How to Win Wars and Influence Nobles

by kaoruyogi

Summary

You'd think a video game lawyer could just drop into a pseudo-medieval universe filled with magic and demons and be totally okay with it, right?

Nah.

In the wake of her brother, Spencer's, disappearance, Belle dropped into Thedas with luggage, but without a clue. After a brief but memorable panic attack, she resolved to be the best goddamn lawyer Thedas had ever seen. Even if she was the only goddamn lawyer Thedas had ever seen. And even if that obstinate asshole, Cullen, wouldn't stop giving her the side-eye every time she walked into a room... Or every time he walked into a room with her in it... Or every time they walked into a room together... Or--Fuck it. You get it.
See the end of the work for notes.
The Big-Ass Hole and the Big Asshole

Chapter Notes

Welcome, fair reader, to my pseudo-self-insert/self-indulgent, modern girl in Thedas fic!
I know, I know, the trope. In my defense, I had no idea this was a thing until after I
started writing. So...whoops. ^_^;;

In any case, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Max!” Belle’s voice was being drowned out by the long-winded worry of her paralegal. He was
such a smart guy but she’d be good goddamned if he wasn’t just a scared little puppy sometimes. On
and on he went, barely taking a breath as he went over the plans for her two-week absence from their
firm—as if they hadn’t been discussing them for weeks already. She represented a number of video
game companies in various actions, but Max was more concerned about her general counsel work
for a larger company. She’d already notified her clients of her impending absence and told each of
them which associates would be handling her caseload, so she had no earthly idea why he was so
stressed.

Of course, stress management had come naturally to her for a very long time. Working as a 9-1-1
operator through law school would do that to a person. It had also made her very impatient with
nervous people who screamed or spewed out copious volumes of information at a pace no one could
keep up with, much like Max was doing at that very moment. Her hands balled up into fists on
instinct, jaw clenching in an attempt to manage her irritation before she shouted at her friend and
colleague while standing in the street in front of her apartment complex. It didn’t work.

“Max!!” she shouted again, so loud she attracted the attention of a passerby. Belle ducked her head,
staring at a particularly dark gum stain in the sidewalk below. This was Orange County, and
everyone yelled at people on their cellphones in the street, but it didn’t make it any less embarrassing.

Max’s voice abruptly ceased it’s prattling, giving Belle a moment’s peace to collect her thoughts
before speaking again. After a slow exhale, she said, “Max, we’ve been over this. Several times in
fact. Everything will be fine. I’m just going to my parents’ house for a couple of weeks. They don’t
even live that far away. I can catch a flight back if there’s some life-threatening emergency. You.
Need. To. Chill. Dude. I’m gonna hang up now because my Uber is supposed to be here in, like,
two minutes. Deep breaths, Max. It’ll be fine.”

As promised, Belle dropped the phone away from her ear, giving the red symbol on the screen a little
tap to disconnect before dropping the device into the purse slung over her shoulder. “Ooooh,” she
groaned, dropping her head back with her eyes shut tight. “Lord give me strength.”

The fresh silence dropped her back into her own mind to focus on what she should have been
worried about. It had been almost three months since her half-brother, Spencer, went missing. He
and Belle lived pretty close to each other, and were just generally pretty close. She’d never really
understood why he wanted to be a firefighter. He was smart as a fucking whip—could have been
anything—but he was a damn good firefighter. He promoted like a rocket after finishing his
Bachelor’s Degree, only twenty-two and already a lieutenant. It made his disappearance all the more
confusing.
He’d gone out for his morning run and just vanished into thin air. He’d had his cellphone on him, and took the knife he used for protection. And Spencer was no small man. His build made men and women swoon and fawn over him in bars. It was rather obnoxious, really. Belle always thought him the prettier of the two of them, his attractive bronze complexion a stark contrast to her easily burnt alabaster skin—he was more like his mother than their father—and striking blue eyes much brighter than her hazel ones. He was tall, fit, and well-muscled where she was still tall, but a bit chubby with a round face and ample bosom and backside. She liked chips, cheese, and chocolate—appetites she was unwilling to abandon to save her a little spare flesh.

All that said, Belle had been paying the rent on Spencer’s apartment in addition to hers for two months in the hopes that he would come back or be found, and the police still had no leads. It was time to go see her father and stepmother and find out what they thought the next steps should be. The idea of giving up hope on her little brother was still too much, but she was, above all, a pragmatist. She couldn’t afford to keep paying double rent every month, and she didn’t have room for all of his stuff in her apartment. But there was no way in fresh hell that she would get rid of even a scrap of it. So she was hopeful their parents would be willing to chip in for a storage unit, one close enough to Belle’s apartment that she could go and visit Spencer’s things from time to time.

Their parents had once given them matching hamesh necklaces—the Jewish symbol for protection—hers in gold and his in white gold, though he rarely wore his in public. He thought it was too gaudy. But Belle knew for a fact that he’d been keeping it in with his turnout gear, and had dug it out of his duffle bag two weeks after he’d gone missing. She took to wearing his charm on the chain with hers. The religious symbolism of it didn’t really bring her any comfort—she wasn’t terribly religious, after all. It was more the feeling of having something of him with her that kept the charm fastened around her neck.

She ran her thumb across the back of his gleaming hamesh as she stared down the street in the direction her phone had told her the Uber would appear. The app said two minutes five minutes ago, but it wasn’t unusual for them to get caught in traffic. The fingers of her other hand tapped at the smooth plastic handle of her rolling luggage, a combination of nerves and impatience conquering her resolve in their tiny physical manifestation. Half her life was packed in the carry-on check bag duo, including outfits for nearly every foreseeable occasion. Much of her family thought it would be wise to convene at the same time, since Belle and Spencer were so rarely able to visit, so she had to be prepared for any eventuality.

Always prepare for any eventuality. It was a mantra that made for a good first responder and a good lawyer. Predict, prepare, preempt. Her mind chanted it over and over, even as she took stock of herself one last time before the Uber’s supposed arrival.

Her curly-wavy copper-red hair was freshly washed, her curtain fringe meticulously straightened over her forehead and just brushing against the top of her oversized prescription sunglasses. The overall length had been growing out well with the painstaking care she’d taken of it after chopping off over two feet a little over a year ago—it was already to her armpit. The gauzy, short sleeved lavender tunic she’d chosen for the day shouldn’t set off any detectors at the TSA checkpoints, and was heat-appropriate given the unseasonably hot autumn weather. Her skinny jeans hugged her curves tight, likely because they, too, were freshly washed. She twisted and stretched her legs a bit awkwardly at that thought, hoping to loosen her pants up a bit before getting on the plane where the waistband would undoubtedly cut uncomfortably into her gut. She already knew the black yoga mat flip flops on her feet would be shucked the second the wheels left the ground. She preferred her feet bare.

The thumb that had been stroking Spencer’s hamesh moved to massage the back of her left earlobe—a habit she’d developed to cope while her right ear had still been perpetually covered with a
headset. It stuck with her long after she left dispatching to become an attorney, though she learned to manage it when clients were grating on her nerves. But in that moment, her aggravation mounted with every passing second the Uber driver didn’t appear. Geoff. She stared at his picture on her phone. He was older than the average Uber driver, his cheerful smile and more gray than brown beard at once welcoming and unsettling. What the fuck was taking him so long?

Belle’s skin crawled as goosebumps raced down her arms and legs, her hair rising skyward. She glared down at her arm, and caught a glimpse of her red curls spreading and separating, lifting away from her shoulders. It was like that time she touched the static ball at the science museum. The faint hum of electricity buzzed in her ears and coursed through her veins. Her eyes darted about, fear rising rapidly in her gut. Nothing around her was moving. Nothing seemed at all affected by whatever was happening to her.

A deafening crack made her scream and flinch, her right hand still clutching her bags even as her left flew up to block her face from what she was certain was an explosion. Instinct dropped her forearm away from her eyes. If someone was hurt, she could help.

No one was hurt. What she saw was worse than carnage. Less than two feet in front of her hung a hole. Not a hole in the ground, but in the air. It was surrounded by neon green tendrils of light that seemed to reach out like paralyzed lighting, striking the ground constantly and in only one place per filament. At the center of it was something her mind would only describe to her as a wormhole. It was black inside, but also not black inside. Faint images of something peeked through the darkness, distorted by space and time.

Belle didn’t know enough about wormholes. In her Wikipedia wanderings, she’d read some wild theories—stuff about time travel and inter-dimensional transportation—and some more scientific works that mentioned how a wormhole could connect two points that were trillions of lightyears apart in a distance of just a few feet. In all her random reading about wormholes, however, she’d never heard mention of one popping open on an actual planet, let alone in a crowded metropolitan area right in front of someone’s face.

But there it was. Or at least that was the most her mind could comprehend of what floated in the air before her. Predict, prepare, preempt, she thought. How, exactly, would her mantra apply to a random green glowing wormhole in the middle of a residential street in Orange County? She considered her options, her static-frizzed hair rising up around her cheeks, almost crackling in the charged air. Run. She should run away. That’s what people were supposed to do when disruptions in the space-time continuum opened in front of their faces, right? Run? Run.

Before she had the chance to finish pivoting away from the anomaly, another cacophonous crack pierced the air around her. The opening seemed to come alive, the green glow and lighting rolling and fluctuating and reaching. One bolt of green lightning snapped, and she felt it hit her. But not like lightning. It didn’t strike and leave. It held onto her. It pulled her.

Belle screamed as loud as she could, emptying her lungs until they ached and holding onto the only things she could reach—her luggage and her carry-on. Stupid. The fucking things rolled. So fucking stupid. Still, she clutched at them with everything she had.

One sharp tug from the wormhole wrested her feet from the sidewalk. She shrieked again, still holding those stupid fucking rolling bags even as her body was sucked into the not-black blackness. They followed her into the wormhole. Maybe.

Oh God. I just died, didn’t I?

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“—econd one. I think it’s safe to assume that this was not a coincidence.”

“If it’s not a coincidence, then perhaps Corypheus is sending them through to infiltrate the Inquisition. She should be locked up in the cells until we find out why she’s here.”

“Or perhaps there is something less sinister at work here. The young man has proven himself quite useful to you over the past several months, hasn’t he?”

“And to you. While that may be true, I am nevertheless considering locking him up as well!”

Arguing. A French-sounding woman and a British man were arguing over Belle’s dead body. Or maybe her not dead body. Maybe her still alive and once again conscious body. What a coup it would be if she hadn’t died in a wormhole. Huzzah.

She chanced opening her eyes, praying all the while that she’d somehow been dosed with acid and made it to the airport where she passed out. Belle abhorred narcotics, but anything would have been preferable to what in absolutely no way could have happened. So she cracked her eyelids apart.

Subtle daylight peeked through a couple of thin slits that she supposed purported to be windows, skinny and useless as they were at providing any substantial form of light. They did manage to illuminate the space enough for her to tell that the walls were made of gray stone. Her sunglasses had been removed, and no one had bothered to replaced them with her regular glasses. Typical. Her vision wasn’t too terrible, though, so she squinted to make out her surroundings. The room was moderately sized, and filled with very old furniture. It all looked sturdy enough, if not terribly odd and plain. She wondered offhandedly about the decorating choices of the security staff at John Wayne Airport.

Her bags lay open on the smooth stone floor, her belongings ruffled, but not quite strewn about. Another tiny victory, she supposed. After all, it’s not as if one’s bags come flying through a wormhole in tow every day, let alone come out the other side intact. But she hadn’t gone through a wormhole, had she? She was still alive, and the man and woman were speaking English, so she must have been somewhere at least vaguely familiar. Right?

A tentative tilt of her head brought the still-arguing pair into Belle’s blurry view. The woman’s back was turned, though her figure—even hidden under some sort of old school chainmail and purple cloth hoodie—made it quite obvious that she was a woman. Wide-cuffed brown leather gloves and boots enveloped her extremities, making quiet shuffling noises as she shifted her weight to uncross and recross her arms.

The man, from what Belle could see without her glasses, may have been rather good-looking. His golden-blonde hair seemed slicked back away from his sunkissed face, though it was all a little… smudgy. She could make out a ridiculously large surcoat with a poofy collar made of…fur? Something? It draped over silvery armor that gleamed even in the weak light. His hands balled into fists at his sides until one would rise to point a very stern finger at the French woman.

Belle squinted hard, confusion prickling at every one of her senses. Something was definitely wrong. More wrong than the hallucinated wormhole.

“Did someone drag me to Medieval Times while I was unconscious?” she rasped, not realizing until she spoke that her throat was really goddamn dry. “Did the fucking Uber driver bring me here instead of the airport?” Fucking Geoff.

Perplexed, angry, and still indistinct eyes landed on her. The woman turned only her head, giving Belle the barest peek at her bobbed red hair and blue eyes. Her gaze was critical, appraising in its
depth. Nothing new. It was something Belle had to contend with every time she walked into an executive’s office, or every time one walked into hers without having bothered to Google her first. She could always tell.

She sat up a little too quickly, and her head swam for a moment as she reached for her sunglasses on the small table beside the bed. Her purse was too far to go for her regular glasses, and she had no intention of staying wherever she was anyway. The other woman turned and the man scowled as she perched the plastic frame atop her nose, giving the bridge a tiny push with her middle finger.

Ah. Everything was much clearer. And the guy’s surcoat collar was definitely fur. Or faux fur. Fuck it, it had a fur-like consistency. His eyes had been just far enough from hers to stop her making out their color without her glasses. But even through the shaded lenses she could tell, then, that they were a very unique shade of amber. And he was good-looking. A years old scar bisected his upper lip just to the right of his nose to a flattering effect. She wondered if it was stage makeup for the show.

“Medieval times?” the French woman asked. “Are you referring to a place or an age?” The inner corners of her eyes narrowed almost undetectably.

“Oh God, here we go. So not Medieval Times, then? What are you guys, LARPers or something? That’s fine. That’s cool, man. I make my living with clients like you.” Belle slipped off the bed onto her knees as she prattled, closing and zipping her suitcase and carry-on and haphazardly throwing her purse over her shoulder. “Didn’t have to rifle through all my shit, but whatever.”

She stood with a sigh, all of her bags in hand and ready to move. “Okay, so I appreciate you both helping me out after I obviously went all…hallucinogenic and wandered away from in front of my complex. But I’m pretty sure that I’ve missed my flight by now, and I really need to get to the airport so I can get to my family’s house up north.” The faces staring back at her were unfazed—still assessing and agitated. Great. “Sooo, I’ll be going now, then.”

The little plastic wheels on her luggage rolled and clacked against the stone floor as she headed for the unfinished wooden door. These people took this shit far too seriously. The hooded woman’s arms never unfolded, though her eyes and head followed Belle as she passed. “A place or an age,” she thought. They can’t even be bothered to get out of character after a drugged woman shows up and passes out.

Just as she was about to reach the door, the large blonde stepped in front of her. Her chest nearly crashed into his silvery armor, and she staggered back a step to avoid the collision. She had to admit he cut a pretty impressive and imposing figure, even with his stupid red and black pimp coat. It was a thought that might have carried more weight had he not been looking down his nose at her. Unacceptable.

“Please move so I can leave.”

“You cannot leave. Not until we’ve uncovered what happened to bring you here.” His scar twitched with his almost imperceptible snarl.

“Thank you for your concern, but I’m fully capable of investigating that on my own. Now, please move so I can leave.”

“You cannot leave.” He spoke slower and louder. She could feel her blood starting to boil. No one was entitled to treat her like she was stupid.

Belle used her middle finger again to slide the bridge of her sunglasses down to the tip of her nose,
tilting her chin up to meet the man’s unyielding amber eyes with her own. “I’m a lawyer, and even though it’s my job to stay out of court, I should tell you that I went to school with some very good plaintiff’s attorneys. If you do not move out from in front of the door and allow me to leave, I’ll be happy to sic one or two of them on you for false imprisonment, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and whatever other causes of action they can come up with to decimate your likely meager bank account.”

The arch of a blonde eyebrow was the big asshole’s only reply.

Okay, fuck this. “Listen, bro,” she said, letting her luggage stand alone in favor of poking him in his stupid chest plate. Her painted fingernail tinked against the metal. “I did not somehow get dosed, hallucinate myself through a fucking wormhole, and meander my way here just so I could be kidnapped by some overgrown, thick-skulled, takes-himself-too-seriously, LARPing motherfucker in a ridiculous coat and some weird hooded chick who likes to watch. So allow me to address you as you’ve seen fit to address me.” She cleared her throat. “Get. The fuck. Out. Of my way.”

He seemed shocked when her two-handed shove knocked him off balance, his eyes going wide as his back slammed into the unfinished wooden door. Self-satisfaction and adrenaline roiled through her body, flaring her nostrils and squaring her shoulders. Served him right.

But she hadn’t anticipated how fast he could move in heavy armor—an oversight she regretted instantly. She didn’t even see him move before she felt his hands squeezing her biceps, locking them to her sides. He wasn’t hurting her—she suspected that was an impressive level of self-restraint—just holding her in place. Under his furrowed brow, his warm, furious eyes darted back and forth between hers, searching for lord knew what. The woman’s voice sounded from Belle’s back just in time to save the asshole’s testicles from her knee.

“Let her go, Cullen.”

The creases between his eyebrows deepened as his scar stretched, reaching for his cheek. Belle could feel the slight heat of angry puffs of air leaving his nose. He looked to the hooded woman, disdainful as he spoke. “Let her go? Leliana, you cannot be serious. You, of all people, should seek to discern the reason for her presence here.”

“I do. And I have a feeling we shall have a better opportunity to find out if you let her leave.”

Belle craned her neck to glimpse the woman—Leliana. Her right arm had uncrossed itself, and her knuckle brushed to and fro under her chin. She had a look of certainty about her that was rather unsettling. The whole situation was rather unsettling. Something was so wrong. Belle’s mind screamed it over and over, pleading not to be ignored.

She turned her gaze back on the man still pinning her in place. Cullen. He was looking down at her again. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You heard mommy,” she snarled. “Let me go.”

The muscles on either side of his jaw expanded and contracted. “Fine.” He removed his hands from her arms, throwing them out to his sides in an impotent gesture of futility. “On your head be it.”

Belle nearly sobbed out her relief when he stepped out of her way. She talked a big game, but doubted she could have stopped him if he really wanted to hurt her. He was so much larger than her, and the self-defense she’d learned didn’t cover fighting an armored man. And threatening to sue someone didn’t always work. It certainly didn’t work on him. Pushing her glasses back up her nose and taking her luggage up behind her, she shoved the door open with her shoulder.

The first shriek that left her throat was reflexive. An icy gust of wind swept across her body and
hurled the hem of her light tunic up to her chest. Why was it so cold?

The second shriek acted as a pronouncement of her terror and rage. Her surroundings were…not what they should have been. She stood atop a stone pathway on the outskirts of what looked like a huge castle. All around her, mountains jutted up from the earth to impossible heights, forming impossibly low valleys below. Everything but the castle—every fucking thing—was covered in a thick layer of snow. Blasts of freezing wind rushed sideways across her path, making little whistling sounds as they passed through gaps in the stones.

Her head whirled around to look behind her. Leliana and Cullen had followed her out, and stood just outside the doorway. Belle’s lip quivered. Whether it was due to the cold or her fear didn’t really matter.

“How the fuck did you take me?” She backed away from them as she cried out her question, desperate to go home. She just wanted to go home.

“Only a few miles from where we found you,” Leliana said. She was calm. Too calm. Too fucking calm.

“Only a few fucking—Fuck you! It’s hot. It’s a hot September. They said it on the news. It’s supposed to be hot for weeks. There’s no snow.” Belle’s breath came in erratic, heavy puffs. Panic attack. Asthma attack. Who knew? Who cared? “There’s no snow for four hundred fucking miles. Where did you fucking take me? Where am I? Who the fuck are you people?” An unbidden tear trickled down her cheek, turning her skin to ice along its slow path.

The hooded woman was still too calm. “We are the Inquisition. We found you at the Temple of Sacred Ashes and brought you to our keep, Skyhold, in the Frostback Mountains.”

“God, just drop the fucking act!”

Leliana took a step forward. “I assure you, I am not acting. The year is 9:41 Dragon. I am Sister Leliana. This,” she held out her hand toward the blonde, who still eyed Belle warily, “is Commander Cullen Rutherford. We work with the Inquisition. You are in our keep—our home, Skyhold. We are on the Orlesian side of the Frostback Mountains in Thedas.”

“The—Thedas? That’s not—Not a place.” Belle’s every utterance was halting and disjointed, fragmented by wheezing breaths she couldn’t control. She was getting very dizzy. She was losing feeling in her fingertips and face. She was going to pass out.

“And Drag—Dragon is not…” Her eyelids fluttered. Her knees wobbled. Her head bobbed. “Not a year. It’s not even…”

Mercifully, everything went black before she hit the ground.

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Chapter End Notes

Alright, so it’s out there! I hope you liked the first chapter!!!

I’ll be updating this fic as often as I can, but like my other two, it gets uploaded only if I have time to write it (because I still work full-time). I’ll also be working on this at the
same time as "Trial by Fire" (incidentally, if you haven't checked it out, give it a once over ^_~), so don't worry, that's still VERY much alive and kicking.

Anywho, thanks for starting this journey with me! I hope you have fun along the way!
That Vexing Interloper

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The queerly dressed, foul-mouthed woman cried for nearly three hours after she woke the second time. Josephine insisted that all three advisors wait in the woman’s room until she calmed enough to discuss how she’d come to be with them. The entire exercise was feckless and pretextual as far as he was concerned. They could have put her in the cells to question her, or Leliana could have extracted whatever information she wanted in her own way. Instead they detained her in comfort, in her own room, while so many shared quarters or slept in tents in the valley below. That thought alone left him piqued—agitated in a way he never would have been if he’d seen anyone else crying. Anyone but her.

The way she’d spoken to him was impudent, to say the very least. While it was clear she had no idea who he was, that fact mattered little to him. That she thought her desires were more important than their cause, however, was a galling concept. He despised the nobility for the same reason, making it obvious to him that the two of them were not going to see eye to eye.

However, Leliana was uncharacteristically kind to her, and Josephine rubbed her back and cooed soothing little assurances for almost the entirety of the three hours of sobbing. Cullen stood with his arms crossed by the door, glowering at the weeping woman. She rocked back and forth, whimpering and puling, having wrapped herself up in a blanket to ward the cool winds away from her pale skin. Loose, winding tendrils of her deep red hair fell over her shoulder as she sniffled and swayed.

He would puff out a loud sigh every now and again to remind the women that they all had better things to do than watch this vexing interloper lament her circumstances. Josephine stared more than a few daggers into him in response. So there he waited. Until she finally began to speak.

Her name was Belle. She haled from someplace called “Orange County, California”—a strange name for a strange place. The year there was 2017, but she couldn’t explain what age it was. She said they didn’t have ages, but then rattled on about the “Middle Ages” and the “Bronze Age” and the “Industrial Age” and something about how ages were never named until after they were over in a flustered stream of consciousness he thought would never end. He became more grateful as she rambled that they hadn’t had time to question the other one. There was no telling what the young man may have spewed out in this state.

She asked for her glasses, telling Cullen they were in her purse next to him. When he looked inside the black and cream colored satchel, a jumble of bright colors and papers and tiny trinkets perplexed him so that he just hurled the whole mess onto the bed in front of her.

“Oh my God, will you stop disrespecting my shit?!” She hollered her curses at him after the odd leather bag spilled some of its contents, an angry, wounded look on her tear-swollen face. “First you want to dig through it, then you don’t want to dig through it, then you’re fucking hucking it at me.” Her head swung from one side to the other as she spoke, her voice still a bit nasal. “Fine. I get it. You don’t like me. You don’t want me here. Well, guess what, Commander Cullen Ruther-whateverthefuck of the Inquisition, I don’t want to be here either.”

She opened an misshapen orange leather pouch and pulled out a pair of clear eyeglasses, not at all like the dark monstrosities she’d been wearing when they found her. Once they were affixed to her face, she looked at him again, calmer this time. “But apparently I’m stuck here. So apparently you’re stuck with me.”
He couldn’t argue with her logic. Though he might argue that they weren’t quite as stuck with her as she was in Thedas. They could take her to Denerim or Val Royeaux and be rid of her. He remained silent, keeping that option to himself.

“How did you come to Thedas?” Leliana asked.

“I don’t know. If I had to guess, it probably happened when that weird green wormhole thing defied all science and reason and sucked me up in the middle of the street.”

The spymaster turned her attention to Cullen. “Your men said she fell from a rift, did they not?”

Of the three of them, he’d had the greatest exposure to Fade rifts. He spent days after the Breach opened fighting off the demons gushing out of the things. So he nodded. “That is also how the first one fell into the wreckage of the Temple. I do not know what a ‘wormhole’ is, but the way she describes it, I believe it is a Fade rift. How one might have opened in this ‘Orange County’ without simply pouring out demons is rather puzzling.”

“Perhaps we should ask Dagna to research this,” Josephine said, speaking up for the first time in what may have been minutes or hours. Her hand still rested on the bespectacled intruder’s shoulder.

Leliana nodded. “Yes, though she will want to take samples.”

A bulky curl flew through the air as the Belle’s head whirled to level a stare at the spymaster. “What do you mean, ‘samples’? Like, ‘oh we’ll just take a piece of her shirt and a few skin cells’ samples or, ‘well, hey, it’s time to chop off a foot’ samples?”

“Somewhere in between, I imagine.”

“Listen, if you’re trying to be funny, comedy has this thing called ‘timing,’ I don’t think you’ve grasped it.”

The spymaster smiled—at the impertinent woman, and she managed to smile back. It was a weak thing, but there was something pleasing about it. It was genuine and warm, and her bottom lip stretched more than her top one. He cleared his throat to jostle himself from the thought.

Three sets of eyes fixed themselves on him, all of them perturbed. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and when the women had determined he had nothing useful to add they returned to their conversation.

“You guys keep talking about ‘the young man’ and ‘the other one.’ There was someone else who dropped in on you like I did?”

Leliana nodded. “There was.”

“Who is he? Do he and I have anything in common that might have drawn both of us here?” Belle’s hazel eyes bore a glimmer of hope beneath their watery sheen.

“I think perhaps we will keep his name to ourselves until he returns in five days’ time. We are uncertain whether anything may link the two of you, and we have not yet ruled out Corypheus’s involvement in your sudden appearance.”

Offhand, Cullen couldn’t fathom anything that might have linked the young man to Belle. They differed in far too many ways.

“I don’t know who or what that is, but I get it.” The outsider accepted Leliana’s reply with too little
protest, in his opinion. While he preferred this non-sobbing version of her, he found her sudden surrender peculiar.

As if reading his thoughts, she looked him dead in the eye and said, “It’s pointless for me to argue with you all. I gather that you’re at war here—needing a Commander and a keep and the clanging swords outside and everything—and I definitely can’t get home without another wormhole or rift or whatever. So all I can do for now is wait until we sort this out and thank you for your help.” Her stare was fixed on him as she spoke, her voice leaving her dusky lips in a tone so even and controlled it was like a different person was talking.

Could they read minds in Orange County?

“And do you have a trade where you come from?” Josephine asked. It was a good question. The Inquisition could not afford to feed anyone that did not work, let alone quarter them. In a private tower only feet from his own. He stifled a growl at the thought.

Belle sniffled and pushed at her nose with her knuckle. “I did. I do? Yes, I guess would be the best answer, ignoring tenses. I’m an attorney.”

Confounded glances flicked between each of the advisors. It was a rare occasion, indeed, when not one of them knew the meaning of a word. Even rarer when the word was related to a trade. Their combined experience with the varied peoples of Thedas offered them a wide pool of knowledge from which to draw their comprehension. Orange County must have been quite bizarre.

Josephine, it seemed, was the first of them brave enough to admit she did not understand. “I apologize. I have never heard of such a trade.” Her hazel eyes cast down for a moment as she considered her next words. “What does it entail?” she asked, looking to Belle’s face again. Their eyes appeared remarkably similar in color from where he stood.

“Oh. Um. Okay, so you don’t have attorneys here. That must make things easier and harder all at once.” Belle was muttering again. She took a deep breath, and as she did her hands rose up in front of her. Her nails were long and covered in some sort of paint. Tiny lines and patterns wove from finger to finger in glittering shades of blue and purple and pink. It was like nothing Cullen had ever encountered before. Like miniscule paintings. Perhaps “attorney” meant “painter” where she came from.

“Okay, an attorney is someone who works with the law,” she said. Her hands moved while she spoke, her long fingers curving with surprising delicacy. Her pinkies stayed out straighter than the others, but not completely straight. Odd.

Cullen ventured a guess. “Is it a post in a guard force?”

Belle bunched her mouth up on the left side of her face. “Not really? Umm…” She hummed and drew both lips between her teeth. “Attorneys—or lawyers or counselors we’re sometimes called—help create the law. Then we help people use the law to protect themselves and attack others who’ve violated it.” Strange. Cullen had only ever heard of monarchs and nobility making the law or punishing violators.

“Most of us specialize in a particular area or study because there are so many laws. I specialize in video ga—Um…I worked a lot on negotiations, drawing up contracts, employment agreements, privacy agreements, and terms of use, and with copyright and trademark stuff. I worked on some incorporations. I also did a little bit of business advisory work with some of my clients. I’d help them with strategies to grow their companies and make more money. Oh, and I do a little mediating here and there.” She splayed her fingers out in a kind of shrug and raised her eyebrows. He supposed she
was finished.

Cullen had never seen Josephine’s eyes light up like they did as Belle explained herself. No one in that room understood some of the words she’d said. There was little doubt about that. But Josephine heard “negotiations,” “contracts,” “agreements,” “grow,” and “more money” and began to glow like the sun. It was unsettling.

Leliana let out a small laugh—also unsettling. “I believe we may have found someone of your ilk, Josie.”

The lady ambassador ignored the remark, the entirety of her energy now honed in on their uninvited guest. She spoke with the voice of a child on Satinalia morning. “Truly? Your work involves contracts and negotiations?” She leaned forward as she pried—unaware of her own movement, Cullen imagined. Josephine was not one to relinquish her composure.

Meanwhile, Belle leaned back, eyes wide with surprise and mouth bearing a poorly bitten back grin. “Yes. That’s most of what I do—did—” She let out an exasperated sigh. She seemed to be having some difficulty reconciling her past and present. “Most of it has to do with contracts and negotiations. There’s other work, but that was my bread and butter.” A fitting choice of words, as that was what she would have to earn for as long as she stayed with them.

If she was not working for Corypheus.

Josephine’s expression turned pensive in a flash. “I could use someone like you. The nobility are fickle, and while many of them are useful for a transaction or two, there is no constant but me to track all of the Inquisition’s contracts. And I have no neutral nobility but myself to engage in negotiations.”

Belle’s face twisted into something like disgust. Who was she to feel disgusted at anything? Cullen’s contempt for her dredged itself up afresh, pricking at his fingertips, clutching the pommel of his sword just a little tighter.

“You’re doing all this by yourself? I mean, I get that you have people who work one or two cases for you, but no one’s got a consistent workload but you? And you’re the only negotiator for—what is this—a whole army?”

“The Inquisition is a peacekeeping force instituted to end the mage rebellion, seal the Breach, find those responsible, and bring them to justice.” Cullen said it like he’d said it hundreds of times. He had. Every new recruit that passed under his command heard it before anything else. They needed to hear it before anything else.

But their pale stranger looked unimpressed. “Okay, thanks. At ease.” She flicked her wrist and hand in an odd kind of salute and looked away for a moment before her eyes snapped back to him. “Wait a second, did you just fucking say ‘mage’?”

The conversation sped up from there. Much to Cullen’s chagrin, Leliana and Josephine poured information out to the interloper, who it seemed had never seen magic or even heard of a real mage. They explained the mage uprising in as simple a set of terms as they could, told her about the Temple of Sacred ashes, the Breach, and Corypheus, and she learned of the events at Haven less than a month ago. Leliana didn’t seem to think Belle was as much a threat as he did. She said too much, in his opinion. But it was her knowledge to give, and not his place to question. He was beginning to feel he was just there to stand guard and be ignored.

It was agreed upon—without Cullen’s input—that Belle would be granted access to Skyhold proper.
She would read and research the laws and customs of Thedas until the Inquisitor’s return in five
days. With him would come the Inquisition’s other drop-in and Seeker Cassandra Pentagast. At that
time, the advisors, Cassandra, and the Inquisitor would make a second assessment of both the
outsiders’ potential threat level and determine whether they could remain part of the organization. If
their statements were deemed credible and their loyalty assured, Belle would begin working as
Josephine’s primary associate. This would put her in a position of power, allowing her access to the
Inquisition’s funds, authority to negotiate and contract on behalf of the Inquisition, and the ability to
communicate with all the nobility of Thedas. Cullen did not wish the last duty upon anyone.

They left her after nightfall, after she finally realized they had moved her to the upper floor of a very
tall tower. She whimpered something about a fear of heights and Josephine promised her a staircase
if all went as she hoped. Leliana whispered something to one of her scouts on the battlements. He
nodded and vanished into the night.

“She will be watched closely,” said the spymaster.

Cullen nodded his relief and approval. “She must be.”

*****

It was three days before he saw Belle again. Three times a day, Leliana’s scouts would report to her,
then to him. Most of what they told him was innocuous. Belle spent the majority of her time in one of
the libraries, and could either be found with her nose buried in a tome in the rotunda or amid the
dusty shelves beneath Josephine’s office.

She screamed the first time she saw Dorian do magic, but immediately grabbed him by the wrist to
demand that he do it again. One of the scouts reported seeing her in the garden trying to replicate the
simple spell to no avail. Cullen thanked his lucky stars for that. The last thing he needed was an
untrained mage traipsing about unattended.

She also spat out ale the first time someone gave it to her in the Herald’s Rest, claiming something
about a sensitive stomach. Cullen wondered if that was a ruse she played up to keep her wits about
her while she spied on them. She wouldn’t be the first to avoid dampening her senses to keep a keen
eye.

She even blanched at shedding her clothes in the baths. He could only perceive such reticence as
concealment of some telling mark on her body. Some scar or brand on her flesh must have bound her
to Corypheus. And she saturated an otherwise clean drying cloth. Wasteful.

There was yet another report that Belle swallowed several smooth pebble-shaped objects every
morning and sometimes throughout the day. They emerged from a mélange of bottles in varying
shapes and colors. He was also told that she counted the objects that remained in the bottles with a
look of worry affixed to her face. When asked once, she said they were for her stomach, head, back,
and neck. She called them “pills” and “meds.” Adan speculated when pressed that perhaps, in
Orange County, these “pills” and “meds” were a means of delivering healing herbs—like a potion or
a poultice for one’s innards. Rubbish. Cullen suspected she was hiding magical items in her gut. Or
perhaps she was swallowing the bits to keep some enchantment in place. As far-fetched as it may
have sounded to someone else, he had seen stranger things. Recently, in fact.

It was well into the depths of Belle’s third night in Skyhold when Cullen encountered her again.
He’d tried to sleep. At least he played at trying to fall asleep. Sleep was an elusive thing, grasping it a
fever dream in and of itself. Most nights he managed about two or three hours of tumultuous rest,
tossing and turning and plagued by nightmares of horrors past. He was beset by night sweats and
lyrium withdrawal symptoms, made worse by the fact that he was still hiding his cessation of the
stuff from the Inquisitor. The man had enough troubles without being burdened with Cullen’s.

He threw on the nearest breeches and tunic he could find, not bothering with the small laces that would have made his shirt presentable. The knot at the hip of his breeches was lazy at best. He just needed a cup of water. He convinced himself that would be enough to help him sleep. He pulled on his boots with his feet more than his hands, stomping his way past his grip to don the worn leather things.

After descending the ladder and exiting his quarters, Cullen cast a quick glance at Belle’s tower. Belle’s tower. He scoffed at the thought. It sat just above the stables where the horses and Warden Blackwall made their beds for the night. They should have given that tower to the Warden, not to some irksome woman who fell through a rift. No light or sound emanated from within, so Cullen believed her to be asleep.

He travelled down the stairs against the battlements into the rear courtyard. It was the way he always went when he needed water in the middle of the night. The way he could disturb the fewest people and be watched by the fewest guards. He tugged the wooden door open as quietly as he could, knowing that many of the cooks and servants slept just below. Likewise, he silenced his footfalls. He’d woken Donatien once, and was loathe to suffer the cook’s spoon-flailing wrath a second time. An odd shadow on the wall and the sound of quiet humming stilled his steps. There was someone else in the kitchen. His eyes scanned the room until they landed on her. Belle sat on the floor next to roaring fireplace in a tangle of limbs. Her back settled against the wall. She wore a soft shirt with a strange image on it, black breeches made from a similar material covering her crossed legs. A heavy looking book lay open between her knees, its spine resting on one of her bare ankles. Her feet were bare too, and the toes of her right foot wiggled on her left thigh. Her right hand sat on the edge of the volume, holding a page aloft as though she was about to turn it. The fingers of her left hand splayed across her cheek. Cullen lost sight of three of them under her hair. It glowed like a fiery halo about her round face, set alight by the flames beside her. Her pinky brushed back and forth across her parted lower lip as she read, the nail occasionally finding itself between her teeth. Her lips were plush and soft like the rest of her body. They were rather enticing when they weren’t spewing vitriol at him.

She turned the page and reached down without looking. The movement drew Cullen’s attention away from his dangerous thoughts about her lips. Her fingers tapped the floor around a half-eaten Orlesian bread roll on a cloth in front of her knee. Her head turned to find the bread her hand hadn’t, and she grabbed it up. But then she caught sight of him.

Belle’s whole body jerked, hurling her bread into the fire and slamming the thick tome shut between her thighs with a loud thump. Her hand flew up to grip her chest. She gasped hard, her supple lips emitting what he could only imagine was a string of curses. “Jesus balls on a bike!” She hissed in a breath. "Fuck!"

He was frozen in place, overwhelmed by boyhood sensation so familiar it made his chest ache. Like he was caught doing something he shouldn’t have done. Seeing something he shouldn’t have seen. But that was wrong. She was the one doing something she shouldn’t have. “What are you doing in here at this time of night?”

She panted a few hard breaths before her hazel eyes flew up to meet his. “Reading, having a snack, what’s it look like? I’m a bad traveler, and I have no fucking idea what time zone this is, but I’m having a very hard time getting on your schedule. I’m also not a huge fan of climbing that godforsaken ladder in the tower. I should ask you the same thing. Shouldn’t you be—I dunno—sleeping or brooding or something?” There it was.
But he was befuddled. “I was...having trouble sleeping and I came in here for some water.” Maker’s breath. Why did he still feel he owed her an explanation?

She squinted up at him from behind her glasses. “Why are you so sweaty? It’s, like, forty-three degrees outside.”

He hadn’t noticed the sweat beading at his forehead and along his back until that moment. But he would not be explaining himself to the nettlesome woman any further. “You should not be in here.”

It was then that she stood. Belle snatched up the heavy book from the floor and marched right up to him. She stopped just shy of their bodies colliding. This close, Cullen could see the details of her eyes. They were blue-green like the sea, but a thick bronze starburst surrounded her pupils. Little flecks of ochre and sienna in that bronze ring made it look like armor—like a round shield that had been battered and marred and dented in the heat of battle. Where the rest of her was soft, her eyes were hard. Warrior’s eyes.

And those embattled eyes darted about, examining his face and boring down into him. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“I find you suspicious.”

“It’s more than that, though. I think there’s something fundamental about me you don’t like.” She canted her head to the side, her gaze never leaving his. Her lips had a natural part when she paused. “That’s fine. But when you find my story credible—and rest assured you didn’t have to wait for whoever the hell is coming back here to do that—we’re going to have to work together, you and I. And that, Commander Cullen Rutherford, is something you’re going to have to come to grips with.”

Belle stepped back, still staring at him. He held himself firm, keeping his posture tight and his jaw clenched. She was right. There was something fundamentally infuriating about her. He couldn’t put his finger on it. Perhaps it was her obstinacy or her foul mouth or her general disregard for their well-founded suspicions. Perhaps it was the way she looked at him.

Book in hand, she slipped past Cullen toward the back door through which he had entered. “By the way,” she said behind him, “I don’t know what kind of drugs you have here in Thedas, but I’ve seen plenty of people detox before. You were right to come down for water. And you should take extra. Hydration is key.” The door closed, shutting out her tempestuous eyes and her confounding lips once more.

He felt exposed. He did not know what "detox" meant, but the way she said it...Maker. She knew something about him that no one else did. She must have.

He retrieved his water from the deep basin and drank it down. It was cool on his parched throat, though it did little to soothe his frayed nerves. He was naked to her. He couldn't shake the feeling. It hovered over him as he trudged back to his tower, as he climbed his ladder, as he lay sleepless through the wee hours of the morning.

Unsettling, needling woman.

It was yet another two days before he saw her again. She stood beside Josephine on the steps of Skyhold outside the main hall, awaiting Inquisitor Trevelyan’s arrival. She seemed firm and composed, an occasional sigh the only sign of her nerves. Even when the Inquisitor and his companions rode through the gate, she remained still. Until the young man came in.

He marched alongside several of Cullen’s infantrymen, his every step dutiful despite the cheering
around them. Cullen realized he wasn’t the only one watching Belle when the soldiers entered. Leliana and Josephine had also locked their eyes on her.

But all she could do was stare down at the portcullis. Her eyes widened first. Her jaw dropped open next. At her sides, her hands trembled. She murmured something they couldn’t quite hear. When Josephine asked Belle to repeat herself, she obliged, only a touch louder.

“P,” she said. One letter, her voice barely a whisper as she said it.

“What?” Josephine asked.

“Spencer!”

Ah. So they did know each other.

*****

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure you’d probably already guessed that the "other one" was Spencer, and I couldn’t keep you in su-Spencer anymore! HA! Dad jokes.

Thanks for coming back for chapter 2!!! I hope you keep enjoying, cause I’m sure as shit having fun writing this!
Belle was nervous. Not pee-your-pants nervous, but twist-your-gut, nauseous nervous. If the Inquisitor didn’t believe her, or if he didn’t like her from what she’d heard, she’d be tossed out of Skyhold on her ear. A stranger in a strange land. Worse, really. A stranger in a strange dimension. She would be left to fend for herself in a world she’d only had five days about which to educate herself.

She stood still anyway, waiting on a landing on the stairs in front of the main hall. Josephine stood beside her. The Antivan woman’s presence was galvanizing, in a way. She’d been sweet and welcoming from the start, never doubting the veracity of Belle’s story. At least, not outwardly. Not like Cullen. That man was as outward as they came. Belle wondered if he’d ever in his life had a secret emotion, or if he had ever smiled, for that matter. He was so dour, even after startling her half to death in the kitchen two nights before. He still frowned and glowered and scowled at her as they waited for the Inquisitor’s arrival through Skyhold’s gates.

Cullen was detoxing. She could tell the moment she got close to him that night. He had a heavy sheen of sweat over him that made his face glisten and dampened his tunic. He was up in the dead center of the night while both moons—this place had two fucking moons—were high in the sky. His breathing alternated from deep to shallow in irregular increments, and his eyes held a kind of thick wateriness that shined over pupils that refused to stay one size, but were too large. He stared at her too intensely to be having a migraine and stood too straight to be suffering from the flu. So she settled on withdrawal.

Belle had seen it enough. People who were brought into the station jail for DUI or possession with intent to sell or burglary sweated and panted and woke screaming. Their pupils would be all manner of fucked up while they waited in the lobby for their property, calling her on the counter phone enough times to make her go out to tell them to sit down before they got arrested a second time. Most of them were squirrellier than Cullen, though. His stillness was rather remarkable, if she was honest.

A cheer rolled up from the small crowd gathered by the massive gate, and Belle’s gut rolled up in answer. Why had thinking about Cullen distracted her so? She barely had time to see the Inquisitor ride into Skyhold, waving and smiling to his adoring welcoming committee while the staff strapped to his back swayed to the beat of his horse’s footfalls.

He was a handsome man in the way her brother was a handsome man. He reminded her a lot of Spencer, really. They had the same tawny skin, similar builds, and haircuts that were so alike it was unsettling. But Spencer’s smile was either subtle or tremendous. He had no in-betweens or moderation. The Inquisitor bore a middling smile as he rode in, trained and just toothy enough to make it seem like he wasn’t as tired as he was. The sag of his eyes and the slight slump of his shoulders gave that away.

Belle’s heart ached for a moment at the loss of her brother. Even if he came back home, she would be gone. She had no idea for how long. It might have been forever. The cheery, unfiltered dwarf in the basement with the missing wall and huge waterfall had no clue either. At least she was funny.

Riding in behind the Inquisitor, Belle’s eyes catalogued a beautiful, stern-faced woman, an ethereal looking young man wearing an enormous hat, and an aloof elf with a bald head that resembled an
egg. A group of soldiers marched in after them, bedraggled and proud. Their shoulders slouched only as much as their armor would allow. They walked at a steady and calculated pace they no doubt counted off in their heads from time to time. One, two, one, two, one, two, one, t—

Spencer. That tremendous grin that made people fawn over him beamed out from the ranks of those exhausted soldiers. He was tired, but bore an extra spring in his step.

Belle stared at him so hard she thought her eyes might fly out of her skull to see him up close. Her hands trembled at her sides. Her body knew it was him, despite her brain’s screaming logic that no, it couldn’t be. How could he also be in Thedas? What were the odds?

Her lips formed the nickname she’d called him since they were kids. “P.”

Josephine said something about not hearing her, so she whispered it again. “P.” She couldn’t believe she was saying it. She couldn’t believe he was there. Right there. Marching along with a group of soldiers like he’d never vanished off the face of the earth.

“What?” Josephine asked.

Belle couldn’t contain herself no longer. She knew it was him. There was no mistaking her baby brother. Her blood. She called his name as much to placate the advisors as to tell him she was there. They were both there. “Spencer!”

That too-big smile dropped and her little brother’s head lifted up, his eyes flitting about, seeking the voice he knew in his bones. Belle was bright enough to stand out. She always was. Her red hair and bleach white skin glowed under the afternoon sun. She lifted her arm anyway, calling out to him a second time even louder, if that was possible.

He froze when his blue eyes landed on her. A young woman marching behind him couldn’t stop counting her steps and collided with his shoulder instead of avoiding him. He didn’t look at her, though. His eyes were locked on his sister. Disbelief adorned his features in the same way Belle imagined it must have colored hers. Spencer stepped out of the rank and file just enough for them to pass by him. He said her nickname. She couldn’t hear it, but she knew he said it. “Bete.”

Belle wasn’t sure when she’d started running down the stairs. She might not have noticed she was if she hadn’t almost nerfed it near the bottom of the steps. All she knew was that her brother was closer every time she blinked. Her eyes and nostrils burned, her throat pressed in on itself. Tears were pouring out. They must have been. There was a coolness across her cheeks she should not have felt. She failed to give even one shit.

Everything hurt when their bodies slammed together. Spencer was coated in armor from head to toe. It pinched and pressed into her fleshy bits. She still didn’t care. They squeezed each other so tight she wondered if she might dent the metal.

She knew she’d gone full ugly cry. Her lips had twisted into a grotesque grimace, her eyes were pinched mostly shut, and her nose leaked its viscous nastiness. It was the kind of cry that would ruin even the most expensive waterproof mascara. Ruin a whole face of makeup, really. Thank God she wasn’t wearing any. Noisy, compressed sobs exploded out of her chest, and they got worse when she felt Spencer’s body shuddering against her. Her shoulder was wet from his tears, as was his, she was sure.

“Oh my God, Belle, oh my God. Oh God you found me. Oh God I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too, P.” Her voice came out in a series of high pitched squeaks. “I found you. I can’t
believe I found you. Don’t you ever disappear on me again. Don’t you ever.”

Spencer sniffled and let out a weak laugh against her shoulder. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

Belle pulled back just enough to look at his face. He’d been getting so much sun. His skin had soaked up a deep tan so different from when he’d been stuck on the night shift at the station house. A layer of blackish-brown dirt coated his face and settled in all the creases. His tears mapped clean trails down his cheeks through the grime. His eyes glistened like a fast moving river, clear and cool. His lips were dry and a little cracked, she could tell even when he smiled at her.

“Have you been here the whole fucking time?” Belle felt herself laugh when she said it. It was a laugh she couldn’t hold down. It bubbled out of her in a manifestation of her joy and relief, effervescent as a hot spring or a bottle of champagne. It didn’t matter that she was crying.

“Yeah.” He sort of smeared his hand through her hair to look at her. She hated it when he did that. But she was still having trouble caring. “This thing opened up in the foothills while I was running and grabbed me.”

“A rift-wormhole thing? All green and weird?”

“Yeah. You too?” Spencer asked. Belle could only nod. “Shit. I had no idea space-time anomalies like that were a thing.”

“I’m still not sure they are. Where did you come out?” She wiped her finger under her nose. So gross.

“At the Temple of Sacred Ashes a little ways down the mountains.”

“They told me that’s where I came out, too. Then what?”

“I was all fucked up and confused, and this weird demon thing cut up my chest pretty good before the Commander found me,” Spencer said. “He saved me and put me to work with a sword and shield after I got healed. Hey, did you know they have fucking magic here?”

Belle chuckled through her tears. “Yeah, I’m making friends with a couple mages here. They’re teaching me stuff about Thedosian—” she enunciated the word carefully, “—magic and politics. A lot of weird shit is going on. And I think I may have volunteered myself to be the Inquisition’s attorney.” They shared a strange look and a watery laugh. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I got busted up when I landed, and I’ve been knocked around a little here and there. But they have these kickass healing potions and stuff here, so everything’s been alright. I’ve been looking-a-like—look-a-liking? I’ve been a look-a-like for the Inquisitor. He’s a pretty chill guy, y’know.”

“Oh, he’s fucking ‘chill,’ huh?” Belle hugged her brother close again. “He fucking better be. Otherwise we’re in big goddamn trouble.” She squeezed him tighter. “I love you. And I missed you, bruder.”

“Same here, schwester.” Silly Yiddish sibling endearments they’d picked up from their parents.

“How do you two know each other?” a woman’s deep and accented voice asked.

Belle turned just enough to see the dark-haired, stern-faced woman staring at them. Walnut eyes burned suspicion into Belle like a branding iron. The hard woman bore a deep and old scar on her cheek. The firm set of her jaw suited her somewhat angular features, and chiseled cheekbones made
her dubiousness beautiful. This must have been Cassandra.

The Seeker’s stare was as analytical as it was aggressive. It was an expression Belle was becoming far too accustomed to seeing. Everyone had been looking at her like that for days. Trying to figure her out. She understood, to a point. Her unconscious body and belongings had, after all, come falling through a hole that ordinarily spewed out demons—this place also had fucking demons.

It seemed Belle had been looking back in silence for too long. Cullen stepped in behind the Seeker and barked at Spencer. “Recruit Dolan!”

To Belle’s shock, Spencer ripped himself from her arms. He stood at attention and thumped his fist on his chest in salute like a good little indoctrinated soldier. It was worrisome. “Yes, Commander?”

“You heard Seeker Cassandra’s question. How do you know this woman?” The way Cullen said “woman” made Belle want to hit him. The way he said a lot of things made Belle want to hit him.

“He’s my little brother,” she said before Spencer could answer. She sniffled and wiped away what was left of their tearful reunion with the heel of her hand.

She watched with no small amount of amusement as confusion washed over everyone in view. It always had, even back home. Looks were exchanged, and eyes darted back and forth between the two of them, seeking some form of similarity in their faces. There wasn’t any.

Another male voice piped up behind her. “This is your sister, Dolan?”

Belle looked over her shoulder without turning her body. The voice belonged to the Inquisitor. He stood with his arms folded across his robed chest. A half smile played about his lips.

“She is, Inquisitor,” said Spencer.

The young man rounded them, taking a position beside the Seeker. He was a few years older than Spencer, Belle noticed now that he was closer. Slim lines had formed on his forehead from what may have been either persistent skepticism or persistent amusement. Still, he couldn’t have been any older than her.

“You realize that’s rather hard to believe on sight, don’t you?” the Inquisitor asked.

“He looks more like his mother, and I look more like our father. His mother is also a different race than mine was,” Belle said, inserting herself again into the conversation. She should not have been left out of it in the first place.

“Was she an elf or Qunari or something?”

Belle and Spencer snorted in unison. She’d met a Qunari in the tavern, Iron Bull. He was a friend of the Inquisitor’s, and looked exactly like his namesake. He was massive and horned with one eye. He was also one of the first people to greet her with any sort of warmth. He was crass and lewd, and she loved it. He reminded her of some of the cops she used to work with. She didn’t even mind when he propositioned her. She’d been a little flattered, though she was fairly certain that his proclivities were pretty expansive. Despite her curiosity about…things, she turned him down.

It seemed ludicrous, in any case, that Spencer could have been half that. “Race doesn’t mean the same thing here as it does where we come from. Spencer’s mom came from a different part of the world, but she was still human. We’re all humans there. It’s just that my mom was from a paler place and his was from Israel. Kind of like your Rivain from what I’ve read and seen in my five days here.”
The Inquisitor hummed. “But you have the same father?”

“Mmhmm.”

He looked at them again and shrugged, the tilted grin returning to his face. “Alright then.” He reached for Belle’s hand and introduced himself. “Maxim Trevelyan. But please call me Max. And for the love of the Maker, please don’t call me Inquisitor.”

Ha. Another Max. This Max was very different from her paralegal, though. She shook his hand and smiled, grateful for the strange familiarity. “Belle Dolan. It’s lovely to meet you Max.”

“You are too trusting, Inquisitor,” Cassandra said. She and Cullen must get along just swimmingly, Belle thought.

“I’m not suggesting we just bring her into the war room and put her to work without asking them both some questions. I’m just accepting that she and Spencer are siblings. Relax, Cassandra.”

The dark-haired Seeker made a disgusted noise that sounded like “ech.” Josephine and Leliana approached with soft footsteps. Josephine laid a delicate hand on Max’s forearm, and Belle could see something between them in the way he looked back at her.

“Perhaps we might begin asking those questions now, Inquisitor,” Josephine said, “if you are feeling up to it.” The sweetness in her tone made Belle want to reach out and hug her.

Max’s half smile turned into a whole one as he looked at his ambassador. “An excellent idea, Josephine.”

The lot of them—Max, Spencer, Belle, Cassandra, Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen—started up the stairs into the main hall. Max beckoned to the bald elf to follow along. Solas, Belle heard him called around Skyhold. He nodded and joined in behind them. They passed through several doors before reaching a midsized room with two windows, a long table, and chairs. It reminded Belle of a conference room. If Belle and Spencer made it through this, she would have to remember where this room was. It was perfect for negotiations. It was sparse, and could remain so for a potentially hostile party. She could also set it up to be more inviting for a friendly negotiation. She chided herself for slipping back into lawyer mode while her actual life was on the line.

Everyone took their seats around the table, with Belle making certain to sit next to her brother. She had not slipped across dimensions to find him only to be parted by something as silly as a conference table. He nudged her with his still-armored shoulder and smiled. She realized she’d had a severe expression on her face and tried to relax her mouth. She wondered if Spencer understood their state of peril. He was smart, but he was still young. He may have been a first responder, but the severity of a situation could often escape his attention. He didn’t have the life experience to fear for his own life like she feared for it.

Questions came in waves from everyone at the table. Belle and Spencer told those present about their lives before being pulled into Thedas. They talked about her mother’s death in a car crash when she was on the way to pick Belle up from kindergarten. They talked about their only semi-religious father’s journey to a temple bereavement group where he met Spencer’s mother, who was mourning the loss of a friend. They talked about Belle “choosing” a different baby brother when her uncle held her up to the window in the neonatal unit. They talked about broken bones and sports and college and career choices. They talked about themselves until the sun set on Skyhold.

Then the questions about Thedas began. “What are your opinions on the Circle of Magi?” Max asked.
Spencer answered first. “Honestly, I haven’t been around that stuff for long enough to have formulated an opinion.” A diplomatic answer, if a bit flippant in his choice of words.

Max looked at Belle, an expert in the diplomatic answer. “Well, from what I understand of the Circle, it seems like a massive human rights violation.” This was not a diplomatic answer. There was a diplomatic answer to the question, but it would have been a lie. Lies would not save her or her brother.

“What do you mean by that?” Cullen asked, his fur having been ruffled by Belle’s response. His fist clenched tight in his leather glove.

“I mean,” she said, glaring at him, “that indefinite imprisonment without a trial, alone, is a violation of a person’s rights. That’s not even considering mass summary execution and lobotomization. That an entire culture of people in multiple nations seemed to accept this as an unquestionable fact of life until recently is baffling to me. And, frankly, nauseating.”

That leather glove creaked. That clenched fist trembled. Cullen looked like he wanted to hurl himself across the table and throttle her. Alternatively, he looked like he was trying not to vomit. “The Circle may not be a perfect solution but—”

“It’s not even a good solution, Cullen,” said Max, cutting the Commander’s statement off at the knees. It was the first time Belle had seen Max angry. “You and I have both experienced the Circle and the terrible things that happen there. You didn’t leave the Order because you felt good about what they were doing, and I didn’t free the mages because I thought we were all just fine under the Chantry’s thumb. I appreciate Belle’s candor on the matter, and happen to agree.”

Belle wished she could have enjoyed watching Cullen get shut down. But a look of profound shame drew his eyes down and away from everyone. They seemed unfocused, like he was remembering something that made him swallow hard. What Max said had touched a sensitive nerve. Perhaps it had dredged up a painful memory. Whatever it was, Cullen had been silenced, and Belle felt a pang of empathy and guilt at his sudden retreat.

The questioning continued for some time. Questions about Corypheus—the bad guy in this scenario, as far as Belle could tell—questions from Solas about what might have caused the rifts that swallowed and transported the siblings—he blustered and speculated, but he had no clue—and questions about their capabilities to be of continued use to the Inquisition. Hours passed, and Belle started to feel the immediate danger to their lives lift and fade away. She mused to herself then that this was the longest job interview she’d ever undergone. The day had long since shifted itself deep into night when everyone decided to wrap up. About fucking time.

“I can’t see any reason why these two shouldn’t be allowed to stay and work for the Inquisition,” said Max. “Can any of you?”

Silent heads shook, and Cassandra said, “I have not heard any lies from either of them, and it seems their interests align with ours.” She added, “For now.”

Cullen remained still and reticent throughout the exchange, though his eyes were once more focused on Belle.

“Excellent,” Max said. His cheerful demeanor belied the exhaustion apparent in his tone. “Then I’m going to declare, or whatever it is that I’m supposed to do at times like this, that Spencer and Belle Dolan may remain with the Inquisition. Spencer will continue his duties under Cullen and in my personal guard, and Belle will begin her diplomatic work with Josephine as soon as both ladies deem it feasible.” He stood. “I further declare that I am going to bed. I will see you all in the morning. Or
maybe the afternoon.”

Belle liked Max. She saw reflections of herself in him. She hoped that she would enjoy working with him for however long she was stuck in Thedas. It couldn’t be for too long, though.

Everyone began filing out of the room behind him. Belle stopped Spencer and said, in a hushed voice, “I can’t stay here for as long as they seem to think we’ll be here. We have to go home. I’m going to fucking die here.”

Spencer shook his head, a confused look on his face. “What are you talking about? The Inquisitor just said we were safe and could stay.”

“I know you’re the picture of health, P, but think for a second. I’m not a healthy person, and I have exactly thirty-three days until I run out of my GI meds. Thirty-four until my inhalers run out. And thirty-fucking-two until I run out of painkillers for the shit this place is doing to my neck, back, and migraines.”

“But no one knows how to get us home,” Spencer said. “We have to make do here until they figure it out. Maybe you should see the healers.”

“Or maybe we should push the efforts to get us home and put some pressure on people to focus on it. If herbs worked for this stuff, people wouldn’t have needed to invent powerful chemicals to help me breathe and not vomit every time I ate or rolled on my right side.” Belle was reaching. She knew she was. She was scared. She knew she shouldn’t have been putting it on her brother. It hadn’t stopped her.

He looked worried, and she felt instant remorse at having said any of it. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re right. I’ll go see the healers soon. Are you going to stay with me tonight? I have a whole tower to myself.” She was asking more for herself than for him.

Spencer eyed her for a moment before answering. “Nah, I’m going to head back to the barracks. I don’t need anyone seeing me any differently. It’s better for the unit if we all stay together.”

Okay, but we’ll talk tomorrow, alright?”

He nodded, and she hugged him tight. He didn’t need her hovering over him, but she wasn’t going to lose him ever again now that she’d found him. Never again. “Night, bruder,” she said into his hair. “Night, schwester.”

Belle hung back when Spencer left. She just needed to take a few deep breaths before she walked out where anyone else could see her. It had been an emotionally taxing day, and she didn’t want to cry in front of anyone. Nor did she want to make it obvious she had been crying with her nose and eyes getting all red and raw. She stared at the candlelit wooden door, watching the vague outline of her shadow flicker over the oaky grain. She inhaled slowly, counting to four as she did. She held her breath in her lungs, counting to five. She let it out, counting to six. The jumble that was her mind eased with every second.

She was about to repeat the process when a large hand pressed on her bicep. Belle spun and gasped, and hissed out a “Shit!” when she saw who touched her. Cullen stood there with an unreadable expression on his face. She hadn’t noticed that he never followed everyone else out. Bad situational awareness on her part. He’d been silent as she’d shared murmured words with her brother. He’d waited until they were alone to approach her.

Perhaps she should have been worried about his intentions. He had, however, numerous
opportunities to hurt or kill her if he wanted. Instead, she suspected he wanted to discuss what she said to him two nights before.

He was silent for several beats before he found his voice. “What did you mean when you said ‘detox’ before?” He spoke low and with a hint of uncertainty. Just a hint.

“It means detoxification. The process of chemicals or toxins leaving the body, usually alcohol or narcotics,” she said. Cullen looked a touch confused. “Withdrawal. When you stop taking something you’ve been taking for a long time.”

Recognition passed across his face, along with a flash of what might have been terror. The second vanished as quick as it came, making Belle question whether she had imagined it. He said nothing. He just stared at her. His lips parted twice, as if he was about to speak but decided against it.

“What were you taking?” asked Belle, breaking the laden silence that hung between them.

Cullen hesitated. Long seconds passed before his answer. “Lyrium,” he said, like it was a secret disgrace.

“Max said you left the Order, and a few people around here have mentioned you used to be a Templar. Did that have anything to do with this?” Belle hadn’t gotten the chance to read enough about the specifics of being a Templar, only what they did in the Circle and the reasons they opposed the mages.

“It did.”

“And I can only assume, because you waited until everyone else left, that they don’t know you’ve stopped taking this stuff.”

“Cassandra is aware. But the Inquisitor…” He hesitated again, no doubt wondering if he should have said anything at all. “I have not yet told him.”

Belle sighed through her nose. “That’s less than optimal. I have no plan to tell him, though, if that’s your concern. But you should, especially if this can negatively impact your work.”

Cullen seemed offended by an insinuation she hadn’t made. “It has yet to.” He was getting hostile with her, as he was wont to do.

She could feel her irritation boiling just below the surface. “Great. Good for you.” Maybe a little closer to the surface than she thought.

His brow furrowed. Deep lines formed there, made deeper by years of similar angry expressions. He didn’t say anything. He just scowled and stared.

“Great, well I’m going to bed. I’ve had a rather trying day. I just found out my brother, who I thought was dead, has been alive and under your impaired command for the past three months. So, pardon me while I go try to digest that information. Oh, but only once I’ve climbed that godforsaken ladder. You have a fan-fucking-tastic evening.”

Belle turned from him and pulled the door open so hard she almost wrenched her shoulder. Obstinate son of a bitch, she thought.

“Asshole,” she said.

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Chapter End Notes

Yay Spencer!!! Yay Max!!! And Cullen can be kind of a dick sometimes, but, then again, so can Belle.

Funny story, I actually did try to pick a different sister when my uncle brought me to see mine through that big window. Good thing it didn't take. ^_~ I also just wanted to quickly mention that even though this is a sort of self-insert, I'm using a different family and marital status for Belle. I have two living parents, a younger sister, and a husband. I guess I just felt like I should mention it so no one gets sad for real life me. Heh...

In any case, thank you for continuing down this very foul-mouthed fucking road with me. I hope you're having as much fun as I am. ^_~
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cullen had never, in all his years, seen a staircase forced into a stone wall as fast as the one constructed in Belle’s tower. Not two days had passed since the Inquisitor granted her permission to stay, and the riotous construction was done in only one span of daylight. Josephine had the process expedited by calling in a favor from a builder’s guild her family traded with in Orlais. She grew very cross with Cullen when he questioned her on the necessity of the fuss. Something about “Maker forbid anyone be comfortable” and “that godforsaken ladder.” He suspected Belle had uttered the latter.

The ambassador also “borrowed” a number of Cullen’s men—appropriated them without asking was more like it—to move a desk into Belle’s tower. The heavy thing was large and ornate, rivalling Josephine’s and his own in size and stature. It was a fine piece of woodwork. Much more than the interloper required. But Cullen dared not question Josephine a second time, lest she send Leliana after him, or worse, a nobleman.

He still couldn’t trust Belle as far as he could throw her. Though she did not divulge his lyrium withdrawal to the Inquisitor, within the first week of her authorized presence, Cullen decided to do it himself. He was taken aback by how calm and understanding the man had been about it. Cullen would even go so far as to say that the Inquisitor had been supportive of the endeavor. He asked after Cullen’s health, clapped a hand on his back, and told him how proud he was of Cullen’s resolve to leave his former life behind.

“And please, Cullen, call me Max,” he said. It was a request that was almost more difficult than quitting lyrium.

Cullen tried to remember to call him Max the next day. They were discussing a potential rotation in Max’s personal guard for the grand ball in seven weeks—an idea he would not even hear of—in his quarters when Cullen used his name. Max smirked in recognition of the difficulty with which Cullen avoided using titles. A small sense of gratification filled Cullen’s chest at having passed through the formality, followed by a cold sensation in his gut at his imagined defiance of hierarchical protocols.

A series of three deliberate knocks interrupted their conversation. Max remained in his seat near his bedside and called down to whomever it was to enter. The sound of soft footsteps followed that of the squeaking door. A mass of red hair soon crested the top of the stairs. Belle. She’d taken to pushing the curtain of hair that hung near her eyes to the side and letting it curl into the rest of her loose ringlets. Her brow was creased and her cheeks pinkened, a somewhat pained look stuck to her face. Her shoulders were high and tense, unmoving even as her bosom swelled with hard breaths in and out.

“Max,” she said, still struggling to breathe, “I have—Josie and I—We—” She wheezed hard and hunched over. One of her hands held a piece of parchment that creased and bent against her thigh as she held herself upright.

Max laughed. “Andraste’s ass, Belle, are you alright?”

Despite the air still sawing through her chest, Belle looked up at them with a look of youthful amusement. “I’m fine,” she said. “It’s just—fucking stairs—all the stairs.” She hunched over again as a hard sigh escaped her chest. “Does everywhere in—Thedas have so many fu—ucking stairs?”
“In my experience, yes,” Max said. “Do you want to sit down?” He stood to meet her.

“No. No, I’m—I’m fine. I’m f—” Another hoarse wheeze. “Yeah. Yeah, I need to sit down.”

Cullen watched with a confused blend of indignation and an emotion he couldn’t quite place as Belle sat on the edge of Max’s bed. She held out the half-crumpled paper, and Max took it from her. She collapsed backward onto the bed while he unwrinkled the document. A sliver of pale flesh shone through a gap between her odd shirt and her odd breeches. Yet more scandalous behavior.

“I—I worked that out with Duke Aubert via correspondence,” she said. Her breathing slowed and quieted as Max read the parchment.

The man’s blue eyes went wide. “How in the Void did you get him to agree to this?”

“I just convinced him it was in the best interests of all parties. And don’t you worry, I’m maintaining my oath and ethical standards exactly as I would have had there actually been a disciplinary committee here.”

“But, this is—it’s…”

Belle sat up then. A smug grin sat on her lips, a glimmer in her eyes. “Awesome? Amazing? Fucking mind blowing?” She wiggled her fingers in the air. “Oh, Belle, you’re the best lawyer we’ve ever had! We should hold a parade in your honor! I think that’s what you were looking for.”

Cullen stood stark still and stunned at her display, at the indecorous audacity of her. His mouth had fallen agape at her effrontery, and he closed it slowly so as not to draw attention to it. He should not have been surprised. She was brash and noisy with him, why should he have believed she would treat the Inquisitor—Max, he reminded himself—any differently?

But Max laughed. He laughed long and loud, and Belle joined him. “I only wish I’d had you around when the Marquis DuRellion was claiming he owned Haven,” he said once their laughter ebbed. “You can bet I would have found a weak link in his chain of title somewhere along the way.”

Cullen was not always good at reading people’s facial expressions, but he could have sworn he saw a flicker of affection between them. That did not sit well with him. He knew Josephine harbored expanding feelings for the Inquisitor and…well…to put it bluntly, he liked her better than Belle. He would not have this intruder interfere with his friend’s happiness.

“I just need you to authorize the release of our end of the bargain,” said Belle.

Max held up the paper. “This is truly well-done, Belle. Of course you can send the Duke what the Inquisition has promised. Thank you.” He handed the letter back to her.

“No. Thank you.” She turned to leave only to pause right beside Cullen and pivot back toward Max. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” Her hair smelled like fruit and lilies this close.

“Ask away,” Max said.

“I’ve been in Thedas for a couple of weeks now, but I still don’t feel comfortable negotiating with the nobility in person because I’m not dressed properly. I always wore suits to work back home, but I don’t have the equivalent here. I was wondering if it would be alright for Josephine and Vivienne to arrange for some tailors to come fit me for some work-appropriate clothes.”

“Some tailors?”
“Yeah. I think it would be good for me to have a variety of outfits. Some tasteful Orleian things to work with the Orlesians, some nice Ferelden clothes to work with the Fereldens, and some neutral stuff—maybe Antivan—for when multiple parties are involved. I’ve come to realize the Orlesians are particularly picky about clothes, and Fereldens are particularly picky about making sure they’re not dealing with Orlesians.” She was not wrong. “But basically, I just need to stop looking so goddamn out of place here.”

Max sent another soft smile her way. “Of course. That sounds like the perfect idea. And, honestly, I’d have anything made for you if it meant you could keep that up.” He gestured to the paper in her hand.

Even from beside her, Cullen could see Belle’s smile wane a little. “Thanks, Max.” She said his name with such ease. Ignoring titles must have been commonplace in Orange County. Or perhaps she was just uncouth in any realm.

She turned to leave again. Her firm and ever-assessing hazel eyes landed on Cullen for a moment, and his breath caught in his throat without reason or explanation. Maybe he was waiting for the inevitable lash of her tongue. Instead, all she said was, “Hey, Cullen.”

He was too startled to reply. He could only watch her pass by and begin walking down the stairs toward the main hall. Her wide set hips rocked and swayed with every step until they were out of view. He noticed that her fingernails were now a single, glittering color as her free hand skinned along the railing until it, too, vanished. All that was left of her was the hair that glowed like wildfire in the beam of sunlight pouring through the window. Even after she set like the evening sun, Cullen watched. He heard with his eyes and his ears her continued descent until she opened and closed the door. And then she was gone.

The sound of Max’s chair creaking whipped Cullen’s head back to face the man. Cullen could feel the heat of a peculiar and furious blush crawling up his neck and cheeks. He fought the urge to rub at the back of his neck.

“Do you know what she just did?” asked Max.

“I really don’t,” Cullen said.

“She reopened a major trade route through Val Colline with four old swords we found in the Dales and a bottle of West Hill Brandy.” He shook his head as he said it.

It was impressive. Cullen was impressed. He could not, however, go around saying things like that. Someone might think he approved of her presence. He grunted his tepid praise and moved on to a more pressing matter.

“She is too familiar with you, Max.” The irony of his words had not escaped him.

“What do you mean by that?” There was no anger in Max’s tone, only curiosity.

“You are the Inquisitor, and we’re at war. She is your underling. She is meant to take orders from you and address you with due respect, not throw herself on your bed and use foul language when speaking to you.”

Max laughed again. “I would expect anyone to use foul language because we’re at war. It’s not a pleasant thing, as you well know, and unpleasant experiences are often met with foul language.

As for her familiarity with me, I asked her to treat me just like she treated her boss in Orange County. She asked me if I was sure and I told her of course I was sure. She smiled and talked about how she
and Vic—that’s her old employer—used to walk around Vic’s office barefoot and talk about case strategies and things they both enjoyed. Don’t ask me if Vic was a man or a woman, by the way. I have no idea.”

Ah. So, Belle was too casual with everyone. That was not terribly shocking.

“I am inclined to agree with her perspective, though. People work better together if they are also friends. If, however, you are suggesting a different type of familiarity, I would remind you that her little brother looks very much like me. I believe she would find any insinuation of romantic familiarity with me rather insulting. Another point on which I would be inclined to agree with her.” Max’s tone bore a seamless blend of warning and amusement.

Their conversation did not last much longer after that. Cullen passed by Josephine, Vivienne, and Belle on his way back to his tower. The three women were chirping away about clothing. The mage and the ambassador looked spry, no doubt thrilled to be discussing a topic so in their element. Belle, on the other hand, looked wilted. It was then that he noticed she was thinner than she had been two weeks prior. It was not by much, but it was noticeable from a distance. She also looked a bit fatigued. Dark circles buried themselves deep beneath her eyes, her every move slightly less animated.

He shook the thoughts of her welfare when he hit the open air of the battlements. The cool wind that swept across and hissed through the cracks and crenellations calmed his body and mind. It was one of his favorite things about Skyhold. It was the reason he left the hole in the roof of his tower. Ideas about Belle were whisked away with each gust, carried away from the battlements, far from his care or concern.

Over the next few days, Cullen noticed her standing on those battlements. Stone-faced and stationary, she would watch as he trained his soldiers, including her brother. Her words about his “impaired command” niggled and ate at him every time he saw her there. He trained that much harder when she watched. He told himself over and over that he had nothing to prove to her. Nothing to prove and nothing to gain by proving anything, in any case. Her opinion of him was unshakable. That he thought of her at all was irritating. She was like a pebble in his boot, always around and always working her way to the forefront of his mind with the mere fact of her presence.

Belle wheedled her way into everyone’s favor but his own. Josephine loved her unladylike lady from the moment they met. Leliana appreciated the way Belle did business. Dorian, Sera, Iron Bull, Varric, and Blackwall all seemed to think she was hilarious, and they would not shut up about her strange adventures in Orange County—ludicrous tales of carriages that moved on their own or flew, of machines that held all the knowledge in the world, and of devices that could be used to hear music whenever one desired or speak to someone a hundred thousand miles away. Cassandra respected Belle’s willingness to get down to business and work for her keep. Solas enjoyed her inquisitive nature, and asked her endless questions about how she came to Thedas. Cole said she was considerate of others and liked to hug him, which Cullen doubted. Vivienne mentioned once how much she enjoyed watching Belle work. That was not a credit in Belle’s favor, in his opinion.

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When he actually saw her work for the first time he reconsidered his position.

Josephine requested that Cullen be the one to fetch Belle from her tower when Comte Du Bellay arrived about a week later. Though he despised being treated as a runner, it was wise to select him for the task, given his inability to disguise his disdain for Orlesian nobility. He did not knock before entering her tower. He did not have to.
She sat at her desk under the highest point of her new staircase, leaning over a large book. Her red curls cascaded over her shoulders, drawing his attention down from her focused eyes. She was fastened into an emerald corset with an ostentatious black collar and long sleeves. The frilled collar dipped down deep between her breasts. From that angle, Cullen wondered if he could see clear to her navel if the garment were not so dark. Her breasts were soft and full and creamy pale, like the rest of her. They pushed against the rich silk with every inhale, issuing silent pleas to be set free. He felt a bead of sweat on his forehead. A product of his lyrium withdrawal, certainly.

He cleared his throat as if to banish her breasts—thoughts of her breasts—thoughts of her away. “Belle,” he said, “Comte Du—”

She cut him off with an absent wave of her hand and an incoherent sound that fell somewhere between a “z” and a “j,” like a “zhzhzhaah uh uh.” Any of his previous inklings were dispelled in an instant.

Her hand hung in the air, a single finger telling him to wait. The index finger of her other hand traced the page beneath her nose. Cullen’s anger and impatience surged up and up with every moment she held him there like a trained dog told to sit, stay.

“Ah!” Belle poked the page. “Ah ha! There you are you sneaky son of a bitch.” Her shoulders shimmied as she placed a torn piece of parchment into the book. She sang a meandering little tune. “This contract is sooo void. So, so void. Mmhmm.” She closed the book on the scrap of paper and turned her bespectacled gaze on him. “I’m sorry about that. I was looking for binding precedent that would help me void one of the Inquisition’s contracts that Max made waaay to hastily.” She gave Cullen a wide grin.

“I see.”

“Hey man, finding binding precedent in a place that essentially has no written law whatsoever is hard. No proper tribunals or anything unless there’s a formal trial needed for somebody important. Most of the time it’s just—” She made a sort of hacking noise and stuck out her tongue while slicing across her throat with her hand. “So, what’s up?”

Cullen clenched and unclenched his jaw. “Comte Du Bellay is in the main hall. Josephine, Leliana, and the Inquisitor are waiting with him.”

“Oh, shit he’s here already?” she asked, standing up to reveal the rest of her flowing garment and close-fitting breeches. It hemmed her in tight, molding her already curvy figure into a bold hourglass. It reminded him of a version of Vivienne’s favorite outfit. She gathered up a board much like Josephine’s and a pile of papers. “God I miss my piece of shit calendaring software. And billables. I never thought I would miss billables, but I fucking miss billables.” He had no idea what she was muttering about.

Belle scurried over to him and closed the door behind them as they left her tower. Someone had given her a key. He knew this because she also locked the door. As the person with the highest responsibility for Skyhold’s security, someone probably should have told him they’d given her a Maker damned key.

Her new boots clicked along the battlements as they walked back toward the main hall. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

Cullen looked down at her, accidentally looking at her breasts before her face. His hand did find the back of his neck then. “Fine.”
Belle arched an eyebrow. “How goes the detox?”

“Fine.”

She sighed through her nose. “You know, you don’t have to be so terse with me. I’m just asking how you are and you’re giving me nothing. I get that we got off on the wrong foot, but I’m expressing genuine concern for your wellbeing.”

He humored her. “What would you like me to tell you?”

“I guess whether you’ve almost kicked the lyrium. It’s been months since you’ve had any, right? It should pretty much be out of your system by now, shouldn’t it?”

She really had no idea about lyrium. Cullen supposed there was nothing quite like it in Orange County. “Lyrium never fully leaves the body. Some symptoms of withdrawal will be with me for the rest of my life.”

Belle grabbed his elbow and pushed, turning him to face her. “What? Your whole life?”

“Yes. And I stopped taking it recently enough that it could still kill me. Or it could send me into an irreparable madness. That is why Cassandra knew before I told the Inquisitor. She has been watching to ensure that I can still fulfill my duties to the Inquisition—to ensure that my command is not ‘impaired.’” He made certain to look her dead in the eye.

She dropped her gaze and started to walk again. “Shit,” was all she said.

He felt an inexplicable need to ease her worry. “It has not killed me yet,” he said.

“Let’s keep it that way.”

Belle charged through the door and into the room where they had questioned her. She kept calling it the “conference room,” and everyone took a shine to the term. Max sat at the head of the table with the Comte on his right and Josephine on his left. Leliana sat near the other end of the table with a seat pulled out beside her for Cullen.

“Good afternoon, Comte Du Bellay, I trust you had a pleasant journey,” Belle said. She used the same voice he’d heard from her that first day. It was like she was a different person. Duplicity for nobility.

“As pleasant as one can have when being dragged into the mountains,” said the Comte. His mask was an opalescent white with red flourishes around the eyes.

Belle flashed him a curt smile as she took her seat next to Josephine. “Then I do hope you’ll allow us to make your unceremonious haul worthwhile.”

“We shall see, Lady Dolan.”

Over the next half hour, Belle talked circles around the Comte. It was like watching a seasoned swordsman duel against a one-armed man with a butter knife. She used about a dozen words that no one in that room had ever heard of. Terms like “promissorily estopped upon assent,” and “impracticability,” and “liquidated damages clause” flew from her lips. She laid page after page of her handwritten contract in front of the Comte, a genial smile affixed to her mouth while she explained the document line by line. The smile seemed perpetual, until the Comte made a demand. In the blink of an eye, Belle’s expression shifted to one of blank sternness. She gave the man a thorough dressing down, spelling out every deficiency in his proposal.
By the end of their meeting, the Comte had signed a contract pledging no fewer than eight trained chevaliers, fully insured against death or dismemberment. Belle made the man insure his own chevaliers against death or dismemberment. She made him promise the Inquisition money if the chevaliers were killed or amputated in any way during their service to the cause. And he smiled at her and thanked her for the privilege. Maker's breath. It was incredible. How could he avoid saying that it was awe-inspiring this time? How, when it could have been nothing less?

“Maker’s balls,” Max said after Josephine escorted the bamboozled Comte out of the room to his quarters, “that was extraordinary. I don’t think I understood half of what you said, either.”

“You’re seriously considering my parade now, aren’t you?” She was a different person all over again. It was disconcerting.

“I’m seriously considering naming my firstborn after you.”

Belle laughed her rich, relaxed laugh as she collected the signed pages of the contract. “Well, if it’s a boy, just name him after P.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, why do you call Spencer ’P?’” Max asked as he stood.

“Because he couldn’t say his name when he was little,” said Belle. “He used to say his name was ’Pencer,’ so we started calling him that as a nickname. Then it got shortened to ‘Pencey,’ then ‘Pen,’ and finally just ‘P.’”

Max hummed his understanding. “And why does he call you ’Bete’ when he thinks no one is paying attention? It means ‘beast’ in Orlesian. That doesn’t seem very brotherly.”

Belle smiled to herself, her eyes wandering over the document in her hands. “It’s plenty brotherly if you’ve ever had a sibling. But that’s a bit of a longer story. The short version is it’s from a story called ’Beauty and the Beast.’”

“La Belle et La Bete,” Leliana said.

Belle tapped the end of her nose. “Bingo. I had this beautiful illustrated version of the original story—we call it a fairytale—and it was all in black and white, except for the red rose. And I would read it over and over to Spencer. It got to where he’d call me Bete if he thought I was being a doucheba—being mean to him. As we got older, it just sort of stuck.”

Everyone made their way to the door, Belle still flipping through the pages of her work. “What did you think of Belle’s work today, Commander?” Leliana asked just loud enough for Belle to hear. She smirked at him after asking. Insidious woman.

“It was…well done,” said Cullen. He could not see Belle’s face, but he could hear her puff out a laugh. “Gee, thanks.”

Leliana could not be stopped from her further prodding. “Don’t worry, Belle. That is high praise coming from our grim Commander.”

A small mercy befell him when Belle brushed it off. “Thanks. If it’s okay with you guys, I’d like to go have dinner with my brother before you—” She pointed a finger at Max. “—spirit him away to Crestwood. That Hawke dude is hysterical, but he wears mischief and trouble over his shoulders like a cloak.”

Cullen had not realized she’d met Garrett Hawke. How could she not have met him? he thought.
Everyone in Thedas seems to have met him. A feckless concern seeped into Cullen’s mind about what Hawke might have told Belle about the man Cullen was back in Kirkwall.

“I’m worried what he’s walking you all into,” she said. She had every reason to be worried. She was right about Hawke. The man flourished while Kirkwall burned, despite having saved it in the end. And one of his closest friends killed hundreds of people when he blew up the Chantry. Belle really had put it well. Hawke did wear mischief and trouble like a cloak.

“But you and Josie will be there to see us off tomorrow, won’t you?” Max asked.

“Yes, Josie and I will be there.” She grinned at him before heading for the large open door to leave the main hall. “See you all tomorrow.” She waved over her shoulder.

Cullen couldn’t help but stare after her again. His hand rested on the pommel of his sword, as it so often did. He felt his grip tighten. Belle was like five different people in one body. She was the calm, intelligent negotiator with the Inquisition’s best interests in mind. She was the stranger with unending potential for malicious intent. She was the silver-tongued, funny girl with a foul mouth and a thousand stories. She was the vicious attack dog with sharpened fangs and a tongue that cut like a knife. She was the fire-haired woman with swaying hips and a hypnotic laugh.

And he was in trouble.

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Chapter End Notes

I mean... Lawyers are sexy. So is watching a beat-down when you're on the winning side. XD

I want to take a moment here and say WOW! Holy shit on a swizzle, you guys! I'm overwhelmed by the positivity you have been absolutely flooding the comments section and my inbox and the kudos button with. You're awesome! Every last one of you! I never anticipated the reaction to this would be so quick and so excited, so thank you all who have joined me! I hope you stick with me and keep having as much fun reading this as I am writing it!

<3<3<3
“You look like a frickin’ peacock,” Spencer said.

Belle preened, running her fingers along the frilled collar of her new Orlesian attire. “I like peacocks.”

“That’s good, Belle, because your brother is right. You do look like a peacock,” said Dorian. “Shimmery, green, and quite full of yourself. It suits you.” He sat across from her at a large congregational table in the center of the Herald’s rest. “Don’t you think, Sera?”

Sera, who sat to the right of Dorian, was almost too busy stuffing her face with stew and booze to answer. She did, though, mouth full and muffled. “Dunno, never seen one.”

“But you told me you’d been to Tevinter. Did you not manage to catch a glimpse of just one while you were there?”

“Bit busy, yeah?” she said before swallowing down her food. “I had things to do not looking at your stupid pee-birds. Pretty’s fine, but if you can’t eat it, sleep with it, or steal it, ’s not worth much.”

“She’s right, you know,” Iron Bull said in his deep voice. “Pretty things are pointless if they’re useless.”

“Well, I suppose it’s good that I’m not useless then, isn’t it?” Dorian asked, leveling a squinting glare at the huge Qunari to his left. There was definitely something going on there.

“I don’t know about that, Buttercup,” said Varric from the end of the table. “You can’t eat, sleep with, or steal the Counselor, and she’s still pretty useful.” Belle loved that he’d taken to calling her Counselor. It lent a sort of foreign familiarity to their interactions.

Sera chewed and grinned at the same time. “Might try number one and two, though, just the same.”

Belle grinned back at her. “Sorry, Sera, I tend to prefer a different set of parts than what you and I got goin’ on.” Belle sipped her water, still smiling.

“Parts you can buy,” Sera said. “Or make.”

Belle’s water nearly came out of her nose. When her laughter had slowed to a simmer, she said, “Very true, but I prefer men anyway.” Sera just scoffed and shoved another heaping spoonful into her face.

“And I know this outfit is a little extravagant, P,” Belle said, turning to her brother, “but it makes my tits look amazing.”

“Here, here!” Bull raised his glass. Belle winked at him.

“Ech! Ew! Can you not, though? Can you just not talk about your…?” He waved his outstretched hand around as if to block the offending boobs from view. “Your…those?”

“Aw, come on. What kind of shitty big sister would I be if I didn’t embarrass my little brother every now and then?” She jostled his shoulders. “Besides, you’re leaving tomorrow, and I won’t get to
harass you for a month. And I’ve really missed harassing you. It’s probably the thing I missed the most after you vanished.”

“So, what, I should just start talking about who I’ve banged since I got here?” Spencer asked. He was always just as good at playing these games.

But Belle wasn’t about to back down. “Yeah, dude.” She made her tone as serious as she could. “Tell me who you banged.”

“Ohhh no, I’m not f—”

“Tell me who you banged, dude.”

“Blonde hair and a soft mouth.” Cole’s voice slipped up beside her, startling her just a bit. The ethereal boy was a mind reader. She just had to accept that. That was a real thing here. He was also sweet and kind. He’d brought her a cup of ginger tea the day after he returned with Max to Skyhold. “For your stomach,” he’d said. “You’re worried, but this will help.” She’d hugged him tight after the initial shock wore off. She’d hugged him tight a few times since, too. He was like a little mind-reading Winnie the Pooh.

“She’s always mean but she was nice then. Like Claire,” said Cole.

“Ewww, dude! You slept with Claire two point oh?” Belle’s mouth curled up into a sneer that melded disgust with amusement.

“Who’s Claire?” asked Varric. He leaned forward, intrigued.

“Tits McGee? His clingy, weird high school girlfriend.”

“She wasn’t weird, Bete.”

“She was so fucking weird, P. She fucking knocked on my fucking window in the middle of the fucking night after you guys broke up! My window! Not yours. Mine. And she knew it was mine, the creep. I was only home for the weekend, too, the little spaz.”

Sera snorted, and Spencer let out an exasperated groan. “Ugh, fine, whatever. She was weird. But she still had a great rack.” He and Sera clacked their mugs together at that. Belle shuddered.

It was moments like this that eased her mind. As everyone chattered about spying and stew and sexual conquests, Belle settled into the idea of being there. She still wanted to go home, that much was certain, but the people around her grew on her. She was still terrified to let Spencer leave Skyhold with nothing but a sword and shield to protect him. She was still terrified to let Spencer leave Skyhold with nothing but a sword and shield to protect him, but knowing that Max was a powerful mage who needed little protecting placated her protective nature. Spencer had a dangerous job before being sucked into another dimension. Albeit, no one was actively trying to kill him most of the time, but there was still very real danger in his day-to-day.

At some point in the evening, Spencer excused himself to join his cohorts at another table, and they eventually retired for the night. One by one, the people laughing with her shuffled off into the night to sleep or fuck, or both. They left until she was alone. Wide awake and alone.

Belle wasn’t sleeping well. She thought about it as she trudged back to her tower. Anxiety and insomnia poked and prodded at her. The latter would have been nonexistent without the former. It wasn’t the kind of anxiety that sent her spiraling into a panic attack every night. It was the kind that whispered in her ear and flicked her consciousness just enough to remind her that something was wrong all the time. She was not supposed to be in Thedas. She was not supposed to be there, and it
would kill her soon. She was sure of it. She only had seventeen days left. Seventeen days until things went south.

She climbed her stairs, all the while giving silent thanks to God for sending wonderful Josephine to her. Belle hated heights, and that godforsaken ladder had only highlighted her fears. She’d slept wrapped up in a blanket in the corner of her the tower for the first three nights, if anyone could call what she did sleeping. She shivered and wept and curled into a ball on the floor. Perhaps she’d slept those three nights, and perhaps she hadn’t.

The king-sized bed the workers had somehow hauled up to her room was passable. It was soft, if a little lumpy, and the covers were warm and plush. She thanked God again for the clandestine set of clasps she’d managed to have put on every piece of her new wardrobe. She unhooked and unsheathed herself and changed into her nightshirt. It really was too short and thin for the weather in Skyhold, but that didn’t matter. The fact that it smelted different didn’t bother her, either. It was the piece of home she could slip into every night.

Belle wasn’t even sure how long she would be able to keep wearing that nightshirt. It was starting to hang off her frame in a strange way. She was losing weight, already down somewhere between ten and fifteen pounds, she reckoned. To a point, that was to be expected when she stopped eating processed foods and chocolate and climbed every fucking stair known to mankind. But there were also times she wasn’t eating at all. She counted calories as she slipped under her covers and sidled up to the window at her bedside that she liked to stare out of in her sleeplessness. Maybe six or seven hundred calories, eight if she was pushing it. That was all she’d eaten that day. Less the day before. She’d made a good arrangement with the cook so she could avoid her food allergies, but that only took her so far.

Fear gripped her constantly. Fear that at any moment her gastroparesis or her GERD or her IBS would flare up and incapacitate her with no remedy. The meds were for management, they weren’t a cure. She couldn’t even think about her asthma, her chronic migraines, her cervical stenosis, her subluxated lumbar spine, her fucked up sinuses, or her very rare but occasional bouts of chemical depression. It was all too much.

So Belle stared out that window, watching the two moons creep across the sky, so huge that they looked like they would collide with the mountains as they passed overhead. Night sounds of wind and passing birds and the odd howling wolf soothed her. She cried most nights, but she usually watched and listened until her eyelids were too heavy, until sleep clawed its way into her head.

Movement on the battlements below caught her eye. A head of thick, surprisingly curly blonde hair exited the nearest tower. Cullen wore a loose white tunic and brown pants, but no shoes. The easy night wind that breezed around Skyhold ruffled his already mussed hair, and he ran his hand through it as he padded toward Belle’s tower. She watched him stop midway and put his hands on the stone wall.

He looked out at the snowy mountains. A dim and otherworldly blue glow hovered in the air—the moons reflecting off the ice—making him appear as if he’d been made a ghost upon the setting of the sun. He really was impressive to behold. Even under his loose clothes, and even from that distance, she could see that he was carved muscle and sinew and raw power. His profile was striking, and his bare hands looked at once soft and rough, fragile and strong.

Cullen leaned on those irreconcilable hands and stretched and twisted his body. The barest hint of sweat darkened the back of his tunic. More withdrawals. Belle wished he would at least put some shoes on. As hot as he might have been, it wasn’t good for him to be out in the frigid air in nothing but wisp-thin fabric. If it had been anyone else, she might have yelled down to them and grinned like
an ass. They might have shared a laugh at the fright she’d given them. They might have gone back to bed or come to keep her company in her solitude.

But this was not anyone else. It was Cullen.

She didn’t hate him. On the contrary, she respected him. It took a while for her to realize that he was like a lot of the cops she’d worked with. He’d probably started out like the brand new cops—baby cops, everyone called them. These baby cops were dead serious about the job, about the cause. They ran themselves ragged working overtime and triple-double shifts and arresting even the most pithy offenders because they were going to make the world a better place, goddamnit.

Then they got tired. They got jaded. Some of them got funny, and some of them got angry. A lot of them landed in between. There was always one moment, one pin in the map of their career, that tipped the scales. An abused kid who begged them for salvation. A cute kid who asked them to play catch on duty. Someone’s schizophrenic brother or husband that shot their partner. Someone’s depressed brother or husband that they managed to talk off of a bridge. There was always something that stuck with them. Plenty of them would keep running themselves ragged until they couldn’t anymore, still determined to make that fraction of a difference. It was admirable, however futile it turned out to be.

Belle wondered what the pin was in Cullen’s map. What was the moment that tipped his scales? How long would he run himself ragged before he couldn’t anymore?

She watched him watch the mountains for uncounted seconds. She didn’t know how long he stood out there, staring at that glittery blue ice that turned him spectral. She only knew once she woke the next morning that she fell asleep watching him. She fell asleep to strange dreams of the blue and blonde phantom that snarled and wept and snarled again, the apparition that ran ragged as he slashed at misshapen demons in the darkness, the ghost that wondered if he would ever make that fraction of a difference.

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“You look like fucking frilly Bayonetta, weirdo,” Spencer said into Belle’s hair as she hugged him goodbye.

“And you look like a level two paladin, you fucking dork.” She squeezed him tighter and they laughed.

“I’m sorry I’m leaving so soon after we found each other again.”

“At least this time it’s by choice,” said Belle.

A throat clearing sound came from behind her. Goddamnit. She rolled her eyes while she was still facing away. The sound came from Cullen. She didn’t even have to look.

Belle and Spencer said their “goodbyes” and “I love you’s,” and she made her prerequisite threats that no one better get killed coupled with menacing and pokey fingers pointed from her eyes to everyone else’s. She watched Josephine linger a bit too long and a bit too close to Max. So, this was that courtly love people talked about. Passing touches and amorous gazes and just that inch of space missing between two bodies. It was adorable.

Belle stood sandwiched between a melancholy Josephine and a stoic Cullen. They watched Max, Varric, Vivienne, and Cassandra ride away, followed by Spencer and the rest of his battalion on foot. Belle caught sight of a short swath of blonde hair and an impressive bust on one of the soldiers. Tits
McGee part deux, she thought.

She noticed Cullen’s flop sweat only in passing as she beelined for her tower to cry in private.

For the first week, Belle missed having her brother to complain to about what a pain in the ass it was to be without all their modern comforts. Taking a piss was an ordeal that either involved a disgusting bucket-chair contraption or a trip to the reeking communal latrine. Her period had only ended a few days before, and it became a mess of stained rags and embarrassing laundry the moment her temporary tampon supply ran dry. And to pick up said embarrassing laundry was a slew of servants, which made Belle uncomfortable in an entirely different way.

She took it upon herself, over several days, to do some housekeeping of her own with the servants. She checked in on all of them, managing to convince a few of them to speak candidly with her about their salaries and living situations. As it turned out, a position at Skyhold, or any of the Inquisition’s other properties, was coveted amongst the serving class. The pay was good and everyone got their own bed or bedroll, which was more than any of them were accustomed to in the homes of their previous employers. It was a relief to hear, though it brought Belle little comfort in accepting their servitude.

She had also taken to playing herself one song on her mp3 player every morning. The thing had a fully-charged twenty-four-hour battery when she’d been sucked into Thedas, and she figured she could make it last for a few months by turning it on for a single song. She sang along when there were words because she loved to sing. She was also rather good at it, if she allowed herself to believe what she’d been told. Settling into a version of her customary morning routine helped prepare her for the day, even for just a few minutes. It was better than nothing.

Belle also discovered that she liked the Ferelden nobility much better than the Orlesians. They were of sturdier stock, in her opinion, and less likely to find offense in petty things. A Bann named Hammett, there to discuss trading embrium shipments for extra Inquisition patrols, was accidentally served wine meant for the soldiers, much to Josephine’s immediate horror. Before she could have the offending beverage replaced, the Bann guffawed and drank down the whole glass.

“Wine is wine,” he said, “and the Inquisition soldiers are getting some damn good wine.” Belle liked Bann Hammett.

Ferelden clothes were also more comfortable. She had a few frocks made in various earthy tones, and belted at the waist rather than corseted. Each garment hung just above her knees, and was paired with leggings made of cotton, lambswool, or something called “samite,” and knee-high leather boots. Belle took the liberty of having cloth inserts put in for arch support. She had no clue how everyone walked, let alone marched, without arch support. It made her feet ache.

Cullen seemed to like her better in Ferelden garb, chest-thumping Ferelden that he was. He would nod a greeting to her before staring, which was an improvement on the unrestrained staring he’d been doing since she arrived. The two of them even managed to sprinkle some casual conversations into their routine amidst the bickering and shouting matches over who said what or who promised something to whom.

He didn’t look well, though. Every day his skin looked paler or greener. That flop sweat Belle noticed in passing became persistent. He would wobble where he stood or brace a hand on the war table or lean a shoulder against a wall. His symptoms were getting worse. But every time she asked him how he was doing, his answer was the same.

“Fine.”
“Fine,” Belle would say back.

She still watched him training from the battlements while she ate lunch. While she’d first started doing it to check his competence as a commander, she’d since begun to watch for his welfare. His hand would rest on the pommel of his sword and his body would sway as he barked out orders or instructions. He looked like he would fall over in a stiff breeze.

About eight days after Spencer and Max had left Skyhold—oh, who was she kidding, it had been exactly eight days, two hours, and twenty-one minutes since they’d left—Belle walked through the rotunda with Dorian and Sera on her way to let Cullen know that she needed two of his men to escort an Arl up from the valley the following day. It was her plan to have dinner with her friends after giving Cullen the message.

“We should ask the Commander to join us,” Dorian said. “I think he must be rather lonely locked away in that tower of his.”

Sera pulled a face. “Pfft! He’ll piss on the party!”

“I’m certain he’ll do no such thing. He just needs to loosen up a little. Perhaps a strong glass of something will help.”

“Trust me,” said Belle as they passed through the door to the battlements, “alcohol is the last thing he needs right now.” It would only make things worse. Alcohol dehydrated people and sapped them of vital nutrients, and Cullen needed every vital nutrient his body could contain.

“Oh? So you don’t think I should ask him to join us?”

“That’s not what I said. Ask him, don’t ask him, do what you want. Do you, booboo.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what that means, but it sounds rather dismissive,” said Dorian.

“And you are right on with that assessment.”

“Perfect! We’ll have an extra dash of dashing at dinner tonight, then!”

Sera groaned.

