

Seeking Veritas

a tale of Anarill

Marie Brown

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Chapter 1: An Unpleasant Evening

"You should have attended the Purification with me," Leola said, fluttering her lashes coyly as Dorian lead her from the dance floor.

"I believe your father and brothers provided suitable chaperones," Dorian responded, not looking at his companion.

"Yes, of course, but it would have been better if you had attended as well."

"We discussed this before, many times," Dorian said, keeping his tone polite and noncommittal. "You know I had too much to do at work to leave for any length of time. I trust you enjoyed yourself?"

"Oh, yes!" Leola sighed dreamily. "It was wonderful. I've never had the opportunity to actually watch as someone's soul was cleansed and purified of sin. I could actually see the sin as it left, thick oily clouds of it."

"That wasn't sin, it was smoke," Dorian snapped, disgust getting the better of discretion. He shook Leola's hand off his arm and stepped away from her. "From a man burning alive."

"Of course it was sin! I know he was burning, of course, it is the only way to purify such vile and disgusting sin and make a soul fit to enter into Veritas. What is wrong with you, dear? You sound as if you'd rather that poor man went straight to Perdition, rather than his reward."

"I can't help but think of how he felt, that's all," Dorian said, running his hand through his hair as his guts roiled. "Standing there in front of cheering folk, tied hand and foot to a stake, as the flames crept closer and began to burn, with all the gathered crowd just waiting for his screams to begin. . . The Purifications sicken me."

"You shock me, sir!" Leola's eyes widened, and she stepped back a pace. People in the crowd around them began paying closer attention to the altercation in their midst.

"Have you no compassion? That was a man, I'm telling you, of flesh, and bone, and intellect. Would you wish to feel the flames eating at *your* body?"

Leola sniffed, tossing her hair. "If I were to become a vile pervert, of *course* I would want to be Purified. It is, after all, the only way to enter into Veritas. What is wrong with you, Dorian?"

Dorian glanced at their avid audience and sighed. Some battles just didn't warrant the cost of fighting. "Nothing is wrong, my dear," he said, feeling the lie like molten lead eating his tongue. "I am just a touch out of sorts this evening. Please excuse me. I feel the need for a walk in the clear night air."

Dorian bowed to his lady and exited the ballroom, through a trail of scandalized whispers, giggles, and raised eyebrows.

Out in the mild warmth of nighttime, Dorian loosened his slender bow tie and starched collar. He took a deep breath with relief, paused for a very brief moment with his eyes closed, considering his destination, then moved purposefully through the night. Not much choice, really, as Leola would likely seek him out in his home to continue lambasting him with her religious fervor. That meant finding a place Leola would never dream of entering, a place filled with sin, depravity, and men: the Bachelor's Lounge.

As always, the Lounge held a crowd of young men, and some not so young, reclining at ease in padded wingback chairs or hunched over gaming tables. A cloud of hazia smoke billowed gently as Dorian entered. He looked around the familiar old room and smiled. He hadn't been here in a while, since he was technically not a bachelor anymore, and it felt good to be back.

"Dorian!"

The sound of that voice broadened his nostalgic smile into a grin. He moved towards the source of the shout, his closest friend and Leola's brother, Osva. He hadn't attended the Purification either, on the same grounds as Dorian.

"What are you doing here, Dorian? I thought you were escorting Leola to the Martinson's ball?"

"I was," Dorian replied, grin dimming a bit. "Your sister became upset with me, because I have no liking of the Purifications."

Osva shuddered, but made a properly pious response. "The Purifications are necessary to save the souls of those lost to sin."

"So they are," Frederik, a mutual friend, chimed in from across the card table. "But that's neither here nor there. Sit down, Dorian, and we'll deal you in."

So Dorian sat and enjoyed the company of his old friends as he hadn't in what seemed a very long time, although the pleasure didn't last more than a few moments before the unthinkable happened.

A ripple of shock spread through the room from the doorway before Dorian had even gotten his first ale from the barkeep. He felt a sharp stab of dread and looked up, just in time to see Leola sweeping into the room, head held high and nostrils flaring with exertion. Dorian couldn't help making an irrelevant, and unflattering, comparison between Leola and Osval. Both shared a distinct family resemblance, but the nose that looked perfectly at home on a man's face looked more horselike when applied to a woman. He brushed off the inappropriate thought and rose to greet his lady.

"Hello, Leola, what brings you here?"

"You know perfectly well what brings me here," she snapped, sailing gracefully across the crowded room towards him. "What kind of beau abandons a lady at a ball?"

"Clearly an unsatisfactory one," Frederik laughed, rising as the lady approached. Osval rose as well, taking his sister by the arm and attempting to guide her back out of the bar. She shook him off.

"Indeed," Leola glared. "And to find you here, in this smoke pit, rather than out walking as you claimed, merely increases the injury done to me. You, sir, are on dangerous ground for one who claims to love me."

"I never said that."

The words popped out before he could stop them and he groaned, clapping a hand to his forehead. "Leola, forgive me, I—"

"Oh!" Leola reeled as if smacked. "Well!" Her cheeks paled, then flushed, then paled again, and she drew herself up to her full height. "If that's the way you feel, then, you may take your poor manners and your dislike of our religion and do with them as you will. I have no more time to waste on the likes of you."

Head held high, Leola exited the Bachelor's Lounge, leaving a wake of stunned silence behind her. Osval glanced at his sister, then his friends, then his sister again. He sighed, then followed after Leola.

"Uh. . . Now what?" Keltas, another friend from childhood, spoke up, breaking the silence to voice the words echoing through everyone's minds.

"Now," Dorian drew an unsteady breath, "I am going to sit back down and drink my ale when it gets here. Then I think I may go home for the evening."

"Sounds like a good enough plan," Keltas said, reaching for his own ale.

Dorian settled back into his chair, moving slowly. He wondered at his own reaction. Nothing. He felt absolutely nothing he should feel, only a ringing sense of relief. The breakup may as well have happened to someone else.

He sipped at his ale when it arrived, brooding. What made him feel so wrong inside? The truth nibbled at the edges of his consciousness, but he ignored it. He ignored his friends, as well, nursing his ale and allowing the card game to flow around him, steadily sorting through his thoughts and feelings. All pointed towards the secret within him, the thing he didn't want to think about.

Dorian set his half-finished ale down and slipped quietly away from the table while three of his friends argued over the point value of a certain card and its conditional modifiers. He ignored the looks from other patrons of the club, whether concerned, condescending, or amused. In fact, he ignored everything, shutting the world out of his consciousness as completely as he could manage, moving steadily through the gaslit streets to the sanctuary of his home.

