker’s eyes. “That depends entirely on you.” And then he looked down, praying with everything that he was. Closing his eyes. Remembering that moment, that defining, beautiful, perfect moment with his back against Cullen’s front, his head upon Cullen’s shoulder, Cullen’s eyes meeting his and closing the gap to kiss him for the first time at the end of their Dark Waltz. The Dark Waltz, at the conclusion of which the dancer’s partner dies despite his love having spent the entire dance trying to convince him to stay.

How ironic.

How appropriate.

A bright flash of light, a crack of thunder inside his skull, and Dorian knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Cullen is literally left at the edge of a cliff for this, a cliffhanger. Stay tuned!

Oh, the Sadness!

Chapter Summary

Cullen senses something isn't quite right. Eventually, he finds out what it is.

Oh, the Sadness!

Cullen didn't really get much about what happened other than that he "almost died" and then miraculously "came back." He wasn't questioning it too much in and of itself as an event, for many warriors such as he fell on battlefields and lived to tell their tales. A great many of the soldiers under his own command could say it of themselves and comrades both.

But something wasn't *quite* right, and though he'd not yet been able to put his finger on it, he knew it had something to do with his beloved mage. Dorian was doting and loving beyond measure, to be sure, rarely leaving Cullen's side day and night, insisting upon taking care of him, giving him everything he possibly could from massages for his aches to an ear for his every complaint; from advice and assistance with stacks upon stacks of paperwork to a quiet strength that gutted Cullen from the sheer sincerity and *devotion* emanating from those beautiful grey eyes. Ensuring he ate right, that he slept enough, that he saw to his own comfort more and worried about others' perceptions of him less.

Dorian made love to him in ways Cullen had never dreamed of, and yet for every loving touch, for every emotionally charged word of adoration that passed his perfect lips to lodge in Cullen's heart, he could not shake that everything was not as it should be. For one thing, the very central aspect of their friendship, that which had blossomed slowly and surely toward where they now found themselves was simply...gone.

The laughter. The dancing. The gliding. Even the kissing and touching lacked...*something*.

Once he caught the Inquisitor looking at Dorian with what could only be described as aching sadness and yet just as quickly she averted her eyes when she noticed the commander watching.

What was it? If only he could name it. Whenever he asked of his lover, "Are you well?" or "Do you feel all right?" or some like, the answer was invariably, "I will never be happier, *amatus*, than wherever I can be that you are whole and hale." Cullen could only assume that his injuries had been more severe than any would say, and that Dorian might've thought he would lose him before they had truly begun on this new path together.

But...somehow that theory didn't quite fit all the facts at hand.

For one thing, Dorian never went anywhere with the Inquisitor anymore, in spite of the fact that he had always been the first person she picked no matter where they were going, even if

it was someplace Dorian detested like Emprise du Lion or the Hissing Wastes. For another, Cullen never saw Dorian practicing his melee skills with his staff any longer. Well, that wasn't true. He still practiced, but it was...odd. Different. For yet another, he never lit fires with a flick of his fingers, or used tiny little wisps or magelights to brighten darkened spaces.

There were always reasons, whenever Cullen would inquire. "Oh, you know our beloved Inquisitor. She's more interested in puzzling out the runes we found in those ruins, so I'm stuck here at Skyhold with my nose buried in books." Or "She is much more in need of my brilliance on this project I'm doing with Dagna than she is of my fireballs in some forsaken desert, *amatus*." Or when asked about using flint and steel to light a fire, receiving the strange response, "Well, you know what they say: when in Ferelden."

And then, without warning, Cullen found out why his senses were always on high alert around the man he loved. Why, as perfect as he was in every way, something felt so wrong that Cullen was rapidly coming to his wits' end about it.