Belle opened the door to Cullen’s office, talking as she did. “Hey, Cullen, I’m going to need to bor—”

She stopped cold at the sight of Cullen lying face down next to his desk, his arm outstretched, as if he’d tried to catch himself as he fell. A small wooden box lay open beside him, its contents spilled and smashed on the floor.

Belle shouted his name as she ran to him. He didn’t move. She felt the sting and scrape of the stone against her knees when she skidded onto the floor. Adrenaline pumped through her body, helping her roll him onto his back. His eyes were closed, his mouth open.

“Cullen?” She patted his cheek. “Cullen, wake up. I need you to wake up for me. Cullen?”

Nothing.

Sera stood frozen by the door. Dorian had appeared on the other side of Cullen’s body at some point. He repeated after Belle with a waiver in his voice. “Cullen? Wake up. Cullen?”

Nothing.
Belle put her ear down next to Cullen’s open mouth.

Nothing.

She put two fingers under his jaw to check for a pulse.

Nothing.

“How’s not breathing and his heart’s not beating, Dorian. Do you know any magic that can bring him back?”

Dorian looked grim as he shook his head. “Not alive. I’m a necromancer, which means he would have to stay dead for me to reanimate him.”

“Then help me get this armor off.”

Belle tugged Cullen’s mantle out of where it was tucked into his belt, while Dorian worked Cullen’s right arm out of it. She pulled it under Cullen’s body and yanked it off his left arm, throwing it out of her way. A mass of silvery steel still stood in her way.

“Roll him toward you,” she said. Oh God, Cullen, breathe, she thought. For the love of God, breathe.

Dorian did as she asked, and she unfastened a small brown buckle that she wondered how Cullen reached every morning. “Down,” she said, and Dorian set Cullen on his back again. They worked at the twin buckles in the front, and pulled Cullen’s cuirass over his limp head.

“Get the straps on your side.” Dorian obeyed again, unfastening the right side of Cullen’s breastplate from his backplate while Belle worked on the left side. Her fingers were steady. They were always steady in an emergency. She was fire-forged for this exact brand of crisis.

She and Dorian pulled Cullen’s breastplate off to reveal his sweat-drenched tunic, every fiber soaked through. His body was still warm. Dorian tugged the backplate out from under the dead man. He was dead. He would not stay that way. He couldn’t.

In almost any case, you’re only going to do compressions until help arrives. No rescue breaths. But in the event of an unwitnessed cardiac arrest, the body is likely deprived of oxygen, and would benefit from compressions and rescue breaths, she remembered the words of the instructor at her last CPR certification renewal. Not compression-only CPR. Rescue breaths and compressions. Rescue breaths and compressions.

Belle tilted Cullen’s head back to open his airway, and swept her finger through his mouth. She fastened her mouth over his, feeling the smooth skin of his scar and the rasp of his stubble against her lips, and breathed into his body twice. His chest rose and fell with each breath. He hadn’t choked on anything. Good.

She laced her fingers together and pressed the heel of her hand into his sternum to start compressions. Thirty to two, thirty to two, thirty to two. Cullen’s ribs cracked against his sternum with her third push. She counted aloud, all the while singing “Stayin’ Alive” in her head to keep the proper pace for her compressions.
“What are you doing?” Dorian asked, no doubt bewildered by her efforts.

“CPR,” she said as she pushed down. Fifteen. “Don’t you dare die, Cullen.” Twenty.

Belle felt again for a pulse at thirty. Still nothing. She breathed into Cullen’s mouth again, watching his chest rise and fall, and started her second set of compressions. “Wake up, Cullen.” She could feel foolish tears rising, burning her eyes. “Wake up. Don’t you fucking die on me, Cullen.”

His head lurched and his body jolted with every compression, his mouth lolled open. One of Belle’s absurd tears broke free and landed on his chest. He couldn’t die. She needed him. The Inquisition needed him, but she needed him, too. She didn’t even know why. All they did was argue and stare at each other.

An uncharacteristic sob forced its way from her unwitting lips after her third set of breaths. He still had no pulse. It wasn’t working. Maybe she should have made Dorian do compressions, he was bigger. But she would have had to teach him how, and time was of the essence.

Thirty more compressions, two more breaths. Nothing.

Where the fuck was Solas? Where was the fucking guy with the strongest healing magic in Skyhold?

Thirty more compressions, two more breaths. Still nothing.

Belle’s tears were flowing uninhibited. “Wake up, you obstinate asshole! This doesn’t get to kill you! You don’t get to die! Wake up!”

She stopped compressions, and balled her right hand into a fist. “Don’t you dare die on me! Don’t you goddamn dare!” She swung that fist down onto his chest as hard as she could, grunting out another sob.

Nothing happened.

Belle screamed as she swung her fist down to thump Cullen’s chest again. It was a desperate scream that belonged to the helpless and hopeless and wretched, to the already-dead warrior thrusting his sword in a pointless final effort to vanquish his enemy. It was fraught and forlorn and tore its way out of her with such force that it made her body tremble.

“Don’t you goddamn dare!”

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Chapter End Notes

Please don’t hit me!!! *flinches*

On a side note, I’m not saying that non-rescue personnel should do rescue breaths. I’m an advocate for compression-only CPR for those who are starting out uninstructed. Also, precordial thumps (slamming one’s fist on someone else’s chest) are *rarely* effective on those whose hearts have stopped beating for an undetermined amount of time. AKA DO NOT TRY WHAT IS DEPICTED ABOVE AT HOME! I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE IF YOU DO, SO DO NOT USE THIS AS A RESUSCITATION GUIDE!
Kay...so...still don't hit me. Pretty please.
Murmured prayers in a foreign language floated in and out of Cullen’s hearing. Prayers, he knew, because they were sung soft and spoken low, even in fragments. A woman’s voice. Andraste? Was this what it felt like to be called to the Maker’s side? Was this what it felt like to die?

He was not going to take the lyrium. He didn’t. But its song had called to him from within the confines of his desk. A siren’s call, luring him to smash against the rocks. And he did. Not in the way the lyrium might have chosen, however.

Mi Shebeirach avoteinu v'imoteinu…

The words echoed in his head until they faded away. He drifted through inky blackness, not the way he thought being taken to the Maker would look. He thought…In truth, he didn’t know how he thought it would be.

Bis’char zeh Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu yishm’reihu…

The song was a silken comfort. It enveloped him, despite the way it faded and returned. He could not hear the whole thing, he suspected, because the language was divine. It could destroy him if he heard it in its entirety, he was certain.

Mikol tzarah v’tzukah umikol nega umachalah, v’yishlach b’rachah v’hatzlachah…

He thought, for the first time, that perhaps he was stuck in blackness because his eyes might still be closed. It seemed unwise to enter the afterlife so obstructed.

V’nomar, Amen.

Amen. He knew that word. The word to end all prayers. Even prayers for the dead ended in amen.

Cullen cracked his eyes open, issuing his own silent prayers for what he might see. Perhaps the gilded spires of the Maker’s Golden City, perhaps the faces of his friends and loved ones and parents, perhaps the Holy and Blessed Andraste herself would be there to guide him to the Maker’s side.

Fire.

He had not expected fire. Fire was for the condemned, for those not chosen by the Maker. He should have expected fire. Why would he, the man who took the souls from mages in making them tranquil and who killed thoughtlessly and without empathy or mercy, why would he be chosen by the Maker? The fire should not have surprised him. It filled his blurred vision through the slit in his eyelids. He resolved to open his eyes wide, to accept his fate, to—

“God?” a familiar voice asked.
Cullen opened his eyes only a bit wider, his resolve faltering. Snow. Fire and snow. But the two could not coexist, not so close together.

“I don’t know if you’re here, God,” that familiar woman’s voice said. “They say you made the universe, but I don’t know if you made every universe. But if you’re here—”

Not snow. Snow did not have a face as round as a full moon or a nose or hazel eyes or the barest hint of a pink blush or a tiny brown mole on its cheek. Snow did not have lips the color of a rose or the last vestiges of dusk. Snow did not sing or murmur prayers for the dead or anyone else. And snow did not coexist with fire.

“—please keep him safe. Please keep Cullen under your gaze and help him to heal. I know I don’t pray much, and maybe that’s bad. Maybe it’s good? I don’t know, but God, I hope you hear this. Please, he is needed.”

Belle. Belle coexisted with fire. It lived in her hair and singed with her words and burned behind her battle-ready eyes.

Cullen let his eyes open further only to see Belle with hers closed. Between her blue-rainbow fingertips, she grasped a small something. Two small somethings. A pang of recognition accompanied the pang of a headache, telling him both that he was alive and that he had seen those somethings before. He never took much notice of the golden and silvery charms that hung around Belle’s neck, but he saw them then. They were like two strange and bejeweled hands, with pinkies or thumbs that were too small or fingers that were too large. She held onto them so tight, the flesh around her shimmering nails reddened and whitened in equal measure.

She rocked back and forth in her wooden chair, little creaks and groans pulling out of the old wood in protest. She began to whisper another prayer with her eyes and brow creased in her severity. The light of morning hung about her. It hung in the way he had only seen from his bed, filtered in through unthatched cracks in his roof and the large hole. Little dust motes hovered in the space between them, sparked and made iridescent by the sunlight.

Cullen wondered what made her prayers for him so fervent, so devout. She didn’t like him. They argued about almost everything. He stared at her far too much. His stares were no longer born of suspicion, but of curiosity and, if he allowed himself to admit it, a touch of lust. He could not help but ponder what the flesh of her hips would feel like under the press of his grip, what those sunset lips would feel like against his own, and what it would feel like to hear her sigh or scream his name instead of spitting it out like so much gristle. And it was thoughts like that that turned his mind back to curiosity at her passionate prayer.

He was content to lie there and watch her rock and pray and clutch those tiny icons. It was not a version of her he had known before that moment. But he supposed it would be unkind to let her keep worrying about him while he lay living and conscious beside her.

“Belle,” he said. It came out more rasped than said, softer than he’d anticipated.

Belle’s eyes fluttered open behind her glasses, and her body ceased its rocking. She looked at him with her lips parted, invisible prayers still dangling from them. Then she smiled. Wide, white teeth greeted him. He noticed that her sharp canine teeth pointed outward just a bit. He’d seen her smiling and laughing before, but never quite so close. Never for him.

“Good morning,” she said.

“It’s good to see you.” Cullen said it without thinking.
Belle laughed her easy laugh. She put her fingers over her mouth and sighed into them. “It’s good to see you, too. Can I ask you something?” He nodded. “Is the Maker real? I mean, did you see him?”

Cullen felt his brow furrow at the unusual question. “I believe he is real, and that he watches over us all, but I have never seen him. Why would I have?”

An expression washed over her face that he had only seen a few times in his life. It was the look of someone who had bad news to tell and thought the recipient had already known. “You died, Cullen,” said Belle.

“I…I what?”

“You were dead for I don’t know how long before I found you. On the floor next to your desk. I did CPR and a couple precordial thumps to bring you back, and by the time Solas finally showed up, all he had to do was make sure your heart kept beating and fix your ribs. How’s your chest feel, by the way?”

What? “My chest? It feels…sore, I suppose.” It ached, really, like he’d been kicked by a horse the day before. “CPR? Pre—thumps?”

Belle smiled at him again, more on her left side than her right. “Cardiopulmonary resuscitation and precordial thumps. They’re ways to kickstart your heart with my hands,” she said, wiggling her fingers in the air. “Without magic. The miracles of modern medicine. We just beat people back to life.” She laughed again.

This was more information that Cullen had been prepared to absorb. He tore his eyes from her to glance around. They were in his quarters. Surely, she had not gotten him up there by herself. “Ah. Yeah, Bull helped with that part. And with getting you out of your sweaty clothes.” He glanced down to find that he was, indeed, wearing a different tunic than he’d put on. She laughed once more. “You can’t imagine what he looked like trying to fit his horns through that little ladder hole of yours. Oh, incidentally, did you know there’s a tree growing through your roof?”

“I did,” was all he could manage. He was dumbstruck. She had somehow brought him back to life without the aid of magic, and gone to great lengths to ensure his comfort. He glanced around the room again. She was the only other person there. She had stayed with him all night. “Have you…” He could scarcely ask. “Have you been here the entire time?”

“Yup,” said Belle. “I climbed your godforsaken ladder all by myself. I guess I’ll have to climb back down, too.” She managed to whine with just her facial expression. “I hope you don’t mind that I took a little nap on the side of the bed you weren’t using.”

Cullen’s head whirled to the empty space beside him. The sheets were rumpled and an indentation had been left in the pillow he never used. Four long rogue hairs lay in loose spirals on the pillowcase. He might have imagined the scent of fruit and lilies from that distance.

“I…I don’t mind.” He really didn’t.

Belle slapped her thighs with both hands and stood. “Well, I guess I should leave you to it, then.”

For the first time, Cullen could regard her whole body. There was a strange, dry stain down the front of her dress. “What is that?”

She looked down. “Oh. Vomitus,” she said with a mock seriousness. “You yakked on me after your heart started again. Suuuper gross, but whatever.”
“Yakked? I don’t unde—” His voice caught in his throat when he saw her knees. Ragged holes had been torn through her dark gray breeches, revealing deep scrapes and a two-inch cut across her right kneecap. “What happened to your legs?”

“Oh,” she said again, lifting the hem of her Ferelden-made frock. It didn’t matter that there were breeches covering her legs. Seeing her pull up her dress, even just a few inches, did something scandalous to his body.

“I guess I sorta did a powerslide across the floor down there when I saw you. Went further than I meant to. And this—” She pointed to the long cut. “—is from a piece of your lyrium bottle. It smashed all over the place and I hit a chunk of it.”

Shame flooded his body, sending a hot flush up his neck and cheeks, and he could hear his blood pounding in his ears. If he had not been such a weak man, if he had not been so tempted to succumb to his addiction, none of this would have happened to her. Belle’s perfectly good dress and breeches would not have been ruined, and she would not have been injured saving him. “I’m very sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she said with another lopsided smile. “Hazards of the trade—and my old trade, not my current one. Sometimes you get barfed on, and sometimes you bang up your knees. Shit happens.” She rubbed at her left earlobe with her knuckle and thumb.

Cullen wondered why she had not allowed Solas to heal her knees. He must have offered his help, helpful as he was. But before Cullen could ask, she spoke again.

“You didn’t—Uh…” She sighed and looked everywhere but at him. “You didn’t take any of that lyrium, did you?” She did look at him then. She looked him right in the eyes.

“No, Belle, I did not.”

“Do you think you can sit up? Just for a few seconds, I promise.”

Despite the ache in his chest, Cullen pushed himself upright. He thought she meant to examine him in some way, and tried not to be surprised and terrified when she sat down on his bed. She looked from his disheveled hair down to his chin. She was so close. Her slow moving eyes appraised what she saw.

His breath seized in his chest when her hands slipped up his shoulders. They rested there for a moment before continuing their journey behind his back, pulling her ever closer to him. Her elbows glided across his neck and he was petrified and warm and his heart fluttered. The heart she made beat for her.

Belle wrapped him up, enveloped him. Her head passed his, her chin coming to rest on his shoulder. She held him tight and close. He could not help that his nose was buried in her hair. Fruit and lilies and panic and want filled his mind. Her breath crept down the back of his neck, his skin prickling and rising to meet the warm air.

He froze there in her arms, stilled by fear and excitement.

“Don’t do that again, okay?” she said into his neck. “Don’t die like that again. I give you a lot of shit, but I—we need you.” She pulled away then, to his relief and chagrin.

“I will do what I can,” he said. He was shocked that he managed to say anything.

“Good.” Belle stood and smoothed out her ruined dress. “Next time I punch you in the chest, it better be because I’m pissed at you.”
She turned from Cullen before he could respond. Although, it wasn’t as if he knew how to respond. A little squeak worked its way out of her when she looked at the ladder, but she started down anyway. Her knuckles were white on the top rung when she cast him a final glance and a worried smile. He just stared, watching her descent until she disappeared and listening to her whine and whimper and curse all the way down the ladder.

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“You are terribly distracted,” said Dorian, shaking Cullen free of what, indeed, was distraction. “I don’t think I’ve ever managed to capture one of your knights so early in the game before. What has your attention so drawn?” The mage leaned back in his chair, more intrigued than Cullen liked.

“Nothing. I am not distracted.” Cullen was lying through his teeth.

“Does this have anything to do with your untimely demise?”

Cullen ignored his opponent and moved a piece he should not have moved to a position where he should not have moved it.

Dorian saw the error and rubbed his hands together. “I’ve heard it can be rather jarring returning to the land of the living. Are you suffering any lingering after-effects?”

“No. I feel fine. And I am not distracted.”

Dorian took that piece Cullen should not have moved from the place where he should not have moved it. “Are you concerned that our fearless leader, Maxim, will remove you from your position as commander?” A touch of worry edged the mage’s voice and expression then.

“Maker’s breath, Dorian, no. The Inquisitor has been supportive of my decision to stop using lyrium, and he practically laughed me out of his quarters when I even suggested that he might need to replace me. Although, I have written to Cassandra to tell them what happened.”

“And?”

“And it has only been a week. I sent the raven before receiving word that they were redirecting to the Storm Coast, so it will probably a bit longer before I hear back. And I am not distracted.” Cullen moved another piece. Not as quite as bad a foul-up as the last move, but it wasn’t much better.

He saw a flash of red hair out of the corner of his eye, and turned to look. Belle was leaving one of the small rooms at the edge of the garden. She was accompanied by two noblewomen, an Orlesian and a Ferelden, and followed by Leliana and Josephine. Belle smiled her genial smile at the women, telling Cullen that business had concluded. The noblewomen walked off toward the guest quarters, deep in conversation, and Belle looked to Leliana and Josephine. They murmured something to each other and laughed.

Belle was so free with her laughter. She did not cover her mouth like a courtly woman. Her laughter was loud and open, her wide white teeth and tilted canines on full display. She crushed her eyes closed and held onto her heart and let her shoulders shudder.

Dorian cleared his throat, snapping Cullen’s eyes back to the chess board. Cullen made an impulsive move without considering anything but what he saw before him. There was no thought or strategy to it.

“Aha!” Dorian slammed his hand down on the table with such force that the chess pieces jumped and toppled.
Cullen looked wide-eyed at the mage. “What? What is it?”

Dorian lips curved into a coy smile. “I’ll have you know that I just stole four of your pieces off the board, a fact which you utterly failed to notice.”

“I—I noticed. I simply knew I could still beat you, and I did not feel like doing you the dishonor of accusing you so publicly.” Oh, but Cullen was a bad liar. A terrible liar. As a boy, he was once punished for sneaking off to the Templars in Honnleath because he couldn’t even muster a proper alibi. All he had to say was that he’d been in the market or with a neighbor boy. But no, he came up with the least plausible excuse—he was fishing, despite leaving his rod at home right next to the door—and he got a good swat on the backside for it.

Dorian’s followed the line of Cullen’s former stare to see Belle there, smiling and pressing her wooden note board to her chest like a treasured keepsake. Her hair was longer than when she first arrived, and she’d gotten thinner than when Cullen had last noticed. Even her new clothes were laced up and belted as tight as they could be to remain comely on her shrinking frame. The three women made for the main hall, and Belle’s expression made a slow transition into melancholy before snapping back to its jovial state under Leliana’s gaze.


“The what?”

Dorian turned back to face him. “Did she not tell you how she managed to save you without magic?”

Cardio-something and something about a thump were all the details Cullen could remember from that part of their conversation. Most of her other words were drowned out by the memory of her chin on his shoulder, her breath on his neck, and her murmured words. “Don’t do that again.” “Need you.” His mind made mulch of the rest.

“I’ll admit, I did not understand a word of her explanation,” Cullen said. That, at least, was honest.

Dorian settled into his chair in an unsettling way. “I suppose you had to be there. Well, there and alive. Our fair and fiery attorney—” The way he pronounced her title made plain that it was still novel to him. “—started off cool as a stream. I’ll concede to the fact that she was calmer than I was when she told Sera to fetch Solas. Though I would have preferred to do it under other circumstances, I helped her get you out of your armor. Then she did the oddest thing.”

Cullen’s elbows were braced on his knees, his whole torso pitched forward.

“She kissed you.”

His mind went blank and black before a thousand emotions rendered him immobile. Confusion, desire, anger, adoration, sorrow, and singular infatuation swirled among the sensations in his brain and in his gut. Above them all, even by the tiniest margin, was hope.

“She…”

“Oh, don’t be angry with her, Cullen,” said Dorian. “I think it was more like breathing.”

It would be more like breathing.

“I think she breathed for you. Your chest rose and fell, and then she proceeded to push down on it and count.”
“Count?”

“Yes, count.” Dorian was looking at some indiscernible something on the ground and shaking his head. A faint, wistful smile had slipped up his lips. “She counted to thirty and started over, several times, in fact. But by the time she stopped trying that, she was sobbing, the poor thing. Screaming at you to wake up and that you were not allowed to die. Then she pounded on your chest.” He slammed the side of his fist into his other hand to punctuate his tale.

Cullen found a few words. “She mentioned punching me in the chest.”

Dorian chuckled at that. “She did do that. Twice, in fact. The second time was when you finally came back to us. You gasped and coughed, and you immediately vomited on poor Belle. She took it in stride, though. She ran her fingers through your hair over and over again, and told you to keep breathing, everything would be okay.” He still stared at the ground, but that wistful smile had become a bit doleful.

Cullen feared that Belle would have to come and restart his heart again. It fluttered and beat arrhythmically, like a soldier who had not yet learned the proper pace at which to march. He imagined her carding her fingers through his hair and weeping over him as a lover might weep over her ailing beloved, that soothing sweetness and devotion and sadness.

Dorian seemed to shake himself from his thoughts, and met Cullen’s gaze again. “Sera finally found Solas in the servant’s quarters, of all unpleasant places, and brought him back to help. There wasn’t much for him to help with, though. Not by then.”

“I…don’t know what to say.”

“I’m certain a ‘thank you’ would suffice for her,” said Dorian. “Or perhaps you could stop arguing with her every time she asks for your assistance in fulfilling a contract for the Inquisition.” The mage lifted his eyebrows.

“I shall start with a ‘thank you,’” Cullen said. He could not abandon all reason in favor of Belle’s feelings, after all.

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He tried to express his gratitude. Over the following days, Belle came into his office with increasing frequency, always with something to say. Most of it was menial—updates about the nobility’s satisfaction with the services of Cullen’s men or correspondence from recruit Dolan. Cullen suspected she was checking on him. Whether she was checking on his competence or his health, however, he was never certain.

He tried to express his gratitude. But Belle seemed bent on picking a fight some days. She started to seem touchier, quicker to anger and much more hostile when she did. Then she would start coughing and close her eyes and excuse herself between noisy breaths.

He tried to express his gratitude. He found it difficult to thank her when she’d begun to look so weak. Her boots dragged just a bit on the ground. Her shoulders slumped in fractions of inches just enough for him to notice. Her dusky rose lips were often pale and dry. She breathed harder and ran her fingertips across her brows with her eyes closed. He got close enough once to see the pupils of her lidded eyes widening and shrinking in unmatched, rapid cadences.

Cullen resolved, one morning, to go to Belle’s tower and thank her. He would knock, she would open the door, he would say, “Thank you,” she would say, “You’re welcome,” or “Fuck off”—one
never knew—and he would go about his business. He held hope and trepidation in his mind as he approached, wondering if talking to her would tamp his confounding affections down or make him forget that the scent of fruit and lilies still lingered on his unused pillow.

He raised his hand to knock on the door, but stopped when he heard her voice flow from her window.

_Eres la ilusión que yo persigo_

_Eres bueno y maldito_

_Yo quiero tocarte y poder_

_Seguirte por doquier_

_Vámonos lejos, vámonos lejos_

_Donde nadie me prohíba tu calor_

He stood there, hand still hovering near the wooden door. He had not known she spoke Antivan. He had not known she sang. He had not known she did both with a passionate and lilting beauty that made his pulse thrum with her exotic tempo. And he did not know what her words meant.

_Yo te voy a robar_

_Te voy a secuestrar_

_Yo te voy a robar_  

_Un, un beso_  

_Yo te voy a robar_  

_Te voy a secuestrar_  

_Yo te voy a robar_  

_Un, un beso_  

_Ah Hahhh Ah Hahhh_

Cullen pictured Belle swaying beside her bed, her head thrown back and eyes closed as she cried out. A kind of mournful lust poured from her once again plush lips. They were slick and soft in his mind’s eye.

_Eres la infusión que necesito_

_Eres muy calientito_

_Yo quiero acercarme y poder_

_Contagiarme de tu ser_

_Vámonos lejos, vámonos lejos_

_Donde nadie me prohíba tu amor_
Only then did he realize his hand was still hanging in the air by the door. He dropped it down to his side, and a cool breeze brushed across the bead of sweat on his forehead. His withdrawal symptoms had not been quite as bad since Belle brought him back, making that sweat a curious thing.

Belle cried out again, a loud and heartbroken series of wails that evoked a vision of her hand pressed to her heart and tears falling from her eyes. She writhed and wept and called out to her god, the god to whom she prayed and pleaded to save Cullen’s life and to heal him. She reached up for her god, begging in her foreign tongue.

The clang of a hammer against a horseshoe jolted Cullen from his image of her. His hands were trembling at his sides, that bead of sweat having multiplied on his forehead and at the back of his neck. He turned from Belle’s door then, intent on speaking to her when she was decent. In truth, he did not know whether she had dressed or not, but the images he had conjured were too compelling and too lascivious and too real. Before speaking to her, he would get a glass of water, or twenty. Perhaps he would spar with Iron Bull. Or perhaps with Blackwall, because in Cullen’s state, Iron Bull would likely beat him within an inch of his life.

And he would ask Josephine to translate Belle’s song, the new siren call that pulled at him and lured him to crash against the rocks.

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Chapter End Notes

Alright, a couple of things.
The prayer at the beginning of the chapter is a Hebrew prayer called a Mi Shebeirach. It's a prayer we say for the ill, either singular or plural. If you'd like to learn more about it, you can check out this link. You can also hear a very pretty (though non-traditional) version of it here.

In my other fics, I've loved to integrate music and lyrics into the story. I won't do it much here (probably just once more), but I hope it hasn't run you off. The lyrics in this chapter were taken from Carla Morrison's song "Un Beso," which you can listen to here to give you a little context (and a beautiful song). Please let me know if you totally hate it, and I'll take it under advisement.
Everything Sucks Ass

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her meds were gone. Every pill and puff, all gone.

Belle couldn’t move, but there was work to be done, so she moved. She couldn’t breathe, but there was work to be done, so she breathed. She couldn’t eat, but there was work to be done so she ate. It didn’t matter that pain ached and jabbed at her. It didn’t matter that she coughed and wheezed and had to lie down every time she ascended the stairs in her quarters. It didn’t matter that she vomited up most of what she ate, and vomited even when she hadn’t eaten. There was work to be done, and it wasn’t like she could get home for a refill, anyway.

She would die in Thedas. Maybe it would take a week, maybe a month, but she would die. A severe asthma attack would take her, or dehydration, or malnutrition. She was a ticking time bomb, and she resolved to do the best work she could until she exploded.

So she got up every morning. Most days, she had to throw up. Acid pooled to great excess in her stomach, unable to escape during the night when the gastroparesis trapped it there. If she didn’t have to throw up first thing, she put on her headphones and listened to her one song. She still sang when there were words. She would be lying if she said the music wasn’t one of the only things that helped her get out of bed in the mornings. She would prefer to sleep while she wasted away.

She walked everywhere slowly. The heat and humidity weren’t factors she had to worry about in Skyhold, so she moved like a sloth to avoid an asthma attack. Her throat would still get sore. Here and there, a breath would still stop in her lungs before she could keep breathing, like an inside out hiccup.

Since she couldn’t eat properly and didn’t have any more painkillers to keep her blood vessels open when her pressure dropped, migraines plagued her. They varied in their severity. Sometimes it would just be the flickering and blinding rainbow-but-white-but-invisible lights. Other times, she barely managed to get to her tower before the miniature stroke leapt into full, debilitating swing. No one would see her for the rest of the day.

Belle wrote up her contracts, attended her meetings, and mingled with the nobility as if nothing at all were amiss. She triple checked her documents, knowing she was not firing on all cylinders but refusing to cause any harm to the Inquisition on account of her own shoddy workmanship. She met with the advisors, who seemed to look at her with increasing concern and scrutiny.

It wasn’t as if she didn’t know she looked worse, either. The tiny mirror in her compact showed her the dark circles under her eyes and the sallow tones of her already pale skin. The laces and belts on her clothes showed her that she was decreasing in size, wasting away. The prominent veins in her arms and the dry skin of her lips showed her that she was already dehydrated. The slump of her shoulders and curve of her posture showed her that her spine ached from top to tail. The tremor in her hands showed her that her nervous system was beginning to go into shock, shutting down synapse by synapse until all it would do was tell her lungs to breathe and her bladder to piss and her bowels to shit. It probably wouldn’t even do that right.

“Are you alright?” Josephine asked in her rolling accent. Worry was plain on her face, as it was on Leliana’s beside her.
Belle realized she’d been staring down at the tarnished pewter markers on the war table for God knows how long. Her fingers trembled against her clipboard—she wondered sometimes if she should keep calling it that because there was no clip on it—and her dry lips hung open in silent want for water and food and just one fucking deep breath that didn’t end in a gasp.

Belle shook her head. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, what were you saying?” She smiled a smile that may not have been as nonchalant as she wanted.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Cullen. He held a stack of missives in one hand, and the pommel of his sword in the other. He stared at her, that perpetual slight crease stuck to his brow. She hated her inability to tell what he was thinking when he stared at her like that, and he did it for the whole meeting.

She sat at her desk the next day just after yet another lunch she couldn’t eat. In her shaky scrawl, which was messy even before she spun into her hell-spiral of ailments, she penned her second letter in the negotiation of an arranged marriage. Josephine warned her that the talks would be arduous and might fail to yield positive results. Belle wanted to try anyway. To her, it was a worthwhile endeavor.

Cullen barged into her office without knocking, a habit for which he seemed to hold quite the affinity. She knew it was him without looking. He always threw open her door like a hot wind, and it always creaked the same way. Without looking up from her letter, she asked, “You need something?”

“That’s why haven’t you been to see the healers?” he asked.

That drew her eyes up. The crease in his brow was no longer slight, but deep and angry. He held a single piece of weather-worn and water-spotted parchment in his hand. What did it say, she wondered.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Belle said. “I’m fine.” She clenched her quivering hand into a fist.

“You are not fine. You are ill. I can see it, plain as day. This—” He held up the paper. “—just confirms my suspicions.”

Belle stood, ignoring the white spots in her vision and trying to avoid wobbling from her instant dizziness. Cullen stepped forward as she rounded her desk with her hand held out. He handed her the parchment and she snatched it away.

She recognized Spencer’s handwriting without a second glance.

_Commander, the letter read._

_I hope you don’t think me insubordinate for writing you. I would normally write to my sister, but I’m very worried about her, and the Inquisitor told me it was okay to send word to you instead. I know it will only be a few days’ time until our return when you get this, but I fear this issue may need to be addressed immediately._

_Belle is sick. She has a lot of parts in her body that don’t work properly, and it makes her very ill if she doesn’t have her medication. She told me she was running out when we reunited, and by my count, she has. Her pills probably ran out at least a week ago. Her handwriting has gotten worse, and she keeps talking about “if something happens to her” while I’m gone. I don’t think she’s seen the healers like I told her to._
If you would, Commander, make sure she’s doing okay. If she isn’t, please get her to go to the healers. I apologize if this seems impertinent, but it’s in the best interests of the Inquisition that she stay alive and well. Not just my own. Even Max the Inquisitor thinks so.

Sincerely,

Recruit Spencer Dolan

“Jesus fucking Christ, P.” She muttered the words to herself as she dropped her hand to her thigh. “I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’m fine.”

That crease in Cullen’s brow deepened even further. He held out his hand. “Come with me to the healers.”

“Dude, I just said I was fine. I don’t need to go to the healers. I’m. Fine. Fit as a fucking fiddle. Right as rain.” Belle set Spencer’s letter on her desk behind her.

In a movement so fast she could barely see it, Cullen grabbed her forearm. She only had enough time to get confused when he tugged up and crouched down. A squeak pushed out of her weak lungs as he hauled her ass over tea kettle onto his shoulder. Her stomach rested on that furry monstrosity he called a mantle and her hands knocked into the backplate of his armor.

“Motherfucker! Put me down!” She pushed herself up against his shoulder so her head was right side up and held high.

He started walking out of her tower. “I suggest you settle down if you do not want your head to hit the doorway.”

“Fuck you! Put me down!” She lowered herself just in time to miss the stone doorway. “What the fuck? What the fuck, Cullen?”

He walked Belle out onto the battlements, her ass beside his head and her arms dangling down his back. His arm wrapped around the back of her knees, and with the toes of her boots she could feel the spot where his breastplate ended and his pants began. She wriggled and smacked at his backplate and tried to reach his face with her fingertips. “Let me go!”

“If you do not stop wriggling, I will. Then you can see how much a stone walkway can hurt one’s face.”

Belle’s mouth fell open in an indignant gasp. “Oh my God! You son of a bitch, put me down!”

Cullen walked her halfway across Skyhold like that. Ass first. Various noises came from various people—laughter, gasps, oohs and aahs like children mocking her for being called into the principal’s office. It was probably the least dignified way she’d ever travelled, and she’d ridden in a shopping cart more than once in her adult life. She thought about going for his balls, but he was right, she would just fall on her face. She didn’t need a broken nose on top of all this bullshit.

Finally, she could hear him open a door. At least she could be mortified inside.

“This her?” a woman’s voice asked. Older, from the sound of her.

Cullen grunted out a “yes” as he crouched to plop Belle onto a little wooden chair. The legs made a scrrch noise against the stone floor.

She made to stand, her hands balled into fists and her arms swinging. But he held her down with one
gloved hand on her shoulder. “You fucking douchebag motherfucker piece of shit! Shit-sour bag of
dick tips! Who the fuck do you think you are, manhandling me like that, you fucking prick?!”

“Oh do calm yourself, child,” the woman said. She was older, maybe in her mid-fifties. Belle spied a
dark, silvery braid running down the length of the woman’s back. “Commander Cullen is only trying
to help you.”

Belle’s jaw clenched tight while she scanned the room. It was lit with dim candlelight. The walls
were covered in shelves and drawers. The shelves and drawers were overflowing with potted plants
and jars and little bottles full of a mélange of different liquids. Two cots sat beside her, and she
suspected more lay beyond the closed door. She’d seen people get taken into that room from the
courtyard when they were wounded or sick.

She turned her gaze to Cullen, whose hand still rested on her shoulder. There was something past
anger on his face. It may have been concern. But Belle was going rage blind. Her vision may also
have been blurring because the blood was finally running back out of her head.

“Tell her what’s wrong with you,” she heard him say.

She lifted her glasses and brought her hand up to rub the heel of it into her blurry eye. “Why don’t
you tell her what’s wrong with you first, dickhead? Why would you do that?”

“You are not well, and you were refusing help.” She could see his face again. She had not been
mistaken in thinking she saw concern there.

“Hmm…That sounds familiar. Why does that sound so familiar? Oh, I know. It’s because you said
you were fine and then you let yourself die on the floor of your goddamn office!” Belle swatted his
hand off her shoulder. She suspected he let her do that.

“I know,” said Cullen. His voice had softened to a degree she’d never heard from him before. He
sounded wounded. Wounded and worried. “I am sorry. I cannot let that happen to you. I do not
know how to bring you back to life with my bare hands. I—I cannot watch you let yourself die.”

Belle heard a thick swallow roll down her own throat. Her eyes burned and blurred again, not from
rage or strange blood flow, but from guilt and fear. She bit down on her bottom lip to keep the tears
back. She was successful with all but one. That one little bastard slipped out and marched halfway
down her cheek before she caught it with her knuckle.

“You have no idea how long it took to find the right combination of medications back home.” She
kept calling it home. It was still home. It was still supposed to be home. She missed it. “It took years.
Years of hives and vomiting and worsened symptoms and bad drug interactions and the fucking
shakes. I’m allergic to fucking everything. I don’t want to wind up sicker because of some random
herbs from some random place.”

Cullen took a breath to speak, but Belle cut him off. “And magic? I haven’t even the slightest inkling
of what magic does to a person’s body or to their insides. I’m not from here. It could scramble me up
like that fucking pig-lizard in ‘Galaxy Quest.’ Turn my insides into my outsides.”

The silvery woman laughed a husky laugh. “That’s not how magic works, dear. I couldn’t turn your
insides into your outsides any more than you could.”

Belle’s body had sure as shit tried, though.

“We used healing magic on Spencer,” said Cullen. “He’s received several treatments with magical
healing, actually. I dare say he’s alright.”
“Why don’t you just let me do a quick little diagnostic spell first?” asked the woman. “No fiddlin’ around, just finding out what’s wrong. I have a feeling it might be easier than having you explain it to me.”

Belle’s lower lip quivered, and she pouted, pitiful and scared. She felt like a little girl getting her first tetanus shot. She used to like the doctors’ offices. They were calm, sterile places where she would see the man or woman she’d become friendly with over years of treatment. This, however, was no doctor’s office. There was dirt and grime everywhere and not a single speaker playing easy listening on KOST 103.5. This woman was not her friendly doctor or nurse or even medical assistant. She was a stranger who wanted to lay hands on Belle like some sort of freaky faith healer.

Belle looked up at Cullen. He was never shy about his wariness of magic. He’d expressed concerns over the alliance with the mages and keeping them in check more than once in their meetings. She looked to him for advice or approval. For something. He looked down at her with a kindness the likes of which she’d never fathomed possible from his stoic features. A small smile touched at the corners of his mouth, giving an infinitesimal curve to his scar. His amber eyes held a tenderness she couldn’t believe was meant for her. With all his edges smoothed like that, he nodded to her. It was safe, he told her silently.

“What’s your name?” Belle asked the woman.

“Eudora. And you’re Belle, the way I hear it told.”

“Yeah. Nice to meet you, Eudora. You can do the spell. Just…be gentle. Please.”

Eudora smiled. “No gentler spell in the world, child.”

Belle’s body tensed as Eudora’s hand splayed across the center of Belle’s chest. A faint buzzing sensation, not unlike what Belle had felt when the rift opened up to swallow her, emanated from the healer’s hand. It oozed through Belle’s body at a snail’s pace, bringing with it a hint of the scent that always preceded a rainstorm. Ozone.

The feeling of the magic coursing through her chest set her on edge. Nervous terror made her whole body shake and shiver. She watched Eudora’s calm, appraising face, but it did little to relax her. Belle trembled like a chihuahua in a snowstorm. She trembled so hard she thought she could hear her bones rattling.

Rough, ungloved fingers touched her palm. She squeezed them hard, turning to the man to whom they were attached. Cullen’s face still held all that gentle kindness. His bare thumb rubbed comforting little circles over the back of her hand.

Belle looked into Cullen’s eyes while the buzzing spread throughout her body. His amber eyes that had always appeared as cold stone encased in museum glass seemed to melt into honey then. They were warm and compassionate and worried. His mouth that was always set in a firm line had become soft and affectionate. She had the inexplicable urge to run her thumb across his bottom lip just to see how it felt.

“All done,” said Eudora, lifting her hand away from Belle’s chest. As surreptitiously as Cullen’s hand had found Belle’s, it was gone again. The loss of his touch left her with a tinge of sadness.

“So what’s the prognosis?” Belle asked.

The healer laughed that husky laugh again. “I don’t know about prognosis, but I can tell what’s wrong with you. And it’s a good news, bad news sort of thing.”

“Alright,” said Eudora, leaning back against a small desk so coated in plants and bottles that Belle hadn’t even realized it was there. “Bad news is most of what’s wrong with you can’t be healed with magic. Can’t be healed permanently at all.”

“I figured as much.” Belle began to stand.

“Not so fast, girly. You want the good news before you run out of here all hangdog, looking like you’ve been kicked?”

Belle settled back in her chair. She swept her arms out to the sides in a sardonic gesture that said, “Please continue.”

“Right. Good news is I can fix your lower back with magic. Won’t be perfect as the day you were born or anything, but I can fix it to where it won’t hurt you so bad every day. More good news is the rest of your ills can be treated with potions, draughts, and herbs.”

“Really?” Belle asked, her tone more dubious than curious.

“Yes, really.” Eudora snatched up a basket from the corner of the room and started piling little bottles and jars and plants into it, listing off what they were for and how to use them as she went.

First was a beaker of purply-clear liquid. It was viscous, coating the sides of its glass container as it sloshed about. “This is for the bile problem in that gut of yours.” Belle thought to correct her before remembering that, before modern medicine, any fluids in the body that weren’t blood were called bile. She let the healer continue. “Woeful bad, that gut is. Not too far off from our Commander, there.”

Belle looked at Cullen, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Maker’s breath. Was it necessary to bring my ailments into this?” He was cute when he was embarrassed.

“It was,” said Eudora. “She’s got to know it works.” She turned her attention back to Belle. “One spoonful of this every morning should set you right for the whole day and night.”

She picked up a little bottle of red stuff next, waterier than the previous concoction. This had an eyedropper for a lid. “This one’s for your aches and pains. It’s real strong, so just a few drops at a time.”

Next up was a bundle of flowering plants with orange and green petals and leaves. Belle thought she’d seen them growing in the garden. “This one’s embrium,” said Eudora. Ah, so that was the stuff Belle had been making deals for all over Ferelden. “This is for your breathing. Put a petal or leaf into a cup of hot water in the mornings. Inhale the steam while it steeps, then drink it down, leaf and all.”

She set the full basket on Belle’s lap. “Take these for two days to make sure they work for you, then come back and see me. I’ll fix your back up then.”

“Okay.” Belle was petrified. Honestly, though, what did she have to lose at this point? She would die if the stuff didn’t work or if she was allergic to any of it. She’d hit “fuck it,” she supposed.

She was following Cullen out of the door when a time-worn hand found her wrist and turned her back. Eudora held up a small envelope full of crushed leaves. She bore a mischievous grin on her face.
“This is just a little something extra,” she said, low enough to be out of Cullen’s earshot. Probably. “For if and when you decide to have a little romp with someone.” Romp? “Make a pinch of this into a tea the morning after. Save yourself the trouble later on.”

*Oh, that kind of romp*, Belle thought. “Oh Jesus. Okay, no. No, I don’t need that.”

“You like girls then?”

Belle’s voice came out like a hiss. “No! Jesus Christ in a crockpot, woman! I just have no plans of having a ‘romp’ with anyone. Boy or girl or anyone.”

“And why not? There’s plenty of strapping young folk around here.” Eudora looked over Belle’s shoulder. “The Commander would do quite nicely, I should think.”

Heat suffused over Belle’s face, and she was grateful she wasn’t a visible blusher. “Oh my God. Oh my God, okay, just give it to me. Whatever will end this conversation.”

Belle snatched up the envelope from the giggling healer, stuffing it into her bra as she walked out the door. She imagined plenty of women left with similar packets every day. She didn’t need anyone thinking she had those plans in mind, least of all Cullen. He’d hung back once he realized she wasn’t with him, and he watched her exit the healer’s room.

“I’m not going to say, ‘thank you’ yet,” she said. “Not until I know these will work and not just kill me. You don’t get a thank you if they kill me. You get to haul me off and bury me or burn me or whatever it is you do with dead people around here. Heavy, ungrateful, dead me. All this trouble and no ‘thank you.’”

Cullen laughed. He actually laughed. It was a low stream of three slow chuckles. “Alright. I accept your terms.”

Belle’s mouth hung open. “Did that hurt?”

He looked confused. “Did what hurt?”

“Laughing. I just assumed you didn’t do it because it hurt or something.” She smiled wide at him.

Cullen’s face pinched up for a moment. “I laugh when I hear something funny. Have you given a thought to the idea that you might not have been funny until just now?”

Belle barked out a laugh of her own through her incredulous and wide open trap. “You sassy asshole!” She laughed again. “Okay. I’ll remember that you said that.”

He smirked at her, shocking her yet again. He was handsome when he smirked.

“See that you do.”

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It worked. The lot of it. All the potions and teas worked. Well, most of the teas worked. She hadn’t tried the post-romp tea yet. That notwithstanding, Belle’s body felt better than it had in years. She was sleeping and eating and breathing again. She’d even manage to put back on a couple of the pounds she’d lost via unhealthy means. Just a couple, though. It was a goddamn miracle, in any case.

The magic had felt strange. It felt even stranger when her lumbar spine had begun to right itself. A rash of *pops* accompanied the odd sensation, and the movement around her nerves nauseated her a
bit. When it was done, though, she felt almost as good as before that day in high school when she fell backwards onto the crooked books in her backpack. Almost like she’d never been injured. Another goddamn miracle.

The few days Spencer mentioned in his letter had passed. He and Max and the others were supposed to arrive that night. Then, in about a week, every high-ranking member of the Inquisition was headed to a place called Halamshiral for some grand ball. Belle was excited to get out of Skyhold and see what other parts of Thedas looked like. It didn’t matter that she was being called upon to schmooze and work and flirt her way through the party. She didn’t mind being dangled in front of the nobility like a prize to be won. She knew she could not be won. She was just happy to be going.

Belle was finishing her appointment with her Rivaini tailor—nice guy, a little handsy, though—when two demure knocks tapped against her door. She would know Josie’s knock anywhere. Belle called out for Josephine to come in while she looked over the final design for her gown. It was perfect, as far as Belle could surmise.

She thanked the tailor and escorted him to the door that Josephine had just opened. Once the door was shut behind him, she turned to her friend slash boss. “What’s up?”

Josephine handed Belle a piece of parchment. “Congratulations on your marriage,” she said with a sly smile. She could be pretty funny when she wanted.

Belle read over the letter and laughed. “Comte Laval agreed to the terms? He’s willing to let Nanette marry Baron Capet’s son, Damien?”

“All he asks is that the Inquisition provide an honor guard for the happy day to demonstrate that we have sanctioned the marriage. He believes that will make up for Nanette marrying below her station.”

Belle grinned and squealed. “I hope she really loves this Damien guy. If not, his dick better be dipped in gold and make her scream with how much work I did getting the Comte to agree to this.”

Josephine hid her giggle behind her hand, no doubt bashful about her amusement at Belle’s lewdness. “Let’s go tell Cullen the news.”

The two women marched arm in arm across the battlements to Cullen’s office. Josie was shorter than Belle by several inches, creating an interesting dynamic to the way their elbows hooked together. They chirped and giggled and mused about salacious details of the relationship between Lady Laval and Lord Capet right up until they were standing in front of Cullen’s desk.

He had his back turned to them. A soldier and a scout were on the receiving end of quite the tongue lashing for being intimate in the guest quarters. One looked humiliated while the other looked proud. It was an interesting sight to see and an interesting story to hear, to say the least. Apparently, the two of them had been at it in an Orlesian minor lord’s room. He walked in on them, but was angrier that they refused to let him join in than he was at their presence there.

“You’re both on night watch duty across Skyhold from one another,” Cullen said. “Next time, find a hiding place that does not send an Orlesian noble knocking at my door. Dismissed.”

The soldier and the scout high tailed it out of Cullen’s office hand in hand. Belle thought she might try to find one of them later. She’d discovered some places in the keep that might have been exactly what they needed for next time.

“Maker’s breath.” Cullen squeezed at the back of his neck again before turning to face the two amused women. “What can I do for you today?”
Josephine was smiling and it made Belle’s smile wider. “I need you to arrange for an honor guard to accompany us to Halamshiral. Four soldiers should be enough.”

“Why?” Cullen sounded like he’d had a long day. Belle thought she would just tell him and leave him be.

“You should congratulate Belle on her marriage,” Josie said. The joke was still funny, and she and Belle laughed about it again.

“What?”

Belle was coming down from the crest of her laughter as she answered. “The marriage will take place near Halamshiral two days after the ball. I figured we could just tote along the extra four people and they could stick around for the ceremony afterwards. They wouldn’t be gone long.”

It looked like Cullen might pop a blood vessel in his neck. His face was going red and heavy breaths sawed through his body. His brow furrowed so deep it seemed like the bridge of his nose might cave in.

“You—You duplicitous woman!” He practically roared it. To say that Belle was confused was an understatement.

“I don’t und—”

“You arrived here and said you wanted to work for the Inquisition. You said you had our best interests in mind. So we trusted you. And the first moment the opportunity arises, you arrange an advantageous marriage to escape us!”

“What?” Josephine said, only to have him interrupt her, too.

He was inching closer and closer to Belle’s face. “You would rather marry some Orlesian noble prat than stay here, you deceitful woman?! Go then! Sell your quim for a good deal!”

Belle’s entire body trembled with hurt and fury. So, this was what Commander Cullen Rutherford of the Inquisition really thought of her. That she would just sell herself off to the highest bidder. Just when she was starting to like him.

She didn’t want him to see the tears rising up in her eyes. She didn’t want him to hear her scream out her anger. She wanted to be rid of him.

Her fist clenched and unclenched at her side as her vision blurred. Cullen’s face was becoming no more than a peach-colored amalgam before her eyes. She resolved to do the only thing she could do. She opened her shaky hand wide, her fingers quivering with her righteous indignation. And her indignation was righteous.

She felt the sting on her palm radiate through her fingertips the instant she slapped him.

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Chapter End Notes

So...I forgot to use the title in the chapter...PLEASE FORGIVE ME!!!!!!!!!!
I also wasn't planning for Eudora being quite so sassy, but she gave herself a voice and that voice screamed "I know better than you," and sassy she became.
Cullen might have heard the slap before he felt its sting. But he did feel the sting. He felt his face reddening under the handprint Belle left on his cheek. Her fingers had been splayed out. They caught every inch of skin they touched, and some inches they hadn’t touched. He’d been slapped like that before. It stayed with him for the rest of his days. He had little doubt this moment, too, would be burned into his mind until the day he died.

He watched her through the door she left open behind her. He watched her march off to her tower in tears because of him. He watched her slam her door so hard he thought it would shatter into a thousand tiny pieces—the same way he thought his heart would shatter into a thousand tiny pieces.

Belle’s slap had snapped his rage in two. He still felt every ounce of it, though only a fraction of it was left to be directed at her. The vast majority of it pivoted inward. The prickling touch of her hand was like a mirror, reflecting to him an image of a man in whom he was so very disappointed. He had no right to be angry with her. She could do what she pleased when it came to marriage. The Inquisition could not force her to stay, and she was likely acting in the organization’s best interests in arranging the marriage in the first place. She had done nothing but what was in the Inquisition’s best interests since she’d arrived.

“Commander.” Josephine’s voice whipped Cullen’s eyes away from Belle’s door. “How dare you speak to her like that?” He had never seen the ambassador so angry. Her brow furrowed and her lips pursed and frowned and her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“I—I am truly sorry. I—”

Josephine cut him off. “She is not the one getting married, Commander. She has spent the last week and a half arranging a marriage for an Orlesian couple who love each other, despite the unfavorable nature of the match for the young lady. It is only Belle’s marriage inasmuch as she worked so hard to procure it for the love-struck daughter of a Comte who is too concerned with the Grand Game to have a care for her feelings.”

Damning. Cullen had made a damning assumption. He hadn’t even asked. He just assumed Belle was marrying herself off. “Her wedding.” Those were Josephine’s words, not his.

“You said—”

“I was joking!” She stamped her slipper shod foot as she shouted at him. “Can no one use humor in your presence without being shouted at or called something unspeakable?”

Without another thought, and without waiting to be scolded any further by the tiny woman, Cullen started for Belle’s tower. Cool wind brushed at the sweat that seemed to have become a permanent
fixture in the presence of the fire-haired, fire-tongued woman. He supposed he could add fire-fingered to his idea of her. His face burned where she hit him, and his ear rung a little. His left eye also felt a bit harassed when he thought about it. But he managed to keep that eye and its twin focused on Belle’s door as he marched on.

What would he say? An apology was obvious. Beyond that, though, what would he say? Would he tell her he did it because he was jealous? That was the truth, though perhaps not a truth he was prepared to reveal. His mind bubbled and rumbled and churned with different combinations of words, different explanations he could offer for his deplorable behavior. Nothing sounded right. Nothing conveyed the depth of his regret.

He opened her door in his usual way, too fast and too eager and too loud. She was not at her desk. Nor was she at her bookshelf or in her chair by the fire with her feet bare and her legs crossed, as he so often saw her. “Belle?” His eyes scanned the room in a pointless way as he called out for her. There was no response. Perhaps she’d run out the other door toward the kitchens. He moved to follow, only stopping when he heard a small sound from above. A sniffle, followed by a weak whimper.

Cullen ascended the geometric stairwell that ran along three of the four walls in the tower. He made deliberate strides, two steps at a time, a cacophony rising from his feet against the wood. He was certain she would yell at him to stop on his way up. When no sound came for him but her sniffles and whimpers, he continued. His heart raced in his chest. He thought that at any moment he might hear it beat against the silverite of his chest plate.

When he crested the stairs he saw her. Belle sat on the edge of her bed, head hanging down to reveal the sliver of pale skin at the parting of her hair. Her elbows rested against her thighs, propping her up, and her long and loose curls brushed her knees. She had a strange contraption fastened to her head. It was white and dull silver, and it wrapped over the top of her head from ear to ear. Each ear nestled beneath cushions that reminded him of smoothed out powder puffs, like the ones he’d seen while questioning ladies of the evening about his Templar brethren. The thing stuck to her head was tethered to another small apparatus in her hand via a miniscule white rope.

Around Belle’s bed were clothes and containers of all shapes and sizes. Everything was open and strewn about on the floor and on chairs and on the unused side of her bed. The chaos of it jabbed at the back of his mind, begging him to clean it up or run away. He saw some of her other odd devices in the small black satchel that rolled about on four wheels. A large gray-black rectangle sat untouched on one side while a much smaller, shinier black rectangle sat on top of it. All manner of tiny black and white ropes and cords bloomed from the heart of that rolling satchel.

Cullen stepped forward and cleared his throat. Belle did not look up. She did not even look startled. She’d heard him coming, certainly. “Belle,” he said. She still did not look up. He ventured a step further. She still did not look up.

He heard soft sounds emanating from her that were not her little sniffles or whimpers. A faint hum flowed from the things on her ears. Magic, certainly. She said Orange County did not have magic. She called her magic “technology.” A strange word for strange things.

He stepped forward again. His toe must have entered her view, because her head rotated up just enough for her to see him over the rim of her glasses. Her eyes and nose were red, a pitiful frown stuck to her lips in a way that made Cullen ache down to his bones.

“Go away before I fucking punch you.” Her voice was thick and watery, and anger dripped from the low evenness of it.
“Belle, I—”

“I can’t hear you,” said Belle, pointing to those powder puffs on her ears. “So go away before I fucking deck you, Cullen.”

“Belle—”

“I still can’t fucking hear you!” She screamed it at him so hard that her eyes slammed closed for a moment, forcing two fresh tears out to slide down her tender, red cheeks. “Go away! I’ll push you down those fucking stairs and I won’t fucking bring you back this time!”

He should have gone then. He knew he should have gone. He kept walking toward her, against all reason. She’d transformed him into a man without reason.

When he’d inched too near to her, she ripped that odd contraption off her head and threw everything in her hands behind her on her bed. She leapt to her feet, eyes full of rage and sorrow and hurt, and closed the distance in one large stride. She grunted, teeth bared as she shoved him hard enough to force him to adjust his stance.

“Is violence the only fucking thing you understand?!” She shoved him again. He stumbled back an inch or two. She was powerful in her fury. “Do I have to hit you again to get you to get the fuck out of here?! You gonna call me a fucking whore again if I don’t slap you?!” Another shove, another small step back.

“Belle, I am sorry,” said Cullen, voice low and loaded with shame.

“You can keep your fucking ‘sorrys!’ Shove them down your throat until you choke on them, for all I give a shit!” Another shove, another small step back.

“I should not have said that. I am so sorry.” His eyes were burning. Seeing her so wounded and knowing that he was the cause of it welled up in him the deepest guilt he’d felt since Kirkwall.

“Get out of here and leave me alone!” Again, he did not listen.

For the second time, he heard the sound before he felt the sting. Her arm swung from behind her back, and her fingers spanned from his jaw to his temple. His ears rang, he saw stars, he considered whether his eye had been displaced from its socket. He did not move.

“Goddamnit!” Belle screamed so loud and so long that her voice cracked. The shrillness of it echoed into the Frostbacks outside her window. It lanced through Cullen’s mind like a white hot blade.

She reeled back and looked at him with such pain in her expression. Fat tears poured from her eyes. Her lips parted into a trembling grimace. Her shoulders slumped and jerked as silent sobs seemed to tear her apart from the inside. A loud sigh shuddered out of her, and she took her glasses off with her left hand. With her right hand—the hand that struck fast and true and with purpose—she covered her eyes. Those fat tears fell out from behind the veil of her fingers, dappling the wooden floor with little wet spots.

Belle’s sobs grew louder then. She took three short, unsteady steps back and fell on the edge of her bed in a manner similar to what Cullen had seen when he walked up the stairs. She set her glasses down beside her, freeing both hands to cover her face as she wept.

Cullen could only watch her collapse in on herself. This was a product of the devastation he wrought on those around him, a reminder that he was not a good man. He was an irredeemable cur with nothing more to give to the Inquisition than a fist and a sword. Destruction and havoc were his trade.
The mark he left on the world.

“It isn’t even my fucking wedding,” said Belle, raw and weak. She still would not look at him. “I helped them.”

“I know.” He barely whispered it.

A cold and bloated silence filled the tower. It surged up to the rafters. It seeped down the stairs and flooded the ground floor. Cullen wondered if it doused the fire.

Belle’s murmured words murdered that silence. Soft and slow, she cut its throat and watched it bleed and die. “None of my old clothes fit.”

After a time, he thought he’d imagined the sound. She did not speak again for several stretched seconds. He would not dare utter a word for fear of shattering her tenuous calm. His skin burned where she’d slapped him twice. He let himself feel it. He swam in the sensation of it as he waited for her to speak again.

She inhaled a deep breath through her stuffed nose and sat up straighter. Her tear-chafed eyes gazed at him, still full of pain and still shimmering. “None of my clothes from home fit me anymore. I’ve wanted to go home since I got here, and now I wouldn’t even have anything to wear if I somehow managed to get back. But you know what? I’ve worked my ass of for you. I’ve worked myself almost to death for the Inquisition. So, what business of yours would it have been if it was my wedding, huh? What stake do you have in my ‘quim,’ as you so elegantly and offensively put it?”

This was the moment Cullen had longed for and dreaded. The chance to explain himself, to tell her of the rancor of his jealousy and the fervor with which he needed her. He could vindicate his ardor in a passionate homily to soothe his own soul and show her the light within him.

But none of that came out. “I… I do not want you to leave.”

He felt like a child born without language. He fumbled about and knocked things over and shouted to get what he wanted. To adequately express his emotions seemed beyond him. How could he tell her he wanted her? How could he, after the man he’d been? After the things he’d said?

Belle scoffed and shook her head. “I don’t get you, Cullen. Some days it’s like you want to be my friend. Other days it seems like you think I’m no better than shit on the bottom of your shoe. I mean, I thought we were finally starting to get along after we left the healer the other day. Then… Then this.” She shrugged in a limp display of perceived futility. “So, which is it?”

This, Cullen could answer. He felt himself stand up straighter, ignoring the heat of her palmprint on his cheek. “I want to be your friend, Belle. That is why I came to apologize. I should not have said…” He thought about it for a moment. The words were too awful to repeat. That they had come from his lips was horrifying. “I should not have said what I said, and for my words and my anger, you have my deepest apology. In truth, I was hurt at the idea that you wanted to escape us.” He cleared his throat, realizing too late that his hand had wandered to the back of his neck. “That you wanted to escape me.”

It was an admission that made his gut drop into his feet. He felt exposed, vulnerable. Every time she’d left him in a huff, part of him was certain she would never return. For a while, satisfaction was the prevailing emotion when he felt this certainty. However, in recent memory, all he felt when she stomped away from him was apprehension and anxiety. Maker help him if she never came back.

“And your first reaction was to accuse me of whoring myself out?” She sniffled. “Look, I don’t want
to escape the Inquisition or you. I don’t. I want to go home. I just wanted to take my brother and go home. But no one seems to be able to help us with that. So, I’m here. And I like it here, most days. Even you’d started to be less of an asshole, until today.”

He had been trying. At the very least, he could take solace in the fact that she had noticed his efforts.

“But I don’t hit people,” said Belle. “I think the last time my anger was so out of control that I actually hit someone, I was nineteen and this idiot I used to know lied to me about something very serious. My self-control doesn’t just drift away on the breeze. But I’ve slapped you twice today, Cullen. Twice.

“I get that you’re sorry, and I guess I appreciate your apology, but I can’t be around you right now. I’m guns hot, and I just really need some time to process what happened today.” Cullen had no idea what “guns hot” meant, but it sounded bad. “So I’ll ask again, will you please leave me alone for a while?”

Belle’s plea hung in the air between them for what may have been a second or an hour. Cullen did not want to leave her. He wanted to hold her close and run his fingers through her hair and cup her jaw in his hands. He wanted to kiss her and coo his apologies against her lips and kiss her again. He wanted to feel that fire in her boil his blood and immolate him from the inside out.

She said nothing when he turned away. She said nothing as he descended the geometric staircase against three of the four walls of her tower. She said nothing before he closed the door behind him.

She said nothing to him for a week. That first night, Max and his retinue returned. Cullen watched as Belle hugged her brother tight before moving on to embrace the Inquisitor. She smiled and spoke in hushed tones to both the men, eventually wandering off with Spencer for the rest of the evening.

Cullen would see her in passing over the following days, though she would avert her eyes or turn to walk the other way. She would not stay for the entirety of war council meetings, instead only briefly conferring with everyone but him before heading back to her tower or to the upper library with Dorian. She busied herself with final preparations for the Winter Palace. She also began new negotiations with any Orlesian nobility holding any title in the Western Approach after Max told them of the trouble with the Grey Wardens brewing there.

Cullen tried to keep his mind focused on his work. It was a task made much more difficult by the fleeting sounds of Belle’s voice outside his tower while he read reports, or in the Herald’s Rest while he tried to get a drink, or in Max’s quarters while Cullen walked up the stairs. She drifted around him like mist, fogging his mind and blurring his vision. A new addiction from which he could suffer withdrawal.

He felt the ghost of her figure and her voice and her scent one night as he took himself in hand. The smell of her hair lingered on his unused pillow, and he leaned against the soft fabric while he stroked himself and twisted his hand around his length. He recalled the sway of her hips and the swell of her bosom in those ostentatious Orlesian corsets. He remembered the heat of her breath on the back of his neck. He yearned for her gentle embrace and her chin on his shoulder. He spilled his spend onto his stomach and fingers with imagined memories of her lips against his ear. Shame soon crept in to shatter his temporary euphoria, reminding him that she hated him, that he would never feel her lips against his ear.

Belle smiled at him on the way to the Winter Palace. It was a small, close-lipped thing, but he felt a change in the wind when he saw it. Once, of course, he realized she was smiling at him. He nearly forgot to smile back before she averted her eyes, but he was fairly certain she saw him.
She spoke to him the next day, having exited the carriage to ride on horseback for the final few miles of their journey as the rising skyline of Halamshiral was just coming into view. She grinned and breathed deep the fresh, warm air around them, her eyes wandering over the changing scenery as they rode. It had been hours since she’d exited the carriage, and she’d been speeding up and slowing down to talk to everyone she knew. He’d heard her laughter all around him.

“God,” she said, riding up behind him on a gray gelding. “My ass hurts so much.”

Cullen hurried to engage with her, terrified she would ride past him without a thought if he paused. “An unfortunate side effect of horseback riding.”

Belle sent a wry smirk his way. “I remember. It’s been about fifteen years, but I remember being saddle sore in my desk chair at school on Mondays after riding all weekend in competitions.”

“I did not know you rode at all,” said Cullen. “Let alone that you rode in any competitions.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been a while, like I said. And they weren’t any kind of competitions like what you have in Thedas. No jousting or field racing or anything like that, though I did a different kind of racing for a few years. I used to have mad riding skills.” She pursed her lips in a funny way, so Cullen chuckled.

She smirked a different smirk. “Did it hurt that time?”

“I find the things that hurt rarely make me laugh.”

Belle’s smirk turned into a smile. “Good to know.”

She rode ahead, and he did not speak with her again until the night of the Grand Ball.

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The ball was going terribly. At least, for Cullen it seemed to be going terribly. The potential assassination if Empress Celene had loomed over the Inquisition members like an axe waiting only for a thin thread to snap.

The first problem was that there were Orlesian nobles everywhere, preening and scheming and talking to him. And touching him. They kept touching him. He flinched and moved every time, trying so hard not to haul off and punch anyone. This viper’s nest of people had no sense of personal space. He felt trapped—an all too familiar sensation. The way they prodded at him and commented on his physique and his hair and his arse fell just short of sending him spiraling into an attack of panic and anxiety.

The second problem was that Venatori had infiltrated the palace, further obscuring evidence of who was behind the planned assassination. The Inquisitor kept stealing away with different people and coming back half drenched in sweat until it became clear that Grand Duke Gaspard’s sister, Florianne, had masterminded Empress Celene’s death with the help of Corypheus. Max managed to put a very public stop to the assassination through intrigue and a few of Cullen’s well-placed soldiers. Max further managed to unite the major players for the throne with a love token and several threats of blackmail. Even further, he managed to steal away with Josephine for a few moments, though not likely unseen due to the sheen and size of her gold satin gown.

Josephine looked lovely and quite in love that evening. Leliana and Vivienne also cut striking figures in their respective lavender and white dresses. Sera and Cassandra had opted to wear their formal Inquisition uniforms, and when they combined with the men, a sea of red, blue, and gold teemed about the ballroom. Cullen thought he looked alright, though the Maker-damned Orlesian tailor had
cut his jacket too tight. That withstanding, everyone looked quite fine.

This brought to mind the third problem. Belle was stunning. She was beyond stunning, but Cullen was ill-equipped to conceive of a word to encompass her appearance. It was not simply her appearance, either. It was her air. Everything seemed to turn around her. She brought any noble within five feet of her to heel with her easy charm and her sharp tongue.

Belle wore a gown that was blue like the sea was blue, bright and dark and inviting and dangerous. The fabric seemed etched with a crisscrossing pattern of tiny stones that glimmered and sparkled in the candlelight of the ballroom and the moonlight of the gardens. The neckline and the sleeves made the garment appear modest, high and long, covering most everything with blue-sheer fabric still etched with that design. The back however, plunged deep and down to her waist, revealing her pale flesh from shoulder to shoulder, from top to almost bottom. The gentle dip of her spine and the flex of her muscles were on display, and they mesmerized him.

She had forgone her glasses that evening in favor of something she called “contact lenses.” More odd “technology,” he assumed. She noted that they were only for special occasions while she was in Thedas. Of course, she told all this to Josephine, Vivienne, and Leliana while Cullen happened to be in earshot. Her eyes were painted over with glittering bronze hues, making them appear greener. Her lips seemed a more robust version of their natural color, the dusky lavender-pink bolder than during her daily activities.

Her red curls were twisted and braided into an intricate knot at the base of her skull, and only the short curls around her face and a few rogue wisps were left wild and free. This revealed not only the delicate curve of her neck while she spoke, but a large, detailed mark over the top of her spine at the bottom of her neck. A black circle bisected with a box was filled with smaller circles that held triangles and even smaller circles. Within the box was a strange design that might have been a city where she came from. Just above the city, like a beacon and a brand burned in stark but curved lettering were stamped the words, “A Man Chooses.”

The words haunted him throughout the night as he watched her. They held a meaning for him, though he wondered at what they held for her. He mused that if they felt the same thing, perhaps it could bring her closer to him. One inch closer. Any inch was worthwhile.

The first thing Belle had done upon entering the palace was scan the room for people she knew—nobility with whom she had already worked. Upon finding her favorite, she meandered over, snatching up a glass of wine along the way from which she would not drink one drop all night. She mingled and socialized, and traveled from cluster of nobles to cluster of nobles with an ease Cullen had only ever seen from Josephine. She was taken out onto the dance floor by more noblemen and noblewomen than Cullen liked, though even one would have been more than Cullen liked. She smiled her genial smile, never too big or too small, and moved with a confidence that told everyone in the room that it did not matter whether she stepped on their toes. She was a fine partner.

Cullen spent the evening with his back against the wall, watching the room and watching Belle, sweating and fending off advances, and struggling to breathe for one reason or another. Members of Max’s inner circle would stop by here and there, with Dorian, Iron Bull, Cassandra, and surprisingly, Sera being among his favorite visitors. Cassandra remarked on the outlandish frivolity of the whole display in a way that smacked of someone who had been forced to contend with such things before. Dorian, Bull, and Sera mostly made fun of the other attendees. Dorian chided Cullen for refusing so many promising dance partners, and Bull chided Dorian for chiding Cullen.

Cullen’s favorite visitor by far, however, was Belle. She would saunter by here and there, and her greener eyes would flash and the corner of her mouth would twitch up just a bit. His heart fluttered
each time. The heart she made beat for her.

After what may have been her fifteenth or one hundredth dance of the night, she came to him in earnest. In one hand, she held that untouched wine, and in the other, she held a bundled and bunched up cloth napkin. The manner in which she held napkin suggested she was concealing something within.

Like a refreshing breeze, she approached the cluster of nobles that had surrounded him for the past fifteen minutes. And like a refreshing breeze, calm and cool, she banished them away with a few words. “I apologize for the interruption, but I must steal the Commander away for a few moments. The shift in power this evening has caused a bit of an upheaval that we must discuss.”

The nobles made a show of groaning and playfully chastising Belle, but they opened up enough space for Cullen to pass through to her. She said her cordial “thank yous” and led him out to a balcony that had somehow rid itself of the serpents left inside. He could breathe again.

“Thank you,” he said. It came out more like a sigh.

Her reserved smile turned wide and real. “It seemed like you were having just the worst time, and I figured you’d been tortured long enough.” “Tortured” was an apt enough term for it. “What a shitshow it is in there. Jesus.”

Belle set down her undrunk wine with a little clink against the stone railing of the balcony. She took the rumpled napkin in both hands and opened it up like a gift, revealing two tiny chocolate cakes. They were a delicacy, even in the Winter Palace. Her greener eyes lit up when they saw those little pastries. She picked one up as though it were a treasure made of glass, and brought it to her lips.

A sinful groan escaped her throat when she bit into the thing, sending sinful thoughts careening through Cullen’s conscious mind. She spoke, voice muffled by the cake. “Mmph. Mrroh God.” She swallowed the first bite down. “Oh my fucking God, I haven’t had chocolate since I got to Thedas. I didn’t even know it was real here.”

She bit down again, another ecstatic groan pouring out of her. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she sighed and writhed, and Cullen’s cock twitched in his breeches. His gaze must have been hungry, because when she opened those eyes, she said, “I’m sorry, did you want one?” and held the remaining cake out toward him.

“No, thank you.” He said it as evenly as he could, though the struggle was hard fought. The more of those he could watch her eat, the better. More fodder for his next shameful tryst with his own hand.

Once Belle had swallowed every last crumb of both tiny cakes, she frowned at the bare napkin in her hand. Her greener eyes moved back up to meet his. “Will you dance with me?” she asked.

“What?” He felt his expression twist into one that may have looked angry, but only betrayed his confusion.

“I’ve spent the whole night dancing with people I don’t know and don’t like. I’d like to spend at least a few minutes dancing with someone I know and don’t like.” She grinned as she said it, and he felt his lip start to curl on one side.

“Are you certain?” Cullen asked. “I am…not a very good dancer. Surely, there is someone better suited than I am.” He hated to reject her offer. He also would have hated to step all over her feet.

“I’m not a great dancer, either. Not in Thedas, anyway. Back home I was pretty good. But that’s beside the point. I’m asking you, dummy. I picked you. I’m trying to bygone some bygones. Mend
some fences. So don’t hurt my feelings, and just say, ‘Of course, I would love nothing more.’ Maybe throw in a ‘my lady,’ and we’re golden.” She stuck out her hand and winked at him.

He smiled then, perhaps the first time he had ever smiled at her. Her grin grew wider, her pointed canines on full display. He took her arm up in his, like a gentleman should. “Of course, my lady, I would love nothing more,” he said.

“Good ‘my lady’ usage, dude,” said Belle. They both laughed.

Their dance was riddled with blunders and missteps, but it was also riddled with smiles and laughter. They talked about things. Not about Thedas or about their work, but how they were. She asked after him and he asked after her. He talked about the scouts and recruits that irked him, and she talked about her favorite “Sera-isms.” All the while, he could feel the naked skin of her back under his palm, the little dip of her spine under his thumb, the edge of her dress brushing against his fingertips. Her hand was soft in his, the flesh of it as supple as he had ever felt. Only an infinitesimal, rough dent on the last knuckle of her ring finger marred that hand. He suspected it was the place her quills sat as she wrote.

When the song ended, Cullen was not ready. He was not ready to be barred from touching her again. He was not ready to stop their conversation. He was not ready to pass her back to the bloodthirsty and greedy nobility for their own use to their own ends.

He walked Belle off the dancefloor, arm in arm as they climbed the stairs to the main floor. They reached the top and moved to the side of the stairs, allowing people to pass behind both their backs as they turned to face each other again. People did pass, rushing about to get on and off the dancefloor.

Belle sighed. “That was probably the most fun I’ve had all night. Aside from the chocolate, that is.” Her smile was once more reserved and genial. A show for the surrounding nobility, Cullen told himself. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure, my lady.”

Belle’s teeth peeked out from between her lips. The left side of her mouth turned up more than the right. “Consider our bygones bygone,” she said. The throng of people rushing around them had grown to a near tumult as the musicians prepared to play another tune.

“Our fences are mended then?” asked Cullen. She smiled too wide to be appropriate there, and just wide enough to make his heart soar.

But then the corners of her mouth began to fall. Her expression slowly twisted from one of joy to one of worry, perhaps tinged with hurt. Her gaze fell away from him, and she turned to look over her shoulder, mouth agape and sucking in slow breaths. Her hand flew behind her. Her arm moved about as she reached around at her back.

“Belle?”

Her breaths grew louder and faster. She craned her neck over her shoulder until her body began to turn. Her back moved to face him, and he saw what she was trying to reach.

Blood gushed from a wide knife wound on the right side of her back between her ribs. Her fingers were covered in it as they rushed about her bare skin. A little cry escaped her lips as she turned the wound out of Cullen’s view once more. Her greener eyes were filled with terror when next he saw them. That thick blood began to burst from her mouth in hard, choking coughs.
Her bloodied fingers tangled in his blue sash before she collapsed forward onto him. He caught her, and lowered both their bodies to the ground. That was when the oblivious nobility noticed. A woman screamed, and there was a sudden rush round Cullen and Belle. A wide berth was given to them, but no one was helping.

Belle’s head rested against his chest as she shuddered and coughed, each lurch throwing more blood from her lips. He curled her into him, cradling her in his arms while his eyes searched the crowd and she died her slow and painful death.

He was certain he shouted for help, though he did not hear it. He was certain he cried out for Solas or Cole or Dorian or anybody, though he did not hear it. He was certain he said Belle’s name and begged her to stay, though he did not hear it.

He was certain her heart was still beating, though he did not hear it.

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Chapter End Notes

I can't stop with the cliffhangers. I just...I can't. No one's allowed to be happy yet, goddamnit.

Here are the inspiration images for Belle's gown. It was designed by Ziad Nakad, whose dresses I fucking loooooove! I've also included a picture of my tattoo, so you can tell what it looks like. I forwent the Inquisition tattoo on my right shoulder. ^_^~
Too hot. Belle was too hot. Never in her wildest imaginings would she have thought she could have been too hot in Thedas. Granted, she had not seen much of Thedas. There were probably deserts somewhere. Was Thedas the name of the continent or the planet? How big was the planet? How many countries were there?

All of these questions were stupid. They were stupid because they did not matter just then. Just then, she was too hot. The only part of her body that wasn’t too hot was her right arm. She reasoned that it must have been the only part of her not under the massive blanket weighing her body down. She felt that familiar tight and widespread heft that could only be a too-thick comforter during a warm season, untucked only enough to slide one person beneath it.

Part of her hand was warm, though. Warm from two other hands. Large hands. Those two large hands held onto her, calloused fingers against her palm and calloused thumbs rubbing soothing little circles. She recalled the sensation of those soothing little circles.

“Though all before me is shadow,” Cullen’s soft voice said into the void created by her eyelids, “yet shall the Maker be my guide.” She felt the warmth of his breath across her fingertips. “I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker’s Light and nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.”

It reminded her of Psalm 23. The one everybody recited when they thought someone was about to die, be it the speaker or their loved ones. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” and “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” and all that. Cullen was saying it over her.

Belle remembered the sensation of being stabbed. It must have been a sharp blade, because she hadn’t felt it until after it was pulled out. It hurt like fuck. It was like a papercut multiplied by ten thousand. It stung and burned when her blood began to leave her body through the newly opened point of egress. She had vague memories of coughing up blood. The blade had probably punctured a few vital organs, a lung chief among them.

In theory, she was still alive. Hypothetically, if she opened her eyes, she would see Cullen and whatever sweltering blanket was covering her to the neck. She postulated that she would be in one piece, having been healed with magic before she died. No one else knew CPR, after all.

She decided to open her eyes all at once. No pussyfooting around or taking a peek at her surroundings. It made no difference whether she did it fast or slow. It would not change where she was or who was around her. She snapped her eyes open, only to be blinded by a beam of light over her face. She hissed in an achy breath, turning her head toward her cool right arm.

Her eyes opened again, less blinded. Cullen’s face was closer to hers than she’d anticipated. He was close enough to kiss her. She tried to decide if she would hate that. He looked startled and relieved, his mouth just a bit agape, an expression only a bit different from the one he’d borne when she fell bleeding into his arms. That scar of his was right in her eyeline. She factored it into her considerations, and decided it was possible she wouldn’t hate it if he kissed her.

“Jesus fucking shit, dude. Who puts a bed right under the fucking morning sun?” Belle sniffed in another deep breath. Something was constricting her chest. Bandaging of some kind or another, most
likely.

Cullen stared at her, dumbstruck and watery-eyed. Maybe he really did want to be her friend. It was hard to believe he would look so relieved if he didn’t. But his silence and expression were making her nervous. She didn’t know why. It might have had something to do with the close proximity of his face to hers, of his lips to hers.

“I’m feeling a freaky, backwards kind of déjà vu right now,” she said.

A fraction of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. His voice came out quiet and gentle. “I must confess, I have no idea what that is.” His thumbs had yet to cease their soothing little circles.

“Oh.” Belle rolled onto her right side, a movement requiring no small effort on her part. She was more sore than she’d anticipated. She supposed that magic must not have been the cure-all she’d perceived it to be—more of a boost than anything. Her head came to rest on the loose fist of her left hand. Being this close to Cullen without him shouting at her was surprisingly comfortable and pleasant. His eyes were like that honey whiskey she’d tasted once in Scotland, all sweet and warm. It was the only whiskey she’d ever enjoyed.

“It’s the sense you get when you feel like something has happened once before,” she said. “Like watching the same dog cross the street in the same spot at the same time of day. Your mind sets off all these alarm bells to tell you something weird is going on. And I’ve just realized what a long time it takes to explain that concept. I guess that’s why they shortened it to déjà vu.”

Cullen chuckled his low chuckle, and she felt a nervous tickle in her gut. Like butterflies. There was no reason for her to have butterflies. She figured the magic that had been used to heal her was still floating around in there. Physics. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, blah blah blah.

“Thank the Maker for that,” he said.

“Is that who you were praying to just now? That’s, like, your God, right?”

“He is,” said Cullen. “And yes, I was praying to him.”

“Have you found that praying helps much here? I don’t mean to sound dismissive, it’s just that it doesn’t always seem to work out so well where I come from. More of a mixed bag.”

“That is a difficult question to answer.” He still rubbed those soothing little circles. He still sat so close. “It likely bears similar effectiveness to your prayers, if I’m answering honestly.” He paused for a moment, his eyes wandering a slow journey over her face. Her gut fluttered again. Fucking magic.

“Who is your god?”

“God is what most of the world calls him—or her, I guess—in one language or another. We really just needed something to call the thing we worship without understanding. In Hebrew, the language of Judaism, my religion, there are a few other words we use. Hashem, Adonai, Yahweh. Lots of people believe in the same God—that he created the universe and everything—but they believe in different teachings. It’s kind of weird.” Like their conversation, it occurred to her.

“Do you think he followed you to Thedas?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.” A little part of her wanted to boop his nose. It might have made her less nervous. She remembered how hot she was only because a bead of sweat slipped down her lower back and across her hip. “Could you help me pull this blanket off a little?”

It was as if the question jolted some sort of sense back into Cullen. He moved away from her. His
thumbs stopped their soothing little circles. With the new distance between them, Belle saw that he
still wore his formal attire from the previous evening. It was covered in her blood. His entire left arm
was stained that thick, dark cherrywood color. His fine and satiny azure sash bore finger-sized
streaks and spattering that seemed to have originated near the center of his chest.

How could she still be alive after losing so much blood? She wondered it as she watched him pull up
the corners of the blanket and tug it down from her torso. There was a delicacy and deliberateness in
his every movement, like he thought he might break her. When he’d freed the blanket’s edges from
beneath the mattress, he folded the top away from her neck, revealing her bandaged body.

The bandages were tight, and they squeezed at her from her breasts to just below her waist. Below
that, all that was left of the clothing she’d been wearing were her lacy pink panties. Cullen, in some
form of divine mercy, had not folded the blanket far enough down to see them from where he was
standing. Her ass was out a little on the other side. Nonetheless, he tensed up immediately, eyes
locked on her, until he shook his head and rubbed at the back of his neck. He wouldn’t look at her
after that.

“I—I’m certain you would like to see your brother,” he said, staring at some invisible thing high up
in the corner of the room. It was kind of adorable how befuddled he looked. “I’ll go and see to it that
he is relieved of his guard duties.” He was walking out the door before he finished saying it. Before
Belle could stop him.

Spencer was all “holy shits” and “what the fucks” and “that fucking bitches” when he barged into
the room. He was scared to hug Belle at first, but did it without hesitation when she reached for him.
He apologized for things for which he owed no apologies. He ruffled her hair in that way she hated.
He told her she looked like shit. Her makeup got all fucked up, he said.

Why, then, had Cullen looked at her like he was seeing a rainbow for the first time?

“Leliana’s people caught that fucking bitch,” he said after he helped her sit upright. “That fucking
bitch who stabbed you. She was screaming something about ‘damn the Lavals’ and ‘she ruined
everything.’” He shook his fist in the air as he played the part of Belle’s would-be assassin.

“What?” Belle sifted through her mental files. “Oh. Oh Christ on a cross, that stupid bitch.” Spencer
widened his eyes in a silent request for explanation. “It was Mallory Asselin. I kind of fucked over
her betrothal to this guy, Damien, when I set him up with this chick, Nanette. Thing is, before you
get all ‘what the fuck’ like you do, Damien and Nanette are in love, and Mallory is obviously a crazy
cunt who stabs people. I mean, I basically saved Damien’s life, if you think about it.”

Spencer did not look convinced. “Okay, I’ll take your word for it. But next time you fuck up
someone’s weird arranged marriage thing, Bete, just make sure they’re not in a position to fucking
stab you, kay?”

They shared a short laugh. “Yeah, fine. Hey, how come you weren’t in here this morning?”

“I love you, but I have a job to do too, you know? I’m responsible for making sure Max is safe, and
after you got stabbed, this whole place went on high alert. I had to stay with him for the night in case
this Mallory chick was some sort of ruse for Corypheus. I asked about you every time someone came
by, but they all told me the Commander wouldn’t let anyone into your room after Solas and Vivienne
left. Dorian and Sera tried to come in, and he told them to kick rocks.”

Belle’s brow furrowed. “What?”

Spencer crossed his legs at the edge of the bed where he sat beside her. “Yeah. He was all, ‘Raaah!
If anyone interferes with Lady Dolan’s rest, I shall see their head on a spike!” His impression of Cullen was atrocious, and included a splay-fingered imitation of bear claws. It was hilarious.

“I’m sorry, what did he say?” asked Belle, inwardly impish.

“He was like, ‘Raaah! If anyone interf—’” He dropped his hands into his lap, a look of realization painted on his face. Belle laughed despite the pain in her chest. “You dick,” said Spencer. It only made her laugh harder.

“You know, he almost killed that chick when Leliana brought her past your room to question her.”

Belle’s laughter died in her throat. “He what?”

“Yes, Aldridge and Kier—” Claire two point oh, “were following Leliana down the hall, and I guess the Commander was sitting out there while Solas and Vivienne were in here with you. And when they walked her by he saw the blood on her hands and fucking lunged at her. It took all three of them to hold him back. The only reason Mallory didn’t get away was because she was too busy pissing herself in the corner. Literally. She literally pissed herself.”

Belle was too stunned to speak. She had given out her fair share of bladed and cutting remarks to those who harmed her friends, but she’d never attacked them. Thedas was a world and a time apart from home, she understood, but Cullen’s reaction was still extreme. She’d seen him bite his tongue during Max’s judgements, no matter how much he hated the person being judged. He trusted their system. For him to seek his own vengeance seemed outside his sense of duty by a stretch.

She’d been staring. Spencer gave her shoulder a gentle nudge with his own. “What’s on your mind?”

She would not be asking her twenty-two year old little brother, of all people, for his opinion on the behaviors of men. She needed to change the subject. She remembered the thing she’d been remembering for weeks. “It’s my birthday today.”

“Shit! It is?”

“Yeah, I think so. I counted a couple of times. All things being equal, it should be October thirtieth back home. So I guess my birthday here is the first of Firstfall.” She thought about it for a moment. “God that’s weird. I have a different birthday now.”

She could tell by the look on Spencer’s face that he didn’t know how to respond, so she smiled a wan little smile at him. “Well a fuck of a ‘happy birthday’ it is like this,” he said. “I bet Lady Montilyet could pull some strings and get you some—”

“No. No, it’s fine. I don’t need anyone but you to know, I think.” Belle was confused about it. She’d had plans to go out dancing on her thirtieth birthday. She and a few of her friends from work and law school were going to dinner and then going out. They’d planned it well in advance to accommodate everyone’s busy schedules. Their work calendaring had invaded their personal lives.

This was not the thirtieth birthday she’d imagined. Recovering from a near-fatal stab wound in some random bed in some random palace in some random dimension was not her idea of a good time.

“You don’t want anyone to know? You? You, who thinks her birthday should be a fucking national holiday?” Spencer put the back of his hand against her forehead, and she swatted it away with a look of warning. “I’m just checking. It’s really unlike you.”

“I don’t know, P. I guess it’s…I don’t know, it’s fucking real if someone knows. My birthday isn’t October thirtieth anymore. It’s the fucking first of Firstfall. That sounds made up. First of Firstfall.”
She made a disgusted noise worthy of Cassandra. “I think I need to lay back down for a little while.”

Spencer knew she wasn’t tired. It was written all over his face. He knew his sister. “Okay, Bete. Just...Just tell someone if you need anything, okay?” He stood and headed for her door. When he reached her doorway, he leaned back inside and said, “Happy birthday, Belle.”

“Thanks,” she said.

The days’ long ride home began the next day. Celene’s “handmaiden,” Briala, had stopped by Belle’s room while she packed early that morning to check in and reassure Belle that the Asselins were no longer welcome in Celene’s court. Belle thanked the sly elven woman, but asked her to reconsider. One silly girl’s stabby meltdown was hardly enough reason to strip an entire family of its titles. Briala reminded her that much worse had been done for much less, and crept out of the room to go on with her shady business.

Belle felt ill at ease the rest of the morning. She’d felt off since the stabbing, or since waking up from recovering from the stabbing. It was not quite the off-day general malaise that struck alongside her little bouts of depression. Something felt awry, like something was missing. Maybe it was her twenties, gone with a night’s fitful sleep and nary a word from anyone. Maybe it was the now untrue fact that she had never been stabbed before. Maybe she was just lonely.

The Winter Palace had done everything it could to separate everyone from each other, isolating her most of all. She’d spent her whole birthday languishing in her room, producing blood to replace the volumes she’d lost and being checked on in passing. Everyone else had their bits of business to take care of before leaving Halamshiral. Sera had Red Jenny shenanigans in town. Dorian and Bull went shopping for God knows what. Varric signed books. Cole and Solas went down to see the infirm. Blackwall and Cassandra sparred with chevaliers in the training yards. Max and Josie schmoozed alongside Vivienne. Leliana recruited. Cullen...Well, Belle didn’t know what Cullen was doing. She didn’t even know why she wondered what he was doing.

She saw him coordinating with the soldiers and drivers before their journey home began. He was back in his ridiculous mantle, alternating between barking orders and murmuring in close confidence. She watched him as a passel of servants—whose welfare she’d pondered since their arrival—rushed around her with luggage and sundries. Only when his eyes locked on her did she realize she’d been staring. She did that thing people always do when they’re caught staring, and her eyes darted about to see random sights until she gave up and walked back inside.

Belle came back out when everyone decided it was time to leave. Josephine had already gotten into the carriage to pout in privacy after finding out that Max would be riding on horseback. Spencer was with his battalion near Max’s horse. Leliana was whispering to a dark and voluptuous woman with a petite figure and impressive head of dreads that swayed and bobbed each time she nodded. Everyone else was milling about, getting on their horses, laughing with their friends, or conducting final checks before the march was called. Belle stood still in the center of the subtle chaos, feeling that edge of unease.

A large gloved hand on her bicep startled her. She gasped and clutched at her heart as she turned—no jumpier than usual, she told herself. Cullen’s bewildered eyes stared back at her. She let out a puff of relief that made her lungs and back ache. “Jesus, Cullen you scared me.”

“I’m sorry.” He meant it.

“It’s okay.” Belle sighed again, slower this time. “What’s up?”

Cullen pressed a small something into her hand. Even gloved, his hands were so warm. The small
something was box-shaped, though it felt soft against her palm. She looked down at it. A little box covered in satiny red fabric with a sloppily tied yellow ribbon. It looked like a gift. She turned her gaze back to Cullen with a little shake of her head and a little crease in her brow to mark her confusion.

“For your birthday,” he said.

Cullen walked away before she could respond. He returned to his task of barking and murmuring for a few more minutes while Belle looked on, stunned. How had he known? Had Spencer told him? Would she be forced to beat her own brother to death for breaking her trust? More stupid questions.

A beckoning tap on the shoulder from Leliana reminded her that it was time to take her seat in the carriage. Belle cradled the little box covered in satiny red fabric with the sloppily tied yellow ribbon against her chest.

She held it there until they were miles away from the Winter Palace. Miles away from the den of iniquity where she had to flirt and tease to get anything done. Miles away from the place she’d danced with Cullen. Miles away from the place he’d been close enough to kiss her.

Her every move was tentative and careful when she opened her gift. She pulled at the sloppily tied yellow ribbon in tiny increments until it fell limp against her thighs. Sheuntucked and unwrapped that satiny red fabric with the kind of meticulous attention she gave her most important contracts. She opened the light wooden lid cautiously and with her fingertips.

The world froze around her. The carriage no longer rocked and rolled in its rhythm. Vivienne, Josie, and Leliana no longer chirped and prattled about the effects of shoes on an empire. Soldiers no longer marched outside her gilded window. Everything stilled but her trembling fingers clutching the gift Cullen had pressed into her hand.

Three tiny chocolate cakes.

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“You’ll have a bit of a scar, but everything else seems to have healed quite nicely,” said Eudora, her tired and gentle hand running over Belle’s back a final time before setting down the hem of Belle’s Fereldan frock. “Solas is a very skilled mage, dear. Better than anyone I ever met in the Circle. You were lucky he was with you all.”

Belle turned to face the healer. They shared warm smiles as she straightened out her dress. “I can probably count the times I’ve been that lucky on one hand. And one of those little fuckers is a wobbler.” She waggled her pinky in the air.

Eudora set to work pulling refills of Belle’s potions and herbs from the shelves. “Wobbler? What in the Void is a wobbler, you strange girl?”

“It’s something that could fall one way or another. Felony or misdemeanor was how I used to use it in my old job, but here I guess I just mean good or bad.”

“Oh? Which piece of luck could wobble, then?”

“Getting sucked into Thedas,” said Belle. Eudora threw a quizzical glance over her shoulder. “On the one hand, I was unlucky because I’m not from here, and this could have ended very badly. I’ll probably never see my parents again. On the other hand, I did find my brother, and well, I survived the whole thing, right?”
The healer chuckled, setting the medicine filled basket down on her desk. “For now. But you just keep stomping on the dreams of power hungry little girls with sharp knives. We’ll see how long that lasts.”

They shared a laugh. Belle took up the basket in the crook of her elbow. “Who knows? I’ve always been pretty fucking crackerjack at pissing people off.” She started toward the door.

“Oh, before you go,” said Eudora, “did you need any more of those other herbs I gave you?” Her eyebrow lifted to give Belle the hint.

Belle waved her hand between the two of them with a look of mild perturbation on her face. “God, no! I told you, no romping. No romping whatsoever, crazy woman.”

The healer looked surprised. Her forehead wrinkled and the lines around her brown eyes smoothed. “Really? You’re certain?”

Belle’s eyes rolled so hard they ached in their sockets. “Uh, yeah. I think I’d be the best person to ask about what the fuck is going on down there.”

“That wasn’t to say you’re not, child. It’s only…” Eudora paused for a few seconds too long.

“Only what? Spit it out.”

“To tell the truth of it, it’s the way the Commander looks at you. To see him watch you, anyone would think something’s on between the two of you.”

Belle huffed out a hollow and humorless laugh. “Pfft! You’ve officially hit looney toons, lady. Crazypants. I hope you have something on those shelves to keep you out of the psych wards. Cullen and I are only just starting to become friends. He—He doesn’t look at me in any kind of way, except maybe irritated. You’re off your nut.”

That same pewter brow arched again, less a hint than a judgment this time. Eudora raised her hands in front of her in a gesture of surrender. “Whatever you say, dear. Nothing at all between you and the Commander. Fine, fine. Just don’t hesitate to let me know if you do need more of those herbs. We don’t need any babes weeping around Skyhold while a darkspawn magister’s trying to destroy the world.”

Belle turned and waved over her shoulder as she walked out of the crazy woman’s office. “Bye, Eudora.” She called it out behind her, letting her sarcasm flow free.

She’d only walked a few feet when “Belle!” shouted from nearby scared her. An uneven noise jerked out of her at the same time her body jerked, jostling the glass bottles in her basket. Her free hand grasped at her chest again—no jumpier than usual, she told herself.

“I’m sorry,” said Cullen, approaching in his strong and steady stride. He bore a look of sheepish contrition in stark contrast to his confident footfalls.

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately.” Belle dropped her hand away from her chest. She closed the distance between them with a few steps of her own.

“And you have been rather jumpy lately.” He arched a brow at her. The skeptical expression was becoming the theme of the day. “Which is the reason Leliana and I came to the decision that we should train you to defend yourself.”

It was Belle’s turn to lift a brow. “I’m not going to start carrying a sword, Cullen.”
“No one said anything about a sword, Belle. The only place you are unguarded is up close.” He moved closer, and for the first time since she’d met him, Belle had trouble looking him in the eye. “We thought it best to instruct you in close quarters defense.”

“No, Belle.” He shook his head twice and only twice, once in each direction. “Today is your training day.”

She felt the laughter puff out of her nose as the corners of her mouth rose. All she could think of was Denzel Washington badgering Ethan Hawke. “You gonna teach me to see and taste the streets? Help me learn to be a narc?” Cullen squinted at her. “Sorry, you just made think of a—You reminded me of something. We can do it this afternoon, just let me set this stuff down and change into something a little more battle-ready.”

He snapped his gloved fingers, making more of a muffled *thump* than a snapping sound. “You there!” He pointed to a passing scout. “Come here.” The hooded man trotted over with an eerie eagerness in his eyes. “Take Lady Dolan’s things to her tower and set them on her desk. Disturb nothing.”

“Yes, ser!” The scout thumped his fist on his chest before scooping Belle’s basket from her arms and running off.

“So you just snap and people do whatever the fuck you tell them, huh?” She put her hands on her hips.

“Yes. Now come with me.” Cullen started for the sparring ring in the courtyard.

“At least let me change first.”

“You will not be wearing ‘something more battle-ready’ if someone attacks you again. You will be wearing this. Follow me.”

Belle swallowed down a thick lump in her throat. Something about his demeanor made her feel both petulant and obedient. She did not like being told what to do, but he was right. If someone tried to kill her again, she would not be wearing jeans or yoga pants or one of her loose tee shirts. She would be wearing Thedosian clothes.

She followed Cullen to the sparring ring, and walked inside when he opened the flimsy wooden gate for her. The entire ring consisted of a wide almost circle made of a meager fence constructed with half-logs. On the far end stood two dummies and a weapon rack covered in blunted, sharpened, and wooden swords and knives. There had once been grass growing in the miniature arena, as evidenced by the few tiny blades that jutted up out of the dirt. Bright and defiant little survivors.

“Where’s Leliana? I thought you said you both decided to train me.”

“I did say that, but we also decided that I should be the one to carry out your training.”

Belle blanched when she saw him remove his mantle and drape it over the fence. Her whole body tensed, her hands closing into slack fists at her sides. He unbuckled the two straps on the front of his cuirass before reaching up and over his shoulder to undo the final buckle with his fingertips. So, that was how he did it by himself. He tugged the piece over his head and set it on one of the dummies.
“What are you doing?” asked Belle.

He did not look at her while he answered, choosing instead to focus his attention on the straps along the sides of his breast and backplates. “No one would be foolish enough to attack you in full armor. The imbecile would find themselves on the end of an Inquisition blade before they could get within arm’s reach.”

Belle kicked at the beleaguered dirt around her feet, muttering an “I guess so” while she watched him strip down to his off-white tunic. He set every piece of his armor on that dummy with a reverence he reserved for so few things. Bull once mentioned that Cullen had been a Templar since he was a boy. He’d probably been wearing one set of armor or another for most of his life. It had probably saved his life a time or two, as well.

Once he’d removed his gloves, Cullen picked up four knives from the weapon rack. Two were wooden, and two were sharp and steely. He held all four toward her. “Which would you prefer?”

“Neither, honestly. I’ve always been nervous around knives. I can never stop thinking I’ll accidentally cut myself and bleed to death or lop off a fucking finger.”

He smirked, handing her one of the wooden blades. “We shall try to remedy that today, then.” Instead of walking back to the rack to put the sharpened knives away or tossing them into the dirt to be returned later, he turned back toward the unarmored dummy. Holding the blade of one of the knives between the pad of his thumb and the knuckle of his index finger, he swung his arm back and hurled the thing into the dummy’s head. The second blade flew just as true, landing with a thunk next to its brother.

“That was…impressive.” That was an understatement. Her heart was pounding hot blood through her ears.

“Perhaps you can learn to do it with some training.” Cullen faced her again, squaring his stance and gripping the hilt of his wooden knife so the blade pointed down.

“Ha! That’s a fucking laugh. I can’t even throw a baseb—”

Belle’s words were cut off by the sudden force of Cullen’s body. She hadn’t realized he was coming at her until his chest was pressed against hers and her back bowed over the roughhewn fence. The smooth wood of his practice blade ghosted across the skin of her neck, and his amber eyes bore down into her. She trembled and panted, stuck, confused, and electrified. He smelled of spiced herbs and soft powder.

“Where would you put your knife if someone attacked you like this?” His voice was a quiet rumble. That was all it needed to be, as close as his face was to hers.

“I—Um—I’ve heard between the third and fourth rib, then push up.” She had to clench her jaw to keep her lower lip from quivering.

“That’s right. Do you know how to find that without looking?”

Belle couldn’t tell if she shook her head or just shook. Cullen reached between them and grabbed her free hand with his. His thumb rasped along her palm as he pulled her hand up and pushed her fingers into a spot on the lower part of his chest. Under the lambswool of his tunic, he was firm and unyielding. She felt the hard planes and gentle curves of muscle, and the supple give of his flesh when he pressed her fingers in further. Again she was forced to swallow down a thick lump in her throat.
“Do you feel that?”