Once inside, he locked the door securely behind him and ran a hand through his hair, disordering it. Why not? He felt disordered on the inside, after all, why not look the part?

The sideboard held a bottle of fine spirits, an engagement gift from Osval. He snorted. So much for the future. Well, perhaps the strong liquor would ease his discomfort better than a simple beer.

Perhaps it eased him too much. Dorian rarely drank strong spirits. The effect of the first glass,

which went down smooth as honey, had him feeling all sorts of warm and tingly, that perhaps his secret wasn't so bad, and that he really wanted more of the lovely spirits. The drink made him feel good, physically at least, so he went ahead and had more, then even more after that. Part of him remained conscious of his thoughts, but most of him focused on his body, and how unusually good he felt. Things never done in polite Bandoran society suddenly seemed a good idea, such as taking off some of his restrictive tight clothing and thinking about his shameful secret as just a part of himself, nothing to be ashamed of, something to be enjoyed instead. Off came more clothes.

I'm drunk, he thought at one point. *Drink is a sin. Sin is fun!*

So he went ahead and sinned some more, a sin even bigger than mere drink, and fell asleep on the couch with a smile on his face, dreaming of his secret. His beautiful, wonderful secret.

A sudden urgency roused Dorian in the dark of night and sent him stumbling for the flushpot. His body wanted to be rid of all the spirits he'd drunk, and held him retching miserably over the flushpot for entirely too long. When the heaves ended, leaving him empty of everything inside, Dorian realized he was cold and sent his body staggering for his warm bed instead of the couch, then dropped into unconsciousness once more.

The second time he went scrambling for the flushpot wasn't nearly as pleasant as the first, and far more undignified than merely throwing up.

Why did I do this to myself?

His body didn't answer, just tried to turn itself inside out. He groaned, thinking about sin and the wages thereof. Perhaps the Churchmen were right.

By the time Dorian reached his bed again, he was shaking and more than half convinced he should renew his faith. If this was the aftermath of sin, he never wanted to sin again!

Faith. Simple, direct, easy to understand but hard to live. Perhaps if he made a greater effort to follow the teachings of the Church, his life would simplify a bit. The teachings of the Church were meant to guide people through life, and he felt in sore need of some guidance now.

But would the Church embrace a sinner such as himself?

Dorian passed out again.

Chapter 2: To Walk the Path

The next time he woke, he heard someone knocking on the door to his small townhouse, followed by the sounds of a key in the lock and the distinctive squeal of the lower hinge. No matter how many times he oiled the thing, it still squealed. Dorian groaned and fumbled his way into his dressing gown. Only one person other than himself had a key to his house.

"Dorian? Are you here?"

Sure enough, Osval's voice sounded from the parlor. Dorian rubbed his forehead, then called out to his friend. "In here. I'll be out in a moment."

"There is a lady present," Osval called back. "Be sure you are decent."

Dorian groaned again, rubbing his head. Leola. Drat. Instead of going straight into the parlor, he detoured into the bathing room and splashed cold water over his face, frowning at his reflection in the mirror. Puffy eyes and thoroughly mussed hair. He ran a brush through his hair, then shrugged and tightened his dressing gown. Not much he could do about the way he looked. Such was the price one paid for drinking to the point of unconsciousness.

He slid his feet into some soft houseshoes and made his way into the parlor, feeling decidedly feeble.

"So, you are alive!" Osval greeted him with a grin, then cocked his head to the side. "Or are you? You scarcely look like you had a restful night, my friend."

Dorian resisted the urge to glare resentfully at his best friend and Leola, who regarded him down that long nose of hers with suspicion. "Greetings, Osval, Miss Leola. No, I did not pass a restful night, but that is none of your concern. What brings you two here this morning?"

"My sister wished to speak to you, and I wanted to find out why you were not at our workplace this morning. From the looks of you, I'd say you still belong in bed. What gives?"

"I have been contemplating my life," Dorian said, neatly sidestepping the truth of his deep and shameful sin.

"Perhaps it is high time you did so, sir," Leola sniffed. "Although it is best to contemplate from a position of pure sobriety."

"My lady, I must apologize," Dorian said, ignoring the small, panicky voice inside, the one that wanted him to chase Leola right out of his house and admonish her to never come back. "I behaved horribly last night, and I humbly crave your forgiveness."

Leola blinked in surprise, then smiled a satisfied little smile. Osva stepped back a bit, to watch the interaction from a better angle.

"Forgiveness for such insulting behavior is not so easily given," Leola said, giving him a coy look. "To achieve forgiveness, one must offer some form of meaningful action."

"I know," Dorian admitted, misery in his voice. He didn't want to do this. Part of him felt he'd come to the completely wrong decision in the dark of night. That part wanted to commit more sin, this time without the alcohol. He snatched his eyes back under control when they turned to Osva. "I have realized the error of my ways. I intend to return to the fold of the Church, and renew my faith, for it has slipped into a dark place of late."

"Oh!" Leola drew herself upright, a delighted smile breaking free of her decorous control. "Good sir, do you mean to say you will walk the Path of Redemption?"

Osva's breath caught in a sound not quite a gasp. Dorian glanced at his friend and saw utter shock on the young man's face.

"I have not decided yet," he hedged. "That is a pretty extreme step, and yet. . ." His voice trailed off, and he shrugged. "I have committed grave sins in my time, and perhaps such is the only true way to expiate them from my soul."

"You're not going," Osva said sharply.

"Brother, how could you? Dear Dorian must redeem himself in the eyes of God and Man if he ever hopes to reach Veritas." Leola smiled at Dorian now. "I do wish I could walk the Path someday, and yet I have never strayed from the teachings of the Church. I just think it must be wondrous, to journey so far from the ordinary world that a supplicant reaches the very edges of Veritas itself! Ah, such glory awaits the humble sinner who reaches the goal. . ."

Dorian swallowed hard. He had a somewhat less idealistic view of the Path, which everyone knew led through the fringes of Perdition long before it brushed up against Veritas, but he almost felt it was the only way to expiate the sin he'd done last night. His eyes turned to Osva again, and this time he let them.

"What do you mean, I'm not going? I've only said I might, not that I will. I feel. . . dirty inside. Unclean. Like I need to find a new meaning in life. What better way to do so than through religion?"

"I can think of plenty other ways to add meaning to life that don't involve a journey to the deadliest place in the world." Osva shook his head. "Honestly, Dori, I can't believe you're even considering such a thing. Apologize to my sister, go to Church more regularly if you must, and just keep your personal opinions of the Purifications to yourself. There's no need to go risking your life because you shot off your mouth to the wrong person."

Leola turned on her brother angrily. "I can't believe what I'm hearing, Osva! Did you seriously just advise your good friend to risk the loss of his immortal soul? Because that is what will happen, you know, if he dies without expiating the sin from his soul. He will be lost, damned straight to Perdition with no hope of redemption."