It all happened during a session round the war table. The Inquisitor was headed off for an untold period of time to meet with a Professor Kenric at ancient Tevinter ruins in the Frostback Basin, and Cullen logically and rightfully suggested that Dorian should be the one to go along because not only would he have the best information on their history, but also a much better chance of helping them through a place crawling with Venatori. Not that he wanted to see the man he adored gone for any length of time, but he had to put the Inquisitor's and Inquisition's best interests before his own.

The Inquisitor rejected the idea. Leliana asked why. The Inquisitor simply said no again. Josephine asked what was going on. When no response was forthcoming she turned to look at Cullen, standing as he always did, directly to her right.

"Is Dorian ill?" Josie questioned, her brow furrowed with genuine concern.

"Not that I am aware," Cullen replied. "I only broke fast with him some hour past, just before this meeting began." The commander narrowed his eyes and returned his gaze to the Inquisitor. "Why don't you ever take Dorian with you anymore?"

"Yes, a good question," Leliana nodded. "I have noticed that ever since our commander's near-fatal run-in with Samson, Dorian has not left the keep once."

"It is not something for me to discuss," the Inquisitor stated flatly, her face a mask of stone as she met Cullen's eyes.

"I know you're his best friend," Cullen countered, "but I also know something is...off. Very much so. *You* know what it is." She said nothing. "Inquisitor, *please*," he finally begged.

She sighed. "Leliana and Josephine, out of the War Room, please."

Leliana shook her head. "No. If this could affect the Inquisition's efficacy —"

"It hasn't yet," the Inquisitor stated. "Please. I would speak with Cullen alone."

Cullen swallowed hard as, with twin looks of disapproval levelled at the Inquisitor on their way out, the Ambassador and the Spymaster exited, closing the door behind them. The woman with a permanently glowing green hand walked over to the windows, leaned against one of the panes with it flattened and bowed her head forward next to it to touch the chilled glass.

“Inquisitor, you’re frightening me. What’s wrong with Dorian that nobody seems to want to confess to me, even him?”

Sad eyes met his. “You have noticed something is...off. Have you deduced precisely what that is?”

His mind sifted through everything he’d been feeling. Everything he’d been noticing. All the thoughts that’d been banging round in his skull since their return from the Winter Palace.

She looked away. “What have you not seen him do since the two of you saved Celene’s life in the face of Gaspard’s treachery?”

“Go out with you,” he replied quickly.

“And why do you think that is?” she whispered. “What role has Dorian always played among the Inner Circle since appearing at Haven’s front gate?”

“Researcher. Intellectual. Mage. He –” That was when not a copper, but an entire sovereign dropped. “Mage,” he breathed, realizing *that* was what had been off. He had not felt or tasted lyrium, nor smelled the ozone that always buzzed round mages, that he’d gotten well used to during his time as a templar and then as Dorian’s close friend. He’d not seen Dorian use magic for any reason, not once, from lighting fires and providing magelights to the spells he would always cast before as part of his exercise routine. He’d only been using the staff against dummies, as one might a quarterstaff, but no spells of fire or ice had accompanied them. “His magic,” he choked out, realizing Dorian’s hands had oft been cold but rather than complaining and warming them with his own internal magical heat spells, he’d taken to wearing gloves if they sat together in Cullen’s cold office reading or playing chess.

The Inquisitor’s eyes moved to catch hold of Cullen’s gaze, only this time they were full of tears.

“Why isn’t he using his magic?” She shook her head. He moved forward and placed a hand on her tiny shoulder. “Inquisitor, *why*?”

“He made a deal with the Maker,” she revealed. “I’m the only one who knows.” She hitched out a sob as Cullen frowned and backed a few steps away.

“What are you talking about?”

“You were killed, Cullen.” He frowned. “You were...*dead*. On the ground. You took a shard of red lyrium in your neck. A shard Samson meant for Dorian.”

Cullen remembered the shard, throwing himself in front of it as it flew from Samson's hand. His mouth dropped open in disbelief. He was...*dead*?