She trembled harder. “Uh huh.”

“Put the end of your blade there and thrust up, and you’ll pierce the heart.” His breath was warm and slipped over her lips before crawling down across her throat and over her earlobes. “Go on.” He let go of her hand.

Belle brought up the tip of her wooden blade in her shaky hand, and put it where her fingers had been. She angled it up, but thrust it no further. “Like this?” She could hear how hard she trembled in the noisy breaths that left her lips.

“Yes. Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to hurt you.” Cullen’s gaze softened, and a whisper of a smile passed over his lips. His scar moved in smooth unison.

“I’m not afraid.”

“You’re shaking.”

“I’m not afraid,” she said again. It was not fear that made her body quiver against him.

“Good.”

She stared up at him, their bodies frozen in a choreographed dance of death. His nearness, his scent, the honey in his eyes, the silken and shiny and pink skin of his scar, the sensation of his breath against her lips, the weight of him bending her to his will. Rationality began to flee her mind in an exodus, a conflagration. She wouldn’t hate it if he kissed her. She wanted him to.

“Cullen!” Max’s voice came in a shout from halfway across the courtyard, startling Cullen away from Belle like a little boy who’d just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Inquisitor?”

“You have to teach me to swordfight,” said Max. It was more growled than said, really.

“Why?” Cullen’s tone was tinged with a kind of irritated confusion he’d mastered over years of command.

“I have to duel against Josephine’s fiancé in Val Royeaux next week when we’re on our way to the Western Approach, and I have not held a sword since I was a child.”

“Fiancé?” Belle asked. “Josie has a fiancé?”

“I do not want to discuss it anymore right now,” Max said as he pulled a blunted sword from the rack. “If you wish to know more, I suggest you speak to the Lady Ambassador.” He was fuming.

“Okay, I will.”

Belle dashed out of the sparring ring, away from Max and away from Cullen. Cullen, who confused and bewildered her. Fresh, cool air cleared the fog of him from her mind as she ascended the stairs into the main hall.

Josephine stood hunched over the front of her desk with her head down, her hands balled into fists over a small mountain of paperwork.

“Josie, are you okay?” Belle asked.
“I am alright, Belle. Thank you for asking. Although, I would prefer not to discuss the engagement my family has arranged. I am certain you’ve just seen Maxim seething about it.” Josephine was the only person who called him Maxim—the only person he would allow to call him Maxim.

Belle approached and put a hand on Josie’s back. She rubbed shapeless patterns into the ambassador’s ruffly silk dress. “I’m sure it will work out okay, Josie. If it’s meant to be, it will be.”

Josie hummed in reply. Just as a comfortable silence had settled between them, she said, “Vámonos lejos, vámonos lejos. Donde nadie me prohíba tu amor.”

Belle froze. Her hand stilled on Josephine’s back. “Where did you hear that?”

“Commander Cullen,” said Josephine. “He told me he read it in a book and asked me to translate it for him, though I’ve yet to find this book myself. In fact, I have never heard the poem before he asked me to translate it.”

“Let’s go far away, let’s go far away. Where no one keeps me from your love.” Belle almost whispered it.

“Why did you not tell me you spoke Antivan?” Josephine sounded a bit excited.

“I thought Antivan was only Italian. Italian where I come from, anyway. That’s the only Antivan I’ve ever heard you speaking. I speak enough Spanish—um—enough of the other dialect to understand, but not to negotiate.”

“Still, that could prove quite useful should Leliana ever need your ears. Incidentally, have you heard that poem before?” Josie had perked up. Belle, however, felt like someone had come to steal away all the breath from her lungs.

“It’s not a poem,” she said. “It’s a song.”

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Chapter End Notes

Falling, falling falling...

<3
Cullen,

It seems your informants were correct. There is evidence of red lyrium smuggling in the Emerald Graves that points to a source in Emprise Du Lion. We will be heading there on our way back to Skyhold. One of the letters also mentioned Samson, and though I think it unlikely we will locate him in a quarry in the snow, I will be sure to keep you informed as to what we find.

Max

PS: How is Josephine?

Inquisit Max,

Thank you for your report. I must admit I am pleased to learn that Leliana is not the only one in Skyhold capable of uncovering important information. I agree that it is unlikely you will find Samson in Emprise Du Lion. He was never one for the cold. However, I am concerned as to what you will find there. Reports from the area have been muddled, at best.

Commander Cullen Rutherford

PS: Josephine is well. She left angrily for Val Royeaux just after you did, but she came back in good spirits. Of course, she also has Belle to keep her company and aid her in her work. They have taken to speaking to each other in Antivan, and I confess that I now find it rather unsettling when they laugh.

Cullen,

The Red Templar presence in Emprise Du Lion is almost overwhelming. They are posted along every route from the town of Sahrnia to the quarry, according to the scouts here. It probably also has something to do with the fact that there is red lyrium sprouting up from the ground just about EVERYWHERE. It’s been enough to make us all a little nauseous and lightheaded, which has made fighting and closing the rifts (it feels like there are a hundred) that much more difficult. We’re destroying as many veins as we can, but the stuff just seems to be multiplying.

It does not help me to remember that we must soon return to Adamant in the Western Approach to deal with the Grey Wardens and their blood magic rituals. All of Thedas seems to have lost its collective mind.

Max

PS: Don’t worry about Belle and Josie. I’m sure all they’re talking about is how devilishly handsome and surprisingly good with a sword I am.
Max,

It is troubling to hear of the volume of red lyrium in Emprise Du Lion. Dagna’s theory is that it grows in places where the veil is thin and thins it further, which would explain the number of rifts. Please make sure to take all necessary precautions, and rest when rest is needed.

Everyone here is working to prepare for our march on Adamant, and Leliana has already dispatched several waves of scouts. I have taken the liberty of sending a number of troops ahead to Griffon Wing Keep to meet with Knight-Captain Rylen and train for the potential battle to come. Josephine and Belle have been reaching out to any nobility with access to troops or siege weapons, and have been successful in gaining numerous pledges for support. I hope to have made you more comfortable in continuing your work in the Emprise without concerning yourself with the tasks ahead.

Commander Cullen

PS: The Antivan-speaking ladies giggled like teenagers when I walked into Josephine’s office yesterday. My worry only continues to mount.

Cullen,

Thank you for all your efforts, including trying to stop referring to me as “Inquisitor” all the time. It is much appreciated.

As you suspected, Samson has been ordering nearly all of the red lyrium from the Sahnia quarry. Unfortunately, they were also testing it on a number of captives they managed to purchase from Mistress Poulin. We took her into the custody of the Inquisition and set as many people free as we could, but some succumbed to the poisoning shortly thereafter. In any case, Samson has been ordering the red lyrium shipments for delivery to a place called the Shrine of Dumat. Since I don’t know where that is, and since we’re fairly close to home, I shall be returning to Skyhold before we embark in an attempt to capture or kill Samson. I’ll see you in a few days.

Max

PS: I’m sure Belle and Josie aren’t up to anything nefarious, but make sure to lock your office doors when you’re out.

Cullen read over Max’s final letter. A headache was forming behind his eyes. Headaches formed behind his eyes every time he heard or read or thought about red lyrium. It made him sweat and remember lyrium’s sweet song and wonder what red lyrium sounded like inside one’s body. He had heard that it sounded louder and more inviting, that it was warm and burned the blood. That was a sensation he did not need.

His withdrawal symptoms had ebbed, but they had by no means ceased. The nightmares continued their little torments. They plagued him with dreams of horrors that turned into memories of horrors that did not fade or vanish for weeks. He still woke in pools of his own sweat, though the sometimes nightly evidence of his withdrawal had all but stopped overflowing into his days.

Everything but the headaches. They ground dull pain into his forehead and his temples and the backs of his eyes for hours at a time. They were worse when he had to train with the Inquisition’s Templars, who had lyrium flowing and singing strong and proud and tempting in their veins. He tried to limit his time to the Knight-Captains, allowing them to train the knights and recruits, as much
as it pained him to give up his leadership to them.

Max’s letters worried Cullen. The amount of red lyrium sprouting from the earth and from the Red Templars in Emprise Du Lion and the effect it had on those who would be unsusceptible to the effects of ordinary lyrium spoke to its power. Cullen would be exposed to it again soon enough. There was no way he would be left at Skyhold while Samson was being captured or killed. He had to be there. He also had to survive it.

Cullen took little solaces where he could. He and Belle were friends, a thought that brought him insurmountable happiness in the moments he felt most low. They rarely argued, and when they did, she never stormed off. She stayed and discussed their disagreement with a level head until they were both satisfied. It was hard for her sometimes, as it was for him. He had seen her clench her fists a time or two.

He also got to be close to her. He got to touch her, in fact. It was always as her mock-attacker, and she always quivered and trembled against him, but he would take any contact he could get. That she still seemed scared enough to shake like that was puzzling, though she denied being afraid every time.

He would miss seeing and touching and hearing her while he was away. Max would be back that night, and they would likely undertake their journey to the Shrine of Dumat within the following days. Scouts had already gone and sent word back as to the Shrine’s precise location, and Max did not like to get comfortable at home when he knew he would have to leave again. He did not require the same commitment from his inner circle. He would be sure to leave Blackwall, Cole, and Varric behind when he and Cullen left for the Shrine, and had already sent word for Sera, Dorian, and Iron Bull to prepare for the journey. Max’s guard, including Spencer, would stay with him.

It pained Cullen to know that Belle would be without her brother and some of her closest friends while he was gone. She would still have Josephine and Leliana and that healer, Eudora, with whom she’d become so friendly. He supposed she would have them with her when everyone left for Adamant, too. The thought gave him little comfort.

She came to see him in his office that afternoon. Orlesian and Fereldan nobility were in residence at Skyhold, so she wore clothes designed by the same Rivaini tailor that had created her now bloodied and ruined ballgown. Cullen did not pretend to understand a single thing about fashion, let alone Rivaini fashion, but he could not fathom why every Rivaini woman he’d ever met had been so exposed. When Belle walked into his office that afternoon, it became clear. It was the doing of the lecherous tailors.

Belle wore a long, loose tunic of rich blue that made her look like a wildfire at midnight. The neckline sank down deep between her breasts, and would have been deeper if not for a flimsy cord woven from side to side into more flesh exposing gaps. Her golden and silvery charms hung there, pointing their misshapen hands down to the obvious cleavage between the pale swell of her bosom. She was an instant and welcome distraction with a smile on her face.

“How are you today, Commander?” she asked, rounding his desk and perching her backside on a little spot he’d begun to leave empty just for that purpose.

“I’m alright. I have a bit of a headache, but I am otherwise well.” Cullen did his best to look past her breasts and at her face. He failed for about two seconds.

“How could you not have a headache, sitting here in the fucking dark and reading people’s gross handwriting all goddamn day?” Her fingertips shuffled a small stack of paper in idle little circles. “You need to knock out one of these walls and let some light in. Get a big, pretty window.” A
wistful sigh emanated from her nose. He wanted to slide his hand up her thigh and under her tunic and make her sigh again.

“Perhaps,” he said, “though I would feel less secure in leaving requisitions and reports out while I was away.”

Belle laughed her easy laugh, throwing her head back and exposing the curve of her throat and those pointed canines. “Because some asshole is just going to dangle themselves six thousand feet above the ground to see that we need more iron?” Her nose crinkled and her eyes closed, and she laughed again.

She made Cullen laugh in answer. “People have tried more daring things for less important information than that, Belle.”

“Well, what you call daring, I call fucking stupid.” She patted him on his plated shoulder as she stood. A silent panic fell over him when he realized she was leaving. His heart began to pound. His stomach went cold. His thighs ached with the adrenaline rush that demanded action. She paused beside him, stopping the heart she made beat for her. “Hey, how—Um—How did you…”

“How did I what?” He struggled not to sound too eager or too afraid or too disinterested.

“Nevermind. It’s nothing. I just came by to check in on you,” she said, walking back to the other side of his desk. “You should take care of that headache. Take a nap or something. I’ll see you tonight for the homecoming.” She waved over her shoulder as she walked away, the sway of her hips leaving him enthralled and crestfallen in equal measure. What had she wanted to ask him?

He did see her that night at the homecoming, as she’d become so fond of calling it. Belle stood between him and Josephine, who stood beside Leliana on the landing of the main stairway. He could have sworn he smelled the fruit and lily scent of Belle’s hair, a scent to which he had become addicted since they began training together. He had inhaled it over and over under the guise of exertion. His new intoxicant.

Belle hugged her brother tight. Then, as was her way, she moved on to hug Max. She said her soft words to the two of them before greeting everyone else, as she always did. Cullen longed to know what she said to them. He pulled Spencer aside for a moment.

“What is it, Commander?”

“What does Belle say to you and the Inquisitor when you return to Skyhold?” Cullen knew the question was reckless. It was made more reckless by asking it to Belle’s one confidant.

But Spencer smiled—such a different smile than his sister’s. “She always says, ‘Thank God my boys are home with me in one piece.’”

“Thank you Dolan,” said Cullen. “I appreciate your candor.”

“Anytime, Commander.” With that, Spencer walked off toward the barracks to bathe and eat, but not before patting Cullen on the back as he passed. It was a confounding gesture that bordered on propriety and insubordination. It also provided a strange sort of comfort.

“Thank God my boys are home with me in one piece.” It was such a small thing, yet it was immense and warm and lovely. Belle loved her brother with her whole heart, and she had extended that love to Max. To her, the Inquisitor was family. She was unhesitant and unrepentant with her love such that she spread it about her with open arms and wide smiles.
To Cullen’s surprise, Belle hugged him before he left with the others two days later. She squeezed her brother and said something in his ear. Then she squeezed Max and said something in his ear. When she came to Cullen, he was certain she would pat him on the arm or keep a respectful distance between them while she said her polite farewells. But she stood up on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. He cursed his armor for keeping the feeling of her chin off his shoulder. He cursed his mantle for keeping the feeling of her breath off his neck. He cursed his gloves for keeping the feeling of the ends of her hair off his fingertips as he held her to him, full of trepidation and awe.

She was substantial in his arms. No wisp or waif of a woman, she felt full and whole and warm and real. There was a kind of softness to her that made him want to squeeze her closer, to wrap her up in his body. The hourglass that time and nature had made of her figure would have made it easy.

“Be safe,” said Belle into his ear.

“I will try,” said Cullen into her hair.

She dropped onto her heels once more, though she held his head in her hands. It was a gesture of intimacy and familiarity he had known only twice before. She smiled that crooked smile of hers, the left side rising more than the right. She said, “Do or do not, there is no try,” and puffed out a short laugh, her ocean and bronze eyes still locked on his gaze.

He tried to smile back, and he thought perhaps he did. He was terrified. She terrified him in a way that was foreign and incomprehensible to him. He had never been so afraid not to return home from battle. He was pledged to the Templars at thirteen, and had been instructed to be brave and courageous in the face of fear and death. He had cowered before, and felt fear and mistrust before, and he had acted in self-defense and with reckless disregard for the lives and souls of those he perceived as threats before. He had never, in all his life, been afraid of not coming home.

But he had never had anything to which he must return. Or anyone. Perhaps she was not his to return to, but his mind screamed that he must. He must come home to her.

He would come home to her.

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The Shrine of Dumat was a far and horrible place surrounded by sand and the stench of old death. Cullen heard and felt the red lyrium from miles away, and it filled him with dread. There had to be a mountain of it to hear it from such a distance. He was dizzy and sweating and nauseated before they reached the front gate. Max ordered his personal guard to stay out of the Shrine and keep watch, and seemed to take silent note of Cullen’s condition before opening the large gate.

Once inside, they saw the mountain of red lyrium he’d feared would be there. It sprang up from the stone and the earth in jutting crags that glowed and boiled the air within the walls. It also sprang up from the flesh and armor of the Red Templars lying in wait for the Inquisitor’s arrival. Cullen fought against them among some of the most skilled warriors he’d ever had the privilege to know. Sera was raucous and boisterous, and her arrows hummed and whistled through the air before striking their death-dealing blows. Dorian and Max used fire and lighting to disintegrate the Red Templars, leaving small piles of smoldering ash with each graceful swing of their staves. Iron Bull bowled through enemies, shattering bone and red lyrium with his body and his war hammer.

The blood of one of the Red Templars splashed on Cullen’s neck during the fight. It seared his flesh and stopped his breath and made him vomit on the stone ground. He maintained only enough wherewithal to wipe the tainted blood off with a discarded rag before it burned into his windpipe. His skin blistered but did not break. This did not happen to anyone else when the blood touched
Inside the Shrine proper, not one breath of air was safe from the fire that had been set or from the sound and scent and sting of the blighted lyrium. It was no more a song than a cacophony of screams was a song, and it shrieked and clawed at him to succumb. He could barely hear the sound of Maddox’s dying voice telling him that Samson had fled, that the Red Templars had stayed behind and died so their corrupted leader could escape. The din of the lyrium in Cullen’s addled mind only served to enhance his confusion at the loyalty of Samson’s men. They followed him and died for him so he could help to destroy the world.

Cullen recalled the last time he had followed someone with such blind faith and obedience. He vomited again.

Bull slung Maddox’s lifeless corpse—that was all he was now, a corpse—over his shoulder and hauled him out of the burning building. Cullen’s guilt, the burn on his neck, and the screeching song of the red lyrium made it difficult for him to see or think or breathe as they left. They fled the collapsing Shrine with naught but the corpse that was once a tranquil that was once a man in love and a handful of tools. No Samson. Only death and destruction. Nothing new for Cullen.

He vomited three more times over the next few days as they traveled back to Skyhold. He could still hear that twisted song ringing, ringing, ringing in his ears and parching his throat. He could scarcely eat for the tune in his head. Dorian, Sera, Bull, Max, and even Spencer took turns asking after him and bringing him snacks. He did what he always did and told them he was fine and turned them away.

He was not fine. He was spun up and tired and he ached. He ached in every way a man can ache. His mind and body and heart and soul were sore and wanting. He could not wait any longer to return to Skyhold—to return to Belle.

*****

Belle took Cullen up in an embrace again when their group returned several evenings later. She hugged her brother. She hugged Max. She hugged Cullen. “Thank God my boys are home with me in one piece,” she said to the three of them. She had included Cullen in her deific and divine gratitude, and his heart swelled up in his chest. It was almost enough to alleviate the nausea and the still-searing pain in his neck.

She tilted his head to the side before she went on to embrace Dorian, Sera, and Bull. She examined the mark on his neck with a critical gaze. “Is this a chemical burn?” she asked. “How did this happen?”

“Blood from one of the Red Templars,” said Cullen. “I did not know it could happen, and I was careless.”

She clicked her tongue in three little *tsks* and smirked at him. “You can’t be careless when you have no fucking clue how to be careful.” She shook her head and dropped her gaze a bit, smiling to herself. Maker, but she was beautiful. “Promise me you’ll have Eudora look at that after you change your clothes.”

“After I change?”

Her teeth peeked out from between her dusky lips. “You’re still covered in blood, and you stink. Change your clothes, have a bath—but be careful of that—” She pointed to his neck. “—and then go see Eudora. I’ll let her know to expect you.”
Cullen felt a smirk creep up his lips. “I did not know I’d relinquished my power to give orders here.”

“You didn’t. I just borrowed it for a sec. You can have it back after you go see Eudora. I’m keeping it until then.”

“Alright.”

“Well? Go on, then! Chop, chop! Scoot!” Belle shooed him away by flailing her arms in the direction of his quarters.

She was right. His mantle and breeches reeked of blood and filth, and he reeked as a result of wearing them for days. He divested himself of this rancid clothes and donned a new pair of breeches and a soft tunic. He did his best to hurry down to the laundry to give them his soiled garments before he had a chance to impart his stench on the clothes he was wearing, then rushed to the baths.

She was also right about the bath. The warm water helped to soothe his aching muscles and wash away the grit, visible and invisible. It was a catharsis of a kind to cleanse himself, body and soul. He lingered in the water, which was unlike him, but he needed the time to think. He needed to think about the Inquisition, about Maddox and Samson, about Knight-Commander Meredith, and about the man he had become. He thought about the man he hoped to be and the man he must be. He thought about the man his family believed him to be and the man he wanted them to know. He thought about the man Belle saw when she looked at him. He wondered whether she saw a friend or a foe, a brother or a brother in arms, family or a lover.

It did him no good to think on such things. For the moment, he was the Commander of the Inquisition’s forces. It was all the man he was meant to be until Corypheus was dead. He told himself this over and over as he dried and dressed, and continued to recite it as he walked down to the healers’ rooms to see Eudora.

She howled a bit when she saw the wound on his neck. “Whoo-oo, Commander! That is a nasty looking burn!” With her index and middle fingers, she tilted his head in a way that was just gentle enough to bely her no-nonsense demeanor. He liked her for that. She had a crassness about her that was comfortable and homey. “How’d you come by this, then?”

“It happened when I was struck by blood with red lyrium in it. Belle called it a ‘chemical burn.’”

Eudora scoffed and rolled her eyes. “That girl. Thinks she knows everything, that one. But she’s daft where it counts. I’ve a salve that should fix this right as rain in two or three days, since I know you hate when I use magic on you. And drink this down for the lyrium nausea.” She passed him a little vial of purple liquid.

Cullen shot the healer a suspicious look as he drank down the vial’s foul contents and as she turned to take a jar that was filled with a rather disgusting green ooze off the shelf. “What you mean ‘she’s daft where it counts?’”

She snorted, handing him the grotesque jar. “Fool girl can’t even see you’re arse over eyeballs blind in love with her.”

He froze where he stood. Caught. His jaw set itself in a hard line, and he glared at her. “What?”

Eudora’s expression shifted from just amused to amused and sly. “Don’t tell me you’re daft too, Commander. It doesn’t become your fine face and those bright eyes of yours.”

“I—She—I—” He could feel the heat suffuse over his cheeks and ears, drowning out any semblance of reason or human speech.
Eudora laughed her husky laugh, long and uninhibited. “You’re both up your own arses! Look, Commander, I have been around too long and seen too much to watch this foolishness of yours continue. We are in the middle of a war. Any and all of us could be blown to the Void at any moment. If you waste any more of the time either of you have, mark me, you’ll regret it for the rest of your days.”

Cullen was struck as dumb as the healer seemed to think him. “What is it that you suggest I do, then?”

“Andraste’s tits, man! Go to her and tell her! It’s well after suppertime, and I’m sure someone as in love with her as you so obviously are would know exactly where she’d be about now. So go there. Run to her, and tell her everything.”

He was still stunned and still frozen. His body warred with his heart and his mind, and his legs refused to move as a result. “I—”

“Go!” Eudora flung her arms out at him. When he did not move, she did it again. “Get out of here and go!”

Cullen wanted to say something before he turned and left, but a “thank you” seemed both insufficient and unwarranted. “Alright” would have been pointless. “Yes, ser” was wildly inappropriate. So he just left without another word.

He sprinted up the nearest staircase to the battlements, charging through the doors of every unoccupied room on the way back to his tower. Belle would be in her quarters at this time of night. She never stayed out long past the first hour after supper. Maker’s breath, Eudora had been right. He did know where Belle would be. As he barged through one door of his tower and set down his jar of green ooze, he hoped the healer had also been right about this course of action.

He would run to her. He would run to her and give her his heart and let her do what she pleased with it. Anything was preferable to ignorance. He passed through the door opposite the one he’d entered, keeping Belle’s tower in his unblinking sight. If she scorned him, he could banish her from his thoughts. If she embraced him, he would bask in the warmth of her affections. His heartbeat outpaced his footsteps two-fold. This was terrifying. This was utterly terrifying. He had faced down blood mages and apostates and Red Templars and Archdemons for Andraste’s sake, and this was more terrifying than all of them combined.

Cullen stopped in front of the thick wooden door that stood between him and the woman with whom he was arse over eyeballs blind in love, as their friend had so uniquely phrased it. His momentum rocked him back and forth from his toes to his heels, and he paused there. A final wave of terror washed over him, making his every breath shallow and weak and setting his hands to trembling at his sides. He commanded the largest standing army in Thedas, and he was crumbling outside the door of just one astonishing woman. When his nerves had released him enough, he did something he never did.

He knocked.

*****

Chapter End Notes
(O_O)

Ahhhhhhhh!!!
Chapter Notes

I figured you guys deserved a speedy update after that last cliffhanger...

Also NSFW ahead ^_^~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A loud knock on the tower door startled Belle as she slipped her nightshirt over her head. It was a knock done with the side of the fist, the blade of the hand. It was a cop knock. **Bang, bang, bang, police, open up**—that sort of knock.

She straightened the sagging fabric as much as she could to give her even a semblance of decency. It was a pointless exercise. The garment would hang off one shoulder if she didn’t let it hang off both, and it dipped down low no matter what she did. She could have taken another moment to change back, but the urgency of the knock entreated her to open the door. She crossed her arms over her breasts to hide them as she descended her stairs.

Belle tilted her head to see who was on the other side of her door as she opened it, hoping she could block her uncovered bits. Cullen stood there, sweating and severe, with an indistinct look that resembled perturbation stuck to his face. What had she done now?

“May I come in?” he asked, tone and expression mismatched to a surprising degree.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, come in.” She walked backwards, pulling the door open in front of her. Cullen rushed in, and she shut it behind him. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. No. I don’t—” He turned to look at her then. “I—You are—”

Belle hugged her arms tighter where they crossed over her. Part of her wanted him to see her like that, vulnerable and exposed, but another part of her was scared out of her mind. Cullen was a man of propriety and honor. What if he shunned her for her exposure? What if he accused her of harlotry again? She walked over to lean on her desk, his gaze following her every move.

“I was getting ready for bed,” she said. “Did you need something?”

“Yes.” His voice cracked a bit, stuck in his throat for too long. “I need to…I must…” He paused, lips parted, and stared for a ten second eternity. She counted it out. **One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand.** Her nerves frayed further with every one thousand.

“Oh my **God**, Cullen, just spit it out! It’s kind of fucking humiliating, you fucking standing there and staring at me without actually completing a single fucking sentence.” Belle began to tremble again. She felt tears prickling at her eyes. She was not prepared for another tongue lashing just then. Not from him. Not the way she’d begun to feel.
Cullen seemed to steady himself. He leveled his eyes with hers, and they bored into her. They were warm and dark, and looking at them for too long quickened the pace of her breathing. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” he said. “You are beautiful.”

“I’m what?” Her words came out long, shaky, and sludgy.

He stepped closer to her. Adrenaline surged through her, making her shake harder and forcing her hard breaths out of her mouth instead of her nose. Those amber eyes drifted over her as he took another step. And another. He was so close she could have touched him with her other arm still tucked under her elbow.

“You are beautiful,” Cullen said again, softer. “You are beautiful and brilliant and infuriating and stubborn, and I cannot form enough words to describe my feelings for you because you confound me so.”

“I think you’re—I think—” Belle’s voice came out broken and hoarse. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “I think you’re doing just fine.”

Honey whiskey eyes wandered over her face. Cullen’s Adam’s apple bobbed with a thick swallow. He looked her in the eye for a moment. She waited.

Belle liked kissing as much as the next guy, but she’d never really found a man who did it quite the way she wanted it. They always used too much tongue, or tried to suck her lips up in their mouths like fish, or tried to get too creative with their teeth. Thus, kissing never failed to become off-putting after a few minutes.

But when Cullen surged forward to kiss her, it was too much and too little all at once. It was oh God, and Jesus Christ, and fuck yes. It was rough and impatient and gentle and tender. He cupped her jaw in his large hands and leaned down to meet her. His lips were warm and soft, and his day-old stubble rasped at her chin. His scar was smooth as silk against her lips.

She wreathed her arms around his neck and stood. She parted her lips, unbidden, and hoped against hope until his tongue slipped into her mouth, slow and gentle. He released her jaw to wrap her waist up in his embrace. He pulled her body flush against him, and she whimpered and sighed at the sensation of him. Every muscle in both their bodies was taught and alive.

Cullen stepped forward, backing Belle up into her desk until it made a scrrch sound on the stone floor. His thigh came to rest between her legs, pressing against her sex. He tightened his grip on her waist and bent his knee just so, sending a jolt of pleasure up her spine and out of her mouth in a weak mewl. He did it again, and this time she pulled her mouth from his to let her little cry fly uninhibited and into the rafters.

With his lips free, he set upon her neck like a starved animal. Hot, noisy breaths hissed against her sensitive skin. He nibbled at her earlobe for a short moment, working his way down to the crook of her neck with little bites and covetous kisses. All the while, he pressed into her core and held her to him. Heat bloomed low within her. His hands skated about on her back, and hers wound into his hair, loosening his unruly curls from whatever he used to slick them back and away.

With little effort, Cullen lifted her by her ass and set her down on the edge of her desk. She felt the cool wood on her skin, her nightshirt pooling behind her. Then she felt his calloused hands on her thighs. He pushed her legs apart, seating himself between them as he painted a hot trail back up her neck and to her mouth. She felt his cock stiffening between them, despite the two or three layers of fabric preventing their joining. He rolled his hips, and she gasped at the pressure. His fingers slipped up to tangle into the hair at the base of her neck. She gasped again when he pulled, hard, baring her
neck and rolling her cheek against his curls. She breathed in and out, in and out, conscious and unconscious in the twilight of his scent and his mouth and his hands and his cock pressing, pressing against her.

Belle’s right hand reached down past the collar of his tunic to feel his skin. The heat and the soft smoothness of him was sunbaked marble, and she sighed. The hand on her waist slid down her body until it squeezed at her bare thigh. Another blossom of heat in her core, another roll of his hips, another gasp. That rough, warrior’s hand wandered up under her nightshirt as those scarred warrior’s lips wandered back to her mouth. He kissed her hard and long and deep, holding her head back and digging his thumb into her hip in a way that made her thighs quiver and her nails drag up his skin. His groans glided like summer down her throat, warm and inviting, begging for flesh to expose itself in an open greeting.

She grabbed at Cullen’s tunic while his hand traveled further up under nightshirt, and she tugged until he let go of her. He left only enough space between them to reach down his back and pull the light fabric over his head. Belle’s mouth hung open at the sight of him. All the hard curves of muscle she’d felt while they trained were bare to her then, and he was made of that sunbaked marble. He was Achilles with an arrow in his heel, and he was Atlas with the world on his shoulders. These men of great strength and great pain stared out at Belle through Cullen’s amber eyes, glassed over with lust. Ravenous. She trembled in her awe.

She grasped at his wrists when he reached for the hem of her nightshirt. Hard, wanton breaths sawed through her chest. “I—I don’t look like that.” She gestured with her eyes at his chiseled masterpiece of a body. “I don’t—I’m not—”

Cullen’s voice left his throat in a kind of gentle growl, dark and kind in equal measure. “You look like you. And you are all I want.”

Belle’s eyes roamed over his bare torso, greedy and yearning in her own right, she knew. She released her grip on his wrists, letting her hands slide up his arms to cup his jaw. He rushed her again, his mouth on hers in an instant. It would never cease to amaze her how fast he could move.

She reached down between them as he nipped and kissed her lips, ear, and neck. His cock was hard and thick in her palm, and she squeezed it through his pants. He groaned against her bare clavicle. She did it again. He reached up under her nightshirt in answer, one hand finding her breast and her pearled nipple, the other toying with the top of her panties. Rugged fingers brushed over sensitive skin, stopping her breath in her throat.

Belle panted into the cool air of her tower. Sweat beaded across her chest, and she felt the wetness of her cunt when Cullen took her in hand and squeezed through the lacy lycra blend of her underwear. She couldn’t take it anymore. She worked at the laces of his pants, grateful that he used a normal knot to secure them.

Cullen’s cock sprang free and into her hand. It was all velvet and slick with need. He grunted into the crook of her neck, and something ripped. Only when she felt those rough fingertips pass over her bare hip did she realize what the thing was that ripped. Her panties were gone then, remnants of desperation torn and discarded on the stone floor. She stroked him, spreading the slick of his desire down his length. A feeble little sound left her lips when he delved between her folds and dipped his middle finger into her. It came out warm and wet, and he stroked her sensitive bundle of nerves in kind. His mouth worked away at her neck, and his fingers slipped away her restraint.

With her free hand, she pushed the waist of his pants down and grabbed his ass. He thrust into her hand, and she pulled him closer to her. He took his dexterous lips from her earlobe and looked her in the eye, their foreheads pressed together, hot air and heavy breath the only things that fit in the space
between them. His lips brushed against hers as he asked, “Are you certain you want this?”

Had Belle been feeling like her snarky self, she might have answered, “No. I just grab random dudes’ dicks and let them finger me for shits and gigs.”

But she was not her snarky self. She was a woman besotted and oversexed. She was drunk on the scent and sensation of him. She was willful and wanton and she fucking needed him. A whimpered little “yes” was all she could manage.

They moved in synchronicity then. Cullen inched forward while Belle guided him into her. He filled her slowly, and she moaned, “Oh God,” at the perfection that was him inside of her. Her lips quivered and her eyes rolled back in her head when he thrust into her. Every nerve in her body was alive and awake and fucking humming. One arm wrapped around her waist again, curving her back and pressing her against him in full. He replaced his middle finger on her clit with his thumb and started massaging harried little circles as he pushed into her again.

Their pace was not slow, but frantic, betraying the urgency of their desires. They grunted and groaned and panted in unison, each climbing higher and higher toward their undoing. Belle’s desk made a dozen more scrrch sounds against the floor while Cullen fucked her. Her legs crept further up his sides with every thrust until the balls of her feet rested on the fallen waist of his pants. She could feel herself nearing her end, walking the tightrope and teetering over the precipice. He must have known because just then he said, “Look at me.”

Belle opened her lidded eyes and lifted her head from where it dangled and swung like a metronome in time with his thrusts. His eyes were dark and voracious. He kissed her with those dark eyes open and let his lips ghost over hers while he said, “Come for me.” Every sound and syllable rumbled through their chests. Belle’s mouth opened wide. Her cheeks flushed and her body shook and a final bud of heat bloomed where he was inside her. “Come for me,” he said again.

And she did. She came around him, loud and broken. There was an unfamiliar savageness to her orgasm that arched her back and her neck, curled her toes, and electrified her body. His thumb continued its little circles, carrying her through wave after wave of roiling pleasure until she heard him roar out and felt him pulse within her. His forehead rested on the flat of her chest. His panted breaths seeped through her nightshirt and into her skin. He held onto her, and thrust into her three more times as he came, hard and erratic. It was fucking beautiful.

Belle carded her fingers through his hair. She curled her body into him while he was still inside her and his arm was still wrapped around her waist. She let her head rest against his shoulder. She held him with everything in her because part of her was certain she would float away or dissolve if she let him go. She needed this. She needed him.

“I should—” said Cullen into her sweat dampened hair. “I—I should…”

“Stay,” she said, certain, despite how soft her voice came out. “You should stay.”

Cullen pulled away enough to look at her. His brow was furrowed up with an obvious hopefulness that made her heart ache for him. Had no one ever needed him so much? Had no one ever pleaded with him or begged him to stay the night? Belle was not above begging just then. He’d awakened something that would not be laid to rest.

“Are you—”

He smiled the most wonderful smile at that, and he kissed her. This was a different kiss, languorous and soft. It was a kiss because he could, not because he needed to. He withdrew from her slowly, and she tried not to whimper at the feeling of loss. His kiss lingered. She took solace in the warmth of it.

Belle squeaked in shock when his hand slipped under her ass and he picked her up. He didn’t shake or tremble under her. He moved easily with her legs around his waist as he walked up the stairs. This was a powerful man. She knew it more than ever in that moment. He sat her on her bed with a smooth ease that betrayed the strength of his body.

She let Cullen take off her nightshirt. The honey in his eyes seemed to melt at the sight of her, and she struggled not to shy away from it. His was not a reaction to which she was accustomed. His eyes meandered over her, explored her. If she did not know better, she would have said he was transfixed.

Cullen must have noticed the still-dark marks on her knees then—purplish reminders of the day he died. He closed his eyes and pressed a kiss against each slow healing scar. He kissed her thighs. He kissed her cunt. He nibbled and licked and sucked at her sensitive bundle of nerves until she came again. She came with abandon and with his fingers laced with hers. She came with Achilles’s and Atlas’s broad shoulders under her thighs. She came with Cullen’s eyes watching her shatter.

Fuck if it wasn’t amazing.

“Did you let Eudora look at that burn?” asked Belle as she crested the stairs with her ruined underwear and a cup of that fucking romp tea in hand. Goddamn Eudora. Bitch had to be right about everything.

Cullen lay in Belle’s bed, bathed in the moonlight that shone through her window. His hair was a mess of golden curls. He barely covered himself with her blanket, his whole torso, one hip, and one and a half legs all naked to the world. She thought about their come on her sheets, but it bothered her less than it might have back home. He looked too content and she felt too happy to ask him to move.

“I did,” he said. “She gave me a salve, but I left it in my tower. It can wait until morning.”

“Are you sure?” Belle perched on the other side of her bed, reticent to drink the awful smelling tea. “I bet it hurts like a bitch.” She sipped the stuff anyway. It tasted like someone thought it was a good idea to throw a bag of ass into a Vitamix with some kale. She grimaced.

Cullen chuckled. “It’s alright. I barely feel it.” He reached over to run his hand along her thigh. “I am sorry that you have to drink that.”

“Meh.” She shrugged. “Worth it.” She chugged the rest down in an attempt not to taste it. It didn’t work. She stuck her tongue out in a mock gag before setting down the green-tinged teacup on her bedside table.
“I’m glad you thought so, too,” said Cullen. He took her hand in his, his thumb rubbing those familiar soothing little circles into her skin as he gazed at her. She smiled in answer.

“Are we—uh—are we telling people about this?” That was a piss-poor way to phrase that question.

He stiffened a bit, but his thumb didn’t stop. “What would you like to do?”

Belle laughed a bit. “I’d be down to shout it from the fucking rooftops, quite frankly. But I get the feeling that might be a bad idea around here. I’d still like to tell Max and the other advisors and the inner circle, if that’s okay with you.”

“So long as it’s only them, I do not see a problem with that. It’s everyone else I’m concerned about. Gossip spreads quickly in the barracks, and I would prefer it if our private affairs remained private.” He arched an eyebrow.

“I’m good with that. But don’t be surprised if you hear about it anyway. There’s a night guard who likes to lean on my tower when she gets tired.”

“Maker’s breath.”

Belle laughed a little louder. She laid down on her side of the bed, the right side, and Cullen sidled over to her. He enveloped her, pulling her into him so her nose brushed against the fine blonde hair on his chest. She so rarely felt safe in Thedas. It was a dangerous place, and it had proven itself as such too many times. But she felt safe in his arms, breathing in the scent of spiced herbs and soft powder.

His voice was so quiet when he spoke that she almost thought it was the wind whistling through the battlements. “What is it like to fly?”

She backed away just enough to turn her head up to look at him. There was a sincerity in his expression that made her smile. “What?”

“You told Sera and Dorian that you have flown before. You even mentioned it the day you landed in Thedas. What is it like?”

“I haven’t flown with my body or anything like that,” said Belle. “We fly in these things called ‘airplanes.’ They’re like…” She paused to consider how she could explain something so far beyond anything in Thedas. “They’re like giant sealed carriages made out of metal. They have big, stiff wings with turbines or jets on them. I don’t know a good way to explain jets, except for that they fly by shooting fire out behind them. I’m sorry.”

“So these airplanes go into the sky with people inside of them? Are they friendly?”

Belle chuckled at that. “Sorry. They’re not animals. They have drivers called ‘pilots’ that turn them on and off and steer them and stuff. And there are windows for everyone inside to look out of. Well, if you get a good seat.”

“What does it look like in the sky?” Cullen was adorable in his curiosity. He gazed down at her with a quizzical look on his face and light in his eyes.

“The kind of planes I went in go really, really high. Higher than the tallest mountain,” said Belle. Cullen gasped the tiniest gasp, and she pressed her lips together to keep from giggling at his wonderment. “So when we’re up there, if there are no clouds, everything looks really small and kind of hazy. We can see the biggest canyons the way they might look on a map, and it all looks kind of flat.”
“And if there are clouds?”

Belle sighed a wistful little sigh. “I liked being over the clouds. They’re totally different that high up. They’re blinding white and fluffy. It’s like riding over a sea of sparkling cotton balls. And the sky above the clouds is so blue. It’s a blue you can’t see anywhere else.”

Cullen’s gaze was warm and sweet, full of affection and awe. “Where do you fly to, in this blue sky? Is Orange County large? Are there many places to go?”

She smiled wide at him. “I hadn’t realized I only ever mentioned Orange County. Orange County is just one place. It’s kind of like how…like how the Hinterlands is just this one place. It’s not a city, but there are cities in it, you know? Orange County is just one place in one state, which is just one place in one continent. And there are seven continents on Earth. I’ve been to three of them.”

“You’ve traveled to three continents? All on airplanes?”

“Well, I was born in North America—that’s one—but I’ve traveled around it on airplanes and in cars—carriages we drive on the ground without horses, just with motors. I flew to Asia, which took eleven and a half hours because it was over fifty-five hundred miles away. It was kind of the same with Europe.”

“It only took eleven and a half hours to get over fifty-five hundred miles?” Cullen’s eyes were wide.

“Yeah. Airplanes go almost six hundred miles an hour.”

“That is…astounding.” He was staring off into the distance, no doubt trying to imagine what that must be like. His arms were still wrapped around her back, and he still held her tight against his chest.

“Mmhmm. Especially in light of the fact that it took almost a fucking week to get to Val Royeaux, and I probably could’ve driven my car there in about four and a half hours. Maybe less.”

“You could have?”

“Yup. Here, to even get the distance between my apartment and my job one way, it would take almost an entire day on horseback,” said Belle. Cullen stared back at her, stunned. “And don’t even get me started on smartphones.”

“What?” Cullen’s eyebrows lifted in a funny sort of worry. “What are smartphones?”

“I promise, I’ll tell you all about them. I’ll even show you one. But it’s my turn to ask a question.”

His look of worry shifted to one of coy amusement. “Are we taking turns?”

“Yeah bro, we’re taking turns.” Belle looped her arm under Cullen’s and held her head up in her hand. “You just asked me, like, a hundred questions”

He chuckled again, those three low laughs filling her with a strange blend of satisfaction and want. “I’m not entirely certain your numbers are correct.”

“Hey man, no one ever accused me of being good at math. Why do you think I went to law school? No fucking math classes, that’s why.” They shared warm laughter at that.

Cullen brushed an encroaching curl away from her eye with his finger. It was an act so intimate it was unnerving. Her gaze faltered for a moment. “Alright,” he said, “what is your question?”
“How…” Again, her voice crammed itself up into her throat like a sock. She just needed to ask the fucking question and get it over with. “How did you know about my birthday back at the Winter Palace?”

“Ah.” He paused for a moment. “I…I overheard you and Spencer talking about it.” It was his turn to look nervous, his gaze’s turn to falter.

“Is that also how you knew the Antivan song lyrics you had Josie translate for you? You ‘overheard’ them?” There was no anger in her tone, though there was a bit of chastisement.

Cullen rushed to his own defense. “That was different,” he said. “I was coming to thank you for saving my life, and I did not want to interrupt you. You sounded…impassioned.”

Belle snorted. “Impassioned, huh?” Cullen’s cheeks turned the slightest tinge of red. “It’s okay. Just don’t spy on me anymore, okay? You’re not great at it. And you can just ask me anything you want to know from now on. If you want to hear me sing, just ask.” She put her hand on his cheek. His skin was soft against her fingertips. Those eyes that looked like amber, like honey whiskey, and like leaves in autumn were also soft. She leaned forward, pressing a slow kiss to his lips. His arms tightened around her, locking her against the hard planes of his body in a way that was less lustful than it was desirous of closeness. He was telling her he wanted her near him. He was telling her he needed her like she needed him.

“Is it okay if tonight I just enjoy you holding me? And then we can fall asleep?”

Cullen’s expression was all warm and sweet again, full of affection and awe again. “Of course, Belle.” He kissed the top of her head when she nestled back into his chest.

“Try not to dream about falling,” she said, voice muffled against his skin. “I sometimes dream about falling when I talk about flying.”

“I do not need to dream about falling,” said Cullen. “I already am.”

Belle puffed out a laugh against the fine hairs on his chest. “You’re a smooth talker, all of a sudden, huh? Maybe we should have done this sooner.”

“Perhaps,” he said, curling in on her and running a hand down her back as she slipped her knee between his thighs. “Perhaps.”

*****

Chapter End Notes

Heheheheheeeeee!!!

FINALLY! That what you're all thinking right? FINA-FUCKING-LLY!

In case you were wondering, the song I was listening to while I wrote this was not my usual smut music. I was listening to Ludovico Einaudi’s “Promessa”. There's a kind of passionate desperation about it that helped me feel my way through this important moment. ^_^
Cullen had been awake for Maker knows how long. The sun had come up, and it bathed Belle’s quarters in buttery golden light. Belle lay beside him with all but her head, one hand, and half her right leg covered. Her red hair was fanned out across the pillow in a wild mess, not so unlike his own curls, he realized as he ran his fingers through them. She was the picture of serenity, her lips parted as if waiting to be kissed.

He stared at her in awe. He had come to her in the night with his heart in his hand, and he had given it to her, and she had opened herself to him. He could say that he took her, and anyone aside from him may have seen it that way, but she had taken him. Every look and sound and caress was a gift she gave him. She trembled and kissed and came for him.

Oh Maker, how she came for him. Belle was a puzzle before those moments, a lock without a key that begged to be opened. She was sighs and quiet gasps and dragging fingernails, sensitive tumblers to be turned and tapped and pressed with precision. When he unlocked her, when his fingers or tongue moved just right, she was loud and glorious. She cursed and keened, gasped and groaned. She pulled him further inside her to demand that he follow her as she cried out. It was a command he obeyed without hesitation.

There she was, peaceful and safe beside him, and he felt unworthy. Cullen had hurt her and she had saved him. He had shouted at her and she had asked him to dance. It was not the way she should have been wooed. A nobleman would have won her heart the right way, with flowers and gifts and promises of land and titles and children. Perhaps he should have left her heart to be won by someone more deserving.

Belle stirred, inhaling slow and deep as her head turned and her hazel eyes opened. Her eyes rolled about for a moment, sleep-dazed and hazy and beautiful. When they landed on him she smiled and took another deep breath. She still held his heart in her hands, and she gave it life and warmth with that sleepy smile.

“I like your hair like that,” she said as she opened her eyes again. “You should leave it curly now and again.”

Cullen could not help but smile back. “I would prefer you to be the only person to see it like this.”

Belle stuck out her tongue and blew a short raspberry at him. “No fun.”

She groaned as she sat up. Her legs crossed and she folded back over on herself. Her hair un-mussed itself, falling in loose and wavy curls across her thigh. Her black nightshirt hung off her shoulder, open and loose in the front, baring her shadowed breasts to him. Part of him thought he should preserve her modesty by looking away. He realized that was a ridiculous notion.

Still folded over her crossed legs, Belle grabbed up her glasses from her bedside table and slipped
them on after rubbing her right eye. Without another thought, she went to her bedside table again, spooning out a dose of the draught they both took for their guts. She swallowed it down with a little “bleh,” and scooped out another dose. She held the spoonful of viscous liquid out to Cullen, her other hand forming a cup underneath it. He closed his mouth around the silverite spoon and swallowed the draught. It tasted like pond scum, but he had tasted worse, so he did not grimace.

She smirked as she set the spoon down. “So fucking domestic already.” She started to laugh, but it turned into a short couple of coughs that shook the sleep out of her lungs.

“I could have taken it from my own stores,” said Cullen.

“Very true, but I don’t want you to leave until you absolutely have to.”

Belle toppled onto her side. Her head rested in his lap. She beamed at him, and he found his hand wandering into her hair of its own accord. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. He kissed the end of her nose, and she giggled. When he moved toward her mouth she pressed her fingers to his lips and covered her own with her other hand. He shot her a quizzical look.

“Morning breath,” she said into her hand. She sat up and snatched another bottle off of her bedside table. It was filled with a clear brown liquid. She took the top off and handed it to him. “Swig and swish.”

Cullen sipped enough to fill his mouth. It was bitter and smelled like rancid leather boots left out in the sun. “Apple cider vinegar,” she said before taking a large sip herself. She sloshed the stuff around in her mouth for a few seconds and gargled it, and he mimicked her movements until she spat into a nearby basin. He crawled to her side of the bed and did the same.

Belle made an O of her mouth and blew out a stream of air. It did not have the same foul odor to which he’d been accustomed in his cramped Templar quarters. “Morning breath,” as she called it, had simply been a fact.

“I had never heard of this particular use for apple cider vinegar.”

“Good oral hygiene is a cornerstone of a healthy blah blah blah. Yadda yadda yadda. It makes kissing in the morning exponentially more pleasant.”

With that, she pounced on him. She pushed him so that his back knocked against her headboard, and held his face in her hands as she kissed him. There was a sleepy need to the press of her lips, languid and hard. One of her hands crept up into his hair, running through his tousled curls. Her painted and long fingernails raked little trials along his scalp that sent chills down his spine. She let his tongue slide between her lips while his fingers slipped up her back and into her hair.

Cullen felt his desire for her growing in every way. His unclothed and uncovered cock filled and rose for her. Belle straddled him, her smallclothes still absent and lying ruined and destroyed somewhere in her room. She did not take him into her. Instead, she pressed the wet heat of her sex against his length and rolled her hips. He moaned at the pressure and the slickness of her and the glide of her clit and her folds. She enveloped him without engulfing him, and it was like being served a bountiful feast in the courtyard of a palace. It was warm and lush and satisfying, no matter that he was not inside.

His hands left her hair when she rolled her hips the second time. He wanted to see her. He found both of her wrists and ensnared them with his fingers. They were small and smooth in his large and rough hands. He drew them away from him slowly. He bent forward as he moved her arms behind her back, grabbing both small wrists into one hand.
He leaned back, but held Belle where he had left her. Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea and her mouth that was like the sunset were all open. Her lips, glossy and swollen and pinker then, moved subtly with every heavy breath. Her long nightdress hid the next roll of her hips and pulse of his cock—a secret to all the world, kept between them and the Maker.

Cullen held her wrists low behind her, arching her back and pushing her full, round breasts toward his face. He could see her pearled nipples under the black fabric. With the thumb of his free hand, he stroked one of those hidden peaks as she stroked his hidden cock with the slick satin of her sex. Her eyes rolled up and her head fell back then. He could not abide such interference with his view of her pleasure. It was an affront to the beauty of her lust, and he would not have it. With only his thumb and forefinger, he tilted her head back up to face him.

“Eyes open, darling,” he said, voice low and firm.

Her heavy lids opened, revealing her powerful dark eyes as she writhed against him. His pleasure mounted beneath her. “Good,” he said. “Good girl.” He rewarded her by circling her other nipple, pebbled and perfect, with his thumb. Her thighs quivered, but her eyes stayed on him. Those lips that were like a shaded rose opened wider, letting out no sound but a sigh. Her pleasure was an enigma, understood only by her. He would find her cipher if it took him every second of every day. He would know what it was that rived her lips apart and tore curses and cries from her beautiful throat.

Belle insinuated herself against him, building that familiar heat in his chest. It was the heat he felt when he took himself in hand and knew her in his mind’s eye, and it was he heat he felt when she came apart with his arm around her waist and her hands clawing at his flesh. He continued his little circles against her perfect peaks through that black fabric. He whispered and groaned little endearments and encouragements as he held her wrists and watched her mouth open further and further, “yes” or “good” or “beautiful” tumbling from his lips here and there. She stared at him as she rocked. Her eyes darkened and her breath quickened, and he was certain she was nearing her undoing.

“Belle?” a familiar voice asked from below them.

They froze, Cullen’s hands gripping Belle’s wrists and cupping her breast, her heat pressed against him. Her eyes were no longer lust-lidded and dark, but wide and petrified. Her mouth was no longer open out of want, but out of horror.

“Belle? Are you awake?” asked Josephine from the center of Belle’s office downstairs.

“Yeah. I’m just about to get dressed,” said Belle. Her eyes darted about in that unfocused way that showed Cullen she was listening.

“Shall I come up to help you? Marquise Effiloche Bouffon’s servants just informed me that she is awake and wishes to discuss the terms of our agreement one last time.”

Belle rolled her eyes. “What’s left to discuss? We hammered all this shit out yesterday.” Cullen still had a hold of her wrists.

“Apparently, she is still concerned that there will be some danger in lending the guard of Val Gamord to aid in our efforts at Adamant. She is considering sending only half the men she promised.”

“Fuck.” Belle’s eyes still darted about, but this time their movement belied her racing thoughts. “Okay. Okay, this is okay. Stay there. I’ll be right down.”
Cullen’s heart raced in his chest. He released Belle’s wrists. His mouth formed the question, “Stay there?” She pressed her lips into a thin line and widened her eyes, shaking her head in warning. She put one finger over her mouth.

She leapt off of him and out of bed. Cullen heard a loud thud, and she hissed in a breath. “Ow! Shit, ow. Suck a sick dick! Okay, that hurt. That hurt.” She limped around the bed, grabbing up clothes along the way. He reached out as if to help her, but she waved him off.

“Are you alright?” asked Josephine.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I stubbed my fucking toe.”

Belle rushed about, slipping on her strangely cut black smallclothes before shedding her nightshirt. She threw the garment at her bed, and it hit Cullen in the face. When he snatched it from his head, he saw her fastening an odd breastband behind her back. Her body shuddered in silent laughter for a moment before she mouthed, “Sorry.” He smiled at her and shook his head. She was too beautiful in her mirth.

Her red curls swirled about her shoulders and covered “A Man Chooses” as she sheathed her legs in soft black leather, and he remembered seeing that hair blow about her frightened face when she discovered she was not where she should have been. He bore a suspicion for her that day bordering on blind hatred. But he loved her now. She had clawed and cursed her way into his blood. It seemed an impossible transition in so short a time, but there he sat, naked in her bed while she dressed for the day. Confounding woman.

She donned a purple corseted dress that reminded him of ripe plums. He had only ever had one. They were plentiful in Kirkwall, but Templar rations were never quite so rich as to include them. As Belle fastened the golden aurum clasps along her side, he remembered the golden aurum necklace the young mage wore as he was brought into the circle from his family’s home. He was complacent, old enough to understand what was happening and why, and young enough not to fight them for his freedom. He had brought a bag with him. It was all he was allowed to bring. In that bag, he stuffed an abundance of plums. His favorite snack, he had told Cullen when he offered one a few days later. Cullen refused him at first. Templars were not to accept gifts from mages. But the plums would go bad soon, the boy reasoned, and he could not eat them all on his own. So Cullen took one—only one—and ate it. He remembered the tart sweetness of it, the snap of the taught skin and the slight graininess of the flesh as he tore into it with his teeth, the way the juice of it gushed out against his lips and dripped down his chin.

He remembered waking up hours later in the boy’s room.

He remembered the boy’s haggard and bruised face when they brought him back to the Gallows a week later.

He remembered the heat of the lyrium brand in his hand and the sound of Meredith’s voice giving the command.

Belle’s lips pressed against his forehead, tearing him from the memory that scrolled before his eyes like a gentle nightmare. She smiled a soft smile at him and he smiled back. He remembered the tart sweetness of her, the feel of her taught skin and supple flesh under the press of his tongue and teeth, the way her nectar gushed out against his lips and dripped down his chin when she came. He would keep a new memory of plums, he decided.

She backed away, pointing to Cullen’s neck and then tapping her own. “Take care of that,” she said soundlessly. He nodded to reassure her, though he had all but forgotten that burn.
He watched her descend the stairs, her hips swaying in that way that enticed and enthralled him. When he could no longer see her, he listened to her boots against the wood and the kind exhaustion in her voice as she greeted Josephine and the scrape of her writing board against her desk as she grabbed it up. He looked out the window to see the two women already deep in conversation as they headed inside.

Once they were gone, he gathered up his boots and breeches and put them on. He realized when he searched for his tunic that it was still downstairs. He found it on Belle’s desk, neatly folded. Well, Josephine already knew.

Later that day, in the middle of a war council meeting to finalize the details of the march to Adamant that would commence in only a few days’ time, Belle walked into the war room. Cullen would be lying if he claimed not to have noticed a change in Leliana’s expression, slight as it was.

“Hey guys,” said Belle, smiling to everyone. “Sorry for interrupting, I just wanted to let Max and Josie know that Marquise Effiloche Bouffon has finalized her agreement to send her forces to meet with our troops in Adamant. All of them.”

“Excellent,” said Max, turning to hug Belle. She laughed at the spontaneity and enthusiasm of his embrace.

“Are you alright, Belle?” asked Leliana.

“I’m fine, Leliana. Max doesn’t hug that hard.” Belle laughed again.

“True. I was inquiring more because of a report I received from one of my scouts this morning.” Oh no, no, no.

“Oh?” Belle’s eyes returned to her the papers on her board for a moment. “What report might that have been?”

“She told me she heard screaming coming from your tower last night, and something that sounded like a skirmish. You seem unharmed this afternoon, though. Are you alright?” No, no, no.

Belle shook her head, her eyes unmoving from those documents. “I’m fine,” she said again. “You really want to ask questions when we both know you already have the answers?”

“I do not have the answers, Belle,” said Leliana, a coy vulgarity to her tone. “But the scout was concerned for your welfare, and she went to Commander Cullen’s quarters to seek his assistance, and he was nowhere to be found.” No, no, no, no.

A sardonic laugh puffed from Belle’s nose. She looked up, all the battle in her eyes alive and ready for war as she smirked. “That’s because he was with me. And I can assure you, there was no skirmish. Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

Cullen felt blood rush up his neck and cheeks and ears. He reached for the back of his neck to try and stop the headache he knew would form if they kept this conversation up. He and Belle wanted to tell their friends, but not like this.

“I’m glad to hear you’re alright,” said Leliana, satisfied with her handiwork.
“Thanks.” Belle slapped the Marquise’s contract down on the war table as she turned to leave. “If anyone else has any questions, I’ll be in the library with Dorian.”

The room was silent when the door closed behind her. Max was staring at the door. Josephine was staring at her writing board. Leliana was staring at Cullen. Cullen was staring at the war table.

Max turned his gaze to Cullen, a stunned expression stuck to his face. “Cullen…you and Belle?”

Cullen cleared his throat, mortified. He would own this. He would do it because it was the honorable thing to do, because it was the truth, and because he loved her. “Yes.”

A slow smile crept up the Inquisitor’s face. A short laugh burst from his chest, and he looked as surprised at the sound of it as Cullen was. “Finally!”

“What?”

“Finally!” Max rounded the war table and stood at Cullen’s side, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him a bit before slapping him on the back. “Before we left for the Shrine, I could have cut the sexual tension between you two with a blunt spoon! Thank the Maker! And good on you, Cullen!” He slapped Cullen on the back again.

“Maker’s breath. I…did not realize anyone felt that way. Thank you for telling me, and for understanding, I suppose. Though I would ask that you all keep this to yourselves until Belle and I have had a chance to settle into this ourselves.”

“You have very little chance of keeping this news a secret if you keep making her scream like that,” said Leliana, smiling from behind her curved fingers.

“That’s enough from you for today, thank you,” said Cullen. She shrugged.

“Leliana!” said Josephine in her lilting Antivan cadence. “Leave Commander Cullen be. If he and Belle want to keep this between the two of them and their friends, why should we interfere?”

“I am not suggesting we interfere, Josie. I am suggesting that Cullen cover your lady’s mouth. Perhaps he should gag her.”

“Leliana!” Josephine was so scandalized and amused that she looked as if her eyes might pop right out of her head. The corners of her mouth trembled with the smile she was holding back for Cullen’s sake. All he could do was blush. Blush on top of blush on top of blush.

“Alright, alright, ladies. Enough of that,” said Max, trying hard not to laugh in his own right as he rounded the table back to his usual place. “There will be nothing to keep secret if we all die because we never finished planning for the siege.”

Cullen did not heed Leliana’s advice. He made Belle scream again that night. And the next. And the morning after that. He had become greedy for the sound of it. Even after he spent himself deep inside of her, he wanted more. He collected and catalogued memories of her quivering thighs and her sighs and her cursing, screaming undoing. He amassed and archived images of her smiling and writhing under him and kissing him. He saved and sorted sensations of her fingertips against his back and the scrape of her nails against his skin and her lips against his ear. The last, he remembered, he had convinced himself he would never feel. He would keep her secreted and safe in his mind, taking thoughts of her with him while he would be away from her.

The day before the march was set to begin, he made his way to Belle’s office. Their contact would be for business, he told himself. He had troop numbers to confirm with her, pledges to verify. If she
wanted anything from him in return, however, he would be more than happy to oblige her.

He stopped outside her door when he heard his name emanate from inside, spoken by Vivienne’s cool voice.

“What about him?” asked Belle, about as nonchalant as she had been when Leliana brought it up.

“He is beneath you, my dear.”

Cullen tried to quell the rage rising in his throat like acid. How dare she? She was a grasping, ignoble woman, herself, clinging to the title of her married nobleman for a foothold in that Maker damned Grand Game.

“Actually, most of the time I’m beneath him,” said Belle. He bit back a laugh.

He could almost hear Vivienne’s imperceptible sneer. “I’m glad you are so comfortable covering your problems with glibness. Allow me to rephrase. Cullen has no title outside of the Inquisition, not since leaving the Templars. You, on the other hand, have already received offers of marriage from several reputable nobles in Orlais and Ferelden. Cullen has nothing more to offer you than his affections, and those will not give you the power a woman of your skill and intelligence deserves.”

Though Cullen was loathe to admit it, she was not wrong. If and when the Inquisition ended or failed or disbanded, he would have nothing to give her. He had a family to whom he could return, and he could take her with him, but their estate was meager in comparison to some of the offers he had heard for her hand. There may have been better offers he had not yet heard.

“First of all, thank you for the compliment, Vivienne. It’s good to know you think of me in that way. Second, I do not have a problem to cover with glibness. Cullen is not a problem. He is a solution. Don’t forget that I also have no title outside of the Inquisition. I don’t have any family here but my brother, so I have no dowry or anything to give to any of these noble suitors that would benefit them besides a former title. Third, Orlesian or Ferelden, I am disinclined to accept any of their marriage proposals. Affection may not carry much weight with you, but it means a fuck of a lot to me. It means everything to me, in fact. Having nothing and no one will remind you of that, so pray to your Maker that you never find yourself in my shoes.”

Cullen felt pride swell in his chest and straighten his spine. Belle was a good and incredible woman, and he did not deserve her. That she thought he did, however, made him want to rush into her office and kiss her in front of Vivienne. They could prove together how much affection mattered. He was convinced.

Instead of barging in, however, he opened the door slowly. Vivienne turned to glance at him over her shoulder, her expression unchanging. Belle beamed her bright smile at him, her tilted canines on full display.

“Your ears must have been burning,” said Belle.

“I will leave you both,” said Vivienne. As she passed him, she turned back for a moment. “Do consider what we discussed, my dear. It is unpleasant out there in the cold, however high your horse may be.”

Once the door closed behind the statuesque woman, Belle clenched her fists in front of her chest and dropped her head back. “Uuugh, she is such a bitch!” she said as she snapped her head back up. She sighed, refocusing her attention on him. “Hey, Commander Handsome.”

He smiled at her and met her on her side of her desk. She kissed him, a sweet little peck of a thing.
“Hello, my darling,” he said.

“Did you hear all that bullshit? She needs to mind her fucking business.” She turned back to the papers stacked high on her desk. It was a familiar sight.

“I did. I also heard your retort.”

“I’ll bet you did.” Belle nudged him with her hip. “You know, opinions are like assholes. Everybody’s got them, and most of them fucking stink.”

Cullen chuckled at that, letting his hand come to rest on her waist. “I came to confirm the final numbers with you for the soldiers we were pledged.”

She leaned into him a bit. “Am I going to see you tonight?” Her voice bore hints of forlornness.

“If you like. I am at your disposal.”

Belle chuffed. “Believe you me, there will be no disposal.”

“I’m counting on it.”

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Unfortunately, Belle had been right. Everyone had opinions when it came to their relationship. She had been mild when she bade him goodbye, disguising a kiss on his cheek by kissing everyone on the cheek. When she came up on her toes to embrace him, she said, “Be safe, and come home to me.” She smiled a different smile at him than the one she smiled at everyone else. There was an affection in it reserved only for him. He smiled back at her before she moved on to embrace Blackwall and kiss him on the cheek.

It seemed all of their masquerading was in vain when it came to their friends, however. Sera and Bull rode up beside him every so often during the long march to offer advice on…methodology. Varric was happy enough to express his disbelief while simultaneously claiming he knew it was bound to happen. Cassandra went moon-eyed when she brought it up, surprising Cullen with advice to “Be as romantic as you can.” Dorian was just as lewd as Bull and Sera, though he masked it under poetic double entendre. Cole remarked on Cullen’s hidden happiness, reassuring him that Belle was just as happy. Solas was calm and genuine in his commentary, though he made sure to remind Cullen not to forget his duties to the Inquisition, as if they were some sort of afterthought. Blackwall had seemed a bit out of sorts since before they left Skyhold, and he was mercifully gentle in his congratulations.

As if the trials of the distance growing between Cullen and Belle had not been enough to stress his mind, Spencer approached him at camp one evening when there were just two days left of the eternal march.

“Commander,” said Spencer just after Cullen had finished his meal, “may I speak to you for a moment?”

Cullen’s stomach dropped to his knees. Belle’s brother was the last person with whom he wanted to discuss this. “Of course, Dolan.” Cullen stood and followed Spencer into the darkness, away from prying ears. Cullen could have sworn he heard Sera’s voice calling out, “Oooooh!” from somewhere in the camp.

They stood in silence for a moment, and Cullen could feel his feet slipping and sinking into the loose sand, despite his lack of movement. The air rushing around them was hot and dry, even at night. Everyone’s lips were chapping in the searing heat of the midday sun, and their skin was darkening
Spencer cleared his throat, breaking that loaded silence. “Permission to speak freely, Commander?”

Cullen barely managed to maintain his severe façade as he said, “Granted, Recruit Dolan.”

Belle’s brother sighed and shook out his arms. It was something Cullen had seen Belle do before she encountered an unpleasant situation or had an unpleasant conversation. He braced himself.

“Are you banging Belle?”

“Am I… banging?”

“Are you. Having sex. With my sister?” There was no mistaking it. Bluntness ran in the family.

“I… Maker’s breath.” Cullen cleared his dry throat. It was as if Spencer’s question had filled Cullen’s lungs with sand. “We have been… intimate, yes.”

Spencer sighed again. He bounced on his toes and shrugged his shoulders four times in rapid succession. He looked like a man preparing for a fight. Cullen braced himself to move if the young man threw a punch.

“Okay. Okay. That’s awesome. I’m really happy for you guys.” Spencer grinned so genuinely that Cullen wondered whether he had suffered from a blow to the head or from heat sickness.

“Th—Thank you?”

“You’re welcome. But listen, Commander,” said Spencer, still a bit more animated than Cullen liked, “rank and position and propriety and all that shit be damned. If you hurt my sister, I’ll fucking come for you. I’ll shank you like a snitch on the yard at Chino. I’m not fucking playing with you, Ser. You understand me?”

Cullen had to admire the peril in which Spencer was willing to put himself to protect his sister. The impertinence of his words glanced off Cullen’s shoulder, though the full force of the warning slammed him in the chest. It did not matter that Spencer used strange and foreign terms. “I understand. Rest assured, nothing could be further from my intentions.”

“Okay. Okay, good.” It occurred to Cullen that they had been equally nervous to have that conversation. He patted Spencer on the back, a gesture which seemed to calm the man. “I’m—Uh—I think I’m done speaking freely, Ser. Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright, Dolan. There was something oddly reassuring about what you just said, as though we were not about to face down an army of skilled warriors in an indestructible fortress.” They shared a tense sort of laugh.

“Yeah, well, Belle’s spent most of her life looking out for me and blazing the trail of awesomeness for me to follow. I don’t think she even realizes it. Whether she does or not, though, I don’t care if I’m her little brother, I’ll protect her for as long as I can.”

“It’s a noble sentiment, and I appreciate the warning. I intend to do the same. No harm will come to her. I swear it on my honor.”
Spencer nodded, understanding flooding his striking blue eyes. “Thanks, Commander.”

Cullen patted the man on the back once more before he trotted off to rejoin his regiment. Cullen stayed behind, letting the hot wind clear his mind for a moment. The weight of his promise settled in his chest, light as a feather and heavy as a brick. He meant every word of it. He would protect Belle with every ounce of strength in his body. He would do it for as long as he lived.

He only hoped that he would live through the next few days. Adamant was a highly defensible fortress filled with Wardens who were doing blood magic. They were marching into his nightmare.

“Be safe, and come home to me.” Belle’s words echoed in his mind as he stood in the dark and in the heat. The wind seemed to carry the sound of her voice across the sand and up into the stars. “Be safe, and come home to me.”

Cullen whispered into the night. He whispered the answer he could not give her in Skyhold’s courtyard in front of the multitudes of people that did not know of their relationship. He whispered, praying that the wind would carry his words across the desert and up into the mountains and through the window of her tower and into her ear before she fell asleep.

“I will come home to you, my love.”

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Chapter End Notes

Love is a many splendored thing. And friends (and brothers) can be really weird about it. XD
Fucking PTSD

Chapter Notes

Descriptions of violence below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Belle had taken to crying at night again. Sometimes it was big, squishy sobbing. Other times it was a couple of tiny tears running down her cheeks. Either way, it was crying. Didn’t matter how fast or fat the tears came.

Her brother was gone, out fighting a war that wasn’t his in a world that wasn’t theirs. He was exposed to a danger from which she could not protect him. A different kind of danger than she knew for him. It was one thing to go fight a fire or, more likely than a fire in Orange County, go into people’s houses and save their lives, but it was something so different to pick up a sword and a shield and try to kill someone before they killed him. These someones, from what she’d heard, were particularly skilled at sword-killing.

Her boyfriend…boyfriend? Boyfriend didn’t sound right. Manfriend? Her dude? Her Cullen was gone fighting the same war. He was adept at all of this, and she knew she shouldn’t be so worried about him, but something in her gut twisted in his absence.

She held a powerful affection for Cullen. She knew it, but she was afraid place it. She had been known to use the word “love” far too liberally where she came from, in the opinions of others. It was something she’d tried to stop doing until she realized that she meant it every time. Falling in love with friends, with family, with boys and men was her means of taking them into her heart, of keeping them close. She could not parse out her affection for people into any subsets more clear than “No,” “Meh,” “Cool,” and “Amazing,” and she let her heart be broken by those who did not think she was “Amazing” in return. Anyone categorized in any of the other groups had no such power over her. They could be sloughed off and shed in favor of someone who felt the same way.

As such, Belle did not like to “date,” as people thought of “dating” back in California. She felt that the beginning of a romantic relationship was best approached as a friendship. Casual romantic entanglement without mutual understanding never served her well, and tended to end in swift hatred or, at the very least, severe and immediate disinterest. It was not her way to dip even a toe into the water before finding its temperature through some other means. That meant no blind dates. That meant no casual sex. That meant no boyfriends before good friends.

Likewise, Cullen did not strike her as a man of half measures. He did not strike her as a man who did anything in his life casually. He did not strike her as the kind of man who referred to a woman as “my darling” without a strong fondness for that woman. The strong fondness, she was reasonably certain, was love.

He loved her. It was written on the backs of his eyes and she watched it play like a zoetrope every time he looked at her. That she had not noticed it weeks ago made her feel like an idiot. It had been there for all to see. And some had seen, as Leliana made quite plain that day in the war room.

They had been friends since the Winter Palace, she knew. They were probably friends before that, too, though she would have been loath to admit it once he yelled at her in his tower. But he
apologized. He stood there while she smacked him around and he apologized. He danced with her and laughed with her, and he went out of his way to be near her, and she liked it. She knew she liked it. There was something about him that excited and calmed her all at once. There were many things about him that excited and calmed her all at once, in fact. Sure he was an obstinate ass, but so was she. He’d have made a good lawyer, she mused from time to time.

While he was gone, Belle decided. She decided that she loved him. He was not “No,” like he was when she first arrived in Thedas. He was not “Meh,” like he was when they could have only the occasional conversation without arguing. He was not “Cool,” like he was when he hauled her into Eudora’s office and made her take care of herself. He was “Amazing,” and she loved him.

It didn’t hurt one iota that he was fucking outstanding at sex. He was fucking mind blowing at sex. If her dumb ass hadn’t wanted to have sex with him before they finally did it, her dumb ass sure as shit did once they had. He was hair-pulling, throat-grabbing, fuck-me-until-I-see-stars-and-don’t-know-my-goddamn-name sex. He made her toes curl and her body tremble with every orgasm. Every. Single. One. Tens across the board. Ungodly and primitive sounds came out of her mouth every time she came, and she hissed out “fucks” and “Gods” as his touch or his tongue or both electrified her nerve endings until she couldn’t breathe at any pace slower than the chug of a fucking freight train at full speed. He was really fucking good at sex.

All of this, and he was gone.

Belle turned to Josephine and Leliana for support. She stayed the night in Josie’s quarters a few times while everyone else was away. There was a subtle opulence to her room. Everything was made of rich materials and crafted with the utmost care and beauty, but she kept her décor sparse. She and Belle languished together most days, both feeling useless while the march and the siege took place. None of the nobility wanted to be in Skyhold while the Inquisitor was away because it was pointless to their efforts at brown-nosing. There were very few deals to be made or alliances to be forged while all of Thedas held its breath to learn what became of the Inquisition and the Grey Wardens. So, the two women kept each other’s company, laughing every day in spite of the dearth of work and the unavailability of their loved ones.

Leliana surprised Belle with kindness and sympathy. The spymaster would come to check on Belle and give updates and missives whenever she could. They took meals together and discussed clothes and art and how Thedas could be made a better place. Belle had no idea before their talks that Leliana had such a long history of perilous benevolence, nor that she held such controversial views about the Chantry. Controversial in the all best ways, from Belle’s perspective. Leliana told stories of her time with the Hero of Ferelden, a woman Belle knew as the Queen of Ferelden, Zoe Theirin. She used to be called Zoe Amell, Leliana told Belle, and she was a fierce and powerful woman whose kindness went unmatched by anyone Leliana had met since. Leliana never saw mages as the threat the Chantry seemed to think they were, and Zoe was proof positive in the spymaster’s eyes. Belle felt closer to Leliana through their conversations, a new kind of closeness she was grateful for in the absence of the man she’d only just realized she loved.

Belle got letters from that man she loved while he was away. She’d taken to saving them and reading them in the huge and twinned moonlight while tiny or fat tears poured from her eyes, while she realized she’d only just gotten to love him and she might lose him already.

Belle, the first one read.

*I have only been away from you for one night, and I miss you already. I miss the cool warmth of you beside me, and the scent of your hair, and the sound of your laugh. Only the knowledge that I must come home to you (and bring your brother and Max back safely) keeps my mind on the task at hand.*
I will come home to you.

Always,

Cullen

She’d laughed at his parenthetical propriety, and sent back a letter with her apologies for not having given him a bottle of her soap and not having taught one of Leliana’s ravens the sound of her laugh. She hoped he chuckled that low chuckle of his when he read it.

Belle,

I still miss you terribly. The desert is hot and awful. You mentioned once that you grew up in a desert. How did a woman as fair as you not cook from the outside in in this sun and heat? I am running out of tunics and smallclothes to wear under my armor. If I needed any other reason to come home to you, it would be to escape this weather and this sand that creeps into everything.

But I have all the reason I need. I will come home to you.

Always,

Cullen

She laughed harder at that one, and sent back a letter reminding him that she was not wearing a full suit of armor while she grew up in the desert, unlike some people, and that the best way to avoid getting sand in all the cracks was not to roll around in it. She snorted as she rolled it up to give to Leliana.

Belle,

I miss you. As I write this, we are close enough to Adamant Fortress that I can hear the shrieks of demons and screams of sacrifices drifting across the sand. We shall begin the siege tomorrow. I pray that the Wardens will see reason and stop their senseless violence and blood magic. It is a danger I am all too familiar with, and I would see it ended before another life is lost.

For now, I can only say that, no matter what happens tomorrow, I will come home to you.

Always,

Cullen

Belle’s stomach sank and twisted when she read that letter. His “always” had been different than the rest of his letter. There were thick spots where his quill had rested too long, and parts that were almost invisible because he’d tried to write them too fast. She wondered if he believed it. For hours, she was afraid to write back. She was not a superstitious woman—unless someone said things were “quiet” when she worked as a 911 operator—but something in her warned her that if she wrote back he might not be alive to receive it.

She decided to write back despite her nerves. You’d better come back in one piece, she wrote, because I have something important to tell you.

She paced and cried for days, waiting for a response. Leliana’s agents’ letters arrived first, telling of the Archdemon and the death of Warden Commander Clarel and the heroism of the Inquisitor. Word had come back that all three of her men were alive, but Cullen still hadn’t written. She couldn’t understand why his was not the first letter to return to Skyhold.
When Leliana finally came to Belle’s tower, parchment in hand, the spymaster bore an unreadable expression. She’d read the letter, Belle knew. She read everyone’s letters. It was a miracle she had time to do anything else with her days with how many letters she read.

The parchment on which Cullen wrote was dirtier than his last few missives. It was harder to unroll, and the pigmentation of the ink varied throughout the text. Belle wondered how many times he’d tried to write it.

Belle,

We were victorious at Adamant, and Max has enlisted the aid of the Grey Wardens. They will.

We all saw terrible things there, Belle. Max and Spencer—the ink got lighter—saw things worse than most. Max, Solas, Blackwall, and Varric fell physically into the Fade with Hawke and Warden Stroud. Max will not tell me what happened there. All he will say is that he got his memories back from the Conclave and that Hawke chose to stay behind so the rest could escape. But Max’s eyes are haunted. No one else will discuss the events of the Fade either, though they all seem—the ink got darker—changed by their experience.

I do not know if Spencer ever told you that he and another soldier from Max’s personal guard were carrying on together, though I assume that he did. Her name was Kier, and she was killed during the battle. She was crushed by a piece of a wall when the Archdemon destroyed it. She was not five feet from your brother when it happened. He—the ink lightened and looked a bit bluer—has not been himself since we left Adamant. He has become reclusive at night, and will not talk to anyone except to say that he is taking watch or going to bed. I only hope that he will talk to you when we return.

I am, for all intents and purposes, in one piece, and I am anxious to resume my duties at Skyhold.

I am coming home to you, Belle.

Always,

Cullen

Belle cried when she read it. She covered her mouth with her hand and collapsed into her chair and cried tears of sorrow and relief. She cried because she was jubilant and mortified and overwhelmed. She cried because everything was terrible and wonderful. She cried because Spencer, Cullen, and Max were alive, but so many others were dead. She cried because the men she loved were coming home to her in pieces.

*****

Max and Spencer were two of the first to come through the portcullis. Belle and Josephine had abandoned their pretenses and were waiting at the bottom of the steps. Josephine embraced Max the second he dismounted his horse, and though he wrapped his arms around her, his face still bore the marks of horror. The kind of horror that replayed in someone’s mind as real as his hand in front of his face.

Spencer’s dark complexion was once more made darker by the presence of dirt and sand caked onto his skin and settled in every young wrinkle. His wide smile was absent, and his bright blue eyes were dim even in the midday sun. He hugged Belle tight. His armor pinched at her skin and crushed her ribs, but she paid the pain no mind.

“P,” she said, “I’m so sorry about what happened. Are you okay?”
Spencer pulled away. Hurt and anger had etched themselves deep into every line on his face, into his
dimmer blue eyes, into the pitch of his voice. “No. No I’m not.”

“Come inside with me and we can talk about it.”

He put more distance between them then. “No. I—I can’t right now. I have to clean this dirt out of
my armor before it rusts. I—Sorry.”

Belle shook her head. She knew better than to force him. “That’s okay, P. Do what you gotta do. I’m
around, though, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” he said as he turned from her to make his way to the barracks.

Belle swallowed hard to keep back the tears forming in her eyes. They stung and burned, blurring
her vision as she watched her decimated brother walk away. A thousand thoughts flickered about in
her head when she saw the slump of his shoulders and recalled the dry hollowness of his voice. She
remembered the cops who had run themselves ragged and tipped the wrong way. She wondered if
he would be angry now, if that was who he was going to be for the rest of his life. She rubbed her
eyes to wipe away the tears before they could come out on their own.

“It’s too clear.”

Cole’s voice beside her made her jump. “Jesus. What?”

“It’s too clear. He wants to talk but it’s too clear. Needs to be blurrier first. Pixelated. See-Oh-Dee,
Used to it with them, not her. Them. Not her.”

Belle couldn’t stop the tears. They slid down her cheeks as she sniffled and said, “Oh my God.” She
had seen injuries like that. She knew he had, too. They’d talked about it in what their father liked to
call their “over-descriptive episodes.”

“He will let you help, but first he needs time for it to fade.”

“I get it. Thanks Cole.” She squeezed him in a light hug.

Max was already on his way into the main hall when she turned to greet him. He trudged up the
stairs in firm, exhausted steps, keeping his shoulders squared in case anyone was watching.
Josephine was not with him, Belle noticed. She waited on the landing, exchanging soft and panicked
words with Leliana.

Hundreds more people filtered through the gate before Belle caught sight of Cullen. He was walking
beside his blue roan stallion. He held the reins while a young healer with a makeshift patch over his
eye sagged in the saddle. Cullen looked grim, but stood taller than most around him. Belle wondered
if his posture was ingrained in him, trained into his blood. It belied the war-weariness of his eyes.
They had seen too much. She suspected that this had not been the first time he’d seen so much
brutality and barbarism for all the wrong reasons. He’d hinted at it, but she still hadn’t told her about
why he left the Templars. Whatever the reason, it had been enough to make risking his life a more
promising prospect.

He swept her into his arms the moment she was within his reach. His gloved fingers grasped at her
arm and pulled her close. Again, she was crushed by plate armor. Again, she didn’t care. There was
a desperation in the way his hands held her, his fingers pressing into the planes of her back as if
trying to burrow into her body. The warm, damp air of his laden sigh wove through her curls and
splashed across her neck. His scent of spiced herbs and soft powder was touched with the mineral
odor of sweat and the metallic tang of dried blood. She breathed him in all the same, letting the relief of his embrace wash over her in an awesome wave.

His nose skimmed her neck as he spoke into her hair. “I’m home. I’ve come back to you.”

A sob surprised its way out of Belle’s chest. “Thank God for that.”

Cullen pulled back enough to look at her face. His amber eyes bore woe and wonderment in equal measure. They were scales, tenuously balanced as they wandered from her forehead to her chin and back. He kissed her. He kissed her in front of everyone. He kissed her with abandon and ardor, and he pressed her into him until her back arched.

“I love you,” said Belle as his lips left her own. “That was the important thing I had to tell you. I love you.”

She hadn’t had the chance to open her eyes or see his face when he kissed her again. His breath hissed in through his nose and his hands moved to surround her jaw. Their lips opened and closed over each other again and again, each kiss harder and more urgent. He buried his affections in her mouth. She felt his passion under her tongue and his devotion at the backs of her teeth and his intimacy tucked away behind her lower lip. He kissed her until she knew nothing but the warm taste of his reverence.

“I love you,” said Cullen as he released her. The wonderment had won over his gaze, and he looked down at her as though he were looking down at God.

“Glad to hear it.”

She felt him grinning when he kissed her again, long and slow. He rested his forehead against hers, and she watched him. His eyes were closed, his brow furrowed. He resembled a man praying, and he may have been for all his enduring faith. She didn’t know what had dragged her brother into Thedas, nor her after him, but it wouldn’t surprise her to learn it had, in fact, been the doing of the Maker.

How could anything surprise her anymore? She’d been sucked through a wormhole—she was still convinced that was what rifts really were—into a world where magic and dragons and demons were real. She’d befriended mages and elves and dwarves, she’d written contracts for enchanted items and gold and herbs, and she’d fallen in love with a warrior who was in recovery from his addiction to a magical narcotic. What the fuck was left?

“I need to go check in with Max,” said Belle after a moment, remembering the throng of soldiers still marching into Skyhold around them and the anguish written on her friend’s face over Josephine’s shoulder. “But I’ll be by later tonight.”

A modicum of that woe returned to Cullen’s eyes as he seemed to remember himself. He released her face from his eager hands. “Alright.”

“I love you.”

“You said that.” He did not say it to remind her. He said it to remind himself. His tone was one of disbelief, of astonishment. It occurred to her then that he may have thought no one would ever say those words to him. That she’d said them seemed a miracle to him, and it broke her heart.

They parted in halting and hesitant motions. Belle ran her fingers down his arm as she turned away from him. His little shudder lingered against her fingertips while she made her way to Max’s room.
Sounds of a tumult, crashes and thumps, met her ears when she opened the door. She could hear Max grunting and things falling over or hitting walls. Something clattered onto the stone floor like a gong. Maybe it was the shield over his fireplace. Glass shattered. Small metal objects *clinked* against the wall. She heard him shout in a way that sounded like he was hurling something out into the valley below his balcony.

When Belle crested the top of the stairs, the wreckage of Max’s room lay all around her. The thing that had clattered to the ground had indeed been that shield. Remnants of bottles, jars, and little trinkets were smashed everywhere. Books lay bruised and open, scattered about the room, though none were in the fireplace. She gave silent thanks for that.

“Max.”

He turned from the open window next to his balcony to face her. Tears eroded tiny canyons into the dirt on his cheeks and reddened his blue eyes. His mouth snarled and sobbed. His hands were bloodied by small cuts on his palms that looked like they stung, even as he clenched his fists at his sides.

“My fucking brother, Belle,” he said, voice hoarse and graveled by his misery.

Belle wouldn’t dare move until he told her in some way or another that she could. She’d seen this volatility before. Fucking PTSD. “What about your brother, Max?”

“The fucking demon—that fucking Nightmare demon—showed me my brother. Nikolai.” He still stood by the window, his bleeding fists still clenched tight. “Nik. Little Nik.” His hands loosened. His shoulders drooped.

“What happened, Max?” Belle inched forward, and when Max’s body did not seize up again, she sat on the couch near the bannister. “What happened at Adamant?”

“Well, the Wardens lost their fucking minds.” He threw his hands up. It was unlike him to curse like that. “They were just…killing everyone. They killed Kier. Oh Maker, is Spencer alright? He and Kier…They killed her.” He shuffled across his room to sit at the edge of his bed. He slouched, holding his head in his hands.

Belle kept her voice low and soft. “I’m sorry about Kier. But Spencer will be fine. He just needs a little time. What else happened, Max?”

“Demons were everywhere and Clarel was a fucking idiot. The Archdemon showed up. He killed Kier, now that I—He did it.Fuck, I just—Clarel blew herself up, and we were falling so I just—I thought—I don’t know what I thought. My hand and this Maker damned mark opened a rift and we were—we were in the Fade just like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“It was fine at first. It was strange and wrong, but I guess it was fine. A spirit was pretending to be Divine Justinia, and she—it—she showed us the way. I got my memories back, fought some giant spiders, listened to everyone be afraid. It was fine.

But Nightmare kept needling at us all. He dug around in our heads and said something to Backwall about being nothing like a Warden, and he showed Varric the shame of his parents, and he said something to Solas in Elvhen that none of us understood, but it meant something to him. Then he showed me Nik.”

“What happened to Nik?”

“Nik died seven years ago in the Circle at Ostwick. He was younger than me, and my parents held
out hope that he wouldn’t wind up a mage like his shame of a brother.” Max spat out his words like so much venom. “But he did. He was a mage and they sent him to the same Circle as me. He was smaller, but he was so smart. But it—it didn’t…”

“Didn’t what?”

“It didn’t matter that he was smart. He died in the Harrowing Chamber. Turned into an abomination. Despair took him. Then a sword took him. I wasn’t there, so I never saw my little brother beheaded. But Nightmare showed me everything. He stood me in that room while my brother was overcome. Nik’s veins and his eyes were wrong. They were the wrong color and they glowed, and his cheeks ripped open and his jaw snapped when Despair screamed at the Templars. Then his head rolled across the ground and landed at my feet. His face was torn and twisted in horror and rage, and he wasn’t my brother anymore. No one was my brother anymore.”

More tears flowed from Max’s eyes. They dropped onto his bloody palms and spattered across the floor. Belle moved to sit beside him. She said nothing as she did. Her words would have been pointless. It was Max’s words that mattered. It was his words that started the process of freeing him from the horrors that replayed in his mind as real as his hands in front of his face.

He leaned his head on her shoulder when she sat. She let her cheek rest on his hair, and her hand rubbed up and down his back. “I’m sorry, Max.”

They sat like that until the sun had moved in the sky. Its light bounced off the snow on the mountains, reminding the world that it was now the afternoon. Belle wanted to stay for him, but she knew he needed to share this with someone else.

“I’m going to send Josie in here with something for your hands, okay?” she asked. Max nodded against her shoulder. “You should tell her.” He nodded again.

She hugged him before she left, and he murmured his gratitude. She told him he was welcome to talk to her anytime. He nodded once more.

Josephine could not have rushed to his side faster. She snatched up the salve Belle had collected from the healers and half ran from her office into the main hall. Her baubles jingled around her neck and her slippers shuffled in her haste. Belle knew Max was lucky to have someone like Josephine. Her love was unconditional and kind. There was a selflessness to it that let her shirk her worries over nobility and propriety and go to him uninhibited.

It was Josie’s already bloomed love that let Belle tend to her own as it blossomed. Belle was able to go to Cullen sooner than she’d planned. It was still early in the evening when she walked into his tower with a calm smile on her face. She opened the door expecting to see him, but was surprised when he was nowhere in his office. Her brow furrowed, and she called his name. He did not answer.

Maybe he was waiting for her in her tower. He knew how much she hated his godforsaken ladder, after all. She passed through his office toward her own, pumping herself up once more for their reunion. To her dismay, he was not there, either. She called his name and walked up the stairs, but her tower was devoid of his presence. Her brow furrowed harder.

Maybe he’d gone for something from Eudora or in the Herald’s rest, she postulated. She made for his tower again. It was the fastest way to get to either of those places without running into anyone along the way. She opened the door and went in again, and was about to exit when she heard something above her. It might have been a creaking floorboard or something falling against the wood. Whatever it was, it drew her eyes aloft.
Belle moved to the base of Cullen’s ladder and looked up. She called his name again. No answer. She would have to go up. She hated that godforsaken ladder. She hated it with every fiber of her being. She’d always refused to be top bunk or get an apartment with a bed loft because fuck ladders. Ladders, no matter how old or sturdy, were rickety and dangerous. They took her to high places, and she did not like to be in high places. How cruel he was to make her climb that godforsaken ladder, and right after she told him she loved him. Asshole.

One shaky, plaintive rung at a time, she ascended the ladder, whining and whimpering the whole way. Hers was a slow and deliberate climb. One missed rung would mean death or paralysis, in her mind, even the first one.

A tentative alleviation of her somewhat irrational fears came when her head popped through the gap at the top of the ladder. She looked around Cullen’s quarters while she hauled herself onto the floor, and saw him in front of his armor stand. He’d divested himself of his armor, and it looked like he’d taken a washcloth to his head and bare torso. There was a tension in the naked muscles of his back where he stood, unmoving even as she chastised him.

“What the fuck, dude? I called your name, and you didn’t answer. You know I hate this godforsaken ladder.”

He did not answer. He did not move to look at her. He barely breathed. An agitated sort of worry crept into Belle’s mind at his stillness. She took note of his hands, balled into fists, and of his arms, bent and taut enough to kill someone if he struck them. She approached him slowly, taking care not to touch him.

“Cullen? Are you okay?”

He did not answer. His breathing alternated from shallow to labored as he stood there. His eyes were glazed over, staring at his armor. His mouth was open, frozen somewhere between a cry and a snarl. Sweat beaded across his brow and at the back of his neck. A curl here and a curl there sprang free of his careful coiffure, leaving a crazed air about him. Something was very wrong.

“Cullen?” Belle reached out and grazed his shoulder with her fingers.

Lightning fast, Cullen hissed in a gasp and pivoted. He snatched her wrist and squeezed, malice fiery in his glazed-over eyes. It was not him in those eyes. It hurt. She felt her bones fighting his grip. Pain shot out through her fingertips and down to her elbow.

She cried out, her body shaking. As evenly as she could manage with his hand crushing her wrist, she said, “Cullen. Cullen, you’re hurting me.”

Her voice seemed to snuff out the fire in his eyes. He withdrew his hand from her wrist and stumbled back into his armor stand. Several pieces rattled to the floor around his bare feet. He panted and stared at her, wild and wounded. He looked like injured, cornered prey.

“I—I—I am—I—”

“Cullen, what just happened?” asked Belle as she rubbed her wrist.

“I—I was—I am—I—I’m so sorry, Belle. I am so sorry.”

Cullen reached for her, moving too fast in light of what had just transpired. She flinched. It was not much of a flinch, but the tremor that rolled from her head to her toes was obvious enough. His expression shifted again. He bore the face of a man who had just killed a defenseless creature, who had accidentally kicked his dog or knocked a nest of baby birds from a tree. His features were
painted over with a kind of grief and pain. He would not look at her.

“I am so sorry,” he said, voice rife with that grief and pain. His every breath was shaky. “I understand if you do not want to see me.”

Belle pulled a face. It was a stupid face, and it made her look as incredulous and dumb as if she’d realized her Milky Way Midnight just got stuck in the vending machine. And she wanted to shake Cullen like she would’ve shaken that fucking vending machine. “How could you think that?”

He glanced up at her. “I—I thought—Aren’t you afraid of me?”

Her face got even dumber, and she scoffed. “Fuck you, ‘afraid of you!’ I’m worried about you. What just happened?”

“What happened at Adamant…” He paused, his eyes darting about, searching for the right words inside of his mind. She thought of the different pigments on his last letter. “It reminded me of something that happened before. Something I saw and felt before.”

He was resisting talking about specifics. That was okay, for the moment. He didn’t need to tell her everything just then. He needed to calm down. His mind needed time to settle. Given his knee-jerk reaction was to believe Belle wanted to leave him, she decided it was best to stay.

With the toe of each of her boots, she freed her heels. She tugged the boots off and tossed them aside somewhere. Cullen’s eyes, drenched in consternation and hurt, followed their flight. She sat on the bed and scooted herself all the way across to her side. She propped her back up against the headboard, shuffling a pillow under her lumbar because she’d be good goddamned if she was going to get achy while she comforted the man she loved.

Belle stretched her arms out toward him. “Come here, Cullen.”

He faltered for a moment, but started over when she smiled and twinkled her fingers, beckoning him again. He sat down on the bed, and she patted her hands on her thighs. His amber eyes, still full of that grief and pain, looked to her in question. She answered by patting her thighs again, more insistent.

Cullen laid his head in her lap like thought he would shatter her. His body was so stiff she might have laughed under different circumstances. But these were not different circumstances. She loved him, and he was in pain. She laced her fingers into his hair and began rubbing his scalp. He sighed after a moment. His body began to relax. She felt his eyelashes brush across her thigh as he closed his eyes, and she began to hum. She remembered the words in her mind—love you like a starfish loves the salty water—closing her own eyes as she carded her fingers through his softening locks.

He curled his body into her after a time. His arms wrapped around her legs, and he held fast. Her voice wavered at the conviction with which he held her. She was his anchor in those moments, holding him in reality, preventing him from drifting toward the demons hidden away in the shadowed grottoes of his mind. She did not let him hear the tear that slipped down her cheek.

Belle ran her fingers through Cullen’s hair over and over for thirty seconds and a hundred years. She let her glittering light pink fingernails skim across his scalp, and listened to his breathing while she hummed. She watched the rise and fall of his chest ease and slow as she tethered him to the world. She waited until long after he’d fallen asleep to stop humming, and she spoke softly into his hair before pressing a kiss to his golden curls.
“I love you. You’re safe.”

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Chapter End Notes

A couple of things: (1) I made an Amell the queen because I thought it was unfair that only a Cousland could marry Alistair, (2) I'm sorry for heavy, but I hope the love lightened it up a little, (3) fuck ladders.

I also wanted to note that "Swan Song," as I referenced in the chapter is the song by A Fine Frenzy, which you can listen to [here](http://example.com).
Skyhold had never been so empty. Cullen walked through the courtyard wondering where everyone had gone. He passed the sparring ring and the healers’ quarters and saw no one. He meandered into the gardens and the Chantry and saw no one. He wandered around the baths and the kitchens and into the main hall and saw no one.

He heard someone. He heard someone screaming. They were bloodcurdling screams that tore through his mind and made his fingers twitch. They were sobbing screams that cracked and broke but never quieted or waned. They were familiar screams. Even standing in the main hall, even halfway across Skyhold, Cullen knew those screams. He knew where and who they came from, and part of him knew why. It was the part of him that let his gut and his thoughts go cold and the part of him that was terrified.

Terrified though he was, he ran toward the screams. The air was thick with them, and he swam through the main hall and through the rotunda and out onto the battlements. The day was night and the sun was twin moons that beamed down blood red light over the whole of the keep. His hand was on his sword, and it was his sword, and he knew it was his sword as he ran to Belle’s tower door.

Closer now, he could hear the cries between the screams. She wailed and wept and begged please, please, oh God, oh Maker, please, and her voice was in the tower and in his ears and in the air. Her voice was in the stones of the battlements and of the tower, and it was in the grain of the wood of her door as he flung it open. His hand was still on his sword, and it was still his sword, and he knew it was still his sword.

Cullen shouted her name, but nothing left his lips. He shouted her name in silence against the screams that flowed through the tower like water and like air and like blood. The sounds of her pain washed down the stairs and out the door around him, and he ran again. He ran up her wooden stairs and around the sharp corners, and the wooden stairs turned to stone as he ran, and the corners rounded as he ran. His hand was on his sword, and it was not his sword, and he knew it was not his sword. His mantle was gone and his armor was heavy, and he had the youth to run and the vitality to run, and the fear that flowed in his veins was no longer the fear of knowing but the fear of not knowing.

Belle screamed. She screamed and sobbed and wailed and wept and begged please, please, oh God, oh Maker, please, and her broken voice was close now. She was close and the top of the stairs was close, and he reached the top, and he saw.

She hung by her wrists in the air, suspended by sick and glowing magic, and her robes were soaked through with blood, and her staff lay splintered and shattered on the Harrowing Chamber floor. Demons and abominations circled round her and hissed and growled and were people no longer, and she looked to him with blood and tears in her bruised eyes, and her lips that were like the dusk were torn and swollen and open, and she screamed his name. “Cullen.” It looked like a scream, but the sound was calm. He unsheathed the sword that was not his and willed silence through the room.
A twisted and ugly glow doused his vision and stopped his silence and stilled the sword that was not his. He was trapped. Bodies lay around him everywhere, and blood flowed, and someone crept into his mind like an ooze while he watched Belle scream. He watched her dangle and struggle and die in the air.

He was in Kirkwall, and she wailed and wept and begged *please, please, oh God, oh Maker, oh*

“Cullen,” and he raised the brand, and the explosion and the fire took her.

He was at Haven, and she wailed and wept and begged *please, please, oh God, oh Maker, oh*

“Cullen,” and he reached for her hand, and the red lyrium ripped through her chest, and he cut down the Red Templar with the sword that was once again his.

He was at Adamant, and she lay crushed beneath a stone, and her guts and her brain were no longer in her body, and her eyes bulged from her skull, and still she said, “Cullen.”

“Cullen,” she said again, and he closed his eyes. He could feel her hands in his hair, and he would give into her temptation, and he would love her even as an abomination, and he would love her even as the conjuring of a desire demon. He felt her fingers in his hair and her breath on his forehead, and he knew he must banish those conjurings, and he knew he must save her.

“No,” he said. He could hear it. “No. Leave me. Leave me!”

Cullen opened his eyes when his body jolted. He was met at first with darkness, with night. It was no longer the blood red night, but the blue and silvery night he knew. He was lying down and covered up, and there was skin on his skin.

“Cullen,” said Belle with her voice that was blessed and holy, “you had a nightmare.”