Dorian looked at the two again, his best friend and his former betrothed, and sighed. One wanted him to stay safe and sinful, the other would be utterly thrilled to hear that he'd died on the Path. Because, of course, death on the Path meant you were forgiven, and God wanted to bring you into Veritas immediately. He'd probably never share Leola's religious obsession, but perhaps she offered some redemption as well, of a sort.

"Maybe I just don't want to lose a friend I've known for so long," Osva tried to shrug off the angry words casually, but his tension showed clearly in his eyes, in the set of his shoulders.

"Both of you have valid arguments," Dorian broke in. "But honestly, the choice is mine to make. Only I know the full extent of the sin which has consumed me, and which I wish to rid

myself of."

"Well spoken, dear Dorian," Leola smiled. "Perhaps upon your return we may discuss reinstating certain future plans."

"Perhaps," Dorian smiled, although his heart sank. But what else could he do? Leola offered his best chance at a normal life, horse face and all. "I shall look forward to that discussion. But for now, I feel the need to begin the process of cleaning myself up, so I believe you two should be on your way."

"Dorian," Osva shook his head. "Please tell me you didn't just make up your mind to undertake this madness."

"And what if I did?"

"I," Osva's voice faltered, then he swallowed hard. "I will go with you."

"Now, Osva, there's no need for that," Dorian began, a hint of panic in his voice. Damn it straight to Perdition, he couldn't expiate the worst sin of all with Osva there!

"You don't know that," Osva responded sharply. "I have my own experiences with sin to worry about."

"What could you have possibly done that is bad enough to walk the Path of Redemption?"

"That is none of your concern."

Leola looked at the two men in a state akin to rapture. "To think, I will know *two* people who have seen Veritas itself!"

"Leola, you're being silly. I think you need to go home. Dorian and I have things to discuss."

Leola pouted a bit at that, but she also nodded. "Very well, I shall leave you two to your plans. I will go to the Church and pray for your safety."

"You're not talking me out of this," Dorian said, barely noticing as Leola sailed out of the parlor in a rustle of skirts. He focused so completely on Osva it hurt his head. Somehow, in the last several minutes of debate, he'd become utterly convinced that the Path offered his only chance for salvation.

"Why not, old friend?" Osva's eyes held sick worry. "You have to admit, your plan sounds crazy."

"I think not." Dorian crossed his arms over his middle, which churned uncomfortably in response to the weird stresses of the morning, added to the alcoholic sickness of the night. "I have a perfectly valid reason to seek redemption. You, on the other hand, do not. You are the one that seems crazy here, not I."

"Come on, Dori, this is me you're talking to here. Remember me? Osva, the friend you've been closest to for years on end? Quit sounding like a bit of booze turned you into a religious fanatic."

"Osva, believe me, I am fully aware of who you are." Dorian sighed. His head hurt. "I think I have to do this, though. *Alone*."

"Why?"

Just the one word, but everything about the way it was spoken reinforced Dorian's decision. "Never mind the why, my friend. Just accept that I've decided to free myself of sin and mend my fences with your sister, okay? And the best way to do that is the time-honored method of cleansing oneself on the Path. It's scary, I'll grant you that, but I feel it's something I must do."

"And what if you don't come back?"

"Then you and Leola can rest easy, knowing I found my way to Veritas."

Never mind that he shivered with fear at the thought of death on the Path.

"Look," Osva said desperately, "you can't even be sure the priests will let you make the attempt! I know you. You're no irredeemable sinner."

"No fear there," Dorian said, with an ironic smile. "Trust me. My sin is deep and dark enough the Guardians will pass me through in a heartbeat."

"I find that difficult to believe." Osva sighed, sagging a bit. He gave Dorian a deeply troubled look. "Very well. If you truly believe you are such a corrupt, sin-filled soul that you must risk death on the Path, then so be it. But I'm still going with you, and you can't stop me. If need be, I'll follow along behind you."

"Don't be stupid," Dorian sighed.

"There's a lot of stupidity in here this morning. Why shouldn't I have some for myself?"

"Osval, stop being an ass!"

Osval nodded approval. "Good word choice, for an ass is quite the stubborn little animal, and so am I. You are not going to face this ordeal alone."

"Why are you so determined to do this? It's stupid for someone who hasn't had a crisis of faith!"

Osval gave him a steady look. "You don't know what goes on inside me. If I choose now to expiate old sins of my own, that is my concern, not yours. And I have made that choice. If you walk the Path of Redemption, I will be there at your side."

Dorian muttered something that probably counted as a major sin. "Fine. Do as you will. But do not expect me to like it."

He turned his back on his friend and returned to his bedroom, rudeness being about the only thing he could control in this unforeseen situation.

He shut the door behind him, careful not to give in to the childish urge to slam it. Safely in his bedroom, he collapsed on the bed, shaking and feeling generally horrible, worse than a common hangover could account for. How had all that happened? Somehow, he'd gone from considering renewing his faith, to making the most extreme commitment a person could make. Not that he thought he deserved better than enduring the walk. Simple penance worked fine for minor sins, such as gambling or visiting with a streetwalker. But what he'd done last night. . . Now, there was a major, soul-destroying sin, although it had been wonderful at the time. So maybe he needed the Path.

But how could he find redemption if Osval walked the Path beside him?

No answers came immediately to mind.

Dorian lay quietly on his bed until the trembling and spinning sensations eased up, although nothing much good happened for his head. His hand lay a short distance from his face, one finger fiddling aimlessly with a fold of the blanket. He watched it, feeling some of the distress ease from his mind and heart. So what if Osval wanted to follow him to the very fringes of Perdition. Fine. So be it. He still felt compelled to go, to carry through the mad plan and cleanse himself of all sin. Maybe it would be harder with an audience, but the end result would be worth it.

Dorian sat up, stifling a groan. Better get moving. He could feel the sinful thoughts within him even now, wanting to grow and take over his life and soul with their evil. No more.

When seeking the Path of Redemption, one must make certain preparations. Dorian gave his bedroom a sober look. All the material objects within looked back at him, singing their alluring song of comfort and familiarity. He put the voices aside and moved to his wardrobe, finding the simplest, most basic outfit he owned. Plain shirt, woolen trousers, a simple, unadorned vest, and a plain cloak. He only owned one pair of boots, so those would have to do. Nothing else. All the fancy party clothes, nice shoes, and even the casual but elegant working outfits, would have to stay.

He felt a little shiver of apprehension as he tucked his comb into his pants pocket. What a dramatic step he was about to take! Dramatic, frightening, and very necessary to redeem himself in the eyes of God and man.