“He took you to the Maker’s side, as perhaps only a necromancer could.” A small, anguished smile graced her features as Cullen felt his insides grow impossibly cold. “He bargained with the Maker for your life. He would have...given anything. Everything. He actually offered the Maker *his* life in exchange.”

“Are we...dead? One of us? *Both* of us?”

“No, you’re both alive,” she confirmed, and Cullen breathed a sigh of relief that neither was the walking dead, at least. “The price the Maker exacted was the thing that made Dorian too prideful. For being willing to let go of that which fostered the temptation to which he had so frequently in life succumbed, he was granted the only boon that mattered.”

The other sovereign dropped. Cullen’s hand smacked palm-first against his mouth as he backed away, eyes filling with tears. “He traded his...his *magic* for..?”

She nodded, tears spilling onto her cheeks. “For your life.”

The world spun suddenly around him. Dorian...without...without what *defined* him? Without what made him *him*? Without his...no. Oh, no.

“Maker, *no*,” Cullen wept openly as he caught himself against the war table, legs barely able to keep him upright. “Why? How could he give up the most important thing in the world to him? His very...his *everything*?” he asked, voice cracking and pleading as if he expected the Inquisitor could somehow change this, make it right, make it not be true, make sense of it in a moment when Cullen could make sense of *nothing*.

“Oh, Cullen,” she half-sobbed, moving forward and wrapping her arms around him. “Because *you* are the most important thing in the world to him. *You* are his everything.” She leaned back and met Cullen’s tearful eyes. “He would have *died* if it meant the Maker restored you. To his way of thinking, losing his magic was a much lesser price than he offered, and it meant he still got to be here with you. Still got to...love you.”

“Nonono, oh, Maker...I...” Cullen couldn’t think, couldn’t *breathe*. “I have to find him. I have to...oh, *Dorian*...”

Unable to contain himself, Cullen very nearly ripped the heavy war room door off its hinges as he tore past Josie and Leliana, who stood there with gaping mouths – having eavesdropped, of course – as he sprinted down the long hallway, a sob being torn from his chest as he made it to Josie’s office and kept going.

“What is he going to do?” Josephine asked.

“I don’t know,” the Inquisitor replied, wiping the tear tracks from her face. “Andraste help us all.”

Oh, the Love!

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of learning the truth, Cullen races to find Dorian. Later, the two receive an unexpected visit.

Oh, the Love!

Cullen was *devastated*.

He ran, boots pounding stone.

Yet also simultaneously he completely comprehended why Dorian had done it.

He checked the library. Everyone scattered in his wake; he imagined he appeared mad to them all.

Dorian gave up...it was...he *literally* loved Cullen more than his own magic, which was... like another limb. Who would do that for another? Who would chop off such an integral...he couldn't...

Full tilt he moved on to the Herald's Rest. Not there. Nobody had seen him.

Not one person in his life had ever been that willing to die for him. Had *ever* been so selfless as to sacrifice all that they were, that made them so uniquely themselves, allowing it to be stripped away just so Cullen himself could live.

He checked Dorian's own room. No sign the man had been there recently.

Dorian talked to the *Maker*? *Bargained* with the actual *Maker*? Was that possible? The Inquisitor seemed to believe it but...Dorian...*bargained* with the bloody *Maker* for *Cullen*.

He burst into his office, completely out of breath, chest heaving and...skidded to a halt in a small puff of dust from his boots sliding against the dirty floor. Cullen swallowed hard as he took in his Dorian, his beloved *mundane* and *magicless* Dorian, seated behind Cullen's own desk crying silent tears. Cullen moved slowly to him. Dorian's face as he looked up and met his lover's eyes told Cullen that he realized the truth had been discovered.

Without a word, for what could he *possibly* say, Cullen fell to his knees before his beautiful, perfect love, grasping his hands, laying his head in his lap. Dorian bowed over him and together they wept.

Without question Cullen knew he would have done the same were the roles reversed. Dorian didn't need to explain, as he understood that *Cullen* knew why. That didn't make it any less gutting.