He panted against the flat of her chest, the heat of his breath amplifying the scent of her skin. All he could see was the pale swath of her flesh and the gilt of her neckline shimmering in his periphery. His forehead sat against the column of her throat, his mouth against her sternum, and his chin at the apex of her cleavage. His arms were wrapped tight around her, fingers still shaking and gripping the boning of the corset that clutched at her waist. The fabric was smooth and soft against his bare arms, and it was fine so that his calloused hands could not ruin it with the clawing terror of his dreams.

Her lips rested just above his hairline. “Shh, you’re okay,” she said into his curls. One of her hands massaged the back of his head, fingertips grazing his ear. The other hand skimmed along his naked back in gentle lines. “I’m right here. We’re in Skyhold. We’re safe in your bed. The sun went down an hour ago. The first moon rose about twenty minutes ago. I’m here. I love you. I’m right here.”

Her words slowed his breathing and chased the vestiges of the Fade and its horrors from his mind. She was there. She loved him. Those were the things that were real, as imaginary as they seemed. That she loved him was a figment of his imagination, surely. A final illusion of the Fade.

“I love you,” said Belle again in her sacred voice, and Cullen’s grasp on her bodice loosened and tightened at once. He held her with a different manner of desperation in those moments. She was sacrosanct, and he clung to her as he would to a hallowed totem. She loved him, and she was to be worshipped.

“I love you,” said Cullen against her warm flesh, voice barely a whisper. He watched in the filtered moonlight as her skin prickled under the ghost of his lips and of his breath.

He pressed a kiss to her chest and felt her sigh into his hair. He parted his lips and kissed her again, letting his mouth glide over her taut and sensitive skin. She sighed again, and her touch seemed to
grow warmer under his reverence. Her body and her mind and her soul were sanctified, and he would pray in the grace and warmth of her love, and he would exalt and revere her above all others, and he would not be taken from her. And she would not be taken from him.

Cullen prayed into her body as he kissed her chest and her collarbone and her throat. “Lady of Perpetual Victory, your praises I sing.”

He breathed in her scent and swallowed her light into his stomach and into his lungs when his lips found hers, and he said against the corner of her mouth, “Gladly do I accept the gift invaluable of your glory.”

Belle shuddered when his fingers lifted her short dress and unlaced her breeches and slipped into her silken haven. He pressed her to his body, begging the Maker to let them become one. “Let me be the vessel,” he said with his teeth on her earlobe and his hand on her quim. She sighed and her fingernails scraped at his back and his scalp. “Let me be the vessel which bears the light of your promise to the world expectant.”

He prayed in silence then. He prayed into her ear and into her mouth. He prayed into her throat and into the soft swell of her covered bosom. He prayed into her stomach and into her hips. He prayed as he slid her breeches down and away, and he prayed with his lips on her cunt. He lapped and suckled at the swollen mound that made her breath hitch in her throat and made tiny blessings pour from her mouth. She writhed under his worship, and he held her hip down in one hand and laced her fingers in the other. She panted and quivered and squeezed against his grip. Her slick nectar coated his chin with every sigh and gasp, each subtle sound a benediction. He rolled his hips against his breeches and his mattress. The friction of his movements coupled with the soft sounds of her pleasure redoubled his desire for the benevolence of her body and of her love.

Belle met her end quieter than he had known her to be, though her nails dug into the back of his hand and her breath came in ragged bursts as her toes curled against his ribcage.

Cullen wiped his mouth and chin on the sheets between her legs, remembering her disdain for the taste of herself on his lips. She lay boneless and trembling and half-naked before him, her hand resting on her forehead as each breath sawed and squeaked in and out of her. To truly become one with such divinity, he knew they had to be bare to one another. Skin to skin and flesh to flesh. He doffed his breeches and smallclothes in a series of sloppy maneuvers she did not see in her lax state. He grabbed handfuls of the side of her corset and twisted, loosening bundles of clasps with each motion. She helped him free herself of her remaining garments, pulling fabric out from under her and over her head and snapping apart her odd breastband.

She laid back in his bed against his rumpled sheets, and she was a goddess, and she was the Maker, and she was Andraste. Her breasts were round and full in their liberation, and he felt their soft press against his chest when he wreathed his arms around her and laid over her. His eyes were fixed on her face as he sheathed himself within her. Her sacred lips opened wide in a sigh, and her blessed eyes drifted shut at their joining.

He hilted himself slowly at first, weaving his fingers into the holy fire that was her hair and watching her lidded eyes watch him. Her nails dug into his sides and carved little pilgrimage trails into his muscles when he quickened his pace. They breathed in time with one another as he thrust into her, and he was anointed by her. Every damp and panted breath was holy oil. Every ghost of a kiss was another demon banished from his mind and from his soul by her divine light.

Belle’s hands and thighs shook, and Cullen’s eyes closed, and their foreheads and noses and lips brushed across each other. Words tumbled from his tongue when he felt her meet her end all around
him. “For You are the fire at the heart of the world, and comfort is only Yours to give.”

Her eyes opened again, wider then. They glittered up at him while he plundered her blessings from between her thighs. Her hands came to rest around his jaw, and he was exhilarated at her attention. He was afraid in that moment, terrified. He was nothing and she was everything, and he was taking from her. He was stealing the divine light away, a greedy thief grasping at it as he would grasp at coin.

“Cullen,” she said against his lips. The rasp of her voice was boon and a balm. His undoing was not far off. “Tell me my name.”

Confusion clawed at the haze in his mind. She was Andraste and she was the Maker, was she not? Her name laid heavy against his gritted teeth. Andraste. Maker. He would have answered but for her eyes. Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea were Belle’s eyes. He felt his lids flutter and a tear slip free. It caressed her cheek as though she wept for him.

“Tell me my name, Cullen.”

Andraste. Maker. He wanted to say her name. But her eyes were Belle’s eyes. Belle who swore and came and loved him. Belle who was real and beneath him. Belle whom he worshipped. She was neither the Maker nor his bride, and the tricks Cullen’s mind played wafted away with her every breath against his parched lips.

“Belle,” said Cullen. “Belle.”

She smiled. She kissed him. She sealed her name on his tongue.

He unraveled within her. His sins and the demons of his past unfurled into her core, and Belle-whom-he-worshipped clutched him tight. Fingers closed around strands of hair, mouths opened against one another, sweat blended and bled together on skin.

He was home. Home was real, and he was there with her. He was not trapped in the Circle tower in Ferelden. He was not in the Gallows or in the aftermath of the explosion of the Chantry in Kirkwall. He was not in the destruction at Haven. He was not in the mindless chaos and sand at Adamant. He was home. She was his home.

“I love you,” said Cullen, his eyes clamped shut for fear she would not be there when they opened.

“I love you,” said Belle. “Look at me, Cullen.”

He relaxed his eyelids, letting them open in half-measures. The sight of her was a solace immeasurable. She was flushed and kind and worried.

“I love you, okay?” She lifted her eyebrows, and he nodded his answer. “But I’m not Andraste, and I’m not the Maker. My va—Sex with me is not going to cure you of all your problems. I’m not some divine, perfect being, alright?” She cooed her admonishments as she would a gentle reassurance. “Don’t pray to me. Don’t try to give me the faith you give your religion. Give me the faith you give to the person you love. I’ll let you down otherwise, and I can’t stand the idea of letting you down.”

Belle was right. He’d let his faith and his fear and her fealty pollute his perception of reality. It was not the first time this had happened, though the first time was born of guilt and penitence rather than terror and adoration. The Templar with whom he had an arrangement of sorts, Parrow—he never dared called her Keelie—had prayed along with him, her back against a stone wall. She came with a cry of Maker! and swore she loved him. But that had not been their arrangement. She transferred from Kirkwall to Ansburg not a month later.
Belle, however, was different. She was thoughtful as to his lapse. She responded to his misplaced faith with empathy and delicacy, traits Cullen failed to exhibit even as her legs were still wrapped around him, even as her arms still held him close, even as he was still inside of her. All he could manage was a nod in acquiescence.

She smiled softly and washed the shame from his face with her wandering gaze. He curled into her, melted into her. His knees came to rest on either side of her hips and his forehead came to rest in the crook of her neck. He embraced her with a mind never to let go. Her pale breasts and their dusky peaks rose and fell in a soothing rhythm, smooth and supple. Her shimmering fingernails traced shapeless artwork into his scalp, his back, and his arms. Would that she could mark him as her own with that shapeless artwork.

They lay like that long after he softened and slipped out of her. Cullen only moved when he heard an unceremonious growl rise from Belle’s stomach, at which point they laughed and she told him she was fucking starving.

He dressed and descended from his loft to fetch them food, and they fed each other small pieces of bread and meat and cheese pinched between delicate fingers, and he fed her the last of the sweet summer blueberries, and he licked the juice of them from her lips, and they made love in the filtered moonlight of his tower, and Belle-whom-he-worshipped as his love cursed and came and fell asleep in his embrace, and it must have been a dream.

All of this must have been a dream, for he loved her the way only dreamers can love.

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It only took a few days for routine to retake Skyhold. Everyone began to move in familiar patterns, and people could be found in the locations and in the states they had been in before Adamant. War council meetings became less burdened, though Max and Josephine’s gazes had taken on a more knowing air. Friends and soldiers were no longer heard crying out their terror in the night. The accursed nobility began to flock to the Inquisitor’s feet in droves once more.

Although the nobility kept Belle busy, and Cullen’s duties likewise occupied him, they’d begun to spend most all of their mutually free moments together. Some days the time seemed fleeting. Other days they had hours to linger in each other’s presence. He began to notice more of her little nuances during their conversations and during the silent moments while they both worked in one of their offices.

He noticed how her eyes lit up when she had occasion to talk about music. He noticed the subtle changes in her posture and how much she used her hands when she mused about various topics. He noticed the way her fingers always seemed to be moving. He noticed that she always seemed to be doing something with her mouth, even when the rest of her was still. She would chew on her lips or touch them or cover them up with whatever cloth she had handy. He also discovered the other things she liked to do with her mouth.

Cullen even managed to get her to sit down for a game of chess in the garden. She was in chess club in junior high school, she told him, though he did not know what junior high school was. He remarked that she must have liked chess very much, and how lucky she must have been to know enough people who also enjoyed it that they could form a group. She laughed her easy laugh and said that she liked it until she realized she fucking sucked. He did not know what that meant until they began to play. She lost swiftly and bitterly, despite his efforts to let her win.

“Fuck,” said Belle as she slapped her thighs. “Welp, I still suck.” She laughed enough to make him smile, which seemed to satisfy her more than winning might have done. “Don’t ask me why I can
plan a legal argument and its ramifications forty fucking steps ahead, but I can’t see a knight one move away from checkmate. Maybe it’s the human element.”

He arched a brow. “There is just as much a human element to chess as there is to the work you do, Belle.”

She snorted. “Yeah, you’re right. Except for one major factor.”

He leaned forward, his elbow braced against his knee and his lips curled into a smirk. “And what might that one factor be, my darling?”

Belle leaned forward in answer. Her chin rested in her hand so her forefinger could brush across her sunset lips. “Chaos, m’dear.” Her eyes blew wide behind her glasses when she said it. “Chaos.”

“Oh? I’d say you were fairly chaotic during that game. It did not appear to be a trait in your favor.”

She laughed, exposing her wide teeth and her pointed canines. Maker, how he loved her. “That may be true, but chess has rules. Each piece can only move in Ex possible ways, and that means that there are only Wy possible moves, and Zee possible outcomes.” She moved pieces around on the board in demonstration—a knight here, a pawn there. “But people,” she said as she held up his queen, “are unpredictable.” She threw the queen over her shoulder into a patch of elfroot behind her.

“People will do stupid shit because they can. They’ll burn their own crops and salt their own earth just so you can’t have it. They’ll kill each other for a street corner. They’ll betray their best friends to save themselves from nothing. And they’ll knock all the pieces off a chess board just to prove a point.” She swept her arm across the board, sending all the little wooden pieces tinkling against the stone floor and grinning a salacious grin. “People are chaotic, and I am good at chaos.” Her finger swept to and fro over her lower lip.

Something about her display was at once unnerving and arousing. The heart she made beat for her raced in his chest. “That you are.” She leaned back in her seat, quite satisfied with herself. He was about to speak again when her name was called from nearby.

They turned toward the sound and saw Spencer approaching. He shot Cullen a sheepish and close-lipped smile and bowed his head as he said, “Excuse me, Commander, do you mind if I borrow my sister for a bit?”

Cullen knew Belle had been waiting for her brother to talk to her about Adamant since their return. She had said as much while she stroked Cullen’s hair one night after a nightmare startled both of them awake. She was worried for her brother as she was worried for Cullen, and he could not blame her. The young man had seen horror up close. It bound the two men together in an unenviable fraternity of the traumatized.

“Of course. I have business to which I must attend, in any case.”

Belle shot him a look of gratitude and affection as she stood to follow Spencer toward her tower. Though Cullen had not yet told her the details of his trauma, she knew of its existence. When he felt comfortable, she said, he would tell her. He should tell her.

Cullen watched them go, the two of them almost attached at the hip, and thought of his own siblings as he cleaned up the chess pieces. He wondered if and when a day would come that he could share his experiences with them as Spencer did with Belle. It would lift a weight from about his neck—an albatross, Belle called it—to be able to tell them why he had kept his distance for so many years, why he so rarely wrote. He could not say what needed to be said on parchment. He had held the
quill fractions of inches over dozens of missives, but he had never managed to say anything of substance.

He regretted it even more after seeing the way Belle worried after her brother. Mia had always been protective over Cullen, and he held little doubt that she had likely been concerned for his welfare for upwards of ten years. His uncommunicative nature may have dealt irreparable damage to their relationship. He tried to put the thoughts from his mind as he headed toward the armory to ensure the production of new swords to replace those lost in the battle was going as planned. He could not mend his family this day, but he would do his best to ensure it was mended when all of this was over. Once Corypheus was defeated, he would go to South Reach and tell his sisters and brother everything. Perhaps Belle would be there to help him. He hoped as he stepped across the hot threshold into the armory that she would be there. He hoped she would want to be there.

She looked lighter on her feet when she came to his tower to collect him for supper in the Herald’s Rest. She beamed at him as she dragged him from behind his desk and out the door. It was not customary for them to dine there, and he worried his presence would disrupt the merriment that existed in his absence.

However, very little changed when he entered the tavern. Soldiers continued to drink and rabblerouse, and some of them even raised their mugs and glasses to him as he passed. They called out to him and thanked him for various things he’d done and said, “Here, here!” before they drank. His nerves dissolved into a small kind of gratification with every acknowledgement as he passed, and by the time they reached the Inquisitor’s table in the center of the tavern, Cullen was almost comfortable being there.

Joviality was the prevailing attitude at the table for most of the evening. Sera and Iron Bull seemed to be trying to drink each other under the table, though it was clear who was losing that battle. Dorian watched them with an expression he meant to exude disgust but exuded amusement instead. Max and Josephine held hands under the table, and it was obvious despite their poor effort at concealing their contact. Cole was peering about and asking strange questions and saying strange things, but there was nothing new there. Varric’s spirits appeared to have lifted in the wake of Hawke’s death, and he regaled the table with stories of the Champion, bidding everyone to toast in the man’s honor at the end of every tale. Cassandra did toast every time, and she was looking rather flushed midway through the evening. Spencer sat at Belle’s left side while Cullen sat at her right, and her brother looked to be recovering as well. The siblings laughed at every joke, their laughter eerily similar now that Cullen was hearing it in unison. Only Blackwall remained rather mirthless, bowing his head to meet the rim of his mug each time he took a drink. Cullen could understand the man’s plight. He too had seen the organization to which he devoted his life torn down by faithlessness and a false god.

“Spencer,” said Bull, “I’ve heard your sister sing, and she’s got quite the set of lungs. Any chance you can grace us all with a tune of your own?”

“Ooh yeah!” said Sera, the drink slurring even her vowels. “Sssing us a song looky-loo-lookalike-alike!” She chortled and slipped about in her chair. The sound made Cullen’s mind buzz at the memory of the trouble that always followed.

“I’m afraid Belle’s the only one in the family with that particular skill set,” said Spencer. “I can’t carry a tune to save my life.”

Varric’s voice came from across the table. “Oh come on, Fireboy, you can’t be that bad.”

“Oh, but I am.”

Belle leaned away from Cullen to nudge her brother with her shoulder. “But he’s a kickass
beatboxer.” Not a single person at that table knew what in the Void that was. “He can make rhythm noises with his mouth.” Upon explanation it was not an impressive talent. Any man worth his boots could muddle his way through a brief *bump, bump, bump, bump* if pressed.

“I’m not that good of a beatboxer either, Bete. Ricks used to kick my ass at the station.”

“Ah, shut up! You’re the best beatboxer in all of Thedas!”

Spencer snorted. “Gee, thanks.”

Belle’s whole body jerked, startling Cullen as an idea burst into her head and out of her mouth. “Ooh! P! Let’s do the thing!”

“No. Nope. No way. I’m not doing the thing.”

“P.” She leveled her eyes on her brother. “Come on. Do the fucking thing.”

He shook his head. “No, dude.”

“Bro. Do it with me.” She spoke differently to him than she did to everyone else. Cullen suspected it was not just a secret sibling language, but the way many people talked where they came from. When Spencer stared at her in silence, she said, “Fine. I’mma do it by myself. All by my lonesome. Now, this is a story all—”

“No fucking fine!” Spencer slammed his hands on the table, though he failed to interrupt the clamoring cheers rising up from their friends. He cupped his hands over his face muttering a quick “Goddamnit” into them before he began.

Then he started to spit. At least, it sounded like he was spitting. He spat into his hand, and after a moment it began to take on the form of some semblance of rhythm. It was unlike any rhythm any of them had ever heard in Thedosian music, but everyone was enraptured. They watched, some with mouths dangling open, as the soldier spat his strange beat into his palms.

Belle’s torso undulated while she sat in her seat. Cullen recalled seeing her move like that before. Then she began to shout in time with that strange beat. “Now, this is a story all about how my life got flip-turned upside down. And I’d like to take a minute, just sit right there, I’ll tell you how I became the prince of a town called Bel Air.”

Spencer continued to spit into his hands, varying the tempo with little flairs here and there. Belle balled her hands into fists and jutted them out in front of her in wide circles over the table. Cullen felt the stunned smile creeping up his face before he even realized he was amused. She continued those circles for a moment, then Spencer changed the beat back to its original form.

“In West Philadelphia born and raised, on the playground was where I spent most of my days. Chillin’ out maxin’ relaxin’ all cool and all shootin’ some b-ball outside of the school. When a couple of guys who were up to no good started makin’ trouble in my neighborhood, I got in one little fight and my mom got scared. She said, ‘You’re movin’ with your auntie and uncle in Bel-Air.’” She kept swinging her arms about, pumping her elbows down toward her body before shaking her finger in the air. Laughter rolled around the table in waves.

She leapt up on the table to thrilled exclamations from nearly everyone. She had a wild grin on her face, and a wicked gleam in her eyes. Nearby soldiers had begun to pay attention to the performance, and some of them were trying to spit in their hands as Spencer was. They all failed. It must have required some measure of skill.
Belle’s boots skittered and skidded across the wooden table as she began to run in place. The table creaked just a bit in protest. Her arms pumped back and forth as her feet moved and kept her in place all at once. When she finished, she raised her hands over her head and began to clap with Spencer’s rhythm. She beckoned everyone with the twinkle of her fingers to join in, and it was not long before more than a dozen people were clapping along with her, including Cullen.

“I whistled for a cab and when it came near the license plate said, ‘FRESH,’ and it had dice in the mirror. If anything I could say that this cab was rare, but I thought, ‘Nah, forget it.’ ‘Yo, home to Bel-Air.’” Spencer made noises Cullen never would have imagined could come from a human mouth.

“I pulled up to the house about 7 or 8 and I yelled to the cabbie, ‘Yo homes, smell ya later!’ I looked at my kingdom. I was finally there to sit on my throne as the Prince of Bel Air.”

She danced about on the table while Spencer got creative with the rhythm for another moment. Everyone kept clapping as she kicked her feet and threw her hands in the air. Cullen wondered if this had been what she meant when she’d told him she was a good dancer back home. She moved in ways he had never seen, moved by the simple sound of her brother spitting into his palms. And she moved with such glee. She pursed her lips and grinned and cackled out her laughter while she gyrated up on that table. Her red curls flew about her face and her shoulders, making her look like a joyous explosion.

When Spencer’s spitting stopped, so did Belle’s dancing. They both panted and laughed as she hopped down from the table to embrace her brother, and soldiers and scouts crowded around them to pat them on the back. Cullen looked on with pride tinged with envy. After seeing her like that, he wanted her all to himself.

He had her to himself after a time. They ambled back to her tower. She was covered in sweat from teaching people how to move like her, and he was covered in sweat from his want of her. He took her against the door the moment it closed behind her. He took her with their clothes on, rushed and ravenous. He took her with his elbows under her knees and her arms around his neck. The door bowed and slammed into its stone frame with his every thrust, and the knowledge that people could hear it only served to fuel his lust further. Belle-whom-he-worshipped keened at the glory that was their joining, and he might have heard other voices outside had he not been so fascinated with making her scream. He took her until they met their ends, and he carried her up to bed. The horrors and demons did not come for him that night.

The next morning, one of Leliana’s scouts shouted up the stairs to wake them. The uncouth intrusion would have been met with fury and a month of nighttime guard duty had the scout not shouted her reason for rousing them so abruptly. Blackwall was gone, and Skyhold’s routine was once more uprooted by anguish and chaos.

There was no rest for the wicked.

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Chapter End Notes

I don't usually post on Fridays, but I felt bad not having updated for so long! I had a 7-day work week last week/the week before, and my husband and I are in escrow on a house, so things have been a little hectic in the Yogi household. I'll try to get back on
track, but I make no guarantees before the start of next month. Thank you, fair reader, for understanding. ^_^

Okay, so you can all thank Kagetsukai for that little interlude in the tavern. XD It was half prompt and half "holy shit this fits perfectly," so I ran with it! <3 And for anyone who didn't grow up in the US with this blessed show, make sure to look up the opening to Fresh Prince of Bel Air. This is the shortened version they showed before most episodes, because that's the one I know! XD
Cullen dressed faster than Belle, like men always did, though he donned his clothes from the
previous night. The thought of the filth on those clothes made Belle’s left eye twitch. He helped her
with the clasps along the side of her golden silk corset. It was a gift from a baroness that came with a
rather licentious proposal that Belle politely declined, but it was a nice corset, so she kept it.

They rushed down the stairs and toward the war room with Cullen running his hand through his
mess of curls and Belle tugging at the hem of her dress to straighten it out under the corset. They
were both unkempt and uncomfortable when she followed behind his crashing entrance. The heavy
door knocks into the wall behind it, and Cullen asked, “What’s this about Blackwall being gone?”

Josephine bore a tattered expression on her face. “He left a note for Maxim, who just rode out of
Skyhold with The Iron Bull, Cole, and Solas.” She handed the note to Cullen.

“You’ve been a friend and an inspiration. You’ve given me the wisdom to know right from wrong
and, more importantly, the courage to uphold the former. It’s been my honor to serve you.” Cullen
read the last bit like a question. His thick brows furrowed, the scar above his lip puckering with his
snarl of angry confusion. Belle had almost forgotten his mastery of that look.

“He received a letter yesterday,” said Leliana. “It said a man named Mornay is to be hanged for his
involvement in a massacre in 9:37. The man claims innocence of wrongdoing. He says he was only
acting on orders from his Captain, Thom Rainier.” Leliana picked up a larger parchment from the
war table and held it out to Belle. “You should read this before you go.”

Unease wound like a python around Belle’s spine as she took the document with a wary look cast
toward the spymaster. The handwriting was small, dense, a block of text not unlike a form contract
one might see at a car dealership or a doctor’s office. The python squeezed harder and harder as she
read the scrawl. “Thom Rainier” and “Blackwall” were sprinkled throughout, as was something
about Rainier commanding his men to murder an entire family and fleeing thereafter. Things
muddled in the middle, and Rainier and Blackwall became interchangeable. They were no longer
two distinct men, but one troubled one. Since Rainier and Blackwall melded into that one troubled
man, there had only been good deeds done. Villages and families were saved, bandits and villains
were routed, children and maidens fair were rescued. A conscription had ended in death and rebirth,
it seemed, and Blackwall was a fucking liar.

“The fuck is this?” asked Belle, passing the page to Cullen without looking. “How long have you
had this, Leliana?”

“Since I heard there was a Grey Warden in the Hinterlands who might be willing to help the
Inquisition.” The spymaster’s face was stone. She was the most unreadable when she was hiding her
emotions. She hadn’t realized it would hurt so many people to keep this a secret.

“I was really hoping you weren’t going to say that.”

“Rainier’s actions were deplorable,” said Cullen, done with the report. “He was a traitor to the
Orlesian crown, and he left his men behind—betrayed them—after murdering an entire family. He
then proceeded to masquerade as this Warden Blackwall to fool people into believing he was some
sort of hero, including the Inquisition!”
He was seething. It made Belle cringe, and Josephine wouldn’t even look at him. Leliana stared him dead in the eye. “He did not fool the Inquisition. He just fooled you.”

Cullen swung the report out in a sweeping gesture. “As if that’s somehow better? That he fooled me and Belle and Josephine and Max and everyone but you? You knew he was a liar and a murderer, and that was good enough?”

Belle put her hand on his chest when he stepped forward. His hands were shaking. “We can debate who was more fucked up when we come back. Right now we should follow Max, don’t you think?” She gave him a pointed look, a warning.

His jaw clenched and unclenched four times, she counted, before he said, “Yes,” and turned to leave the war room. The door slammed against the wall again as he left. Belle and Josephine flinched. Belle wasn’t sure she’d ever seen him that angry.

“Maxim was…distraught when he left,” said Josephine. “You will write as soon as you know what’s going on, won’t you?”

Belle sighed. “Yeah, Josie. We’ll tell you as soon as we have something. Leliana? Are there any other reports like that about anyone else?”

“None of note.”

“I’m struggling to figure out what is ‘of note’ to you right now. I’ll be sure to ask again when we get back.”

Belle thought as she walked back to her tower. She thought as she packed her saddlebags. She thought as she walked down toward the stables. Blackwall or Rainier or whoever he was had been deceptive. He’d been a murderer and a bona fide asshole just four or five years ago. How long before that massacre he’d been a bona fide asshole, she hadn’t a clue. But that was a defining moment. Then he vanished, Blackwall found him, maybe conscripted him for the Grey Wardens? That was a thing Grey Wardens did. They conscripted, recruited from the unwanted and the criminal elements of Thedas. Many of the Inquisition’s Warden allies would, ipso facto, be criminals.

Belle struggled with her unmitigated contempt for liars and criminals and her desire to reward the redemption of the redeemable. She warred within her mind, listing pros and cons, recalling facts and statistics, hosting a mock trial in her headspace. She needed more facts, she decided. She hated that she needed more facts, but she needed more facts. Insufficient evidence. The arguments on either side were too compelling to declare a winner. Or a loser.

Cullen’s rage had not dissipated by the time she made her way down to the stables. It billowed and oscillated in the air around him like overcharged pistons threatening to break loose and kill anyone who revved his engine. His movements around his horse were deliberate and aggressive, though he remained gentle while saddling the animal and looking him over.

She moved to her new, already-saddled grullo stallion without a word to Cullen. He was coiffed and dressed again, the Commander in every way. He issued curt orders to the few soldiers mounting their horses to accompany them to Val Royeaux. Belle tied off the little leather straps to secure her saddlebags before stepping into her stirrup and swinging her leg over the horse’s back.

They all left Skyhold without a word. Nobody spoke for hours. The soldiers were petrified to speak before their Commander, and Belle had nothing constructive to offer in such mixed company. So they all rode in silence until Cullen called them to a stop at a creek to let the horses drink. Belle and Cullen still did not speak until they made camp that night.
She crawled into his tent uninvited, despite having had one erected for her own use. It was for emergency use only, she’d decided, in case he chased her away. He was sitting on his cot reading reports by candlelight when she lifted the flap and crept inside.

He did not chase her away. He rubbed the back of his neck and his temples and his eyes, and he looked up at her with eyes that cried out, “Why?” She shook her head and sat beside him. His hand came to rest on her thigh, and she massaged his neck while she kissed him on the forehead and the cheek. They kicked off their boots and removed the restrictive parts of their clothing before laying down on the cot that was too small for both of them. They made a thicket of limbs. She nestled her head in the crook of his neck, he smoothed his fingers over her hair, and she rubbed his back.

After a thousand delicate touches, Cullen spoke over her head in whispers. “What do you like most about Thedas?”

Belle made a face into his neck at the odd question. “Besides the vague but constant threat of imminent death?” Air puffed out of him at that, jostling her a bit and bringing a kind of relief into the space around them. “I mean, it’s beautiful here. There’s no smog, no traffic. There’s fucking magic, for Christ’s sake. There’s work for me to do. My brother’s here. Max is here, and Dorian and Sera and Bull and everyone else. And you. You’re here.”

“And what do you miss about Orange County?”

It was her turn to puff out a laugh. He still called it that. She figured he didn’t really know what else to call it. “It varies from moment to moment, I guess. I miss my dad and my stepmom. I miss my friends. I miss my job. I miss technology. I miss music and TV and the internet and video games.”

“That is a lot to miss.”

“Yeah. It is a lot to miss.”

His fingertips ambled down to circle the space between her shoulder blades. It tickled. “What do the markings on your back mean?”

It was not an alien question. She’d been asked some version or another by almost anyone who saw her tattoo, and she was happy to talk about it. She had a notion that Cullen had formulated his own meaning, one that may have matched her own.

“It’s from a video game. We’ve talked about those a little, but the story for this game took place in an era with an art style a lot like the one around the words. The little city under the words was underwater. It was called Rapture.” He hummed to mark his curiosity or confusion, or both.

“The words, though… ‘A Man Chooses.’” Belle sighed. She sighed too much. People at work used to make fun of her. They sighed at her with wide smiles in the hallways. She sighed and smiled wide back at them, and everyone laughed. She sighed again. “It’s a quote from the game, but it’s more than that. It’s supposed to be a reminder.”

“Of what?” Cullen’s hands caressed her back and wound into the hair at the nape of her neck.

“To choose, every day. To be a complete person, man or woman or whatever, you have to decide who you’re going to be. You can’t let life drag you around, so every day you choose. Choose to do the right thing or the wrong thing. Choose to be a good person or an evil one. Choose to grow. Just choose. And own those choices. I know every morning that I’ll have choices to make, starting with the one to get out of bed and live my life, wherever that may be.”
He pulled back enough to look at her. The honey whiskey eyes that gazed back at her no longer asked, “Why?” but, “How?” His hand moved from her hair to cup her jaw. “You have heard by now, I’m certain, that I was at Ferelden’s Circle when it fell?”

“I had heard that, yeah. But no one told me what happened there.” Her mind began to play a song to fill the silence that spread beneath the canvas of their tent, the choral version from the sequel to the origin of her tattoo. *Will the Circle be unbroken? By and by, by and by?*

“Abominations and blood mages made their way through the tower killing Templars and mages indiscriminately,” he said. “People were trapped and dying in nearly every room. There was blood everywhere.” *Is a better home a-waiting in the sky, oh, in the sky?*

“A group of Templars and I followed the carnage to the Harrowing Chamber. I passed by people I trained with, grew up with. Some of them were bloodless bodies, dead from hanging or being crushed. Others were in pieces, scattered around so we had to—” Cullen’s Adam’s apple bobbed in her eyeline. “They had to be gathered up for funerary rights.” *In the joyous days of childhood, oft they told of wondrous love.*

“Those of us who survived the initial encounter were trapped there by the Senior Enchanter and some of his…followers. Demons and evil magic filled that room, filled my mind. I was tortured for hours, forced to watch my friends die and to fend off images of horror and desire.” *Pointed to the dying savior. Now they dwell with him above.*

Cullen wasn’t really looking at her anymore. His eyes were facing her direction, but he was far away. A tear slipped from her eye unseen. “I was sent to Kirkwall after that. It was a stricter Circle than the one in Ferelden. The Knight Commander was known for her severity, a trait which I suppose was meant to ease my mind. It did for a time.” *Will the Circle be unbroken? By and by, by and by?*

“But that severity belied her paranoia and madness. She held the Circle and everyone in it hostage every day for years. She made mages tranquil for the slightest infractions, and she expelled Templars from the order for the same offenses. Samson was one of them.” *Is a better home a-waiting in the sky, oh, in the sky?*

“Blood magic and death were everywhere yet again. Eventually, I was persuaded to side against the Knight Commander, Meredith. I should have done it sooner. I should have done it years sooner. But I had learned to distrust mages. More than that I had learned to hate them. It was easy to follow someone who felt as I did.” *You remember songs of Heaven, which you sang with childish voice.*

“Even after the Templars retook the Circle from Meredith, mage unrest had reached a breaking point. Hawke’s friend, Anders blew up the Chantry in Kirkwall. He killed people—men and women and children—and nearly a year of chaos followed. Riots broke out on every side. That was how I got this scar.” Cullen curled his upper lip to show Belle which scar, but she knew without being shown. “The father of a child killed in the explosion held a piece of the Chantry in his hand and beat me with it. I let him. One of the mages offered to help tend the wound, but I went to the apothecary for a poultice and some stitches. I could not bear to take the help of the people I had so eagerly sought to oppress.” *Do you love the hymns they taught you, or are songs of earth your choice?*

Belle’s tears had stopped. She’d heard these stories from so many people. Not Cullen’s stories, but modern versions of them too eerily similar to pass off as coincidence. Cullen’s adult life had been fucked up. It had been fucked up and it fucked him up. It had ruined him. She remembered the few stories he’d told about his childhood, how eager he’d been to help people. This man he described, this hateful and spiteful and tortured man, had not been who he was meant to be. He was meant to be the gentle, bashful man who bandaged scraped knees, not the distrustful man who burned people’s
“I left the Order without hesitation when Cassandra approached me for the Inquisition. I had been promoted, but I wanted nothing to do with that life any longer. I chose, Belle. I chose to try and be a better man, to try to atone for the evil I have done. But I don’t know if it’s enough. I can never take back what I’ve done. I can never undo it. Can a man choose to be redeemed?”

Cullen’s eyes were focused on her again. He looked surprised when she wiped an unnoticed tear from his cheek. “If it’s sincere, yes.” A modicum of hope softened the outer corners of his amber eyes. “No one can stop you from being a good man but you. You haven’t done that. You fucked up. You were traumatized, and you fucked up, but it hasn’t made you any less a good man than you were the day before the Circle fell.”

He shook his head, letting his hand weave back into her hair. “I do not hope to be considered a good man after all that I’ve done. I only hope not to be considered an evil one.”

Belle buried her head in his chest to stop him seeing the anguish on her face and the tears in her eyes. It wasn’t fair to cry about that. It wasn’t fair to hurt him more by letting him see how his words tore her apart. It wasn’t fair that he thought of himself that way. “You’re not an evil man, Cullen,” she said, voice muffled by the slim line of skin and soft hair bared by his open tunic. “You may be an obstinate ass, but you’re not evil.”

He chuckled those three low chuckles of his. She tried not to let her responding laugh sound as watery as it was. She smeared her forehead against his chest, wondering if she could burrow into him to change his heart. His body shifted. His arms deepened the tangled knot of their limbs, his biceps covering her ears until all she could hear was the thick sounds of their pulses and their breaths. She tightened her arms around his waist.

If they could have become one body, it would have happened then. Belle imagined it. They would melt together like crayons left out on a desert sidewalk by children who were feeling experimental and artistic and destructive. They were red and blue wax, and they would liquefy and dissolve together until they were a puddle of purple. They would stain the sidewalk for two winters, and people who walked by would look down and smile, remembering the day they were laid out on that blistering concrete. And they would be a strange purple mass in someone’s closet for thirty or forty years, until they were discovered again.

She fell asleep, dreaming of heartlines in shades of purple.

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Val Royeaux was impressive. It was populous and tall, though a thin layer of fresh dirt coated everything. It seemed that at least one thin layer of something covered everything in Thedas. To Val Royeaux’s credit, there was a clear amount of effort in keeping most of the city free of anything more than one layer of scuzz at a time.

Belle fit in for the most part. Her clothes were the right cut and color for the posh city, but her hair stood out in the sea of strange hats. They weren’t strange because she hadn’t seen them before. Quite the contrary, they were strange because she had seen them before. They were all massive and their shapes seemed to defy logic and all of the laws of physics she knew. Maybe magic held them up.

Cullen, however, stood out like a very handsome sore thumb. Ladies and gentlemen alike were all a-titter over him as they made their way through the city. They murmured about how majestic he was with his lion’s mane and how firm his backside must have been and how firm other parts of him must have been. Belle may have “accidentally” swatted a hand away from his ass at one point or another,
and he may have known about it, but neither of them said a word.

One of Leliana’s scouts had waited for them at the edge of the city. She told them the Inquisitor and his party would be found at the jail in the marketplace in the city center. It was a long walk, and Cullen and Belle passed any number of gilded shops, opulent hotels, and frilly whores along the way. To Belle’s surprise, one of the painted ladies made bedroom eyes and bit a lip at her instead of Cullen. It was a little flattering.

The smell of prisons was unmistakable in any dimension. It was more pungent in Thedas, though. Belle avoided the parts of Skyhold near the cells. The scent was too familiar and too raw. There was shit and piss, and it merged with the odor of perspiration. It wasn’t the sweat of activity, however, it was the sweat of desperation and resignation. It had a different smell, less like cumin and more like thyme. Thyme, shit, and piss amalgamated and lingered in the air, made damp and ever more pervasive by the open-mouthed breathing that added the foulness of rot to the disgusting fetor.

None of their friends covered their noses. Belle and Cullen approached, and he spoke to Solas and Bull, who wore a kind of sorrowful and knowing disdain on their features. They talked about the way the betrayal stung Max. They sighed. They talked about the way the betrayal stung them.

Belle listened in silence, which was not normal for her. She was always involved in whatever conversation was going on around her. It was one of her most obnoxious traits, she’d been told. Too involved, too opinionated, too aggressive. She listened then because she didn’t know what to say. The betrayal hurt her, too, but it was the question of forgiveness that occupied her thoughts.

“Good men do bad things, too,” said Cole from beside her, startling her. His voice was soft enough not to disturb the other men’s discussion. Belle backed away from Cullen to speak with the ethereal boy. Under his wide-brimmed hat, he almost always seemed troubled. That must have been what it was like to be able to hear everyone’s thoughts all day and night. There had to have been a darkness in it.

“I know,” she said.

“You know. They don’t. It’s twisted up in bad. Good can’t outweigh bad. But it’s wrong. It’s a choice, always a choice. They like redemption stories because they sound nice, but they don’t believe. Forgiveness is not a lie their mothers told. Not a lie the Chantry told.”

“I know,” she said again. She felt stupid repeating herself. “Did you know about Blackwall being Rainier?”

“He wasn’t what he said. But he covered it. ‘Not him anymore. Be better. Be better.’ I didn’t know why.”

Cullen laid a hand on her shoulder. “You do not have to go in if you would rather stay out here.”

“I’ll be fine. This isn’t my first time in a prison.” Belle turned to speak to Cole again, but he had moved to stand beside Solas without her noticing.

The smell was worse inside. It was compacted and murky, and it all but destroyed every molecule of free-floating oxygen. She had half expected to hear tortured screams when she went in, like in the movies or at the amusement parks or haunted jails. Instead, her ears were met with a creeping quiet. A cough here and a loud sniff there flicked at the silence, not enough to shatter it.

Past an open, barred door, Max’s voice managed to pierce the bloated silence. “I suppose that’s everything I wanted to know.”
“I’m sorry,” said Blackwall slash Rainier.

“I know.”

Max appeared in that open doorway a moment later. To Belle’s surprise, he looked more pensive than he did distraught. He marched up to Cullen and Belle, as even-faced and schooled as he had ever been.

“Inquisitor.”

“Max.”

“Cullen, Belle.”

Cullen reached into one of the pouches on his belt and pulled out a piece of parchment that looked like it had been folded and unfolded a hundred times. “I have Leliana’s report on Bla—Thom Rainier.”

Max unfolded the document and scanned over it, the shakiness of his blue gaze the sole indicator of his distress. When he was finished, he sighed, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips into a thin line. “She’s had this the whole time, hasn’t she.” It wasn’t a question.

“She has,” said Belle. The second betrayal was a tiny one in comparison, but it must have felt gargantuan on Max’s shoulders in that moment. They slumped when she answered.

“Of course.”

“He fooled the rest of us from the start, Max,” said Cullen. He reached forward and put his hand on Max’s arm in a comforting gesture. Max did not look comforted. “He may have resigned himself to his fate, but we can still—”

“Get him out of here and back to Skyhold, Belle.”

“Uh—Yeah. Of course, Max. I’ll do what I can.”

With a curt nod, Max walked past them and out of the prison. Cullen and Belle stared at the door before turning to each other. Cullen’s brow furrowed in the way on Cullen’s brow could furrow. “Will you—Do you think—”

“I can do it. I’ll need a few days, but I think I can do it.” The wheels had been turning since they left Skyhold. She’d been processing every plan and every outcome for days while they rode toward the city.

“I will stay in Val Royeaux until you’ve finished, then.”

“No, you should go back with Max. He needs everyone he can get right now. Besides, you fucking hate Orlais.” She said it low enough that the guards wouldn’t hear.

He shook his head. “I cannot just leave you here in this viper’s nest.”

Belle took his hand. “I’ll be fine. Just leave the soldiers with me and get word to Sera to have the Red Jennies watch my back. I know there are plenty of them here. Plus, I can’t very well ‘Bridge of Spies’ Blackwall slash Rainier if I have you around to help me, right? It’s a solo gig.”

The furrow in his brow shifted up to mark his worry. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about. But alright. I will return with Max and the others to Skyhold, but you had better check in
“Aww, thanks, creepy.” She grinned and made her voice saccharine when she said it, and Cullen smirked. That smirk was a godsend, a sign of turning tides. He trusted her to do right, and he knew what was right. He didn’t fail to question Max’s orders because they were orders, but because he agreed. He’d been about to say that they could have Blackwall slash Rainier released to the Inquisition. The only reason he didn’t say it was because Max beat him to the punch.

Cullen and Belle kissed just inside the city limits before he left. A kiss from him always seemed to be a kiss rife with ardor and desperation. She supposed that would wear off with time and familiarity, but she enjoyed the press of his hands on her jaw and her back while it lasted. The lords and ladies of Val Royeaux had been right about his firmness and his beauty. They had been wrong about where it existed. Cullen’s firmness and beauty were not in his exterior, but down in his soul. He opened it to her every time their lips met, and it was blinding in its splendor. Amidst all the lies and bullshit, he was an honest and courageous man. That he thought himself anything but a good man in the face of the light that shone within him was a tragedy worthy of Shakespeare.

Fucking Shakespeare.

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It took just five days to get Blackwall slash Rainier out of prison and on his way back to Skyhold. Albeit, he went as a prisoner of the Inquisition, but he was still out of prison.

Belle sought out what passed for a Magistrate on the first day and filed a well-pleaded request for a stay of execution, which was granted when said excuse-for-a-Magistrate was reminded that Empress Celene supported the Inquisition in all its endeavors. On the second, third, and fourth days, she went from noble house to noble house—only those that supported Celene—to collect support for Blackwall slash Rainier’s release. She drank so much tea those three days she wasn’t sure if she would ever be able to pee on a normal schedule again. On the fourth night, she penned and sent a memorandum to the Empress recounting the overwhelming number of houses that wished to see Blackwall slash Rainier released to the Inquisition for judgment. On the fifth day, an order was issued from Halamshiral to do just that.

The ride home with the man was just as silent as the ride to collect him had been. Everyone felt their own blend of emotions when they looked at the filthy, broken man who was two men. None of the soldiers spoke to him or to each other after Belle scolded one of them for a stupid remark.

She had just enough time upon arriving to take a bath and change before Max called her and his advisors into the packed main hall. He kept Blackwall slash Rainier bound in chains when he had him brought in for judgment. Everyone in the room murmured to one another, and at least two of them spat onto the stone floor. The sight made Belle’s stomach turn.

Josephine took her place just in front of Max’s throne. He sat straight and stone-faced in his seat, but his blue eyes were filled with the same tumult Belle had seen in the prison in Val Royeaux. He nodded at her to begin.

“For judgment this day, Inquisitor, I must present Captain Thom Rainier, formerly known to us as Warden Blackwall.”

The chains jingled and clinked as he was brought to the edge of the first small step in front of the throne. The soldier holding his left shoulder shoved him down to his knees so hard they hit the floor with an audible thud. It was all Belle could do not to slap the young soldier for such behavior. It was as if no one remembered all the good this man had done, all the lives he had saved. She had fought
her own internal battle to come to terms with it, but she knew he deserved his redemption. He had chosen, and he had stuck by those choices.

“His crimes… Well, you know his crimes. It was no small effort to bring him here, but he is now yours to judge.”

“It should not have come to this,” said Max, unmoving. “You should have told me sooner. You should have let me help.”

“I did not want your help, Inquisitor. I wanted to do what was right. I was ready to accept death for my crimes, and now Lady Dolan has risked her reputation to have me brought to you instead.”

*My reputation’s fine*, she wanted to say—she would have said. It was not her time to speak.

“I was not prepared to accept your death, Thom Rainier. Belle did as I asked, and her reputation has not been tarnished because of it, I assure you. There was no other way that did not end in violence or bloodshed, and I knew you would never have forgiven me for that.”

“It is not you who needs forgiveness, Inquisitor, nor is it me. I know what I have done, and I am prepared to face the consequences for my deeds.”

“You may not want or need my forgiveness, but I give it freely.” Half of the room gasped. One or two people may have walked out. “In the past four years, you have spent every waking moment watching over others. You had committed yourself to the Grey Wardens, and it was only a formality that prevented your joining. Since then, you have behaved as a Grey Warden should behave, which is more than I can say for the true Grey Wardens that I took for allies after Adamant. You have saved lives and you have helped close the Breach. You have fought on the side of good since your mistake four years ago, Thom Rainier, and I will not let another good man die. You have your freedom. Do with it what you will.”

The lump in Belle’s throat made it increasingly difficult not to cry as she watched and listened. She looked to Cullen, whose expression was just trained enough to hide his thick swallow. He watched Rainier stand and say, “I—Thank you, Inquisitor. I only hope that I can become half the man you’ve described while I continue my work with the Inquisition.”

“And I only hope you can realize that you already are.”

The crowd in the main hall began to dissipate. Max stood and approached Rainier as the shackles were being removed from his hands and feet. The two exchanged quiet words as everyone left in the room looked on. Josephine clutched her board, an obvious relief on her face, plain as day. Leliana lingered near the door that led to the war room, arms crossed, almost as unreadable as ever. Almost.

They were watching good men. Three good men who refused to acknowledge or accept their goodness. Each of the three good men approached his nature in a different way, but it did not stop them from being good. Rainier ran from the sins of his past, doing his good under a disguise. Max lived his life as he saw fit, doing his good as opportunities arose. Cullen wore his sins on his sleeve and in the lines on his forehead and dark circles under his eyes, and he did his good without believing it was enough.


And Belle chose to love each of them.

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In case you're curious, the lyrics are from the abbreviated version of "Will the Circle be Unbroken" from the Bioshock Infinite soundtrack, which you can listen to [here](#).

Also in case you're curious, that is really why I got my tattoo. Make good choices, fair reader. ^_^~
“Oh God.”

Mornings had become Cullen’s favorite time of day. It was a rather recent development, however. He had despised mornings once. He despised them for years. He had long associated them with illness and pain. They had borne the residue of his withdrawal and of the terrors of his nights. He had woken too many mornings coated in sweat, migraines and nausea pounding away at his body.

“Ahhh.”

In Kirkwall, mornings signaled the start of a day filled with distrust and paranoia and anger. In Haven, mornings signaled the start of a day filled with fear and uncertainty and anguish. In Skyhold, mornings signaled the start of a day filled with caprice and apprehension and death. He received reports of every Inquisition death first thing in the morning, laid out on his desk and sealed with black wax. Some days he did not want to open it. Some days he waited until it would create too much risk not to know. Even at this moment, that report was sitting on his desk, waiting to make any number of deaths official.

“Unnhh.”

In spite of all this, mornings had become his favorite time of day. This morning, he was not thinking about that report. He was not thinking about his withdrawal symptoms. He was not thinking about any of the problems waiting for him after he dressed for the day.

Cullen was thinking about the sounds pouring out of Belle with his every thrust inside her. They were feral and primitive sounds, carnal and bestial grunts and groans. Her fingers clawed at the bedsheets as she snarled and howled out her pleasure. Maker, but he had waited for this. For three or four months by his admittedly flawed recollection, he had sought to pull these sounds from her throat during more than just her orgasms. He wanted her savage and speechless.

She had woken in a series of sluggish little gestures that morning. Her back was to him, her hair fanned out on her pillow, her neck and the very top of her tattoo exposed to his roving eyes. She had put on his tunic the night before in lieu of her nightshirt, and he felt a kind of unfamiliar possessiveness as he listened to her waking breaths and watched her shoulders stir. His cock began to twitch and fill when she ran her painted fingernails across her bare skin and mewled.

Cullen had pulled Belle to him in her dozing state, pressing his length against her. She let out a single lethargic chuckle before rocking back into him. She had given her permission to proceed. He kissed the back of her neck as his hand skimmed up her stomach to squeeze her breast. Under his tunic, he felt her nipple rise and stiffen. He ran his thumb over the clothed pearl, and she rocked back into him again.

He shifted her onto her stomach by pulling his arm out from under her, sitting up as she pushed the pillow away from her face. He straddled her closed thighs, pinning them together with his knees. His tunic had rucked up enough to expose the dimples above her bare and well-rounded arse. Belle sighed and wiggled a bit when he let his thumbs rest in those dimples and his fingers caress her full hips. She glanced back at him with lidded and lust-dark eyes, wiggling again. He moved his right hand in response, slipping it between her thighs to tease her sex. She hissed in a breath and pressed
her forehead into the mattress. He toyed with her for a moment, spreading her arousal around her quim, then over his length.

She moaned long and loud when he entered her.

With every roll of his hips he drove deeper into her slick and tightened core, and with every roll of his hips she growled and groaned and cursed. He laid over her, just one elbow preventing him from smothering her as he rended those noises from her throat. His face was buried in the crook of her neck, the scent of fruit and lilies and her skin fogging his consciousness. His right hand worked its way beneath her, massaging tiny circles over her sensitive bundle of nerves. The pressure of his thrusts pushed her hips down into his hand to punctuate each stroke of his fingers.

Cullen nibbled on her earlobe, and she turned enough for him to watch her bite her lower lip. Belle was somatic and animalistic beneath him, torn away from the brilliance of her mind, no longer self-conscious, just sweating and screaming.

“Good girl,” he said against her ear. She cried out in a way he would have mistaken for pain had he not seen her hazel eyes roll back in pleasure. Her breath became erratic, marking the imminence of her orgasm. “That’s it. That’s it.” Heat and pressure built and swelled at the base of his cock. Maker, this was the tightest she had ever been. “Come. Come for me.”

Belle stopped breathing until he felt her come undone under and around him. Her back arched up to meet his chest. Her shoulders hunched. Her knuckles went as white as the sheets to which they clung. Her mouth opened wide before a broken and discordant cry forced its way from deep in her chest.

Cullen’s own end nearly startled him. He had been so focused on the sight and sound and sensation of her that he had all but forgotten that familiar pressure that had been building within him. With a final few fitful thrusts, he came deep inside her, grunting through gritted teeth.

She lifted her hips enough for him to remove his hand. He held himself up on trembling elbows and trembling knees while they descended from the peak of their passion. Sense seemed to find her before it did him, and she reached back to give him a weak swat on the arse. Tremulous laughter rolled through them, freeing him from the bindings of his lust. He kissed the spot between her shoulder blades as he withdrew from her, and she let a grounding breath blow through her lips.

After a moment, Belle rolled to the edge of the bed and stood. “Cover your ears, close your eyes, and hum,” she said. She had asked him to do it before. He knew it meant she needed to relieve herself.

Cullen complied until he felt the vibration of her tiptoeing past the end of the bed. He cracked his eyes open to watch her scamper over to her waist seat. His oversized tunic hung loose around her, exposing her shoulder as she half-ran to the opposite corner of the room. A smirk worked its way up his lips at the sight of her. His eyes slammed shut just before she turned to catch sight of him watching her. He kept his ears covered and kept humming.

It only took a few moments for Belle to settle herself for the morning. She doled out their potions and drank her teas, grimacing at the taste of each liquid. Just when it seemed she would say it was time to get up and “greet the fucking day,” she cast a rather critical glance his way. She watched him—analyzed him—and he began to feel a discomfort in his blatant nudity. Out of some form of Andrastian shame, he covered his hips with her blanket.

She reached into one of her many bags then, and hauled out the tiny silver object and powderpuff mechanism she had been using the day he came to apologize for his misconceptions. “Listen,” she said, “since you just rocked my world, I think it’s only fair that I finally rock yours.”
He shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“This,” said Belle as she held up the small silver contraption, “is an Em-Pee-Three player. And these—” She held up the powderpuffs. “—are headphones. I use these to listen to music that plays from this.” She approached, taking steps slow enough to worry him and holding out the “headphones.” “I want you to hear the music I miss.”

The “headphones” hung from her hand while Cullen stared at them. She wanted him to take them, of that much he was certain, but what she wanted him to do with them was a mystery. He took them from her. They felt strange in his hands, textures altogether foreign against his skin. The only familiar part of them was the leather covering the powderpuffs.

“Put them on your ears.” She pantomimed what he was meant to do as she said it.

He mimicked her until the supple leather sat over his ears. There was something terrifying about the newness of the sensation and the snugness of these “headphones.” The white cord tethered them to the “Em-Pee-Three player” in her hand.

“Don’t freak out, okay?” Her voice was muffled by the queer objects on his ears. She made some reassuring gesture that made him more nervous. “Sound is going to come out of the headphones when I count to three. One, two, three.”

For as gentle as the tones were that flowed from the “headphones,” Cullen flinched as if someone had hurled a fireball at him. Air sawed in and out of his chest while invisible and alien instruments played all around him. Belle’s hand came to rest on his thigh, and he looked at her, wide-eyed. She smiled as chimes tinkled softly around them. Her mouth formed “listen.” He steadied himself to obey. Something that sounded like an ocarina but was not an ocarina played a lilting melody whose tune was new and exotic. His skin prickled as a chill rushed through his arms and legs. Another strange instrument played a burbling accompaniment. The sound was a peculiar and beautiful anomaly.

All of a sudden, a rush of other instruments flooded his ears. Drums and strings and an unseen choir rose higher and higher before they crashed to a halt, catching his breath in his throat. His mouth hung open. He stared at the beaming woman who loved him as the burbling sound sang its melody once more. The tune ebbed and slowed in a way that was almost sorrowful. A final note signaled the end of the song as it echoed into nothing, the moment when dancers would bow to one another and part, the moment the musicians would take their rest. But there were no dancers, and there were no musicians. There was only Cullen and Belle.

Static and muffled silence filled his ears. There was a stillness between the two lovers that belied their overwhelmed state. Belle was the first to move. She let go of the hand Cullen had not realized she was holding and brushed from his cheek a tear he had not realized was falling. She took the “headphones” from his ears, sending in a rush of sounds he had not realized constituted quiet. Hammers clanged and people called out to one another outside. Horses chuffed and nickered and stomped their shod feet. Wind whistled through the Frostbacks and a wolf howled somewhere in the mountains. The quiet was cacophonous.

“What did you think?” Her eyes were round as saucers, childlike in their curiosity. She held fast to the items still in her hands, as though his disapproval would cause them to vanish.

Cullen always had difficulty expressing his emotions. Throughout his life as a Templar, he had learned to keep them to himself. It was training, and he took to it, as he did with any training. Anything that could be taught could be learned, including the ability to keep one’s feelings out of one’s mouth.
Thus, his words failed him. “That was…” Incredible, transfixing, strange, surprising, beautiful—any of these words would have been inadequate, but at least they would have been expressive. “I have so many questions,” he said instead.

A smirk crept up the left side of Belle’s mouth. She stood, setting her contraptions down in her bag before moving toward a window. “Jim!” She had a bellow like a commanding officer. It was loud enough and firm enough to make any soldier hop to. “Jim, you lurker, I know you’re out there!”


“Please let the Inquisitor and the other advisors know to send for Commander Cullen or me here if they have any urgent business, but that otherwise, we’ll be here for a few hours.”

“Yes! R-Right away, Lady Dolan!”

“Oh! R-Right away, Lady Dolan!”

“Thanks!” She almost sang the word. She rolled her eyes and smiled at Cullen before returning to his side. She scooted in from her side of the bed and sat cross-legged next to him. Her body loosened with a heavy sigh. “Alright. What do you want to know?”

For endless minutes, Cullen asked and Belle answered. She told him about the bansuri from a place called “India,” where she had never been. She told him about the piano that so many people learned to play in their youth and forgot how to play as adults. She told him about violins and cellos and guitars and that those were just a few of the acoustic instruments. She told him that electricity, like Max wielded, powered most of society in her world, including instruments and the things people used to listen to instruments. She told him that she still had some things powered by electricity and the cords and cables used to charge them with her. She told him that the Em-Pee-Three player and the headphones both used electricity, and that was how he could hear the bansuri and the piano and the violins and cellos.

“And remember I told you I’d show a smartphone someday?” She reached into one of her bags again.

Cullen was reeling by then. He considered himself a well-read and intelligent man, by general standards. Belle was introducing so much new information, he wondered how she could contain it all. Now, he had this “smartphone” with which to contend.

She emerged from her haphazard pile of things with a small, black rectangle in her hand, glassy like obsidian. For a split second, he saw his reflection on the shiny surface. He looked dumbstruck and disheveled. His hair was all askew, curls everywhere. She had told him she liked it that way, and he could not understand why. He looked a wild mess.

Belle opened the back of the shiny object to snap something inside, then snapped the thing shut. “I took the battery out so I’d have some left if I ever made it back. But since it looks like that’s never happening, I might as well use it now, right?” Cullen cast a wary eye to her, and she smiled. “It’ll be fine, I promise.” She tinkered with the thing in her hands for a moment. “Okay, so, things are going to pop up on this screen. Don’t worry, it’s not magic, just electrical impulses that you or I can control.”

She sidled up to him, shoulder to shoulder, and pressed something on the little box. All at once, it lit up bright as anything he had ever seen. Shapes composed of light and color swam about under the glassy surface, and he thought that there must have been an entire world kept inside. A circle made of blue and white spun about. The letters “AT&T” appeared thereafter.

“What in the Maker’s name…”
“It’s—it was my service provider. I used to be able to use this to talk to anyone in the world if I had
their phone number or email address.”

“How could you do such a thing?” As he asked the question, more colors exploded onto the screen.
It looked like a thousand soap bubbles in the sun, like those blown into the air by street tricksters and
mages to entertain children.

“My voice or my words would get turned into a signal—a soundwave, like energy—and fly instantly
to the person I was talking to or sending a message to. Sometimes, it even had to go through space,
like, into the stars.” Belle smiled when Cullen shook his head in disbelief. “Yeah. And just imagine,
if we had this in Thedas, you and I could have heard each other’s voices while you were in the
Western Approach and I was here. You could have told me you were alive the very minute the
fighting stopped.”

She swiped her finger up the glass. A group of numbers and letters appeared, and she poked them in
a rapid sequence. Her fingernails tapped against the surface as she went. Again, the images changed.
Dozens of tiny squares with even tinier paintings seemed to fly up behind the glass from some
unknown abyss. Belle poked a yellow square with a white square inside of it, and the surface
changed yet again. She swiped and poked something else, and it changed once more. The top of the
glass said, “Spencer Dolan,” beneath which was a series of numbers. Under that were more squares
filled with the smallest words Cullen had ever seen.

“Spencer and I used to send text messages to each other all day every day.” She swiped her finger
down, sending the words flickering across the glass. See?”

Jun 16 8:03 AM, the words read. You working today?

Jun 16 8:05 AM, Nah

Jun 16 8:06 AM, Wanna have lunch at that Thai place? Whatzit? Thaitopia? I have a client
conference on the north side this afternoon.

Jun 16 8:07 AM, Thailandia? K.

Jun 16 8:07 AM, Whatever. Cool. 12?

Jun 16 8:09 AM, Yeah. I’m running the foothills this morning. Fuckin’ police and fire games coming
up. But I’ll be back way before.

Jun 16 8:10 AM, You better not fucking stink, dude.

Jun 16 8:11 AM, Keep talking Bete and I’ll stay stinky just for you. There was a little yellow circle
that resembled a face kissing with a red heart shape near what may have been the mouth.

Jun 16 8:12 AM, Hahaha ass! See you at 12. Love you, be safe!

Jun 16 8:13 AM, Love you too.

Jun 16 12:33 PM, WTF where are you? I have that meeting soon!

Jun 16 6:17 PM, Where are you? I’m at your apartment and no one—The end of the glass cut off
the last missive.

Cullen looked at Belle beside him. Her expression was stern and pensive, though her eyes looked as
if they felt heavy in their sockets. He would not claim to understand much of what she was showing
him, but he thought, perhaps, that these words had been sent the day Spencer went missing.

Belle stirred at Cullen’s shoulder, making a sound like “blugh” before tapping the glass again. The words disappeared, replaced by the dozen-square image. That none of this was magic seemed implausible, if not altogether impossible. There was no magic in Orange County, Belle had told him. She said it multitudinously. Magic was as hard for her to understand as this technology was for him to understand.

“Ooh! Want to see what I looked like when I was a little girl?” She tapped and swiped and tapped the screen in a deft dance with her thumbs, sending the images behind the glass careening and disappearing and reappearing in an instant.

“Your parents must have been very wealthy to afford a portrait of you as a child.”

She snorted. “Not particularly. We have these things called ‘cameras’ that capture images instantly—photographs, or photos, or pictures. This phone has two of them—cameras, I mean. When I was a kid, we used to have to take the pictures on film and have them put on paper to see them. But now—these days—back there, we could take them and store them with just electricity. In fact…” She drew out the last word while she prodded the glass.

Without warning, Cullen saw his face staring back at him. It was not as it had been when nothing was behind the glass. It was as if he was behind the glass. It mimicked his actions fractions of seconds after he did them, like looking in a slothful mirror. Belle’s face was next to his own, and she was smiling at him in their reflection. An uncertain smile overtook him. She laughed. The glass flickered. Cullen jumped.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Look.” With one tap, she showed him the moment just before the flickering glass. He saw his own still face, dubious and unkept and smiling. He saw her still face, bright and beaming. “We just took a photo of ourselves. A selfie. I just took a selfie in Thedas.” She snorted again. “And here…” She tapped and swiped away. “This is me and Spencer when he was two years old. I was ten.”

She held up the glass again. A round-faced little girl and a pudgy toddler stared back at him. The little girl had a scrunched up nose and a wide grin with one missing canine as she stared back at him, frozen in time. Her red hair was stark straight. The little boy was of a darker complexion, and he had big eyes that were a jarring shade of blue. His mouth was pinched together as if to kiss the little girl.

“My hair didn’t get curly until I was sixteen or seventeen. It’s still so weird.”

“This is a photograph—” Cullen over-enunciated all three syllables. “—of you and Spencer?” He let his hand come to rest over hers, drawing the image closer to him. She puffed out a laugh against his cheek. He examined the little girl’s face. He saw pieces of Belle in the child—the way her nose rumpled up when she thought something was funny, her hazel eyes that were a bit bluer back then, and something else. There was a wit about her, an intelligence in her impishness. “You were rather adorable.”

She laughed her easy laugh then. “Thank you. I bet you were a cutie as little boy, too. All nerdy and excited. ‘I’m gonna run off and join the Templars!’” Her imitation of his young voice seemed intentionally inaccurate.

He chuckled. “I was very excitable about certain things, Templars included. My hair was also much curlier when I was a child.”

Belle ran her fingers through the rat’s nest of his hair. “I like how it is now.” She shimmied up to kiss
his forehead. She smelled like herself and she smelled like him. She glowed in the shadowed sunlight in her room, hair like wildfire and skin like mountain snow. Her eyes were still like armor and like the sea, though they were full of questions. “You’re being pretty calm about all this. Handling it pretty well.”

“I can assure you, I find all of this quite confusing. And a bit frightening, if I’m being honest. But if you are comfortable with it, and I don’t understand it, it makes very little sense for me not to trust you.” Cullen’s hand inched from her bared shoulder to the back of her neck as he spoke. She had never given him a reason to doubt or mistrust her, only reasons she could be trusted above all others. She kept his confidence when she had no incentive, she championed causes on his behalf, she forgave, she made his heart beat again.

“So you don’t think that me taking your picture is going to, like, steal your soul or some other bullshit?”

“Is it going to steal my soul?”

Another little laugh puffed out of her nose. “No.”

“Then no, I do not believe that you taking my picture is going to steal my soul.”

“Good.” Belle stayed beside him as she tapped the glass four more times. The images disappeared. She opened the back and removed the “battery,” and the piece of glass she called a “smartphone” was once more just a small, black rectangle, glassy like obsidian. She set the objects down on her bedside table. “Better safe than sorry. It’ll just run out of power if I leave it in the fucking thing. It’ll still run out of power eventually, just…slower.”

His fingers brushed up and down that bare spot, back and forth over her cool skin. “I’m sorry you were pulled away from everything you know, everything that makes you happy.”

“Not everything.” She let her head rest against his chest. The heart she made beat for her fluttered. This was their intimacy. It came in tiny moments scattered throughout the day. Confessions and revelations shared in the golden light of morning, a warm glance and smile as they passed each other around Skyhold, subtle sighs when their bodies touched, eyes closed and palms against cheeks. A thousand tiny and tangible moments made this real.

“I have some dealings in Ferelden in about four days’ time. Would you care to accompany me?”

“And stop being cooped up in Skyhold? Why, oh why would I ever want to go somewhere else with the man I love when I can be stuck in the same fucking twenty-acre keep for weeks on end?” She pursed her lips and looked up at him with mischief in her widened eyes.

“Is that a ‘yes?’”

“Pfft! ‘Is that a yes?’ You’re lucky you’re cute.” Belle patted his chest before sitting up. “Where are we going? I can probably get something set up while we’re there. Two birds.”

Cullen was not one for secrets, but he thought them necessary under specific sets of circumstances. “Redcliffe, mostly.”

She hopped off the bed to sift through her scattered piles of clothes. The mess was still irksome, but he had grown somewhat accustomed to it by then. She snatched up her blue and white smallclothes and slipped them up her thighs. “Ooh. Yeah, I need to pay a visit to the Arl there—Teagan? He’s got a bug up his ass about something, and he’s being all pissy with resources.”
Cullen stood to don his own smalls. “Excellent. I shall make the necessary arrangements. But first I must see to this ‘enchanted item’ that Morrigan woman is having delivered to Skyhold today.”

“Personally? Not a fan of hers. She’s got that superiority complex thing. Doesn’t matter how smart or stupid anyone is around her. She has to be smarter, or at least feel like she’s smarter.” Belle tugged on her breeches. “It’s not a good look.”

Cullen put on his breeches as well—right leg, then left, same as he had always done. “It is true she has not changed much since I first met her during the Blight.”

“Don’t you mean ‘tis true?” Belle smirked, and they shared a soft laugh. “And hey, don’t you want your shirt back before you go check on her weird little delivery?”

Cullen smirked back. “I’m certain I could find some use for it.”

She turned her back to him as she doffed his tunic. The gentle curve of her spine arched and swayed until she was exposed from her dimples up. Her red curls draped back over “A Man Chooses” once Belle had removed the tunic. He let his eyes roam over her skin and soft muscle. He wanted to run his hand up her spine and watch her flesh prickle under his touch, to hear her giggle and feel her smack his hand away before she kissed him.

The need to catch his tunic after she threw it over her shoulder tore him away from his thoughts. “Do you need any assistance getting dressed?” he asked.

“Nah, I’ll be fine.” She lifted one of her odd breastbands from the pile nearest to her and fastened it. Her shoulder blades always jutted out behind her when she did that. “Angel wings,” she called the phenomenon. “We have mixed company today.”

“Very well. I shall see you this evening then?”

“Count on it.”

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It was nearly dark out when Belle finally emerged from the Arl’s estate. She bore a weary kind of satisfaction on her face. Cullen knew the expression. It was one maintained after a long day’s work ended in positive results, whether stacking hay, mastering a new sword technique, or negotiating with nobility.

Her feet dragged in the grass as she approached. She stopped just shy of him. As much as he wanted to embrace her, he understood that propriety had to come first this close to prying eyes and ears.

“Jesus, that was exhausting. He’s really stubborn, you know?”

“I have heard that.”

Belle sighed and shook her head. “Are we going to the inn now?”

“If you can stand to ride just a bit further, there is something I would like to show you.”

She arched a brow. “Something to show me? Can I ask what?”

“You may ask, but I may choose not to answer.” Cullen’s lips curled on the right side. He had managed to keep his secret for days already. There was no point in giving it up now.

Belle grinned in response. “Alright, shady. Take me to thing you want to show me.”
Once out of Redcliffe, the ride was not far. Even in the dark, and even with one of the moons risen
in only a crescent, Cullen knew the way. His surroundings appeared with more clarity and familiarity
with his horse’s every footfall. The same trees and the same boulders sat in the same places they had
been years before, and it was not long before he smelled the vegetal and flowery scent to which he
had become so accustomed.

Cullen dismounted, and Belle followed. He showed her the best place to tie up their horses. She
asked if they were where they were supposed to be, and he replied that they had to go just a bit
further. He took her hand to lead her forward. Evening mist clouded the area, obscuring her view of
the surprise. But he knew the way.

As it always had, the fog cleared around the lake. The crescent moon’s reflection shimmered in the
water that always seemed to be moving, despite having nowhere to go. Little white daisies and
yellow dandelions bloomed all around the lake. There were patches of them around the small dock as
Cullen and Belle approached, and he picked one for her. She looked around with the wonderment of
a little girl, grinning when he handed her the flower.

“Where are we?”

“This is Lake Ash,” he said, leading her out onto the dock. It had aged since he had last seen it, but it
stood sturdy against the tiny lapping swells. “I grew up not far from here, in Honnleath. I used to
come here. It was always quiet.”

Belle closed her eyes and breathed deep the sweet air. “With two sisters and a brother, I can only
imagine. And I bet you guys had to share rooms.”

“We did. They were very loud, as I’m sure you know. I came here to clear my head, though they
always found me, eventually.”

She wore a knowing smile. “P used to bang on my bedroom door and cryyy his poor little eyes out if
I didn’t come out. I wish I had a place like this when I was that age. A quiet spot to chill out. I bet
nerdy little you loved it here.” She swung their conjoined hands into his hip.

“I did,” said Cullen. “I still do. I wanted to bring you here to show you something from my past that
had not been spoiled. I have no photographs to show you, and this was the closest thing I could think
of.”

“It’s beautiful. When was the last time you came here?”

His hand trembled when he reached into his pocket. There was no reason to be nervous, he reminded
himself as his hand wrapped around the coin there. “It was the day I left for Templar training.” He
withdrew the coin, holding it in his open palm for her to see. The golden face of Andraste shined
under the moonlight. “My brother, Branson, gave me this. It just happened to be in his pocket, but he
said it was for luck. Templars are not supposed to carry such things. Our faith should see us
through.” He had not meant to say it like that. His faith had carried him through, to a point. He
would be hard pressed to say it had been enough.

Belle’s fingers brushed across the little misshapen hands that hung from her neck. “Faith and luck
often go hand in hand, I think. It’s not wrong to want to make sure, even if it fails as spectacularly as
it has in your case.”

“I’m not so certain that it has failed. I should have died at least a dozen times by now.”

“You’ve died at least once, by my count.” Her eyebrows rose to mark her skepticism.
“I suppose that is true. But you were there, and now you’re here. We are here. How can I not consider myself lucky after all that?”

“I guess you’re right. Lucky you.” Belle smiled as she poked his breastplate.

Cullen took a deep breath, then another. He lifted their linked hands and opened hers, palm up. He pressed the coin against her skin, closing her fingers around the warm metal. “I want you to have this.”

She shook her head, worry plain on her face. “What? No. Cullen, I can’t—I can’t take this. You told me your brother gave it to you. It’s lucky. You can’t just—“

“I have so little to give, Belle,” he said over her. “I have no title beyond the Inquisition, no lands, no money. I have nothing to give to you but my love, my vow of loyalty, and this coin. You deserve so much more, but this—this is all I have to give.”

Belle’s lower lip quivered as he spoke. She blinked hard to bite back the tears that slipped from her eyes when she opened them. She sniffled once. “Okay,” she said, voice thick and strained. “I’ll take it. I’ll keep it safe.” She sniffled again. “But I want you to know that your love is enough. All that other stuff is—it’s bullshit. Your love is enough, okay?”

Cullen wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Alright.” He cupped her jaw with his hands to make certain she could see him. Not only that she was looking at him, but that she could see him. “You have everything.”

He leaned down to kiss her, then. Their lips met softly, tenderly. She still tasted of the tea she had drunk at the Arl’s estate. Perhaps he had intended the kiss to be short when it began, but her cool lips turned warm against him, and his blood warmed with them. Her arms wreathed round his neck, her fist still clenched tight around the coin. Her lips parted with a delicate sigh. Their tongues twined and slipped together in practiced motions, and his hand moved from her face to her lower back to pull her closer. Their heads tilted, opening them to one another in the utmost. He kissed her until her tears dried away, until there was no more sorrow between them, until he was certain she knew how much he loved her.

When they made their bed at the inn in Redcliffe that night, they were gentle with each other. Each touch was met with closed eyes and soft sighs. Each kiss was met with more love than desire. Each sound came laden with unspoken oaths of devotion. This was their intimacy.

Cullen relished the ride back the next morning. So little had changed, but everything had changed between them. They had a tacit understanding. They were all they needed.

But reality had a way of creeping up in volumes too loud to be ignored. The day after they returned, Max called a meeting of the war council. He brought Morrigan in with him, and she explained her idea as to where Corypheus was likely headed next.

The enchanted item she had brought into Skyhold was known as an “eluvian,” an ancient artifact of the Elvhen that was apparently used to travel massive distances in short periods of time. They did not connect directly with one another, however. Instead, they each led to a place Morrigan called “the Crossroads.” It was her theory that Corypheus wanted these eluvians for his own use, not because he wanted to travel massive distances in short periods of time, but because he wanted to get into the Crossroads. It was unclear to Cullen what benefit could be had by entering the Crossroads, suffice it to say that it was a place of great power that was not of the waking world.

There was one other eluvian of which Morrigan knew the whereabouts. It was held in the Temple of
Mythal, deep in the Arbor Wilds. Max seemed convinced that she was correct. She had taken him to the Crossroads, he said, and he felt immense power there. He could not explain the source, only that he knew it was there. He ordered Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine to muster up as many forces and resources as they were able. The Inquisition and its allies were to march on the Arbor Wilds within the month.

As Cullen left the war room that afternoon, he was reminded of his duties to the Inquisition. He could not fail in his tasks, could not be distracted. He and Belle would be busy for weeks leading to the march, and it was likely that she would join him on the journey this time. He had to keep her safe. He had to keep his men safe. He had to keep the Inquisitor safe.

A headache blossomed in his temples as he sat at his desk. If Corypheus was there, Samson would be there. It may have been their only opportunity to stop them both in one fell swoop. Max had the red lyrium rune that Dagna had forged from the tools found at the Shrine of Dumat, and they had every intention of using it against Samson when next they met him.

Part of Cullen hoped that Samson would see reason, that he would not force Max to kill him. Cullen could have become Samson, had the past changed in even the smallest of ways. He could have become any one of the Red Templars. It seemed unfair to cut short their lives, even Samson’s, because of the fate left to them by the Chantry’s failings.

Another part of Cullen wanted Samson dead. Whether the Chantry had failed the Templars or not, it was not enough reason to follow a darkspawn magister and poison and murder thousands. The atrocities those men had committed since being fed red lyrium were countless, and Samson was responsible for all of them.

Cullen withdrew a stack of parchment from his desk to begin sending word to all of his soldiers and the soldiers of the forces with whom the Inquisition had allied. Dwelling on Samson’s fate would prepare none of them for the battle that was to come. It would keep no one safe. It would not keep Belle safe. As he penned missive after missive, he resolved to keep Belle safe. He would be there to protect her.

He had to protect her.

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Chapter End Notes

I first want to apologize to you, fair reader. I feel like I’m taking forever between uploads now, but I promise I have a good reason. My husband and I have been in and out of two escrows in a row now, leaving us with a lot of uncertainty about our future. In the midst of the maelstrom, I’ve also been looking unsuccessfully for work as an attorney. There have been a lot of decisions made of late, but for now, I just wanted to say sorry for not uploading like I was for the first 10-12 chapters.

Phew, now that that's done, I can share the song I was thinking of Cullen listening to. It's called "Calling Out," and it's from the score of "Ori, and the Blind Forest." You can listen to it here if you like.
War is Hell (And It’s Not Just a Fucking Cliché)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Forced marches could suck a fucking dick. Better yet, they could suck two dicks and a left nut.

Belle’s entire body ached from tip to tail. Her head ached more the further south they marched because, apparently, there were still allergens in Thedas to compress her sinuses. Her neck, back, ass, crotch, and thighs ached from riding in the carriage and riding on horseback. She walked when she could, but she almost snapped her ankle on the third day and had to stop trying.

It was a small mercy that Eudora had decided to come along with the other healers. She patched up Belle’s little cuts and bruises, though they were less numerous or frequent than Belle thought they might have been. The healer’s best balm for Belle was to be a much-needed lifter of spirits. The woman was, after all, a noisy and unashamed rabble-rouser. “Maker, this cart is rattling my bones from arse to tits,” or, “I never could master that twirly-whirly, spinning nonsense with my staff when I was in the Circle,” she would say. The latter made Sera laugh, too. Eudora was also Sera’s favorite healer, surprising no one. The two women had a lot in common, including boundless snark.

Dorian would ride alongside the women, putting in his two cents about Eudora and Sera’s colorful commentary on “the modern mage.” The phrase made Belle chuckle each time she heard it. The modern mage. She envisioned magazine covers with too-thin models draped in Chanel or Alexander McQueen robes, arms wrapped like boney serpents around Tiffany staves. Maybe it would be more like a family magazine, and the cover would bear images of happy little mage families or couples decked out in matching polo shirts and playing catch with fireballs. The articles inside would range from “How to Find the Best Necromancy Preschool for Your Tot,” to “Fifteen Ways to Thaw Your Ice Mage in the Sack.” Belle nearly toppled from her horse, she laughed so hard.

Max had gifted Bull a battlenug because the Qunari was just this side of snapping a horse’s back, even the drafts. The battlenug was somehow both hulking and snuggly with a face like a squishy rhinoceros and horns like an ancient mountain goat. Bull named him Mertam—an exercise in irony, according to Bull—and the two were perfect for each other. Bull spoiled the giant thing rotten the whole march, sneaking him vegetables and the odd fruit every time they stopped.

“You treat that drooling animal better than you treat me,” said Dorian one evening at their campfire.

“I treat you just as sweetly when I’ve turned you into a drooling animal, kadan,” said Bull. Dorian shut up after that.

Varric wrote everything down, even while he rode. When Belle asked him why, he said with all seriousness and conviction, “Counselor, someone’s got to tell this story to everyone who wasn’t here. Some of the things that happen along this march will be legendary one day. Incidentally, what do you think would be a good title for the book? I’m thinking, ‘All This Shit is Weird,’ by Varric Tethras. Or maybe, ‘No One Listens to the Dwarf’ with the subtitle, ‘The Story of How Thedas Almost Burned to a Crisp Six Thousand Times.’” Belle picked the second option.

Vivienne, Leliana, and Josephine spent most of their time in one of the carriages. When Empress Celene surprised an entire army by joining the march with her forces, the four women were all but inseparable. Belle spent what time she had to with the empress, kissing ass and licking boots, but preferred to be away from the onslaught of noble horseshit the woman spewed on a never ending basis. Belle was not Vivienne, who seemed unable or unwilling to stop appearing unreadable and
superior. Belle liked to shut her superiority off after a few hours of use. It was too exhausting to spend the whole day looking down her nose, and her glasses weren’t suitable for accommodating the adjustment.

Morrigan likewise lingered near Celene, though she could also be found arguing with Solas about something related to magic or elves or just about anything. On rare occasions, she rode with Max, though he seemed to tire of her company after fifteen minutes. He didn’t care for her. Her presence was a means to an end, he’d told Belle. The witch, he’d said, knew something.

When Solas was not arguing with Morrigan, he could often be seen riding in silence, a pensive stare glued to his face. Belle liked the elf well enough, though he may not always have liked her. The way he’d spoken about her unceremonious arrival in Thedas sometimes sounded like chastisement. Other times it had sounded like he felt a personal attachment to the incident. He had become less apt to ask her about it in recent months, but everyone had become less apt to ask her about it in recent months.

Cole lingered near everyone at one time or another. He had become more…corporeal lately. Belle noticed him more, and he surprised her less. His personality had not changed—he still said odd and invasive things—but he seemed happier, in a way. It was in his tone and on his face in tiny increments. She might even have heard him laugh once, though the sound was so short and came as such a surprise no one could be certain.

Blackwall, as everyone agreed to continue calling him, marched with the soldiers. He was no more fit to ride than any one of them, he’d said before they set out. The soldiers began to accept him again as they marched. It was a slow process, but Spencer helped, choosing to sit next to Blackwall at meals and march with him for several days. Spencer chastised some of his fellow soldiers for their judgments and accusations, reminding them how many of their own lives Blackwall had saved. Belle could not have been prouder of her brother for championing the beleaguered man. Spencer was one of the good ones.

Cassandra alternated between riding and marching, always near the front of the forces. She was a galvanizing and powerful presence for the soldiers, never showing weakness and always understanding of their struggles. She made sure boots were kept dry and shields were kept high. She and Cullen often rode side by side, locked in intense conversation or in complete silence. Casualness between the two warriors was a rarity.

Cullen had withdrawn from Belle in degrees too small to cause her to worry until midway through the march. It started the day Max told everyone they would soon be marching to the Arbor Wilds. Cullen spent that night with Belle, but he had refused to leave his office for dinner. He started refusing to leave his tower for lunch. He started refusing to leave his tower for any meals. He stopped spending the night in her tower.

She tried to be understanding. He was under immense pressure to plan a successful march, a successful attack, and a thousand successful contingencies. The Inquisition’s cause and his cause had to be one and the same. She understood. She was a workaholic before being sucked into Thedas, even a bit of one thereafter. She tried not to mind the dark circles under his eyes or the way he would ignore food when it was brought to him. She tried not to pay attention to the way he snapped at people more than usual or pinched the bridge of his nose. She tried not to feel hurt at his continued absence from her bed or his constant answer of, “There is too much work to be done,” when she asked him to join her. She tried, but it wasn’t working.

As the troops marched on, Cullen grew ever more distant. Belle had hoped that they would share a tent, and they did. She would creep in after dinner to find him already hunched over some document or another, writing or reading by dim candlelight as he held his forehead in his left hand. The
muscles of his neck and shoulders were stiff and knotted, as if a pack of overeager boy scouts had gone to work on him in pursuit of a merit badge. Belle would dig her hitchhiker’s thumbs into those knots, squeezing and massaging them until she thought her fingers would snap at the first knuckle. She was nearly brought to relieved tears when he finally dropped his head and groaned at her ministrations, but that only happened once.

She was brought to tears after the first week. She began massaging his shoulders, and he reached back to lift her hand away. “Don’t trouble yourself,” he said.

“I’m not troubling myself. I want to—he—”

“I will join you in bed shortly.” He didn’t look at her when he said it.

“Fine.” It came out exactly as harsh as she meant. Still, he did not turn to look at her.

He was just under stress, she told herself. He had not intended his words to be cruel. He was Atlas with the world on his shoulders, and he was Achilles with an arrow in his heel. His withdrawal symptoms were flaring up under the pressure of thousands of lives resting on his judgment. Constant headaches, flop sweats, she may have heard him vomiting once.

Belle laid down, tearful, angry, and terrified. It took almost an hour for her to fall asleep to the sounds of Cullen’s scribbling. She drifted off with her back to him, her arms crossed over her chest, and her hands balled into fists.

She woke up alone.

She had her own tent set up the next night. It wasn’t because she was angry at him. It wasn’t because she needed distance from him. It wasn’t because she thought he needed to be alone. It was because she could not watch him do this to himself again. She could not watch him kill himself under the yoke of his workload a second time, and she could not intervene. It was not her place to tell him not to plan or not to work. The strain on him, his tension, was justifiable. The fate of an entire fucking continent depended on his strategy. The weight of that would have broken a lesser man. She only hoped it would not break him.

She had barely seen Cullen during the last leg of their journey. He walked alongside soldiers and he rode at the head of the army as he had done, and he slept or didn’t sleep alone in his tent. His skin went sallow and his eyes seemed to sink into his head to be surrounded by yellowish, blueish, purplish circles. He was worn down and ragged, yet he managed to appear composed in front of his men. He looked almost regal with his tired head held high and his tired gaze held firm. Even at his worst, he was a fucking sight to behold.

When they finally reached the Arbor Wilds, Corypheus’s forces had already entrenched themselves in the network of groves nestled in the vast woods. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Red Templars and Tevinter mages calling themselves “Venatori” sat between the Inquisition and some magic mirror in a temple. Belle would have been lying if she claimed to have full comprehension of the importance of this magic mirror, but it was important to Max and it was important to Cullen and it was important to Josephine, so it was important to Belle.

Cullen approached Belle after dinner that night. The attack was to happen at dawn, he had told everyone upon their arrival. They all had one more night to rest, he’d said. The irony was not lost on her.

She had been forced to join Celene’s party for some eve-of-battle pow-wow that didn’t include anyone actually involved in the battle or its planning. It was an excuse for the empress to gather those
she considered kindred close to her while she was afraid. If the battle was lost, there was a very good chance that Celene would no longer be empress by the time she returned to Orlais, if she returned to Orlais at all.

A gloved hand came to rest on Belle’s shoulder. The touch was gentle, like a nervous little boy trying to get the attention of the teacher he thought was beautiful so he could hand her an apple. When Belle turned, Cullen’s weary face looked back at her with a kind of doleful affection. “May I speak to you for a moment?”

She nodded, turning back to her esteemed company to bow her head. “I beg your pardon, your majesty, but I must excuse myself for a few moments.” Celene cast an appraising glance at Cullen before issuing a silent decree with a flippant wave. Belle clenched her jaw to keep herself from sighing as she stood. She bowed her head again before following Cullen to a quiet spot among the trees.

“I apologize for interrupting your meal,” said Cullen. His voice was soft and sad. The same doleful affection still rested on his features.

“It’s okay. It was begging to be interrupted. I hate having to sit up straight and pretend to be interested for that long.” She really did. “I don’t mind you stealing me away from the pompous bullshit.” She really didn’t.

“I—Uh…” His hand found the back of his neck, his sore neck he wouldn’t let her massage. His enervated eyes wandered to where the stars would have been had the trees not been so lush and so numerous.

His other hand lifted from his side. In it was a simple black leather scabbard with an equally simple black leather belt beneath it. The hilt of the dagger in the scabbard was also simple in its way. There were no gems or shining adornments, only deep azure leather embossed with a Celtic or Norse-looking design. It was Fereldan, without a shadow of a doubt.

“I want you to have this. I want you to wear it tomorrow—until the battle is done.” Cullen held it out in the too-substantial space between them.

Belle seized the opportunity to close the distance. She stepped forward, taking the dagger in one hand and locking his fingers in the other. “Okay.”

His gaze was uneven. The little lines on his forehead contorted into an upside down horseshoe with his apparent worry, spilling his imaginary luck down the bridge of his nose. His nose that was bent ever so slightly in the middle. His nose that had probably been broken at least once. His nose that she would gamble would be passed on to his children. “I know you’ll stay in the camps, and I know you’ll be protected, but I need you to wear it. I need you to stay safe.”

“Okay.”

“I need to know you’ll stay safe, stay alive.”

“Okay.” Belle’s hand unclasped from Cullen’s, and she moved her palm to his jaw. Her thumb traced a tiny blue vein down from his cheekbone until it met with her other fingers. His eyes that had seemed nearly as pale as his skin were once again warm as honey whiskey. They roved over her face, scanning every mole and freckle as if to memorize them.

His lips crashed into hers without warning. It could not have been called anything but a crash. It was a reckless collision of flesh, a desperate meeting not to be averted by any force in any universe. His
arms flew around her waist to press her to him, though his breastplate forbade the closeness they sought. His mouth opened once to close around her lower lip, and again to close around her upper lip. His tongue tasted her, teased at her skin, but did not beg entry at first. When it did, there was a kind of glory to it. It was brilliant and bright, his every movement a subtle devotion. He paid his penance, tucking it away in the corners of her mouth for safekeeping. Her hand squeezed at the back of his neck, and his hands squeezed at her waist. It was the kind of kiss meant to end all kisses. That, she would not allow.

Difficult as it was, it was Belle’s turn to withdraw. She watched his lips, pinker from the press of her own, then followed his scar up toward his eyes. “I need to know you’ll stay safe too, you know. You’re not allowed to just kiss me and run off in the morning to die. You have to take care of yourself.”

“I will do what I must to ensure the Inquisition is victorious,” said Cullen. His fingertips still burrowed into her in the spaces between her corset’s bones. Their lips were nearly touching.

“Man, fuck that,” said Belle. She dropped the dagger onto the weedy and leafy ground so that she could surround his face with her hands. “Fuck that noise, Cullen. You think the Inquisition’s going to be any good without you? You think someone else can just pick up your sword and go, ‘Oh, hey, yo, woah, I’m your Commander now,’ and that’ll just be all sunshine and rainbows? No. You live. You do what you must to ensure you live. I’m not hanging around in fucking Thedas if you’re not here. I’m not. So you better goddamn well live.”

There was a ferocity in his stare, a determination. “I do not plan to die.”

“Yeah, well, don’t just not plan to die. Plan to live, okay? And for the love of God, will you please stay hydrated?” Belle ran her thumbs along his cheekbones. “It’s really obvious you haven’t been drinking water. You’re not taking care of yourself.”

Cullen’s intensity turned to mild amusement. His mild amusement turned to adoration. “Alright. I will try to take care of myself, and I will do everything in my power to return to you.”

“That’s better.”

He kissed her again. There was less hopelessness in it, less fear. It wasn’t a kiss to end all kisses. It was a kiss to show his love. There didn’t need to be anything else to it. He would take care of himself. He would survive the fight. He would come back to her. That was all.

Belle told herself it would be alright, despite the pit in her stomach and the reminders screaming and clawing at the back of her mind that nothing was ever alright. But it had to be. It would be.

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Two days. For two days, the fighting dragged on. Belle did not see Cullen at all, though she heard from returning scouts and incoming wounded that he was fighting with everything he had. She heard that he saved one soldier’s life, then another, then another. She heard that he was pushing the Inquisition’s troops forward. She heard that he was pushing the Red Templars back. A tentative kind of pride swelled in her at the thought of his courage and compassion, and she would rest her hand on the dagger she wore beneath her light surcoat or the coin she kept in her deepest pocket.

Max had gone out with the first wave, but had been drawn back for his protection several times. Cassandra, Blackwall, and Iron Bull were helping Cullen with the push on the front lines. Cole and Sera ventured out past the front from time to time to set fires whose smoke could be seen from the rear camps, and Varric followed to lay traps for anyone who should not have been behind them.
Dorian, Morrigan, and Vivienne fought among the warriors while Solas acted as a protector and healer, leading out whatever the mage versions of battle medics were to aid the injured.

Of course, Belle received all of this information second and third-hand. She was stuck at the rear camps with Celene and Josie. Leliana and a line of archers and mages stood at the edge of camp, decimating anyone foolish enough to approach.

Belle split her time between sipping tea with Empress Celene and helping Eudora with the arriving wounded. Belle had learned enough in all her time in doctor’s offices and emergency rooms to know how to triage. Crush wounds, stab wounds, blunt force trauma wounds, fatal wounds. Most were easy to discern. There was blood, or there wasn’t. There was bruising, or there wasn’t. The soldier was conscious, or they weren’t. The soldier was alive, or they weren’t.

While Belle sat with the Empress, she penned triage signs in secret. She wrote large numbers—one through four—on pieces of parchment as if writing short updates to the nobility. One was meant for those whose injuries were mild and non-life-threatening. Two was meant for those whose injuries were severe and bore non-imminent threats of death. Three was meant for those who needed immediate attention if they were to survive. Four was meant for those who could not be saved. Belle hated fucking four. She wanted to stop writing four for the rest of her life by the first evening. There had been too many fours. One would have been too many.

In the early afternoon on the second day of fighting, someone approached her. She was all but breaking her fingers, tightening a tourniquet around the arm of a hard-faced woman with a deep gash in one arm and a piece of parchment with a two in the other. Belle thought she heard her name, at first, but couldn’t be sure with the choir of the wounded crying out around her.

“Lady Dolan,” an Orlesian voice said again. She glanced up to see a man she may have recognized as one of Celene’s servants. The ubiquitous masks they wore made it difficult to be certain who was who in the zoo.

Belle grunted out a “Yes?” as she pulled the fabric a final time. The wounded woman beside her whimpered for the first time.

“Empress Celene has requested your presence, at once.”

Belle looked up at the man. His arms were crossed over his chest and his foot tapped the ground in a dramatic show of impatience. “I’m a little busy, in case you hadn’t noticed. And, you know, I just left her.”

She stood to move to the next cot. A man in his forties sat up, an eerie red shard sticking out of his lower abdomen. She looked over the wound, putting her hand near the shard as she did. The air around it felt hot. Something about it nauseated her. She’d seen a great many shards like these since the battle began. Red lyrium. Varric told her not to touch it before he left, so she didn’t. She handed the man a three.

“That may be so, but she has requested your presence again. The Empress is not to be ignored in favor of these…common soldiers.” The Orlesian’s accent made his words sound even more laden with disgust than they might otherwise have been.

Belle wanted to tell the man to shove it up his ass, to shove himself up the empress’s ass so she wouldn’t feel ignored. “There aren’t enough healers here. I just relieved some of them. Somebody could die if I leave.”

As if on cue, one of the healers she relieved, a young Qunari man, trotted back into the tent. “I took
the liberty of retrieving him,” said the Orlesian. The Qunari touched Belle on the shoulder and gave her a small smile. He nodded toward the exit of the tent.

Belle sighed through her nose, trying not to look too petulant as she stood. “Fine. Let’s go.”

As they walked through the camp, she swore she heard an explosion and felt the ground quake beneath her feet. No one else seemed to notice, as everyone kept about their business of mixing potions, making arrows, and cleaning and repairing blades. She thought about the one on her hip, concealed from the world like her worry for Cullen was concealed from the world. She hoped he was drinking water.

“We just passed Empress Celene’s tent,” said Belle as she watched it fall further and further behind her. Calling it a tent was doing it a disservice. It was more of a portable multi-room structure, like a rambler made of canvas. It sat among the other tents, cream colored where they were maroon, massive where they were tiny, and stately where they were shabby. It was a feckless display of wealth amidst those fighting for the welfare of the world.

“She wishes to speak to you where there are fewer eyes and ears.”

Belle was not about to sleep with Celene. Fuck diplomacy. Maybe that was what it was called when people did that. “Fuck Diplomacy” sounded like an archaic negotiation tactic. “Okay,” said Belle, knowing full well that she might lose her job if this little tete-a-tete took a swerve. She might lose her head while she was at it. No pressure.

The man held up the flap of a far flung tent and gestured for Belle to enter. The tent was tiny, likely erected to keep sensitive supplies dry. That would explain the smell of salted meat and the large crates. What it would not explain was the absence of anyone else in the tent. “Where’s Empress Celene?” asked Belle as she turned to look at the Orlesian.

No sooner than she had closed her mouth had he rushed her. She gasped and flinched, as was her way when she was startled. She felt cold metal against her throat and wood against her back. The foulness of the man’s breath had no room to dissipate before crawling up her nose. Every detail of his mask was visible to her, each dent and ding immediately suspicious. His ice-blue eyes bore a smugness that made her angrier than the thought of the blade meant to take her life. There was nowhere to escape, nowhere to run but through him. She leaned her head back as far as she could without causing him to take notice.

“This is what happens to cunts who tear down noble families for sport.” The man spat as he spoke, peppering Belle’s lips and chin with his rank spittle.

Belle’s right hand crept up her thigh. Her dagger was tucked away. He didn’t know she had it. Even if he did, he didn’t know she’d learned to use it. “I’m sorry,” she said, feeling the smooth bottom of the scabbard. “I have no idea who the fuck you’re talking about.”

The man hissed a wet breath through gritted teeth, pushing into her and knocking her head against the crate behind her. “Perhaps you know my name then? Does Asselin sound familiar to you, you foreign bitch? Neville Asselin? Mallory’s brother? The man whose future you fucked when you ruined her marriage?” He spat again.

Belle’s fingers found the hilt of the dagger. Her fingertips grazed the design stamped into the leather before closing around it to withdraw the blade from its sheath. She took it out slowly as she said, “I didn’t fuck your future. You should blame your sister for that. If she could’ve just moved on and not stabbed me in the middle of a crowded room—the same crowded room as the empress was in—maybe your family wouldn’t have lost everything.” The tip of the blade swayed in the air when it
came loose. She turned it upright as he spoke again.

“My sister is not at fault in any of this! You ruined her life! You ruined all of our—” Neville stopped short when Belle jammed the blade into his chest. Between the third and fourth rib and up to pierce the heart. That was the way she’d practiced with Cullen. They had practiced it for days. Her wooden practice blade had never entered his body, never pierced his flesh or his organs, never killed him. Every blood vessel in her body felt as though it was flowing with ice. Every muscle was tense. Every breath was shaky as it came in or out. Her thighs ached. This was fight or flight. She had the urge to do both.

Neville’s eyes went wide. He let out a thick cough as his blade dropped away from Belle’s throat. She jerked the hilt of the dagger to make sure she hit something vital, and he coughed again. When he finally went limp and heavy against her, she let him fall to the dirt in a heap.

Her hands trembled even after she balled them into fists. Her breaths were noisy, in and out of her nose. Cold in, cold out. He was dead. She had to be sure he was dead. She reached down, seeing her bloodied hand for the first time and not minding, and ripped the blade from the body. She stabbed him in the heart again, down instead of up. Neville didn’t move. He didn’t breathe. She checked for a pulse to find none, not even the faintest thump against her index and middle fingers.

Belle was overwhelmed by the compulsion to get away from the corpse she’d made. She’d always thought that if she had to kill someone to stay alive, she would say something afterward. “Fuck you,” or something. Maybe something quippier, she was never really sure. Instead, she took her dagger from the body and left the tent in silence. She thought about sheathing the blade, but decided she didn’t want to get any more blood on her clothes or ruin the scabbard. Banal practicality in the face of crisis was ingrained in her bones. She almost laughed at the way her mind worked, but she’d just killed a man and she thought better of it.

She wandered over to Celene’s obscene tent, aware that her surcoat and pants were splashed with blood. Celene’s servants balked when Belle entered. “Josephine? Are you in here?”

“Belle?” said Josephine’s voice from behind a wall of cream colored fabric. “I thought you were aiding the healers fo—” She rounded the wall and stopped in a stiff motion. “What in the Maker’s name?” She walked a couple of hasty steps to meet Belle in the center of what passed for a foyer. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I mean, I guess? Neville Asselin just tried to cut my throat.” Belle gestured with her bloody knife in the direction of the tent containing the salted meat and the corpse. “I killed him first.” Her matter-of-factness made her a little dizzy. It seemed dumb.

Celene’s voice rang out in shrill tones from where Josephine had been. “Is everything alright, Lady Montilyet?”

“All is well, Your Majesty. I shall return in a moment.” Josephine lifted Belle’s chin to examine her neck. “We must get you to the healers to have your wound tended.”