"Goodbye, life," he muttered, turning his back on the comforts of home. It hurt. Was it supposed to hurt? Did he dare ask a priest? Because, if abandoning all his worldly wealth wasn't supposed to hurt, there'd be one more sin blackening his soul.

Dorian locked the door to his home for the last time with a feeling of unreality. It seemed like he floated just a bit separate from his body, watching himself do incomprehensible things. But out here, in the light of day, with the brilliant sunshine stabbing right through his eyes like daggers of light, he felt even more certain. Yes. Do this. Walk the Path and rid himself of sin. Because he couldn't carry the weight of his secret around with him anymore. It shadowed every part of his life, made each day a trial and not a blessing. Just be rid of it, and move on.

The strength of his resolve reassured him, allowing Dorian to take his first steps down the frightening road ahead. He thought about taking a cab, but in light of his decision to commit to

cleansing himself fully, he walked instead. Through the quiet cobbled streets, with genteel old homes looking down on him, beneath the shade of well-grown trees, all the way to the Church he walked, alone with his thoughts. Perhaps Osva had changed his mind. Perhaps this would work out well after all.

But no, there stood Osva, waiting for him outside the Church.

"It's about time you got here," his friend said, scowling. "You're the one wanted to do this, you should go first."

"You don't have to go with me."

Dorian forced himself to walk past Osva and into the Church without pause or hesitation. The big wooden doors swallowed him whole.

The Church interior spread out before him, cool and dim. The only light came from the glow of beautiful stained glass windows. A single beeswax candle burned upon the high altar, but it kept its pool of light around itself. Dorian swallowed hard and went to the Supplicant's Door.

Inside, a priest met him. Dorian felt an instant sense of panic. He'd been afraid of the breed for most of his life, a fear that stemmed from something that happened so long ago he couldn't remember it at all. All he knew was that every priest, in their flowing black robes, frightened him at a very deep level. And it didn't help that they all preached a constant stream of repression and intolerance.

"Priest, I need to change my life," he blurted out, around the visceral stab of fear.

"You have come to the right place, Supplicant," the priest intoned solemnly. That was another reason Dorian disliked priests. Everything they said or did sounded straight out of a morality play. "You may begin by listing your sins."

Here we go, Dorian thought, and began with the sin of disliking priests and the Church in general.

Chapter 3: Embarkation

Dorian waited in the back of the Church. He felt horribly ashamed of himself. Now he *knew* there was no hope for him other than walking the Path. He quivered inside with the aftermath of the verbal flaying the priest had given him. The only good part of the entire experience was the priest's confirmation that the Path of Redemption would fix him, make him worthy of life in polite society.

Although he still felt a shred of doubt. Because here he sat, on a humble wooden bench, feeling the heat of the sun through the bits of shadow cast by the sparsely-leaved tree spreading overhead, and waiting for Osva. He needed to see a familiar, friendly face, more than he'd ever admit. He probably should wish for Leola, but truthfully, he no longer existed to her. Once a priest sanctified a pilgrimage to the Path, a person died to society. His position as a non-entity was marked clearly by the drab, shapeless Pilgrim's Robe he wore, its undyed roughspun wool the antithesis of modern fashion. Only safely negotiating the Path would return him to life, and to more comfortable clothing.

He shouldn't worry about physical comfort. Dorian focused his mind on the health of his soul.

By the time Osva actually emerged from the Church, Dorian felt more calm. His trembling self-loathing had transformed into calm acceptance. Yes, he carried a lifetime's worth of unclean sin inside him. But he'd taken the first steps towards fixing himself.

"I'm glad you waited," Osva said, blinking in the sunlight.

Dorian rose from his bench. "There's no sense in abandoning you when you've come this far," he said, "although I still would prefer doing this on my own."

"Well, your preferences in this case matter little. Come, let's get on the road."

They began their pilgrimage right then and there, with no fuss. Dorian found himself wondering how Osva managed to emerge from the interview with the priest so calmly. Had he not suffered a similar degrading experience, where the priest flayed his soul raw and laid it out for careful examination and thorough condemnation? Or was his skin simply thicker, more able to withstand such painful scrutiny?

"I'd like to make something clear right now," Osva said, voice tightly controlled.

"Yes?"

"I don't see any reason we should ever discuss what may or may not have transpired in that Church."

Ah. Perhaps Osval merely hid the distress more successfully.

"Agreed."

They walked in silence for a while, through the streets of Cambrialle. The few people out and about had a variety of different reactions, seeing the pilgrims in their midst. Most common was the look of guilt. How many secrets did the city folk hold? How pervasive was the problem of intense sin, and the lack of desire to do anything about it? Were the priests right when they said society was doomed to Perdition?

"I can see this isn't going to be much fun," Osval said, finally breaking the introspective silence as they reached the outer edge of the city.

Dorian glanced at him, the ghost of a smile playing about his lips. "Fun? We're not supposed to have fun. This is, after all, a journey of reflection and repentance."

"Indeed." The look Osval gave him held little of piety, more of annoyance. "But renewing one's faith shouldn't mean renouncing all enjoyment of life."

"Perhaps not."

"And that is why I'm here," Osval suddenly laughed, although the sound fell short of his usual carefree gaiety. "I have to make sure you come out of this still recognizable as yourself, after all."

Dorian smiled, but didn't reply. Did he want to remain recognizable? Memories crowded into his head, demanding attention. The person that had lived through so many good times with Osval concealed a deadly secret within. Did he truly want that person to survive?

Chapter 4: On the Road to Perdition

The journey stretched out over more than three weeks. As penitent pilgrims, the two young men of course could not ride horses, nor hire a cart, or do anything to make their pilgrimage easier. So they walked. All day long, in fact, which amounted to more physical activity than either was accustomed to.

The continent of Bandor looked rather medium-sized on a map, but when trying to travel on foot, it certainly seemed to grow much larger. Travel had progressed very nicely from the days when humans had to get around on their own two feet, to the point where a well-off traveller could expect to cross the entire continent in a matter of days, if one was willing to ride all night on the carriage relay route. Posting stations, relay routes, all-night livery stables, all made travel easy, and regular patrols by the civic armsmen kept the roads safe. But for a penitent travelling on foot, marked as invisible to all by the Pilgrim's Robe, travel meant day upon day of miserable trudging through slowly changing countryside.

Cambrialle, the place where both Dorian and Osval had been born, was a fine old port town located in the temperate midsection of Bandor's eastern coast. It was a beautiful place, filled with old brickwork and huge, spreading trees, with flowers blooming in every patch of sunlight. Leaving the loveliness behind wasn't easy, but then, it wasn't supposed to be. The Path of Redemption lay far to the north, well into the steamy hot tropical zone, where the Hellmount reared black and ominous against the deep blue sky. Three and a half weeks of walking, it took, all the while unacknowledged by any folk save the religious community.