"Don't be sad, *amatus*," Dorian admonished softly, fingers carding through Cullen's longer, curlier hair. "I would rather live without my magic than live without you." Cullen raised his tear-stained face, looking upon the man with wonder, a hollow ache that he feared would never be filled threatening to consume him over the finality of it all, the acceptance Dorian had of the decision he'd made. "If you ask me to relive that moment one thousand times one hundred thousand times, I will ask the Maker for the same boon and offer him the same payment in return, more if it ever were to become necessary."

"Dorian," Cullen breathed. "The words 'I love you' seem so inadequate to your sacrifice." He kissed Dorian's hands. Every finger. Every knuckle. Every immaculate fingernail.

"Inadequate is never a word I would use to describe your love for me," Dorian countered with a genuine smile. "Come. Let us to bed, my love. Emotions are ever so exhausting."

The men climbed the ladder, disrobed, and fell into bed together, both of them depleted and simply unable to speak or think or process anything more just then.

While they slept there came to them a woman dressed all in flowing fabrics of white and gold. A woman who, if she were to be seen, looked for all the world like the statues of Andraste that adorned every chantry across Thedas. An apparition in whole transparent, the figure held her hands over the sleeping couple wound so tightly together that they were almost a single round ball of flesh under the blankets.

A purplish glow moved from her hands down to the sleeping forms. It melted through the blankets and for the fraction of a second, both men bathed in its ethereal color. Were anyone to have been looking up at the windows of the commander's office, they would have seen the strange, unnatural shade come and go so quickly they might have brushed it off as simply seeing things that weren't there.

Then the beautiful non-corporeal woman smiled and were any nearby, they might have been among the few to overhear these words she spake unto them. "For you, song-weaver, once more I will try. To My children venture, carrying wisdom; if they but listen, I shall return." Then abruptly, she disappeared.

The men stirred but did not wake.

Oh, the Magic!

Chapter Summary

Their story concludes with a promise, a giving of thanks, with magic and above all, with love.

Oh, the Magic!

The next morning, Cullen and Dorian slept very late. When they finally awoke, Cullen noted mumbly-like that the weather appeared to be turning colder. Without even thinking about it, Dorian flicked his hand sleepily and a harmless circle of fire appeared above the bed, instantly warming them. Neither man reacted.

Until they did.

They sat bolt upright in unison, and Cullen egged a wide-eyed Dorian on to test himself – suddenly he could do it. Do it *all*. Dead flowers came back to life. Lightning zapped in an arc from his hand to Cullen's, eliciting a delighted yelp from the warrior's lips. Dorian's hand next held a ball of purple fire, then flicked at an elfroot potion on a nearby crate and froze it completely.

Joy!

Pure, indescribable *ecstasy*.

The more Dorian tried to do, the more they were convinced all magic was returned to him and they laughed and yelled and whooped and hollered, running in their sleep pants and sleep shirts, bare feet slapping upon the battlements, crying out for the Inquisitor as they sprinted across the wall and down the steps and through the courtyard to startled stares and shocked visages, up the huge staircase to the keep proper, through the main hall where a few nobles and Varric had already gathered for early fast-breaking, all the way to the Inquisitor's room, taking the stairs outside her sanctuary two and three at a time, managing to wake her with pounding fists upon the door only to find Leliana sharing her bed.

The women screamed happily at the news, cheered as Dorian cast spell after spell against the unfortunate objects in the huge bedroom, joined in the giddy and almost insane laughter when Dorian raised a dead spider back to life and they watched it skitter pinkly along her desk even as he froze the halla statue on the mantle, set fire to a book atop the wardrobe, spun dizzily rainbow-colored glittering ice crystals all around them in a maelstrom of snow and gently-falling ice.

As Leliana full-on hugged Dorian, Cullen took the Inquisitor aside. He wanted to do something he had been planning before, and whispered it to her, and she agreed.