Belle shook her head. “He didn’t get me, though.”

Josephine’s dark brows knotted together, her blue-hazel eyes quizzical. “Belle, you have a two-inch cut along your throat.”

“I do?” Belle started to reach up to feel her neck, stopping once she remembered the upward-facing dagger in her hand. “He cut me?”
“Yes, and you are still bleeding. Come with me.” Josephine ushered Belle out of Celene’s quarters and toward the healers’ tents.

“Goddamn. Adrenaline is a hell of a thing.” Belle started to feel the sting of the wound when they reached the halfway point. “Ow. Now I know it’s there. Shit.” She reached up with her left hand to touch the tender skin around the cut. She was, in fact, still bleeding.

“Are you alright?” Josephine asked again as they entered the dingy red tent.

Exhaustion began to wash over Belle the moment she sat on an empty cot. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. “I dunno. My neck hurts now. But someone should really go get that dead guy. Like, secure the scene for investigation or something. I dunno how you guys do shit here. I dunno.”

The same young Qunari man she had relieved and had relieved her in return approached. “What happened?” There was a distinct measure of consternation in his voice.

“I know, right? I just left here all not bloody and here I come a few minutes later all…bloody. That guy tried to slit my throat. I guess he did a little. Did he say anything to you?” Belle pointed at the young man with the hand she’d forgotten was still clutching a dagger.

He was gentle with her when he moved her bedaggered hand away. “About killing you? No. You can put down the knife, though. You’re safe now.”

Belle’s fingers would not loosen. Her nails dug into the bloodstained blue leather. “Um.” She willed herself to let go of the knife, but her fingers were not to be moved. “I can’t.” She tried again. “Nope. I can’t.”

Josephine’s hand came to rest over Belle’s, and the muscles began to relax. When Belle’s fingers loosened enough, Josephine slipped the dagger away. She laid it down on a small table next to the cot. Belle’s jaw was set tight while she watched. Her nails had left little crescent indentations in the blue leather, and she could see the spot where her hand had been—the only part of the grip that wasn’t coated in rapidly coagulating blood.

“I do not wish to leave you just yet, but Celene—”

“No, yeah, dude. Go ahead. Handle it. We got this.” Belle gave Josephine a weak smile as she pointed back and forth between herself and the young man. Josephine gave her one last baleful look before leaving the healers’ tent. Belle sighed an unsteady sigh. “Yeah. We got this.”

Some kind of horn sounded outside while the man, whose name Belle learned was Ash, twinkled his magical fingers around her bleeding knife wound. The feeling of tissue knitting itself back together was eerie, and a bit squishy. “Battle’s over,” said Ash absently, looking down at Belle’s still-healing neck with an appraising eye.

“Is that what that horn thing meant?”

“Yes. Have you never been to battle before this?”

“No. This is my fir—” She gasped as the last jagged bits of her cut reconnected. “First battle.”

“Well, well,” said Ash. “First battle and you didn’t even have to leave camp to kill a man. Well done.”

“ Doesn’t feel well done. Feels shitty.”
“I know, but it happened. Stay here for a moment, I’m going to get you some water. You look a little pale.”

Belle couldn’t stop the little puff of laughter that left her nose. “I always look pale. But I guess this is the ‘no blood in my body’ kind of pale, huh?”

“The very same.”

Ash came back with a small cup of cool water a moment later. Belle drained it, and he went to fetch more. They went through this two more times before her thirst was slaked. “You should have brought me a bigger cup.” They both laughed a bit. She felt nauseous.

He told her to lie still for a while before she tried to get up. She knew that her body need time to make more blood, and she complied. She couldn’t keep from looking at the ruined dagger. Could daggers get ruined? They were intended to spill blood. That was their raison d’etre. How was she meant to clean the dried blood from the leather so she could use the thing again? Was she supposed to use it again? Would she have to use it again?

Hullabaloo and ruckus outside pulled Belle from the whirl of her thoughts, and she blinked her dry eyes. She was still conscious. She reckoned she would still be conscious if she stood to see the cause of the fuss. Testing her theory, she rose inch by inch from her cot, inhaling the whole time. Dizziness when standing was, after all, most frequently caused by lack of oxygen flowing to the brain.

Belle stepped out of the tent and glanced around. Entering from the edge of the camp where Leliana had been holding the line, Belle made out Spencer and his friend, Aldridge, dragging something on a makeshift half-stretcher. On closer inspection, the thing they were dragging appeared to be an unconscious man. Dark, greasy hair lay in a messy mop around his head and face, and some of his veins seemed to glow red. Bits and pieces of silvery armor clung to the fabric of his gambeson, but they looked as if they had been shattered.

Following close behind the stretcher, to Belle’s shuddering relief, was Cullen. She stepped toward him, though she was a good distance from the entrance to the camp. He was all in one piece. He looked tired and irritated, and someone had opened up his eyebrow with a well-placed punch, but he seemed alright. His posture was straight as ever, his head held as high as ever. She could have cried at the sight of him. She did cry at the sight of him.

Then he saw her. The fatigue and irritation on his face melted away into joy before dissolving into apprehension. His pace quickened until he was jogging toward her. She imagined she looked rather stupid the way she was holding her arms out long before he reached her, though it was worth every ounce of embarrassment the moment that he did. She wept into his neck when he embraced her, not caring for what seemed like the hundredth time that his armor pinched and pushed at her. Every bit of everything she was feeling rushed out of her eyes in globulous tears and out of her mouth in muffled sobs. He lifted her feet from the ground and carried her somewhere. She didn’t care to look where.

Cullen laid her down in the cot from which she’d risen. She supposed she had not gotten very far from the tent. When Belle allowed him to pull away enough to see her, he asked, “Whose blood is that?”

“Some of it’s mine. This guy—the chick who tried to kill me at the Winter Palace, y’know—her brother. He tried to kill me.” Before she could finish, Cullen lurched away.

“Where is he?” His voice was dark and robust when he spoke, filled with rage and something like desire.
“The rest of it’s his blood. He’s dead. In a supply tent somewhere that way.” She pointed, making aimless shapes in the air with her uncertain hand. “Or maybe not in the tent anymore. I told Josie. Maybe they took him out already. I don’t know. Did we win?”

Cullen’s face had become a battlefield. Worry and happiness and fury and weariness warred within his features. “In a way, yes.”

“Was that Samson that Spencer was dragging in?”

“It was. Though, Corypheus has not been defeated. Not yet.”

“That sucks, I guess. But yay, you got Samson. That’s good right?”

Cullen removed his glove to run his knuckles across her cheek. She reveled in the sensation of him. “It is. Are you alright?”

“I don’t know. I’m alive and Ash was kind enough to put my skin back together, so…I guess in that sense, I’m fine. But…I don’t know.” There were too many thoughts vying for top billing in her mind for anything to coalesce into something clear. “I should thank you for the dagger. And for all the training. I would be much less okay without those.”

“Maker’s breath, Belle.” Cullen enveloped her in his arms again. It was the first time she’d felt safe since the battle began. “Thank the Maker you’re alive, my darling. I could not bear it if you—If—”

“Shh, no. No, no, no. None of that bullshit. We’re both alive, and we’re both together. That’s enough right this second. Okay?” She felt him nod into her neck and shoulder. “Is Max okay?”

“He is alive, but he went through the eluvian with Morrigan and a few others. He is likely back at Skyhold. A few of us must leave as soon as we can to get home ahead of the march.”

Belle let out a heavy breath into his skin. She swam in the scent of him for a moment, spiced herbs and soft powder and the little something that was just him. She could take the time to cope with everything later. In that moment, she wanted to remain where and as they were. “Can we sleep first? We’ve both had a rough couple of days, one of us more than the other. I’ll let you pick which one.”

Cullen chuckled, letting his warm breath splash across her neck and through her hair. “Yes. We can leave in the morning. I would like to stay in your tent tonight, if that would be agreeable?”

“Pfft. Agreeable. Of course I want you to stay with me. I’ve missed you so fucking much I can’t stand it.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“Well, thank God for that.”

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Chapter End Notes

Crazy comes in all shapes and sizes. Maybe he's born with it, maybe it's Asselin.

I managed to only cry once while I was writing this chapter!!! Everybody clap! ^_^~
Hauling Samson from the Arbor Wilds to Skyhold was proving more problematic than Cullen had anticipated. The first problem was the limited cadre that would allow them to travel fast enough to get to Skyhold before any of Samson’s information became useless to the Inquisition. Due to their diminutive ranks, the soldiers alternated watch and guard shifts with the members of the inner circle who had not gone into the Temple of Mythal with Max. Not only was it a logistical complication, but Cullen was constantly forced to intervene when Sera decided she was going to kill Samson after he ran his mouth during her guard rotation.

And Samson did run his mouth. That was the second problem. It was all too likely that the man sought to get himself killed by one person or another before reaching Skyhold where his knowledge of Corypheus’s plans would be plucked from his skull by whatever means Max deemed appropriate. Samson pecked and gnawed at everyone around him, and was spat on and punched more than once for his efforts.

He focused particular attention on Cullen. Samson knew Cullen could hear the red lyrium running in his addled and glowing veins. Samson knew it sang to Cullen in tones that were less dulcet and inviting than they were cloying and demanding. Samson knew Cullen had stopped taking any lyrium altogether. Samson knew too much, and it took every ounce of patience Cullen had not to engage him. Samson’s presence exacerbated Cullen’s withdrawal symptoms. This made that every ounce of patience that much harder to muster. Had Cullen been in the earlier phases of his withdrawal, he might have punched Samson, might have killed him for all he had done. Had he been in the earlier phases of his withdrawal, he might have killed Samson just to suck the lyrium from his marrow. It was a notion that plagued him day and night.

Samson’s harassment doubled when he realized Belle was Cullen’s romantic partner. Samson leered and made obscene gestures and catcalled her. Much of the time she seemed too lost in her own mind to notice. She would stare at nothing, unblinking as they rode and as they ate and as they dressed and as they undressed. She would find her way back to Cullen when he touched her, and she would smile as if nothing at all were amiss. She would laugh if someone said something humorous, and she would engage in conversation to add her perspective, often redoubling the laughter in the air. To the casual observer, Belle was relaxed and normal, jovial and unabashed as ever.

Cullen was not a casual observer. He had held Belle under his magnified scrutiny since the day she fell into Thedas. He noted the way her brow furrowed and her jaw canted after she laughed from time to time, pensive as she chewed the tip of her tongue between her back teeth. The frequency of her sighs after she spoke had increased from her standard brief periods of agitation. Her hands had ceased their fidgeting, instead floating about her face to rub her eyes beneath her glasses. She stirred more in the night, her sleep restless and fragmented.

His attentiveness to her subtle shift in behavior drew his eyes away from Samson more than he should have allowed. On their second to last night on the road, Cullen watched Belle smile while Josephine told a story he could not hear next to a campfire he could not feel. It was his time to guard Samson, which drew him away from the pleasant dinner he might otherwise have been enjoying with Belle and the other advisors and members of Max’s inner circle. Samson had to be kept away for the sake of everyone’s sanity, they had all decided.
“You don’t deserve her, you know,” said Samson, leaning in close enough that Cullen could smell the ancient rot in the man’s mouth.

“There are very few things on which I would find myself inclined to agree with you. But, in this case, you are correct. I don’t deserve her.”

“You don’t deserve any of it.”

“Right again.” Cullen was loath to continue his concessions. He was loath to continue this conversation. Every time Samson opened his mouth, Cullen’s nausea grew. The scent of dead teeth and dying organs wafted out on Samson’s breath, mingling with the screeching song of the red lyrium that seemed to grow louder in an attempt to drown out his words.

“I was a better man than you, Rutherford. I am a better man than you.”

“For a time, you were a better man than me, but I did not poison and kill hundreds of Templars and bind them to a darkspawn magister simply because I was disillusioned with the Chantry and addicted to lyrium I could not obtain by other means.”

“No. You burned mages’ souls from their bodies, instead. You followed the Chantry like a blind, dumb dog. You enjoyed the hateful shit they fed you. You gobbled it down. Even after you claim to have turned your back on the Chantry, you stayed their dog. Helping Hawke stop Meredith and leaving the Order didn’t change a thing. You joined the Chantry’s Inquisition so you could keep mages locked up forever. That you travel with them and that you work for one of them must really twist your guts.” Samson’s voice had an edge and a viscosity to it. Every word he spoke was like a venomous and creeping ooze. The chains around his wrist jangled with his every weak gesture.

Cullen turned to look Samson in his jaundiced red and blue eyes. “I will not continue to argue with you about the quality of our characters. My reasons for joining the Inquisition had nothing to do with locking up mages. I sought to stop a war I helped start. One that threatened to destroy Thedas. You have chosen the wrong side, Raleigh, and you took good men and women down with you. I am proud of my work with the Inquisition, and I am proud to call the Inquisitor—a mage, as you so thoughtfully mentioned—my friend.”

“Hey.” Belle’s voice rang like a soft chime from nearby. Cullen turned to see her approaching with Sera by her side. The campfire behind the women made Belle’s long curls glow around her shadowed face like the sun eclipsed by a moon. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that she wore a strange kind of smirk that pinched the left side of her face together, marking the equal measures of her concern and amusement. “Don’t feed the trolls.”

She came close enough to put her cool hand on the back of Cullen’s neck. Sera stayed a bit further away, squinting at Samson with her arms crossed. Belle’s fingers pressed and massaged Cullen’s tightened muscles, and he felt his fists relax until they were hands once more. “I just wanted to let you know I’m headed to bed. I know you have a couple hours left on douche duty.” Cullen nodded.

“I bet your cunt tastes like cherries,” said Samson. Cullen’s hands became fists again.

Belle’s eyebrows lifted and she shook her head. “And I bet your dick tastes like a dead man’s toe cheese, but some questions will just never be answered.”

Samson let out a dark chuckle. He must have been quite committed to dying before reaching Skyhold. In all the time Cullen had known him, and in everything he’d ever heard about him, Raleigh Samson had never been a lecherous or prurient man. Despite his blatant self-interest when it came to his lyrium addiction, he was not the kind of man to hound women. Before he had been
removed from the Order, he had always been respectful toward women, mage and Templar alike. Even as they removed him from the Temple of Mythal, several women lay among the dead and defeated Red Templars around him.

“Anyway,” said Belle, “I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in a bit.” She left a brief kiss on Cullen’s forehead before walking away. Cullen watched her hips sway as she went. Her waving curls had grown down to the inward curve of her back, and her longer hair swung the opposite direction of her hips, like a pendulum.

Sera stayed behind, arms still crossed over her chest. She jerked her head toward the campfire. “I need to talk to you, Commander Fuzzy Shoulders.” Samson snorted, and Cullen looked from Sera to Samson and back. He could not leave their prisoner in favor of a private conversation. She sighed. “Right, you listen, Crotch Rot.”

“I’m all ears.” Samson’s sneer was audible.

“No horses near you. Nothing ‘round for a hundred miles. Try anything stupid, we catch you. And you’ll get an arse full of arrows. Just your arse. Won’t kill you, but will hurt. Lots.”

Cullen watched as the sneer melted off Samson’s face like ice in the spring. He said nothing in answer, but it was clear that he understood. Cullen stood to step away with Sera. The two of them both stood with Samson in their periphery. He was a nebulous cloud of red and black and sickly flesh out of the corner of Cullen’s eye. “What is it?”

“You noticed Belle being all…droopy, yeah? She’s laughing and happy, but it doesn’t get in. Doesn’t get to her eyes.”

Sera’s observation left Cullen taken aback. “I have noticed, yes. I had not realized anyone else had.”

“Pfft.” The blonde elf rolled her eyes and her head in unison. “Course I noticed. Dorian too. Josie might, hard to tell. She’s good at playing her cards close. Leliana definitely. If Bull or Varric were here, they’d see.” Sera took a breath to squint at Samson again before continuing. “She won’t say what’s wrong. If I ask, she smiles and pretends right’s right. You’re her Cully-Wully. She’ll tell you what’s got her all floppy when she thinks we’re not looking, yeah?”

“You know as well as I do that Belle cannot be made to do anything. I have two hours left on my guard shift, in any case, and she’ll be asleep by the time I can speak to her.”

“I’m taking over for the rest.” Sera tapped her foot in the tamped down grass beneath their camp. She reached into one of her pouches and withdrew a weathered and perforated sock. “Got a gag for Crotch Rot, so don’t worry about me killing him. More fun to aim for his arse if he does something stupid, anyway. You ever see a grown man with an arrow in his arse? Good for a laugh, that.”

Cullen’s stare was circumspect. He scanned Sera’s body language for signs of deceit or mischief and saw none. Her blue eyes, ever alight with a thousand simultaneous ideas, were at once clever and troubled. She held his gaze for as long as she could stand before rolling her eyes and her head in unison again. “Go on.” She clapped a hand on his arm and shoved him as hard as a person that much smaller could shove a person that much larger. He abided, listening to her soft footsteps and her sunny voice saying, “Open your mouth, Crotch Rot,” as he made his way toward the tent he shared with Belle.

She had her back to him when he entered, her long fingers plucking away at the laces on the back of her pale gray corset. The wings of her shoulder blades jutted out from beneath her dress that was gauzy and blue as the pre-morning sky. Were it not for the red curls draped over her shoulders and
the harried manner in which she tugged at her corset, she would have looked to him as the skies over Honnleath while he fed his family’s livestock as a boy. She would have been the nimbus fog and the crisp, wet air that dampened the barley just so, the way the sheep and horses liked it best.

Cullen had not startled her. She peered over her shoulder and around her firestorm of loose curls, and he saw her eyes smile at him. “I should have known I would spend two hours futzing with this corset,” she said as she turned away. “Out of the seven fucking hundred million I have, I had to bring the one—” She held up her index finger, then brought it back down to the tangle over her spine. “—that doesn’t have clasps along the side.”

He tugged his hands free of his gloves, tossing the soft leather onto the table he installed every night in every one of his tents by sheer force of habit. As the cool evening air hit the sweat on his naked palms, he thought of how feckless that small table was with all its ungainliness and parts and pieces. Purposeless so much of the time. A waste of space.

Belle had managed to loosen the knot for the lower half of the corset, and had moved onto the upper knot. She spat out a fricative half syllable that might have been a curse when her finger was ensnared by the mess of cords. Cullen joined the fray, working faster in light of his clear view of the battlefield and its gangly soldiers. “Sera took over the rest of my watch.”

“That’s weird. You’re not worried she’s going to kill Samson?”

“She brought a sock.”

Belle’s responding laugh was like a spring. It had a bouncy quality to it that very nearly made Cullen forget the reason Sera had relieved him. The fabric of Belle’s corset sighed open when he loosened the final knot. “Ahh, thank you. I could feel the bones digging into my ribcage. Riding in a corset sucks a bag of dicks. I should have brought better clothes.”

Cullen doffed his mantle, speaking as he unfastened his pauldrons from his cuirass and his cuirass from his breastplate. “Sera is worried about you.”

Belle still had her back to him. She slid the corset down past her hips, stepping out of it and setting it on the table beside his gloves. Her bare toes flexed in the grass beneath their feet. “Why’s that?”

“I have been worried, too,” said Cullen. Belle slipped out of her breeches, finally turning to help him with his breastplate. Her lips pursed and moved to the left side of her face. “You have not been yourself since we left the Arbor Wilds.”

“Oh? And who have I been?”

“Maker’s breath. Please don’t be glib.”

“Then you don’t be precious. Tell me what you mean.” She took his breastplate from his chest while he held the backplate.

“You have been…pensive.”

“I’m usually pensive.” Belle turned away again. She pulled her dress up over her head, revealing her shimmering scar and a myriad of red indentations from her ribs to her hips. She ran a finger up one of the painful-looking marks and hummed out her displeasure. Her nightdress covered everything in short order. “I think a lot. For example, right now I’m thinking about what you’re trying to ask me. But you’re being oblique and it’s making deciphering your meaning difficult.”

Cullen crossed their tent in one stride. He spun to sit on the bed so he could look her in the eye.
“Please don’t be so evasive.”

“I’m not being evasive.”

“You are. You have been distant and silent at the oddest moments. You’re being combative with me, and I’m only trying to figure out how I help you feel better.”

Belle sighed through her nose and leveled her gaze with his. “I’m fine. That’s what’s bothering me. Okay? I fucking killed a guy. A guy was alive and now he’s not, and I have absolutely no qualms with that.” Her voice wound itself tighter and tighter. “I’m just one hundred percent fine with the fact that guy is dead. I’m really fucking struggling with that. Like, does that make me a stone cold killer? Am I just…” She threw her hands up and shook her head. Her eyes went wider and wider. “Like, am I just totally cool with killing whoever now? Am I evil now because I don’t care that that douchecanoe is dead? Am I going to Hell? Is there a Hell here? It’s a lot to process. I get quiet when I’m processing. So, yeah, I’m fine, and it’s freaking me the fuck out.” She became more and more animated right up until her mouth clapped shut. She sat down beside him with a thud. Her head came to rest on his shoulder. “And now I’m getting even more confirmation that I’m a terrible person because I snapped at you for asking me what was wrong.”

Cullen looked down at her. The pin straight part in her hair was all he could see. “You are not a terrible person,” he said. She looked up at him, her neck contorted in a way that must have been uncomfortable. “You’ve given your good nature away simply by asking these questions of yourself.”

“I tried telling myself that. I can’t convince myself to believe me.”

“Can you convince yourself to believe me, then?” He ran his hand from her alabaster part to her alabaster chin. He let his fingers splay over her crooked neck. “I have known every type of person. Some days, I’m certain I have been every type of person. An unscrupulous killer, while she might not concern herself with the fact that she had taken a life, would also not concern herself with the morality of her actions. She would not have to find a way to justify it to herself because she would not give the virtue of her reasons a moment’s thought. The killing would be right to her simply because she had done it.”

“Well, that’s a whole lot of circular reasoning.”

Cullen twisted at his waist, holding Belle’s face in his hands. “Precisely. And you are not a woman who indulges in circular reasoning.” He knew she hated circular reasoning. She’d once ranted about it for fifteen minutes after a meeting with a very self-indulgent Bann.

Belle puffed out a laugh. “Uh uh.”

“We can then surmise—” He kissed her left cheek. “—that because you ask yourself these questions, and do not engage in circular reasoning—” He kissed her right cheek. Her nose scrunched up when she giggled. “—you are not an unscrupulous killer, correct?”

She beamed at him, and the heart she made beat for her warmed in his chest. “Have I ever told you that you’d have made a great attorney?”

“I don’t believe you have.”

“Well, you would’ve. Except the kissing. Can’t go all kissing on your clients and your jurors and shit. That’s fraternization. It’s frowned upon.” Belle’s moon face always looked so small in his hands.

“I suppose I should be happy that you’re not one of my clients or jurors, then?” Cullen kissed her
smiling lips. A brief thing, like a punctuation mark.

“I suppose you should.” She dropped her forehead against his chest. “I concede. I’m not an unscrupulous killer. That’s not going to stop me from dwelling on it for another tiny eternity, mind you. But I’m really tired, my spine has turned to gel-oh, and my ribs feel like they’re going to cave in.”

Cullen focused his hearing outside their tent. Several soldiers chuckled and whispered around the nearby fire. Night birds and insects chirped far from the circle of tents and carts. Sera was not murdering Samson inasmuch as she was talking mindlessly at him. Knowing her, she was simply trying to yammer him into submission. Talk him to death.

Gently, Cullen laid Belle down on their cot, taking his place beside her in the manner he determined least likely to jostle her tired body. Her back was flush to his chest, her head resting on her pillow and his bicep. From where he lay, he could just make out her eyes. He watched them blink and roll lazily in every direction before they closed. Her breathing was deep and even the moment her lashes grazed her cheek.

Cullen’s eyes remained open for a time. His mind remained active. His ears remained vigilant. He could not name the moment he fell asleep, though he would later recall drifting off to the sound of Sera mulling over the intricacies of raisin use in cookies.

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Cullen may have given the appearance that he was working when the guards brought Samson into his office. He had certainly been attempting to work. Knowing that he was expected to extract information from his former cohort—the man with whom he had once shared a room—made the words on the reports before him impossible to decipher. It was one thing to ask Cullen to capture and transport Samson. It was something else entirely to ask him to rekindle an obliterated relationship under the misbegotten pretense of mutual civility and humanity. Samson had been correct during Max’s judgement. Cullen did not believe there was anything worthy left in the man.

The former Templar and former Red Templar both had their heads down when the door opened. They looked up simultaneously, each catching flashes of contempt in the other’s eyes. This would be no easy task. Samson was unchained, though he was flanked by two rather large Inquisition soldiers. He squared his shoulders before walking through the door. The soldiers saluted and closed it behind him.

“Cullen.”

“Raleigh.” Cullen stood at the curt greeting. The first way he could think to remind Samson of his humanity was to remind him of his given name. He told Max that he was willing to give the Inquisition his knowledge, but from one look at him in this moment, Cullen doubted whether that would happen. “Are your quarters sufficient?”

Samson took another step forward as Cullen rounded his desk. “Better than a jail cell. Not by much.” He shrugged toward the door.

“Surely you can understand why we need to keep you under guard until—”

“Until you’ve got everything you can get out of me.”

“Until we can trust you,” said Cullen. “Once I can report back to the Inquisitor that you and I have built a good rapport, we will decrease the guard.”
“And how do you suppose that’s going to happen, Commander?” Samson stepped forward again. He had learned long ago that proximity and intimidation were among the best weapons at a Templar’s disposal, as had Cullen. Again, Cullen could smell the formidable reek of decay. “We never built much of one, even before I was cast out of the Order.”

Cullen stood firm, unyielding even as Samson loomed before him. The bedraggled man was two or three inches shorter than Cullen, but he continued to wield menace like a blade. He would have been ominous to someone who did not know him so well as Cullen once had. Samson’s prolonged proximity did, however, set Cullen’s head and gut to spinning. It was all he could do not to back away to evade the wailing emanating from Samson’s blood.

The sound of a door opening might have startled them had they not been fighting a silent battle of stony stares. “Hey, Cullen, how many sol—Oh.” On the boundaries of Cullen’s vision, he saw a mass of red hair and ivory skin that could only have been Belle. “I didn’t realize you were…doing this right now. I’ll come back in a bit.”

Samson broke his gaze, turning to look at Belle. “My lady.” There was a slowness to the way he said it. A thickness. A sludge. He pivoted to aim an exaggerated bow at her. “The Commander and I were just getting started.”

Cullen’s eyes flicked to Belle, who stood expressionless just inside the doorframe. The natural downturn of her mouth gave her a sternness that perpetually walked the line between anger and annoyance. She glanced at Cullen before fixing her glare on Samson.

Samson took her silence as invitation to continue. “I was just about to ask the Commander what he already knows about Red Templars. Perhaps I should ask you, my lady. What do you know about Red Templars?”

“Enough.”

“Is that so? I wonder, what constitutes ‘enough?’ For instance, did you know that ordinary lyrium is essentially a poison that Templars build a tolerance to?”

“As so many narcotics are,” Cullen could hear Belle let out a slow sigh through her nose. “I also know that red lyrium is worse, before you feel the urge to ask me about that, too.”

“And did you know that red lyrium attacks the blue stuff? Tries to destroy it in order to replace it?” Belle remained silent. “You didn’t know that, eh? It’s like a sickness destroying another sickness. It burns up the lyrium in your blood. Boils it till it’s gone.”

“Sounds painful.”

“Oh, it’s excruciating. If a Templar gets it on his skin before he has his first philter, it’ll try and burn right through to get at the blue stuff. Would you like a demonstration?”

In an instant, Samson reeled back and spat in Cullen’s face. In an instant, the bridge of Cullen’s nose and the top of his cheek were set aflame. In an instant, Cullen cried out his agony. He moved quickly, using his sleeve to wipe the tainted blood and saliva from his skin.

“Hey!” was bellowed from where Belle stood. Where she no longer stood. She appeared through Cullen’s blurred vision as fire and ice carried toward him on the wind. But she was not coming for him. She grunted as she swung her crooked arm at Samson’s face. The bony blade of her lightly clothed elbow connected with his nose, and it was his turn to cry out in pain as fresh blood poured from within and without. She rocked back, fist poised to strike the bleeding man again.
Cullen snatched her up before she could swing. His arm wrapped around her waist, and he tugged her back. Her feet lifted off the floor. Her whole body lurched and flailed. He worried for a moment that she might escape his grasp.

“I’m gonna fuck you the fuck up! Piece of fucking shit!” Belle’s leg swung out, narrowly missing Samson’s head. She spat at him while Cullen hauled her out of the open door. “Fuck you! Motherfucker!” The adjacent door opened to reveal the two guards just before Cullen shut himself out.

Belle groaned and hollered and thrashed until they reached her doorway. She began to fidget and ramble through her adrenaline surge the moment he set her down. “Fucking asshole. Are you okay? Holy shit. I actually connected. I didn’t think I would. I only ever went to that one Krav Maga class. But I watched a shitload of Muay Thai and Em-Em-Ay. Maybe that’s why. Are you okay?” She was all but vibrating.

Cullen’s anger bubbled deep in his chest. He held her arms to still her. “Why would you do something so reckless?”

“Reckless? I’m fine. It’s okay, he wasn’t going to hurt me.”

“You might have destroyed any chance I have at getting information about Corypheus’s plans. Why would you let him provoke you like that? Why would you hit him?”

“What? I might what?” Belle’s brow furrowed in confusion and in fury. “He attacked you! He hurt you! So I hurt him back! He knows the fucking score.”

The anger bubbling in Cullen’s chest rolled up and growled through his throat. “He was testing me! He was testing you! He is testing everything!” His voice left his lips loud and harsh. Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea went wide. “He wants his last chance to die fighting. The red lyrium is killing him. He wants to die before it can. I will not have you or anyone else giving him the idea that he is entitled to that kind of relief!”

Belle looked as though she wanted to hit him or scream at him or cry. She shrugged his hands from her arms. She turned and walked through her door, closing it behind her. He heard the door to the other side of the battlements open and close, and saw her march off toward the kitchen. Her head was down and her hands were clenched tight into furious fists.

With yet another reason to despise Samson tucked away his mind, Cullen re-entered his tower. Samson sat in a chair that had been dragged from beside the wall into the center of the room. Two large hands belonging to two large men rested on either of his shoulders. Cullen dismissed them, reassuring one of them that he would be fine and reminding the soldier not to question orders.

“She’s a spitfire, your Belle.” Samson chuckled that dark chuckle. His tongue darted out to stop the blood running out of his nostrils and over his lips and down his chin. He winced when he sniffed, and he chuckled again. A serrated cut over the bridge of his nose gushed more blood. Even the man’s blood looked viscous and heavy—too thick for human veins.

“An interesting choice of words.” Cullen perched himself on the edge of his desk. His hand found the pommel of his sword, and he was grounded by the cool metal and rough cord there. Has skin felt raw, but there was no need for a healer. The red lyrium in Samson’s blood had not been as concentrated as that of the Red Templar Cullen slew at the Shrine of Dumat.

“I can’t help but notice I’m still alive. Even after attacking the Commander of the Inquisition in his own quarters. Your lot must be desperate.”
“Not as desperate as you, apparently. Do you want to die so badly that you’re willing to throw away any chance at redemption?”

Samson scoffed. “There’s no redemption for me. There’s only madness or the end of a blade. Both, if your Maker sees fit to cast me out in the most fitting way. The longer I wait to die, the more the red lyrium kills me. As I said on my knees before your Inquisitor, Corypheus could only delay my corruption.”

“And as I said, you were part of something larger than yourself once. Why did you become a Templar?”

“Same as you. I wanted to help people. Just not the same people as the Chantry wanted me to help.”

“Do you think you’re helping anyone right now? The bulk of your Red Templars have been wiped out. The Templars left alive and untainted by red lyrium have nevertheless been tainted by your actions and by your leadership under Corypheus. Do you honestly believe that the mages would benefit in any way from his success?”

“I don’t believe anyone can benefit from anything happening in Thedas right now. The Chantry’s in chaos, looking for anyone they can blame for all of it. Templars have become just as hated and distrusted as mages. No one can seem to stop killing each other. At least Corypheus was able to unite Thedas, even if it meant uniting against him.”

“If he wins, everyone will be subjugated. As I recall, that was one of your—how did you put it—your ‘philosophical differences’ with the Order and the Chantry. If you help us defeat him, the Inquisition will have sway with the Chantry. We could have a say in the selection of the next Divine. The world can change, if you help us keep it alive. Men can find redemption. Perhaps even some of your own men.”

Samson went silent for what seemed like a lifetime. His head hung looser on his neck, much of his will to fight having fled his body. He was exhausted. Cullen understood that kind of exhaustion. It was the kind that left a man feeling less than a man after fighting for too long for a cause he knew she should not have supported. Cullen felt it in Kirkwall. Each night, he sat at the edge of his bed with his head hanging loose on his neck, his body protesting every move he’d made throughout the day, his mind praying for the clarity and the strength to understand and to do what was right. The weight of a thousand lives crushed him, as it crushed Samson now.

“Alright.” All the viscosity and sliminess had left Samson’s voice. All that remained was the same voice that had once asked Cullen about what it was like in Honnleath before the Blight. It was the same voice that had comforted mages and Templars on their worst days, and it was the same voice that decried the Order’s treatment of its charges. “What do you want to know?”

It was deep into the night when Cullen called the soldiers in to escort Samson back to his quarters. The former Templars made arrangements amongst themselves for the timing of their next meeting. Cullen made no promises of a merciful death to Samson, and Samson made no promises to remain alive until the madness ripped his mind from his will.

It was too late to approach Belle that night, and Cullen was still vexed at her rashness. He wished he had not shouted at her and he wished he had shouted louder. He had been unable to compose himself enough to find the words to make her understand. He resolved to find those words before he slept as he ascended the godforsaken ladder into his loft. He could no longer think of the word “ladder” without his mind adding “godforsaken” in Belle’s voice.

His ire faded as he lay over the blankets on his still tidy bed. It faded into gentle sorrow at his
inability to hold her close and murmur his explanations and apologies into her hair. He would speak with her the next day, though it may very well have been the next day by the time his eyes drifted shut. The Fade was cruel and unmerciful when it finally took him, and in his nightmares his own cruelty was reflected on the backs of his eyelids.

The blood of the wicked would always flow through his veins, refusing to be forgotten, refusing to release him, refusing to allow him to be a better man.

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Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy...everyone's pissed.

I hope you don't mind me coming up with some theories on red lyrium, on why Red Templars are a thing, and why maybe we don't see too many normies surviving red lyrium. That whole thing didn't feel very well fleshed-out in the games for me.

Also, I emphatically disagree with the use of raisins in cookies. I felt like I should put that out there. ^_~

I seem to have lost some of my more regular commenters in the last few chapters. I hope you're all still out there, and I hope I'm still telling a story you're still enjoying! <3
Heyyyyy! I'm back!!! I'm so sorry for the massive delay between chapters, but real life went abso-fucking-lutely insane! I hope (if you saw it) that you enjoyed what I did manage to put out between uploads. In any case, here we are. Thanks for sticking with me, fair reader!!! It means more than you can know!

<3

Belle had bad habits. She had bad habits and she had vices. She touched her mouth too much. She occasionally talked for the sole purpose of filling the silence. She enjoyed cheese more than any one person had the right to do. She had a quick temper. She held grudges. She could be brutal and unreasonable.

She yammered on and on and on about her argument with Cullen as Dorian watched her pace. Unconcealed laughter danced in his gray eyes while she blathered about how angry she was, how obtuse Cullen was being, and how fucking stupid the entire fight had been. She would not allow the mage a word of counsel or retort as she recounted the play-by-play of the entire event in excruciating and undoubtedly biased detail. It was only when she collapsed in a cross-armed huff into the chair opposite his that he managed to ask her a question.

“Have you, in the midst of all your dramatic fury, considered Cullen’s perspective in this argument?”

“Yes.” Her head swiveled on her neck and her chin flicked up in that snarky way it always did when she was feeling indignant.

“And?” Dorian’s brows lifted, and his fingers gestured in a flourish.

Belle reminded herself of a querulous child when she said, “And I hate being wrong! So let’s move on from his perspective and focus on how frickin’ pissed off I am!” She stared at the small red spot on the point of her elbow. Samson may have ruined a perfectly good lavender crepe tunic with his face blood. She crossed her arms harder.

“As much as I can appreciate the need to vent one’s frustrations, and as entertaining as I find your very animated fulmination, wouldn’t you rather discuss how to resolve your dispute with Cullen? Off the top of my head, I can think of more than a few ways, though one or two may involve someone on their knees.”

Belle’s head went almost horizontal. “I know how to resolve the dispute. I go there and tell him that I realize his talks with Samson aren’t so different from my negotiations with the nobility, and that I get how delicate it all is and how tactful he has to be, and I say sorry for interfering when I broke that motherfucker’s nose, and we kiss and make up and I can go on my merry. I know. But I’m fucking pissed. And I just want to be fucking pissed right now. And if you’re not going to help me be pissed, I’m going to find someone who will.”

She stood without another word and stomped toward the stairwell. Dorian’s exuberant “a-HA-
hahaha” echoed through the rotunda to follow her out as she considered her next destination. She had no interest in seeing Cullen yet, let alone speaking to him. Their spat was only an hour old. Since she didn’t want to be anywhere he might go, talking to Max wasn’t an option. Notwithstanding his potential proximity to Cullen, Max had been a little wonky since they’d returned from the Arbor Wilds. He said he drank from something called the “Well of Sorrows” in the Temple of Mythal, said he knew more than he ever could have dreamed. It was easy enough to believe, given the intermittence of his vacant stares.

Belle considered her other options. Like Max, Josephine and Leliana would be prone to being near Cullen. Spencer had been promoted to Knight-Captain and was busy training with his battalion. Eudora wasn’t back from the Wilds, and even if she were, she would have been bumptious and pesky about the whole thing. Blackwall was out, not that he would have had much more than uncomfortable grunting or more “solutions” to contribute. Cassandra and Bull might have listened, or they might have tried to make her hit things. She’d seen them hitting things when they were angry. That might have been useful, but she had done enough hitting for the day. Solas seemed disinterested in Belle’s activities beyond anything that might have had to do with her surprise existence in Thedas, though he was happy enough to answer her questions when she had them. Vivienne would have said, sarcastically, that it was such a shame but that it was for the best, and would have told Belle to end the relationship. Varric would write something down. Belle didn’t know what, but she was certain he’d write something down. Her need to rant might have puzzled Cole.

Sera. Sera was more likely to join in Belle’s pissing and moaning than to try and fix things. She would be in the tavern, a place Cullen was loath to go, especially on his own. She was perfect.

Belle listened to the click of her boots on the stone floor and the stone steps as she headed through the main hall and outside toward the Herald’s Rest. Her fight with Cullen seemed distant in light of her talk with Dorian, like driftwood that rode the tide back to its rightful place in the world. The purpose in her ire melted away as her thoughts of the altercation melted away. She bristled for the sake of bristling. Impotent anger begat more impotent anger. She was hopped up on it by the time she found Sera up in the loft in the Herald’s Rest.

The elf was sitting on a cushion near the window sawing away with an arrow’s edge at a chunk of blonde hair she’d decided had grown too long. It had never occurred to Belle that this was the way Sera got a choppy bob in Thedas, by actually chopping it. Blue eyes landed on Belle as the spare hair broke free. Sera fluttered her fingers outside to discard the unwanted strands. They floated on the perpetual breeze to scatter about Skyhold, where they would end up in someone’s eye, in someone’s supper, or in someone’s horse’s shit halfway across Thedas. Sera smiled.

“Hey you. You look pissy.”

Belle plopped onto the nearest chair, or what looked like the nearest chair. It shifted under her weight. Upon closer inspection, it may have been a pile of books under a pilfered swath of drapery.

“I am pissy.”

Sera tilted her head. She reminded Belle of the cockatiel her family had growing up. That cockatiel never liked Belle half as much as Sera did. There was an odd comfort in that. “Is it because of that blood on your elbow? You cut yourself on one of those whingey little letters people send you? ‘Ooh, the Inquisition owes me more feathers to stuff up under my arse,’ or whatever?”

“Nope. Not my blood.”

“Whose is it, then? How’d it get on you?”

“It’s Samson’s blood. It got on me when I busted his fucking nose a little bit ago.” Belle swung her
elbow out in a pantomime of the way she thought she’d done it. In truth, she couldn’t really remember her form.

Sera whooped before she chortled. “You? You broke his—” She closed her arms over her stomach while she laughed her little goblin laugh. Her eyes squeezed shut as she leaned over, and she toppled. Her body hit the planks, the thud of the impact and her half-giggled “Ow” the only noises that could put bounds to her boundless mirth.

Belle pursed her lips. She was torn between laughing and scowling at the response. “For your information, I know stuff.” Her arms were crossed again.

“Yeah?” said Sera from the flat of her back. “What stuff?”

“Stuff like how to break a dude’s nose stuff.”

“Pfft. Right, okay, why’d you do that?” Sera hopped up from the floor with more ease than Belle would have in a thousand lifetimes. “Wait. Got to get a drink so I can listen properly.”

Once Sera returned with not only a drink, but a pile of some sort of meat over a pile of some sort of starch, Belle regaled her with the whole sordid affair. Sera looked sufficiently galled, even with her mouth full of gnashed up, gray-beige food. She threw in her two cents and, despite not always being witty, her comments were supportive. When Belle was done with her story, the two women began grousing and shouting about this thing that made them angry or that thing that was so obnoxious or the other thing they hated, until they had ventured far from the original topic of their discussion.

It was dark and both of them had eaten dinner by the time Belle found herself feeling a bit better. Sera was half drunk and slurring something about something being shite when Belle decided that catharsis had been had and it was time to go to bed. She helped the elf lay back on the cushioned perch, and took the cloth she’d been sitting on to cover her sloshed friend. It had been laid over a stack of books, as Belle suspected.

She closed the door behind her. Sera’s voice still muttered into the air, though it quieted after a moment. Belle saw through a tavern window that the lights were still lit in Cullen’s office and his quarters above. She snuck through the courtyard and up the stairs near the kitchen to get to her tower. It would have been faster to go through the main hall, but she had developed a keen disinterest in speaking to anyone else before she slept, and it was dark enough in the courtyard that she did not concern herself with the possibility of Cullen seeing her.

The door always creaked when pushed or pulled from its frame, like a child torn from the arms of its mother. Belle made every effort to keep it from slamming behind her. Her rage had gone from jet fuel to a lead ball in her gut, and she felt the weight of it as she went upstairs and disrobed. It had become a pathetic kind of emotion, dead and festering with no hope of resurrection. It made her sigh when she sat on her bed.

She looked at Cullen’s tower. Her stomach dropped at the blackness she saw though his window. He’d gone to sleep. There were no amends to be made that night. Not like she wanted to make amends with him, anyway. Fucker. She gave his window the finger so hard her arm shook, and she gave the window the finger a second and a third time for good measure. She plowed her body into her mattress and pulled her blanket up to her chin. Her next sigh was less a sigh than it was a huff. People always said never to go to bed angry, but her father had once told her that sometimes that just wasn’t realistic, that things sometimes just looked better in the morning. She hoped to God he was fucking right.
Belle’s rest was less than restful. She tossed and turned for what seemed like hours until her eyes refused to stay open any longer. She had strange dreams of gunfire, bursting bodies, and white waterfalls like the ones she’d seen in the northernmost national parks as a child. The murderous parts of her dreams were not so unusual. She always had murder dreams before or after a high-stress day. She was never the one doing the murdering, always bearing witness in some unrealistic state of serene awe. The waterfalls, though, she could not place.

Her anger no longer simmered at the surface of her, but it was unmistakably present. It manifested in anxiety and adrenaline surges at the mere thought of seeing Cullen. She found herself unprepared for the confrontation that was destined to occur at some point in the day. Her mantra sounded off in her mind. Predict, prepare, preempt.

A thousand variations in the course of events of their impending meeting cycled through her head like short films. A permutation in the conversation would arise, and Belle would rewind the moment a dozen times to view the results of each of her plausible options. There were non-conversational options to consider, as well. He could choose to walk away from her, or she from him. He could strike at her, though that was such a remote possibility that it was meritless to ponder. She rewound that variant all the way to the beginning. This was all done in short order before she finished lacing her boots, but she felt no less trepidatious about seeing him.

As she had said to Cullen, people were chaotic, and she was good at chaos. There was less and less chaos to a person’s answers the better she knew them, resulting in fewer possible moves and fewer possible outcomes. That they were operating under the veil of love, however, made every possibility seem too real. Love was a muddling factor that made people unpredictable, chaotic as a consequence of familiarity.

Belle clenched her teeth for the better part of the morning. Every time one of her doors opened, her legs tightened and her gut turned to ice before she could see that it was a soldier passing through on rounds, a scout bringing up a message, or a servant bringing up breakfast. Her hand ached under the tension with which she held her quill. In the silence of her office, she chastised herself for her apprehensiveness.

Her stomach rumbled out its emptiness, and she decided to review one final request before heading to the kitchen for sandwich fixings. As she read through the looping Orlesian script, it dawned on her that the correspondence was a request for military assistance in exchange for gold and political favors. It wasn’t urgent, and there were already Inquisition forces in the area, but she would have to talk to Cullen about redirecting them.

She whined and wriggled in her seat like a five-year-old, eyes pinched shut with a cartoonish frown draped over her lips. She’d been bracing herself all morning, and now she would have to be the one who broke radio silence. She would have to bend first. When had her life become so replete with such ceaseless and omnipresent bullshit?

Belle stood and made for Cullen’s office. Her posture was terrible and she had a shit-sour look plastered on her face, but out she went in all her childish fractiousness. She took a deep breath before opening the door, squaring her shoulders for the conversation she’d been dreading all morning.

He wasn’t there. His office was empty. She listened for sounds from his loft. Nothing. She’d gotten herself worked up for nothing. In response to the unceremonious letdown, her irrational fury reanimated with whiplash inducing momentum. It was a hollow and aimless thing in its second iteration, but it was no less vicious.

Missive still in hand, she stomped back across the battlements to get the accoutrements for her sandwich. She slapped a few pieces of unused morning ham onto a slice of French bread—it was
fucking French bread, fuck this Orlesian bread bullshit—and two slices of white cheese onto the ham, and capped her disheveled heap of saturated fats and proteins with another piece of bread. The one-handed meal was an ungainly mess. Dada fucking sandwich. It fell apart as Belle crammed it down her throat walking back up the stairs, through her office, and up to Cullen’s desk. Little chunks of meat fell out everywhere.

With the last dry, fatty mouthful still rolling around in her maw, Belle smacked the wrinkled letter down on the desk. She snatched up the nearest quill and inkpot she could find, and scribbled a message in her disgusting handwriting.

Send THIS MANY troops THERE

THANKS

She drew two shambling arrows up to the points of reference for “THIS MANY” and “THERE,” and scrawled the ugliest, swirly fucking underline she could manage beneath “THANKS.” She might have ripped the parchment. She ran the back of her left hand across her mouth to wipe away the crumbs there, some of which landed on the wet ink. She slammed the quill down on the desk and turned to leave.

A high pitched growl flew through her gritted teeth once she let the door to her office crash closed behind her. The worst part of everything that was happening was that the vast majority of her anger was aimed at the mere fact that she had gotten angry in the first place. Only about a fifth of her ire was directed at Cullen, and it was weak, at best. She sank into her chair with her head in her hands and growled again.

One of her doors opened. “What?!?”

“Easy there, Counselor. I might actually start thinking you don’t like it when I just barge into your office,” said Varric. He had a jaunty way of speaking that made him sound lighter than other people.

Belle sighed through her nose. She tried to visualize her anger leaving her body in little gusts of steam. “Sorry.” She let her thumb and fingers hold her head up at her hairline when she turned to him. He bore his trademark rakish smirk and his trademark chest hair with his boundless trademark charisma. “I’m just having a rough—Umm—Whatever. What’s up?”

“As always, it seems I’ve arrived just in the nick of time. I’m setting up a little card game in the Herald’s Rest after supper tonight, and I was hoping you would join us.”

Varric’s appearance had been a bucket of water to Belle’s rage fire, and the resulting ash left her fatigued. Her words came out slow and lazy. “What kind of card game? I don’t know how to play poker or anything.”

“Not poker. Wicked Grace.”

She squinted at him. “Isn’t that basically Thedosian poker? I don’t know how to play that either. And I don’t like to gamble.”

He chuckled, light as air. “You don’t really have your own money to gamble with, though, do you? I’d be happy to loan you a few coins. I have a feeling I’ll get them back. You can learn while we play if you stick with me for the first few hands.”

“Ehh…I don’t know why you think you’d get your money back with me playing a game I’ve never played before. I’m a noob. You don’t trust noobs to win, dude. Maybe I can just, like, hang out while you all play.”
“Oh no, Counselor. If you’re staying, you’re playing. Come on, it’ll be fun. Curly already agreed to play, however begrudgingly.”

“Cullen,” said Belle. Her disbelief was apparent. Varric nodded. “Commander Cullen Rutherford of the Inquisition agreed to join your card game.”

“Yup. I know, I know, hard to believe. But I only embellish the truth. I don’t make it up outright. Of course, I may or may not have told him you would be there.”

She squinted at him again, more playful than dubious this time. “Fine. I’ll play, but only because I want to see someone shut him down. He’s got no poker face. He gets all smug when he thinks he’s winning something. So, yeah, fine. You’re my bankroll. But if I lose, and I’m pretty sure I will, I don’t owe you any real money. Deal?”

Varric’s smirk morphed into a genuine smile. “Deal. You can repay me in favors if it comes to that.” He turned to leave. “I’ll see you tonight, Counselor,” he said as the door creaked shut between them.

Belle let her head fall back into her hands. This evening would be, if anything, very interesting.

*****

Of everyone Belle had ever met, Cullen was the only one who could be counted on to show up to a card game at a tavern in full armor. This was not a tavern in a foreign or hostile place. This was the tavern that sat no more than three hundred feet from the tower where he slept. Yet there he was, bedecked in plate armor over his chest, back, and arms, that furry monstrosity billowing over his shoulders. As angry as Belle had been at him, she couldn’t help the tiny smile that tugged at the left corner of her mouth.

He was standing by the bar with just enough of his back to Belle that he didn’t see her walk in. He and Cassandra were deep in conversation, each wearing their characteristic severity as if it were their favorite pair of shoes. Even as they sipped from the large flagons in their hands, they were the picture of solemnity. Then Cassandra’s eyes caught sight of Belle and widened. The Seeker looked back at Cullen before gesturing toward Belle with a gentle nod.

Belle stiffened where she stood. They were talking about her. There was no way they weren’t talking about her. She had been talking to her friends about him for a day, why wouldn’t he talk to his friends about her?

Cullen turned to see her standing in the middle of the room. Shit. His whole torso rose with a breath he seemed to hold. His face was frozen in near blankness. Before she had seen that face so many mornings and so many afternoons and so many nights, she might have found his expression unreadable. An infinitesimal wrinkle between his eyebrows left him an open book. He was as nervous as she was to talk, and he was happy and angry, hopeful and despairing at the sight of her.

He fidgeted with his flagon, twitching toward and away from the bar in a moment of indecisiveness. In the end, he chose to keep it with him while he approached her. She watched him, terrified and optimistic.

“Belle! You came!” Max’s voice turned Belle’s gaze from Cullen. Max had a huge, stupid grin on his face, and he about skipped over to her. At least he was feeling better. “I’m so glad you came to play.” His jubilance was that of a second-grader whose newest and—of course—best friend came over after school for a rousing game of Candyland.

Over his shoulder, Josephine smiled and waved. Belle smiled back at both of them. “Couldn’t pass it
up. But be ready to take a lot of Varric’s money. I have no goddam idea how to play Wicked Grace.”

“Oh it’s quite easy,” said Josephine.

“If it’s easy like poker’s easy, I’m fucked. I congratulate you in advance on your winnings.” Belle held out her arm and bowed her head.

“Surely you’re not so terrible. You always seem so certain of yourself during our negotiations.” Josie’s fingers brushed and twined with Max’s in a clandestine little dance. Their love was such a private thing. Even among friends, they were secretive and cautious.

“Well, sure. But I always know the other side’s cards.” Belle winked. “Much easier that way. I prefer facts to bluffing.”

“If you like, you can sit with us, and I will teach you the game,” said Josie.

“Nah, I’m good. Varric promised to show me for the first few hands. I get the feeling he’s had time to get pretty good at this.”

On cue, Varric appeared at Belle’s side. He nudged her arm with his shoulder. “You wouldn’t be wrong, Counselor. Although, I have a feeling Ruffles, here, has a few tricks up her puffed sleeves.”

Josephine looked positively scandalized. “Oh no, it’s been years since I’ve even seen a game of Wicked Grace.”

Skepticism turned up the corner of Varric’s mouth. “We’ll see about that,” he said as he ushered Belle toward the table covered in cards and cups.

Cullen had already taken his seat near the center of the table across from the spot where Josephine had set her clipboard and quill. Belle wondered if the ambassador intended to keep a detailed accounting of everyone’s bets, winnings, and losses—to be paid in full at the end of the business day, of course. Varric had squeezed an extra chair between Cullen’s seat and his own. It wasn’t unreasonable to think Belle might want to sit next to her…She still didn’t know what to call him. Boyfriend still sounded wrong. Had they any chance to apologize to one another before the game began, Varric’s assumption would have been correct. As they were, she stared at the table when she sat, feeling the heat of Cullen’s gaze emblazoned across the left side of her face.

The game seemed simple enough once they started. This suit beat that, these cards beat those. Belle began to play after the fifth hand, betting the minimum at every opportunity. She tried to get a sense of everyone’s style when they upped each ante. Sera was under the table long before Belle joined the game. Varric violated his own “no play, no stay” rule for Cole, though the young man looked as if he might burst out of his skin if he didn’t announce someone’s thoughts soon. Cullen, as predicted, was just a little pompous when he suspected his cards would trump those of his opponents. Max had no poker face. He grinned and frowned more with each successive hand. Blackwall got shifty. Cassandra’s eyebrows gave her away. Dorian puffed up with a kind of pride when he pinched good cards between his fingers, and he puffed up with a kind of indignation when he held losers. Bull was cagey. Josie was next to impossible to read.

So it went for some time. Belle won a few hands on what she could only assume was pure luck. After a while, no one noticed that she stopped taking cards and making bets. She was up by four silver sovereigns when she quit. All the money she had to her name, save for the priceless and ever present coin in her pocket. Varric told a funny story about Hawke and the death of a Duke, and Belle laughed. Max told a funny story about his distinctly unfunny harrowing, and Belle laughed. Cullen
told a funny story about a naked prank on a recruit in the Ferelden Circle, and Belle laughed.

It was the first time their eyes met since they sat. Without thinking, she looked at him, the source of her laughter, with a wide smile on her face. His expression went sanguine at the sight of her. His cheeks and nose were flushed red from drink.

It was also the first time Belle perceived the phenomenon unfolding around her. Everyone was drunk. They were all operating at varying levels of intoxication, but each and every person at and under that table was fucked up. Including Cullen. His ale colored eyes swam in the nystagmus made actual by their liquid counterpart. His posture was unsteady at best. It would have been the perfect time to talk. He would have been malleable and affectionate, and she would not have been forced to admit quite as much fault in their dispute.

But nothing could be so simple. He turned from her upon hearing, “And the dealer takes everything! I win again.”

Cullen swayed on his stool. “Not so fast,” he said, a hair’s breadth from a slur. “Deal again. I’ve figured out your tells, Lady Ambassador.”

Josephine smirked while Belle’s stomach dropped. “Commander! Everyone knows a lady has no tells.”

He settled in, and those around them watched, bemused. “Then let’s see if your good fortune lasts one more hand.”

“Cullen,” said Belle in a near whisper, “maybe don’t.” She touched his arm. “You’re kind of drunk, and she’s been kicking all our asses all night.”

He shrugged her off, looking to her with a bleary sort of perturbation. “I know what I’m doing. I will not have any more interference.” She was an annoyance to him. An irritant.

And she was pissed. “Fine then. Go ahead. Lose your fucking shirt.”

She didn’t think he would take her words quite so literally. Over the next hour, everyone chatted and laughed as they watched Cullen lose more than just his shirt. First, Josie took his mantle. Next came his armor—arms first, then the plates, piece by clattering piece. One boot. The other boot. One sock at a time.

His shirt came over his head next, and Belle’s disgruntled mind warred with her wandering eyes. Almost everyone’s eyes wandered. She couldn’t fault them. Cullen was, after all, her Atlas and her Achilles, pained and beautiful and painted over with the emblems of his past suffering.

When his pants came off she almost couldn’t stand it. She was forced to sit there, pissed off and piqued, while he lay all but bare to the world. There was nothing she could do to stop him. He’d made that clear. He could embarrass himself all he fucking wanted. Served him right.

Belle tried to maintain that attitude when he lost his last hand, and his last article of clothing. He did not stand to remove his underwear, just sort of lifted himself from his stool enough to shimmy them off. There was a rage in his swimming eyes as he set the garment on the table, one that shot through every part of Belle’s body. It was not a sensation to which she was accustomed. Furious arousal. She needed to punch him and she needed to fuck him. Both overwhelming desires set her mind adrift, and she failed to notice anything else until nearly every person had stood to turn their back.

Cullen looked at her just once more before he ran from the tavern. It was a look loaded with shame, anger, and want. He was as confounded as she was when he ran past her. The sounds of his
footbeats on the stairs and the door to the battlements slamming shut were nearly drowned out by the laughter simmering through the room.

Josephine and Max had lost their courtly inhibitions somewhere in the space between their drunkenness and her decisive victory. They stood by the tavern fire, backs to the table, his nose and lips grazing her ear as he whispered some sinful little thing or another. Belle gathered up Cullen’s pants and tunic in silence so as to disturb the lovers as little as possible. She said only, “May I?” and held the clothing up. Josie waved her off, unconcerned with the pittance removed from her winnings.

Belle walked up the stairs and out onto the battlements with her arms full of Cullen’s clothes. A chill on the night wind bit through her sleeves, but there was always a chill in Skyhold. It troubled her less than it had months before. She had acclimatized.

It was warm again when she opened the door to Cullen’s office. She hadn’t needed to bring his things. He was already wearing a different pair of brown breeches. They were tied with a haphazard knot, sitting low on his waist as he paced in front of his desk with his hands on his head. He appeared to be berating himself.

“Brought your clothes you don’t need,” she said, and threw them on the floor. She shut the door behind her. He continued to pace. “Josie’s keeping the heavy shit and that furry monstrosity until you go and collect them yourself.”

His only response was more pacing. He shook his head a little and huffed as his bare feet scraped against the stone with each about face. The muscles against his ribcage and under his arms flexed and surged with every clench of his fingers, catching the candlelight to cast his body in bronze.

An unmistakable itch dragged up Belle’s spine, but her ire was not to be cast aside. Frustrated in every way a woman could be, she strode up to him. “You proud of what you did back there?”

A growl rose in Cullen’s throat. “No.” He continued to pace. His elbow missed her by mere inches.

“Hey! Quit fucking stomping around!”

He stopped and stared at her with his swimming eyes. His mouth was a lion’s mouth, hanging open with teeth bared just enough. His chest and shoulders rose and fell with each predatory breath. That itch reached the base of Belle’s skull to make her salivate.

“What’s going on with you?”

Cullen growled again. “I have been trying to decide what to say to you all day—since last night. I had a plan. Then that damned dwarf handed me an ale, and I took it and proceeded to make a complete fool of myself! I do not need help embarrassing myself in front of you.”

“I dare say you don’t.”

“Do not chastise me.”

Belle stepped forward until she was all but touching him. His scent wafted up her nose and into her mind, chasing the itch from the back of her skull down, down, down. “Or what?”

With one move that might have been a precursor to Aikido, Cullen snatched up her right hand with his left and pulled her past him. The momentum knocked the tops of her thigs into his desk and pitched her forward. Her hands slammed down to keep her upright, tearing parchment and toppling inkwells. Before she could ask what the fuck, a loud slap on her ass lanced a stinging pleasure up and out of her mouth in a shuddered breath.
Cullen stood to her right. More aptly, he stood on her right, pressed against her so the only way she could move was away. She had no desire to move away. She wanted to stay in the haze of his scent, his skin, and his amber eyes that no longer swam, but burned. She craned her neck to look into those eyes, and they looked back out from within his stern face. He might have been grinding his teeth, the way his lips parted and came together again.

It was not the first time he’d spanked her, but it was the first time he’d done it like this.

He hovered over her for a silent moment that had her lower lip trembling. He gritted his teeth in the split second when he slapped her ass again. Belle’s fingers curled and crumpled the sheets of paper on which they rested. Her toes curled, too, inside her boots. Her head dropped forward, and she looked down through the curtain of her red curls at the mess she’d made. Black ink oozed onto the edge of her palm, pooling and staining everything it touched.

A rough hand wrapped around her throat and jaw and drew her head up. Cullen’s eyes were darker when they met hers again. Hungrier. His lips passed over hers, brushed over them, their mouths open. Her elbows and knees quivered at the phantom contact. His lips continued to skim her skin, and his eyes continued to smolder. He swatted her again. Her eyes rolled shut, and his grip tightened.

“Do not chastise me,” he said.

Even with the heat of his breath on her cheek and the stinging handprint on her ass, she said in a heady voice, “Or what?”

Belle had never seen Cullen play the archer, but he made a bow of her then. With the slightest pressure from his hand, he arched her neck and her back, stringing her tight. Heat bloomed low within her, and she felt the slick of her lust accumulating against the flesh between her legs. He towered over her like this, a hero and a demigod in her open eyes. An archer of great esteem and renown. His rough, open palm loosed arrow after arrow of pleasure through her bowed body with each explosive smack. Though she had never seen him play the archer, his skill was unmatched.

He stole her breath with the clutch of his hand and with the seal of his mouth. He came down from the tower of his size with his lips already parted. He kissed her as if to consume her, as if his teeth and his tongue and his lips and each smack of his free hand would allow his greed to engulf her body entire. His cock filled and hardened against her hip, and with every swat of his hand and stroke of his tongue she needed it more. She would have fallen if she reached for it, if she offered him any small gesture of relief. The conjunctive work of their hands and her weak knees was the only thing keeping her upright.

Cullen’s lips parted from hers, and she opened her eyes to watch him linger above her. His arm wrapped around her waist and his callused fingers pushed up under her tunic with no amount of delicacy. He untied the front of her pants, every tug of the laces coarse and careless. His lips remained poised just shy of her own, tantalizing her and rendering her weak efforts to reach them futile and frustrating. He kept her neck and back bowed when he jerked her pants down over her ass with two swift pulls.

The warmth of the room was lost to Belle’s bared and tender skin. The heat of Cullen’s palmprint coupled with the heat between her thighs only served to make the cool air cooler. She tried to spread her legs, to invite him inside her, but the rumpled pants around her thighs kept them locked together.

She felt every ridge on his hand when he spanked her again. The sensation and sound were different. The sting and the pleasure that followed were greater, and the sound was so much louder. Belle whimpered in answer. She clamped her teeth shut to bite back the plea clawing at the base of her curved throat.
Cullen’s lips were still so close when he said, “Open your mouth.”

Belle obeyed. Her jaw dropped open with the natural tension in her muscles and tendons. With little repositioning, Cullen’s middle finger rasped along her lower lip. A primitive sound rumbled in his chest. She couldn’t react, couldn’t stand the teasing. All at once, it seemed more than an adequate brand of punishment.

That rugged finger ran along her lips twice more, drawing her mouth open further and further with each pass. When he slipped between her teeth and over her tongue, she mewled. “Good girl,” he said as she closed her lips around the digit. She massaged him with her tongue, and he pushed deeper. “Good girl,” he said again, and smacked her ass once more. She made an unholy sound in answer. She might have cried from the pressure building inside her if it hadn’t felt so goddamn good.

Cullen ran his hand across her ass, and she felt the rawness of her skin afresh. Belle felt something against her hip while she sucked at his finger. She was so desperate to feel him within her in any way she could manage, she almost didn’t notice when he unlaced his pants. Before his length could touch her, he moved behind her.

His lips were on her ear when he slipped inside her. She groaned over his finger, and he said, “Oh Maker,” and then he was moving within her. He took his soaked finger from her mouth. She would have whined at the loss, but when he glided between her legs to work in tiny circles over her clit, the feeling robbed her of her voice.

Back no longer bowed, Belle reached over her shoulder to grab Cullen’s hair. She held his lips, tongue, and teeth to her neck by her handful of his curls. Air hissed in through his nose every time he bit her, and they grunted feral, noisy grunts as he fucked her. His thrusts were purposeful and severe, and with her legs closed, she could feel everything. His left hand clamped down on her hip to keep her where he wanted her, a bruising strength in his grip.

They grew louder and more savage with every thrust, both covered in slick and saliva, both nearing the peak of their pleasure. Belle wondered what would happen if someone were to walk in through the door she left unlocked. They would see their commander with his pants below his ass fucking their ambassador’s lady until she couldn’t see straight. They would see the flex of his muscles and the beautiful brutality of his movements. They would see her made a cavewoman, primordial and screaming. The thought of it joined with the sensation of him to plunge her into her undoing. She shook with the force of lightning striking every nerve ending in her body and cried out like thunder toward the valley just outside his slit of a window. Only a moment after, Cullen roared as he came, cock pulsing inside her, lips flush with her skin.

They panted and huffed together. Cullen’s forehead rested in the crook of her neck while they were slowly made human again. Belle watched the candlelight flicker against the stone walls as her vision widened from the tunnel made by her orgasm. He let out a heavy sigh.

“I am sorry,” he said.

“Me too.” She paused, the weight of the moment bearing down heavier than his head on her shoulders. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

“More than you know,” said Belle.

“No.” Cullen kissed her spine and kissed the spot behind her ear. “I do know. I do.”
“You do?”

“I do.”

Belle sighed, grateful beyond measure. “Good.”

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Chapter End Notes

Woohoo! Stubborn asses have make-up sex!!! ^_~

I bet it would have taken FOR. EV. ER. for Cullen to lose so much that he lost all that armor and THEN his clothes. FOR-FUCKING-EVER! I figured he had to have been at least a little drunk to let himself get so caught up.

Also, I hope I'm not the only one who gets this irrational, simmering anger after an unresolved argument. It's so obnoxious, but it just won't go away! I bet you can relate, fair reader. I bet you can relate.

Thanks again for sticking with me! <3
The Second End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was in his arms when it happened.

Cullen had learned long before then that Belle could not be forced to remain in any position that seemed natural to him. The morning after they made their apologies—twice—they lay in his bed, and she’d made a bramble of their bodies. Her legs were over and under his, serpentlike and twisted around his thigh and his calf down to her ankles. Her left arm was curled against his side, and her right hand rested on his chest. It did not quite rest, however. No part of her ever rested. Her fingers fidgeted in tiny movements, each one alternating at irregular intervals between slight pressure against his skin and brief rakes through the fine hairs on his chest.

“I forgot to ask, did you get my note yesterday?”

“The torn request for troops coated in breadcrumbs?”

Belle laughed in a lazy way. A kind of “hm-hm hmm.” “Yeah, that one,” she said. Her red curls were spirals as relaxed and lazy as that laugh, and they rested on her skin light as air. The gilt ribbons of sunlight on her hair and her flesh made her gleam and flare, blinding as magic. Difficult to see. Impossible to look away.

“I did.” Cullen brushed those curls from her face with his fingertips. Her smile materialized in the swell on the horizon of her cheek. “I sent the instructions yesterday afternoon.”

“Kay cool.” Her way of expressing simultaneous acknowledgment and gratitude.

Belle’s fingers bent in an odd pattern, pressing her nails into his skin. It was only just then that he noticed something strange. Her long nails that had, since the day she fell into Thedas, borne a variety of vibrant and shimmering colors at every glance were bare. The whiter tips were stained in shades of yellow, not unlike the purple-blue fingertips of weavers and clothmakers, though he had never seen her wear a shimmering yellow.

Cullen took her hand, propping the naked little things against his forefinger. The curved edges tickled the spaces between his knuckles. “I’d grown accustomed to the colors,” he said.

Belle first grunted in question, then she grunted in displeasure. “I ran out. Fucking sucks, but I knew it would happen eventually. I know they look gross, but the yellow parts will grow out.”

“They do not look ’gross.’” He rotated her hand in the sunlight. “Although, I rather miss the way they sparkled.”

Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea always looked bigger when she turned her head up to face him. They unnerved him like that, as though she could see straight into his heart to know the truth of him. A smile hung on her lips. “You miss the way they sparkled? You like sparkly things?”

Blood rushed up his neck and cheeks at her amusement. “I—They are meant to catch the eye, aren’t they? It’s not so dissimilar to a warrior’s need to keep his armor clean. Anyone will tell you that it’s necessary to stop it rusting or catching, but no knight wants to be caught in dingy armor. It’s… unbecoming.”
Belle’s pointed canines appeared with her puff of a laugh. “Unbecoming, huh? I like that you like sparkly things, just so we’re clear. Takes a man to admit he likes things pretty, like how Bull got all giddy when Max gave him that pink axe. He won’t even use it, just leaves it hanging on his wall.” She laughed again.

Forehead and nose and cheeks and lips—all were wanting for a kiss. Cullen leaned down to press one above her quirked eyebrow. She closed her eyes and hummed. “I do like pretty things,” he said. “And you are beautiful.” She hummed again.

A deafening explosion fractured the air. Belle screamed, and Cullen rolled her beneath him to shield her from the source of the tumult. Where there were panes of glass in his windows, they rattled and shook until he was certain they would shatter. His ears popped, and the concussion of the blast blinded him for a moment.

When his eyes refocused, the world was cast in a sickly and familiar green glow. Dread washed over him, sending a vile tingle down his spine. He cursed the foolishness that rended his armor from his possession.

Beneath him, Belle’s eyes gaped. “What the f—The fuck?” Her voice was low and distant, though it might have been dulled by the ringing in his ears. “The fuck was that?”

She did not wait for him to answer. Her touch had none of its earlier delicacy when she shoved him off. Cullen’s tunic billowed about her bare backside as she rolled off the bed to stand. There was no thud or creak when Belle’s feet hit the floorboards. His impaired ears perceived only the laden sounds of her bewildered breaths as her eyes darted about in the queer light. A look of recognition passed over her face. “What just happened?” she whispered. Louder, she asked a second time. “What just happened?”

Again, she did not wait for him to answer. “Where the f—” Belle hunched, head whipping from side to side. “Where the fuck are my p—Ah.” She straightened with her breeches in hand, hunching again to scramble into them.

Only then did Cullen realize that he had not moved. He lay naked on his stomach, propped up on his elbow. By the time he regained enough sense to begin dressing himself, Belle’s bootless feet were tapping down the rungs of his godforsaken ladder. They slapped the stone floor once when she landed and five more times before his door yawned open. Silence overtook his tower once more, save for the muffled sound of his tunic rushing past his ears.

“What the hell?” said Belle beneath his window. He hurried down the godforsaken ladder, barefoot in his own right, and flung open the door.

Belle’s face was glazed over with horror, staring at the source of the light. The source Cullen could not bring himself to admit he already knew. All of Skyhold sat frozen, washed in the green glare. The snowy mountains were enameled in veridium and jade from their narrow peaks to the wide belly of their valley below.

“What the hell is that?” Belle pointed, but Cullen did not look. He looked, instead, at her. There was an intensity to her sudden focus on him that drove an ache into his heart.

“The Breach.”

“That’s the Breach? That’s the Breach everyone talked about? The Breach Max closed? That’s the Breach?” She repeated the word enough times that it began to sound wrong.
“Corypheus is desperate. He must have reopened it.”

Belle blinked hard and shook her head, setting her lazy curls to trembling. He supposed they could no longer be lazy, vexed as she was then. “Reopened it? What the fu—What? What the fuck? How do w—What—I—”

“Max is the only one who can close it. Corypheus knows that.”

“Max,” she said. She looked not at Cullen, but through him.

“It nearly killed him last time, and he had a hundred mages at his back. But the mark would have killed him first had he not—”

“Max!” Belle spun on her heel and sprinted toward the rotunda. Cullen had never seen her full stride. Her long legs extended in long steps as a hart through an open field. He gave chase, and caught up with her when her feet skittered long enough for her to open the door.

Cullen followed her through the rotunda. Solas was not at his scaffolding where he could oft be found, though his brush sat atop an open jar of paint. The ravens high in the rookery squawked and cawed in their usual manner, unperturbed by the clamorous gait of the pair of interlopers. Few people were present in the spiraled tower at that time of morning, but Cullen heard their murmurs. Talk of the Breach and a panic and the end of the world echoed like sighs against the rounded walls as he followed Belle through the doors into the main hall. The second end of the world.

Several nobles stood in the vast room. Their rapt attention was fixed on the green light leaking through stained glass windows depicting Max’s exploits in exaggerated and glorified detail. One or two people shifted to regard the Inquisition’s Commander sprinting behind the Ambassador’s lady. They watched Belle run, unbound breasts covered only by a man’s tunic—his tunic—and Cullen following, barefoot and unarmed. Had the Breach not reopened only moments before, he imagined their appearance would have caused quite the stir.

“Max!” said Belle as she ran toward the lower entry to the Inquisitor’s quarters. “Max!” She tried the door when they reached it, but it was locked. She called his name twice more while she hit the wood, first with an open hand, then with the side of her closed fist. “Max, it’s me. Open the door.”

Cullen was preparing to force entry for reasons he did not quite understand when a quiet click sounded from inside. Again, Belle did not wait. She barged in, closing the door so fast she nearly caught Cullen’s ankle against the frame.

Josephine stood in the stairwell before them. She wore a man’s tunic, like Belle, and her waist-long and jet black hair surrounded her in thick waves. She had tears in her eyes. “It’s killing him again,” she said. “The mark will kill him.”

“But it’s not killing me,” said Max from somewhere above them. A loud crack reverberated from that somewhere, sending a ripple through the air that reeked of magic. The insipid ozone scent nauseated Cullen, as did Max’s pained yelp. “It just hurts. A lot.”

Belle turned to Cullen, purpose coating her expression. “Go find Solas.”

Cullen was torn. He looked up toward where Max likely lay dying and realized there was nothing he could do for his friend other than what was being asked of him. He nodded, opened the door, and left the stairwell.

It took less time to find Solas than Cullen expected. He was not in the rotunda. Of that much, Cullen was certain. He knew the elf to linger in one of several places. He might have been in the old library
under the main hall or in the healers’ rooms or in the garden. The lower library seemed unlikely just then, the large shockwave caused by the Breach having drawn almost everyone outside. Cullen decided to exit the large doors and head for the healers’ rooms. Someone might have suffered an injury as a result of the blast.

He stopped halfway down the first flight of stairs. Solas stood on the landing with his arms behind his back, one hand holding the other wrist. It was a dignified stance that seemed out of place among the terrified onlookers strewn about Skyhold with their hands over their mouths or clenched at their sides or tangled in their hair. At the center of the hysteria, Solas stood enveloped in an eerie calm and, in closer proximity, with an almost disappointed look on his face.

“Corypheus appears to have run out of options,” he said and gestured to the Breach. “The last efforts of a desperate, thoughtless man.”

Cullen did not have the luxury of time to dissect the unusual statement. “The mark has become active again.”

“In what way?”

“In the same way it was when the Breach was first opened.”

Solas’s look of disappointment morphed into one of concern. His brows furrowed. “The same way?”

“I did not see it, but that is what I was told.”

“Then I shall see for myself.”

Solas followed Cullen back through the main hall, back through the distracted nobility, back through the door to Max’s quarters. There was no crackling commotion, as Cullen expected. Rather, an uncomfortable and ominous quiet had settled in the air in his brief absence. As he ascended the stairs, Belle’s voice chimed in a soft tune. The words were unintelligible until he reached the top.

“Come, Josephine, on my flying machine, going up she goes, up she goes.” Belle sat beside Josephine in matching chairs along the wall near the balcony window. Josephine was dressed in her own clothing, and she pinned her hair into place and sniffled a bit as Belle rubbed her back. Belle slouched in her seat, her free arm squeezed between her breasts and her thighs. She glanced up at Cullen and continued to sing.

“Balance yourself like a bird on a beam in the air she goes. There she goes. Up, up a little bit higher. Oh my. The moon is on fire. Come, Josephine, on my flying machine, going up. All on. Goodbye.”

Max sat at the edge of his bed. With both hands, he buttoned the thin coat he preferred to wear under his robes. His left hand still glowed, though it throbbed in lieu of flashing. The murderous crackling had become little more than a dull and occasional pop. Solas cast a look tinged with mild irritation at Cullen and moved to examine Max’s hand.

“It calmed,” said Max. He stood and walked to his armor stand before Solas could reach him. “I believe,” he said as he fitted his arms into the black and silver fabric, “that it only—how did you put it a moment ago?” His eyes flicked to Belle almost in passing. “‘Freaks out?’ I believe it only freaks out within the first few moments of the Breach’s opening, if the Breach is opened properly. Although —” He paused to focus on a tricky toggle. “I don’t see how it could ever really be opened properly. Perhaps it would be better to say that it was not opened accidentally this time. Would I be correct in that assumption?”

“You would,” said Solas, arms crossed once more behind his back. A dutiful soldier. Or a man who
fell, as Cullen did, into formality in his most uncertain moments.

“Ah.”

Cullen crossed over to Belle. Her hand continued to sweep back and forth and up and down Josephine’s back, though Josephine appeared uncomfirted by the gesture. She was beyond consolation, staring at her beloved with mourning already coating her eyes in thick layer of unshed tears.

“P told me,” said Belle, not looking at Cullen, or at anything really. “He said last time the Breach opened—when you found him—he remembered hearing people talking about the mark. They kept saying not to worry about the murderer, his own hand would kill him soon enough. I just figured…” Her words trailed off past the small shake of her head.

Soft boots meant for subtler people clambered up the stairs. Wood heeled shoes accompanied them at a slower and more balanced pace. Sera’s unkempt blonde hair fluttered about her crazed face. She was already dressed for battle, fitted leathers and mismatched metals snug on her lithe figure. Her bow and quiver, full of ill-assorted arrows, hung in their rightful places on her back. Every pocket of the odd belt around her hips was all but overflowing with small jars and various pointy knickknacks.

Vivienne appeared next. She was Sera’s antipode, but she was also dressed for war. Her burgundy robe corseted in close around her waist. A centuries-old skull topped her unnerving staff, and it swayed over her head with the measure of her hips. A mild but disdainful expression passed across her face when she peered down at Sera.

“Right, we going?” said Sera, crossing her arms.

“What our resident ragamuffin means to say,” said Vivienne, “is that we are ready to leave when you are, my dear. All of us.”

“What I mean to say is what I said. Cassandra’s with Beardy and Dennett, getting all the horses ready. You’re up here, getting you ready, yeah?”

“Yes,” said Max. He squared his heel in the boot he finished pulling on by tapping it against his opposite toe. “Everyone’s in the courtyard?”

Vivienne nodded. “All but Solas. What luck that we should find him here.” The mages exchanged pointed looks that spoke in volumes beyond Cullen’s range of hearing.

“Allow me a moment to fetch my staff,” said Solas.

“I took the liberty of having it brought down to your horse.”

“You are too kind.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Enough,” said Max. “Let’s be on our way. I’d like to make it to the Temple before nightfall.”

Cullen shook himself from the state of confusion he had fallen into while observing the tense scene. “Wait. You cannot go now. Our troops are still returning from the Arbor Wilds. They are miles away. Too far to meet you before you encounter Corypheus.”

“I can’t wait for them. I know where Corypheus is right now. I know he’s desperate because I know he’s thrown out all of the plans Samson told you he’d made. I know how to kill him. His forces have
been whittled down next to nothing. We have to strike now, before he manages to expand the Breach and destroy Thedas.”

Max was right. Cullen knew Max was right. Before anyone could utter another word, Max gently pulled Josephine to her feet. He surrounded her face in his hands, and she calmed under his touch. Her trained dignity and grace returned to her in a wave.

“You and Belle start preparing the invitations for our victory celebration,” said Max. The two women chuffed. “I don’t want you fretting about getting them out in time when I come back. Alright?”

Josephine nodded. Max wrapped her up in his arms, and they shared inaudible whispers encapsulating their affections. He kissed her, and she clung to him. When their bodies parted, Josephine looked as if Max had taken the air with him.

Everyone followed Max back through the door of his quarters, back through the distracted nobility, back through the main hall. Leliana waited in the courtyard with the rest of the inner circle and a tiny retinue of scouts. They were to accompany the Inquisitor to the Temple and keep a safe enough distance to allow them to send word back to Skyhold. Cullen pondered what any of those left behind might do if the word sent was anything but “victory.”

Strained jokes made their way from Varric to Bull to Dorian to Sera and back. Cole understood, but did not laugh. Vivienne and Solas stared daggers at one another, and both lobbed their suspicious regard at Morrigan. Cassandra spoke to Leliana and Blackwall, each of the three epitomizing the severity of those to whom death had made itself certain. A reality. A fact. Cullen would have spoken in such a manner had anyone engaged him in conversation in that moment.

He was helpless. No one engaged him in conversation. His opinions and advice were not sought by anyone. He would have volunteered to go with them, to take up arms alongside them. To be a blunt instrument was the sole skill he could proffer. He would be rebuffed, however, denied the opportunity to fight and to protect. Instead, all he did was watch. He watched them mount their horses. He watched Josephine wave a hopeful little wave. He watched Max lead the way as the group rode out of the portcullis.

Belle called out after them to be safe. Her voice left her throat, forceful as it had ever been, despite the fix of her unblinking eyes on the Breach. The viridescent vortex glinted in those open eyes, reflecting out like hypnosis. It vanished with a single blink. Unease painted her features, but she turned to Josephine, linked their arms, and said, “Come on. I have a bra to put on, and then we have a list to make.” Leliana put a hand on Josephine’s back, and the women turned to reenter the main hall.

Cullen watched them go as well. He watched their slow pace as they marched up the stairs. He watched Belle nudge Josephine’s shoulder and Leliana squeeze Josephine’s side. He watched Belle’s furtive glance at the Breach. He watched her darken at the sight.

There he remained, alone in the vacant courtyard. Helpless in every way a man could be helpless. Useless in every way a man could be useless. The culmination of a year-long war would take place in a matter of hours, and he was not permitted to fight. His friends and his love were distressed, and he was unable to offer them even a modicum of relief. The notion sent an ache to his head and a weariness to his body that he wished were unfamiliar.

But there were still troops returning from the Arbor Wilds, still orders to be given, still a war to be won. Cullen levelled his posture, breathed deep the fresh and pernicious air, and set about collecting his armor from whatever final resting place it secured overnight. There was no sense maintaining his
vulnerability any longer. Hours passed at incorrect speeds. Cullen found himself staring not at his paperwork, but at his windows. The Breach remained open, no matter how hard he willed it to close. Every moment it spun in the sky like a muculent whirlpool, he wondered if Max had reached the Temple of Sacred Ashes. He wondered if the fight had begun and who was winning. He wondered if Max was still alive, if any of his friends were still alive. The mesmeric green glow flooded his vision and his thoughts, making it impossible to keep working.

He went to the Chantry to pray. Prayer helped in the most dire times. It used to help in the most dire times. “Though all before me is shadow, yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker’s Light, and nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.” The words did not bring him the comfort or clarity for which he hoped, for which he prayed. Instead, they rang morbid bells in his ears as prayers over the charred residue of the dead. That scent seeped into his mind. He grimaced and stood, looking to the statue of the Blessed Andraste as though she would come to life to provide him some explanation for his feelings. She did not come to life. She stood fast, arms outstretched, stone-faced and serene. Cullen scoffed.

A final option existed to quell his restless thoughts. Belle’s chaotic stillness often calmed the tremulousness within him. They hadn’t the chance to speak before she whisked Josephine away, and Belle’s demeanor in doing so left him ill at ease.

As he made his way to her tower, he noted the queer silence in Skyhold. The uncomfortable hush joined with the omnipresent green glow, nightmarelike. He put his hand on the pommel of his sword and gripped it. It was his sword, and he knew it was his sword. It stayed his sword all the way to Belle’s tower door.

It was dark in her office. She sat at her desk on a cushionless chair, scribbling away by firelight. She had stuffed every cover and cushion into every crack and crevice, impeding any attempt by the sallow green light to enter.

“I can’t look at it,” said Belle without stopping her quill. “It just reminds me.” She looked up at him. “Sorry. I can only imagine what it reminds you of. It’s selfish of me to…” She shut her mouth and opened it again, only to snap it closed. Finally, she said, “I just feel bad.”

Cullen approached her desk. “I understand. Though you’re not being selfish by refusing to look at it. In truth, I’m grateful for its absence in here. I cannot stop worrying while it hangs in the sky. It pains me not to be there.”

“It doesn’t pain me that you’re not there.” Belle finally set down her quill to focus on him. In the dim room, the ink stain they made the previous night on the side of her left hand was barely visible. “You know, I’ve never seen Corypheus. I have no idea what this enigma of an enemy even looks like. But I have seen Samson. And I’ve seen Red Templars. And I’ve heard the way people—the way Max describes Corypheus. I’m sorry, but I’m completely okay with you not being anywhere near that fucking psycho.”

Cullen’s brow furrowed. “Even if that means Max dies? That all of our friends die?”

“If they died, it wouldn’t be because you weren’t there. But if you died it would be because you were. Max and Cassandra and Sera and everyone, they’re really good at what they do. They know their shit. I have one hundred percent faith that they’re coming back from this. All alive. But if they didn’t? What if you were there and none of you did? Who keeps the fight alive then, huh? Not me, Leliana, and Josephine. Not by ourselves. I know you don’t like it, but you’re needed here. Not just
by me, either.”

Belle picked up her quill and resumed her writing. Cullen stood in stunned silence, staring into the dark. Her lack of sentimentality and her brutally practical analysis were not things to which he had borne witness in such grim situations. She was curt and emotionless, and it left a feeling of disquiet in him. Worse, she was right. Any argument against her point would have made him seem mawkish or feeble.

The scrape of the nib against the parchment paused again. “I’m sorry,” she said. Her tone was softer, the methodical terseness tamped down below the surface. “I’m used to versions of this conversation in different contexts. No fate of the world shit but…Sorry. I have a tendency to disassociate my internal emotions from my external ones in periods of crisis. It’s something sort of trained into me. I was a first responder for a long time, you know, and I always had to be the calm one. Then I became a lawyer and I had to be Zen master f**king practical in front of clients whenever they were having some problem. I’ve had to be prepared to deal with the worst possible outcomes of every scenario for years. Predict, prepare, preempt. I just—I dunno—I just sort of shut off the scared part of me that wants to curl up into a ball and cry and the angry part of me that wants to go kick this Corypheus guy square in the gooch.”

Cullen went silent again. This silence, however, was not an uncomfortable one. Rather, his silence was one of envy. “I wish I were capable of that,” he said.

Belle’s quill nib recommenced it’s scratching. “Yeah, well, compartmentalization’s not always all it’s cracked up to be. When the walls crumble—and they eventually do—they crumble pretty f**king catastrophically.”

He took his hand from the pommel of his sword and put it on her back. She sighed, but the tail of her quill never stopped fluttering over the parchment. He watched her write for a time.

The Inquisition humbly requests the honor of your presence…Her handwriting was not quite as terrible as she always claimed it to be. Some people in Thedas could neither read nor write. That she had the ability to spell, even in impossibly tiny and jagged lettering, was good enough.

“What is a ‘gooch?’” he said after a moment. “I do not remember that part of the body in my anatomical education.”

A bark of a laugh lunged from her throat, shattering her stoic façade. Cullen flinched at her startling gaiety. Belle’s eyes were closed, her nose scrunched as she giggled and rocked in her stiff chair. His heart lightened.

Then the room lightened. A door opened, letting the snow reflected moonlight pour into the room. The light streaming in was different than it was when Cullen was outside only minutes ago. It was no longer green. Pale blue and silvery white, it beamed in onto Belle’s face to make her lustrous.

The scout who had flung open the door beamed as well. A fool grin spread his mouth. “Commander, Lady Dolan,” he said. “The battle is over! The Inquisitor has sealed the Breach! Corypheus is dead!”

Cullen could fully engage in revelry only among those he trusted with his life. It stood to reason, in light of the bone-chilling theft of his every article of clothing just two weeks prior, that he could not trust his closest friends not to attempt to pilfer his attire a second time should he allow himself to become quite so inebriated. Thus, he could not fully engage in the official revelries of the Inquisition’s victory over Corypheus. He laughed and celebrated, but he did so while taking measured sips of his ale.
The Inquisition hosted the real, but unofficial, celebration of the victory on the night of Max’s return with most of his party. Only Solas did not accompany them. Not because he died in the battle, but because he fled after the destruction of Corypheus’s orb. Leliana tasked her network of spies with locating either the man or his reason for leaving, though they had thus far returned emptyhanded. The elf’s murals stained Skyhold’s rotunda walls, doomed to remain unfinished evidence of his surreptitious betrayal. Max’s troubled demeanor washed over him several times that night, and on countless occasions since that night.

This night, however, Max smiled and laughed and drank too much. He gave and received dozens of slaps on the back and shakes of the hand. He was joyful. Joyful on the surface, at the very least.

Cullen’s enjoyment of the evening was tempered by Belle’s absence from his side. She spent the majority of the reception seeing to this arrangement or that platter or the other cask of ale or wine that had been misplaced. When not consumed by the operation, she was forced, alongside Josephine, to keep the visiting nobility company and stroke their inflated egos. The sole benefit to her duties, in Cullen’s view, was that most of the nobles were so preoccupied accepting their unearned gratitude that they did not have time to harass him. He did not miss the manner of the attention he had received at the Winter Palace. He was watching Belle, full and undrunk glass of wine in her hand, when someone nudged his side.

“You hear me, Curly?” said Varric with a wry smile. “Or are you so smitten that your ears have stopped working?”

“Perhaps it is simply that I don’t wish to answer whatever question you just asked me.” Cullen let a kernel of his mirth show in a mild smirk.

“Let me ask again, then, and we’ll just see which one it is. Now that the war’s over, what’s next for you and our fair Counselor?” The dwarf swung his arm in Belle’s direction. Cullen looked at her again, and the sensation of falling swooped through his stomach. She word her plum colored dress that night.

“It is difficult to say. There is still work to be done, but now that Corypheus has been defeated, perhaps she’ll want to focus some of her attention on finding a way for her and her brother to return to their world.” It occurred to him that he had never asked her what she wanted to do when the worst was over. It was possible that she would want to leave Skyhold to make a life for herself. That she would want to leave him.

Belle turned her head and smiled, and he thought she might have heard him. She set a hand on the arm of the Fereldan man to whom she was speaking and said something. The man grinned and bowed his head to her, an action she mirrored with calculated femininity. She came toward Cullen and Varric then, and the heart she made beat for her pounded in Cullen’s chest.

“Are you two talking shit?” she said. Joviality danced about in her hazel eyes.

Varric chuckled. “I was just asking Curly, here, what his plans were for you two now that the war’s over.”

“And I was just answering that you might want to find a way for you and Spencer to return home.”

Belle stuck out her tongue and said, “Blah,” and she gave a flippant wave of her hand. “That’s not realistic. Then again, neither was our showing up here in the first place. In any case, no one knows anything about it, so I’m not going to concern myself with it. And you.” She poked Varric in his bicep. “You don’t go stirring the pot. I don’t need your help getting my hooks in our handsome Commander.”
The dwarf chuckled again. “No, I don’t imagine you do. Besides, it looks like the hooks are already in pretty deep.”

Heat suffused up Cullen’s neck and cheeks and over his ears. He put a hand on the back of his neck. Belle laughed. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have to go mingle.” She widened her eyes and fluttered her fingers around her glass before walking away.

She was still mingling by the time most everyone retired for the evening. Cullen attempted to stay until she was prepared to leave, but elected to return to his tower upon the realization that she may very well be stuck in the main hall until dawn. He stole away while some Orlesian woman in a garish red mask yammered at her.

Cullen stripped away his armor first, electing to leave it in his office rather than his quarters. When he finished, he noticed a fresh stack of papers on his desk. The Void taken scouts and soldiers seemed prepared to flood him with requests and reports at all hours of the day and night. They must have known of his compulsion to read through everything before he could sleep. He sat at his desk, and began to sift through the missives.

He finished reading the first six documents in stride. He was squinting at the seventh, feeling a headache chipping its way into his temple, when his door opened. “Maker’s breath,” he said without looking. “If you’ve brought me something else to read I swear I’ll—”

“Oh, only me,” said Belle. She closed the door behind her and locked it. A thrill jumped up his spine.

“Only you,” said Cullen. She could not fathom the depth of his reply. It was only her. In all the world, in any world, it was only her.

She came to him like a dream, like gossamer. The sound of her shoes dropping to the stone floor was ancient and remote. An echo of something foretold. Prophetic. Each snap of her unfastening corset knocked at the door to his mind to remind him to open and let her in. The look in her eyes reminded that she was already inside. She had made a home for herself in every room and corridor.

Belle’s plum colored dress rose around her calves and around her thighs as she straddled him. Her seduction was silent and subtle, in her eyes and in the gentle caress of her fingertips on his jaw. She kissed him. Blood roared in his ears and in his cock. The heat of her core rested against him, two thin layers of cloth inhibiting their joining. She wrapped her arms around his neck, wound her fingers in his hair, opened his mouth with her own. Cullen snared her waist, tugging her against him until her body was an extension of his own.

She rolled her hips. The ecstatic friction of her movement wrested a groan from him that she met with a whimper. She did it again. And again. She did it until they were all but sobbing into each other’s mouths, until they could no longer breathe. He pulled his lips from hers, pulled his cock free of his breeches, pulled her smallclothes to the side. Into his ear, she sighed a sigh that was half wind and half fire as she slid down onto him. He burrowed his fingers into her sides and his nose into her hair. They were swans, necks twisted round one another.

Cullen and Belle rocked together. His chair creaked in time with them. The creaks grew louder as the pair grew louder. One of Belle’s hands left Cullen’s hair and slapped onto the back of the overburdened seat. Her unpainted fingernails scraped at his scalp. Her rapid and heavy breaths splashed across his ear and neck, and he brushed aside her hair to kiss and bite her. She made a series of weak little sounds, rutting against him harder and faster. Her breaths no longer splashed across his ear and neck. She met her end all around him, crying out through parted lips and gritted teeth. Cullen followed her over the edge as a disciple follows his master. He growled as he came deep inside her. Her fingers squeezed and clutched at him, and he growled again as the second spasm took him.
Belle’s thighs trembled against his hips. She and Cullen panted, starved for air and for each other. They stayed like that for several minutes before either of them could speak. Her breathing slowed until she might have been asleep astride him, but her fingers kept moving. They fidgeted in his hair, alternating, as was their way, between tiny pressure and raking across his scalp. Her other arm draped down his back and clung to him. He clung to her as well.

“I don’t want to go back,” she said, her voice muffled by his skin. “I don’t want to go back because I don’t want to lose you. You’re here, so I’m here.”

“I don’t want to lose you either,” said Cullen. “I cannot lose you.”

“Okay.”

“Only you,” he said. “Only you.”

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Chapter End Notes

My God, you guys. My GAHD! I’m so sorry for the huge space between updates, but we went through a full-strength upheaval this past couple months. I quit my job, my husband and I packed up and moved from Orange County to Washington, and now I’m looking for new work up here. It's been crazy! Exciting, but fucking crazy.

The war’s over, but this story isn't. We've got miles to go before we sleep. Miles and miles to go before we sleep. ^_~

Love you all! Thanks for your continued support!!!
A person might have been persuaded to believe that when the Inquisition defeated Corypheus, there would be less work. This person might have been persuaded by those around them, or they might have persuaded themselves. This person would never really know who had been quite so convincing.

Belle might have been this person. She’d been certain that there would be less work dropped onto her desk in the month following Corypheus’s defeat. If anything, she thought the workload might be about the same. It might break even, at best. Never in her wildest speculations did she imagine that her workload would nearly double.

Since Max had returned victorious from the Temple of Sacred Ashes, requests and demands from the Thedosian nobility began flooding into Belle’s office, piling higher and higher every day. And she only got half of them. Nobles from Rivain to Tevinter to the Anderfells began pressing the Inquisition for its involvement or abstention in matters to the north, and every arranged marriage on the entire continent seemed to require some official decree or sanction to sustain its validity. So much work hit Belle’s desk that it was becoming difficult to see even an inch of the dark wood grain that held it all up.

Belle was not the only one for whom the work continued to multiply. Max was still needed all over Orlais and Ferelden, as rifts continued to open and darkspawn began popping up in both expected and unexpected places. Belle never really garnered a full understanding of darkspawn, only the gist that they were unnatural and bad, like sentient zombies. Within several weeks of his victory, Max was already on his way to someplace called “the Deep Roads” to help investigate the cause of a number of unusual earthquakes. He wasn’t a geologist, and he didn’t even know what tectonic plates were—not that Belle was such an expert, but, having lived in Southern California her entire life, she knew a thing or two—so she couldn’t understand why he, of all people, just had to be there.

Leliana had been elected Divine, which Belle surmised was the Thedosian pope, but she still had her fingers in every kind of pie under the sun while her transition was underway. When it came to shifts in social issues, mysterious deaths, or colossal religious reform, one needed look no further for a source than Leliana, or Divine Victoria, as she was to be called. Josephine was just as busy as Belle, dealing with the other half of the deluge of requests and demands. Cassandra embarked on a furious letter-writing campaign to rebuild her order of not-Templars-but-kind-of, the Seekers of Truth. Sera flitted in and out of Skyhold like a devious hummingbird with all her Red Jenny business, occasionally dragging Dagna along with her. Varric turned down bi-weekly requests to return to Kirkwall, and from what little Belle knew of the place, she couldn’t blame him. Cullen went to Edgehall to help the locals establish a new city guard in the wake of a massive pseudo-political upheaval.

The Arl of Edgehall had died, thereafter leaving several interested parties to engage in about ten or twelve years’ worth of infighting and shenanigans that left the Edgelhall Arling without a clear Arl. Hundreds of people died, walls rose and fell, and orphans were misappropriated. In the end, all it took to settle the region was a little elbow grease from Belle, Josie, and Leliana and a series of witty, dad-joke-filled missives to and from King Alistair. A new Arl was appointed with deference to work done to aid Ferelden and the Inquisition, and everyone seemed satisfied with the choice.

Cullen only agreed to help set up the city guard in person after Max did everything short of issuing a
signed order. It should have been done by the locals, Cullen contended in his protests. They understood the needs of the people. But Max was dead set on presenting support from the Inquisition after all the organization had done to stabilize the Arling. Cullen begged Belle to accompany him before he left, and he made some good points in his pleas. There was still a little unrest in Edgehall, and it would serve everyone’s interests to have an attaché from the Inquisition visit with the new Arl while Cullen helped with the guard. Belle’s justification for staying was stronger. She had too much work to do in Skyhold. A heavy workload was Cullen’s kryptonite, his opposing element. It never failed to snuff out his resistance in a dispute.

He went to Edgehall without her, dragging his metaphorical feet the whole way. He planned to stay for ten days, though Belle persuaded him that he could stay longer if the new Guard Captain needed help after that.

Belle hadn’t convinced him to go because she wanted him gone. She wanted him near her, but she knew beyond her own desires that he needed to go for the good of the Inquisition and the people of Edgehall. They deserved a city guard trained by the best. Cullen was the best. When he left she smiled and waved him out of the portcullis, miserable as she watched him take a piece of her away. Her heart in his saddlebag. He wrote every evening so she would wake up to his letters, and she wrote every morning so he could fall asleep with hers. It was sweet and disgusting, according to Cassandra and Dorian.