Or, of course, their companion.

The two friends had been on the road for more than two weeks when they reached a quiet, out of the way monastery perched on a cliff overlooking the ocean. The sun hung low, well on its way to setting, so they decided to stop for the night.

The priest at the gate welcomed their arrival solemnly.

"Greetings, Pilgrims," he said, with a humble inclination of his head. "Please, go on to the priory. The Curator will wish to speak to you."

"Really, now," Osval said, as they moved into the monastery. "I wonder why?"

"Perhaps he got wind of your lack of faith," Dorian teased, although carefully. He'd been schooling himself as he walked to temper his responses, manage his feelings and such more carefully, in order to better fit the proper model of pious behaviour. If he could just control himself,

then surely his life would improve beyond measure!

Osva! made a rude noise. "More likely, he heard you going on like a pompous windbag this morning, and wants to take you to task."

Dorian hid a wince. "Sorry," he muttered. "Just trying to. . . you know."

Fortunately, they reached the priory door by then, sparing the chance for any further conflict. The journey had been punctuated by squabbles, some more major than others, as Dorian sought transformation, and Osva! sought restoration of his old friend.

Inside, they found the Curator already waiting for them, looking anxious.

"Greetings, Pilgrims," he said, in a voice more tense than a priest's usual wont. "It is good that you have come."

"Thank you for your welcome," Dorian said.

"Is there some need we can fulfill?" Osva! skipped any small talk and got straight to the point.

"Indeed," the Curator smiled. "Come, let us go to dinner, and you may meet our other guest. As a woman alone, we have been unwilling to allow her to progress any further without escort."

"I see," Dorian said, grasping at a tiny hope with desperate mental hands. "Is she a Pilgrim, as well?"

"Yes." The Curator opened a heavy wooden door, and the smell of mutton stew rolled out into the corridor.

"Of course, she can travel with us," Dorian said, before the priest could even ask. He ignored the offended look Osva! gave him.

With another travelling companion, even a woman, Dorian would feel far more comfortable. All this time alone with Osva! had been nothing but exquisite torture, provoking deep misery and internal conflict. A woman meant a third party to conversations, a witness to prevent any inappropriate conduct, another set of eyes watching and passing judgment on every interaction. What a relief! He hadn't done anything inappropriate, of course, but the temptation taunted him every day, urging him to relax, to enjoy Osva!'s company, to just settle into the close companionship and shut the entire world out. Which, of course, represented the very reason he hadn't wanted Osva! along on this journey in the first place.

They entered the priory's humble dining room, a wooden-walled place with a long table and benches. A woman in a pilgrim's robe sat alone, while a half-dozen monks clustered together at the farthest possible end of the table, away from her. Dorian wondered what he'd just gotten them in for.

"Pilgrims, meet Rothanna," the Curator announced. The woman looked up and smiled, abruptly abandoning her dinner.

"More Pilgrims!" she exclaimed, and her voice sounded lovely, in addition to being very excited. Perhaps she'd had training as a vocalist. "Welcome! I am sure we will be great friends."

The Curator introduced them to her, then fled. Dorian wondered anew at the way the religious folk treated this woman. What about her upset them so?

Both Osva! and Dorian found out first thing in the morning why Rothanna made all the monks so very uncomfortable.

"You were a what?"

"Silly Dorian, you heard what I said," Rothanna said, with a delightful laugh that belied the truth of what she'd revealed. "I was a Comforter."

"Well. At least we know now why the monks disliked you so." Osva! recovered his voice first, although he drifted a bit farther away from Rothanna as they walked.

"And is this why you are committed to walk the Path?" Dorian asked, wondering if his eyebrows would ever come down from his hairline.

"Yes, of course. For one must start anew in life if one wishes to wed a respectable man."

"Indeed," Dorian replied. "I am here for a similar reason. I have to walk the Path before my betrothed will have me."

Osva! snorted, but said nothing.

They walked steadily through the day, although the woman slowed them down a bit. For one thing, she wanted to talk. All the time, in fact. And she had to stop many times more often than the

men did to go behind the bushes and relieve herself. For a while, she walked just with Osva, trying to get him off to the side of the road alone with her any time they stopped. Then she switched her attentions to Dorian, and he began to seriously question her commitment to redemption.

"Miss Rothanna," he said frostily, after the third time he'd shaken her hand off his arm. "Are you indeed committed to change? For you are not acting like it, one little bit. You forget, miss, that I have a fiancée, who is in fact Osva's sister. So do not act like I am one of your clients."

"Oh, Dorian, you are just no fun!" Rothanna pouted, but Dorian ignored her. "It's been so long since I've enjoyed the companionship of a man. Can't you relax a little? We haven't even reached the Path yet!"

"The point of this journey is not to relax, it is to reform."

"Dear Dorian, you do indeed sound as though someone stuck a stick right up your penitent ass. Don't you know even the priests care not for what a penitent does on the road to Hellmount?"

Dorian's eyes widened at the sound of a woman swearing. "Miss Rothanna! You shock me. Now please, let me alone, and find another subject for conversation. Your wiles will have no effect on me."

Sometimes societal norms were helpful, after all. Despite the restrictive nature of Bandoran society, it most certainly provided a clear framework for interacting appropriately with others. And while this woman fell well short of acceptable, the proper response for a well-mannered man to such a woman was clear: have nothing to do with her.

"I'd almost have fared better with the priests," Rothanna sniffed, then sighed. "Very well. Have it your way. I will endeavor to speak in as bland and boring manner as you yourself do, eschewing all bawdy byplay and attempts to elicit physical intimacy."

"Thank you," Dorian said, although his voice was sharp with irritation. Bland and boring, eh? And Osva felt much the same. What in Veritas was he doing to himself, anyway?

They continued on along the coast, and Rothanna held herself to talk of the Church's history. A safe, if boring subject, it filled the hours until they reached the next Church facility, their last stop before the end of life as they knew it.

She'd decided to become a Church historian in her new life, an occupation her respectable fiancée approved of. And although she'd only recently begun her studies, Rothanna had firm enough opinions that the discussion grew lively enough to even attract Osva. The three Pilgrims reached their destination shortly before sunset, walking companiably enough, with none of the conflicts spawned by Rothanna's desire to practice her former trade.

Chapter 5: The Path of Redemption

The Guardians of the Path occupied a small Church and refectory complex crouched uneasily on the side of the massive, looming Hellmount. The entire volcano was enclosed by a stone wall, securing it, making certain that no unwary wanderer ever trod the Path by accident. Dorian couldn't stop himself from sticking tight to Osva's side as they approached the very gates of Perdition.