Without any sort of explanation save “it’s a surprise!” Dorian found himself dragged back to his room and prepared his person and a bag for travel as Cullen directed. The next thing he knew, he and his *amatus* were out in the middle of Ferelden nowhere enjoying all of Dorian’s magic, letting spells fly, Cullen even running through his walls of flames like a giddy schoolboy playing in a waterfall – with a carefully cast barrier surrounding him, of course – before getting back on the two horses they had ridden to get there.

And then some day or so after the magic had returned, after a sleep at a roadside inn, noisy lovemaking that nearly got them thrown out by the innkeeper’s wife and a hearty breakfast to begin a sunny, crisp day, a sign appeared next to the road upon which they traveled and Dorian halted his horse in shock. For the sign proclaimed they were entering South Reach and the mage knew as well as anyone in the Inquisition why that arling was important to his lover.

“Why are we here?” Dorian asked, genuinely curious.

Cullen dismounted the massive Ferelden Forder he’d been riding. There was no one nearby to witness their next moments, and Cullen was happy to have this man alone to himself for the next little while before he...as explained to Dorian, took him to meet his family, “because any man who will give up half of what he is and always has been, is keeper material.”

Dorian wept as the men clung to each other there on the dirt road leading toward the vast farmlands where his siblings now dwelled and then Cullen pulled something from his saddlebags. As if to punctuate his words and deeds, he handed Dorian a necklace that bore half of a heart. Engraved on it was the word *Cullen*. “But why only half?” Dorian asked as the man he had loved enough to give it all for, clasped it round his neck. “And why are you giving me one bearing your name?”

“Because,” Cullen explained as he pulled out the twin of it, upon which was engraved *Dorian*. “If you place this round my neck as I have for you,” he said softly, nervously handing the necklace to Dorian, “then you are declaring your willingness to become my betrothed and your willingness to accept *me* as *your* betrothed.”

“A p-p...proposal?” Dorian stammered out, eyes huge and wavering, lower lip fighting not to tremble.

Cullen dropped to his knees before the most amazing person he had ever known. “Yes. Yes, my love. I ask for your hand. I ask for you to accept mine. Forever, Dorian.”

With only the sound of a full body laugh that showcased more happiness than Dorian had ever thought he could feel, he threw himself at his *amatus*, the two of them crashing to the ground, tumbling round and round on the dirt road and off into the grasses at its side as their horses sidestepped their tomfoolery. They kiss, kiss, kissed, one and two and three and laughter and the bumping of noses and the remembrance of jokes and hearts soaring and teasing over chess boards and gliding across a ballroom floor and making love for the first time and saving the life of an empress and sacrifice and death and life and restoration of all that was good and right; it all culminated here and now into a “Yes!” cried out by Dorian because of course he accepted the declared permanence of happiness, and he placed the other chain round his fiancé’s neck.

Cullen helped them both to their feet by way of a nearby fence post and took Dorian's hands and squeezed them and held them, gazing into his eyes, those grey, stormy, glittering eyes full of more emotion, more love, than he thought the whole of Thedas could contain. "My sister will be so relieved I won't grow old alone. You're the answer to every prayer I have ever made, Dorian Pavus, and not one minute of any day shall henceforth pass that I have not reinforced that in some way to you."

Dorian smiled and replied, as they embraced again, "Oh, the magic of us, *amatus*."

"I wish I had more words, *better* words, for you, my heart," Cullen breathed as he pressed their lips together.

Dorian shook his head. "I don't want just words, Cullen. I want *you*."

"Then you have me. For always."

The mage with powers returned then looked heavenward as Cullen closed his eyes and buried his face in his neck with a loving sigh. Dorian swallowed over the lump in his throat, remembering the tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed figure the Maker had become before him and mouthed, *Thank you*.

Dorian would swear ever after that there in the middle of a bright, sunny day he saw a shooting star in response.

And the laughter never left them again.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!