Adding to Belle’s daily misery, on top of the crushing workload and the faraway boyf—partn—Cullen, her MP3 player’s battery finally gave out. It died four days after Cullen left, and Belle panicked. On a strange and silly kind of instinct, she rummaged through the months-untouched luggage encapsulating her former life, seeking her charger. School House Rock and Little Mermaid graphic tees and pair upon pair of yoga pants and denim jeans flew around the room amid her frenzy. Her charger was nowhere to be found. Not only was the micro USB cord missing, but every cord she’d packed seemed to have grown legs and meandered off. Her laptop power brick and cables were missing. Every wall and cigarette lighter plug was gone. Every tiny micro USB or USB-C cable and every miniscule adapter was lost. Belle crumpled and cried that morning. She cried for too long over the deprivation of menial things she could no longer use and could no longer have used. She returned to her duties after a brief eternity, puffy-eyed and lonely, and her paperwork swallowed her for another four days.

She was reading over the fiftieth or hundredth or seventeen billionth marriage contract to cross her desk when her door creaked open. She’d lost track of the time, and a rumble of her stomach led her to believe that someone might have brought her lunch. She flicked a glance at the door with a modicum of hope lifting her spirits only to see Jim standing in the opening. His bland face wore a bland expression of bland trepidation, and Belle’s shoulders drooped. She had come to expect nothing of import from the scout, and he had always delivered.

“He’s back?” Belle set down her quill pen and flexed her hand. She ran her thumb over the groove on the last knuckle of her ring finger in a futile attempt to smooth it away. “He didn’t say anything about coming back early.”
“N-No, my lady. I said that the Rutherfords are here. In the courtyard.”

“Rutherfords?” She overenunciated the S to the point that it sounded like a series of Zs. “Plural?”

“Yes, ma’am. The Rutherfords are here. Your brother is greeting them, since he and his men were training in the courtyard when they arrived.”

“What?” The word came out long, low, and dumb. Jim fidgeted in the doorway. “Rutherfordzzz?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Belle’s expression dipped between perplexed and worried as she stood. She walked toward Jim, knowing she could see most of the courtyard from a spot on the battlements behind him. He opened his mouth, but a flippant wave of her hand and a vague shush shut it for him. Her fingers came to rest in star shapes in a low, rough crenellation.

In the courtyard, someone stood in the way only a twenty-three-year-old, too smart for his own good or anyone else’s, easy breezy brother of hers could stand. Across from him milled a sea of golden blonde curls in varying lengths and styles in front of a two-horse wagon. Two women and a man, cloaked and beleaguered, smiled as they opened and closed their mouths at Spencer. The shorter of the women turned to a man with dark hair and the two miniature humans tucked at his sides. The man reached over to clasp arms with Spencer. Another miniature human, bigger than the other two, emerged from the golden blonde sea with a mop of curls to match his full-sized counterparts.

Belle knew their names without hearing the introductions underway below. The tallest of them was Branson, Cullen’s younger brother. From this distance, they could have been the same man. The miniature human beside him was his son, Alden, born of a mother who died in the days following his birth. The tallest woman was Cullen’s youngest sister, Rosalie. She beamed, making wide gestures at the grandiosity of Skyhold all around her. Then there was Cullen’s older sister, Mia. She smiled a polite and tepid smile, though her head swung about from time to time. Her husband, Marcus, clutched their son, Owen, who had dark hair to match his father’s. Marcus also restrained their daughter, Dawn, by her tiny hand while she attempted to run off to explore, as four-year-old little girls were wont to do.

“Shit,” said Belle under her breath. She marched back into her office, fussing with her hair. “Fuck.” She fussed with her clothes, tugging and smoothing away imagined wrinkles until the garment no longer held its natural shape. “Oh my God. Shit.” She fussed with her neck, digging her ugly, naked nails into the flesh above her high collar while she tried to think of a way out of the inevitable situation into which she was about to be forced.

“M-My lady?”

“Fuck!” She jerked. She’d forgotten Jim. There he stood, staring at the nervous wreck of a woman she’d become in less than a two minute span of silence. Her nerves of steel had gone to shit. Nerves of shit.

“He’s not here,” she said. “They’re here, and he’s not here. I don’t know them. I don’t know if they know about me. What the fuck, dude?” Her voice went whiny, and she stamped her feet. She hated herself in these states of peevish fretfulness. “I’m so bad with siblings. I’m great with parents because, well, I mean, hello? Shit. I-I’m halfway to smart and I don’t have any crazy piercings or anything, and, like, how much more can you hope for at first sight, right? But I’m, like, never as cool as the siblings. They always think I’m a nerd. Big ol’ dork. Shit! And I’m dressed all weird…” She swept her outstretched hands over herself in demonstration. “But I look okay today, right? I look okay?”
“You look l-lovely, ma’am.” The sweat on Jim’s palms became obvious with the manner in which he opened and closed his gloved hands in front of him.

“Thank you. I don’t know why I’m asking you. This is stupid. I’m being stupid. I mean, I should just go down there, right? Just go down. Just, like, introduce myself, right? Yeah. Okay.”

Without waiting for another unnecessary word from her accidental sounding board, Belle exited her office through the door she used to get to the kitchen. Cartoon tires screeched in her ears when she stopped a few feet from her tower and pivoted to run back inside. She tore a piece of parchment and set to scribbling.

_I know what I said. Come home NOW. Family’s here._

Belle rolled the paper up with the flat of her hand against the desk. She handed the small tube she’d made to Jim, who still stood dumbfounded in her doorway. “Get this to the Commander, ASAP.”

She said it like she always said it. Ey-sap. Again, she made for the courtyard. Quiet stretched its vacuous fingers from where she left Jim. “That means now. I don’t hear your fucking feet moving.”

“Ah! R-Right away my lady!” His shuffling feet left a momentary respite in their wake. Cullen would be home soon. He would be there with his family, and he would sing Belle’s praises to his siblings, and they wouldn’t think she was a big ol’ dork.

Nerves and hunger mixed in her stomach, forming noisy butterflies to nauseate her. She had a terrible look on her face while she half-trudged toward Cullen’s family. She thought of all the things she should say, all the things she shouldn’t day, and all the things she didn’t understand. She settled on a simple greeting and hoped the milieu would drum up appropriate topics of conversation.

Belle was not an inconspicuous person. Red hair and a wardrobe composed of bright colors made her less than subtle. She could not sneak up on people from anywhere in their line of sight. It came as no surprise when the Rutherfords spied her coming from halfway across the courtyard. They watched her with furtive glances, still giving their halfhearted attention to whatever Spencer was saying to kill time.

Once they deemed Belle close enough, Rosalie was the first to break with social protocol. She turned her full gaze and her full body toward Belle. Belle smiled, casual as she was able, and waved. “Hi. I’m—”

“Belle!” Rosalie almost shrieked. She squealed as she ran the few short steps toward Belle with her arms outstretched. Belle grunted at the impact of their bodies, and she laughed out of an uneasy blend of amusement and compulsion.

“Oh, it’s so nice to finally meet you,” said Rosalie, squeezing Belle’s body in a vicelike grip too firm for someone her size. “Oh, I’m so happy! Oh!” Rosalie released Belle to hold them apart at arm’s length. “You are Belle, right? I would feel so terribly stupid if you weren’t Belle. It’s just you have red hair and I could only assume—Oh, but the Nightingale—the new Divine—has red hair too, doesn’t she? Are you the Nightingale? The Divine? Oh dear, I—”

Belle laughed again, this time out of relief. “I’m Belle. You had it right the first time, don’t worry.”

Rosalie squealed again and bounced, sending her long blonde curls into the air for a split second before she wrapped Belle up once more. “Ah, Belle! It is you! Thank the Maker!” Rosalie did not sound like her brother. Her dialect, if Belle had to place it, sounded more like Sera’s.

“It’s very nice to meet you, too. You must be Rosalie, right?”
The youngest Rutherford sibling pulled away again, aghast. “Oh no, I forgot to introduce myself. Ohhh…” She fretted and shook her head. “I’m so sorry. Yes. Rosalie Rutherford.” She released Belle altogether to curtsey. She took Belle’s hand in the way someone must have told her women of high society take other women’s hands. “A pleasure to meet you, Lady Dolan.”

Belle curtseyed in answer, a gesticulation she’d never liked much. The practice of appearing both benevolent and unyielding was made exponentially more difficult by bending. “The pleasure is all mine, Lady Rutherford.”

Rosalie giggled and blushed. Though she and Cullen shared a nose and some of their expressive features, she looked most like him when she blushed. Her eyes were blue, and the rest of her face bore a delicacy foreign to the other Rutherfords. “I’m about as far from a lady as a woman can get. Nowhere near your stature. But thank you.”

It was all Belle could do not to guffaw when the young woman mentioned stature. Everything Belle had was made up to suit the needs of the Inquisition. Leliana’s suggestion that Belle’s background be left vague enough for gossip to spread was adopted without argument. Rumors flew about her being the bastard daughter of King Maric, half-sister to King Alistair. Some people assumed she was the last child of a noble house in the Free Marches, adopted by a new family to keep her safe from the murderous intent of the unknown assailant still at large in Thedas. The Inquisition did nothing to quiet this scuttlebutt, and not even the drunknest noble would forget his manners enough to ask.

Rosalie’s blue eyes widened. “Oh!” She turned and waved behind her, motioning for the rest of the family to join them. “This is my brother, Branson,” she said.

Branson leaned forward, took Belle’s hand, and kissed her knuckles. Belle pressed her lips together to stop the amalgam of emotions from flying out of her face. He also had blue eyes, and they watched her as he stood. “A pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Dolan.” His voice was like Cullen’s, but not like Cullen’s. The pitch and cadence were different, and he had the same dialect as Rosalie.

Branson ushered his son forward. There might as well have been neon lights flashing over the kid’s head, buzzing and screaming their proclamation. This was what Cullen looked like when he was nine years old.

“This is my son, Alden,” said Branson.

Alden had an endearing confidence about him. Swagger. He mimicked his father, taking up Belle’s hand and kissing it. “Pleasure to meet you, my lady.” He bowed too deep, wobbling a little to keep his feet beneath him.

Belle bit back a grin and gave him an exaggerated bow in return. “I’m very pleased to meet you, too, Ser Alden.” The boy snorted. “And you, Branson.” The father smirked. Belle looked anywhere but at that smirk.

“This is our sister, Mia,” said Rosalie.

Mia stepped to the forefront, the matriarch of all that remained of the Rutherford family. Her married surname was Welles, but her face and build ensured she could never be mistaken for anyone but a Rutherford. Despite being shorter than Rosalie, Mia was by no means a short woman. Her hair hung behind her in a braid that peeked out from behind her cloak when she curtseyed. The movement was not a practiced one. Mia held none of the puffery or bluster displayed by her siblings. She had a fire and a humor in her chestnut eyes and a boldness in her carriage that communicated to anyone looking at her that she had seen what the world had to provide to people in her position, and she was undaunted.
“I’m glad to finally meet the woman who’s stolen my brother’s heart away,” said Mia in a voice more robust than her sister’s. She had a coyness in her grin that set Belle at ease by a small margin. She swept Belle into a gentler hug than Rosalie had provided.

“I’m thrilled to meet the sister that helped shape the man whose heart I may or may not have stolen away,” said Belle. The two women shared a short laugh, and Mia backed away.

“This is my husband, Marcus.” Marcus shook Belle’s hand, and they exchanged pleasantries. “And these are my children, Owen and Dawn.”

Owen had his father’s hair and his mother’s nose. That Rutherford nose. It unified the family, leaving Marcus looking a bit out of place. The boy took her hand and bowed a little. Belle appreciated the gesture from the shyest of the young cousins.

Dawn, every inch of her the picture of her namesake, tottered up to Belle. She looked back at her father for approval. When he nodded, she said in the smallest caricature of a little girl’s voice, “It’s nice to meet you. Do you want to be friends?”

Belle melted. She let the flow of her newly liquid body drop her into a crouch, as close to eyelevel as she could get to the sweet girl. She put a hand on her chest in an embellished gesture of shock. “Friends? You want to be my friend? Me?” Dawn nodded. “Thank you! Let’s be best friends, okay?”

Dawn giggled like a golden windchime before slamming back into her father’s leg to grip it tight. Belle stood. “You’ve all met my brother, Knight-Captain Spencer Dolan.” Spencer thumped a fist on his chest and bowed, wide smile displaying his orthodontically perfect teeth. Belle remembered that smile studded with silver braces and lime green rubber bands, somehow still charming.

“Yes,” said Rosalie. A timid and predatory grin took hold of her expression, all too familiar on the faces of people looking at Spencer. “We’ve had the pleasure.”

Belle rolled her eyes to herself. “He told you that Cullen’s not here, then?”

“Yup,” said Spencer. “I told them he’s in Edgehall on Inquisition business. I also told them I’d be happy to keep them company until he gets back.” He pointed his smile at Rosalie.

Belle rolled her eyes at him then. “Thanks a heap. I just wrote to him before I came down, and he should be back sometime tomorrow. I’m sure you’re all exhausted and probably about as hungry as I am right now. If it’s okay with you, I can have someone get your things and stable your horses, and I can take you to your rooms.”

“Rooms?” asked Mia. She overenunciated the S to the point that it sounded like a series of Zs, and Belle smiled.

“Yes.”

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“This is too grand,” said Mia, neck craned as her eyes fluttered over the intricate details of the room Belle chose for her and her husband. A Bann vacated only days before, and it was rather grand, indeed. Belle placed Branson and Rosalie in somewhat smaller rooms nearby, and they seemed happy enough for the space.

“It’s just grand enough, in my opinion,” said Belle. “You came a long way, and you’re on vacation.” She sang the final word, coupling the impromptu tune with her vacation hands—loose cha-cha fists
swung in time with a couple awkward bobs of her head. Marcus snorted, and Mia looked at her like she was nuts. Owen had already taken a seat by the massive window and opened a tired book, and Dawn ran in itty bitty circles over the round rug in front of the fireplace.

Belle began to second guess her impulse to give the Rutherfords the finest the Inquisition had to offer. She’d done something like this before, and she watched an entire family shift its estimation of her from sweet to snobby. Buying a block of rooms in Las Vegas, a place Belle abhorred for nearly every reason people loved it, so her boyfriend’s family would be happy had backfired. They didn’t understand the gesture or her reason for making it. It wasn’t meant to show them that she had so much money or so much privilege that she could do something extravagant, but to show that she was willing to spend so much or use her pull to make them feel special.

“We can’t accept such generosity,” said Mia, too serious for Belle’s comfort.

“Well, I-I could only put you in so many places, and I won’t have you sleeping in the servants’ quarters or the barracks. I just—I meant no offense. I just wanted to show you how important it is to me that you feel comfortable with us. You came a long way, and you’re Cullen’s family. Hence—” Belle put her hands up, helpless against her own logic. “Grand.”

“But we don’t want special treatment. If this room is needed—if we’re displacing someone of greater importance, that is—we’d be happy to sleep elsewhere.”

“No, no, no. You’re not displacing anyone. And if you were, well, frankly, most of these people could stand to be taken down a peg or two. In any case, you are important. You’re very important, and I want you to be as comfortable as I can help you be while you’re in our home, as big and weird as that sounds. I won’t force you to stay in this room, but I’d be grateful if you would.”

“I like it in here,” said Owen. His voice was soft, but his tone was firm. Hallmarks of a boy who was an introvert not because he disliked people or because they made him nervous, but because he believed nothing should be said when it didn’t need to be said. His uncle hadn’t had a hand in raising him, but he’d turned out a bit like the man anyway.

Marcus cleared his throat. “We’d be delighted to oblige, Lady Dolan.” He gave her a cheeky bow. Belle smiled.

“You’re sure?”

“We are.” Marcus said it. Mia didn’t look it.

“Awesome. And please call me Belle. I still have a bit of work left to finish for the day. Do you mind if I send someone up with some lunch for you when I stop off in the kitchen?”

“Send someone up?” asked Mia. The couple glanced at each other.

“Yeah.” Belle was already walking out of the room, her urge to flee betraying itself in her harried strides. “Yeah, I’ll just have someone bring something up in a couple minutes. I’ll let you get settled for a little while, but I’ll be back for dinner. Okay? I’ll see you in a bit.” The door closed behind her, and her gut fell into her feet.

She fucked it up. Fucked it all up. She was certain as she walked down to the kitchen to make a sandwich and have food sent to Cullen’s siblings that she’d done everything she could to fuck it all up. They hated her. They had to. She was a spaz and a half. Who could abide a spaz and a half, especially a spaz and a half that was shtuping their estranged brother? No one in their right mind, that was who.
Belle stewed in her perceived failure for the rest of the day. It made her work more tedious, it made her snipper with scouts and messengers, and it made her bowls irritable. She still felt green when she left her tower to meet the siblings for dinner. What a feather it would be in the cap of her horrid first impression if she shat herself right there at the table.

Spencer had already made his ass right at home next to Rosalie by the time Belle arrived. Belle glared at her brother as she sat, and he flared his nostrils at her in a silent wisecrack. Branson and Marcus stood when Belle moved toward the table, and sat when she sat. She did her best not to allow her queasiness to manifest on her face as dinner was served. She needed everyone to enjoy the roasted goose, not think she was trying to poison them all with fetid fowl. In their mercy, the Rutherfords ate it. They heaped meat and vegetables onto their plates and thanked Belle and the Maker for the food. Belle smiled and watched, and she took a bite or two while everyone fell into conversation.

The group’s discussion flowed easily after the first few tense moments. The topics were perfunctory, filled with surface information most of them already knew about one another. Belle and Spencer bounced off each other, as they had always done. Branson, much to Belle’s surprise, kept pace with them, matching wit for wit at every opportunity. Rosalie tittered and giggled through it all, dropping in a few key words in a few key moments. Spencer watched her too much, and Belle kicked him under the table. Her swinging feet only served to embolden her brother, however, and every time she connected, he smiled broader and charmed the youngest Miss Rutherford harder. Belle wasn’t concerned with Rosalie’s virtue. She could handle herself from what Belle knew of her. Belle was more concerned with what might happen if Cullen caught wind of their flirtations.

Across the table, Marcus and the children laughed and ate, participating in the chatter and rabble when they saw fit. Belle knew the least about Marcus at the beginning of the evening, and she knew the most about him by the end of it. He had been a member of South Reach’s city guard when the Rutherfords fled there from Honnleath. He became a farmer only after Mia agreed to marry him, which she refused to do for years because she believed her siblings were too young. Meanwhile, Branson wedded and bedded another young woman in secret, and she was pregnant within a matter of months. Marcus was quite animated when he told the story of Mia throwing up her hands and saying, “Fine, I suppose I can finally marry you,” much to the delight of her affectionate sister. Everyone at the table laughed.

Except Mia. Belle watched throughout the meal, and Mia never crossed over from courteous to jovial. She wore a lukewarm smile for two hours. She picked at her food, moving it around the plate like a child trying to convince her mother that, yes, she had eaten her broccoli. No one else seemed to notice, or no one said anything. Belle, situationally self-absorbed as she was, wondered if she had done something wrong. Maybe it was their greeting, or maybe it was the room. Maybe Mia hated goose and was too polite to say anything. Whatever the reason for Mia’s reticence, it plucked at Belle’s anxiety until she couldn’t eat either. It was all she could do not to leap up and flee the table to wreck the communal privies.

The party parted with cordial farewells. Belle prayed to God and whoever else might be listening that Cullen could repair whatever she had done to offend Mia. She returned to her tower dejected and ill, despite the seeming success of the dinner. She set about the work she’d shirked to meet the siblings and dine with them, and she worked until the growling in her gut shifted from sickly to hungry and a headache began to blossom in her right temple. It was late enough that the cooks and kitchen workers would be gone for the night, so she made her way across the battlements and down the stone steps. The brisk night air cooled her airways with each breath, and the cold splintered and spread to her nerve endings to make her shiver once. She enjoyed the sensation. It made her feel tangible.
A small gasp startled her when she opened the kitchen door. She jumped, bringing one hand to her chest and bracing the other on the table beside her to keep from falling. Mia hovered over a semi round loaf of bread with a large knife sticking out of it. One of her hands sat on her chest, the other braced against the table. The two women stared at each other for a moment, eyes wide and bodies mirrored, until they let out a cumulative breath.

“I’m sorry,” they said, their voices overlapping.

“I’m sorry,” Mia said again. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I know I shouldn’t be here, I only—I can leave if—”

“No, no! Please stay. I just came down to do what it looks like you’re doing. Do you mind if I have a slice?”

“Of course not. It’s the Inquisition’s bread, after all.”

Mia cut the loaf and handed a piece to Belle before taking one for herself. They bit into the dark and doughy bread in unison, each chewing in silence. Belle distracted herself with the flavors rolling over her tongue and with thoughts of why she’d never liked pumpernickel before coming to Thedas.

“I have trouble eating food I didn’t have at least a hand in making,” said Mia. “I’m not accustomed to being served.”

Belle hadn’t considered that. It occurred to her then that she hadn’t considered much in the way of how Mia must have felt. She and her husband, children, brother, sister, and nephew had all made the journey from South Reach to Skyhold with the probable intent of seeing Cullen. They’d left their lives that were so different from Belle’s only to be greeted by a stranger upon their arrival and left alone in strange rooms that must have been alien when compared to the repose of their family home. Belle knew the feeling too well, and her guilt weighed heavier for it.

“I had trouble eating when I first got here, too,” said Belle. “It took a while for me to get used to it.”

“But I’d imagine you’re well accustomed to eating food prepared by other people. I feel silly even bringing it up.”

Belle recalled four star restaurants, then she recalled McDonald’s. “Not in the way you’d think. Don’t feel silly, though. I feel terrible for not even thinking about it. That was really thoughtless and ignorant of me. I apologize.”

“Oh no, don’t feel bad. It’s only—” Mia paused for a long while. She looked at the floor as if the words she’d thought to say had fallen onto the smooth cobble. “You know, I thought I had a good idea when I told everyone we should come and surprise Cullen. It’s been so many years since we’ve seen him, and he was finally writing more, and the Inquisition did so much to keep us safe. Perish the thought that he might not have wanted to see us or, Maker forbid, that he might actually be away when we arrived. Such is the nature of surprises, I suppose. Surprises and my silly, stubborn brother.”

“I know he would have wanted to be here. He loves you all very much. He’s been talking about when we might have time to come and visit you.”

Mia smiled. “He loves you too, you know. He writes about you more than he writes about himself sometimes. I suppose that’s why Rosalie thought she knew you so well.”

“She probably does.” Belle laughed, and Mia’s smile widened. For the first time since they’d met, peace settled over them. “I should have been more hospitable when you arrived. It’s just I’ve been
overloaded with work since Max—I mean the Inquisitor killed Corypheus. That and I was terrified none of you would like me without Cullen here to sort of soften the blow of…well, me, I guess.”

“Nonsense.” Mia spoke with her mouth full before shuffling some of the chewed bread to the side. “You’ve been very hospitable. You’ve already fed us twice. Three times.” She held up what was left of her slice of bread. “And you gave us nicer rooms than we ever thought we’d see in our entire lives. The room you put us in is nearly the size of our entire house! It’s a bit daunting, honestly. How does one person take up all that space?”

“I think their egos take up most of the space.”

Mia chuckled. It was a pleasant sound that reminded Belle of Cullen’s laugh. Three soft chuckles, lined up and spread out. “I can only imagine. But I appreciate everything you’ve done. For us and for my brother. He sounds different in his letters now than he did a year ago. Not that he was writing much a year ago. I’ve had to search halfway across Thedas for that man more than once, but this is the first time in years I’ve felt like I won’t have to do that again.”

“I’m really glad to hear you say that,” said Belle.

“So am I.”

They left the kitchen with fond good nights uttered between them. Belle’s fears, although still heightened and vibrant with every thought of every possible outcome of the rest of the visit, began to dissolve. By the time she shed her clothes and laid down for the night, she almost looked forward to the following day. Cullen would come home, and she would see the joy on his face when he reunited with his siblings and met his niece and nephews. Belle thought of all their faces, picturing them in the soft light of a Hallmark world or a holiday commercial for something other than Lexus SUVs topped with ungainly bows. They would share stories and be a family, and she would see every kind of love that Cullen had to offer. It would be beautiful.

Then Cullen would kill Spencer.

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Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE! It’s the Rutherfordzzz! That went about as well as could be expected, under the circumstances. ^_~

Also, Spencer and Rosalie sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N--*is murdered by Cullen*
I know what I said. Come home NOW. Family’s here.

Cullen thrice read the scratched and ragged note before forming a coherent thought. He had thoughts preceding the coherent one, but they were built of gibberish and not to be considered. After those came cogence. One or both of Belle and Spencer’s parents must have been pulled through a rift into Thedas. Her family seemed marked for tribulation. Or perhaps Max’s family had made the unwelcome journey from the Free Marches and were making themselves at home in his absence. These were the only rationales he could fathom for Belle’s vagueness and urgency.

It was a piece of luck that he had already completed most of his work with the new Edgehall city guard. Upon receiving Belle’s missive, he told the new captain that he would be leaving in the morning. The two rushed through some final advice on tactics and sorted a month of rotations in an hour. The captain was a bright woman with no patience for nonsense, and she worked with a speed and intelligence that reminded Cullen of a woman he knew in his days in Kirkwall. Aveline was not a woman to be matched, but he hoped this new captain would come close.

He did not sleep that night. He cursed himself for lying about in such wakefulness instead of riding to Skyhold then and there. His horse needed the rest, he reminded himself, he could not abide any injury to the animal or to himself that would likely be caused by a hasty ride through the Frostbacks in the dark. He tossed in his bed in the Arl’s manor and attempted to pummel his pillow into a shape comfortable enough to lull him into slumber. It might have worked for an hour or so, but he could not be certain.

At the first hint of morning light, Cullen rode out of Edgehall. His horse huffed and snorted as they raced through the meadows and through the mountains and through the portcullis of Skyhold. By their arrival, the beast’s coat was soaked in sweat, its sides heaving labored breaths in and out to meet the cool air within the keep’s walls. One of Dennett’s men came to collect the horse, and he patted him on the neck twice before leading him to the stables for feed and warm water. A hard-ridden mount was not an unfamiliar sight for the young man.

Cullen’s eyes darted about, seeking the commotion he thought inevitable for the arrival of yet another person sprung through a rift, or for the unwanted invasion of a noble family who turned its back on both its sons. His gaze was met, instead, with calm. The Inquisition milled about in the early afternoon sun. Soldiers sparred in the courtyard ring. Merchants peddled their wares by barking at passersby, enticing them with scents or bargains. Healers escorted those with catastrophic injuries on assisted walks to help them regain their strength. Not one hair was out of place.

Cullen’s brow furrowed. What he saw was not at all what he anticipated. He looked again, and his eyes landed on a familiar silver-haired mage ambling toward the healers’ rooms from the garden. She moved at the pace of a much older woman, as if she had nothing much to do but dawdle and grin.

“Eudora,” he said as he walked her way.

Her grin widened in a wolfish manner, making him a bit anxious. “Commander. You’re a sight for sore, old eyes. Nice to see you back so soon. Timely, too.”

“Where is Belle?”
Eudora thrust a thumb over her shoulder. “In the gardens. You ought to go see her. She’s got something for you. A mess of somethings, really.”

“Thank you.” Cullen had no time for the healer’s caginess. He was worried and suspicious and a little angry when he charged through the garden door.

Belle was easy to find. She was easy to find because she was vivid and vibrant and because Cullen was bound to her, body and soul. He would always find her. When he found her in the garden, she sat cross-legged in the grass near the small patch of prophet’s laurel from which the healers and apothecaries plucked a number of their remedies. She wore a brilliant smile and a thin crown of tiny white flowers and green stems over her hair. She was laughing.

Seated before her was a little girl. Their knees touched, and Belle’s hands folded under her chin as she watched the focused child tie two small flowers together to complete a second circular chain. The girl’s tongue stuck out, though it was barely visible under the chaos of her blonde curls. When she was satisfied with her daisy chain crown, she stretched her arms up to add it to the one already resting on Belle’s hair. Belle leaned down, humbled by the bestowal.

It was a perplexing sight. Belle had no children, no nieces or nephews. Whose family was this little girl? Not Max’s, surely. The girl looked nothing like the Inquisitor. If anything, she looked like…

Cullen glanced up when a giggle bounced against the garden walls. On the opposite end of the garden, through the mechanisms of the watering well, he spied Spencer. The knight-captain laughed beside a young blonde woman. The well obstructed pieces of her face, but she had a familiarity about her. A nose Cullen thought he recognized.

Behind the bench, the backs of two men and a rather tall boy faced Cullen. Their fronts faced Cole, whose covered head bobbed while his mouth said words Cullen was too far away to hear. The taller of the backs belonged to a blonde man. It seemed there had been an influx of flaxen hair in Cullen’s absence. He would swear he recognized the way that man shifted his weight from one foot to another while he rolled his shoulders.

Cullen realized he was walking forward. Inching might have been a more appropriate term for his tentative and unconscious steps. His eyes swept to the small covered pavilion in the far corner of the garden where two people sat at the stone and wood chessboard that sprang from the ground. A dark haired boy faced away from him. A blonde woman with a long braid hanging over her shoulder sat on the other side of the board with a simultaneously smug and kind expression on her face. If not for that expression, Cullen might not have recognized her.

“Mia?” he said, too soft to be heard by anyone. He closed his eyes and shook his head, and he continued to inch forward. Her cheeks were fuller and she was older, but he was certain it was her. When he opened his eyes, she was still sitting there. That smug but kind look still shaped her face. “Mia?” he said, louder.

She heard him then. Mia looked at him, and all the smugness melted away from her features. All that was left was kindness and love. She smiled wide and stood. Cullen worried his knees might give way beneath him as she approached. Tears blurred her body, though she became clear once more when they fell.

“Maker’s breath, Cullen,” she said as she reached him. He remembered the sound of her voice. She put her hands on either side of his face and held him still. “You’re bigger than I remembered.”

“It’s the armor.” His throat flooded with words, backed up and choked off by his thick tongue and his thick skull. He could manage only those three in answer.
Mia rested her thumbs at the corners of his eyes, sweeping them out toward his temples. “You got older.”

Cullen brought up his hand to grasp hers. He cursed the barrier his gloves kept between them. “So did you.”

She laughed, watery-eyed as they had both become. “Last time I saw you, you were still such a babyface.”

“I was seventeen. I was not a baby.”

She laughed again. “Now here you are with crow’s feet and a sword on your hip that’s taller than your niece.” She looked behind her at the spot where Belle played with the little girl. The girl sat in Belle’s lap, Belle’s arms wreathed around her. They both beamed at him.

Cullen’s heart—the heard Belle made beat for her—pounded in his chest and in his ears. “That—That is…Dawn?”

Mia nodded and opened the space between her body and his. From the pavilion came the dark-haired boy. He had a face like his mother’s. She put her hand on his back and kissed the top of his head when he reached them. “And this is your nephew, Owen.”

Cullen watched in silent wonder as Owen embraced him. Slender arms wrapped around his waist, and Owen said, “I’m so glad I finally get to meet you, Uncle Cullen.” Of all the titles given to precede his name, Uncle was Cullen’s favorite. Owen looked up at him with round bronze eyes. “Can you teach me to beat Mother at chess?”

A laugh broke free of the dammed up words in Cullen’s throat. “If I can figure out how to beat her myself, you’ll be the first to know.”

Dawn rambled over to squeeze his thigh. “Uncle Cullen! Me and Belle made daisy crowns! If I make you one, will you play Dragon with me?”

“Dragon?”

“She wants you to throw her in the air,” said Mia. “Uncle Cullen can play Dragons with you later, if he wants. But I think he’s tired right now.” She looked at him, and her smugness returned to curl her lips. “He hasn’t slept.”

A woman’s voice screamed Cullen’s name from across the garden. The sound came again with a blonde and pink blur that slammed into his chest hard enough to knock the wind from both of them. Rosalie made pained noises that blended with fits of giggles as she squeezed his neck. He held her tight against him, marveling at the size of her.

“Rosalie?” he said, setting her down. She bit her lower lip into her mouth and smiled at him. “You outgrew Mia? The last time I saw you, you were smaller than him.” He pointed at Owen.

“And whose fault is that?” She said it with a smile and another giggle, but shame washed over him, nonetheless.

“I am sorry. My life has not long been my own to do with as I please. It still mostly isn’t.” A poor excuse, despite its truth.

Rosalie’s smile faltered, a kind of guilt creeping into her eyes. Mia interjected. “It’s alright. We’re here now.”
Cullen startled when Branson appeared between the heads of their two sisters. Looking at him was like looking in a distorted and slightly shorter mirror. Their similarities were uncanny. “Cullen!” Branson held his arms out wide and swung them over Cullen’s shoulders. A loud *twang* rang out when he slapped Cullen’s backplate. “Good job on all this Commander shite. And with Belle. She’s a treasure, if I ever met one,” said Branson up close, a wily smirk baring only three of his teeth.

“I’m not certain whether I should thank you or threaten you.”

“Bit of both, I’d wager.” The bothers shared laughter that sounded similar enough for both of them to stop.

Branson introduced his son, Alden, Cullen’s oldest nephew. The boy reminded Cullen of himself in appearance, but there could be no doubt he was Branson’s son. He greeted Cullen as “Uncle Cul,” and he asked Cullen to teach him to swordfight so he could “show that Ronald down the road a thing or two.”

Mia introduced her husband, Marcus, the source of Owen’s dark hair and Dawn’s green eyes. He seemed the amiable sort, comfortable and secure in himself and his surroundings. He had an ease about his air that Cullen envied. He was kind, and his past as a member of the South Reach city guard meant that he could protect his family. Cullen’s family. Cullen could ask nothing more of a suitable husband for his sister.

In his periphery, Cullen saw Belle round the lot of them. Pride overwhelmed him when she came to his side with hope-lifted brows. “You have all met Lady Belle Dolan, Ambassador Montilyet’s lady and Counselor of the Inquisi—”

“You puffed up knob,” said Branson. “By now, we know more about her than we do about you.” Everyone laughed.

“Yes, we met her,” said Rosalie. “And we love her.”

Mia chimed in. “Don’t do or say anything stupid, now, little brother. We’re counting on you to keep her around.” Mia winked at Belle, who smiled with her pointed canines in full view.

Cullen was puffed up when it came to Belle. She was the best part of him, and he was grateful she was in Skyhold to soften the blow he would have been to his family. He was not the boy they remembered. He was not even the man he remembered. They might have hated him if not for her.

He watched Dawn drag her off to make another daisy chain while his siblings stayed with him to catch up. They peppered him with questions, though in their excitement, they appeared satisfied with his short answers. They were all just as eager to tell him about their lives.

Marcus and Mia’s home was home to all of them, and they all played a part in operating their wheat farm. It had been difficult for them to learn a new trade, as they had all been raised to farm sheep, and Branson and Rosalie were still quite young when the family fled Honnleath during the Blight. The first few years were the most arduous, with Mia shouldering the brunt of the labor. It made her the perfect mother, Marcus added, but she would have been even if it had not happened. Mia looked to her husband with pride. Branson grew quiet for a time. Rosalie started in about how she really ought to be married already, but no one was brave enough to court her with a family like that.

Cullen listened to all of it. He devoured their stories, imbibed their lives. For long moments while they spoke, he imagined how things might have been if he had stayed, if he had never become a Templar. Rosalie would still be unmarried, of course. Mia would not have been forced to wait to marry Marcus, and she would not have been forced to sheaf and plow and plant alone, and she
would not have been forced to track down her brother every few years while she worried he might be dead. Cullen might have married a farmer’s daughter, and he could have been a father by then. Things might have been better.

He looked past his siblings at Belle. She and Dawn had covered themselves and his nephews in daisy chains, and her smile glowed in the dimming daylight. He thought of her and of the good he had done in the past year. No. Things would not have been better if he had stayed, if he had never become a Templar. He would not have done anything for anyone. He would not have his friends. He would not have Belle.

Spencer joined them all for dinner. He sat too close to Rosalie, and he made her laugh far too much. Cullen watched the pair of them. He also watched Belle make angry faces at her brother just before shuffling noises emanated from under the table and Spencer flinched. Cullen recalled his talk with Spencer in the dark and sandy reaches of the Western Approach. More and more as the evening slipped on, he recognized the imminent need for an upended version of that conversation.

Cullen received every embrace from his family with subdued glee when they parted to retire for the evening. He held them tight. Part of him believed that if he held them tight enough, they might forgive him, might know he loved them, might know the reasons he stayed away for so long. Dawn made certain to give him two kisses goodnight. She kissed him once on the cheek, then grabbed his face in her hands and stood on her toes to kiss him once on the forehead. She nodded, satisfied her work was complete.

He accompanied Belle to her tower to end their evening. They slept there together most nights they were both in Skyhold. Cullen began to feel at home and at peace amidst the gentle pandemonium of her belongings. His own bed became uncomfortable and foreign, like an outgrown shoe.

They changed into their sleeping attire. Belle put on her nightdress—he missed the one she wore when she first arrived—and Cullen donned a pair of soft breeches. He sat at the edge of the bed for a long moment, and he contemplated the day’s events. His siblings’ happy faces shone in his mind. But the longer he envisioned them, the darker they turned. They shifted and warped and grew younger with every second until they became the angry and weeping faces of his youth. He imagined them on the day he left for Templar training, all sobbing and forlorn. He imagined them the last time his family was allowed to come and visit him before his vigil, sad eyes belying fake smiles. He imagined them as he had not seen them, devastated at the loss of their parents, red-faced and bawling.

“Does your neck actually hurt when you do that?” Belle’s voice ripped him from his made up memories. His elbow sat suspended in the air, his hand squeezing at the back of his neck. “I’ve always wondered.”

“Not always. Sometimes it does, but sometimes my head aches. Other times…Maker’s breath. It’s become a bit of a habit.”

Fabric rustled behind him. Belle made little grunting noises, and after the bed rocked beneath him he felt the clothed heat of her against his lower back. She wreathed her bared legs around his hips, crossing them over his lap.

Her hands were cool when they came to rest on Cullen’s naked skin. Her fingers pushed small ripples into the flesh and muscle from the base of his neck out to the tops of his shoulders, testing. Assessing. She traced out once and came back, and she stopped near the base of his neck. She pressed down several times in the same place and muttered, “Jesus,” to herself. With her fingers and her thumbs, she began kneading at the firm mass of muscle, hard. The pressure of her digits raced down Cullen’s jaw and pinched at his throat and squeezed at his temples. It raced and pinched and
squeezed until he thought he might vomit. A pained sound forced its way out of his throat, and Belle
said something like “sorry.” In his agony, he gripped her knees, ashamed and bruising in the face of
such comparatively menial suffering.

Then the pain was gone. Something within him gave way. The bowstring pulled back and back and
back until it threatened to snap had finally loosed. In a fire flash before his closed eyes his anguish
vanished. Exquisite relief surged in to replace it. He groaned and let his head drop. Belle’s breath
tickled and tingled across his neck as her mouth neared, his every nerve reawakened and blinded by
long awaited exposure to the light of sensation.

“Feel good now?” she asked. Cullen could only hum his reply. “Good. Can I tell you something
then?” Another hum. Belle moved close enough that her breath warmed his ear, and her fingers
paused. “If you ever leave me alone to meet anyone from your past again, I’ll straight up murder
you.”

Cullen opened his eyes and laughed, and Belle backed away to continue her kneading. “Mia did not
warn me they—”

“Murder. Real life murder. Stab-stab, bee-yotch.”

He chuckled again, deeming silent abstention and acceptance his best option. Belle continued her
heavy-handed but pleasant ministrations with little more to say for a time. Cullen ran his hands along
her legs as an indication of his gratitude, and they were plush and supple and velveteen. She
apologized for not having shaved her legs in almost a week, and he told her he did not notice. He
listened to the sound of her breathing, an echo of the delicate breeze in the Frostbacks. Then she
began to sing.

Azúcar morena es tu piel,
Tus besos me saben a pura miel
Tu boca son cerezas para comer
Tu voz retumba en todo mi ser

Her voice was quiet, at first. Cullen mistook her murmured music for the wind, distracted as he was
by the contentment sparkling along his spine like a trail of Tempest fire. He recognized her Antivan
words and arcane rhythm only with a trill of her tongue. He closed his eyes to listen, to feel her
faraway words vibrate in the air around them.

Azúcar, azúcar tu piel
Azúcar, azúcar dame de beber
Azúcar morena es tu piel,
Es tu bella voz que retumba en mi ser

Azúcar morena es tu piel,
Dame un ratito pa’ quererte
A escondidas donde nadie nos pueda ver
En secreto podré entregarme

Belle’s tune flowed like foreign wine. It was exotic and flavorful, dipping low and rising high. He imagined the taste of the words on her lips. Sweet and spiced, intoxicating and indulgent.

Azúcar, azúcar tu piel
Azúcar, azúcar dame de beber
Azúcar morena es tu piel,
Ss tu bella voz que retumba en mi ser
Son tus ojos que manipulan mi miel
Azúcar, azúcar
Yo tengo también pa’ darte de beber
Azúcar morena es tu piel,
Es tu bella voz que retumba en mi ser

Azúcar, azúcar
Azúcar morena es tu piel,
Es tu bella voz que retumba en mi ser
Son tus ojos que manipulan mi miel

Cullen sighed when Belle stopped singing. She stopped kneading, too, leaving his shoulders raw and lost in the cruel nothing air. Her body thumped against the bed, though her legs remained twined about his hips. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome. God, I’m so fucking tired. So fucking tired.” She scrambled away then, shuffling about in the bed until she reached her usual placement and position.

Cullen lay down beside her and enveloped her. She deflated as she relaxed into his embrace, and he knew her eyes were closing. “For everything.”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you for everything.”

“Mm. Mmhmm. ‘S cool.” The long quiet that followed bade him believe she fell asleep. She cleared her throat, sending an inward jolt through his chest. “Dark sugar. Uh, brown sugar. Really it’s brunette sugar, but that doesn’t—ehn…” Fatigue slurred every word.

“What?”

“I was gonna tell you what it meant. Your skin is brown sugar. Your kiss knows…” She trailed off. “Honey. Mouth—There’s stuff about your mouth. And the good stuff, the stuff about your voice rumbles through all my being. I like that one. Then there’s more skin sugar, and then—”
yawn made her squeak. “More in the morning.” A sloppy giggle shook her shoulders. In a strange voice, she said, “Tune in for more. Tonight. At ah-leven.” Another sloppy giggle wriggled through her before she stilled.

She fell asleep not long after. Cullen lie awake, his mind the central battlefield of a war between restless excitement and exhaustion. And mild confusion, if he was honest. He thought, as he watched Belle’s neck crane and fingers twitch, that everything was perfect. His family was alive and well and still loved him, and his beloved slept in the protection of his arms. A sense of calm overtook him, and the exhaustion won out.

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Almost a week passed, and Cullen’s family was set to leave Skyhold in a matter of days. They could not stay away from their farm long enough to await Max’s return from the Deep Roads. The harvest season was nearly done, and they worried at burdening their friends and Marcus’s family with sheaving and selling the last of the wheat. Cullen made no effort to plead with them to stay. It was an impractical and feckless endeavor. They had lives to lead outside of Skyhold, and he would find time to visit them soon enough. He swore it.

Belle, however, put on a great show of distress at the prospect of their leaving so soon. Though Cullen suspected a show was all she could muster. While she enjoyed their presence in the most outward and believable sense, they distracted as much from her painful workload as they did from his. Josephine was already beginning to founder under the excess, and the guilt of it writ itself on Belle’s face at the most inopportune moments.

She and Cullen took turns in their offices, an hour or so at a time, but it became more difficult to leave his family as time wore on. Dawn launched into screaming fits and temper tantrums every time Belle mentioned going to work. Cullen admired Belle’s ability to calm the sweet and tiny savage through stern words and cooed compromises. Alden, who must have learned his manipulation tactics from his Aunt Mia, complained at not having enough time to get to know his Uncle Cul. It was a fair argument, not to be outmaneuvered with any small amount of effort. But Cullen held thousands of lives at the end of his quill, and he impressed upon the boy the severity and importance of such responsibility. Owen did not whine or complain when Belle or Cullen snuck away, which left Cullen feeling all the more guilty. All Owen asked was to accompany Belle to her tower to read while she worked. He liked the quiet there. Uncle Cullen’s office was too noisy, he said, with too many people in clickety-clackety armor going in and out all the time. He was right.

On the eve of the fifth day of his family’s visit, Cullen took Spencer aside. The young man had spent their entire supper making Rosalie giggle and blush and, as far as Cullen could tell, holding her hand beneath the table. Maker only knew what those two got up to when they were out of eyeshot. Cullen found that particular thought irksome, and he pushed it from his mind.

“Knight-Captain,” he said.

Spencer smirked. “Look, if we’re about to have the conversation I think we’re about to have, I’d rather you called me by my name. Using my rank won’t intimidate me. Ser.” That Cullen ever bore any doubt this man was Belle’s brother seemed a ridiculous notion.

“Fine,” said Cullen through clenched teeth. “Spencer, what are your intentions with my sister?”

“I want to get to know her better. I like her. A lot. She’s sweet and smart and tough as shit, and any guy would be lucky to find himself near that kind of woman, let alone get any attention from her.”

“And beautiful.”
“Huh?”

“You like her because she’s beautiful, don’t you?”

Spencer shrugged and shook his head. “Well, yeah, she is. But that’s not really why I like her. Look, I’ve seen some shit in my lifetime. You gotta understand that. I watched a woman I liked a lot get crushed to death by a giant hunk of wall. I’ve killed, like, a bunch of guys. Sword in, sword out, move on. I thought being a firefighter was tough but, fuck, man. Fuck.” Spencer ran the back of his hand over his mouth and stared at the ground. Cullen knew the expression. He knew it down in his bones. Spencer took a sharp breath through his nose, gaze locking with Cullen’s once more.

“So, I’ve realigned my priorities. When I was back in California, I figured I’d be a bachelor and screw around until I was about thirty while I promoted up through the department, unless I met someone that made me change my mind. Now…It’s important to find someone to hold onto. There’s gotta be someone I can count on to have my back, who makes me happy, despite all the bullshit. I mean, you get it, right? You have my sister. She gets you, man. And you get her. That’s what I’m looking for. That’s my intention, I guess.”

Cullen stared at Spencer for too long. Spencer stared back in earnest. The man’s words were genuine and heartfelt, and they left Cullen hard pressed to disagree or rebuff him. “Alright. But—what was it you said—if you hurt her, I’ll…shank you like a snitch on the yard at Chino, I believe was how you put it. I’m still not quite certain what that means, but rest assured, there will be no shortage of pain if you harm her. In any way.”

A short laugh puffed out of Spencer. “I’d expect nothing less.” He grasped Cullen’s forearm in a proper firm handshake, though it began to feel like a contest of grips after a moment. Cullen relented first, not to lose the contest, but to show Spencer that he would no longer interfere.

Cullen met Belle in her tower that night. When he entered, he found her hunched over a stack of documents. Her furious scribbling scratched and echoed about her office. He wondered if she had ripped anything with the violence of her writing.

She look up at him, and her brows knitted together at what she saw. “Did my brother put his fucking foot in his mouth?”

“No. Not at all. He expressed himself very well, in fact.”

“And?”

“If Rosalie reciprocates his feelings, he is free to pursue her.”

Belle set her quill down and rubbed her eyes as she laughed. “I like that you think you have a say.” On the ebb of her laughter she yawned. “Fuck. Dawn made me play Dragon for, like, twenty minutes today. My arms feel like they’re going to fall off. I don’t have those mom muscles yet. I don’t know how Mia does it. Thank God for Owen.” She stood, and Cullen followed her up the stairs. “He’s just like you, you know. All quiet and smart and all…knowing too much with his eyes. Mini you.”

A touch of pride welled up within Cullen. At first, the idea that his nephew had managed to be so much like him without his presence struck him as odd. Then he remembered that Mia was the boy’s mother, and it seemed less odd.

Cullen watched Belle’s hips sway in front of him. He’d not had her in two weeks. He longed to take her at the top of the stairs, at the foot of the bed, over their blankets and sheets. He bit back his
hunger at the glimpse of skin he caught in the corner of his eye as they changed. He adjusted himself against her tired body so that she would not feel the ardency of his desire. Her tired eyes teared at her yawns, crying out for sleep. He would not interfere that night.

The next morning, however, he took her.

He woke with his need made obvious, pressed tight against his breeches and against Belle’s backside. Her bare neck trapped his right arm, but his left wrist hung over her waist. Somewhere between her movement and Cullen’s lewd waking dreams, her nightdress bunch up itself up around her ribs. She stirred in the way she often did when she woke, arching her back and craning her neck. Pleasure ripped through him, and he groaned in her ear and gripped her hip.

Before she woke enough to comprehend the sound, Cullen kissed the back of her neck. He kissed the side of her throat. He nibbled at her earlobe. Belle hummed. “We have to go down and meet your family for breakfast,” she said.

Her body betrayed her, rolling and writhing against him. He bit her. “It won’t take long,” he said, his voice an unfamiliar rumble.

Belle’s responding laugh was hoarse and brief. Cullen ended it with another bite and with his hand between her legs. She gasped, tangling her fingers in his sleep mussed hair. He stretched his right arm down until he reached past her golden and silvery charms and under the neckline of her nightdress. Her nipple pearled and peaked for his delicate grazes, and she rocked back to send another jolt of pleasure through him. She released him to pull away her smallclothes, baring her to him. He pressed at the places where her thighs joined her sex. He loved those places. The places that kept her intimacy tucked away from the rest of the world.

Her fingers fumbled at the laces of his breeches, but he let her fumble. He would not remove his hands from her breasts or her slick folds, and he would not remove his mouth from her flesh. When she finally freed him, he slipped his hand down her thigh to draw her leg over his hip. She grasped his length to guide him into her as his hand resumed its work. She was tighter than their last time together, and he nearly spilled into her after two weak thrusts. In light of the efforts of his hands and his lips, and in light of the freshness of the sensations due to their unintended abstinence, she was already nearing her own end. He hilted himself with a moan and rocked inside her in small movements. She bit back her words, resulting in a long and fricative noise, like a dozen F’s in a long, hissing line. Her body quaked and trembled against him, and the feeling of her toppled him. He growled into the nape of her neck as he spent himself deep inside her.

Belle released her unyielding grip, leaving four itchy little indentations in Cullen’s skin. He did not mind them. As he dressed for the day, his smalls and breeches brushed past them, and he smiled to himself. He felt them even as he followed Belle down the stairs and out the door of the tower. She checked her desk for new missives on their way out, and they made their way into Cullen’s office to do the same.

With only a few things left on his desk for the both of them, they headed into the courtyard. Belle held Cullen’s hand, their fingers laced together as they walked. Rosalie stood with Branson near the foot of the steps to the main hall. They chatted while Alden and Dawn played in the grass. Branson waved to Cullen and Belle, and they both waved back.

One by one, the hairs on Cullen’s arms began to rise. His skin prickled, and the faint hum of electricity buzzed in his ears. A twisted but familiar inkling seized his gut, crushing in its peculiarity. He looked to Belle. An expression of knowing horror parted her lips and widened her eyes. Her long curls rose up around her shoulders, levitating in the static.
A tremendous crack split the air, and Cullen flinched. Belle screamed beside him. A sickly green glow cast about them, and people in all directions began to shriek and flee. A rift hung before him, unwavering and still. Tendrils of green lightning stung the ground, at once snapping and fizzling and constant. This was not like the other rifts he had seen. At its core was a queer blackness that undulated and flowed with unseeable images.

Belle clutched his hand with a crushing fervor. The rift crackled again. It began to twist and squirm in the air, alive. Cullen had seen such movement. The appearance of a demon thereafter was inevitable. He wore enough armor to protect Belle, he thought. He pulled her to him and faced his back toward the rift. He might have enough time to draw his sword before the demon would have time to strike. Other warriors must have been running to aid him in the fight.

“No! Run!” Belle’s voice was almost unrecognizable in the cacophony. Her smaller hands pushed at his stomach.

Cullen opened his mouth to refuse, but speech fled his body as his feet left the ground. A tug like that of an oppressive owner on a disobedient dog’s leash jerked them free of the dirt and grass beneath them. Belle screamed again, and he would swear the tiny bulbs of her tears dripped up from her eyes that were like armor and like the sea. He prayed to the Maker to let their deaths be swift as they passed into the black, helpless against the mighty force that dragged them. He closed his eyes and held her tight.

She was in his arms when it happened.

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Chapter End Notes

WHAT THE FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU~~~

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN

*straightens hair and clothes* Okay, now that that's done, I can tell you that this chapter contained the lyrics from the song "Azucar Morena" by (you guessed it) Carla Morrison, which you can listen to [here](#) or [here](#). I can also tell you that I FUCKIN' TOLD YOU WE HAD SO MUCH MORE TO DEAL WITH IN THIS FIC DUDE!!! ^_~

Thanks for sticking with me (if you even do after this XD)! <3
Dead. Dead again. Belle took little solace in knowing that she could count the number of times she was certain she died on one hand. She was still dead. Dead before she could marry or have babies. Dead before she could work for Sony or Microsoft or even EA. Dee-Eee-Dee. Dead.

Boong. Doctor Kim, three-five-one-four. Doctor Kim, three-five-one-four.

Boong. Doctor Laghari, please call radiology, six-eight-two-six.

Boong. ER, call two-seven-nine-oh.

Or not. Dead people couldn’t hear hospital sounds. Who knew, though? Maybe she was a ghost. If she was alive, maybe one of her migraines had finally gone full stroke-out and knocked her into a coma. Maybe she’d been hit by a car. Maybe she’d just had one really long, weird, fucked up dream.

Belle opened her eyes. Fluorescent light singed her pupils from the ceiling. Things were fuzzy. She made out the outline of her glasses on a counter next to a sink across the small room, just out of reach. Blueish-white walls and a blueish-white curtain cordoned her off from the rest of the world, and she wore a blueish-white hospital gown and sat under blueish-white hospital blankets. Nearby, a woman screamed and said, “Fuck you,” before rattling something loud made of plastic and metal. Tweaker screams. Come-down screams. Belle could not have been in the ICU if someone was strapped to a bed with tweaker screams so close. She was in the ER. She looked around again, seeking the yellow or red call button. The IV needle in the pit of her elbow tapped the edge of her vein as she moved, and she winced. She pressed the button when she found it, and she waited.

“Can I help you?” The tinny sound of the woman’s voice coming through the small speaker on the wall startled Belle. She’d forgotten about hospital room intercom systems.

“I think I was brought in unconscious. I’m awake now, though. Can someone come talk to me?”

“Let me see here…Oop. Yup, there you are. Okay someone will be over in a moment.”

“Thank you.”

Belle’s lip began to quiver while she waited. Her eyes watered as she contemplated the reality of her reality. She wondered if she’d dreamt the whole thing, if Spencer had never gone missing, if Cullen wasn’t real. She cried a little.

A shortish Filipina woman tore open the curtain, breaking Belle’s wallowing concentration and her sequestration from the world outside. They were, in fact, in an ER. A nurse’s station sat at the center of everything, abuzz with overworked staff picking up phones and passing charts from hand to hand. Several curtains hung open in rooms across the way. Belle saw a twelve-year-old boy getting a cast on his arm, a woman with an ice pack over her right eye, and another clutching a barf bin.

“Good afternoon,” said the nurse in a thick accent. “I’m Nurse Carmen.” She spoke while she flicked through Belle’s chart and flitted through the room. “How are you peeling?” She poked and eyed the bag of dwindling fluids attached to Belle’s IV.

“I’m—Uh—I’m okay, I guess. Under the circumstances.”
“Okay gooood.” Nurse Carmen scribbled the stats on the monitor into the chart. Pulse, ninety-four. Blood pressure, one-oh-five over sixty-two. “Hmm. Are you sure you’re not peeling dizzy or lightheaded? Your pulse is a little high and your blood pressure is a little low.”

“A little, but I’m just stressed about how I got here, I think. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Can you tell me what you remember?”

“Waiting for an Uber, I guess. The rest is fuzzy.” It wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Hmm. Well, your chart says you were pound unconscious by a hiker in Brea Canyon about seben hours ago, before dawn. Is that where you were going?”

“No.” But it was close to where she lived. “This is going to sound weird, I think, but can you tell me the date today? The whole thing?”

“You’d be surprised how much people ask that. Today’s October second, twenty-eighteen.”

Belle’s heartbeat sped in her chest and on the monitor beside her. One-oh-four. Lingering dizziness and lightheadedness surged to the forefront. “Was there a man brought in with me? Tall, blonde, in a furry coat and armor?”

Nurse Carmen let out a short laugh while she looked at Belle’s chart. “Yes. It was pretty tough to get all that opp him. I don’t know what you two were doing out there like that.”

Belle threw off her blankets and stood. The floor was cold and real under her bare feet. Nurse Carmen cooed a series of “no-no-no’s” and tried to sit Belle back down. “I need to see him. Right now. I need to see him.”

“You can see him in a little while,” said Nurse Carmen with her hands on Belle’s shoulders.

“No. Now. If I’m awake, he’s either awake or he’ll be waking up any second. Take this IV out.”

Belle stood again.

“I can’t take it out. You’re still dehydrated and you—”

“Take it out, or I’m gonna do that stupid fucking thing people always do in movies and take it out myself. Take it out.” Nurse Carmen shook her head. “Fine.”

Belle’s breath hissed in through her teeth as she pulled the IV needle free. She did it slowly, and she pressed her thumb down on the infinitesimal wound to avoid bruising while she rounded the bed. She snatched up her glasses and almost poked herself in the eye when she put them on. Beside her bed, her belongings hung from a hook in a clear plastic bag. She dug around until she found one of her pockets, and until she found what she sought in that pocket.

A commotion rang out from down the hall. Metal and plastic clanged and clattered, and an indistinct male voice bellowed indistinct male noises. Nurse Carmen peered out around the curtain, said, “Stay here,” and hustled toward the racket. Belle followed.

Several nurses and a pudgy security guard moved like a flock of half-running, half-walking, multicolored birds. Down the hall, every small, unsecured item one might find in an ER patient’s room flew into the hallway from behind an open curtain. A choir of voices shouted at one another, male and female alike. Nurses stood in the hallway with their arms outstretched in gestures both soothing and threatening in nature. Belle ran past Nurse Carmen into the opening of the room.
Cullen stood against the back wall, wedged in a corner. Like Belle, he wore a blueish-white hospital
gown, though it fit much tighter on him in a few places. His shoulders and chest heaved up and
down with his open-mouthed breaths. His face was painted over in a patchwork of rage and terror,
and he held a stainless steel rolling utility table out in front of him by its legs.

“Come no closer!” he said to the nurses, and he thrust the utility table out ahead of him. It hit the
corner of the countertop with a thwang.

“Cullen,” said Belle. “Stop. It’s okay. It’s me. You’re safe.”

When his eyes landed on her, the fear and fury vanished for the barest moment. Then they
redoubled. “No! I will not be tempted, demon! You would use the image of the woman I love to—
Never again. Never again!”

“Miss, don’t go in there,” said someone behind her.

She ignored them. She ignored the tears pooling in her eyes and plunging down her cheeks. She
ignored the silvery wall Cullen held up between them. She stepped forward and held out the coin
Cullen had given her. “You remember when you gave me this? It was all you had, and you gave it to
me on that little dock, and you told me you loved me and that I had everything. You remember?”

Sparks of recognition flashed in his eyes, but he kept the table up. She soldiered on. “You carried me
over your shoulder like an asshole when you saw how sick I was. You made me sit down with
Eudora, and I was so mad at you. And then she gave me that fucking tea. I had that fucking tea for
months before you came to me that night in my office. You were scared, and you thought you
needed to leave, but I wanted you to stay. You gave me those fucking stupid, amazing little cakes for
my birthday. I’m not a demon. I’m me, you obstinate asshole!”

Relief washed the anger from Cullen’s face. He dropped the table. Belle stepped over it and into his
arms. He squeezed her so hard her ribs ached. He sobbed once into her hair and said, “Thank the
Maker. Thank the Maker.”

A male voice sounded off from behind her. “Sir, you need to return to your bed.” The security guard,
if she had to guess.

Belle held one open hand out behind her. “Back off!” Rubber soled shoes squeaked and skidded on
cold tile. She took Cullen’s face in her hands, pulling him away to look him in his honeyed eyes. She
kissed him once, just long enough to let him know she wasn’t going anywhere.

She turned her head to the pudgy security guard. “My name is Belle Chava Dolan. Date of birth ten,
thirty, nineteen-eighty-six. Call the police. I’m a missing person.”

Two officers showed up half an hour later. The first, a babyfaced young man with his hair buzzed
down to nothing and a nameplate that read “Hutchins.” The second, a woman with stripes on her
arms, an unhinged bun in her hair, a nameplate that said “Rodriguez,” and a look of perturbation that
passed over her face here and there. A trainee and his training officer, as far as Belle could tell.

She caught a glimpse of the form on the trainee’s clipboard. His TO told him to bring a standard
“Found Person” report after running Belle’s name. Belle understood that there had probably not been
enough evidence to label her disappearance suspicious when she vanished. It would have been a
wobbler. Her parents would have told the police about her missing brother, the plane ticket, and the
Uber. The police might even have searched her apartment. But they would have found no blood, no
evidence of a struggle, and nothing missing but the things she might take with her on a trip. It would have been a wobbler, but they would have landed on a non-criminal report. Belle felt terrible for the convoluted mess she was about to lay on this poor trainee.

She told the officers she’d been kidnapped over a year ago, and Hutchins looked at Rodriguez like someone had just told him where Jimmy Hoffa was buried. Belle told them it was okay to go call homicide or pull the report if they wanted to do it before she kept talking, but they told her to continue. She proceeded to spin a convoluted tale of her kidnapping, drugging, and subsequent trafficking to what she believed to be a different country by a group calling themselves “the Inquisition.” She said they took her someplace high in the mountains where it snowed in the early fall, and they kept her there, working for them until they decided she wasn’t needed anymore. They set their society up with a juxtaposition of Middle and Bronze Age technology, and a version of feudalism in their social schemata, she told the officers. They called the whole place “Thedas.” Belle said she didn’t know why they called it that.

Rodriguez, skepticism plain on her face, asked about Cullen. He identified himself as he always had, as Cullen Stanton Rutherford of Honnleath. When she asked where Honnleath was, he told her. Belle explained that he’d been born wherever it was the Inquisition had taken her, that he didn’t even know a world existed outside of Thedas until she arrived. She told the officers that she and Cullen fell in love, and he refused to let them take her away without him. He held her hand and nodded. “Love conquers all, eh?” said Rodriguez, and she sucked her teeth.

The police didn’t believe a word of what Belle said. At least, Rodriguez didn’t believe a word of what Belle said. Hutchins looked a little convinced.

“Real nice. Thanks for that. Just look at the clothes we were wearing when we were found.” Belle pointed to the pile of plate armor capped with Cullen’s furry surcoat in the corner. “You think we just made that and ran around for over a year? Ooh, better yet, did you bring a Blue Check device? Run his fingerprints. Run them everywhere. Send them to Interpol or some foreign government or some shit. He won’t show up.”

Rodriguez crossed her arms and pursed her lips. She seemed perplexed, and that look of perturbation passed over her face again. She was not the type of woman who appreciated being perplexed. “Are you on any medications, ma’am?”

“Jesus. I was a 9-1-1 operator for four years, you know,” said Belle. “I had to pass a background check once, too. You can verify I’m not crazy if you want. Wait for my parents. Someone called them, and they’ll be here in a couple hours to talk to you. Or call my boss, Victoria Rengel, at her law firm. She’ll vouch for my sanity. Or call my partners at my station at the Department, and they can tell you just exactly how fucking crazy I am. Or—and this might just be the craziest thing I’ve said yet—you can call fucking homicide and get a fucking detective down here now so I don’t have to repeat this horrible fucking traumatic story all over again. Cool?”

“One more question before we start making phone calls. Any relation to Spencer Dolan, the missing Fire Lieutenant? I ran into him a couple times on the job, and he vanished a few months before you did, if I remember correctly.”

Belle felt like all the blood left her body. There she sat, in front of two cops, telling them half-truths, and of course they knew Spencer. She let her emotions pour out into her expression, angry and sorrowful. “He’s my brother. They took him first. I don’t know why. He’s still there.”

The missing persons homicide detective took a little less than an hour to arrive. Cullen waited with Belle in still silence, holding her hand and looking out through their open curtain. To anyone else, he would have seemed calm and maybe a little annoyed. To Belle, he was terrified and hypervigilant.
His eyes darted toward every errant noise, his body rigid and ready for a fight. Whenever anyone approached, he clutched Belle’s hand and flexed his toes against the floor. He squinted up at the fluorescent lights from time to time, suspicious and no doubt attempting to discern what type of magic kept them alight. She wanted to explain everything he saw, but this was not the time for such talk. First, they had to convince a handful of people of an abduction and a secret society so far removed from the rest of the world its citizens still wore armor.

The detective was a tough sell. He looked to be in his early forties, and very tired. He introduced himself as Detective Eisiminger—she’d never met a homicide detective with an average name—and he handed Belle and Cullen each a business card. They were emblazoned with his department’s seal, puffy and depressed and a little shiny. They reminded Belle a bit of herself just then. Cullen examined the card before setting it on the counter. She suspected he had no intention of keeping it.

Belle began her story over again. She started with unconsciousness on the street and waking up in a room in what she thought was a castle. No, she answered Eisiminger, there were no periods of twilight in which she might have seen something helpful. There weren’t any this time either, before he asked.

She continued with the Inquisition putting her to work. She wrote letters for them, she replied to Eiseminger, diplomatic letters requesting resources and people and sometimes arranging marriages. No, she did not get to address them herself, and she didn’t really know who was writing back to her.

She went on explain that the new scar on her neck that didn’t match her physical description in the report was from a man who tried to cut her throat after his jealous sister stabbed her in the back. Yes, she responded to Eisiminger, it hurt like a motherfucker both times. No, she did not know where either of them came from or went.

“And what’s your role in all this, Mister Rutherford?” asked Eisiminger.

Cullen sat up straighter in his hospital gown. “I am—was the commander of the Inquisition’s forces. Such as they were.”

“Forces? Like an army?”

“Yes.”

“Were you preparing for some kind of war?”

Cullen glanced at Belle, and she looked him square in the eyes. As he opened his mouth to speak, she prayed for the right answer to leave his lips. “We were prepared.” She could have cried in her relief at his omission of the war they were already fighting.

“Do you know who it was this Inquisition was planning on warring against?” Eisiminger was hunting for some sort of homeland security issue, something that would get him promoted.

“I do not.”

Eisiminger’s face twisted into the same perturbed look that Rodriguez had borne. He sighed. It was a deep and tired sound, and for the first time since his arrival, Belle felt bad for the untruths they were telling him. “Do you have any idea why they would have kidnapped Belle and her brother?”

“I do not. I was quite vexed when I discovered what they had done. Not to mention that their arrival shattered my perception of the world as I knew it. It was all very distressing.”

“Vexed?”
“It means upset,” said Belle.

“I know what it means, thanks.” Eisiminger sighed again and tapped the end of his pen against the pad of paper in his hands. He tapped, tapped, tapped until Belle wanted to scream at him.

“Listen,” she said, and he stopped tapping, “I’ll tell you everything I know. We’ll tell you everything we know. But I know you read the report. If the officers that responded to my apartment had found even a speck of blood or a hint of foul play, my case would have been knocked up to the top of your list. Other than that, the circs support a kidnapping. I was kidnapped. And what we’re telling you really happened. It sounds every kind of fucked up, and I sound every kind of crazy—believe me, I know—but it happened. I have the scars to prove it. No amount of skepticism or sighing or pen tapping is going to change it.”

Cullen squeezed her hand. Tears stung her eyes and her sinuses, and a lump formed in her throat. If Eisiminger asked her another question, she was going to lose her composure. That was the last thing she wanted. No one ever listened to the crying woman. No one ever took the crying woman seriously. No one ever believed the crying woman. The crying woman was a lunatic and a liar, and the crying woman was guilty.

Eisiminger sighed a third time. “Okay,” he said. He paused for too long, and Belle’s lip began to quiver. “Okay. You know how this works. I think we’re done for now, but you know I’m going to need to call you both down to my office and ask you some more questions after I’ve run this by my lieutenant.”

Belle nodded. “Yeah, of course.” A tear slipped free, and she wiped it away in as stealthy a manner as she could manage.

“Oh, okay.” Eisiminger tapped his pen one last time. “Well, I’m going to have another chat with your nurses and wait for your dad and stepmom to get here. I have to ask them a few questions before they see you. I’m sure you get it.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Eisiminger shook Belle’s hand first, then Cullen’s. Cullen seemed a bit put off by the unfamiliar form of contact. This was not how hands were shaken in Thedas. Eisiminger saw the reaction and cocked his head, assessing the veracity of Cullen’s body language for a moment before leaving their room. He closed the curtain behind him, and for the first time in hours, Belle and Cullen found themselves alone.

Both their bodies sagged at the apparent disappearance of deep scrutiny. Belle looked at Cullen, and he looked at her. Loss and gratitude vied for control of their features, though neither won. She shook her head. Another tear broke away, and she let it slide and slide down her cheek.

“I didn’t want this,” she said.

Cullen said nothing. He stared at her. Into her. Past her eyes and into her heart and mind. Yet another tear fell, then another, and another. All the while, he stared at her.

*Boong. ICU dial four-seven-two-three. ICU, four-seven-two-three.*

*Boong. Doctor Song to oncology, please.*

*Boong. Psych, please call the ER. Psych call ER one-zero-one-two.*

Belle wondered if the last one was for her. She stared back at Cullen, angrier and angrier as tears
made of vinyl-bagged electrolyte water careened down her face. He could not have thought this was her doing, could he? He could not have thought she wished or prayed for this, and that somehow some god somewhere heard her and answered.

“Say something.” Her voice came out harsh and hissed, almost cruel.

Cullen flinched, sending shame spiking through her gut. He released her hand to envelope her in his arms. His fingers weaved into her hair at the base of her neck, and his nose burrowed into her shoulder. His breaths came through her blueish-white hospital gown in uneven bursts. “I’m lost,” he said.

They stayed like that, holding each other until Belle’s fingertips began to tingle and numb. She braced herself to release him, readying her heart for the pain she knew would evidence itself on his face. It was hard, but what they were about to face would be much harder.

The curtain separating them from the frightening world outside swung open. Cullen gripped her tighter for a split second, but thought better of his instincts and released her. “Oh my God,” she heard before she turned around. “Oh, thank God.”

“Daddy?”

Belle turned around. Her father stood in the opening where the curtain hung. His eyes were wide and teary, and his hands trembled at his sides. He was thinner than he’d been last time she saw him, his beard whiter. She froze at the sight of him, halted by her disbelief. The moment he moved, tears blinded her vision. She held out her arms toward him and sobbed. “Oh God, Daddy!”

Her father swept her into an embrace and hugged her close. He said something she couldn’t hear over the sound of her crying. She wept into him like a lost child. She cried so hard and so loud that she figured she would never be able stop. He pulled her from his shoulder to look at her, and he wiped the tears from her melted face.

“I thought I’d never see you again. I was so scared I’d never see you again.”

“Me too.”

“Your hair’s so long,” said her father.

“It grew,” said Belle through her weeping.

“Oh my God, Belle!” A woman’s voice joined the melee.

Belle’s stepmother, Ilana, rushed into the room in a frenzy of dark, frizzy curls. Belle sobbed a greeting to her. Ilana put a hand on Belle’s cheek. Belle cried into the palm of the woman who reared her, and they smiled soggy smiles at one another.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” said Ilana. Belle didn’t answer. “Are you okay?”

Belle sniffled hard and long to keep her snot from clouding her voice. “Yeah. Just a little dehydrated. I guess they dumped us in Brea Canyon, of all fucking places. We’re lucky we didn’t get eaten by fucking coyotes.”

“Of all the things to feel lucky for, that’s what you pick?” said Ilana with a short, damp chuckle.

Belle grinned at her family like a mushy madwoman, tear-soaked and split. She never thought she would see their faces again, and there they stood. But what she’d left behind gnawed at her, and who
she’d brought back needed addressing. She leaned back from the tangle of her parents’ embrace.

“Dad, Ilana,” she said as she took Cullen’s hand and looked to him, “this is Cullen.”

A hush befell everyone in the small room, bloated with questions and emotions.

*Boong. Janitorial to two-oh-five, please.*

Belle’s father wrested himself from his perplexity and smiled. He shook Cullen’s hand. The clasping of their hands was a firm, noisy thing. “Good to meet you, Cullen. I’m Dov.”

“And you, ser.”

Ilana looked Cullen in the eye as she reached between everyone to shake his hand. “Hi, I’m Ilana.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Ilana.” His tone was a bit terse, making his words somewhat unconvincing.

From then, the conversation turned rather cursory. Belle’s parents told her they’d had all of her things moved to storage—in a unit next to Spencer’s belongings—and that her paid off blue Honda was sitting in a covered storage lot in Anaheim. She asked if her hard drives were safe, and her father told her that yes, they were in her fire safe on top of the piles of her things, and, incidentally, why didn’t she ever lock her fire safe because someone could just break in and steal her identity. Ilana shushed him and went on to say that they had two separate suites at the hotel near the Brea Mall on an open reservation because, well, they couldn’t renew Belle’s lease without her and they didn’t know whether she’d want to stay with them or by herself, and, well, now that they knew Cullen was there, she probably wanted her own room.

Throughout the conversation, both her parents glanced at Cullen several times. Belle understood. Cullen was a wildcard, an unexpected entity. She knew neither of them could fathom why Belle would bring Cullen with her instead of her brother. She tried not to concern herself with what was going on in their minds just then. She would explain what she could tomorrow.

They asked Belle if she was ready to go, and she requested a moment alone with Cullen. They acquiesced, closing the curtain behind them. His jaw was set tight, which only served to enhance the bewilderment in his amber eyes. His palms were clammy against her fingers. “This is a lot,” she said.

“That is an understatement. I can hardly understand anything your parents are talking about, and this Maker damned light is bright enough to rouse the dead.”

“I hate to break it to you, but there are a lot of painfully bright lights here. Almost exclusively.”

“Of course there are.” A tiny snarl curved his scar.

Belle’s brow furrowed in her consternation. “I’m sorry.”

Cullen shook his head. “Nothing to be done.”

“My parents got a room for us at an inn nearby, and they want to know if we’re ready to go there.”

“If it means I can change out of this drafty nightdress and get away from all this noise, yes.”

“It means the first thing, yeah. But we’re in the middle of a major metropolitan area. Everywhere’s noisy compared to pretty much anywhere in Thedas. I just want you to be prepared for that. And we’re going to get in a car, remember I told you about those.”
Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. Agitation emanated from him like a cloud of toxic radiation. “Fine.” He stood to change without another word. He snatched up his clothes and whipped them into separate piles before dressing. Belle watched for a moment, anxiety flicking at her temples.

They left the hospital with Cullen’s armor under their arms. Belle’s parents made no comment about the clanging metal, or about her strange Orlesian garments, but passersby had plenty to say. A teenage girl even wanted a photo. Cullen glared at her while Belle politely declined.

Belle’s father brought around the silver rent-a-car just as they stepped outside. “Maker’s breath, it’s so hot. Are the seasons different here?”

Belle opened her mouth to explain, but Ilana cut her off with a short laugh. “That’s assuming there are seasons in Southern California. The temperature here ranges from hot to hotter, all the way up to Satan’s asshole, and down to a bit chilly. It’s why her father and I moved north.”

“North?”

“You mind if we put your stuff in the trunk?” said Belle’s father. “Car’s going to get pretty crowded if we bring that up front.”

Cullen was dubious as he watched the trunk buzz open. He craned his neck and stuck his head down into the compartment. “Will it be safe here?”

“Yeah, man, it’ll be safe. It’ll be right here for us to take out when we get to the hotel.”

Cullen stayed dubious as he placed his armor into the trunk. He shot Belle an odd look when he took his gauntlets from her hands. She did her best to reassure him without words, but her efforts were in vain. He got into the cramped backseat of the car and sat without closing the door. When Belle’s father closed if for him, Cullen winced. Belle showed him how to put on his seatbelt, and he winced again when the car began to move.

Cullen was taught and strained during the entirety of the eight minute ride to the hotel. He griped Belle’s hand and the door handle until his already pale knuckles went sheet white. He stared out the window at all of the other cars, homes, and small businesses whirring by. His head swung back and forth over and over, and Belle was sure he was making himself carsick.

He proved her right when he got out of the car. He swayed on his feet and swallowed several times while he removed his armor from the trunk. Belle’s parents, in their uncanny wisdom, had already checked in for both rooms, and they gave her two keycards. The rooms were on the third floor, but Belle suggested she and Cullen take the stairs. Elevators were scary enough for people who knew what they were, and Cullen was claustrophobic. In theory, they had time to address elevators later, when they were less out of their element.

Belle’s parents offered to come into the room with them, but Belle apologized and told them she would come to their room later if she was feeling up to it. Her parents were wonderful, intelligent people. They smiled kind smiles, hugged her, and told her everything would be okay, that she could take her time, that they were there if she needed them. She had no doubt she would need them.

The suite was the size of a small apartment, though Cullen didn’t seem to notice. He set his armor in an armchair near the bolted down desk, and he stared down at the heap of fur, cloth, and metal with a blankness Belle couldn’t read. He cut a strange figure in the modernized room, his hand-spun and hand-sewn tunic and pants a stark contrast to the mile of synthetic fabrics coating every inch of floor and furniture.
“We’ll go across the street to Target tomorrow and get some clothes,” said Belle after a few moments of watching him watch his armor. Of course there was a Target across the street from their hotel, and of course there was a mall right behind it. That was the Brea way of life. Eat, shop, eat, work, eat, shop, sleep, repeat.

“What Target?” asked Cullen without looking. She’d left the lights off, and the sun had begun to set. The darker the room became, the more he was obscured.

“It’s the name of a store. It’s really big, and it has pretty much everything we need.”

“Do they sell weaponry or dummies there?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then why do they call it ‘Target?’”

“I don’t know.”

Cullen sighed. His large, strange figure wilted a little in the blued fading light. He slumped down onto the couch, holding his head in his hands. Belle clicked on a shaded lamp, casting a melancholy orange glow throughout the room. He didn’t react. She sat beside him on the couch and rubbed his back.

He spoke after the sun had set. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand what?”

“Any of this.” He dropped his hands from his face and looked at her. Confusion and rage roiled within him and out through his eyes. “I don’t understand anything. How did this happen again? What happened? I don’t understand anything anyone is saying to me, and I don’t know what anything is!” His voice rose with his body. He made wild gestures as he began to pace.

“It’s okay. We can—”

“What is this—this thing?” he asked as he grabbed the TV remote off the coffee table.

“It’s a remote. It turns the TV on and—”

“I don’t know what that means!” He hurled the remote against the opposite wall, sending the back cover and two batteries flying off in different directions. Belle jumped and made a small sound. “I don’t understand!”

“Hey!” The single word jumped out of her like a bark. Cullen stopped where he stood. “I know it sucks. Okay? I know. This is not the first time this happened to me. But I didn’t come to Skyhold and start breaking shit. You’re tired. I get it. We’ve both been through hell. This is bass-fucking backwards and upside fucking down! But at least we’re together. I’m so fucking sorry and so fucking relieved you’re here. Do you know what it would have done to me to be pulled back here without you? It would have ruined me! Fucking. Ruined. Me. So, yeah, fine, I’m a selfish asshole, but thank God you’re here. Thank God!” She crowed her exclamation skyward before looking back to Cullen.

All the fury fled his face. “Forgive me,” he said with all the contrition of a man who felt his guilt too deep. “I hadn’t considered… I didn’t think it was really possible that you were unhappy to be back here. This is your home, and you seemed to miss it for so long.”

“Yeah, well… not anymore. I missed my parents, but I got used to the rest. Now I have way more
people to miss. P’s still back there, too.”

Cullen pulled her into his arms. She let herself rest against him. An exhausted energy whirled through her blood to make her limbs itch. She longed for stillness and for movement, for sleep and for wakeful verve, all in equal measure.

Cullen’s lips on her neck surprised her. The delicate kiss he laid against her skin brought with it a peculiar kind of desire. Belle rolled her chin on his shoulder, inviting another. He kissed her neck again, slow and lingering. Her fingers closed against his back and around his shirt, and she sighed. He kissed her neck again, then he kissed her ear, then her jaw.

When their lips met, it flipped a desperate switch. Manic energy swept their hands over each other’s bodies, and delirium brought Belle’s back to the floor. Fraught and frantic, they removed each other’s clothes. Her corset ripped, and a small hole in Cullen’s tunic widened. With Belle’s ass and Cullen’s knees scraping against the rough and dingy Berber carpet, he thrust into her. They moaned and whined together, and his hands pressed at her wrists and her forehead until his arms snaked around her back. With their nakedness press together in full, with his knees spreading her legs further apart, with her fingernails digging deep divots in his shoulder blades, they came. It was grounding, a frenetic confirmation of their corporeality. They were tangible, concrete because they could feel one another. They were actual because they could see and touch and taste and smell and hear each other. Their carnality was their physicality was their mortality.

She would get a Plan B in the morning. Lord knew plans A through Z were fucked anyway.

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Chapter End Notes

Maker help us all, Cullen’s in Orange County! *turmoil ensues*

Sorry there's so much dialogue. It just really needed to be there, so I hope you don't mind. ^_^

Also, woohoo! I managed to end a cliffhanger in less than two weeks! XD
Of all the mystifying contraptions Belle showed him that first morning in Orange County, the shower was Cullen’s favorite.

When they woke from their troubled slumber, she first demonstrated use of something she called a “Tee-Vee,” which seemed to him a larger and more sentient version of the smartphone she had once shown him in Thedas. It flashed noisy imagery in a thousand screeching colors at a time. He found it rather obnoxious.

Next, she showed him a refrigerator, or “fridge” as she seemed so fond of calling it, an ungainly cold storage closet powered not by ice runes, but by electricity. After that, she half demonstrated the use of a microwave, activating it with nothing inside. She said it would ordinarily be used to cook food faster than fire. How anything could cook food faster than fire was beyond him, but when he put his face near the black glowing box to examine it, Belle pulled him away. She chided him, telling him that was a good way to get cancer.

The wonders of indoor plumbing followed. The kitchen sink tapped into a seemingly endless supply of water, though Belle explained that there was likely still a drought in California, so they should be careful how much water they used. Even more intriguing about the sink, in Cullen’s view, was that the temperature of the responding water could be controlled through the use of just two knobs. When she took him into the bathroom—her term for a privy—the sink used only one knob, but the temperature still bent to their whims with a twist of the wrist. Left for hot, right for cold. Belle said it should always be that way, unless someone installed the fixture backwards. She lamented several discoveries of backwards fixtures the hard way.

The toilet soon became Cullen’s second favorite contraption that morning. Belle lifted a white ring and urged him to relieve himself into the porcelain bowl of apparently clean water. Cullen thought it wasteful, but he complied. She stood by while he did, but he did not mind. Having other men and women around for this sort of activity was a matter of course in Thedas, and he paid no mind to the urging of the door of this bathroom toward privacy. His too-full bladder empty, Belle handed him several squares of flimsy paper with which he was meant to clean himself. She lowered the white circle, the toilet’s seat, and told him to always raise it before urinating and lower it before flushing. His confusion at the difference between urinating and flushing made her smile, and she pushed down on a small silver handle. “Flushing,” she said. In a flurry of sound that made him flinch, his waste was whisked away on the tide of the small bowl, sent plummeting through a wide hole at the bottom.

“Where did it go?”

Belle smiled again. “To the sewer, then to a waste water treatment plant where it gets filtered and destroyed, then someone will reuse the water to water their grass. Like a golf course or something.”

“Why must I lower the seat before flushing?”

“Because I have no interest in fucking falling in.”

Then came the shower. The blessed shower. It looked, at first glance, like a ceramic horse trough with a curtain. The curtain looked as if someone had drunk two dozen containers of random paints and vomited them all over the cloth. Vivienne would have torn it from its cold steel rod and snapped
her fingers to set it alight. Cullen shuddered.

His shuddering ceased when Belle began to disrobe. He watched her pull her tunic over her head, and he watched her long red curls fall about her bare waist. With her breastband still in place, she leaned over and tugged on a knob protruding from the wall. Raucous water punched its way out of the large spigot near the edge of the trough. She turned to look at him and pulled a small toggle on the spigot, explaining her actions as a redirection of the water’s flow. As sure as she described it, the water rushed like rain out of another spigot much higher on the wall.

“Take off your clothes,” she said. Cullen obeyed. “Spacetime travel is dirty business.”

Belle tested the water with her fingers before stepping into the trough, which he then recognized as a tub. She groaned as the steaming stream of water battered against her neck and breasts. Cullen’s cock twitched. She reached out a wet hand, and he took it. She bade him follow her example, and he did. She closed the paint vomit curtain behind him.

Bathing had always been rather inconvenient for a man of his size. Most communal tubs were made for smaller men, nobles and famers and the like. As a result, Cullen often found himself standing for the sake of his knees and elbows, though it made cleansing a chilly endeavor. Water never stayed warm on a scrubbing cloth or on flesh for long. He had never considered pouring it over himself because it would have made a mess, and his fellow Templars would not have appreciated his dampening of their clothes while they bathed in close quarters.

But this shower, this was a miracle. Perfect water washed over him in a steady surge, warming and soothing his beleaguered body. He dipped his head into the torrent to soak his face and hair. He inhaled the warm air, feeling for the first time in his life as though he could breathe underwater.

“I always took showers for granted,” said Belle behind him. Her hands appeared around his waist, one holding a little pink bar of what must have been soap and the other holding a frothy white cloth. Her hands retracted again, and they caressed his shoulders and his back. She worked in gentle sweeping motions with the cloth, her bare hand following along to rinse away the soap and filth from his skin. Cullen groaned. She chuffed.

“I wish I could say I wouldn’t take them for granted anymore,” she said as she washed his arms. “But I probably will.” Her hands glided down his back and over his backside and down his legs. “It just becomes another chore.” She swept back up his legs. Her breasts pressed against his back when she moved to wash his chest and stomach. “Something you have to do every morning.” His cock twitched again.

It did not stop this time. It rose and filled. Every trickling droplet of soap and water tickled and tingled and made it harder, almost to the point of pain. Belle ran the cloth along the flesh on either side of it, teasing the base with soft foamy suds. Her lips were wet on the back of his neck. Her hair stuck to his shoulder blades. She dropped the cloth between his legs and coiled her fingers around his length.

Belle stroked him in slow and measured motions. Cullen closed his eyes, lost in the scalding water and in the smoothness of her palm. He reached behind him to press her to him in full, and he held her against him by the supple muscle of her backside. She nuzzled into the crook of his neck, humming a quiet and unfamiliar tune. Her spine curved, tucking the soft flesh of her belly into him. He wrapped his free hand around hers to guide her. He squeezed with her fingers, scaling her tempo and wringing out his pleasure with the slick firmness of their combined grip. She raked her nails up into his hair and tilted his head back to bite his earlobe. He growled.

“How does that feel, Commander?” said Belle in a voice like the water pounding their bodies. He
could not answer. His words were lost, tangled in her fingers as they scraped his scalp and massaged his cock. His only means of response was to burrow his blunt nails deeper into the flesh of her bottom. She chuckled, a sound as dark as the world before his pinched shut eyes. “Come, Commander.”

Cullen was always good at following orders, and he was not about to let his reputation slip. He spilled himself on her command, hissing and moaning into their artificial downpour. Belle rinsed his spend from her fingertips before embracing him and pressing a brief kiss to the bottom of his neck.

“All clean,” she said.

Cullen chuckled. “Quite thoroughly.”

Belle laughed in answer. “Good. But now I’m freezing.”

Only then did he notice he had blocked the stream of water with his size. “Maker’s breath, I—forgive me.”

“Wanna get out and get dressed while I finish up? There are some towels on that rack there.”

“Of course.”

Cullen stepped out of the tub, careful not to slip on the shiny floor. Belle closed the curtain as he took a cloth from a small metal shelf. It felt rough, though it was nothing to which he was unaccustomed. He donned his soiled clothes with no small amount of regret at the touch of their filth to his cleanliness. He had no choice, however. He thought perhaps he might shower again before changing into the clean clothes they planned to purchase.

With nothing to tame his curls, he left the privy to wait for Belle in the sitting room. While he waited, his hair dried into an absurd mess. One rogue curl draped itself over his forehead. A pesky cobweb that would not be cleared away, despite his repeated blowing.

A rhythmic series of knocks against the door startled him. Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock, knock knock. Cullen retrieved his sword from the chair before approaching the door. He could not know who waited on the other side, nor if they meant to do harm to him or to Belle. His gut cried out as he opened.

“Hi!” said Ilana, glossy cheerful blue eyes and glossy cheerful mulberry lips smiling from the other side.

“Hey,” said Dov with a short wave. “Brought you guys breakfast so you wouldn’t miss it.” He and his wife each held a black tray in their hands, both coated with Orange County foodstuffs.

“T-Thank you.” Cullen opened the door wide enough to allow them through.

Ilana chattered away as she walked past him. “We didn’t know what you like, so we just got you a little bit of everything. Hope that’s okay. People are weird about their food, you know, so I get it. We’re just being overly cautious.” She turned around after setting her tray on the small table. “Woah, hey. Sword.” She backed into the table, eyes locked on the long blade in his hand.

“Forgive me,” he said, moving to sheathe the weapon. “I didn’t know you were the one knocking.”

“I appreciate the protective instinct,” said Dov with a brief laugh. “Just a heads up for next time, though, there’s a little peephole in the door so you can see who’s on the other side. No swords required.”
Cullen reached for the back of his neck. “Thank you. I must admit to being a little uncomfortable at my unfamiliarity with my surroundings.”

“I can only imagine. I’m so sorry for what’s happened to you, sweetie.” Ilana gave him a brief but sad little smile. “Belle’s in the shower?” Cullen nodded. “Okay, well then, you get first dibs on the food. Eat, eat, before it all gets cold.”

Cullen leaned over the trays to examine their contents. He recognized one or two of the items and several of the fruits, but not the fluffy yellow mass or the round slivers of bread. “What is this?” He pointed to the fluffy yellow mass.

“The eggs? Do you not like scrambled? We just figured that was the safest bet. We can get them for you poached or fried or something, if you want.”

“No, these will be alright. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen eggs prepared this way. I did not recognize them.”

“What? How did you eat them?”

“Hard or soft boiled, depending on the time of day,” said Cullen. Ilana hummed at him. “And—if I may ask—what are these?” He pointed to the rounded bread.

“Oh God, you’ve never had pancakes before?” Ilana looked at him with a touch of horror.

“Jesus, Ilana,” said Dov from the seat he had taken on the sofa.

She made the same little *tsk* sound Belle sometimes made when someone annoyed her. “What, I’m not allowed to be surprised?”

“Just—Can you let the poor guy eat without making him feel like he’s from fucking Mars or something? Come here and sit down, huh? Relax a little. Let him relax a little.”

“Fine, fine. Sorry, Cullen. Here’s a fork.”

Cullen thanked her and sat in front of one of the heaps of food. The sound emanating from the bathroom shifted from sibilance to high pitched whirring just as he began to eat. He ate the things he recognized first, bacon and toasted bread and strawberries. Everything tasted just a bit different. The bacon was saltier, the bread blander, the strawberries firmer and fresher. Then he tested the eggs. Their flavor surprised him, unlike any egg he had ever tasted. Scrambling them made them delicious instead of dull. His share disappeared before he had the opportunity to suss out their foreign qualities. Next, he tried the pancakes. They dripped with something sticky and viscous and sweet-smelling, and they were luscious and toothsome. Saccharine in the way a dessert was saccharine. It had never occurred to him to eat something so sweet so early in the morning, and he was not sure he ever would again, but these were pleasant this once.

Belle came out of the bathroom in the middle of his second pancake. Cullen stood from the table, feeling guilty over eating before she had the chance. She seemed a bit changed, in spite of her identical attire. Her hair had grown more voluminous, and her curls wound themselves just a little tighter. Her expression bore the same exhaustion. Her posture held the same unintentional sag.

She greeted her parents and thanked them for bringing breakfast, though she only pecked at a few pieces of an orange fruit that was not an orange and a twisted piece of bread. She suggested with her mouth half full that they go to Target before everything got too busy. Then, she asked her father to take her to her storage unit and to someplace called “Fry’s” to get new versions of some of the things she’d left behind in Thedas, then to take her to her car on the way back. She said that she could get
her cards back—whatever she meant by that—and order new a new driver’s license—whatever she meant by that—within the next few days so her parents could stop paying for everything. They waved her off and told her to take her time.

“I just want to be up and running and fucking self-sufficient, okay?”

“Okay,” said Dov. “We get it. We’re just trying to take some of the pressure off you, okay?” Between Dov and Ilana, Cullen was beginning to understand the way Belle spoke. “Whatever you need.”

Belle closed her eyes and sighed. “Yeah. Okay, sorry.” She sighed again. “Sorry.” Cullen took her hand. She smiled, wan and on the verge of tears.

Dov stood with some difficulty and put his hands on his daughter’s shoulders. He shook her in a form of familial jest that made her chuckle. “It’s okay, Cutie.” He kissed the top of her head, and her tears receded, her smile soft but widening. His beard was once the same color as her hair. His eyes were rich and brown, a different shape than hers. She had her mother’s eyes. She had her father’s face.

Cullen began to miss his family.

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Target was as Belle had described it. After waiting in the incomprehensible heat for a red light to extinguish itself in favor of a green one, they all crossed the road from their lodging into a swath of uninhabited cars and nonnative trees. People milled about, many with very small and very loud children. Some pushed around carts built of red baskets that appeared suspended in the air over a set of wheels. Each cart contained the odd assortment of unrecognizable goods in every unholy shade of blaring color.

Cullen stopped several feet from the wall of windows where there should have been an entrance. Belle and her parents continued walking straight toward the glass. Just as he began his call for them to stop, the glass parted, allowing them through unmolested. Cullen followed, though he made every effort to discern what force caused the windows to open unprovoked.

Inside, he was confronted with two sets of stairs that moved up and down on their own. He clenched his teeth as he watched them glide in opposite directions. While he stared, a sort of chime sounded to his left. A silver door slid open to reveal a mother with two children and an overloaded cart. She stepped through the door, and he saw that the room from which she exited was the size of a large closet. There was no door on the other side.

Belle took his hand, ripping him from his idle confusion. “Come on,” she said, and she took him toward the gliding stairs. He pulled back a bit, and she said, “Commit to one stair and step onto it with both feet. Don’t freak out.”

She demonstrated, pointing at the flat black grate that hummed out from under the metal floor to rise and morph into stairs. “Follow me.” She stepped onto the grate and began to move away from him, still holding his hand. Cullen scrambled forward in an attempt to follow, but the steps transformed under only the front half of his feet. He stumbled. His stomach lurched. He was falling.

Belle tugged him toward her, her other hand gripping the moving handrail. With her help and the help of the rail, he regained a semblance of his balance. A shaky breath left him as he found his footing. His stomach stayed at the bottom of the stairs. “Maker’s breath.”
“Sorry. If it makes any difference, I’ve almost fallen on at least a dozen of these things. Escalators require a weirdly specific kind of hand-eye coordination.”

“Why not simply use stairs?” said Cullen. Belle helped him step off before the place he was standing disappeared.

“Because people are lazy,” said Ilana.

“Oh it’s too difficult for them to climb the stairs.” Dov cast a wry glance at his wife. She put up her hands in concession.

The shop proper was gargantuan. Its walls stretched beyond Cullen’s vision, though he found himself half blinded by the sea of lights beaming down from every inch of the ceiling. Red banners bearing screaming white letters and numbers were festooned about, sprouting from shelves, dangling from this item or that. Hundreds of people wandered through narrow aisles coated in alien goods, all murmuring and laughing and shouting. An amalgam of scents swirled in the air before forcing their way up his nose to nauseate him. Contraptions beeped and buzzed and rumbled in discord from every direction. Bizarre music pumped and sloshed in a deluge from above with no musicians in sight.

Panic gripped at his chest. His breath and his heart began to race. Sweat beaded on his brow. His eyes attempted to follow dozens of people amid the swarm at once.

“Hey,” said a voice that was near and far. A hand grazed his arm. “Hey, shhh.”

Cullen’s gaze locked onto Belle. A veneer of smooth serenity enameled her features. Her hand found his, and he locked it in his grasp. “You’re okay. It’s safe here. No one’s going to touch you. No one’s going to hurt you or attack you. It’s okay.”

Cullen nodded. His panic eased. His breath and his heart slowed. The sweat on his brow cooled. His eyes held still and firm on Belle. Her brows furrowed and rose, a question without a question. “I’m alright,” he said. She smiled, and he released her.

She left his side and dragged a cart from one of four long rows. “Okay,” she said. “We don’t have all day. Divide and conquer. Ilana, you remember all my bed, bath, and blah blah brands?” Ilana nodded. “Awesome. Can you grab sundries, then? Toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoos, conditioners, deodorants, soaps, et cetera. And maybe a nice pomade for Cullen.”

“Oh, but you have such lovely curly hair.”

Cullen’s still trembling hand wandered up the back of his neck, following his rushing flush. “Thank you.”

“I agree, but he doesn’t like it in his face. So, pomade, yeah?” Belle’s head swung up and down and back and forth when she spoke. Ilana nodded again. “Cool. Oh yeah, shit.” Belle leaned in to whisper something to her stepmother, and Ilana’s brows rose high on her forehead, tugging up the corners of her mouth before she nodded a third time.

“Dad, you know all my food allergies and shit, can you grab us some groceries? Sandwich stuff, shit we can microwave, snacks, fruit, maybe juice. Oh, and can you get me some Cheetos and Doritos? Oh! And chocolate. Fucking chocolate.” Her words melted into a drool.

“Yup.” Dov took the handle of the cart, rolling it into place for him to push off toward the source of all Belle’s requested food.
“Cool. Cullen?” She turned to him, lacing their fingers together. It was his first moment of true ease in hours. “Clothes. Once more into the Breach!” He snorted. She smirked. “Too soon?”

“Perhaps.”

“Oh well. We’ll all reconvene near the café by customer service. That way you can get a coffee if you want,” she said to her father.

Their cadre splintered into three parts, headed in three different directions. Cullen held Belle’s hand tight for fear of losing her in the massive and strange building. He followed her toward an expanse of colorful fabrics, each dangling or folded in crop-like bunches and rows. The determination in her marching steps gave him a modicum of reassurance as to where it was they were going and what it was they were doing.

The first discernable group of clothing that came into his view could scarcely be labeled as such. Dozens of glorified breastbands and smalls hung in a square formation. Several images of young women wearing only those items as they frolicked outdoors flanked the mortifying display. In her profound mercy and propriety, Belle walked past without even looking at the tiny garments. She muttered to herself. “Basics. Basics. Basics.”

She continued muttering to herself as they wove through the field of fabric. “What size am I anymore, even?” She snatched up two of the same shirt. “Sale. Two. Nah, three.” Two, no, three pairs of somewhat blue breeches made of a fabric Cullen had seen her wear in her first week in Thedas. “Shirts. Shirts, shirts. More shirts than pants.” She sifted through countless tunics of all shapes and colors, plucking herself a heaping armful. “Do I even need a jacket here anymore? Eh. Hoodie.” “Ech, who designed that thing?” “Suit. Suitsuitsuitsuitsuit.”

As Belle’s nimble fingers skimmed across miles of apparel, Cullen observed. He observed the focus with which she and others around her avoided speaking to one another. He observed that, while some people spoke like her, many also spoke Antivan. He observed that most people speaking Common around them did so through their noses and high in the back of their throats. Their voices grated at his nerves, their laughter more so.

Two malnourished and adolescent-looking blonde women chirped and giggled in his periphery, staring at him as they did. A number of people had stared at him. One young man tripped and nearly fell. But there was a perniciousness in the leering and tittering of these two.

“Wouldn’t you?” the shorter one asked.

“Hell yeah,” the other said. “Anywhere he wants.”

“What the fuck is he doing with that chunky bitch?”

Outrage bubbled up in Cullen’s chest and into his throat. His hands balled into fists at his sides. He inhaled, long and deep, readying himself to unleash every drop of his wrath.

“Seriously?” said Belle, looking at the impudent women for the first time. “Listen, jealousy ain’t pretty on you, boo boo. Maybe you should look for something that fits you better. I bet they have something in the doggy aisle. Fit you real nice.”