"I didn't think it would smoke all over like that," Osva said, pace slowing.

"It looks ready to swallow the world."

"Yes."

The two men lagged behind, not even noticing Rothanna's resolute march directly into the Church. The volcano loomed over them, threatening imminent destruction.

"What if it erupts?"

Dorian chuckled weakly. "Then we'll know the Creator has deemed everyone for miles around worthy of ascension to Veritas."

"Maybe." Osva's feet stopped moving, and he reached out and touched Dorian's arm. "Dori. Are we really going to do this? Are we truly going to walk the slopes of a volcano? They erupt, you know."

"I am. I don't know about you, but I need this, terror and all. I want to get rid of the sin inside me, before it corrupts my life through, past all hope of redemption. I need to be *normal*."

Osva looked away from the looming menace, straight into Dorian's soul. "Dori, whatever happens in there, remember the good times we've had, okay? I've never seen you as a sinner, or

anything other than a normal person, and my closest friend. Never forget that."

"Nothing will make me forget your friendship, Osva," Dorian said, fighting to keep his response in check. He only partially succeeded, for no power in him could keep his hand from reaching out to touch Osva. "Or the way you refuse to give up on me, no matter how I try to push you away for the sake of my soul."

"Your soul. . ." Osva broke off what he'd been about to say, and gave himself a shake. "Right. For the health of our souls, then. Let's do this."

Together, they moved the last few steps of the path, each entering the Church because the other did.

Inside, they saw no sign of Rothanna. She must have already set foot to the Path itself.

"Welcome, Pilgrims," a priest said, materializing out of the thick interior shadows. "Have you come to seek Veritas?"

"Yes," Dorian replied. "Yes, we have."

The priests took their tokens, the ones they'd received from the Church back home, and provided them with leather packs.

"The journey is long and difficult," one of the anonymous robed men said, watching Dorian and Osva settling their packs. "It may stretch over a period of several days. This difficulty is essential, for the health of your souls. While on the Path, remember, disaster may strike at any moment. But should you live to reach the end, the brothers at the exit gate will grant you your new start in life, with a sum of gold, and garments suitable for normal travel. Fare well, my Pilgrims, and may you earn the redemption you seek."

And then it all became *real*, with no turning back. Because the priest led them to a courtyard, and to an ornate, sturdily locked iron gate.

"This gate represents the crossing between this world and the next," the Gatekeeper told them, as he unlocked the rusted iron padlock. "It is a place that ties two worlds together, that of the living, and that of the dead. There is no turning back now. In order to return to life, you must cross through to the other side."

Dorian gulped, but stepped forward resolutely. He felt a sense of hope as his foot fell on the other side of the gateway, on the Path itself. Right out of the mortal world. He shivered as he took his first full stride into the fringes of Perdition.

"Here we go," Osva said, stretching his legs to catch up to Dorian. Behind them, the iron gate creaked shut, sealing them out of the mortal world.

"What do you think we'll find?"

"Redemption, of course. That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

Dorian didn't bother to respond. Instead, he picked his way forward, feeling a shiver of apprehension. What lay ahead? Redemption, sure, but to get to it, they had to go through Perdition. Just the fringes, the outlying areas, but still Perdition. Would they meet any demons?

Within an hour of starting on the true Path, they knew they truly had left the normal world behind.

"What is it?" Osva asked, as they stared at the innocuous crack in the ground that hissed and steamed.

Dorian should have told him to back off, step away, quit crowding so indecently close. But instead, he stared at the proof of hellfire and quivered inside, taking comfort from Osva's nearness. Seeing the mountain itself smoking from a distance hadn't prepared him for this, the source of the smoke. "It's a vent," he said eventually. "What else could it be? It's a vent, letting the smoke from the fiery pits of torment escape, lest they blow up like a boiler without a relief valve."

"You know, I could almost believe that. But come on, let's get moving. The day isn't getting any younger, and I don't want to spend any more nights than necessary in this place."

"We are close, so close. . . Yes. Let's move on. I hope the ground is sturdy, because I never want to get any closer to hellfire than we are right now."

That was the first of many wondrous terrors the two young men encountered over the next two days. As they followed the Path along the slopes of the blasted mountain, they passed many more

steaming vents, and toxic hot springs, and pools that bubbled incessantly. There was one phenomenon they discovered right up on the mountain itself that terrified both of them into clutching at each other like frightened little children. They'd been talking about the weird shape of the Hellmount, how it looked rather like a vast explosion had pulverized the side of the mountain they were picking their way across, leaving the other half intact, when the ground itself boomed and a bubbling pool exploded. A scalding plume of water shot straight up into the air, steaming and hissing, while Osva and Dorian clung to each other in horror. Then Osva noticed that the water was coming back down in a runoff channel that aimed straight for them.

"Dori, run!"

They ran, tripping and stumbling, as the water hissed its way across the Path behind them.

"That was closer than I want to come to death," Osva panted, when they stopped their panicked flight. Behind them, the plume had subsided to a steady blubbing boil again, lurking, waiting to erupt on the next unwary traveler.

"I agree. Even if it does mean going straight to Veritas, I don't want to get boiled alive. Let's get out of here."

"I'm right with you. Lead on!"

They made it a total of three days, picking their way through the volcanic wasteland, sleeping on ground that kept them warm, before true disaster struck.

They'd finally passed the worst of the threats midmorning. The Path carried them out of the hellish fields of Perdition and onto a twisty, slippery trail, covered in volcanic cinders and enormous, pitch black boulders.

"This part of the Path is the most miserable yet," Osva observed, as they picked and slid their way along the narrow thread of Path snaking down the side of the massive Hellmount.

"It is necessary," Dorian shrugged. "You heard the priest. We must subject our bodies to hardship and misery to cleanse ourselves of the evil within. Although I think the valley of fire back there did a pretty thorough job of creating hardship and misery."

"Good thing you and Leola are getting back together," Osva grumbled. "You're sounding just like her these days. Whatever happened to—*shit!*"

Osva's foot slipped on the treacherous Path, and he crowded up against the side of the cliff. Dorian turned, heart in throat, then started to admonish his friend for swearing *here*, of all places. Then, even as Osva smiled at him and started to move forward, he slipped again.

Time slowed down into an agonizing crawl. Dorian saw every detail of the crumbling black rock of the Path, Osva's foot shooting in slow motion straight off the edge, the smile on his friend's face shifting into pure panic as both feet went off the Path and he started to fall.

Dorian's heart stuttered and threatened to stop dead in his chest even as he lunged for Osva. He caught a hand, then both of them hit with wrenching suddenness. Dorian fell belly down on the Path, Osva clinging to his hand and dangling over the edge of the sheer cliff. Somewhere, far down below, an angry river roared.

Oh please God not him I don't care if You've forgiven him and want him with you I NEED HIM don't take Osva PLEASE!

Dorian's arm wanted to break from the awkward angle. He shifted minutely, and Osva managed to grab hold of the cliff with his other hand, easing a fraction of the strain.

"Don't you dare let go, Dori!"

Dorian ignored the words, instead concentrating on getting a better grip. He also managed to get his knees up under him, so he wasn't sprawled flat on the trail. "Can you get up here if I pull?"

"Maybe," Osva said, panicked eyes locked on his friend. "Just don't let me fall!"

"Never." Dorian braced himself the best he could manage, ignoring the pain of the sharp volcanic rock digging into his knees and shins, then used every ounce of strength in him to *pull* at Osva, all the while praying frantically. "Come on, you can do it, I know you can. Up. All the way."

Bits of the rock wall broke off as Osva struggled to get back on the Path, bouncing away into nothingness. Dorian ignored them, just like the pain. None of that mattered. What mattered was that Osva was almost back up on the much safer Path now, nearly half of him up over the edge, and

here came a leg. . . "Almost there. Come on. Just a bit more!"

He put a bit of extra effort into his pulling, and Osva! made it back onto the narrow Path.

Just about long enough to have a panting breath or three, though. Then the overstressed Path gave way completely and both young men fell in a shower of viciously sharp volcanic rock shards.

Dorian lost all rational thought to pure animal panic as he fell through the air. He screamed, then all the air got knocked out of him as he hit some kind of ledge. The panic grew worse as he tried to breathe and couldn't. It hurt. He'd brought them here to this horrible place, and now both of them were going to die, and all his attempts at useless piety couldn't help him now. It *hurt*. And where was Osva! He had to breathe, or he couldn't find Osva!

Finally, after an eternity of burning pain in his lungs, Dorian managed a single, whooping breath. The air gritted with dust, but it felt as wonderful as life itself inside his lungs. He gasped, chest heaving as his body tried to recover, then sat up and looked for Osva!.

"Osva! No, oh no, please no. . ."

His friend lay in an awkward position, still as death. *No!* Dorian scrambled across the ledge, part of him noting the decent width of the ledge and that neither of them was in immediate danger of falling again, and shoved rubble out of the way until he reached Osva!. Trembling with the fear of what he might find, he reached for Osva!'s neck, where the big artery should throb with life. He couldn't find it at first, then realized after checking his own neck he'd missed the spot. There! A steady, strong pulse.

Dorian blinked against the sudden prickling of relieved tears and started sorting out Osva!'s limbs, getting him out of the awkward position he'd landed in and checking for broken bones or other obvious injuries.

Osva! groaned. "Dori?"

"Right here, Osva!."

"Help me sit up, would you? I've got a horrible rock digging into my kidney."

Dorian helped him up, then lost some of his decorum and pulled Osva! into his arms for an awkward, though heartfelt, hug. "Osva!, I thought I'd lost you," he murmured into the other man's neck. "I thought you were dead. I swear, I don't know what I'd ever do without you. I need you. I can't face life on my own."

"I'm right here, Dori, and I'm not going anywhere."

Dorian thought he should probably let go, but he didn't want to. Osva! held him just as tight, with no indication he wanted to let go, either.

"Don't you ever do that again, Osva!," he said, pulling away enough to see Osva!'s face, dirty and scratched, but alive. The memory of seeing him go over the cliff edge reached up and strangled him and his hold tightened. "Never. You just can't die, do you understand me?"

Then, because he wasn't thinking clearly in the stressful moment, because his soul still felt black with sin even here on the Path of Redemption, he did what he'd wanted to do for so very long and kissed Osva!.

Their lips met with a jolt that felt akin to a lightning strike. Dorian forgot to be afraid of sin for a long, beautiful moment, feeling Osva! in his arms, as his friend shifted even closer and buried his hands in Dorian's short hair.

But then the beauty ended when Osva! broke away.

"Ow!" He rubbed at his back, but wore a brilliant smile, and didn't let go with his other hand.

"Bad time for a cramp. Let me just—"

Then Dorian's conscious mind caught up with what he'd done and he stood up abruptly. Now what? *Uh*. . . Act like any proper Bandoran when something went wrong: *it never happened*.

"We'd best get back on the Path," he said, although his voice wobbled a bit. All he wanted to do was kiss Osva! again.

"Dorian, you are just unreal." Osva! shook his head slowly, then tried to rise to his feet.

"What do you mean?" Dorian helped, this time keeping his hands to a more appropriate contact.

"I mean, you can't just kiss me like that and pretend it never happened. Because it did. And I'm

not about to let it go."

"*Please*, Osva," Dorian backed up a step, noticing as he did so that the ledge opened out into some kind of cave. "Please. Don't."

"Don't what? Don't tell you how badly I needed that?" Osva stepped closer, carefully avoiding the rubble on the ledge, and reached for Dorian.

Who, of course, stood stiff as a board.

"Damn you, Dori," Osva said, somewhat muffled by Dorian's robe. "Damn you. You can't get away with this."

Dorian's arms crept up and wrapped around Osva, although he tried to tell them not to. *Well, maybe just a hug. . . It'll be okay.*

"That's better. I can't tell you how long I've wanted this. I know it's wrong, in the eyes of God and man, and I just don't care. I just want to love you, and be loved by you, and spend my days hearing you laugh. And seeing you smile. And watching the way your eyes light up when you see me. All I want in life is *you*, Dori, and be damned to social mores. I wanted to keep you around so badly I talked you into proposing to my *sister*, for pity's sake. Because if you married Leola, you'd be family for real, and I'd have every excuse in the world to spend time with you."

Dorian's hands moved tentatively as Osva spoke, exploring the strength in the male back beneath them, making the inevitable comparison with holding Leola. Comparison? Not really. These sensations made him suddenly understand why some people could commit this sin despite the threat of Purification.

"Osva, please," he said, trying to pull away. "Don't. You know it's not right. You know this is the sin that brought me here. *Please. . .*"

"Or do you want me to just give up? Would that make your damned morals feel better?" Osva broke away, out of Dorian's arms, glaring. "Would it be better if I just pitched myself off this godforsaken cliff for real? Be an easy end to your problem, after all."

"Osva!" Dorian all but dove forward, catching Osva in his arms and holding him tightly. "Don't even think about it!"

"I want to be with you, Dori," Osva murmured, the words tickling Dorian's neck. "I don't like what you're trying to do to yourself these days, but I'll forgive you, if you just let go and love me."