The shorter woman’s mouth dropped open. Her friend laughed and swore. “What did you just say to me? You don’t know me, bitch. I—”

“That’s right, I don’t know you. And you don’t fucking know me, you fucking thirsty, dumbass ratchet. You sure as shit don’t know him. So back the fuck off. Mind your business.” Belle shooed
the woman away with a facetious wave of her hand and turned back to the clothes in front of her.

“Whatever, bitch,” said the woman as her friend ushered her away. “When you’re ready for a real woman, you look me up, baby.”

“Jesus fucking Christ on a pogo stick,” said Belle under her breath. She pushed a line of coats around on the bar from which they hung.

Cullen ran a hand down her back. “What was all that?”

“Just a couple envious savages. They’re mad cause they think you’re too hot for me.”

“What?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, you’re, like, painfully good-looking. It’s obnoxious, really.” Belle smirked and winked at him.

He followed her to the portion of the shop over which hung a large banner exclaiming, “MEN’S CLOTHING.” They both surveyed their surroundings upon their arrival, though Cullen suspected their purposes for doing so diverged somewhat. He sought to map their environment, to seek out hidden dangers. Belle sought the locations of each article of clothing she wanted for him.

Cullen despised being dressed. The last time someone else chose his outfit, he wound up stuffed like a sausage in a bright red jacket, too tight to allow him to combat the groping hands of an Orlesian viper’s nest. Under ordinary circumstances, he was perfectly capable of selecting his own attire. But under these circumstances, he hadn’t the slightest idea of what was comfortable, much less what was in fashion. So he traipsed after Belle, watching her hold a mélange of shirts and breeches up against him and listening to her mutter. “Large? Ehhhh large? Large.” “Men’s pant sizes…” “We’ll try thirty-two, I guess, but I have no fucking idea.” “Thirty-fooouuur inseam?” Her head went sideways as she assessed him. Her critical gaze brought his hand to the back of his neck.

Their arms piled high with assorted fabric. Belle said, “Okay, time to try stuff on. If one thing in one size fits you, it’s a pretty safe bet the rest will. But all this shit—” Her pile jerked up. “It’s all made by different people, which means I have to try at least half this crap on.”

“The tailors don’t all use the same measurements?”

“Nope.”

“That seems unwise,” said Cullen as they approached a row of red doors. “And a little unfair to you.”

“Preach.”

She lead them to the largest of the small red rooms, looking over her shoulder the whole way. The girl sitting behind the barrier they passed was too preoccupied talking to the air and rearranging clothes in front of her to notice them. Belle closed the door and locked it before dropping everything onto a small red stool. The shopkeeper’s obsession with the aggressive color was unending.

Belle stripped off her clothes and boots in a manner much more utilitarian than Cullen was accustomed to seeing from her. He followed her example, folding his tunic and breeches in a neat stack atop his boots. She began flinging clothes on and off, taking only a cursory glance in the mirror and making a dismissive sound or saying, “Okay,” before hurling each item into one of two heaps. He followed her example again, starting with the shirt and breeches nearest the top of his pile.
The shirt was dark green and soft. Softer than anything he had ever worn. He slipped it over his head and pushed his arms through their proper holes. Ignoring the length of the sleeves being much shorter than was customary, something about the garment felt odd. The collar hugged too close to the front of his neck, closer than his armor had done.

Belle looked at him, her head half in and half out of a mauve dress. “Is that on backwards?” She huffed herself into the dress, which Cullen thought looked beautiful on her, and folded down the collar under his throat. “Yeah. Backwards. See?” She held it away from him, displaying a block of nonsensical lettering stuck to the cloth. “That’s the tag. The tag always goes in the back.” He sighed. “It’s okay. There’s a learning curve. Just like me, remember?” She smiled.

He tucked his arms in and spun the shirt to face the right direction. Once adjusted, much to his surprise, it was quite comfortable. In the mirror, it hung the way the images outside lead him to believe it was intended to hang. Satisfied as he could be with his unorthodox appearance thus far, he put on the breeches the sign had described as “DENIM,” but Belle described as “jeans.” The material from which they were crafted was cool and smooth, and the jeans slid up to an agreeable point on his hips. He fastened the top button, but it left a gaping hole over his manhood, surrounded by metal teeth.

As he stared down at the opening and contemplated the forms of torture men in this world were willing to endure, Belle puffed a laugh through her nose. “It’s a zipper.” She stopped buttoning her cobalt shirt halfway up, leaving a pleasant window to her breasts, and pinched a small piece of metal at the base of the rows of teeth. “Watch your junk,” she said as she pulled up and the gap closed. “Pull tab Ay to position Bee. How do they feel? They look like they fit okay. Are they too tight anywhere?” She stuck a finger in his waistband and tugged twice, jostling a nervous laugh out of him.

“No. I believe they fit as they are meant to.”

“Too short? Too long? Can you walk?”

A step forward in any direction would have bumped him into a wall or into her. “It’s a bit hard to tell in here.”

“You can walk the little hallway outside the door. There’s another set of mirrors out there, too.”

He exited the small room, leaving the door open as he attempted as normal a walk as he was able. Everything stayed in its place. The jeans seemed the correct length. Nothing was visible that was not meant to be visible, though he still felt strange having so much of his arms exposed. With his hair so out of order and in this disparate attire, he saw a different man looking back at him through the mirror.

Belle poked out her head and cocked it with a smirk. “What?” said Cullen.

“That outfit’s doing a lot for me right now,” she said. Heat suffused through his cheeks, drawing his hand up to the back of his neck once more. “Oh God, don’t do that. You’re making it worse.” Her smirk widened into a girlish grin, and she covered her mouth and ducked back into their small room.

He looked after her for a moment before turning to examine himself again. The man watching him was tattered despite his new clothes. The man watching him had a beaten and bruised soul that glared out through amber eyes, dark circles forming beleaguered pools beneath them. The man watching him had been overwhelmed by life in every way. Overwhelmed by evil. Overwhelmed by pain. Overwhelmed by love.
Belle selected their undergarments before they met with her parents. She picked something called “boxer briefs” for him so that he could “keep things snug while keeping them loose.” She picked several enticing things for herself, some of them lacy, all of them sleek. He decided he looked forward to seeing them on her, and to taking them off her. He had so little to look forward to, after all.

She also selected their shoes. She chose two pairs for herself. One was black cloth with a very thin and severe heel. The other pair was flat, made of black leather and embellished with small straps across the toe. Cullen had to try on several pairs of the same low brown boots before he found the correct size. A remarkable volume of padding cushioned his feet, and he was hesitant to change back into his Fereldan boots when it was time to leave.

The four cadre members took their loaded cart out of the shop with them after paying what Cullen could only imagine was an exorbitant sum. Dov and Ilana went into the small room he had seen on the way in—a much transformed lift, Cullen discovered—and he and Belle rode the self-propelled stairs down, more successfully than they had on the way up. Belle ate something blue and pebble-like as they exited the shop out into the blazing and oppressive heat. Cullen looked to the sky, certain that the sun could be no more than ten feet from his face. What he saw instead made his heart stop.

“Is that…”

“An airplane,” said Belle.

Cullen waited for Belle to return to their room until after dark. He showered again. He folded his new clothes. He ate an apple. He tried to sleep. He read every scrap of shiny paper on every surface. He found a book in a drawer called “The Holy Bible,” and began to read that. Parts of it were familiar.

When Belle came through the door, she peppered the space with boxes and bags. She stuck a multitude of tiny black bricks into holes in the walls. Each tiny black brick was attached to a tiny black cord. Each tiny black cord was attached to something that lit up. She opened up something that fell somewhere between the Tee-Vee and the smartphone in size, and she called it a laptop. She tethered a larger and shinier black brick to it and left it alone for a few moments.

She produced a new smartphone. Then she produced a second. She handed the second one to him and told him to press this and press that and he could speak to her, no matter where either of them were. She promised to show him more soon, but said she had to make a call before it got too late. Cullen’s bewilderment at the whirlwind of her left him frozen where he sat.

Belle paced as she held the smartphone against her cheek. She swung her feet around her like an impatient little girl and rubbed the back of her left ear with her thumb. She nibbled at a bit of dry skin on her lower lip and ogled the colorful floor. After a few minutes of this, her face brightened.

“Hey! Vic!”

She laughed.

“Oh good, I’m glad he called you. Thanks for sticking by them through all this. I appreciate it more than you could ever know, honestly.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m bad at waiting.”

She laughed again.
“Well, I figured in a couple weeks I could—”

She withered where she stood.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, no, I totally get it. You’re sure—”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I remember you told me about him.”

“Okay.”

“So I should be expecting a call from him?”

“Okay. Will you send me his Vee card?”

“Yeah, no, just so I have it.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, maybe Tuesday, if that’s good for you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks again.”

“Bye.”

Cullen watched Belle’s lip quiver as she took the smartphone from her face and stared at it. Her fingers went pale around the edges of the contraption, the fervor of her grip making her hand tremble. She set the device down on the low table before crumbling onto the cushion beside him. He put his arm over her shoulders, and she tucked herself into him, curling up until her knees nearly pressed against her chin.

“What happened?”

“I lost my job,” she said. Her voice was small, wounded. “I should have expected it I guess. It’s not like a firm that size and that busy can go without an attorney indefinitely. But it was my job. She gave away my job.”

Cullen ran his fingers through her hair. “I’m sorry. I know your work was important to you.” Among their commonalities was their commitment and pride in the completion of their duties. He reveled in her little victory celebrations after she struck a beneficial accord. She always danced in her seat and hummed some unhewn melody.

“It is. It was, I guess. Can’t get a new apartment without a job. No proof of income for the last year. No place to live.” Belle ran her knuckles over her lips. “Vic said she got an interview for me.”

“An interview?”

“Yeah, it’s—When you want to get a job here, you have to, like, schedule a time to meet with someone from the company and talk to them about how you’re qualified for the job and how you’ll be a good fit with their company. You guys kind of did one when I got to Thedas.”
“We did. We did it with almost everyone placed in a role of any influence. But we never had a name for the process, and it was not really something we had time to plan.”

Belle made a sound that might have been a laugh. “Yeah, well everything here runs on a schedule. I had a program at work that kept track of everything I did every six minutes.”

“Maker’s breath, six minutes? That’s hardly even enough time to begin writing a letter.”

“Things are faster here. Always faster.” She paused, but seemed to shake herself before falling too deep into her thoughts. “We billed people for our work in six-minute increments so they wouldn’t have to pay for a whole hour if we only did something small for them.”

“I see.” He did not see.

“This interview…Vic knows a guy that works at this giant company called Microsoft. She met him, like, six or seven years ago. I think maybe they slept together once at some point. I don’t fucking know. Anyway, she said they had a few counsel openings, and she called him about me last night after my dad told her I was back. She talked me up, and now he wants to talk to me about maybe giving me a new job.”

“That was very kind of her.”

“Yeah, it was. But the new job would be in Washington.”

“Where is that?”

“It’s about twelve hundred miles north of here. It’s actually where my dad and Ilana live.”

As compared to Belle’s quiet nonchalance, twelve hundred miles was an unfathomable distance for Cullen. It would take an army more than a month to march that distance. A person on horseback could make better time by a few weeks, at best. “Do you want to go there?”

“I don’t know. I like it there, and the job is basically my dream job. But I’d be leaving the place I lived my whole life.”

“You’ve already done that.”

She looked up at him. Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea were lost, searching his face for an answer to a question he never heard. There was an unnerving frailty about her, like she might simply effervesce and evaporate in the manufactured breeze. “You’re right. And honestly, staying here might be worse. We’d be trying to make a new life inside an old life. Like building a house inside of another house. It will never quite fit. It’ll never feel right—never be the right size. Spencer’s not here anymore. I feel like I never really knew most of my friends. And it’s too fucking hot here, anyway.” Despondency tainted her weak smile, leaving her meager attempt at humor unconvincing.

Nevertheless, Cullen smiled back at her. He brushed the hair from her cheek and held her moon face in his hand. Though their battles would be different, many still lay ahead. He would remain the warrior she needed him to be. He would build them a new life that stood on its own, and he would build them a house that stood on its own, and he would do everything in his power to ensure that he and Belle could stand on their own. This world was his home not because he was trapped here, but because Belle was here. She was his home.

He kissed her forehead. “I love you,” he said. “And I will follow you anywhere.”

“You’ve already done that.”
Chapter End Notes

In summation: showers are awesome, being back sucks, Target is a shitshow, and being without a job bites the big one.

I'm making a few tweaks to the path Belle's life took compared to mine, as some of you who know me may notice, but the poor girl's been through enough, honestly. I also might be dragging her and Cullen behind me to Washington. This bitch gets an interview for my dream job! How dare?

Speaking of all that, I've started my third (and hopefully last) bar prep to get licensed here in WA, so uploads will probably slow down for the next couple months. Thanks for sticking with me!!! <3
Cullen’s newness to the world was like a second infancy. It was adorable and impatient, sweet and frustrating. He had questions about everything in their first month of living in Orange County. He asked Belle some questions she didn’t have answers to, and he asked her some questions that didn’t really have answers. The fecundity of his imagination was boundless. It was impressive, and it was exhausting.

She showed him how to use the internet on her laptop early on. She watched him do what she had done when she first got to Thedas. Research. He clicked and clicked and clicked, treading dozens of varied informational pathways a day, drinking up knowledge like a man in an oasis surrounded by a million miles of desert in every direction. She supposed he was a man lost in the desert, really. In the back of her mind, she worried he would reach the point of knowing more about the world than she did.

Cullen began by educating himself on the topics that interested him the most. He started with war. The long-documented history of tens of thousands of battles took his pouring over for nearly a week. Faster than Belle could have consumed all that information. At one point, however, the geographical proportions of the world popped onto the screen alongside the current global population. The size of Earth and the amount of people on it put him in a state for two hours. His brow furrowed and unfurrowed, and he paced around their suite’s living room trying to reason it out.

“These numbers cannot possibly be correct. How can there be that many people in this world? Nearly eight billion?” he said, distracting Belle from her neglected Tumblr feed for the fifth time since his pacing began.

She let her wrist go limp as she flicked her attention to him, knocking her phone into her bare ankle. She groaned, and half sighed her reply. “Dude, I dunno. A combination of the spread of mass religious beliefs that advocate copious reproduction, improvements in medical science to stop people from dying from literally everything, and really shitty birth control methodologies up until the past couple decades. You could have Googled that.”

Cullen glowered down at her. “I apologize that it is not yet my first instinct to beg answers to my questions from a machine.” His tone was razor sharp.

Belle set her jaw hard. So did Cullen. Several brutal seconds into their tiny standoff, she relented. She shut her eyes and inhaled. The cool, conditioned air buzzed in through her nose and blew out through her pursed lips. When she opened her eyes, much of Cullen’s ire had melted into a complicated kind of remorse.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“So am I.” He brushed his hand across her shoulder before returning to whatever dark corner of the internet he’d found in his endless clicking. A passing gesture of love stretched thin by proximity and inactivity.

Cullen’s click-click-clicking lead him next to history. He told Belle he intended to focus on the history of her nation, but she suspected, after seeing images of several very steepley, thousand-year-old-looking churches splashed across her 4K laptop screen, that he had wandered well past the
United States. Those same steepley, thousand-year-old-looking churches dragged him into religion. She knew he’d discovered the sordid and bloody history of Judaism when, following a dispersion of disgusted grunts, he sat on the couch beside her and swept her into his arms. He clutched her tight, wondering aloud how her people seemed so happy after all they went through. She thought to bring up the elves, but decided against it when he buried his nose in her hair.

Religion led back to war, as it so often did. Belle watched as Cullen found himself at a loss for what to read. He thought he’d exhausted the contents of the entire internet. She pressed her lips together to bite back a giggle at the sight of his mild distress. But the next day’s malaise, coupled with a rapid response by hotel security to his courtyard palm-tree-dummy training session, brought him back up to their room with questions about physical maintenance. He asked Belle first. She put a hand on her soft gut and reminded him that she was the last person he should be asking about exercise. She ate another Cheeto, and he took to the internet once more. When she woke the following morning, she found him with a towel draped over his shoulder preparing to shower after lifting weights and jogging in the hotel gym while she slept. He was settling in alright, she reckoned.

Eisiminger called them to his office after two weeks of radio silence. He told them that there was no record of any radical group calling themselves “the Inquisition” in any database in any country. Belle said that of course there wasn’t. Why would there be? What kind of sense would that make? She spouted off about shell corporations and airspace rights and that movie, “The Village,” and Eisiminger leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. She didn’t have to feign her anger when she told him that what she and Cullen experienced was real. It was real, and it was painful. The bit about the pain was no lie, either. The anguish of being ripped away from the people she’d grown to call family, not to mention her actual brother, clawed and gnawed at her with incessant persistence. Cullen corroborated her every word.

When she ran out of steam and all she could do was sit and seethe, Eisiminger apologized. He didn’t apologize for his occasionally suspicious glances or his sporadically accusatory tone. She didn’t expect him to apologize for that. That was behavior she would hope for in a detective, had she presented him a real crime to solve. Instead, he apologized for the lack of progress on her case. He told her that, with no leads and nothing more on which to follow up, he was going to have to put her case in the “inactive” file. She put on a dramatic show of anger to hide her relief, tearing up and scowling, demanding something more be done. Eisiminger apologized again, and Cullen put on his own dramatic show of comforting her. Eisiminger went on to recommend that Cullen apply for a U-visa if he planned on remaining in the country, and handed him a form. Belle knew full well that the single form was insufficient, and said as much before she and Cullen stormed out of the Homicide Bureau’s offices. She wept real tears when they got into her little blue car.

On the third week, Belle sent her parents home to Washington. They protested for hours before and during dinner at the little Italian restaurant in Downtown Brea that was always too busy. Cullen sat at the outer edge of the booth and faced the door while they ate and argued, still hypervigilant, still nervous. Belle was too, if she was honest. They both jumped when someone dropped a plate. He reached for his absent sword. Everyone cheered at the waiter. Belle’s hand trembled until Cullen took it in his under the table. Her father narrowed his eyes at her in a silent question, and she answered him with a near imperceptible shake of her head.

Not long after, he capitulated. He caved first, as she suspected he might. He tried to bring Ilana around by reminding her that they should probably get ready for Belle and Cullen to move north, because Belle was a shoo-in for that job at Microsoft, of course. Fear and discomfort passed over Ilana’s face for a moment. She said something in a voice so soft that the discordant eaters around them drowned it before it could reach Belle’s ears.

Belle’s father nodded, and Ilana swayed with the cadence of his hand running up and down her
back. “We’re only a few hours away if he comes back.”

Ilana’s eyes went watery, but she nodded too. Belle and Cullen shared a communicative glance. It was time to tell her parents why Spencer wasn’t there, why she and Cullen were so jumpy, why he needed a U-visa.

She sat her parents on the sofa in their suite after dinner. Unwelcome news was always taken best when surrounded by the comfort of one’s own belongings. Cullen sat in the chair next to Ilana, and Belle stood. She was accustomed to making presentations, and standing gave her a feeling of control over what was about to happen.

“I’m going to start telling you what I have to tell you in a second,” she said. “But first, I need to know that both of you know I’m not crazy. I’ve never exhibited signs of any mental illness that would alter my perceptions of reality, right?”

“Right,” said her father.

“Of course not,” said Ilana.

“Okay. Dad, you’re an engineer, and I know you’re not that kind of engineer, but what do you know about wormholes?”

He cocked his head. “Not a whole lot. The bit with the hole in the folded piece of paper is about it.”

Belle let out an irked little noise. She paced in front of the lifeless black television. Two steps left, two steps right. “So—and again, I swear I’m not crazy—what I told the police—what I told you—is about half true. Spencer and I were in a place called Thedas, and Cullen really does come from there, but—” The words caught in her throat, causing a strangled squeak. “Thedas isn’t anywhere on Earth.”

“What?” said Ilana.

“It sounds insane. It sounds one hundred percent batshit cuckoo coco-nuts, I know. But I was waiting for an Uber outside my apartment to take me to the airport, and this green hole thing that I can only assume was a wormhole or something like that just appeared on the sidewalk and sucked me up. Just sucked me and my bags right up.” Belle pantomimed with her hand, flicking her wrist and closing her splayed fingers. “And when I woke up, I was someplace else. The geography of the land was different than here, and the seasons were different from here, and I didn’t just stay in one place while I was there. We,” she said as she gestured between herself and Cullen, “rode halfway across the continent on horseback and in carriages. We would have hit some modern civilization by then, right? Then, one random day, another wormhole thing just poofed into existence in front of me and Cullen and ate us both.”

“Wormholes?” said Ilana. The blankness in her tone welled up anxiety in Belle’s chest. Her flowy T-shirt felt three sizes too small.

“Yeah. Wormholes. That’s why Spencer isn’t here, why he didn’t come back too. They were just these blips. Opened and closed.”

“My confirmation of what she says cannot mean much to you, such as things are,” said Cullen, “but everything she says is true. In Thedas, we call these wormholes ‘rifts.’ Spencer fell out of a rift about three months before Belle did, but that’s how both of them arrived in Thedas. And it’s how Belle and I were taken from Thedas to arrive here.”

Belle’s father cleaved the long silence that followed before it grew too great to bear. “So Spencer…”
He stopped, searching for the words, searching for the question to which he might even begin to put words.

“Spencer’s alive and well. He’s actually pretty happy there. He met someone.”

“My sister, Rosalie.”

Ilana wore confused horror like a mask over her usually happy face. Belle’s father opened and closed his mouth like a fish drowning in air. She hadn’t planned this, she realized. Hadn’t done it right. Predict, prepare, preempt. She forgot to follow her mantra, and now she was ruining her parents’ lives. They were sitting in front of her trying to figure out if they should commit her. Slap her in the loony bin with the rest of the crazies. Deport Cullen to nowhere or hold him in ICE lockup on indefinite detention because they would never, ever figure out his country of origin.

Belle stood in the prison of her anxiety, spinning out into oblivion. Then her father asked, “Why you?”

“Huh?”

“Why you? And why Spencer? I mean, I love you, and don’t take this the wrong way or anything, but neither of you are that special.”

Belle laughed. It was a delirious thing, and it burst out of her without warning. She wasn’t helping the case for her sanity. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “No one there knew either. And it’s not like I can run around asking proper astrophysicists why without sounding bananas crazy.”


“Me too,” said Belle’s father.

“Really?” said Belle.

“Yeah. And, honestly, it’s more plausible than human trafficking.”

“What?”

“You really think you, of all people, would get kidnapped and escape and come back here without telling every single person you talked to some crazy story about how you punched at least one guy in the face?”

“Or stabbed one to death,” said Belle.

Her father gave her the side eye. “Or stabbed one to death.”

Her parents flew back to Washington two days later.

Four weeks after Belle and Cullen’s unceremonious landing in Orange County, she had her Skype interview with the council of counselors for Microsoft. Vic’s friend, Josh, sat between two women, and across from one woman and one man. They were friendly, and they asked her all the questions Josh told her they would ask when she’d spoken to him on the phone three weeks earlier. She felt as prepared as she could have been, having spent a year without any technology just before interviewing for one of the largest tech companies in the world. She offered a few quips, and the council of counselors laughed just the right amount.
Cullen sat on the sofa two feet away and watched the entire process. After almost an hour and forty-five minutes of back and forth, the council of counselors muted their end of the conversation to deliberate. Belle watched their mouths move, but they were too far from the camera, their mannerisms too subdued for her to make out what any of them said. She reached for Cullen’s hand out of view of her webcam. The warmth of his calluses on her palm and her fingertips reminded her that she had been battle-hardened. She had been through so much worse than waiting for a few lawyers to decide whether she was skilled enough to work for them. She had been stabbed, for Christ’s sake. Twice.

The council of counselors unmuted their microphone, and Alicia, the woman sitting across the conference table from Josh, told Belle that Josh and the other two women were going to be stepping out for the duration of the conversation. Belle said her farewells, and Josh winked toward the camera on his way through the metal doorframe.

When the door to the conference room closed, Alicia folded her hands in front of her and smiled. “Okay, so let’s talk relo expenses. If you have a down payment, we’d like to help you with moving costs and closing.”

Less than half an hour later, Belle was e-signing an employment contract. She started sobbing halfway through the at-will provisions, and Cullen took her up in his embrace. She clung to his powerful forearms as they wreathed around her neck and shoulders. His galvanizing presence reminded her how lucky she was to have him. She loved him so much it was like a stone in her stomach. The certainty that she could provide for them was an indispensable boon, a small but sturdy umbrella in the torrent of fucked up shit raining down on them every day.

But their relationship wasn’t all peaches and light. As time passed, as Belle wrapped up the task of un-disappearing, as she met with everyone she needed to meet, and as she waited for her parents’ video tours of prospective houses, she and Cullen began to go stir crazy. They played a dangerous waiting game that threatened to rend them from one another by exposure. Between them, they managed no more than an hour or so apart each day. He had his burgeoning workout routine, and she had the odd friend with whom to eat lunch and avoid chatting about her disappearance. The other twenty-three hours of the day, they were locked in their suite, alone, bored, and bickering over tiny annoyances.

Sex helped. It staved off the ennui and frustration, and it tethered them to one another in a way that felt natural, unforced. It was also almost the only exercise Belle got in the absence of her daily need to walk up and down five thousand flights of stairs.

During their refractory periods, or their post-argument periods, or really any period not occupied by a solid fuck or something solidly fucked, they watched movies and TV shows and listened to music. Cullen had over thirty years of catching up to do on the media that helped form Belle’s personality, and she was more than happy to use it as an excuse to ease the occasional tension. They situated themselves on the couch, her ankles always crossed over his thighs, and dug into their respective snacks—that douchenozzle nibbled on apples and strawberries while she stuffed her face with Doritos and chocolate—before she hit play.

Cullen’s opinions, as in most cases, formed quickly. He liked John Wayne. He disliked Alfred Hitchcock. He said he thought RomComs were feckless, but Belle caught the worry on his face when it seemed like the main characters wouldn’t end up together. He scoffed when she pointed out that he practically *was* Mr. Darcy. She laughed so hard when he and Matthew Macfayden made the exact same sound in unison that she had to pause the movie with Keira Knightley’s eyes half closed. Cullen conceded.
When it came to music, he surprised her. He favored classical and neo-classical composers, which she anticipated. He grimaced at most EDM, though he tolerated ambient electronica, and he slammed her laptop shut when she started playing her favorite death metal track, which was to be expected. But he asked her to play more of her indie and alternative music, like Ray LaMontagne and Feist and Fleet Foxes, he loved the blues, and he latched onto jazz singers like Billie Holiday. Belle should have known that he would be contrary and old fashioned, even in a different world.

She glanced up at him once, a few minutes after telling her realtor to make an offer on a four-bedroom house with granite countertops in the kitchen and a plum tree in the backyard. He sat at the desk in front of her laptop with his chin resting on his fist. “God Bless the Child” emanated from the speakers as his eyes scanned over some half-visible article about the Yukon gold rush. She watched him for a moment. He squinted and craned his neck toward the screen, and he sighed when he returned to his resting position.

As she watched him, for the first time in more than a month, she didn’t think, well, what the fuck now. For the first time in more than a month, she thought that maybe their lives weren’t ruined. For the first time in more than a month, she thought there might be a future for them that didn’t exist in the past.

He smiled when he caught her staring.

“Just breathe.”

“I am breathing.”

“Yeah, but do it slower.”

Cullen glowered. “Was there no other way to get to Washington?”

“I am not driving for nineteen and a half hours in a rental car. Maybe someday, in our own car, for fun and shit, but I’m not doing it just to move.”

Boong, boong. Flight attendants, please prepare for takeoff.

Cullen jumped at the announcement and squeezed Belle’s hand so tight her fingers began to tingle. His other hand clutched the armrest near the open window. The too-close Orange County morning sun glared rabid on the tarmac outside the thick plexiglass. She wondered if he knew how much she had to love him to give him the window seat.

“What do you need a Valium?” said the leathery woman in the aisle seat. “Or a Xanax? I’ve got both.”

Belle smiled her sweet, phony smile. “Noo, thaaanks,” she said in the way only someone from Southern California could say it. “He’ll be okay. It’s just his first time flying.”

“This is unnatural,” said Cullen through his teeth.

The leathery woman giggled and reached across Belle’s lap to touch Cullen’s thigh. Belle made an ugly face in her shock and repugnance. The goddamn nerve of some fucking people.

“It’s science, honey. Perfectly natural.”

Belle cleared her throat and nudged the woman’s arm. They shared another phony smile as the leathery woman withdrew to her own space. She set about the task of ignoring everyone around her
by putting in earbuds and starting “BIG” on the little screen stuck to the seat in front of her.

Belle shook her head, turning her attention back to her terrified…boyfriend still didn’t sound right. Cullen stared out the small window. The jets on the wings just behind them whirred to raucous life. She couldn’t feel her fingertips anymore. “Do you want to close the window?”

“What?”

“Do you want to see everything, or do you want to close the window?”

“I want,” he said between shallow breaths. “I want to see.”

“Okay.”

Everything began to rattle as the Airbus lurched down the runway. Cullen’s chest heaved. He had to be getting dizzy. The plane sped up until everything outside became a blur of soiled beige and shiny black. He gasped when the aircraft lifted off the ground, and the rattling all around them stopped. Her fingertips started to burn.

He leaned his forehead against the mottled plastic window frame and watched the ground recede. His breathing slowed amid the awe that spread over his face. His mouth hung open, and his grip on Belle’s fingers loosened. The pins and needles set in as the blood poured back into her digits. The plane flew west on its takeoff flightpath, and the wide blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean stretched out beneath them. Cullen looked out ahead, and said, “I have never seen so much.”

“So much what?” asked Belle.

“Everything.”

For the whole hour of their flight, he stared out that window and held Belle’s hand. She watched him watch the deserts fade into mountains, and the mountains blossom into forests. “You were right,” he said when the Pacific Northwest clouds shrouded the earth.

“About?”

“The clouds. It’s like a sea of cotton. And I have never seen sky so blue.”

When they began their descent, Cullen watched the rain part around the wing behind them. Belle explained that they were going so fast they cut through the air and the rain. She helped him pop his ears as the earth came into view once more in shades of gray, blue, and green. She endured the pins and needles in her fingers a second time when they went wheels down.

SeaTac was a much larger airport than the local one from which they’d departed. The volume of people was larger too. Belle rushed them through the terminals to avoid allowing Cullen enough time to become overwhelmed by the crowd. Once they reached the baggage claim, he scowled at the chute until their luggage appeared, both bags flipping end over end. He lifted them off the conveyor belt with enviable ease. Belle saw a few people watch him do it, and watch him for a little too long thereafter.

She had to stop him when he tried to unzip his bag to check on his sword and armor—he wouldn’t let her ship it ahead. It had been difficult enough explaining the blade and plate to TSA when they checked in. They didn’t need to be detained on their way out.

It was raining when they exited the terminal. Belle suppressed a grin at Cullen’s tentative mastery of sliding glass doors. He put his hand out from under the awning to feel the rain on his skin, and he
looked at her with a kind of satisfaction. “Rain is the same everywhere,” he said.

She smiled. “Did you think it was going to come up from the ground?” He shook his head and kissed her forehead.

Her father picked them up in his green SUV a few minutes later. He told them he would have been there faster if anyone knew how to drive in this fucking airport. Belle let Cullen ride shotgun to avoid his carsickness.

“So, Cullen, how was your first flight?”

“Harrowing.”

“Ha,” said Belle.

They stopped at the car dealership on the way to her parents’ house. Cullen told her he wanted to ride home with her father, and she gave him a dubious look before he closed his door and they went on ahead. She verified the car on the lot was the car she ordered. It was bigger, bluer, and sportier than her last vehicle, which she’d sold in Orange County to make their move easier. She made her down payment, signed the paperwork, and followed a few miles behind her men. By the time she reached her parents’ house, her things had been unloaded from the SUV. She parked in the driveway beside it and went into the house.

“Belle? Is that you?” said Ilana’s voice from the kitchen.

“Nope. Just a murderer, here to do some murderin’. Don’t mind me.” Belle hung her raincoat on the rack near the door. “How many people do you guys give your keys to?”

“Oh, anyone who will take one, really.” Ilana’s voice grew closer as Belle followed it into the kitchen. “Dad just goes to the park sometimes and hands them out to vagrants. You know, in case they feel like robbing us blind or relieving us of our lives while we sleep.”

Belle laughed and hugged her stepmother. “I bet they appreciate that. No one likes a house that’s hard to burglarize. And murder is so much harder when the door’s locked.”

“It’s good to see you, sweetie. How’s your new car?”

“Fast.” An oddly familiar scent filled the warm kitchen and Belle’s nostrils. She sniffed the air. “What are you cooking?”

Ilana beamed. “Well, I did some Googling, and I found some recipes that I thought might make Cullen feel more at home. I decided on roasted mutton, potatoes, and root veggies. It’s weird, but I realized I’ve never cooked a parsnip before.”

Belle’s mouth watered. A year and a half ago, the thought of roasted mutton, potatoes, and root veggies would have sounded okay. Just okay. Never as amazing as it sounded that day. Despite being in her parents’ house, a place that was a second home for so many years, the food in the oven would be the first thing in a long time to give both her and Cullen even a fraction of that kind of comfort.

“Where is he, anyway?”

“Your dad took him into the garage to make sure his sword and armor made it through the flight okay. That’s so weird to say.”
“I know. Believe me, I know.”

Belle made for the door leading out to the garage. In front of the door, a heap of red Rubbermaid tubs marked “Camping” blocked her view of most of the room. “—t kind of steel is this? A few of the machinists I used to work with would be really into this craftsmanship,” said her father. The soft ping ping of a knuckle rapping against metal punctuated his remarks.

“It’s silverite. Steel armor is ill suited against enchanted weapons or magic. Templars are given silverite armor after completing their initiation. I was used to it, so I commissioned a modified version of it upon joining the Inquisition.”

Belle rounded the Rubbermaids to see Cullen kneeling on a moving blanket on the floor with his armor spread out piecemeal. Her father sat on a tool bench. He was hunched over with a touch of awe on his face, running his fingers over the Templar insignia on one of Cullen’s bracers. “We don’t have silverite here. I wonder what the chemical composition of this stuff is.”

“Everything all in one piece?” said Belle, drawing their attention away from the armor.

Cullen stood. “It seems to be. It’s difficult to know for certain, but I don’t want to strike it without any way to repair it.”

“It’s pretty cool,” said Belle’s father.

“Did you boys have a nice ride home?”

“Yup. How’s your new car? You want to take me for a ride later? Maybe let me—I don’t know—drive it?” Her father gave her a signature Dolan family shit-eating grin.

“Yes, yeah,” said Belle. “God, so desperate.”

Her father stood with a guttural groan. His pain had gotten worse while she was gone. She wished Eudora could have fixed his back too. He patted the spot between her shoulder blades where her tattoo proclaimed, “A Man Chooses,” in strong black ink. She hugged his waist. Cullen watched with a wistful look, a small smirk curling his lips and crinkling his scar.

Belle took her father out in her new car, as promised. They went to an empty school parking lot so he could do slippery donuts on the wet asphalt. They cackled together as the tires squealed and he cranked the steering wheel to the right, then to the left. She had missed him.

During their drive back to the house, she asked him what he and Cullen talked about after they left her at the dealership. He said, “Stuff.”

She struggled not to cry at dinner. Her backward nostalgia hit her like a truck the moment the first forkful hit her tongue. Her eyes burned, and her vision blurred. She could just make out Cullen hoovering the meal like it was his first, or his last. The flavors stoked memories of the early moments of their tenuous friendship, of dinners with Sera and Dorian and Bull, of lunches with Max and Josie and the visiting nobility, of Spencer. She barely maintained the wherewithal to tell Ilana that the food was delicious.

Her dreams were fitful that night. Barbarous and bathed in green. Her friends and her brother died and came back over and over, each death more heinous than the last. She tried to intervene. She screamed, she battled against the weight of her feet, and she called out to them to flee. Not one of them recognized her. Not one of them listened. They just died. Again and again, they died.

She and Cullen went to their new house the next morning. It was sunny. They met the realtor and the
escrow agent for their first and final walkthrough before signing the closing documents. Everything was as Belle imagined. The bedrooms were large and clean. The master bathroom had a shower that was separate from the tub. The tan granite countertops in the kitchen gleamed. The plum tree in the backyard clung onto its last few leaves, each one the color of Cullen’s eyes.

Sparks didn’t fly when she signed the closing documents and handed over the cashier’s check. The heavens didn’t open, and the angels didn’t sing. It was all rather anticlimactic for the accomplishment of such a lofty goal. Her pen just scratched across some papers, and a stranger just took tens of thousands of her dollars with little more than a tepid “Congratulations.” He handed her the keys and a copy of the paperwork, and he and the realtor left.

Belle and Cullen stayed behind in the silence of their new home. He’d knocked on and jiggled a few things during their walkthrough, no doubt testing the flimsy modern craftsmanship. What wouldn’t seem flimsy after living in a place as staunch and fortified as Skyhold? But in the new silence, he just stared at the high living room ceiling.

“What do you think of it?” said Belle.

“It is…different.”

“Different than what?”

Cullen shifted on his feet. His movement was silent on the new carpet. “Since I was a boy, I thought I would live and die in a Circle or a Chantry House. That was the only way a Templar could honorably leave the Order. After joining the Inquisition, I did not have the luxury of time to consider what I might do if by some miracle I survived, let alone if we won. But I suppose I believed that, should I ever have a home of my own, I might have at least a hand in building it. This is simply… beyond my expectation.”

Belle laid down on the living room carpet. She sprawled out beneath the skylight, letting the muted warmth of the sun soak into her pale skin. She closed her eyes and breathed deep the lemon cleaner-scented air. “Well, we got a good deal. Cause I’m a Tom Slick, hotshot motherfucker who gets good deals. That’s what I do.” She smiled.

Cullen chuckled his three low chuckles. “I suppose it is.”

The sound of socks shuffling on carpet got loud and close, then the sound of someone laying down rustled up beside her. The weight of Cullen’s head came to rest on her stomach. She carded her fingers through his hair. They laid together in the sun puddle for a quiet minute or a quiet hour or a quiet day before she said, “You know, most of my furniture is old, hand-me-down crap. We need new stuff. So, if you want, you can still have a hand in putting this home together.”

Cullen wrapped his hand around her wrist and removed her hand from his hair. She frowned. He kissed the back of her hand, then pressed her palm to his chest. His heart beat a steady rhythm under her touch. *Thuh-thump, thuh-thump, thuh-thump.* She opened her eyes, and the sunlight bleached her vision.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Anytime.”

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Chapter End Notes
DISCLAIMER: I know less than fucking nothing about Microsoft’s hiring process or who works in their legal department. FICTION! XD

I hope you liked my little headcanon about Cullen's favorite "modern" movies and music! ^_^~ There’s a lot going on in this chapter, and in the chapters to come. So put your hands on your back, slide them down until you feel a crack, then hold onto your butt!!!
Heeeyyyyyyyy! I’m finally back with this! I felt bad for having gone so long without updating, so have a long-ass chapter!!! Thanks for sticking with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Given the right set of circumstances and the right measure of determination, a person could learn an immeasurable amount in a year. Such had been the case for Belle during her first year in Thedas. Such also proved to be the case for Cullen during his first year in America.

He learned that his dreams were different there. He still dreamed. Nightmares continued to plague him. In the absence of the Fade, however, their narratives skewed. His horrors lacked the cogence and clarity of those in Thedas. His dreams bounced from point to point, plot to plot, each unrelated to the one before. Skipping stones on a placid lake with a terrifying undercurrent. Their consistent inconsistence peeled away some of the anguish that had accompanied falling asleep for so many years. He no longer feared the lucidity of his torture and his traumas when he closed his eyes at night. But his bed was too soft.

He learned more about Belle’s life before they met. Her childhood had been well documented since before her birth. Dov and Ilana kept albums filled with pictures of Belle’s mother, Sadie, as her womb swelled and grew, as she held her infant daughter and ruffled a fluffy tuft of red hair, as she held a tiny and smiling Belle on her hip in forests and deserts and on beaches, as she pinned a ribbon on Belle’s chest emblazoned with, “First Day of Kindergarten,” in bright pink letters. As Cullen suspected, Belle had her mother’s eyes. Even on the shiny but faded paper, he saw the same light burning in Sadie’s eyes as he had come to love in Belle’s. The final picture in Sadie’s final album showed Belle and a much younger Dov preparing to throw Sadie’s ashes and a small daisy crown into the ocean.

He learned that Belle loved to dance. He had known it to some degree in Thedas, having seen the show she and Spencer put on in the Herald’s Rest and the fragmented little movements she made when she thought no one was looking. In their home, however, she danced nearly every day. In the mornings, while she ate her Cocoa Pebbles or drank her blueberry and oatmeal smoothies, she rocked on the balls of her feet and swayed her hips in made up rhythms in their kitchen. In the evenings, after she shed the skin of her work and donned her yoga pants, she undulated and sang along to a myriad of tunes blaring from the speakers in their bedroom. He watched and smiled, but he never joined her. He had no talent for unstructured or unplanned movement. His lack of skill, however, did not prevent him from enjoying the view.

He learned how to drive a car. He avoided it until it proved necessary to accomplish his daily tasks. Belle bought him a vehicle like her father’s. Old, she said. They both taught him, though Dov had more time because he was retired. People in this world retired from their work when they reached old age. It was an unfamiliar concept, but Dov proved a good friend and useful resource in all his free time. He even accompanied Cullen to the Void-taken Department of Licensing and sat with him until a rather put-upon woman came to administer the driver’s examination. Cullen passed with some ease. He would never understand why all those teenagers in all those movies he watched with Belle got themselves in such a state over such a simple test.
He learned how to build a table. The one Belle owned when they came to Washington was a frail and rickety thing. He could have snapped all the legs with his bare hands if he put any effort behind the idea. With boredom and Belle’s words about furnishings ringing in his ears, he obtained a large slab of walnut wood. It was dark and twisted, beautifully rugged on every edge. He used some of Dov’s tools and purchased some of his own, and he labored in the garage while Belle was at work, concealing his efforts under a stained cloth before she returned. It felt good to make something, to watch something become more than it was under his labor. It was not a feeling to which he was accustomed. He had never made a habit of improving things.

When Cullen finished the table, he brought it into the house and placed it in the dining area beside the kitchen. He left the wood as live as he was able. Still dark and twisted, still beautifully rugged on every edge. It cut a striking figure in the afternoon sun filtering through the windows. He turned it one way, then another, then another, until he was satisfied with its placement and appearance. Belle screamed when she saw it. The sound was ebullient, paired with several little hops. It made him grin. She embraced him and began to weep.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said with her nose buried in his chest. “It looks like the war table.”

He learned to run a business. One morning, as Belle made up her face with various creams and powders and brushes, she said, “I was down in one of the game dev offices yesterday, and one of the coders was griping about not having a decent swordfighting studio on this side of the lake. He said it would take him an hour to drive to a place in Seattle, and the one time he did, the place wasn’t worth the drive.”

Cullen locked eyes with her reflection. “Swordfighting studio?”

She hummed in the affirmative. “I guess it’s a thing,” she said with her mouth stretched open as she applied black gunk to her eyelashes. “I looked it up, and there are a couple places way over on the westside, but like the guy said, nothing over here. It’s an underserved market.”

“Maker’s breath, why would anyone here want to learn to swordfight? They want to subject themselves to that kind of pain and risk without any necessity for it? On purpose?”

“It’s good exercise. Look at you, for shit’s sake,” said Belle as she pulled on a black blouse. She wore more black there than she had in Thedas. She almost never wore black in Thedas. “And in this field of nerdy flowers who’ve been playing fantasy games their entire lives, the chance to actually hold a sword, let alone hit someone with it, has to seem rad as fuck. It would have seemed rad as fuck to me. I wish I would have known about this stuff before a rift fucking ate me.”

Exactly thirty-nine days later, Cullen held his first class. He stood in his shined armor and his dry-cleaned mantle in front of a group of unlearned and untested men and women, and the familiarity of the scenario crashed over him like a waterfall. Despite the blue foam mats that lined the floor and the walls, despite the bespectacled and sweatpants-clad appearance of his students, he felt at home in his task. In their desire to learn. They stared at him, some with mouths agape, as he explained his expectations. He expected them to be clever. He expected them to be safe. He expected them to push themselves past their limits, and to continue pushing as many times past as many limits as would be necessary to attain proficiency.

They came back. Over and over, they came back. He began with two class sessions per week, one on Tuesday evenings and one on Saturday mornings. The demand for his tutelage increased at exponential rates over an astonishingly brief period of weeks. Soon, he expanded his schedule to provide training sessions throughout the week. He also began teaching children’s classes with foam and wooden swords on Thursday and Saturday afternoons. He did not work on Sundays because he chose not to work on Sundays. To have the ability to choose when to work—to choose when not to
work—was a freedom he had never known.

He learned to recreate. In the absence of an unabating and ceaseless influx of requisitions and troop movements and pleas for aid, Cullen found himself with the time to seek out activities that fulfilled more than his sense of duty. He engaged in the business of living. He jogged in the morning rain. He became proficient in the smoking and charring of various meats. He and Belle took his car up into the mountains and off the paved roads. She laughed louder than her blaring music in a kind of adrenaline-fueled frenzy every time she drove off a short ledge and the tires bounced off the damp rocks below. He dug his dull fingernails into the handle she called the “oh shit bar,” and he learned to laugh along with her. She taught him how to play video games. They walked in the Cascades, which, with every jagged and snowy peak, called to mind the silhouette of the Frostbacks. He and Belle lived near a lake—he found that almost anyone within a hundred miles could, if pressed, say they lived near one lake or another—and they sat on its grassy shores when the sun came out and feasted on the fruits of the plum tree in their backyard and on the fruits of his meat-smoking labors.

On just such a day, when the air around the verdant lakeside was crisp and cold, Cullen thought he saw a mabari. A woman walked beside the massive pewter-colored dog on the paved path adjacent to where he and Belle sat. Belle must have seen his head swivel as the dog and the woman passed, because she said, “I really hope you’re staring at that dog.”

He craned his neck when the dog crested a small hill and began to vanish. “What else would I be looking at?”

Belle snorted and took a bite of her smoked ham sandwich. “Of course, I forgot who I was talking to.” The meat and doughy bread muffled her voice.

Cullen turned back to her when the dog disappeared. “You have mabari here?”

She cocked her head as she chewed, mild confusion creasing her brow. “What?”

“That was a mabari that just walked past. There are mabari here, and I haven’t known for almost a year?”

“That was a Cane Corso,” she said. “Cane Corso. Kah-Nay Corso. Whatever. Beautiful dogs. Fucking expensive.” She took another bite of her sandwich. “I mean, you can totally train them to be defense dogs and biters and stuff, but otherwise they’re big ol’ sweethearts. Not quite the war hounds you’re thinking of.”

He looked after the disappeared dog for a moment. He had not considered stealing anything since his father put him over a knee for pilfering a hot bun from a neighbor’s windowsill when he was six years old. Still, he considered stealing that dog. It was only for the smallest fraction of a second, but he considered it.

Belle had leveled an odd stare at him while his back was turned. It was pensive, searching, and a bit agitated. Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea unnerved him then just as they had the first time they came to rest on his face.

“So…” she finally said. She paused, bunching up her lips from side to side in a manner reminiscent of a rabbit. She rolled her eyes and heaved out a sigh. “So, are we ever going to, like, get married?”

Stupefaction locked Cullen’s muscles and widened his eyes. He could not blink. He could not breathe. Had he any food or drink in his mouth, it would have dribbled out in a ludicrous display of his bewilderment. Her question caught him so off-guard he nearly toppled over where he sat. The deep pocket of his cargo pants suddenly felt as though it were full of lead.
Belle made a disgusted noise worthy of Cassandra as she shut her eyes and shook her head. “Ugh, goddamnit, I’m like a fucking rubber mallet. Blunt as a fucking ball peen hammer. Sorry. I didn’t mean to ask you that like that. I thought about it for too long and it just exploded out of my face like some busted firecracker. I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

Cullen inhaled to speak, but he realized he had taken too long when she started yammering again. “I mean, I guess I just wanted to figure out where you’re at with all this. I know it’s only been a couple years—a couple really weird years—but I don’t want to be with anyone else, like, ever. And I wanted to know if you felt the same way. But, like, that’s a lot of pressure, and that was kind of a dick move on my part. But you’re my best friend. I love you. And…tax season is coming. Deductions for married couples are…great.” She chuffed out a humorless laugh. “Okay. Shut up. Just—I’m gonna shut up now. Gonna stop talking. Forever.”

He waited a moment, lest she recant her sentiments and interrupt him a second time. When it was clear she meant not to open her frowning mouth, he said, “I love you, too.”

She smiled a little. “Well that’s good.”

Cullen reached into his deep pocket and pulled out the mass of lead. In his hand, it was not lead. In his hand, it was small and square and velveteen. In his hand, it was a box. His fingers trembled, and the heart she made beat for her thrummed a dissonant and deafening cadence up from his chest into his ears.

Belle’s mien shifted when she saw the black velvet cube. At least a dozen emotions streaked across her face, culminating in a confused mosaic of incongruous features. “What the fuck is that?” she said. Her near-shouting voice bounced off the dark and serene water only to have its echo silenced by the surrounding cluster of evergreens. She pointed a pink and burgundy fingernail at the box. “What the fuck is that?” she said, louder. She laughed to release a touch of her muted mania.

He fumbled when he tried to pull back the lid, realizing the box was upside down too late to avoid feeling foolish. He considered his seated position and wondered if he ought to shift to one knee. In Thedas, proposals of marriage rarely took such a form and formality as they did in this world. They were oft arranged by third parties—parents, mostly—or undertaken in a casual negotiation. After having watched Belle cry at scads of proposal videos on the internet, however, Cullen thought better of such an informal stance. In a series of clumsy maneuvers, he managed to reposition himself onto one knee, and to reposition the box right side up.

When he opened it, Belle said, louder than the first two times, “What the fuck is that?!”

“That” was a ring. A ring that, despite his ineptitude at selecting even the smallest bauble to match her attire in Thedas, he designed. With the help of a reputable jeweler, of course. The ring itself was forged in warm gold, smoothed and rounded to gleaming perfection. Clustered atop the annular band was a collection of gemstones. Six small diamonds formed little triangles on either side of the large central stone. The jeweler called it a “showpiece.” It glittered in the rare sunlight in shades of blue and green and purple, fractal despite the stone’s oval shape. It was Belle’s favorite gem, according to her father. Mystic topaz. It was no small mercy that the jeweler knew the manner of stone to which Cullen referred, as he had never seen such a mineral. But it was a beautiful sight. Almost beautiful enough to deserve to adorn Belle’s finger.

“Marry me,” he said, or he thought he said. The war drums beating in his ears crowded out his voice.

“What?” said Belle. Her lips quivered, forming a queer smile. Her eyes flooded, and plump tears gushed down her pinkening cheeks.
The presumptuousness of his phrasing pooled in a headache at the base of his neck. That she had begun the conversation did little to assuage his embarrassment. He reached for the pain—his telling nervous habit. “I mean will you—Uh—” He sighed, deflating. “I had a plan…And there wasn’t a dog.” He threw an absent gesture in the direction where the dog had vanished.

“You had a plan?” Her voice came out shrill, stuffed up with the byproducts of her weeping.

“I’ve thought of little else for some time.” Cullen’s knee began to throb against the picnic blanket against the dirt. “You are my best friend too, Belle. I cannot imagine my life here—my life anywhere—without you. So will you—Would you—” Emotion and nerves sealed off the final words of his question, trapping them in this throat. The only way they seemed able to escape was through mindless blurtting, and he would not be so foolish as to do that again.

Belle’s head swung and stuttered in a wild nod. “Yeah,” she said. “Yes!” She lunged forward, throwing her arms around him and tackling him into the damp dirt. She cried out her answer a dozen more times. Yesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyes. She cried it out until it no was no longer recognizable as a word, only as an expression of her ardor and joy. She held his face and kissed him until his cheeks were wet with her tears and neither of them could breathe.

When they rose, he slipped the ring on her trembling finger with his trembling hand. She grinned as she examined it, tilting her hand from side to side to catch the light. “God, this is seriously beautiful. How’d you think to pick one with mystic topaz? How’d you even find one with mystic topaz?”

“Your father told me it was your favorite, so I took the name of the stone to someone far better equipped than I am to make it for you.”

“You asked my dad?”

“Yes, I—Was that wrong? I meant no disrespect—”

“How long have you had this?”

Cullen exhaled a long breath and righted his posture. “Several months.”

“How long have you been carrying it around?”

“For the last month.”

“Goddamnit,” said Belle, her tone dueling between amusement and chastisement. She gave him an innocuous shove. “What if you got mugged walking around with this big ass thing in your pocket?”

He smirked. “I don’t think you should marry me if you don’t believe I can handle whatever miscreant would be stupid enough to attempt something like that.”

Her nose scrunched up as she laughed.

“What?”

“You just used the word ‘miscreant’ so casually,” she said, giggles still rolling through her. “And I’m a little delirious right now.”

“As am I.”

That night, the slow drag of her fingernails down his bare spine invited him between her thighs. Her lips skimmed over his jaw and his mouth and his nose as he moved to accept. Her knees crooked, her
legs parting like butterfly wings to allow him to taste the nectar of her. They fluttered under his firm grip that held them open, pinned down to ensure the full display of her beauty. They shivered and shuddered as she writhed under his attentions. He released them only after she unraveled, keening and crying out curses that met his ears like a song.

With her pliant calf pressed to his shoulder and his cock buried deep inside her, he murmured encouragements to her as one murmured prayers to the Maker. He told her she was good. He told her she was beautiful. He told her he wanted her. He told her to come. She obliged, and he followed her into the blinding darkness of their climax, grunting and growling and godless. Godless but for her.

*****

The interior of Dov’s car smelled of nothing on normal days. Cullen rather enjoyed the lack of olfactory stimulus. There were so few places in this world devoid of intentional scents, and it was a blessing to escape the onslaught.

This was not a normal day. In lieu of nothing, the interior of Dov’s car smelled of flowers. He and Cullen wore tiny bouquets of blue flowers pinned to the lapels of their black suits. The aromatic boutonnieres were composed of cobalt blue delphiniums and green tuffets of button mums. Cullen only knew the names of these flowers because Belle sat in front of her laptop quibbling about them for over an hour one evening. The clustered flowers sat against a backdrop created by the single eye of a peacock feather, and each was wrapped with a golden ribbon and held to the men’s chests with a pin.

They arrived at their destination early. The drive to the Seattle Municipal Courthouse from Cullen and Belle’s home took just forty-five minutes on that Friday afternoon, though Belle told her father to allot at least an hour and a quarter for traffic. Dov, cool and patient man he was with his daughter, simply agreed and patted her on the back. When Cullen asked him how he always seemed to know what to say, he replied that Cullen would too after knowing her for thirty years. He added his vote of confidence in the strength of their union and gave Cullen a little pat on the back, identical to the one he bestowed on his daughter. Cullen smiled. He had forgotten what it was like to have a father.

On the tenth floor of the courthouse, where magistrates performed wedding ceremonies, several members of Belle’s family had already arrived to greet Cullen and Dov in the hallway. Dov’s brothers came from thousands of miles away, and they shook Cullen’s hand and embraced him, welcoming him to the family. Each spoke with a different accent, one like Belle’s, one with a drawl. Ilana’s sister and nephew were also in attendance, smiling and kind like their kinswoman. Three of Belle’s friends, two men and a woman whom Cullen had met on several occasions, congratulated him with hugs and handshakes.

Cullen glanced in the direction of the obscured elevator every time he heard the noise signaling its arrival on the floor, anxious to see his bride. She insisted that they prepare and travel separately, and she demanded he not even see her dress before the day. Each time the elevator sounded, his stomach went cold and his eyes flicked over only to be met with the sight of men and women in dark suits like those Belle wore to work. Each time the elevator sounded, he was crestfallen. Each time the elevator sounded, he worried that she had realized what a terrible mistake she was making in forever tethering her life to someone so flawed and so broken.

The elevator chimed again, and out of his quickly developed habit he looked. He saw nothing, but heard Belle’s voice. “No,” she said. His heart stopped. No? Fear bubbled up in his gut, nauseating him.

“No. No, I told their guy they have no permission or access to use that feature.” She paused. “Yeah, it’s explicit and conspicuous in the contract, too. It was practically in size twenty font, for God’s
“Get off the phone,” said Ilana’s voice in a hiss. “Tell them you’re about to get married. Off.”

“Do me a favor and pull it. When they call back, you can point them to the provision.” Another pause. “No, if they want to use it we’ll have to draw up a new agreement and they’ll have to pay for it. And please remind them that if they try to backdoor their way in, they’ll be in breach and subject to suit. Yeah, just for trying. No, it would be a dick move but they’re trying to weasel into extras they didn’t pay for.”

“Off!”

“Hey, I gotta go. I’m about to get married, remember?” Belle laughed. “Yeah, yeah, thanks. Email me if you need to, but just remember I might not answer for a while. Honeymooning and all. Yeah, service is still spotty in Alaska. Okay. Okay, thanks. Bye.”

“Jesus.”

“Sorry. Shit. Everyone forgets when people are starting their vacations and shit. Fucking phone calls and workaholic bullshit.”

As she spoke, Belle rounded the corner, shoving her phone into a small lacey purse. Cullen’s breath caught in his chest. Her long red curls hung over her bared shoulder in a loose braid, the crest of it embellished with a pin that matched Cullen’s boutonniere. Her ivory dress was bedecked with embroidered ivory flowers that cascaded from her bosom to her thighs. The wide gossamer skirt swished and swayed about her calves as she walked, and her bright teal high-heeled shoes clacked against the stony tile floor. She handed the lacy purse to Ilana, and in her other hand she held a bouquet of blue and green and almost black flowers. A large mystic topaz pendant hung from her neck, matched by her dangling earrings—and of course her engagement ring. Her face looked as it had on the night of the ball at Halamshiral.

She saw him and smiled, greener eyes shining. He felt, for a moment, like a child standing in front of a statue of Andraste for the first time. Humbled and penitent. Terrified and besotted.

“Hello,” she said, and she took his hand.

“Hello,” he said, because it was all he could say.

She ran a finger down his black tie. “You clean up pretty well, Commander.”

“You look—you are…” He shook his head in an attempt to wrest an adequate word free from the more eloquent corners of his mind with the hope that it might fall out of his mouth. Belle’s smile widened. “Breathtaking.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry I ran behind. There was a line at the clerk’s window to pay.”

“It’s alright.”

Her family and friends greeted her much as they had greeted Cullen. He watched her embrace and chat with each of them, all the while watching “A Man Chooses” flex and stretch between her shoulder blades. The words rang truer every time he saw them.

“Dolan and Rutherford?” someone said.

“That’s us,” said Belle.
They followed the woman who called their names out onto the large balcony of the courthouse. It was a gray day, but Belle liked gray days. Cullen looked out at the entire city through the glass railing and open air, all awash in the delicate gloom. Belle gripped his hand tight.

A diminutive man dressed in judicial vestments introduced himself as the man who would be marrying them. He took their marriage bands to hold until the appropriate time in the ceremony and asked if they were ready to begin. Belle glanced at Cullen with the question in her eyes. He nodded.

“Yep,” she said. “We’re ready.”

The magistrate commenced with an oration about the importance of marriage. Cullen heard fragments of it. He heard the bit about marriage as a contract between two people that loved one another. He heard the part about the undying nature of true love. He heard the portion about “for better or worse” meaning that they were to stand by each other through the very best and the very worst of their lives.

What he heard most of all, however, was his heartbeat. He stared at Belle through increasingly blurry eyes, recounting the intersection of their lives. He recalled their first tumultuous meeting, and he could almost feel the hundreds of times she had poked him in the chest since that moment. He recalled their months of constant bickering and distrust, and he could almost smell the snowy Skyhold air he inhaled to cool his temper. He recalled the day he died, and he could almost hear Belle’s cries as she pounded his heart until it beat anew. He remembered seeing her frailty and the empathy that flooded his mind to wash away the anger between them. He remembered her kindness. He remembered succumbing to his love for her.

“Cullen?” said the magistrate, jarring Cullen from his reminiscence. The man handed him Belle’s wedding band. It was simple enough, gold with diamonds to match those on her first ring. “Place this ring on Belle’s finger.”

As Cullen slipped the ring on, the magistrate said, “Do you, Cullen Rutherford, promise to love and comfort Belle, to uplift and support her in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, and, forsaking all others, be faithful and true to her as long as you both shall live?”

“I do. I swear to the Maker to love this woman for the rest of my days.”

The magistrate lifted a single brow before handing Cullen’s wedding band to Belle. “Belle, place this ring on Cullen’s finger.”

Her whole hand quavered as she slid the wide golden band onto his much larger finger. A tiny tear crept out of the corner of her eye. She let out a wobbly chuckle and wiped it away.

“Do you, Belle Dolan, promise to love and comfort Cullen, to uplift and support him in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, and, forsaking all others, be faithful and true to him as long as you both shall live?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“As I understand it,” said the magistrate, “you would like to participate in the Jewish tradition of breaking a glass. May we have the glass?”

Ilana appeared beside Belle with a dainty but bulky black drawstring bag. She passed it to the magistrate, who in turn placed it on the floor near Cullen’s feet. “The breaking of the glass is meant to symbolize the fragility of life and human relationships. Breaking it is meant to ensure that your marriage remains intact, despite the harshness of the world. Go ahead, Cullen.”
Cullen brought down his foot on the small bag with all the force he could muster. A tremendous *pop* rang out into the air as the glass shattered under the sole of his black leather shoe. Everyone on the balcony shouted, “Mazel tov!” Belle laughed, glowing in her gaiety.

“With that,” said the magistrate, “by virtue of the authority vested in me as a magistrate for the state of Washington, I now pronounce you lawfully married in accordance with the laws of the state of Washington. Those who have been joined together, let no one put asunder. You may kiss.”

Cullen wasted no time in closing the meager space between them. He hauled Belle into his arms, pressing their lips and bodies together in a display of intimacy that might once have made him blush. Her family that was now his family clapped and cheered around them. He clung to her waist as he kissed her, holding her silken jaw just so. Her pulse raced under his ring finger. The finger that, for the first time in his life and well beyond his imagination, bore a ring.

The magistrate hooted and said, “Someone call the science museum, cause there’s some serious chemistry happening over here.”

Belle laughed so hard she hunched over in Cullen’s arms and snorted. “Thanks, Your Honor. That was terrible.”

His Honor chuckled. “You’re very welcome, Missus Rutherford.”

“I think I like the sound of that.”

Their family and Belle’s friends accompanied them back to their house for a reception. Several of her co-workers joined them after the work day ended. She hired a local truck that served tacos to park outside and feed guests. Music played in both the house and the backyard, and people ate and drank and enjoyed each other’s company. Cullen installed himself at his new wife’s side, meandering from group to group to accept felicitations. He was stiff and strained, but he managed cordiality with most everyone. She mentioned just once that she wished Spencer were there.

Belle knocked a plastic knife against her plastic cup in the backyard. All those within earshot turned toward them, and Cullen watched her with no small measure of curiosity.

“Hey everybody. I want to thank you all for taking the time to be with us on our big day. It means the world—all the worlds to us,” she said. Everyone raised their glasses and mumbled their indistinct responses.

She squared her body with his and looked at him, benevolence tinging her expression. “Cullen, I know we didn’t get along very well when we first met. Actually, not getting along is an understatement. We basically hated each other.” Faint laughter diffused through the small crowd. “But somehow, through all the bullshit, we managed to find each other. To really see each other. We’ve both gotten more than a little banged up and bruised by life, but I want you to know that you’re my hero. You’re my Atlas, holding all the troubles of the world on your shoulders just so it can keep turning. You’re my Achilles, powerful and brave and wounded.” Her voice waivered and faltered as her eyes welled up. His own welled up in answer. “Life may have broken us, taken pieces of us, but our broken pieces fit together to make us stronger. I love you so much. Thank you for changing my universe.”

There might have been applause, but Cullen did not hear it. His wife’s profound words enveloped his mind, and her arms enveloped his body, and her lips enveloped his reply. They wept and kissed together, and, for the second time that day, he could not muster a single shred of concern for the opinions or musings of those watching.
He swept the tears from Belle’s cheeks with his thumbs on their parting. He glanced at Dov, sharing brief and wordless communication. Dov lifted his phone from his pocket, and after a few flicks of his wrist the music playing around them stopped. Cullen would never pretend to understand the technology around him, but neither would he hesitate to use it to his advantage.

“Belle,” he said in response to her quizzical appearance, “it is customary that a bride and groom share at least one dance on their wedding day. Even though you said you wanted to dispense with all the pomp and tradition, will you do me the honor of joining me for this dance, my lady?”

The song Cullen selected began to play, and a woman’s strange and soft voice began to sing. *Oh I do believe in all the things you see. What comes is better than what came before.*

Belle, his beloved, his wife, took his hand and danced with him. It was nothing like their dance at the Winter Palace. It was slower, quieter, made of movements chosen on their whims. He held her close and swayed with her.

“Good ‘my lady’ usage, dude.”

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Even before they married, Cullen and Belle had settled into a kind of routine. Each day of the week promised a certain volume of work for each of them. On the evenings when he had late sessions, she would tend to the preparation—or purchase, as was often the case—of dinner. When his classes ended in the afternoons, he preferred to cook.

He found he enjoyed the structure of cooking. Every meal had a recipe, every recipe had steps to follow, every step to follow had detailed instructions. Like swordfighting, there were points in the process in which he had the opportunity to add personal touches. Also like swordfighting, those points existed within a predetermined procedure. The skills and techniques involved in cooking could be honed like a parry or a strike. A well-timed sear on a tender cut of meat could be just as effective as a well-timed blow to an opponent’s tender blind spot.

He did not, however, enjoy going to the supermarket to retrieve the ingredients for his meals. There was nothing super about it. No matter which version of the shop he chose, he found himself assaulted by artificial light and aggressive music. Adding to his distaste for the place was the volume and similarity of every item. It seemed impossible to choose from the wide array of identical butter or eggs. He often found himself selecting whatever was closest to him, which occasionally led to dismal results.

In spite of his disdain for the place, it was a Wednesday. Cullen always cooked dinner on Wednesday. He drove to the supermarket in the rain after his final training session that afternoon, and he carefully selected the ingredients for filet mignon with compound butter, roasted asparagus, and twice-baked potatoes. His wife—he would never grow accustomed to calling her that—favored the meal, and it seemed to make her feel better when her blood was thin. It happened from time to time that her body would not produce the correct volume of the correct nutrients on its own. He learned to see the signs not long after they came to Washington. She grew pale and tired, and she often craved red meat. Though she had not yet asked for red meat, Cullen noticed she had been pallid and quite exhausted for the past several days. He hoped the meal would help, even if it only lifted her spirits.

The sight of a figure on his front porch surprised him. He spied the shape of a person from far down the street, and it was only when he drew near enough for the rain to cease its obstruction of his view that he saw a mass of bright red hair. He let out the breath he had not realized he was holding and parked his vehicle in the driveway.
Belle had already changed into the clothes she wore at home. She sat on a chair in the center of the porch, bare feet resting on the railing and covered in beaded raindrops. It would not have been an odd sight but for the time. At half past four in the afternoon she would ordinarily still be in her office.

“Hey,” she said when he exited the car with groceries in hand.

Cullen carried the bags onto the porch and set them down in front of the door. “Are you alright?”

She did not stand. Instead, she craned her neck to look at him. “I threw up a couple times at work. I’ve been feeling a little woogity, so I thought I should come home.”

He crouched beside her and ran his fingers through her hair. She smiled a wan little smile.

“I thought you might not be feeling well,” he said. “I was planning on cooking filet and potatoes for you tonight, but if you can’t stomach it I can go back and get the ingredients for a soup.”

“I think I can stomach it.”

She held up her hand. Between her fingers, she clutched three narrow white plastic sticks. Her fingertips were bloodless where they gripped the small objects.

“You know,” she said, “I’m really terrible at surprises. Even if I’m the one who fucking planned them, I always ruin them. I jump the gun or blurt or something. Every time. I thought of a bunch of cute ways to tell you. There’s a hot dog bun on a baking sheet in the oven, and I bought some shoes I have no idea what the fuck I thought I was going to do with. So, in lieu of a cute surprise because I suck, here’s three pee sticks.” She handed them to him with a weary but genuine smile. “I’m pregnant.”

Everything stopped. Time stood still. The world stopped spinning. The rain froze in the air. Belle’s weary but genuine smile hung before Cullen like a portrait in a palace. Ancient and ideal and magnificent. The gloaming light cast ethereal radiance over her moon face, and he memorized it then and there.

Time resumed. The world spun. The hushed sibilance of the rain beating down on the earth recommenced. He looked at the white plastic sticks. Each bore two thick crossed blue lines that he supposed were meant to signify positivity.

“You are…”

Belle waited for him to finish, raising her brows in a gesture of patient encouragement. Upon her tacit understanding that he was too stunned to speak, and she said, “Pregnant.”

Cullen exhaled hard to push out his next words. “And I—I’m…”

She waited again. “Going to be a father.”

In the ensuing silence, he battled a downpour of emotions that threatened to drown him. Belle’s demeanor shifted from happiness to worry amid his delay. She rapped on her lips with her knuckles, watching him, waiting for a real response.

“I’m sorry,” she said after too long. “I thought you wan—”

Cullen cut her short with a clumsy embrace. A stone wall collapsing on a bed of perfect flowers. “Never be sorry,” he said, voice joy-cracked. “Never ever be sorry. Thank you. Oh Maker, thank you.”
His hands were in her hair and on her face. He peppered her cheeks and chin and nose and lips with a thousand kisses. He reveled in the wriggling laughter that rose up from her blessed mouth. She was his squirming altar and his giggling deity. She was his wife and his world, and soon she would be the mother of his child.

He thought then that the Maker was with him. He believed then that they had built a life there worth living. He knew then that they would be happy.

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Chapter End Notes

Notes: bam! Bam! BAM! ALL THE THINGS!!!!!!! Here’s Belle’s rings (my rings)!!!
(Bonus: my husband’s ring that I didn’t think Cullen would like)

Here’s Belle’s dress!!!
Here’s their wedding dance song!!!

AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!! Thanks so much for sticking with me through the great writing famine! There’s still A LOT left in this story, so I hope you keep hanging out with me and enjoying!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Belle had been overweight before she got sucked into Thedas. She had no problem admitting it. She was probably still a little overweight even after her ailments stripped her of thirty or forty pounds and her corsets squeezed out another five or so.

She had been overweight, but she had never been round. Chunky, but never round. Squishy, but never round. Nearly eight months into her pregnancy, she was round. She was so round that she was certain if she somehow wandered into some godawful Nickelback concert somewhere at that very moment, the crowd would try to bounce her across the auditorium.

Mercifully, Belle was not at a Nickelback concert when she thought about how round she had become. Less mercifully, she was at a park on a warm Saturday morning in the midst of a brutal struggle to find a comfortable way to sit on metal bleachers. Her father and Ilana brought cushions for the three of them, but the extra padding did little to ease the pressure on Belle’s hips and tailbone. To be fair to the bleachers and the cushions, nothing anywhere did much of anything to ease the pressure on her hips and tailbone. Nor did anything assuage her constant need to pee or her persistent discomfort at the sensation of a tiny foot or fist embedded in her liver or colon. Pregnancy was shitty, and Belle was shitty about it.

Halfway through her vain attempt to alleviate the pain in her right asscheek by shifting to her weight onto the left one, a woman sat down in the spot beside her. Belle noticed as her belly and the baby began to grow, more and more women sat beside her in public places and at events. She supposed they did it because, well, who would just run up and hurt a pregnant woman? It made more sense when the women who sat beside her were mothers themselves. A kind of kinship arose through the experience of pregnancy that put them at ease by her side.

She could tell the woman who plopped down beside her was a mother. Almost everyone there that day was a parent or a grandparent, though the odd close aunt or uncle managed to sprinkle themselves into the crowd. But this woman watched the makeshift arena around which they sat with a brand of pride only a mother could wear. She stared down at the cluster of sixteen children milling about around Cullen, all donning their little gambesons or picking a favorite out of the collection of identical wooden longswords and shields in preparation for their first exhibition.

The mother, who was already sitting too close, leaned in closer to nudge Belle’s shoulder with her own. “Which one’s yours?” she asked.

Belle smirked and huffed out an almost inaudible laugh through her nose. “The biggest one,” she said. She watched as Cullen crouched down to help a seven-year-old girl fasten her puffy garb. He still cut an impressive figure in his shined and dry-cleaned armor and surcoat, even while his gloved fingers fumbled over teeny tiny laces.

The mother scanned the milieu for a moment with a perplexed look on her face before releasing a nervous titter. “It’s so hard to tell who’s bigger than who with all that stuff they have to put on.”

Belle laughed, loud enough for the mother to hear this time. “I’m Cullen’s wife, Belle.”

The mother sang out a long “Ohhhh” of recognition. “Oh,” she said again, “the lawyer. Oh,” she said a third time, “it’s so nice to meet you. I’m Alexandra.”
“Nice to meet you, too. Which one’s yours?”

The mother pointed. “I’m Atticus’s mom. The one with the long dirty blonde hair.”

“Atticus,” said Belle. She pressed her lips together to stop whatever derisive chuckle or remark was bubbling up at the back of her throat from escaping.

“Yeah,” said the mother at a pitch far higher than Belle would have imagined she could hear. “You know, noble name makes a noble man and all that.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Of course, the noble names and noblemen that came to Belle’s mind were much less noble than Atticus Finch. She wondered when the word’s meaning had shifted, when nobility no longer came with a title but with dignity, honor, and respect.

“Sorry,” said a man from the bench below her. He and the woman beside him twisted around to look up at her. “Not eavesdropping, we swear, but did you say you’re Cullen’s wife?”

“Yep. He’s my husband.”

“And our son-in-law,” said Ilana, proud as she pleased.

“That’s great,” said the woman down below. “He’s such a godsend.”

“Yeah. Our daughter was shaping up to be a real asshole before we signed her up for his classes. Now she’s disciplined. Hell, she actually listens to us.”

“I’m really glad to hear it,” said Belle. She meant it, though more in the way that she was glad to hear such high praise for her husband.

“You’re lucky,” said the man with a licentious lift of his eyebrows. “He’s a real catch.”

“I think we both feel pretty lucky.”

“I bet.”

The man and woman faced forward again. Belle listened to the harsh whispers flying between them. The woman chastised the man, Brad, for flirting with anything with legs. Brad clarified that he only flirted with anything with attractive legs. The woman quibbled over the fact that he just hit on their daughter’s swordfighting teacher and his pregnant wife. Brad reminded the woman how hot he thought she was when she was pregnant. He told her not to worry, it was all in good fun. Belle and Ilana shared a bemused look. Belle’s father just shook his head.

“Recruits,” said Cullen, somewhere between a bark and a bellow for everyone’s benefit, “formation and attention.”

All the lightly armored children clamored into two straight rows. Shortest in the front, tallest in the back. They stood holding their shields stiff at their sides, their wooden swords dangling from false sheathes attached to their well-worn belts. They watched their commander like good little indoctrinated soldiers, and images of Spencer thumping his chest in salute and forming up with his own battalion conjured in her mind. Belle’s heart began to ache for her brother. She thumbed the back of his namesh on her chain, hoping to oust the sorrow from her thoughts. A swift kick in the pelvis from the baby helped.

Cullen spoke again only when he was satisfied with the formation and attention positions of his pupils, which meant he did not speak for several minutes. Once the children finished fidgeting and
swapping places, he began by turning to the parents.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said, a touch less enthusiastic than he was with the kids. He hated marketing his business because it meant glad-handing and giving feckless speeches touting his own skill as a swordsman and teacher. It pained him, Belle knew, that people there couldn’t tell how skilled he was by seeing him fight or hearing of his reputation. But reputations had to be built, and he was forced to rebuild his for this world.

Despite his somewhat obvious irritation, he continued. “I appreciate your continued patronage of the Inquisition School of Swordsmanship.” Branding was a cake walk. “And I thank you for your attendance at our first children’s sparring exhibition match.” The crowd clapped. “Please remember that a new session will begin in two weeks. I have registration forms for adults and children with me today, and they are also available on the studio’s website.”

Belle would never get used to listening to him talking about his website. It was like listening to a ten-year-old talk about tax evasion. Neither understood the concepts about which they were speaking, but they would be happy enough to talk about them anyway.

Cullen turned to face the children, and his posture changed. He stood straighter. Self-assured and assertive. Commanding. His hand came to rest on the pommel of his own very real sword, and he walked up and down the line to inspect his troops. Belle knew his confidence wasn’t bolstered because he was engaging with children, but because he was engaging with tiny soldiers. Their small stature and the lack of a cause for which to fight did not stop him from feeling like a commander addressing his troops. He had a sword in his hand and recruits to instruct. The people watching thought he was putting on a show with his armor and his formality. They didn’t understand all that was simply who he was. It was Cullen at his best, and it thrilled her to see him at his best.

“Recruits,” he said, and she smiled, “you have all trained for this moment. This is your time to prove yourselves in battle. When you engage your opponent, remember your training and the skills you’ve learned. Be clever in your fight, but more importantly, be safe.”

The pack of little voices barked, “Yes, ser!” in near perfect unison.

Cullen’s chin rose by a fraction of an inch. “Danny. Keira. You’ll be fighting first.”

Brad and the woman in front of Belle started whooping and hollering for Keira. Belle clapped and howled for her husband. The children not involved in the first bout took their seats on the bottom of the bleachers opposite those on which Belle sat. Danny and Keira donned big soft red boxing helmets, and Cullen checked them as they squared off with their shields up.

Cullen stepped back and called for the bout to start. Keira lit off, lightning fast and unafraid. She roared as she bashed Danny’s shield with her own, knocking him off balance. With his padded side exposed, she struck a hard blow with her wooden sword. Danny grunted at the impact, and Cullen called the point for Keira. He told the pair to return to their starting positions to reset. Once they were in their places, he told them to begin again. The second round lasted longer because only fatal blows scored points.

Amid the sounds of the fight, the mother beside Belle leaned in too close again. “I just love how he lets the girls fight the boys,” she said. “It’s so inclusive and empowering.”

“Where he comes from, there’s no distinction between gender in warriors. Some of the best fighters there are women. I’ve seen them, too. Stone cold badasses.”

“That’s fantastic. Where does he come from, exactly?”
Belle’s gut went cold. She rubbed her round belly and smiled, innocent and flighty as she could manage. “Oh God, it’s this little place so far away you wouldn’t have heard of it. Practically another universe.”

The mother giggled. “I know how that is. My sister-in-law is from this tiny village in Ecuador I can’t even pronounce.”

Belle laughed back, doing her best not to sound phony. “Seriously, right?” She scooched toward Ilana, nudging her purse along with her.

Keira won her match against Danny. She would have had a promising future as a Templar or Chevalier in Thedas. Belle hoped the girl’s parents would keep her under Cullen’s tutelage. She imagined Kiera, all grown up and covered in bruises and battle scars with a wide grin on her face.

She thought about her own daughter, too. The little girl massacring Belle’s liver seemed to take after Belle in the womb. Cullen’s mother told him he was a quiet child until his birth, never moving much in the day or night. Belle’s parents, on the other hand, told her all her life how they were this close to naming her “Rowdy.” She wondered which parent her daughter would resemble most, whether she would want to fight with her body or with her words, if she would be stubborn or…well, stubborn.

After an hour and a half, all the banging and clacking stopped. Each of the sixteen children had their turn to fight, and each won or lost. Cullen gave out no awards or special recognition. It was enough, in his oft expressed view, that each child knew how they performed and understood ways to improve.

Belle loitered with her father and Ilana after the exhibition ended. She watched parents hug their proud, sweaty children and hand completed registration forms to Cullen with gratified smiles. He thanked them all with strict sincerity. As the park employees arrived to begin dismantling the bleachers and cleaning up the area, some of the families headed to the playground about fifty yards away. Others—mostly those with just one child—got into their cars to leave. Belle and her parents rejoined Cullen after everyone left him alone.

“Maker’s breath,” he said, amber eyes following the particularly chatty mother and her long-haired son. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think that went well.”

Belle rose onto the tips of her fat toes to give him a chaste kiss. His scar crinkled up with the curve of his lips. “It went kickass. Obviously the kids fucking love you, and the parents couldn’t stop fawning over you. Really fawning. All over you.”

Belle’s father patted Cullen on the back, his hand making a dull sound against the cloth covered silverite backplate. “That was real goddamn impressive, man. I’ve never seen so many kids whooping each other’s asses with sticks with such good form.” He chuckled to himself.

“It was really cool to see,” said Ilana. “Belle’s right, those kids really like you.”

“And I like them.” Cullen put a gloved hand low on Belle’s round belly. “Will you be alright for a few moments while I put the equipment in the car?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Take your time. But after, we go out and celebrate. I’m fucking starving, and this baby wants a big ass cheeseburger.”

As he kissed her forehead, goosebumps raced down her arms and legs. They were familiar goosebumps, but not because she got them when he kissed her. The hair on her forearms prickled and stood, and the curls around her face lifted and pulled away. The faint hum of electricity buzzed
in her ears and coursed through her veins. Her eyes met with Cullen’s with a shared degree of panic.

A deafening crack split the air. Belle and Ilana screamed, and they all flinched. Belle stared at the glowing, green-tendrilled rift, every nerve and impulse firing off at once. She spied Cullen out of the corner of her eye. Conflict and fear turned his lips and his brow.

People throughout the park began shrieking and bawling in the instant Belle took to watch the flux of the not-black blackness at the center of the frozen rift. Children in the nearby playground wailed for their mommies and daddies. Parents cried out the names of their babies.

“What the fuck is that?!” said Ilana.

Just as Belle and Cullen pivoted away, the rift’s stasis shattered. It crackled to life, undulating and striking the ground with its viridescent lightning. Her hand was in his. She got up on the tips of her fat toes again, and she began to flee.

“Run!” she said to her parents. They didn’t listen. They stood and gawked.

She grabbed her father’s arm to get him to move. Her touch took his eyes from the rift, and he seemed to shake himself from his trance. But it was too late. As it had done twice before, the rift lashed out with a filament of light to snatch her up. Cullen grunted, trapped alongside her. Their feet lifted from the ground, and Ilana and Belle’s father grabbed onto their wrists.

“No!”

The rift pulled harder. Impatient. Annoyed. Belle’s skin ached and burned where her father gripped it. She tried to curl in on herself to protect her baby, but the rift’s willful gravity would have none of it. She shut her eyes and sobbed once, and a sharp tug ripped her into the not-black blackness.

The world was gone again.

*****

Dead. Not dead. It had become impossible for Belle to tell what she was and what she wasn’t. Dead. Not dead. The very nature of death was a mystery. Life after death was an unknown. Cognizance of death was an unknown. The existence of the soul was an unknown. She hated the unknown.

She didn’t accept death. She did not go quietly into that good night. She struggled and screamed, railing against it with everything in her tired body. She beat back death for her unborn child. At least, she hoped she did.

“My Maker know my heart. Take from me a life of sorrow. Lift me from a world of pain. Judge me worthy of your endless pride.”

A warm, rough hand held hers tight. Cullen’s voice wavered as he prayed over her dead body. Or maybe her not dead body. Maybe her still alive and once again conscious body. What a coup it would be if she hadn’t died in a rift. Déjà huzzah.

He pressed her knuckles to his forehead. She knew it was his forehead only because she felt a smooth curl fall onto the back of her hand. He rocked, skin to skin, flesh to flesh with her. The distinct sound of his armor creaking echoed in the void of her semi-consciousness.

Belle chanced opening her eyes, praying all the while that she’d dropped into some freak hormone-
induced hallucination at the park and somehow been carried home to bed. It wasn’t an ideal concept for a pregnant woman to pass out all flibbertigibbet, but she preferred that to being yanked through spacetime again. She peeled her eyelids apart to test her theory.

They’d left her glasses on this time, which was a first among all the times she’d died or not died. She played a clap track in her mind for their consideration. Her husband’s hulking, still armored form filled her clear vision. He hunched, spilling fervent prayers over her fingers with his eyes glued to the floor. What she saw next was familiar, but not the familiar she expected. She lay in her bed in her room in her home. But it was no longer her bed, no longer her room, and no longer her home.

Light peered in through ancient windows to cast the golden glow of midday over stone walls and wooden floors. The interior of Belle’s tower in Skyhold looked just as it had when she left. Rather, it looked just as it had when she was torn away. With Cullen in his armor and her room so well preserved, she thought for a second she’d imagined being pulled back to her world. Maybe she nerfed it on one of the thousand stairs in the keep and banged her head. It must all have been a concussion-fueled dream. She settled on that explanation until—

She gasped, hard and loud, and shot up with her hand on her round belly. “The baby!” she said, breathless, already beginning to cry.

Cullen’s head flicked up, autumnal eyes full of relief and panic. He put his hands on her shoulders to soothe her. He spoke in words she couldn’t hear through the heaving breaths of her terror.

“Oh God, oh God, the baby, my baby,” said Belle through her sobs. “My baby! Is she okay? Oh God, my baby!” Overflowing with hope and grief, she curled in around her womb and rocked the unborn child.

“She is alive,” said a soft voice from beside her.

Belle yelped and lurched. “Cole,” she said, watery and wobbly.

Cole sat near the foot of the bed. The ethereal boy reached forward to put a lukewarm hand over hers. He smiled a little at her, a simultaneously comforting and unnerving sight. “Safe and warm,” he said. “Hungry. Heart beats and beats and beats. She likes to listen. Easy to hear because she’s very small and it’s very loud.”

“So she’s okay?”

“Uncomfortable, but—”

The undulating sensation that always accompanied the baby’s self-adjustment churned through Belle’s stomach and intestines. She gasped again, gentler and quieter. She closed her eyes and embraced the swell of her daughter.

“Comfortable now,” said Cole. “Still hungry.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, Cole,” said Cullen. He still held her other hand, his thumb rubbing soothing little circles into her skin like a blurry memory.

“I am happy to see you. You’re happy, too. But less. Too weird.” The boy’s usual halting cadence made it sound even weirder. “Too much. Twisted sideways bullshit.”

“I’ve never heard you curse before,” said Belle, too wracked to overcome the unenthusiastic lilt of
“I haven’t before. It feels wrong on my tongue, but it’s right on yours. I won’t do it again.”

She removed her hand from her belly to reassure Cole with a touch on the shoulder. “It’s okay. You do whatever you want.”

“Are you alright, my darling?” asked Cullen. He hadn’t called her that in a long time. Something about domestic familiarity led them to speak without ever really addressing one another. She contemplated how long it had been since he’d called her by her name.

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like to get up?”

“I don’t know.”

He peered at her with a strange kind of sorrow marking him. He should have been happy. He was home again. She felt terrible for tearing that joy away from him. How unfair of her to be so distraught when her husband had every reason in the universe to be thrilled.

“Go to the main hall,” said Cole. “It will help.”

Cullen shot him a look of warning, and Belle glanced between them. “Why?” she said.

“You’ve been asleep too long. Your father and not-your-mother are waiting there.”

“What?” Adrenaline surged through her body, chilling her gut and tightening her muscles.

“Pulling, pulling, pulled. Should have let go. No, this is better. Has to be better. All here.”

“It’s true,” said Cullen, head hanging in mild contrition. “They refused to let go before we were swallowed by the rift. It pulled them through with us. Much the same, I imagine, as it pulled me through with you.”

Belle was already standing by the time he finished his explanation. She ambled to the stairs as fast as she could. She hadn’t started to waddle yet, so she made good time closing the short distance. Cullen and Cole followed. Over her shoulder, she said, “I resent the implication that I somehow caused all this. Like I wanted everyone to get ripped through spacetime with me or some-fucking-thing.”

“I was not suggesting that. You know I was not suggesting that.”

“I—Ugh. I know. I know you weren’t. I’m just…” Her fat feet plunked down the steps. “I don’t know.” She opened the door and made for Cullen’s tower. Shame washed over her again. She shouldn’t have spoken to him like that.

She watched Cole run off ahead before she marched through Cullen’s office. Everything in it was exactly the same. It was like the fucking Twilight Zone. Unease spilled into her chest, setting her breathing at an irregular rhythm. Cullen made a small sound of discomfort to match the apprehension oozing through her.

They passed through the rotunda. The sight of Solas’s unfinished mural made her feel ill. She clung to her tenuous calm, though she hesitated to consider herself even remotely calm with her low-key persecution delusion ripping her rationality to shreds. She was out of her depth, and she was being an asshole. She tried to steady her breathing while she walked. In through her nose, out through her
mouth, focused on the tilted world around her. The scent of old books and torchlit stone perforated her ballooning anxiety, releasing a modicum of the tense air trapped in her lungs. The sound of the crows and their rattling cages in the rookery above grounded her in the reality of her circumstances. The tilted world straightened a bit, and her erratic breathing slowed.

Belle’s father and Ilana sat face to face at one of the long tables near the entrance to Skyhold’s main hall. Cole sat with them, along with Josephine, Krem and… “Jesus fuck,” said Belle under her breath. She watched as Ilana reached up to touch one of Iron Bull’s horns in awe. Bull indulged Ilana’s curiosity, tipping the horn down so she could cop a better feel.

“How do you put on shirts?” said Belle’s father.

“Mostly, I don’t,” said Bull. “But if I do, it’s gotta have buttons. Strong ones.”

Belle’s father nodded. “Makes sense.”

Belle decided she really was in Twilight Zone. There her parents sat with a spirit and a Qunari, acting as if nothing at all was out of the ordinary. She’d been prepared to see them as frightened and out of sorts as she was when she first arrived in Thedas. She’d been prepared for a tearful reunion full of apologies, comforting sentiments, and promises to help them acclimate to this new world. Instead, she watched her stepmother fondle Bull’s horns and listened to her father ask him about shirts. The surrealistic qualities of the scene playing out before her tilted the world again.

Ilana saw her first. “You’re finally awake,” she said, happy as could be.

“Yeah. Are you guys…Is everything okay?”

Belle’s father stood from the bench with a groan and smiled at her. “Everything’s fine over here.”

Belle’s eye twitched. “That’s…good, I guess.” She paused for a long second. “Okay, you guys are acting really fucking weird. What the fuck is going on here?”

Her father approached and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll admit that for the first couple hours we were really freaked out. Like, so freaked out we wouldn’t leave the room they had us in. I mean, this is fucked up. This is real fucked up. But you told us a lot about this place, and after a while, curiosity got the better of us. Miss Montilyet’s been showing us around and telling us about everything you did while you were here. Everyone really seems to respect you.” He looked at Cullen. “Everyone really does respect you, you know. A couple people practically pissed themselves when they heard you were back.”

“I—” Cullen cleared his throat and squeezed the back of his neck. “I kept a tight command.”

“I figured. Either way, though, here is where you and Spencer both are now. So here’s where we want to be. Plus, it doesn’t make any sense for us to get upset about it. All that would do is make you guys upset about it. No point in that.”

“Okay,” said Belle, sludgy and dumb as she began to fall into the back of her own mind.

She wondered if her dad was insane or ingenious. He might have been both. Or he was just the chillest person in the history of chill people. The living embodiment of no point crying over spilled milk. A chill enigma. A chillnigma. Whatever he was, he’d passed the symptoms to Ilana like a contagion. She just sat and nodded in profound, silent agreement with everything he said.

Josephine crept forward behind him, more timid than Belle had ever seen her. She wore a tentative, close-lipped smile and lifted her brows. Belle mirrored her with all the sincerity she could muster.
“Hi Josie.”

The Antivan’s voice came out shaky in answer. “It is so good to see you. To see you both. We’ve—I’ve missed you.”

Belle wrapped her arms around Josie and gave her a little squeeze. Belle’s façade slipped for the briefest moment over the woman’s shoulder, drooping into tepid worry. “I missed you too. All the time.”

Josephine, on the other hand, beamed when Belle released her. “I must congratulate you both for your marriage. And for your baby. Missus Dolan said you are having a girl?”

“Thanks. Yeah, she’s a girl.” By force of habit, Belle laid a hand on her belly.

“Thank you, Josephine,” said Cullen.

Eerie formality hung heavy in the air between the three of them. Thick and stifling. Nearly two years apart made them nervous around one another. They each had a thousand questions piled up in their throats, all fighting to be asked and answered at once.

“Red,” said Bull, booming as ever, bursting the swollen silence. “Good to see you. I don’t recall you being so round last time.”

“Thanks for reminding me, Bull. I hadn’t thought about how round I was for the last ten or fifteen minutes. But babies’ll do that to you.”

He laughed his raucous laugh and clapped a hand on Cullen’s back, knocking Cullen forward a little. “Good work.”

Cullen steadied himself. “Thank you, I suppose.”

Bull beckoned Krem, who gave his greetings and felicitations before reminding Bull that they needed to be on their way or they wouldn’t get far enough before nightfall. “You’re leaving?” said Belle.

“We were just stopping through here on our way to the Tevinter border. Got a job up there dealing with a couple blood mages who sacrificed the wrong slave. We just thought we ought to stick around until you woke up. Figured you’d be pissed if you heard we left while you were unconscious.”

“You figured right. I’ll miss you.” Belle hugged the hulking Qunari about as well as she could hug someone that much larger. “Again.”

“I think we’ll be seeing each other very soon,” he said with what might have been a wink. “But I’ll let Josephine fill you in on that.”

As promised, Josie bade Belle and Cullen follow her to her office after Bull and Krem left. The nobility still loitered in packs in the main hall, and the trio could apparently not abide prying ears listening in on the conversation they were about to have. When the door to the office shut, Josephine hugged Belle again, much tighter than the first time.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am that you’ve both returned to us. So much has happened in your absence, and the timing of your return could not have been better.”

“I think it could have,” said Belle.
“I am sorry that it had to happen this way.”

“What has happened?” said Cullen.

The ambassador took a tiny breath. “After you two were taken by the rift, Leliana, Cassandra, Maxim, and I decided that, because so few people actually saw what happened, we needed to behave as though you were still here.”

“You needed to avoid the appearance of vulnerability.” Cullen bobbed his head in understanding as he spoke.

“Precisely. We bought silence from those in the courtyard that morning, and Leliana hired several forgers to write on your behalf. I continued our work alone,” she said with a glance at Belle, “and Knight-Captains Rylen and Spencer jointly assumed your duties as Commander.”

“Where is P, by the way?” said Belle, still mired in the mirk of her mind.

“He was returning from a meeting with the Denerim city guard and stopped in South Reach to visit your sister,” Josephine nodded toward Cullen. “Though he should already be on his way here, as I sent word to him the moment I learned of your arrival. I also took the liberty of sending word to everyone else.”

“Where is everybody, anyway?”

“Maxim took Cassandra to Verchiel to meet with some of the nobility there. We hoped Cassandra’s Nevarran nobility would be of some persuasion to the Orlesian noble houses, and she agreed to accompany him on the condition that she could reach out regarding a Seeker of Truth that may be living nearby. Sera tagged along with them, and she’s undoubtedly stirring up trouble with the servants while no one is looking. Madame de Fer returned to court two months after you were taken. Varric has been appointed as Viscount of Kirkwall, though he returns here as often as he is able. He finds his work tedious, apparently. Dorian is currently visiting Magister Maevaris Tilani in Minrathous to discuss some shifts in the political climate. Thom Rainier is in Val Forêt with one of the surviving members of his company. He is helping the man start a farm. And Solas is still missing. No one has heard from him since Corypheus’s death. Even Leliana—pardon me, Divine Victoria—has been unsuccessful in her attempts to locate him.”

“Wait, why is Max meeting with nobles in Verchiel? What is he trying to persuade them about, exactly?” asked Belle.

“I suppose that brings me to our most recent concern. While most of Thedas still appreciates the Inquisition and continues to request our aid in a variety of matters, there are some who feel that we have exhausted our welcome. They believe that because Corypheus is dead, and because the Breach and most of the rifts are closed, there is no need for the Inquisition to continue. Although we have dismissed some of our troops, people still believe we have amassed too much power and that we render the rulers of Orlais and Ferelden ineffectual.”

“Okay, but my question still stands.”

“There are rumors—as of now they are only rumors—that there will be an Exalted Council formed to determine whether the Inquisition should continue or be dissolved.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” said Cullen, a tinge of his classic ire toward nobility in his voice, “that a few nobles will meet alongside the Divine to decide the Inquisition’s fate for us.”
“Yes,” said Josephine. “However, in the event an Exalted Council is convened, we will still have the opportunity to argue on our own behalf. I was worried the task would fall only to me, but now that you’ve returned, you could—I mean, your help would be invaluable.”

Belle’s head was spinning. It might have been the hormones, or the spacetime travel, or the mass of information Josephine just dumped on her. It might have been a slew of things. Every right thing and every wrong thing careened through her mind simultaneously.

“Maybe,” she said, a bit hazy, staring at the gray stone wall over Josie’s shoulder. “I—Maybe. I’m sorry. I’m just now realizing that everything we built back home is gone. My company is going to give away my job. The bank’s going to foreclose on our house. Our cars are going to get repossessed. Cullen’s business is going to evaporate. Our credit will be unsalvageable. It’s all gone. Poof. Just like that. All that work.” She pressed her lips together tight. Cullen reached for her hand, but she pulled away.

“I am very sorry,” said Josephine as the callowness of her request seemed to dawn on her.

“Yeah. I—Uh…I need a few minutes.”

Belle made her way out of Josie’s office and out of the main hall. She walked back across the battlements, back into her tower, and back up to her room. She scanned the space, closer than she had when she awoke just minutes before. Her things were as she left them. Her luggage lay half open. Her new purse sat next to her old purse. Her clothes were strewn about the floor and chairs. Her bedsheets were rumpled on her side and made on Cullen’s. She expected dust, but found none.

She stood in the middle of the room and screamed. She screamed so hard her eyes pinched shut and her clenched fists trembled. She screamed so hard her knees gave out and stung through her jeans when they hit the floor. She screamed so hard her throat burned and she thought her lungs might collapse. She screamed even as strong arms wreathed around from behind her. She screamed until her voice cracked and her lightheadedness made consciousness a slippery thing. She screamed until she couldn’t scream anymore. She screamed until her vision went white and hear ears popped.

The world was gone.

*****

Chapter End Notes

Well what the fucking fucketty fuck, huh?

I sure hope this chapter answered at least a few of your questions. ^_~
It was light when Cullen woke. He released a slow morning sigh through his nose, easy and cool because the day could not yet be ruined. He stretched his leg and flexed his toes. One of them cracked, and he savored the gone tension.

Only after he turned over did he realize he was alone. His arm reached out to find nothing and no one. Loose dread tightened around his mind in an instant as he searched the top of the tower with bleary eyes for his wife.

He found her standing by a window, light streaming in all around her. Her overlong red curls shone like a halo of embers and sparks around the back of her head as she stared out over the Frostbacks. He peered at the blurry silhouette of her rounded belly, filled with his child and covered only by the wisp of a nightdress made almost invisible by the too-bright sunlight.

“Your are beautiful,” he said to the back of her.

“Thank you.” The fog of sleep hung heavy in Cullen’s mind, and it made her voice sound strange in his ears. Then she laughed a laugh that was not hers.

Cullen rubbed his eyes, but he still could not see her. She remained blurry even as she turned to face him, and the sun from behind her obscured her face. He was afraid. She approached him in measured steps that made his gut churn. It churned at the shrouded darkness of her eclipsed expression and the queerness of her gait and the creeping grin he felt but did not see growing on her lips. She reached the side of the bed and touched his arm with fingers like death, and he saw her creeping grin through his clouded eyes, and her face was not her face.

Desire bit down on her purple lip and flicked her tongue over her teeth and smiled again. Her fingers that were like death skimmed his arm to land on his chest, and she leaned in close with her hazy face, and she breathed her evil over his lips. He pulled away, and she said it’s only me. He said it isn’t you. She said this is what you want, and he replied no. She said again, this is what you want, your wife fat with child and your own world and you took it all for yourself, and you gave in to me. He said no again, and he reached for his sword. There was no sword.