Dorian couldn't break away. His last bits of resolve weakened under the onslaught of countless strong emotions. His senses reeled, struggling to take in everything: the flickering darkness behind his tight-shut eyes, the scent of Osva's hair, his warmth, the near desperation they held each other with. . .

"Osva, I don't even care anymore. I need you too badly. Forget the Church. Forget society. And damn God for making laws that say love it wrong."

Then he did it deliberately, on purpose, with full knowledge that he committed a mortal sin. He moved a bit, opening his eyes enough to find Osva's lips, and kissed a man.

Osva kissed him back, intense and awkward and filled with love. It was beautiful, easily one of the most incredibly wonderful events in Dorian's life, second only to that first kiss. Why? Wasn't sin supposed to be vile and depraved? Not glorious. Not the kind of thing that lifted his soul straight to Veritas on wings of pure joy.

"I am so sorry," he murmured, and Osva shivered. "I tried so hard to deny this feeling, and all I really did was act like a complete fool."

"You're forgiven," Osva replied, and Dorian learned why he'd been shivering. The feel of his breath, and his warm lips moving so close against his skin. . . Dorian shivered, too.

Then Dorian pulled away, ignoring Osva's immediate sound of protest. "I have no idea what we're doing," he said, fumbling at the rope belt securing the lumpy robe to his body, "but I know we're wearing way too much by way of clothing."

Osva laughed, and they peeled away the enveloping robes. Dorian blushed as his came off, leaving him in nothing but underpants. He hadn't been naked in front of anyone since he was a child, too young to bathe on his own. So to mask his embarrassment, he spread his robe out on the rough ground, then kissed Osva.

The embrace was infinitely better without the enveloping fabric in the way.

"Oh, the things I want to do to you," Osval panted, face flushed beneath the coating of dirt. "Dori, let me love you!"

"I'm not stopping you anymore," Dorian murmured, around what felt like his heart up in his throat. Or was that a knot of madness? It might be, it might very well be. . . "Osval. Love me always. Stay with me. I need you. I can't bear the thought of losing you."

The things they did then, right there on the very Path of Redemption, condemned them straight to the deepest pits of Perdition in the eyes of the Church. Dorian didn't care, anymore. All he cared about was the feel of Osval's skin under his hands, and the surprising ways Osval touched him, and the pleasures they discovered in each other's arms.

Afterwards, they lay together on their discarded clothing, there on the ledge that had saved their lives. Dorian felt good. So good, in fact, that he couldn't believe God hadn't stricken them both dead. And not in the good way, either. Not the kind of death that meant God forgave them and wanted them with Him. No, the kind of death that sent them both straight to the true depths of Perdition, where the hellfires burned so hot the smoke forced its way out through the ground above.

Somehow, he didn't feel sinful anymore, even though he'd committed such sins of the flesh that his soul was doomed forever. In fact, he felt peaceful inside, and able to find beauty even in the harsh environment of the Path. It wasn't actually Perdition, after all. He could see that now. They were on the slopes of a perfectly natural volcano. The gate they'd gone through at the monastery hadn't opened out into a different reality. It had just let them access the slopes of the volcano rearing behind the monastery. The land around them was harsh, true, but it was a natural harshness, not the place of eternal torment. In light of his newfound peace, he recognized that every strange and dangerous thing they'd seen was just a natural part of the volcanic system.

Dorian realized something, as he lay naked with his lover under the light of the setting sun. He realized that the Path of Redemption had done its job. He hadn't necessarily found forgiveness in the eyes of God, but he'd forgiven himself. The thought made him smile as he toyed drowsily with Osval's hair. The peaceful feeling inside made all the trials of the Path worthwhile.

Of course, there'd likely be problems when they made it off the slopes of the volcano, but he'd deal with those when they came. Their best option probably lay in leaving Bandor entirely. Everybody knew most countries weren't civilized, and wallowed in sin and depravity the likes of which proper God-fearing Bandorans couldn't even imagine. And all who survived the Path were given an equal fresh start to their new lives, a hundred gold coins. Of course, that was a mere pittance compared to what he'd surrendered to the Church on beginning this quest, but he truly didn't care at this moment. All that mattered was the man here in his arms, and their chance at a new life together.

"Osval," he said, trying to find a way to kiss his lover without dislocating his shoulder. "Wake up, Osval."

"No," came the sleepy protest.

"Yes. You have to let me up, okay? I'm going to find the packs. The sun's going down, and you know how cold it gets out here."

"Oh, okay." Osval sat up with a groan. "God, I hurt."

"Me too. Guess falling down a mountain will do that to a person." Dorian slipped into his underpants, then stood and discovered there were gravel bits inside. He shook the bits out, grimacing, and made sure to shake his robe out well before putting it on.

The packs were easy enough to find. One had caught on a rock outcropping high overhead. The other had come loose at some point and fallen near where Dorian had landed. He looked up at the hanging pack and sighed. That'd likely be the one with the food in it.

So he climbed painstakingly up the rough wall, scaring himself often by grabbing or stepping on something crumbly. He reached the pack, barely managing to unhook it without falling again. Then he discovered that while going up had been unpleasant, going down the rock wall was pure misery, especially in the bulky Pilgrim's Robe.

"Don't you dare fall again," Osval called. "I've just managed to make this place bearable. You'd

pull down half the mountain."

Dorian reached a reasonable jumping off point and did so, landing on the ledge with a thud and a wince. But he had the pack.

And he had Osva, holding him close and kissing him.

"You shouldn't give me heart failure like that," Osva chided. "I don't want to lose you now that I've finally got you."

"No fear of that," Dorian said, around another kiss. Who would have believed the joy contained in such a simple physical caress? "I'm not going anywhere. Especially not the rest of the way off the mountain. Not until we get free of this place, anyway."

Osva stiffened. "And what then? What future do you see then, and am I in it?"

"That depends." Dorian ran his fingers through Osva's hair, learning the texture. "Are you willing to take a trip with me? Because I see little future for *us* here. Now that you've finally caught me out, forced me to admit that all I want to do is spend my life wallowing in sin here in your arms, I see little chance of making a good life here in Bandor. Will you come away with me? Will you leave all this behind and seek out a new life, one where we can be together?"

Osva smiled. His eyes shone with love. "You truly need to ask that? Of course I will come with you, Dori, wherever you go. You've been at the center of my life for far too long now for me to just give up and walk away from you."

"Good. Then I see a wonderful future for us, *together*. One where you and I can live each day without fear, without hiding."

The last of the day's light faded around them as they melted into each other's arms, ending the life of hidden desires, fear, and sin. What would the morning bring? Bright hope, and the warmth of love, for certain. Let the old life die with the night.

* * * *

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