Desire leaned in close again, and she kissed his cheek, and he knew he was dying. She said you gave into me and I have you here in your world, and I’m fat with your child, and you are mine. He said no a third time, and he scrambled out from under her. She laughed the laugh that was not hers and shook her head and told him there is no escaping me, my love. He reached again for his sword, and again there was no sword. He backed away and away and away until the ground vanished from under his bare feet, and he fell naked down the stairs of the tower.

He landed on soft ground with more sunlight pouring into his eyes. He rolled onto his side to see that he lay under the skylight in his living room in Washington. His true wife stood at the center of the room, eyes full of tears and searching for him. He could not know her mind, but he knew she was
searching for him. He stood, and he was still naked, and he called out to her. Desire laughed the laugh that was not hers and said she cannot hear you and she cannot see you because you are mine and you are gone. His true wife called his name and he said I’m here, and she called his name again, and he said I’m here again. Her calls turned to cries, frantic and miserable, and her small tears turned torrential, and she wept and cried out for him and wept and cried out for him and wept and cried out for him, and he was gone from her. She fell to her knees on the soft tan carpet and wailed. She screamed, and her scream was a shadow, and it vanished before he perceived it.

The sunlight above him turned to darkness and back to light, and his true wife still knelt on the soft tan carpet, and she still wept and screamed. The light turned to dark and to light, and she remained, and she wept and screamed and became old before him. The light turned to dark and to light, and she remained, and she was dead on the soft tan carpet. She lay twisted and gray and blue and so very still. The shadow of her screams at once loomed heavy and loud, and it pounded his ears over and over and over until he began to go mad at the sound. He screamed in answer, and Desire laughed the laugh that was not hers.

It was dark when Cullen woke. His eyes shot open, and a shredded gasp replaced his slow morning sigh. Sweat beaded cold on his forehead and chest, lingering in its place even as he struggled to slow his breathing. His hands sat fisted in the sheets beside him.

A ragged sniffle snapped his attention to Belle’s side of the bed. She lay with her back to him, her overlong red curls fanned out over her pillow. Her shoulders rolled and shifted.

“You okay?” she said without looking. Her voice came out cracked and stuffed. She had been crying.

“I think so. A nightmare.”

Belle hummed. “Yeah.”

“They’re worse here.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong?” said Cullen. He released the sheet and put his hand on her shoulder. She shied away from his touch.

“Nothing.”

He attempted to blink away the remnants of his fitful sleep. Outside the window beyond his wife, the dawn was just beginning to break. The sky wore hints of blue in dark hues like an old sapphire or forgotten velvet. Cullen wiped the cold sweat from his brow and his chest, and he wrapped an arm around Belle to hold her to him. She made a tattered little noise that, in his drowsiness, he could not discern as one of pleasure or displeasure.

“Are you having trouble sleeping?” he said near her ear. Her hair still smelled of fruit and lilies.

“Yeah.”

“Perhaps it will pass in a day or so. It did last time.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you certain you’re alright?”
“Yeah.”

Belle’s monosyllabic responses rang false. Each one was terse and shallow, a surface response to cover a deep hole. Cullen knew her distress. He knew she was unhappy about being torn away from her world again after everything they so painstakingly built there. He could not fault her for it. Despite being back in his own world, no longer displaced by forces beyond his control, he would miss that place. He would miss the comforts and conveniences, and he would miss his pupils. But with the entirety of his family finally in one place, he would not miss those things much.

He worried over her condition for a time, but exhaustion from the day’s multidimensional travels nagged at his eyelids. He knew her well enough to know she would not wish to be mother-henned before dawn, or at all, for that matter. With naught to do and no more words to pass between them, he drifted off again. He dozed, dreamless until day broke in earnest.

When Cullen woke for the final time that morning, Belle was asleep. He slipped out of bed, careful to create as little disturbance as possible for his light-sleeping wife. She did not wake, or if she did, she did not stir. He made the wise decision the previous night to shed his armor on the lower level of the tower. He supposed, as he fastened his breastplate and backplate together, this was no longer Belle’s tower, but the tower they would share as husband and wife. It was not quite their two thousand square foot house with four bedrooms and three bathrooms—Belle insisted it had two and three quarter bathrooms, though Cullen still did not understand how a bathroom could be less than a bathroom—but it would serve. They would have to make some rearrangements in concession for the coming of their daughter. Perhaps, he thought, they would move Belle’s desk into his office that they might leave their tower solely for residence. He thought she might like the idea of adjusting their living conditions, that she might consider it the chance to nest afresh in Thedas. Nesting was, after all, quite important for a new mother, according to the websites she had sent him.

As he stepped out onto the battlements, a thousand memories and a thousand sensations struck him at once. Chilled wind gusted through the stone and whistled, and he recalled every time he walked that path. He breathed deep, drinking up the cold fresh air. It enlivened him. So little had changed in his absence. It was almost as if he never left.

His meeting with Knight-Captain Rylen, however, reminded him that he had, in fact, been absent from his duties for nearly two years. The men exchanged warm greetings and caught each other up on personal matters before broaching the subject of the Inquisition.

“This asking after me first bit is new, Commander,” said Rylen of Cullen’s newfound willingness to reverse the standard order of events. The Starkhaven man crossed his arms and grinned, stretching the bold tattoos beneath his lower lip.

Cullen’s hand found the back of his neck. “I suppose it is. I am sorry for that.” After a moment, he gave the man a smirk. “Perhaps I have become too acclimated to a world in which small talk is all but required and people’s greatest fear is public speaking.” He chuckled as he said it.

Rylen’s mouth tilted in disbelief. “Public speaking? As in talking to groups of people? Really?”

“Yes. According to hundreds of studies and surveys and the like, most people there fear public speaking over death. I suppose, to some degree, it makes sense. It is far easier to make a fool of oneself in front of the entire world there than it is here.”

The Starkhavener wrinkled his prominent nose and its matching angular tattoo. “That seems a bit silly. Far-fetched even. I’m not sure I believe this tall tale of yours, Commander.”

Cullen’s smirk slipped into a grin. “You can ask my wife. She’ll probably laugh at the question, but
she will confirm every word I’ve told you to be true.”

“Ah, aye. Your wife. I’ll bet she and the babe you’ve got on the way are the real reason you’ve gone so soft.”

“I have not gone soft.”

“Well, no one’d fault you for it,” said Rylen with a sly gleam in his eye. “Spending nearly two years in your cushy life, fearing only public speaking, with your sharp-witted woman to keep you cozy at night. And sometimes in the morning. And perhaps the occasional afternoon.”

“Rylen.”

“And now a baby coming. ‘When did the Commander turn into a mushy toff who cares about hearing other people’s feelings before his troop movements?’ they’ll ask, and I’ll tell them, ‘Oh it was a fairly recent development, brought on, no doubt, by the company of his blushing bride and their babe.’ And they’ll understand, of course.”

“That’s quite enough, thank you. Maker’s breath. You can be certain I’ll never ask after your wellbeing again.”

“Now there’s the hard arse everyone remembers.”

The men shared brief laughter before finally delving into the task at hand. Rylen provided the entirety of the Inquisition’s troop numbers, movements, casualties, and major events in painstaking detail. Cullen appreciated the diligence with which Rylen and Spencer had filled his role in his absence, and it seemed they had done a commendable job together. Midway through the discussion, Rylen remarked on the testicular fortitude it must have taken for Cullen to do all that work alone, though his choice of words was far more anatomical and contained a piece of Starkhaven slang Cullen had only ever heard through closed doors in the brothels of Kirkwall.

Throughout their meeting, something rang in Cullen’s ears underneath their conversation. It was something he had not heard for nigh on two years. It took longer than it should have for him to recognize the sound. But that sound, the song of lyrium emanating from Rylen’s blood, was loath to be forgotten. Cullen’s head ached a broken-down but familiar ache at the noise all but pealing out of his old friend.

To break the enticing cadence of that awful song, Cullen said, “You’re still taking lyrium?”

Rylen’s mien shifted, somber at the question. “I am. I intended to stop after we defeated Corypheus, but before I had the chance…Well, I thought I’d better keep taking it until the Inquisition disbanded or you somehow returned to us.”

“Disbanded?”

“Those rumors Ambassador Montilyet told you about are more than just rumors. Nobles all over Thedas are calling for the Inquisition’s disbandment. Rather vocally. Even your King Alistair seems to have been persuaded to question our continued operation. The Exalted Council will happen. It’s just a matter of how long the Inquisitor and Ambassador can manage to delay it.”

The notion was more than a little disquieting. It should not have surprised Cullen that he would return to Thedas just in time for chaos to meet him again. This time, however, the chaos took on a shape of a kind he was ill equipped to combat. A riot of consequences rushed through his thoughts, stirring up scads of insecurity in his family’s future. It was all he could do not to run out of his office that very second to demand assurances from Josephine.
“That may be,” he said, pushing aside his concerns for the moment, “but if you still wish to stop taking lyrium, I will grant you leave to do it. From what you’ve told me, Knight-Captain Spencer is quite capable of being my second for a month or so while your initial withdrawal symptoms pass.”

“But how could I take a leave when it would be so entertaining to see that? Commander Cullen working side by side with his little sister’s betrothed and his very own brother by marriage. What a show that would be. But I suppose I would have to take the leave for it to happen. Ach decisions, decisions.”

“Betrothed?”

“Oh yes, Spencer regaled me with the whole story. Even asked for my advice, as if I know something or anything about proposing matrimony to anyone. You weren’t around, so he talked to your brother—nice fellow, nothing like you for how similar you look. Promises and a lovely little ring were exchanged some months ago, much to the delight of your kin.”

“Promises.” This was not a question.

“Aye, promises. No vows yet, not to worry. That was to be saved for our disbandment as well. Although, the two of them don’t seem to know the difference. Spencer spends all his spare time—what little of it he has—in South Reach.”

Cullen swallowed his seething hard. Rylen’s goading was obvious enough, but it was no lie. Cullen knew somewhere in the recesses of his mind that something like this might happen when he granted Spencer permission to court Rosalie. If he was honest, the fact of their betrothal was not the thing that vexed him. It sounded like Spencer had taken all the proper and respectful steps he ought to have taken. It was that they had done it in Cullen’s absence. It left the sensation of having been forgotten low in his lungs, and they pinched and puckered with his next few breaths. His thoughts were hypocrisy, but he thought them nonetheless.

He chose to ignore his pinched and puckered lungs in favor of jabbing back at his friend. “Your avoidance of the topic of quitting lyrium is noted, Knight-Captain. Just know that should you decide to do so, you have my support.”

Rylen chuffed. “You truly have returned to us, Commander. Single-minded as ever. I’ll consider it and give you my decision soon.”

“Good.”

Hours had passed by the time they finished. One of the women from the kitchen had brought them lunch, and the sun had risen high and begun its slow sinking toward the horizon. Cullen took a few moments to ensure his desk was arranged as he liked it before returning to the tower he shared with Belle. He expected to find her at her desk, but when he entered she was nowhere to be seen. He climbed the stairs, wondering if she had chosen instead to begin making their quarters feel a bit more like home.

She had not. Everything was strewn about in the same disarray it was the morning they were pulled from Thedas. It was as though she had not returned with him at all. When his eyes fell upon her, she lay in bed curled up on her side like a harassed caterpillar, every limb tucked in as far as it could be. It might have been endearing had it not been so concerning.

“Hi,” she said in a small version of her voice.

“Are you alright?” said Cullen as he moved to her bedside. “Is something wrong with the baby?”
Belle shook her head against her pillow, ruffling her hair into her pale cheek. “No, the baby’s fine. She was kicking the shit out of me a few minutes ago. I just don’t feel good.” She ran a finger across the tip of her reddened nose and blinked her bloodshot eyes several times, as if to secrete something away behind her eyelids. She had been crying again.

“You know your eye color is one of the rarest on Earth? Amber. Just two percent of the population. Who knows here…I hope she has your eyes.”

He wanted to tell her he hoped their daughter had her eyes. He wanted to tell her he hoped their daughter looked exactly like her. He wanted to tell her that, in truth, he did not care how their daughter looked, so long as she grew up happy. Instead, he watched his wife attempt to hide her feelings in trepidatious silence.

“Ilana and Dad stopped by a little while ago,” she said, looking at him for the first time. “They’re settling in way faster than I did. Dad’s all hopped up on bringing technology to Thedas. He’s convinced he can get Skyhold running on indoor plumbing and electricity in a few months. I told him not to get too worked up about it, but he’s got that same look he used to get when he had too many simultaneous ideas. I think he’s just excited to be working again. I sent him to Dagna. Ilana’s on a mission to meet every single fucking person in Skyhold. She’s always been one of those ‘get to know all your neighbors’ types of people. They said Josie put them in one of the nice rooms by the garden.”

“All of that sounds positive.”

“She came by, too. Looking for me. She said my name from downstairs and I didn’t say anything. She left after a couple minutes.”

Cullen sat down in the small space between Belle’s elbows and the edge of the bed. “I know you’re unhappy about being here,” he said. She set her jaw tight and looked away. Her lower lip trembled for a fraction of a second. “But we are here together. We found happiness in Thedas once. And now our entire family is here. Your parents are getting on alright. Your brother is apparently engaged to my sister.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Rylen told me during our meeting. Spencer and Rosalie are to be married af—soon.”

“That’s good. Weird, but good. I’ll have to tell my parents. Or maybe I’ll let him do it, I dunno.” Belle sighed.

Cullen watched his wife for a long moment. She bore an expression he had never seen on her. She looked lost. He felt her slipping into something he did not recognize, and it frightened him. Images of his nightmare flashed behind his eyes. He shuddered at their parallel. To assuage his fears and to ground himself, he put a hand on Belle’s arm. She grimaced and recoiled from his touch, lancing pain through the heart she made beat for her.

“Sorry,” she said in that small version of her voice. “My skin hurts. Everything fucking hurts. I just—I dunno.”

Belle dissolved into tears in an instant. She did not sob or cry out. She simply dissolved. Those tears raced across the bridge of her nose and sideways down her cheeks, pooling in a dark blotch on her pillow.
“I’m sorry,” she said again, her words rounded and dense, compacted by her woe.

Cullen slipped off the edge of the bed, landing hard on his knees before her. “Tell me what to do,” he said. He pleaded. He took her hand. “Tell me what to do.”

“Nothing. There’s—” She sniffled and shut her eyes. Shocking clarity filled them when they opened again. “There’s nothing,” she said, firm and plain. “You can’t do anything. I just… I need to think. Or not think. Or—I dunno.”

Without another word or gesture to elucidate, Belle turned away from him. He stared at her back for a long while. He traced the blue and pink and white lines on her plaid shirt, each one curved against her spine. Hopeless tears clouded his vision, and images of his nightmare flashed again. His blurry wife spoke in a different voice and wept before him, and he worried if he took his eyes off her for one moment, if any time passed, he would find her twisted and gray and blue and so very still.

After Maker knew how long, it became clear she would not speak to him. Cullen stood without a word. He left her to her weeping, looking back just once before descending the stairs. She was motionless, save for the occasional jolt of a sob that ripped through her coiled body.

Out in the cold and whistling wind on the battlements, he felt for the first time that he might be losing her.

*****

It was three days before Cullen saw Belle outside of their tower. She shut out the world, and she shut out her husband. She became a ghost of herself, distant and spectral as a vanishing spirit on the edge of the Veil. She spoke very little. She slept very little. She ate very little. She simply drifted.

On the second day, Cullen went with Dov to see Eudora in the healers’ rooms. Dov sought to assess whether his physical ailments could be remedied. He requested Cullen’s presence because he had never felt quite at ease with doctors back home and anticipated the same unease with those in Thedas. Cullen had a mound of waiting work that rose to his pauldrons, and he did what he could to explain that the practices of the Inquisition’s healers were far removed from the doctors of Washington. That only made Dov more insistent upon Cullen’s attendance.

Unsurprisingly, Eudora and Dov got along quite well. Dov seemed the perfect foil for Eudora’s unique brand of snappy communication. They had each other laughing within minutes. Cullen felt his continued presence was rather pointless, but he remained for his own reasons. Eudora told Dov his back could be righted in the same way she had righted his daughter’s. She gave him a basketful of jars and herbs, as was her way, and he wrote down all her instructions in his pristine and remarkably straight handwriting. They set aside a time for him to return to have his spine adjusted, as the healer needed to prepare for a procedure that demanded the exertion of so much of her magic. Apparently, the adjustment of so many delicate bones was quite taxing on one’s mana.

Cullen stayed after Dov left. Eudora perched on the edge of her desk with a serious look on her face that was uncharacteristic for the clever woman. He gripped the pommel of his sword to combat his nerves.

“Belle’s unwell, Commander,” she said.

“I had gathered as much. But she will not tell me what’s wrong. I only want to help her. I had hoped your visit would help, but she is still… ailing.”

“That she is. And she may yet ail for quite some time.”
“Why?” The question came out angrier than he meant it.

Eudora was unfazed. “Her ills have got no roots in her body. Nothing for me or any of my ilk to heal. I’d be the first to try to set her right if I could. You know I like the silly girl.”

“But she said she was in pain. She said her skin and her body ache. Pain can be healed, or at least lessened.”

“Only if it’s got a place in the body to come from. Your wife’s pain is real, and she feels it way down deep in her bones, but it’s not growing out of her body. Her ailment is one of the mind. Something happened when the rift pulled her back here. Something inside her broke. Not sure if it snapped or smashed, but it surely did break.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means what I’ve been saying, Commander. What she’s got can’t be fixed, except by her. You can’t help her but to be kind and understanding, and I suspect you already are that. If the thing that broke snapped, she ought to come round soon enough. If it smashed…well, that’s worse.”

“Smashed?” said Cullen. “I don’t understand.” He despised his persistent lack of understanding. He was not a stupid man, but Belle and everything to do with her always seemed to make him question his own intelligence. It did not help that Eudora was speaking in riddles.

“If a sword or a staff snaps, it can be mended. Never be as strong as it was, but it’ll serve. If it’s smashed, it breaks into too many pieces. Makes it much harder to put back together, and Maker knows it will never be right again.”

Cullen reeled. He felt as if the silver-haired woman had kicked him in the chest. Never be right again. His breath stopped up in his lungs, and he fought to let it out. He thought he might suffocate under the weight of her implications or drown under the guilt of his own selfish desire to return to Thedas. Belle had always been strong, even at her most vulnerable. She was powerful. Unbreakable. Yet something within her had broken, perhaps irreparably.

“I knew a young man once, an apprentice in the Circle,” said Eudora, louder than Cullen’s screaming thoughts. She had a faraway look in her eyes. “Something in him was smashed to the Void well before I met him. I was as kind to him as I could manage. Most of us were. But none of us could put him back together. He couldn’t mend, couldn’t get right again. Months before his harrowing…” She let out a long sigh. “He could not survive himself.”

Cullen swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat, pushing and pushing at the thick anxiety trapped there. Maker, this could kill her. This thing inside Belle, this unbreakable broken thing inside her, could kill her.

That thought niggled at him all day and all night after he left the healers’ rooms. His eyes kept reading while his mind wandered over his concerns. In bed that night, he stared at his wife until his eyes burned, waiting for some sign of improvement or deterioration. She remained idle, but he could not do the same.

Spencer returned on the third day, drawing Belle outside and down into the courtyard with her parents. He had grown a bit of a beard in their absence. It became him in a strange way. His smile was identical, as wide and uninhibited as ever.

The reunion of the Dolan family was rough and damp. Spencer collided with his parents and with Belle. Armor rattled. The four of them exchanged a jumble of tearful and gleeful words,
incomprehensible to anyone but them. They talked over each other and spoke in a concoction of at least two languages, though it may have been as many as three or four. They collapsed into each other a heap, an amalgam of intrinsic love and relief.

Cullen found his own trickle of relief in smaller measure at the sight of a smile on Belle’s face. It was a slight and fragile kind of smile, and he knew it would not last. He would enjoy it for as long as it did.

He looked on as Spencer told his family of his welfare and his life and his engagement to Rosalie. Dov and Ilana all but demanded to meet her as soon as possible. Spencer assured them they would, and said it was even more likely because she was eager to see her brother again. Dov remarked that the situation was like some backwards version of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, and Belle laughed. Cullen shut his eyes to hear the sound. He breathed it in. He tried to hold it. It fluttered away, leaving only a glimmer to echo through the crowded halls of his mind.

With the preliminary homecoming done, and with Belle having excused herself to lay down on account of pregnancy, Spencer approached Cullen. His smile stayed broad, if a bit soggy and flushed. The two men locked arms in greeting.

“So you knocked her up, huh?” said Spencer with a short chuckle.


“Yeah, well at least you married her first. Congrats, by the way. I couldn’t have asked for a better brother-in-law, Commander.”

“I suppose I could say the same, Knight-Captain.”

“Sorry that went down the way it did. I would’ve talked to you about it. But none of us knew whether you were ever coming back.”

“It’s alright,” said Cullen, and he meant it. “You love her, and none of us could remain static forever in anticipation of something we could not be certain would ever happen.”

“You said it.” Spencer’s demeanor changed, a kind of darkness washing over him. “What’s going on with my sister? She seems off. Way off.”

Cullen exhaled a slow and noisy breath through his nose. “I don’t know, exactly. Eudora believes it’s something to do with her mind.”

Spencer shut his bright blue eyes. “Fuck,” he said. “She told you about her chemical depression, right?”

“She did. Though I confess I did not really understand what she meant by that when she said it. She never explained further. I think she assumed I knew. Is that was this is?”

“Probably. Shit. Fuck.” Spencer sighed. “The chemical depression is…Since she was a teenager, the chemicals in her brain—all the stuff controlling the signals everything in there sends to everything else—those have been imbalanced. It’s genetic, from her mom’s side. The parts of her brain that tell her to be happy don’t always work the way they should. So she gets depressed. Usually, she can trick her brain into working right or she can push through it after a day or two. She’s gotten pretty fucking good at it, too. She hasn’t needed meds in, like, thirteen or fourteen years. But if she’s as bad as she looks, it’s going to be harder than that this time. She really didn’t explain all this?”
Cullen shook his head. “No. I wish she had. It explains much more of her behavior in the past two years than I would have liked. I should have asked.” He really should have.

“She needs to get whatever’s bugging her out of her. It’s like poison. For a while, she would go to a therapist for maintenance whenever she got too low. There’s no one like that in Thedas. Fuck. Have you tried talking to her?”

“Several days ago. She refused to speak to me, and she’s barely said a word since.”

“You gotta get her to talk to you. She’s gotta tell you what’s wrong. If she bottles it up, it’ll only get worse. Listen, I know she’s probably the one who usually has to get you to talk about your feelings, right? She’s like that with everyone. She just pokes at you until you spill your guts. You have to do that to her now. It might suck for a few minutes, but she’ll talk. You know her, she loves to talk.”

“I don’t understand how that will help if her brain is forcing her to be unhappy.”

“It’s like I said. All that shit she’s holding in, all that anger and sadness and whatever else is like a poison. A nasty, shitty, sad-making poison. The longer she holds all that shit in, the harder it gets for her brain to learn to act right again. She starts sending her own signals to tell her brain not to be happy, and it just spirals out of control. She has to talk. I could do it, but it needs to be you. You have to learn to pull her out of her funks. This won’t be the last time something like this happens.”

Cullen marched up the stairs and across the battlements toward their tower, resolve and fealty pulsing through him stronger with every step. He made vows to Belle. He promised before the Maker that he would support and uplift her in sickness and in health, for better or for worse. He swore an oath to her. He swore dozens of oaths to her. He had a duty to uphold, and he would not forsake it.

Belle was not laying down when he reached their quarters. She sat in an ornate chair she had turned to face a window that looked out over the Frostbacks. Her feet were tucked up under her, and one hand rested atop her pregnant belly. She pressed the other against her lips, worrying at her teeth with her thumbnail. Her eyes that were like armor and like the sea were glassy and dull.

She spared Cullen a glance when she heard him. “Hey,” she said with all the liveliness of a plucked and wilted flower.

He hauled their second ornate chair to a spot just inches in front of hers, and he sat down, and he began his task. “Belle,” he said, “I know you are unhappy. I know you are beyond unhappy. Please. Please, I beg you,” he took her hand from her lips and kissed it, “tell me what’s wrong.”

Belle shook her head a little. “Nothing’s wr—”

“You cannot think I’m stupid enough to believe that. I know you. I know you better than I have ever known anyone. You struggle not to laugh every time someone trips, no matter how important they are. You get the smallest wrinkle in your brow when you read about the law. You would never intentionally step on a snail. You cry a little whenever you see puppies playing with small children. I know you, Belle. Something is very wrong. Please tell me what it is.”

She blinked at him several times, then swiped at her cheek with the knuckle he did not have under his thumb. “I’m just upset,” she said, walking a fine line between rage and despair. “It’s not a big deal. It’s so fucking dumb, but I’m fucking upset.”

Cullen hunched over enough to kiss her hand again, though he did not press his lips to her cold skin. He peered up at his wife’s crestfallen face, and he watched as her eyes watered and overflowed. “It is not dumb. I love you. Please talk to me,” he said as soft as he could.
“I worked so hard. I worked so fucking hard.” She sniffled. “I got my dream job, and I went to work every day, and I was doing really well. I was really goddamn proud of myself for how well I was doing.” Her voice began to vanish into the tension in her throat as she clung desperately to the last vestiges of her composure. “For how well I re-assimilated into society and how hard I was working. I got us our beautiful house. And that kitchen. You started a business, and I was so proud of you, too. We had a life. We had a whole life. And in the end, it turned out we built it out of straw on top of a fucking Jenga tower. And now it’s all gone. It’s all gone, and there’s no guarantee we won’t wind up back there, together or alone, with or without our baby, with no fucking life left to live. It’s all so fucking up, and I’m so fucking angry I can’t stand to look at anyone. Nothing feels real anymore.”

Belle averted her eyes back out the window. Her composure had fled, leaving her wracked and ruined in her ornate chair. Cullen rubbed small circles into the back of her hand, and he waited.

“Now I have to give birth here, with no epidural, no meds, no Oh-Bee-Gee-Why-En, no hospital, no fucking anything. No Nick-You if something’s wrong when she’s born. And then we have to raise our kid here. We have to raise our little girl where there are dragons that eat people, and darkspawn that kill people, and no discernable rules of law or governance to stop her getting raped or murdered by some asshole who just feels like it that day. This was not what I wanted. This wasn’t what I fucking wanted! This is a fucking nightmare!” She was almost screaming now.

“And you’re perfectly happy here,” she said. “You probably wanted to come back. And how can I blame you? So I’m the asshole for being pissed the fuck off about it. But we had it.” She held out her hand like a grasping claw in front of her face. “We had it in our hands, and it fucking slipped through our fucking fingers. I got a taste of a really good life—a really fucking excellent life—and now it’s gone for-fucking-ever. And I’m sorry for being angry about that.” She looked at him again, anguish and guilt so plain on her features it made him want to cut out his own heart and hand it to her. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Cullen wrapped his arms around his wife. For all the Maker’s mercy, she reciprocated. She sobbed into the puffed up collar of his surcoat, and he told her it was alright to be angry. He ran his fingers through her hair and down her back, and he told her he would stay with her for as long as she needed. The trickle of his earlier relief began to flow over him like a river, wide and roaring and vital. They had embarked on their slow journey back to each other. He would not lose her.

With their flood gates opened, Belle and Cullen stayed in their tower for the next four days. They talked for hours upon hours upon hours, until she had gone over all her pain dozens of times from dozens of angles. When she could breathe again, they talked about the future, and he fed her all her favorite Thedosian foods, and they made love. It was languid and warm and profound. The sun cast strange shadows over their new bodies, and they traced the fringes of the dark shapes with delicate caresses. He stayed inside her as their bodies stilled, and he touched every part of her he could reach. She laughed for him.

They returned to their duties just over a week and a half after their arrival in Thedas. Belle agreed to move her desk, though she had it taken to Josephine’s office. That was the most preferable arrangement to maintain the proper balance in their marriage, he and Belle agreed. Time apart was as important as time together.

When Max arrived in Skyhold, an outpouring of joy arrived with him. Sera and Cassandra gushed and cooed over Belle’s pregnant belly. Sera tried to jump up high enough to lock Cullen’s head in her arm, but succeeded only in mashing the side of his face with her clammy palm. Cassandra asked about the wedding with big doe eyes. Max hugged Belle and Cullen tight and gave them his
beaming congratulations. All felt well and right for a few easy moments.

The celebration of their cadre of reunited friends lasted for about an hour, but Max broke the revelry with a single sentence. The weight of his words fell upon them all with an instant kind of mass.

“One month from now,” he said, “the Exalted Council will convene at the Winter Palace to try and disband the Inquisition.”

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Chapter End Notes

Setting aside my usual snarky post-chapter boollsheet for a moment: I do have chemical depression. This chapter was written from experience (though the surrounding circumstances are obviously different). Everyone's depression/mental illness/disability is caused by different factors, exacerbated by different things, and controlled in different ways. I haven't needed medication for my depression in a very long time because I've done a LOT of therapy to figure out my needs and my imbalance is relatively mild on a normal basis. That being said, everyone is different. I would prefer it if no one sought to demean one another or me for the millions of variations of mental health, treatment strategies, or recovery. A-thankya.

Onto other matters. This chapter had to happen. It was really tough to get past the start, mostly because I just wanted to keep everyone in character and do their problems justice. I hope you think I've managed to keep telling the same story you bought into a little over a year ago. And I want to thank you for sticking with me through all these righteous ups and downs, twists and turns, and all the other directions. <3

Also, for those of you who don't follow me on Tumblr, I PASSED THE WASHINGTON BAR EXAM!!! BOOM!!! DOUBLE LAWYERED!!! Double chocolate lawyer cake! Other lawyer pun!
“Ooh. Ooooh Jesus fucking balls.” Belle reached up and hammered the roof of the carriage with the side of her fist to signal the driver to stop. “Ahhh.” She hissed in a breath.

“Is something the matter?” said Josephine from her seat opposite Belle. The ambassador had long since become accustomed to Belle’s persistently foul mouth, and she no longer got quite so scandalized when Belle issued a string of curses.

Belle hissed in another breath. “Ooh. Gotta pee.” She shut her eyes and tilted her head back. The carriage didn’t stop. It kept rocking away, sloshing the full capacity of her bladder from side to side. “Gotta pee, pee, pee.”

She banged on the ceiling again. “It’s a right fucking now sorta thing, dude!” she said from deep in her diaphragm.

Josie leaned her head out of the small window. “Please stop,” she said just once at a very reasonable volume.

The carriage stopped. Belle squinted her pained gratitude to her friend before flinging the door open. On this stupid carriage ride from Skyhold to Halamshiral, she had gone from thirty-seven weeks pregnant to thirty-eight weeks pregnant. As a result, she had to piss. Always. The only time she didn’t have to piss was the five second window after she had just finished taking a piss. Even then, there was a little tingle. And it was always urgent. There was no slow buildup to the moment her schoolteachers would have called “an emergency,” no ten or twenty minutes during which she could just hold it. There was only ever the terrifying sensation that her bladder would evacuate everywhere and on everything in ten, nine, eight…

She exited the carriage, half hopping and half sliding, like an elephant seal, and she waddled past several Inquisition soldiers toward a small ridge. They saluted her, because of course they did. Only men under Cullen’s instruction would salute a beached whale as it ran past to piss behind a bush.

Belle muttered to herself as she shuffled. “Oh God. OhGodohGodohGodohGod.” Her feet kicked up dirt because her hips and legs had shifted to make bending her knees a gargantuan effort. She ducked behind a shrub just large enough to cover her when she squatted. She was grateful she’d chosen only Antivan-tailored maternity wear to bring to the Winter Palace when she wasn’t in her expanded Inquisition uniform. It was easiest to pull up and down. Fereldan would have been better, but she didn’t want to piss any Orlesians off. Of the more neutral nations’ alternatives, Antiva’s puffed sleeves and empire waisted long gowns seemed the best option. Nevarrans cut their pregnant women’s clothes too tight, and they seemed to enjoy slapping little pieces of armor on everything. Tevinter, aside from being a non-option because it was Tevinter, belted their garb to the point of ridiculousness. Rivaini maternity gowns were essentially shifts, meant for an easy transition from pregnancy to nursing—Belle ordered several of them in bright colors for use at Skyhold. The Anderfells didn’t send a tailor.

When Belle finished, and her bladder twinge returned to a level that didn’t induce blind panic, she tottered back toward her carriage at the center of the caravan. Cullen stood beside his blue roan stallion, both having taken up a strategic position between her and the blissful discomfort of her seat. Her husband’s face was marked up with stress, pinched and crinkled in too many places.
“Are you alright?” he said when she was still a few feet away. “Did something happen?”

Belle rolled her eyes. “Same thing that happened the last fifty billion hojillion times I stopped the caravan. I had to pee. She’s sitting on my fucking bladder.” She gave him a peck on the lips when she got close enough. “You gotta quit worrying.”

Some of the crinkles smoothed. “You can hardly blame me. She’s due in two weeks’ time. Rosalie was born two weeks before she was expected.”

“That may be true, but Rosalie was baby number four. First babies are pretty much always late. I bet Mia was late.”

“By nearly a week.”

“See? We’ll be in Halamshiral in a couple hours, and this Exalted Council thing should only last a few days. Then we’ll turn around and be home in Skyhold just in time to wait another week. So chill.”

Belle kissed him again, and he held her hand to help her back into the carriage before the caravan spurred on. With the rocking recommenced, she retreated into her thoughts for a while. If she was honest, she was as worried as Cullen about when their baby would decide to burst onto the scene. She believed what she’d said. Most first babies arrived late. But there was no certainty in those statistics. If anything, the fact that every first baby she’d ever met came late, herself included, meant she was bound to be the exception that proved the rule.

She was all too glad to be torn from her spiraling thoughts when Josie suggested they go over their strategy once more before they reached the edge of the city. Max would lead the negotiations as the figurehead of the organization, and he understood enough about nobility from his upbringing to do a fair job with some assistance. Belle and Josie were there to back him up and chime in as needed.

Belle’s extra duties included playing the roles of both the sympathetic pregnant woman and the pitbull attorney. She was happy enough to do the latter, should the opportunity arise, but the former annoyed her. She hated playing the pregnancy pity card when it came to matters of professionalism. In Washington, an opposing counsellor once told her to take a break—not asked, told—and she threatened to have him sanctioned for discrimination. It hadn’t mattered one iota that she really needed to piss at the time.

The towering white and gold heights of the Winter Palace came over the horizon first, and soon the low built slums of the rest of Halamshiral appeared. As the Inquisition retinue rolled through the city streets, Belle noted that not enough had changed since Max helped elevate Brialia into power behind Celene and Gaspard. The elves living within the city looked to be as impoverished as ever. Children, thin even for their lithe builds and covered in filth, stared in awe of the soldiers and carriages as they passed. The whole situation nauseated Belle. It felt too familiar. She watched as Sera, who had been riding ahead near Max and Cassandra, stopped her horse to lean down and speak to two or three of the children and toss them a bag of coin for whatever information they’d passed along.

As the gates of the Winter Palace closed behind the last of the Inquisition soldiers, Belle couldn’t help but feel hypocritical. With all the power she’d been granted, she was there for a purpose other than freeing the impoverished from their Thedosian ghettos. In that moment, her duties felt selfish. The gates ensconced the guilty away from their atrocities and their neglect, and now she was locked in with the monsters, trapped and masquerading as one of them. It was no wonder Cullen hated the nobility with such fervor.

Josephine accompanied Max around the gardens to socialize with the nobles whose asses he was
expected to kiss. The two had become much more open with their relationship while Belle was gone, and they allowed each other a number of adorable favors and little intimacies that made her smile from across the courtyard. It brought her some relief to see nobles from all over Thedas seem to be kind and accepting of the full-bloomed love between the Inquisitor and his ambassador.

Cullen helped Belle out of the carriage and saw to it she was hydrated. He fetched two dainty glasses of water, gave one to her, and held the other until she needed it. He asked after her welfare every few minutes. It was very sweet, but he was helicoptering. She couldn’t entirely blame him, though. She had been stabbed the last time they were there, after all. It made her feel safer to have him so close, especially knowing he wouldn’t be in the chamber for most of the Exalted Council’s proceedings. So she let him hover.

They found all their friends as they meandered and mingled. Varric had been waiting just inside the gates to waylay everyone for a little while with all his new stories of being Viscount. Belle told him she would have hugged him, but that she was pretty sure her belly would knock him flat on his ass. He said it wouldn’t have been the first time.

Thom Rainier had finally decided to go by his real name, and he gave Cullen a jolt of a handshake when they met again. He congratulated them on the pregnancy and caught them up on his dealings of the past two years. Belle was pleased to hear of all the good work he’d been doing with the surviving men from his battalion and with those imprisoned for crimes they did not commit. She offered her legal assistance should he ever find someone who might benefit from it, and he told her he would start a list from which she could take her pick. A scintilla of regret eked into the back of her mind at the thought of so much pro bono.

Vivienne had remained very much herself with the passage of time. She proffered her felicitations for the marriage and pregnancy, but she made an offhanded remark about Belle’s willingness to marry down. Belle reminded her Cullen was at least five inches taller, which meant she’d married quite a ways up. Vivienne offered to treat her to a proper spa day after the baby was born, and she gave Cullen a backhanded compliment about the inevitable but conciliatory handsomeness of the child. The couple moved on with a foul taste in their mouths and promises of free pampering. At least they had broken even with the woman.

Dorian and Iron Bull lingered near one another in the tavern, making eyes across the room while everyone caught up. “You’ve become rather rotund since the last time I saw you,” said Dorian with a jaunty lift of an eyebrow.

“And somehow you’ve become even shinier,” said Belle. She poked one of the dozen little silvery diamond plates on his chest.

He laughed and drew her into his arms. “I have missed you very much, you know. Things can get very dull without your sharp tongue around.”

“I doubt anything could be dull with his sharp tongue around.” She stuck out a thumb toward Bull.

“Ah.” Dorian cleared his throat. “Yes, well, never dull there.”

“I am glad you two found each other,” said Cullen, much to Belle’s grinning surprise. “It’s good to know you’ve found something close to the happiness I feel with Belle.”

Dorian rolled his eyes and groaned. “Maferath’s balls, Commander. Must you always be so sweet and endearing? It’s enough to make my teeth rot.”

“Oh shush, butthead,” said Belle as she let her head fall to rest on Cullen’s shoulder. “I like him
sweet and endearing. Don’t ruin him.”

The newly appointed Magister laughed. “I’m not the one who ruined him. The Cullen I first met
would have run away gagging if he heard someone talking like that. You, my dear, are the one who
ruined him.”

“Fine. So don’t un-ruin him.”

“I’m still standing right here,” said Cullen.

“Cutting your usual dashing figure. I will miss you both when I return home at the end of all this.
Bull and I can never seem to finish a game of chess.”

“Then stop playing strip chess you fucking fiend,” said Belle.

“Now let’s not be hasty.”

“How long will you be in Tevinter?” said Cullen.

“For the foreseeable future, I’m afraid. If I truly mean to change things, I need to do my part in the
changing. You two could always visit. I go to the border of the Free Marches several times a month
if you’re not inclined to fear for your life every moment in Minrathous.”

“For your chess games, huh?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” Dorian peacocked a little.

“We’ll see what we can do after she gets here in a few weeks.” Belle rubbed a single circle over her
belly. “Shit’s about to get weird.”

A doleful, longing expression passed over his face. “You know, I envy you that.”

“You guys could always adopt. I’m sure there are a zillion little orphan boys and girls who would
kill for such rad dads. And you know you’d be able to protect them cause Bull’s a fucking murder
machine. You’re no slouch in the death-dealing department, either, mind you.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps once I’ve managed to fix enough that Bull can actually live in Minrathous.
But for now, I’ll settle for seeing your little bundle grow up on your very frequent visits.” He glanced
in Bull’s direction, and Belle’s eyes followed. Bull tilted his head toward the door and stood. “Well,
if you don’t mind, I’m feeling a bit exhausted from my travels and am in rather desperate need of a
long nap.”

Belle nodded with a licentious smile. “Oh I’ll bet. A real long nap. I bet you’ll feel so good after your
real long nap. Looonn—”

“You are one of my dearest friends. With that in mind, do shut up.”

She giggled, and he headed for the exit. She called out after him. “Enjoy your long nap!” He swatted
the air behind him before vanishing through the doorway. She took a sip of the second glass of water
she’d finally removed from her husband’s hand.

“I suppose that’s one more chess game they won’t finish,” said Cullen.

Belle spat her water everywhere.

After she finished apologizing to the three people she’d moistened, and after sitting with Cole to
listen to some of Maryden’s newest tunes, Belle and Cullen decided to peruse the wares of the merchants set up in the courtyard for the occasion. The goods were mostly useless. Baubles and vanity weapons meant to hang from walls instead of belts. When they were midway through the makeshift marketplace, a booming bark thundered from a stall behind them. Belle lurched, nearly spilling what remained of her water down the front of her dress. Cullen spun around, prepared to defend his wife with nothing but his balled fists.

She turned around to meet her would-be attacker. Instead, she saw a massive gray dog that looked exactly like a Cane Corso. Its pointed nub of a tail twitched back and forth, dragging its ass into an ecstatic wag. Its mouth hung open, pink tongue lolling out over too many teeth.

“What’s mabari is this?” said Cullen, loosening his fists so as not to scare the shopkeeper.

The masked man answered with a thick Orlesian accent that Belle almost didn’t mistake for French first. “As of this moment, Ser, he is no one’s.”

“No one’s?”

“Someone brought him to the palace, that much is certain. I saw him drinking from one of the fountains. Then he tried to catch one of the fish. Rather than letting the guards kill him, I took him to see if I might find his owner. No one has claimed him since yesterday.”

Belle and Cullen approached the dog, and Belle held out her hand like a paw. The mabari gave it a few short sniffs before licking all of her knuckles at once. She smiled and scratched behind his ear. Cullen took a knee in front of the dog.

“Another Fereldan stranded in Orlais,” he said, sounding somewhat faraway. He held up his fist like a SWAT team member signaling his partners to stop. The dog’s intelligent brown eyes snapped to Cullen’s hand, and he sat. Cullen laid his hand flat, palm down, and the dog laid down. Belle shot a quizzical glance at her husband.

“How much do you want for him?” said Cullen to the merchant.

“What?” said Belle. “Hey wait a second, this is a conversation. You can’t just unilaterally decide we’re getting a dog now.”

A stitch knit itself between his brows. “But you love dogs.”

“Yeah, and it’s a big decision to get one. One we have to make together. We’re in the middle of a goddamn upheaval. We don’t even know if we’ll be living in the same place next month.”

Cullen turned his attention to the mabari. “You don’t mind where you live, do you?”

The dog barked and licked her hand again.

Belle’s eyes widened. She shook her head and chided them both with her tongue against her teeth. “Don’t try to weaponize his cuteness. It’s beneath both of you.” The dog barked again. “Hey now,” she said to him. “Cullen, we’re already about to have another mouth we have to figure out how to feed. I want a dog too, but this is something we should talk about.”

“Aren’t we talking about it now?”

She felt the incredulity spreading over her face before she heard it in her voice. “Well, yeah, but—I mean—Cooler heads, right?”
Cullen stood, taking her hands in his and looking her in the eye. The glowing amber of his gaze still made her just a bit weak in the knees. “Mabari are very intelligent. He will be the perfect protector for our daughter. And in the unlikely event we need to hunt for our food, we would have a much better chance at catching something with his help. He’s a Fereldan. He cannot be left alone in Orlais. It’s a travesty.”

Belle stared at her husband for a long while. The stich in his brow rose and rose until it threatened to meet his hairline. She looked at the mabari panting beside her. “What are we going to call him?”

She watched her husband all but leap out of his skin. She had never seen him so giddy. It made her laugh despite herself.

“Charles,” he said.

“Charles? Like Charlie?”

“No. Charles.”

“That’s weird, though.”

“It’s not weird.” Cullen turned to the giant dog. “You like the name Charles, don’t you?”

Charles barked. His tongue flapped up against his nose.

Belle bit back a laugh. “Fine. Charles it is. But I reserve the right to call him Charles Barkley.”

Cullen narrowed his eyes at her. “Is that the name of a person?”

“No.”

“The world may never know.”

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The sister moons cast sibling shadows in every direction when they rose high over Thedas on the third night in Halamshiral. They propagated at dozens upon dozens of angles to create a complex mosaic of light and dark. Belle stared out the window of the immaculate room she shared with Cullen, tracing through the maze of varied darkness to find the blinding reflections that glinted off the nearby gold and silver towers. Her hair had gotten too long, she thought just then, though she couldn’t say why she thought it.

She made her way back toward the bed where Cullen and Charles slept. Her restlessness left the sheets on her side in tousled disarray, and she sat in the blank spot she’d abandoned when she gave up on sleep and stood however long ago. She watched her husband sleep while her mind ticked like a broken clock stuck in time. His lips moved a little, and he murmured something about a chicken, and she smiled. It almost always made her smile when he talked in his sleep.

But Belle knew she wouldn’t sleep for some time yet. Too many things rattled through her thoughts, not the least of which was the unshakable feeling that she was fucking lying to fucking everyone. She was lying to the Exalted Council, save for Divine Leliana Victoria, about the extent of the very real Qunari threat Max kept running off to handle. She and Josephine spun up an easily punctured tale of the Inquisitor’s valiant efforts to stop a spy or two, knowing full well a small army had plans to blow up the Winter Palace. All of it to save her client’s—the Inquisition’s—ass. The bar ethics committee would have had a field day. She would have become a cautionary tale spread through every professional responsibility class in every law school in every state where she was licensed. That there was no bar ethics committee in Thedas brought her little comfort. She had managed to maintain her oaths until now.
She was lying to Josephine about the extent of her concern over Max’s growing mark. Just after he followed the first dead Qunari’s trail through an eluvian, his mark began to glow more brightly than ever. And it was spreading. As Belle sat awake that third night in Halamshiral, Max’s mark had already crept like toxic vines up and up, pausing just below his elbow. It hurt him. She saw him grimacing as he clutched his cracked fist when he thought no one was looking. Josephine asked Belle if she thought it could kill him, and Belle said no. It was a lie intended to bring comfort, but it sat like acrimony in her gut.

She was lying to her husband about the extent of her fear of their baby being born on the road to Skyhold. She told him over and over that the baby was going to be late. First babies were always late. But she’d had her bloody show last night. It happened in the dark, and she told Cullen about it when he woke to her scrambling to clean up. He said they should leave for Skyhold at first light, and she told him it could still be weeks before the birth. That part wasn’t a lie. She put her hand on his cheek and kissed his forehead, and she told him not to worry because she wasn’t. That part was a lie.

Belle laid her too-long hair back on her pillow to try to sleep again. She counted tiles on the ceiling and stones in the walls, and she wondered when Arl Teagan had turned into such a tumbling dickweed. He’d been so friendly when they corresponded in the past. Now he’d spent two days ranting about the Inquisition’s invasion of Ferelden with Grey Wardens in its ranks and touting his country’s exile of the Wardens, like he hadn’t helped the Wardens a decade ago and been a key supporter of Fereleden’s Warden king and queen. Belle contemplated who could have shifted his perspective in such drastic fashion while she counted. She fell asleep before she got very far.

The third day of the Exalted Council proceeded exactly as the first two. Teagan was snarling his nonsense, Duke Cyril de Montfort was oozing praise and sprinkling less than subtle hints about the Inquisition marching under Orlais’s banners, and Divine Leliana Victoria was playing the skillful foil to help buy time. Max and his horrifying arm were off God knows where with Sera, Rainier, and Vivienne to try and put a stop to the Qunari demolition crew. All Belle could hope for at his point was that he would come back with some tale of triumph and bravery to save everyone’s asses by convincing the Exalted Council of the Inquisition’s continued utility and necessity. And for her wicked Braxton Hicks contractions to cut the shit already.

“Arl Teagan,” said Duke Cyril, “I fail to understand how the Inquisition’s continued presence at your Caer Bronach—” his pronunciation of the keep’s name seemed intentionally atrocious “—constitutes an invasion. It has been far from exclusive, from what I am told, and your country maintained no control over the place for decades.”

Teagan sneered past Divine Leliana Victoria at the Orlesian. “Of course you don’t understand. Your country has been trying to invade Ferelden for more than a hundred years. Far be it from you to claim to know the appearance of an invading force.”

“On the contrary, Arl. It is for that very reason that an Orlesian, above all others, would know precisely what an invading force looks like. We could produce one with little more than a flick of the quill.”

“And that’s exactly what you’re trying to do now, twisting the Inquisition into Orlais’s control.”

Belle couldn’t believe they were still on about this. Three days of the same thing. Circular arguments upon circular arguments. She hated circular arguments.

She cleared her throat, drawing the eyes of the dais. “As Ambassador Montilyet and I have mentioned,” several times, “the Inquisition has already substantially decreased its presence at Caer Bronach over the past two years, and we would be more than happy to release primary control of the keep to Ferelden on the conditions that we be allowed to maintain a small number of troops and
scouts there, and that Ferelden would not allow the keep to fall prey to highwaymen or other
dangerous influences. But you have refused to provide such assurances, Arl Teagan.”

“And I will continue to refuse.”

Belle glanced at Josephine before replying. The ambassador had dark circles under her eyes, and her
posture listed here and there under her exhaustion. Tiny strands of frayed hair spoiled her usually
perfect coiffure. Belle had never seen her friend in such ragged shape.

“Why is that?” said Belle, turning her attention back to Teagan.

“I will not promise to allow a foreign force to maintain even the slightest presence on in a fortress on
Ferelden soil.”

“With respect, the Inquisition is far from foreign. Almost every person in Caer Bronach today is
Ferelden. But what about the second condition? Why are you refusing to give us the assurance that
Ferelden won’t let the keep fall into the wrong hands?”

“I do not rule Ferelden. I do not presume to assure you or anyone else of our willingness to maintain
our own forces anywhere.”

“So, to clarify, you want the Inquisition to abandon a keep we took from murdering bandits to
protect the citizens of Crestwood because you don’t want us there, but you can’t say you’re willing
to garrison soldiers there to provide that same protection? I’m not certain the citizens of Crestwood
would be so thrilled to hear how quickly you’re tossing away their safety for the sake of removing
the Inquisition’s presence. Not to mention those who have started families with the Inquisition
personnel stationed at the keep for the past three years.”

“I am not implying anything of the sort,” said Teagan, whose cheeks were turning pinker by the
second. “I am simply not empowered to make any guarantees on behalf of King Alistair.”

Out of the corner of Belle’s eye, she saw a blonde elf scurrying up to Josephine. The young woman
leaned in to whisper something in Josie’s ear. “Well, you may not be empowered to make
 guarantees, but I am,” said Belle, struggling to focus. “I can guarantee that if the Inquisition remains
at Caer Bronach, no Ferelden property will be turned over to bandits or marauders, and the citizens
of Crestwood and their families will be safe.”

Without warning, Josephine gasped and leapt up from her chair. She didn’t say a word to Belle or
anyone else. She just ran out of the chamber, nearly clipping the elf’s heels with her toes. The
audience to the hearing erupted into a riot of whispers. Belle winced as another phony contraction
squeezed through her.

“This is highly irregular. Does Ambassador Montilyet have something better to do than argue the
Inquisition’s case?” said Teagan, every seething syllable overenunciated.

“I apologize. Ambassador Montilyet has been called away on a minor emergency,” said Belle, lying
again through her gritted teeth. This practice contraction hurt more than the last batch. “We can
continue with your leave.”

And continue they did. After about fifteen minutes of back and forth between the Arl and the Duke,
with Belle’s occasional interjection, she watched as another young messenger slid up behind Divine
Leliana Victoria and whisper something into the side of her huge hat. A hand on Belle’s shoulder
startled her, and she whipped her head around to see Cullen’s face very close to her own. He wore a
familiar expression, unreadable to those who didn’t know him well, but painted over with unease to
“Max has been seriously wounded,” he said quietly.

“Jesus.”

“He asked me to retrieve you for a few moments. He was very insistent.”

Belle was halfway to her feet when Divine Leliana Victoria said, “Duke Cyril, Arl Teagan, perhaps we should take a short recess. A matter has just come to my attention that I must see to.”

“Of course, Your Holiness,” said the Duke.

“Of course,” said the Arl.

“Excuse me,” said Belle, and she waddled out of the chamber with her husband.

Cullen held her hand as they started their trek across almost the full length of the palace to get to Max’s quarters. “What happened?”

He shook his head. “I’m not entirely certain. Rainier was carrying Max over his shoulder when they came back through the eluvian, and half of Max’s marked arm was missing.”

“What the fuck? Missing? Arms don’t go missing.”

“Rainier said Max cut it off himself. Max ran ahead after the Viddasala while the others stayed back to fight a number of Qunari she’d left behind. He came back screaming, holding his arm, and he took Rainier’s sword and cut it off.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Vivienne did what she could to stop the bleeding, and they brought him back. He’s been raving. Something about Solas.”

“Solas?”

“I don’t know why. But he told me to bring you to him at least five times before I agreed.”

“I don’t get why he was so insis—Gah!” Another fraudulent contraction wrapped Belle up in a tight torment, stopping her words and her feet. She hunched over with her eyes clamped shut. She squeezed Cullen’s hand so hard it stung.

“Belle! What’s happening?”

She blew out a long, slow breath with the ebb of the pain. “It’s fine. I’m fine. Braxton Hicks. Just more Braxton Hicks.”

“That was not like the others,” he said. He looked angry.

She smiled at him, though from the furrow in his brow it wasn’t terribly convincing. “Yeah it was. I’m fine. Just all this walking. Let’s go, come on.”

They managed to make it to make it to Max’s room without further incident, and Belle managed to persuade herself into believing her own words. The contractions weren’t real. They were practice for when the baby would come in two or three weeks. They hurt worse, but it was just because her idiot body needed a bit of a dress rehearsal.
The scene in Max’s quarters was the calmest version of a horror show Belle had ever seen. She reckoned that was because most of the horror happened before she got there. Divine Leliana Victoria was already there, holding the free hand of a weeping Josephine. The Antivan’s other hand carded through Max’s sweaty hairline in a soft rhythm. His pallor was somewhat gray, and half his arm was gone. White bandages smattered with dark red blood and yellowed plasma clung to what remained. Belle covered her mouth to keep from cursing.

“You’re here,” said Max upon catching his mildly delirious gaze on her. “Good.”

She didn’t know what to say. She wanted to ask why he went berserk and hacked off his own arm. She wanted to ask if he was okay. She wanted to ask if he’d been listening to her all those times she’d told him to be safe. All those times she’d thanked God he came back in one piece. For the first time, he hadn’t done either.

“I’m here,” she said instead, and she walked to his bedside.

“I had to tell you,” he said, more than a little weak and more than a little frantic. “Now. Before you worry about it for another second.”

“Tell me what?” A thousand possibilities streamed through her mind. She stilled herself with her mantra. Predict, prepare, preempt.

“Solas. Solas wanted me to tell you he’s sorry.”

“Sorry? For leaving the Inquisition? I don’t—”

“Sorry for tearing you and Spencer from your lives.”

Belle’s stomach churned, and she thought for a second she might throw up where she stood. “What?”

“It was his fault. His hubris, he said. The very first time, with Spencer, he thought he could take advantage of the Breach to tear down the Veil.”

“Tear down the Veil?” said Divine Leliana Victoria.

“It’s his aim. Fen’Harel. Solas. He gave Corypheus the orb. Didn’t know he’d do so much wrong with it. He thought he’d just tear down the Veil. Then Solas—Fen’Harel could take everything back.”

Belle felt Cullen’s tense breaths splash across the back of her neck. His features were just as tight. “He caused all of this.”

“He thought he could do it,” said Max. “But all he did was pull Spencer through. He thinks it happened because of where Spencer was. I didn’t really understand any of that. But it latched onto your blood, Belle.”

“And he just…kept trying?” She fought her tears and her urge to vomit.

“After we sealed the Breach, he tried again. Then after Corypheus. Then again two months ago. The last two times, he really thought it would work. Hubris,” said Max again. “He won’t try again until he’s certain. He’s sorry it happened.”

It was Solas. Solas who she thought was nice. Solas who had always seemed just a touch off. He was the cause of her thrice ruined life. Belle’s entire body trembled. Her rage boiled. “He’s fucking
“We have to stop him. It’ll kill everyone. Everyone. If he does it.”

Cullen’s large hands found her shoulders. “We will,” he said.

“I’ll fucking kill him myself, I swear to God.” A tear raced down her cheek.

Max lifted his partial arm as if to take her hand. He looked embarrassed when he realized what he’d done. Another tear loosed itself, and she reached down to take his other hand. He gave her a weak smile.

His eyes darted between Belle and Divine Leliana Victoria. “Can you two try to adjourn the Exalted Council for the day? Tell them I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” said Josephine, still weeping. “No, you must rest. Two days, at least. Please, my love.”

“It has to be tomorrow. I promise, it won’t take long.”

“I can do that,” said Belle.

“Of course,” said Divine Leliana Victoria.

“Thank you.”

Belle held her husband’s hand all the way back to the Exalted Council chamber, her rage bubbling and frothing in the space made by their pensive silence. Leliana parted from them several minutes before, wisely choosing to avoid the appearance of favoritism. She was already seated when they entered the room.

Belle stepped forward. Cullen hung back. She stood before the center of the dais to address the council.

“I apologize for the unusual nature of this request, but the Inquisitor has asked that the Exalted Council adjourn for the remainder of the day so that he might personally address all of your concerns tomorrow.”

“I see no problem with that,” said Duke Cyril.

“Nor do I,” said Divine Leliana Victoria.

“I do,” said Arl Teagan. Of course. “There is no point in delaying this process to wait for his defenses any longer. If he was able to request our adjournment, he is just as able to come here and speak for himself.”

“He’s not, actually,” said Belle. “He’s been wounded, and he needs to rest for the evening. He has assured me he will explain everything himself—”

Pain ripped through her body like a scythe. She curled in on herself for a moment, made blind and breathless by the purity of her agony, and she grunted against it. She tried to straighten her torso, to explain that it was just a dress rehearsal, but the excruciating Gehenna only continued to build. She held onto her round belly, and she screamed, and she was one hundred percent sure her asshole was about to fall out.

Strong arms, Cullen’s arms, lifted her and carried her away. He was shouting something to someone,
but all she could hear was the cacophony made by her body’s attempts to rive itself in half. That idiot body had skipped dress rehearsal and jumped right to opening fucking night with a sold out crowd. And she was furious.

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Chapter End Notes

BUM BUM BAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!

So, fair reader, I'm willing to bet this chapter answered one or two of your questions. Maybe more? Maybe less? Please let me know how it made you feel, cause it made me feel all the things, m'kay? ALL THE THINGS, MMMM'KAAAAAYYYY?
Cullen had always held some ambivalence for the term “miracle.” He heard the word overused in recent memory, but a true miracle always bore an eerie duality in its happening. It was duplicitous. On one side of the coin, miracles were wonderful. They seemed to prove the existence of the Maker, of something greater than one man, of something that could choose the righteous to survive above all others.

But the other side of the coin was darker. Black and wretched. The reality of miracles was that they must always be preceded by deep misfortune and calamity. The very nature of miracles required that their subject avoid death or disaster by only the narrowest margin through immeasurable strength of will or divine luck. The subject of a miracle would, therefore, be unlikely to consider what happened to them to be a miracle.

Cullen had been the subject of and borne witness to several miracles. His survival at Kinloch Hold was a miracle only because everyone around him died. His siblings’ survival during the Fifth Blight was a miracle only because their parents and hundreds of others died. Max’s survival at Haven was a miracle only because he avoided a crushing death under a mountain of snow by his chance position near an abandoned mineshaft after dozens of people died.

Thus, when Cullen first heard the phrase, “the miracle of childbirth,” he was dubious about its use. After all, how could the coming of life into the world result from the narrow avoidance of death? He remained dubious about the phrase for most of his life, never having been present to bear witness to such a miracle. His father had chased him out of the house during the birth of his siblings. The Circle healers had chased him out when the occasional pregnant mage gave birth. He chased himself out under all other birthing circumstances he had almost seen.

It was only upon the birth of his own daughter that he understood “the miracle of childbirth.” The entire ordeal was a brutal exercise in unending terror. A concerto of the unceasing screams of the Void. A whiff of the hot and rancid exhalations of ever hovering death.

At first, it all seemed manageable. Late morning wound into late afternoon, and Belle’s pain came in waves. She sat up in their bed, propped up by half a dozen pillows. The elven midwife called into the palace from outside the gates ducked in and out of the room to work minor magic over Belle’s stomach. She said all was well. But after shrinking periods of minutes, all did not appear well. Belle’s body would contract, twisting her neck and fisting her hands into the sheets so hard her knuckles turned the color of sun-bleached bone. Occasionally, she grabbed onto him instead. She inhaled through her nose, and her lip quivered as she blew the held breath out through her mouth. Sometimes she vomited. Sometimes she cursed. Sometimes she cried. Sometimes she did all three.

Cullen was helpless. He hated it. He would have taken the pain from her without a second thought if someone gave him the chance. Instead, he did what little he could to bring her comfort. He held her
hair back when she vomited into the ornate porcelain basin the midwife called silly. He measured tiny sips of water for her. He tied her curls up and away when she asked, though he regarded his efforts as slapdash at best. He let her crush his hands with every wave of her pain, his own negligible by any comparison. He held her up when the midwife suggested she walk about the room to speed the process.

Their mabari seemed to feel equally helpless. Charles paced around the bed, laying his heavy head on Belle’s hand in the quiet moments between contractions. Cullen began to signal him to move away, but she said she liked him there. She stroked the dog’s short fur with her eyes closed in the dwindling absences of pain.

The sun dipped away beneath the palace walls, and late afternoon gave way to late evening. Her spasming agony worsened by the hour. The midwife massaged magic into the small of Belle’s back, though it did little to alleviate the pain. She showed Cullen where and how to touch his wife to keep her blood flowing in the right direction and coax the child out of the womb. He ignored the dark scars on Belle’s bent knees caused by his temporary death all those years ago.

When the midwife stepped out, Belle turned to him, sweaty and severe and scared. “If I die—” she said.

“No.”

“Don’t fucking ‘no’ me, goddamnit. If I die, you have to let Mia and my parents help you. I don’t want you alone when you raise our little girl.” A fat tear sliced through the perspiration on her pink cheek. “You need your family, and she needs hers.”

His vision blurred, clearing with the streak of moisture down his face. “You will not die. You can’t. I can’t…” The notion choked off his voice.

She gave him a wavering smile and wiped away his tear with her thumb. “I promise. I’m doing everything I can not to die. But if I do, you can make it, okay? You and her. You can make it. And you better, or I’ll turn into a spirit thing and cross the Veil to whoop your ass.”

Cullen laughed. It came out thick and stunted. He nodded and kissed the back of her hand. He held it to his forehead to conceal the two additional tears that loosed themselves in an attempt to betray him. His mouth began to move in silent prayer, begging the Maker not to take her away, not to leave him with the biting memory of another death, not to compel him to mourn every time he looked in their daughter’s eyes.

“Do not take her,” he whispered through trembling lips. “Maker, I beg you, please do not take her from me.”

Late evening succumbed to the murky blackness of early morning. The part of morning which could hardly be called morning. Belle was exhausted. She laid back and closed her eyes and stopped breathing more than once. The midwife tasked Cullen with keeping her awake, and Belle might have spurned him had her contractions not been all but constant.

When the time finally came for her to push, she made a valiant effort. Her moon face turned red, eclipsed by excruciation. She laid sloppy hands on his cheeks, and she pulled him to her, and she wept that she couldn’t do it. He promised her that she could. He asked the Maker not to let him be a liar. She pushed and screamed for so long he had trouble remembering a time before pushing and screaming. He would swear he never heard her take a breath, though she wailed and grunted with all the force of a torrent.
“I can see the head. Just a little longer. A few more hard pushes.”

Cullen’s heart crammed itself into the back of his throat. It beat there, loud and fast, obscuring his words and dizzying him. Belle pushed for a little longer. She pushed a few more hard pushes. The midwife gasped and made a sound like she discovered a lost and ancient treasure. A baby cried. Belle’s body went a little slack.

She was still alive. Still conscious. She made a delirious sound he realized was laughter as she sobbed and panted. He began to breathe again.

Belle held out her arms and wiggled her fingers for the source of the piercing and squeaky little shrieks. “Give me my Sadie,” she said, hoarse and happy. “Give me my little Sadie Jo.”

They had agreed on the name not long after discovering their child would be a daughter. She was named for Belle’s mother. Her middle name, Josephine, was meant to honor a dear friend they thought they might never see again. Even after returning to Thedas, they decided to keep the name. It had grown on them both, and they could not imagine a raising child called anything else.

The midwife wrapped up squealing little Sadie in linens much too fine for such a use, and she set the baby on Belle’s chest. Belle laughed and cried and grinned, and Cullen kissed her damp forehead. He kissed his daughter. Their miracle.

When all was said and done, the midwife excused herself for a moment. Cullen thanked her and watched her leave, and he caught a glimpse of the world outside their room before the door closed behind her. More aptly, he caught a glimpse of Sera slumped over Rainier’s shoulder, both of them half asleep. He also caught a glimpse of the glimmer of Dorian’s outfit and the tip of Iron Bull’s horn. He tilted his ear to the door and listened.

The midwife’s voice said, “They’ve had a healthy baby girl. Mother’s doing well,” and a flurry of relieved noises followed. He had no idea how many of their friends had been waiting there, nor how long they had waited, but he felt a sudden pang of gratitude for their presence. No one had any need of their gracious worry now, however. There had been a miracle.

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It was a gray day that morning. Belle would be happy when she woke. She loved gray days. She loved gray days, and she loved their new daughter. He had little doubt she would want to see the two together, but she was asleep. And Cullen would not wake her just yet.

Although his primary reason for not rousing his wife was that she needed rest more than anyone he had ever known, he had to admit some selfishness in his ulterior motive. He had read, in at least one of the half dozen books he purchased upon finding out Belle was pregnant, that it was crucial to the bonding process for babies to have skin to skin contact with their parents. He did not recall when the book or books recommended he start that skin to skin contact, so he opted to try it just then. In his view, he could not hold her soon enough.

He doffed his tunic and snuck over to Belle’s side of the bed where Sadie lay in a small padded basket atop a sturdy table. He almost tripped over Charles, who had curled up just beneath the makeshift bassinette. The mabari lifted his head at the sound of Cullen’s bare footsteps, and he eyed the man before him for a moment. Despite being the object of his own hound’s suspicion, Cullen felt certain that his choice to rescue the dog from his Orlesian fate was the right one. True to Cullen’s word, Charles would make the perfect protector for Sadie.

The mabari continued to watch as Cullen reached into the basket to lift out his daughter. Charles’s
ears perked up higher at Sadie’s little snorts and squeaks, but they returned to their tentative position when she calmed against Cullen’s chest.

She was so very small in his large hands. Tiny and amazing. Her birth-swollen features were still muddled, her eyes still gray at never having seen the sun, but she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She was hot against his skin, and he looked down at her and hoped her cheeks would always be this round. He closed his eyes and put his nose to the fine tuft of near colorless hair atop her head. Her scent was otherworldly. She smelled of softness and newness, and he breathed her into himself.

Then Sadie began to fuss, and Cullen began to panic. The realization that all the books he read had not prepared him to be a real father poured over him. They were all theory. They told him only what to do if a fictional baby fuzzed. Not one of them told him what to do when his newborn daughter, his Sadie, started to fuss.

Out of this sudden and crushing sensation of inadequacy and terror, he began to pace and sway. His daughter began to settle. He breathed out a slow sigh of dizzied relief, and soon he found himself humming a soft tune he had enjoyed in Washington. It reminded him of what he felt with this fragile new life in his arms, this overwhelming urge to protect. He would lay down his life for this tiny girl. The odd word or two of the song slipped through his lips as he hummed.

“May no man’s touch ever chain you,” he sang, and then he hummed again. “And as for the clouds, just let them roll.”

Sadie, his beautiful and perfect Sadie, huffed and snored against his chest. All the world melted away. All the politics and the Orlesians and the Inquisition sloughed off his shoulders, and it was just him with his daughter and his sleeping wife, and it was just them and the gray day outside the window.

An unsubtle knock and the opening of their door whipped his head around. His grip on his daughter tightened, and he heard Charles stir and stand at attention. Cullen tried to recall where he put his sword.

Josephine stepped into the room, a world-worn and weary look marking her. She blanched when her eyes landed on him, and he remembered his shirtlessness. Then she saw his daughter in his arms, and it was as if every practice of courtly decorum she had ever learned evaporated in an instant.

She cooed a bit too loud and said, “Blessed Andraste, she is so beautiful!”

Cullen put a finger over his lips before pointing to his sleeping wife, and Josephine grimaced her apology. She crossed the room to speak in whispers and to see the child.

“Oh Maker,” she said, holding a hand on her chest, “just look at her. Congratulations, Commander. She is perfect.”

“She is,” said Cullen, proud as anything that someone else saw what he saw. He turned to allow Josephine a better view of his little girl’s tiny face. “I would like to formally introduce you to my daughter, Sadie Josephine Rutherford.”

Josephine clapped the hand not on her chest over her awestruck mouth. Her hazel eyes welled up, and she shook her head. “Me? You’ve named her—I—” It was the first time he had ever seen her at a loss for words, and it brought a wide smile to his face. She swiped away the tears that tumbled free and beamed. “I am truly honored. Truly.”
“I am glad. Belle picked her name, and I quite liked the sound of it.”

Josephine let out a soft giggle. “As do I.” She cast an appreciative look toward the bed.

Cullen watched Josephine watching Sadie for a few long seconds. He began to feel slightly uncomfortable at his state of undress and the nearness of her head to his right nipple. “I can only assume you needed us for something?”

“Oh, of course. Apologies. Just moments ago I could think of nothing else, and now I’ve become so distracted I did not even remember why I came here.” Her dourness returned by a half measure. “Just a few moments ago, Maxim met with the Exalted Council. He declared that the Inquisition will remain active as an honor guard and investigative force for the Divine. Then he left the chamber.”

“Can he do that?”

Josephine shrugged. “He just did. And he has strongly suggested that the Inquisition take its leave tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning? I don’t know if Belle can walk, much less travel. It’s too soon.”

“I know. I have arranged for a healer and a wet nurse to meet with you this afternoon and to travel back to Skyhold with us if need be.”

“She won’t want the wet nurse. She has been quite adamant about feeding Sadie herself.” Cullen glanced at his wife. Her eyes remained closed where she lay.

“It is merely a precaution,” said Josephine, placating him with a gentle gesture of her hand. “There can be a great many difficulties involved with feeding a newborn, I am told. If anything, the wet nurse will simply be available to provide assistance and instruction for Belle.”

“She and I will discuss it when she wakes. But please make certain the healer arrives first.”

“Of course.” Josephine looked from him to his daughter and smiled again. “I will leave you all to rest.”

“Thank you.”

Belle stirred in their bed just as the door clicked shut behind Josephine. She gave him a bleary grin when he approached. The left side of her mouth tilted up more than the right. She was a beautiful mess. A few loose curls embedded themselves in pillow-shaped dents on her cheek, while the mass of her hair remained tied in Cullen’s helter-skelter knot. He leaned over, keeping a careful grip on the baby, and pressed a lingering kiss to his wife’s forehead.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

She motioned to him in a vague and lilting wave. “Well, all this is so cute I think my ovaries might just explode. Which would just about match the rest of the décor down there. It feels like someone shoved a nuke up my pee hole and let ‘er rip.” She winced as she adjusted herself to sit up a little. “Jesus.”

Cullen said, “I’m sorry,” because what else could he say? He felt more than a touch responsible for her pain.

“It is what it is,” she said with a slight lift of a shoulder. “So Max decided fuck diplomacy and just declared the Inquisition would continue, huh?”
“You heard all of that?”

“ kinda tough to sleep through one of Josie’s more purposeful knocks. She cried at Sadie’s name, didn’t she? It sounded like she was crying. She totally cried.”

He puffed out a laugh, trying so desperately to keep Sadie from waking. “She did.”

“Yeah,” said Belle with a long and self-satisfied nod. “Called it.”

Without warning, a molten hot liquid trickled down Cullen’s stomach. He flinched and stepped back on instinct, and his wife snorted. It did not take him long to realize what that molten hot liquid was or its point of origin.

“You’ve officially been indoctrinated,” said Belle. “I was wondering whether piss, shit, or puke would get you first.” She held out her hands and flexed her fingers. “Gimme my girl. You can get cleaned up and put your shirt back on. Or don’t put your shirt back on. Do you.”

The world was a vastly different place when she held their daughter. Belle had somehow remained the same woman he loved and metamorphosed into a doting mother all at once, and all in the blink of an eye. She glowed with that child in her arms. He watched her look down at Sadie, and he saw a future stretch out and yawn open before him. He saw lazy mornings and smiling faces. He saw scraped knees and round tear-streaked cheeks. He saw his family huddled together and overflowing with love.

“I love you,” he said to his wife as he sat on the bed beside her, his bare skin wiped clean of newborn urine.

“I love you, too,” she said. She chuffed. “You’d better love me after all this, damn. I hope that healer can magic my vagina back together. That’d be nice. I would genuinely appreciate not worrying if my fucking uterus is going to fall out when I pee.”

Cullen shook his head. Belle had never been anything but straightforward. It was a blessing, really, strange as it was. He had no stomach for insincerity or frivolity in matters of communication. “I’m certain there is something they can do.”

“Let’s hope so. Incidentally…” She paused as a coy look overtook her. “Sorry our daughter’s accidentally Orlesian.”

“No.”

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The journey home to Skyhold was a trial of faith and patience. The healer Josephine enlisted was very skilled, and had done wonders for Belle in the time allowed. But she still suffered a great deal of pain while traversing the roads of Orlais. Cullen rode beside the carriage at all times, listening to the anguished whimpers seeping out of his wife and child with every bump and stone beneath the spoked wheels.

He wanted to stop the caravan. He wanted to stay put long enough for his wife to heal. Neither option was available to him. The Inquisition needed to beat a hasty return to Skyhold while leads on Solas’s spies and plans were plentiful, and while the members of the Exalted Council were stunned enough to accept Max’s decree as fact.

The trip was made much more arduous by the hardship of learning to be parents in transit. For over a day, Sadie refused to latch to Belle’s breast to nurse. Belle sobbed into Cullen’s chest each time the
wet nurse took their daughter away to feed. It would not have been so bad in Washington, he had to admit. They would have had formula and breast pumps, and Belle could have nourished the child herself instead of passing her to a stranger.

Even after the latching problem was solved, neither Belle nor Cullen slept during the night. Sadie’s shrill cries woke half the camp on an hourly basis. She needed to be fed or changed or burped or rocked. He had never heard a newborn quite so loud. Belle told him it was a family curse. He might have liked to know about such a thing before maintaining the misapprehension that he might ever sleep again.

Cullen had grown accustomed to being awake at all hours of the day and night. His withdrawal symptoms and perpetual nightmares saw to that. But even he was slouching in his saddle by the time they rode through Skyhold’s portcullis. Through the shaded window of the carriage, he saw Belle’s eyes rolling around, lids fluttering in an attempt not to drift into the blissful abyss of sleep. Sadie nursed with gusto, much as she had done on a constant basis throughout their journey home. He wondered if she had been possessed by a demon of gluttony at the moment of her birth.

Dov, Ilana, Spencer, and, to Cullen’s surprise, Rosalie were waiting in the courtyard when the Inquisition retinue returned. They all beamed, and Rosalie fidgeted. Cullen helped Belle and Sadie onto solid ground—Belle still had some trouble closing the distance between the carriage floor and the earth, up or down. She did her level best to smile at their family, though her sagging eyes belied her exhaustion. Cullen suspected his did the same.

Dov looked spryer and more excited than Cullen had ever seen him. Eudora’s magic had clearly done him some good. Spencer’s attention was wrapped up in Charles, who bounded up to the man as if they had known each other their entire lives. Ilana asked in her most gentle and understanding tone if she could hold little Sadie, and after some hesitance, Belle handed the baby to her. Ilana took her with all the care of a woman that had just remembered what it was like to hold an infant of her own, and she smiled down at her granddaughter. Dov hung his head over his wife’s shoulder to join in the outpouring of love.

Cullen wished his parents could have met his little girl. They would have been proud, he thought. They would have loved her fiercely, and they would have adored Belle. His father liked a woman who spoke her mind. His mother had been proof of that. She would have seen Belle as kindred right away, and frankly, she would have harassed him about why it had taken him so long to make his move.

As Rosalie hugged Belle too hard, and Belle warned her about the dangers of milk stains on everknit wool, he thought about the first time he met his wife. She called him all manner of names he did not yet understand. She threatened him. Her knee very nearly met with his testicles. If someone had approached him after she fell unconscious and told him that soon he would love her, that soon he would marry her, that soon she would give him a perfectly round and squirming daughter, he would have had them shackled and thrown in the dungeon for their obvious insanity. It would not have stopped it from being true. He loved her desperately, and he married her because he knew he could never be parted from her, and she gave him a perfectly round and squirming daughter he would die to protect.

Dov told them he made some modifications to their tower, and Belle gave him a wary look. He bade them follow him up, and Ilana carried Sadie along. Belle seemed almost relieved to be divested of their daughter for the walk. Cullen helped her up the stairs while she laughed and griped about their plenitude.

The tower was dark when Dov opened the door. No fire in the lower fireplace. No candles flickering
on tables. No sunlight streaming through the shuttered windows.

“Let there be light!” said Dov.

A dull and metallic flick echoed through the space, and all at once, there was, in fact, light. An assortment of rounded glass fixtures was strung up about the room, dangling from the ceiling and jutting out from the walls. Each random bowl or glass held a series of glowing strands that reminded Cullen of the expensive light bulbs in Washington. Together, they cast a warm and welcoming glow throughout the lower half of the tower.

“Holy shit, Dad,” said Belle, mouth and eyes agape. “You really did it.”

“Yes.” Dov walked into the center of the room as he looked around and crossed his arms. He had a proud look to him that tugged at the corners of Cullen’s mouth. “Braided up the wires with leather so no one’ll get shocked.” He pointed to said wires. “Had to get kind of random with the bulbs since we didn’t want to pay a glass blower if this didn’t work. The whole thing’s powered by one rune. Dagna was already on the right track when I went to see her the first time. She was just having trouble with the alternating current.”

“Wait. How was she already on the right track?”

“Cullen never told you? He gave her a bunch of your chargers and asked her to try to make them work.”

Cullen’s hand found the back of his neck. His wife contorted to look at him. “What?”

“Maker’s breath, that was so long ago. I had forgotten. It was meant to be a surprise. I wanted you to be able to listen to your music whenever you liked.”

Belle’s mien shifted in the way it always did when she was about to tell him he was adorable or sweet. “That was really sweet of you,” she said, exactly as he thought she might, and she took his hand. He gave hers a little squeeze. “Thank you.”

“We rigged up the upstairs, too,” said Dov, plainly more enthusiastic about his work than the small displays of affection going on around him. “And the undercroft. Doing our place next, and Dagna said she was going to talk to your friend, Max, and see if he wanted it in his room, too. We’re talking about trying to put a generator wheel into the waterfall under this place.”

“This is really awesome, Dad. Seriously. Really fucking awesome.” Belle stepped into the center of the room to embrace her father. He patted her on the back. “Thank you,” she said into his neck.

“You’re welcome, Cutie.”

Sadie seemed to realize something was happening that did not involve her. She began to wriggle and whine in Ilana’s arms. Cullen was standing close enough to sniff out the reason. Belle moved to take up the child, but he stepped in before she could. He was determined to be a good father and a good husband, and that meant he would change his fair share of soiled diapers and calm his fair share of tantrums.

Belle told her parents she and Cullen were going to change Sadie and maybe, just maybe, try to take a short nap. Ilana said they could always send someone to get her if they needed a break. She truly was a kind woman, and Cullen was glad for her presence as their daughter’s grandmother. Belle thanked her before following him up the stairs.

He was grateful for Belle’s foresight in preparing their quarters for Sadie’s arrival. She had a portion
of the large room cordoned off with wooden screens to create a separate space for the nursery, and
she filled it with a soothing blend of charm and necessity. She had a fine changing table, crib, waste
bin, and chest of drawers crafted of cherry wood, and she littered the space with pillows and
cushions and stuffed animals. He had not the slightest inkling where she got it all. He knew only that
the haphazardly sewn stuffed bee with a tiny bloodstain on it came from Sera’s unskilled hand.

Belle had been painting a mural in the room she picked for a nursery in their home in Washington.
One wall was beginning to look like a misty and wooded mountain range in the haze of morning.
She bought a dozen shades of green paint to make certain it turned out as she hoped. It was more
than halfway finished when they were pulled back to Thedas.

She let out a long groan when she laid in their bed, and Cullen smiled. He opened the diaper. He
tried not to gag at the sight of the mess before him, and for the most part was successful. Charles
followed him in, and even the mabari balked at the brown-green horror. Cullen had helped change
Rosalie’s diapers in his boyhood, but one never truly acclimated to the particular color and texture of
infant waste. Nor did one ever truly acclimate to the odor.

The flesh of Sadie’s face had calmed since her birth, and he began to see little hallmarks in her
features. She had Belle’s ears and chin. Her hair was fine and soft as spiderwebs, making it
impossible to discern its future color. It felt too early to know with any certainty, but he believed she
had his nose. “The Rutherford Snoot,” as Belle once called it. He gave Sadie a delicate tap on her
Rutherford Snoot, watching her blink in her infant shock and return to squirming.

“You are every wonder, my sweet,” he said to her. “Every wonder in every world.”

Belle was already asleep when he brought Sadie out of her nursery. He set the baby in the ruffled
bassinette Josephine gave them, and her namesake wriggled in her swaddle at the newness of it all.
He sat down in the ornate chair Belle positioned at her bedside for nursing, and he took in the
splendor of his family, and his heart felt full. Sadie battled against her closing eyes in a final attempt
to take in the strange world around her. Belle lay still, save for her slow breaths. She was crystal in
that moment, fragile and cutting and glowing in the mellow golden sunlight, and she was
magnificent. Oh but she was magnificent.

Despite his awareness of Solas’s new threat to Thedas, and despite all the work he knew to be piling
upon his desk as he sat there, Cullen was at peace. His life had not gone at all as he had planned, yet
somehow it was so much better than he ever dared to dream. Not only had he survived his life as a
Templar and as Commander of the Inquisition, but he had managed to build life anew out of the
ruble of a man he had become. He had seen horrors. He had seen worlds. He loved, and he was
privy to love. He became a husband. He became a father. He would never be satisfied with his
atonement for the wrongdoings of his past, never feel worthy of his new life, but in that moment he
found a kind of serenity in himself. In that moment he knew. All was well. All would be well. His
eyes drifted shut.

Those who were joined together would never be put asunder.

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Chapter End Notes

Finally, a little peace for our beleaguered Commander and his beleaguered Belle...
Side note: I know there's a whole lot of stuff about being new parents in this chapter that you might find...off-putting? But my sister and my best friend recently had babies, and I thought it was really important to represent what that's like. It's exhausting and frustrating, and sometimes it's super gross. I wanted to be real about it because I'm a little, teeny, itty bitty little bit tired of seeing the trials of new parenthood glossed over, or even out and out lied about. So there you go.

We're almost to the finish line!!! I'm so grateful to you for being with me through this massive journey, but I'll be gushing about that way more in the end notes of the next chapter. <3<3<3
Green, creeping ivy and a smattering of white, yellow, and pink flowers coated the gray stone walls of the royal palace in Denerim in the summertime. All that life made the dreary building seem cheerful, almost in spite of its ancient, dour stonework. It filled the air with a pleasant aroma that whisked up into Belle’s nose as she walked through the courtyard toward the door. She sneezed.

“Bless you,” said Sadie from the right.

“Yeah, bless you,” said Adeline from the left.

“Thank you, ladies,” said Belle to her daughters.

She crouched down to kiss her girls on their foreheads and straighten their garments. The brown leather messenger bag slung across her torso almost hit the ground. She gave Sadie a quick peck first. The elder sister had her father’s eyes and nose, and her mother’s ears and attitude. She was stubborn to a fault and given to fidgeting and rambunctiousness, some of which was to be expected of a seven-year-old. Belle tried not to worry whether Sadie and her father would argue when she became a teenager, though it seemed fairly inevitable.

Belle pivoted on the balls of her feet to press a kiss to Adeline’s forehead. They named her for Cullen’s mother. Little Adeline Dagny, just three years old, had eyes like Belle’s, though Adeline’s were bluer. She was stubborn, too, in her way. But her manner was much more akin to Cullen’s, sullen and severe when tested, gentle and kind the rest of the time. Both girls had thick heads of fine strawberry blonde curls, though Sadie’s were more strawberry than blonde, and Adeline’s were more blonde than strawberry.

“Alright, ladies,” said Belle as she stood, “are we ready?”

“Yeah,” said the girls, a bit out of sync with each other.

Adeline squealed and clamped her steely grip down around Belle’s fingers. “I’m—I’m—” she said, too hyper to breathe. “I’m gonna play dragons with Duncan. He said—He said he got a—a gigantic one for his nameday.”

“I know,” said Belle, saccharine as could be for the sake of her youngest’s enthusiasm. She’d been the one to read Duncan’s letter aloud to Adeline a few weeks before.

“I’m gonna be purple!”

“Ooh, purple? Purple’s awesome, right Sadie Jo?”

Sadie gave her mother an indulging little smirk as they began to climb the stairs. “Right.”

“Are you excited to see Thalia? It’s been a few months.”

“Yeah,” said Sadie, much more capable of breathing through her eagerness. “She said her mother would make us lemon cream cake for after we’re done practicing.”

Sadie had befriended the daughter of one of the elven cooks working in the palace on a previous
visit, and the two began corresponding with the kind of fervor only tenable in such tiny pen pals. As it happened, both girls had a knack for archery. Sadie learned from her Auntie Sera while she and Dagna visited to work with Belle’s father. Sera and Sadie engaged in their extracurricular activities unbeknownst to Cullen, until it was too late for him to stop it without incurring a series of temper tantrums from both the child and the adult in question. The royal guard was kind enough to set up a children’s practice range for Sadie and her friend when they visited.

“Lemon cream cake sounds really yummy,” said Belle, utterly serious. Lemon cream cake sounded delicious. She thought to ask Sadie to save some for her and Adeline, but decided to let the young friends keep something special to themselves.

“Mmhmm.”

Once the guards opened the palace doors for them, they were escorted through the halls. The interior of the palace was as festooned with flora as the exterior. Small gaps in the pre-Summerday décor existed only in more private areas meant for living and working, such as the space Belle and her daughters entered on their way to a familiar room.

The King and Queen’s study was massive. It was roughly the size of Cullen’s entire tower at Skyhold, though Belle hadn’t seen it for an exact comparison in a few years. The King’s steward opened the much smaller door and announced them. “Lady Belle Rutherford and her daughters, Sadie and Adeline.” Belle was grateful for his decreased formality since her first visit.

“Thank you, Euan,” said King Alistair.

Belle and Sadie were midway through a brief curtsey when two shrieks sounded through the room. One came from the opposite end. One came from right next to them. Adeline broke away in a flurry of clacking footfalls and happy growls.

“Duncan!”

“Addy!”

Adeline and the Crown Prince of Ferelden ran full bore at each other on two sets of spindly legs. Prince Duncan, who had just turned four, looked like a little maniac with all his teeth showing and his mousy brown hair blown almost straight back behind him. The children collided at high speed. Their chests thumped and they grunted before screeching each other’s names into their ears again. They wrapped their arms around one another, squeezing too hard. Belle opened her mouth to warn her daughter not to break the Prince.

“Duncan,” said Queen Zoe. “Gentle with your friend, please.”

The children released each other. “Okay, Mama,” said Duncan.

The Queen rose to her feet and crossed the room, ruffling her son’s hair a little along the way. She cast an endearing and welcoming look toward Belle before they wrapped each other up in an embrace. “It’s so good to see you again, Belle.”

“It’s good to see you too, Your Majesty,” said Belle.

The Queen held Belle by the shoulders and stared her in the eyes. The little gap in her front teeth peeked out from behind her lips. “Maker, if someone in this palace besides my darling husband doesn’t start calling me by my name soon, I’m going to lose my mind. You know you can call me Zoe.”
“I know, I know. I just prefer to do the protocol thing first.” Belle smirked.

“Hello, Belle,” said the King as he knelt down beside the smallest of them. “And hello to you, Lady Adeline. And to you, Lady Sadie,” he said across the room. He chuckled to himself while Sadie waved. “I always love the sound of that. Lady Sadie.” He snorted.

“Hello Alistair,” said Belle. She wouldn’t have called him that but for his threat months before that he would only address her by her string of ridiculous titles if she called him “Your Majesty” again. “You’re looking chipper today.”

“It’s warm, the sun is out, my family’s unblighted, and we have our friends here for a momentous day. Hard to be grumpy with a list like that. I am sorry your husband couldn’t join us, though. He always brings a certain stodginess that makes me feel important. You know how I love to feel important.” Alistair’s sarcasm had never been subtle.

“He wanted to be here.” Not entirely a lie. Cullen had mentioned wishing he could accompany her and the children to Denerim. Not to the palace. “But a new group of retiring Templars arrived from the College two nights ago. He had his hands pretty full when we left.”

“He’s doing good work,” said Zoe. “We’ll excuse him this time. But just this once.” She turned her attention to the children. “Speaking of excused, you’re all welcome to go out and play. I know Adeline is excited to play dragons, and I’m willing to bet that Sadie is anxious to see her friend and go puncture some things on the training grounds. I know I’d much rather be doing that.”

“Me too,” said Alistair.

Sadie gave an upbeat nod. She moved to collect her sister and Duncan. Alistair held his son’s head in place to press a rapid series of noisy kisses on the child’s forehead. The boy cackled and pushed at his father, who eventually relinquished him to Sadie. She held both the smaller children’s hands as she led them out of the room to play.

“Incidentally,” said Belle as the door closed, “I wanted to thank you both again for granting us those lots in South Reach. Cullen couldn’t be helping these Templars to transition into non-lyrium soldiering positions without them. And no one in my family would have had a place to live after the Inquisition ultimately disbanded, which would have sucked since Adeline was only two months old.”

“It was the least we could do after…well, everything,” said Alistair. “Everything, everything. Not to mention Divine Victoria put more than a little weight behind your request.”

“It’s still so strange to think of our Leliana as the Divine. Even after all these years, it’s so hard for me to remember to call her that. Divine Victoria.” Zoe shook her head at the surrealness. Her long, loose braid of blonde-brown hair swished over her shoulder and against her chest.

“Seriously. We knew her for years, and all of a sudden, she changed her name and got way more important.”

“Not unlike what happened to you, hmm?” said Zoe to her husband as he approached.

“I didn’t change my name. Only my title. And technically, you’re the one who changed it, love.” Alistair touched the end of his prominent nose to his wife’s, and they looked content for a moment. Realizing Belle was still standing there, he shot her a sheepish look and said, “I guess we’d better get to work, then.”

“I guess so,” said Belle.
The three of them moved to Alistair’s desk. It was surprisingly small for a king’s workspace. Parchments of all shapes, sizes, and colors sat in uneven stacks atop the scuffed reddish wood. It was clear he spent a lot of time working there. Belle thought of the all tiny nicks she’d accidentally scratched into her own desk over the years. She’d probably made one or two while drafting the documents she hauled out of her messenger bag. The one coin she always kept with her slid out from between the pages to *plunk* against the inside of the soft leather, and she set the papers down on the desk.

Alistair tilted his head sideways, sizing up the small pile. “Is this it?”

“This is both documents we discussed.” Belle separated the first from the second. She decided to keep the latter in her lap until they conquered the former. She turned the larger, primary concern to face the King and Queen. “This one,” she said, and tapped it with a single finger, “is the final draft of the Constitution of Ferelden.”

“This one has everything we discussed?” said Zoe.

Belle nodded. “Yes. It establishes positions in the Landsmeet—which will meet more regularly—for representatives selected by a popular, common vote, while leaving intact the positions for the nobility. The numbers will be fifty-fifty, nobility to common representatives, just like you wanted.”

“Perfect,” said Alistair. He glanced down at the documents and peeled away the top sheet to begin reading.

“Honestly, I might have recommended avoiding this whole thing if it weren’t for the sheer numbers of the nobility and their influence over the flow of commerce. I’m inclined toward a much more… holistic approach to governance. You leave me alone and I’ll leave you alone—that sort of thing. But the common people need protection for the time being, until things even out a little and they can really start making their own money instead of relying on Banns and Arls.”

She observed, willing away the butterflies in her stomach as Alistair read over the first page. He handed it to Zoe and waited before moving on to the second. Zoe’s deep brown eyes flickered across the parchment. When she finished, Belle continued.

“We’ve got the provisions in there retaining certain powers for the Crown—commanding the armies, selecting ambassadors, foreign affairs, and quite a few other things. But there’s also an impeachment provision in there for egregious violations of law by the king and or queen. Keeps people from being beheaded, but also keeps bad rulers from maintaining their positions.”

“I feel like I should be worried about that,” said Alistair, that very worry all but tattooed in the lines on his forehead. “Should I be worried about that?” Belle noticed then that a few gray hairs had sprouted on his red head.

She laughed. “I highly doubt it. You’ve been nothing but fair in your time on the throne. Your citizens love you. Just teach Duncan to act right and make sure he passes that along, and this provision will wind up almost never mattering.”

“Well, I did make a mage the Queen of Ferelden in spite of some very adamant protest. And by protest, of course, I mean at least half a dozen people tried to kill us in our sleep.”

“You didn’t make me anything. You married me, and by circumstance I became the queen. Honestly.” Zoe donned a coy expression. “And the whole assassination thing was nonsense. They weren’t even trying.”
“At this point, with the College so well established, and with magical incidents at an all-time low, I really don’t think anyone even thinks about any of that anymore,” said Belle. “And she’s the Hero of Ferelden.” Zoe rolled her eyes and groaned. She really didn’t like that title. “I think this country owes you both enough to give you a pass on the whole mage thing. Anyway, it’ll be moot in a couple weeks.”

“At least I won’t be beheaded.”

“There is that.” She pointed them back to the task at hand. “The next bit establishes a court system so you don’t have to personally preside over every matter in Ferelden.”

“Oh Maker,” said Zoe, tilting her head back with a short sigh. “That will be so nice. Not having to sit for weeks on end listening to every dispute over possession of every druffalo in the country.”

“Then we jump into the fundamental rights. This is the biggest section, the things we all felt strongest about. Free speech, free association, free religion, free marriage, et cetera. All of that’s in there, including,” said Belle with a pointed look at Alistair, “mages’ rights to marry and to raise their own children. This section is the great equalizer codified. No matter what race, gender, or anything else anyone is, they all have the same fundamental, inalienable rights.”

Alistair muttered to himself as he read. “Mm…Freedom from imprisonment unless…Freedom from involuntary servitude…Right to own property…Freedom from unlawful divestment thereof.” His eyes met hers. “This is really good.”

Zoe added an emphatic nod. “Absolutely.”

Belle pressed her lips together in a dubious line resembling a smile. “I don’t know about all that. I’ve never penned a constitution before. I just tried to combine what I know and what you wanted with some language that was specific and easy to understand. I know how it can be when these sorts of things are too vague and complicated. Plus, there are ways to add to it if need be. Amendments and stuff.”

“You’re selling yourself short, Belle,” said Zoe. She reached across the desk to touch Belle’s hand. “Ferelden will be the first country to establish a written rule of law, and it is all thanks to your efforts.”

“That’s a stretch, but thank you. I just hope it does as much good as it has the potential to do.”

“It will.”

After they reached the end of the Constitution, Belle said, “Well that’s that monster. Have your advisors take a look. If there are any more changes that need to be made, let me know. Otherwise, Ferelden will officially become a constitutional monarchy when you hold the signing ceremony on Summerday.”

“You will come back for all that, right?” said Alistair. “It would be a shame to miss so much pomp and circumstance. And flowers.”

“Oh yeah. One hundred percent. I wouldn’t miss that for anything. And I’ll be sure the whole family comes along.”

“That reminds me, we still owe your father a medal for everything he did. Harnessing electricity to power the city, indoor plumbing. Oh Maker, indoor plumbing. I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed not smelling the aftermath of…Andraste’s mercy, the man’s a genius.”
Belle peered around the room. Her father and Dagna’s unique brand of light fixtures poked out of every wall. They were dark at the moment, unnecessary for the volume of summer sun glowing through the windows. Refractions from the old, extravagant stained glass had begun their slow trudge across the wooden floor with the advent of afternoon.

She chuckled. “I’m not gonna lie, he’d probably be really psyched about that. He’d act all humble, like he didn’t deserve it, but he’d be really pumped.”

“Sounds familiar,” said Zoe in a cagey tone. “That’s settled then. Constitutional monarchy and medals for the entire Dolan and Rutherford clan, children and all.” She laughed, a disarming and wide open sound that could entice anyone to join in her mirth. Alistair did, without reservation. So did Belle.

When the laughter calmed to a low rumble, Belle set the second document on the desk. She pushed it forward, careful not to jostle any of the meticulously haphazard piles already nested there. Her confidence twinged with the presentation of the few modest papers. It didn’t have any reason to twinge. Alistair and Zoe told her to draw it up. A formality, they said. Of course the request would be granted.

“The petition,” she said, lower than she’d said anything all day. “For the Crown to commission the property and funding to establish a school of law in South Reach.”

Belle and Cullen had engaged in many multifaceted discussions when she got the idea to start teaching. She thought she was old enough and educated enough to start teaching, and thought it would be more important to start alongside the enactment of a new constitution to ensure adequate understanding. He agreed, but he fretted over the balance of their lives and their ability to run a Templar rehabilitation home and a law school. They wrote their friends, seeking their educated opinions. Max and Josie, who had finally gotten to marry and settle in Antiva, said they thought it was inspired. Divine Leliana Victoria gave her support and said she had a few people to send over if the school came to fruition. Lord Seeker Cassandra wrote that she could provide both pupils and instructors, if need be.

The couple came to a decision, and after months of back and forth and several meetings with the King and Queen that convinced Belle they would be supportive, she finally proposed the idea to them. She was right. They launched a wealth of enthusiasm toward the concept. They were the ones to suggest that the school be established in South Reach to keep Belle with her family at night. She held an abiding gratitude for the alacrity of their support up to this moment, but she worried it had waned since their last discussion of the matter.

“Oh, yes,” said Alistair upon seeing the culmination of all that effort. “Fantastic. I’m glad you brought this, too. I’ll sign it and start the funding right now.” He lifted his quill from his inkwell.

“Actually.” Belle held out her hand. The King paused, a bit bewildered. Ink dripped back down into the well. “Because I have some interest in this, I’d prefer if you read it over outside of my presence and had it examined by your advisors before signing it.”

Both Alistair and Zoe squinted at her. It would have been comical had it not been so unnerving. “Why?” said Alistair. “We know what it says and what you’re asking for. We’ve talked about it for months. We see no reason not to start right now.” He looked to his wife, and they both nodded.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm. But it’s part of what I’d be teaching my pupils. It’s unethical for me to give you a legal document I drafted myself, and in which I have a pretty substantial interest, without advising you to seek outside counsel about it before signing. I’ve always done what I could to maintain a specific code of ethics when it comes to things like this. It really matters to me.”
“That is admirable,” said Zoe.

“Thank you. I’m just trying to do my job the right way.”

Alistair set his quill back down. “Okay.” He crossed his arms and smirked. “We’ll look it over and take it to the small council meeting tonight, and we’ll send you a letter when we’ve signed it. It’ll probably get to your house before you do, just so you know.”

Belle gave an affable shake of her head to the royals and chuffed a bit. “Whatever you say.”

“That’s right,” he said, showing his teeth in a mockingly haughty grin. “Whatever I say.”

“Alistair,” said Zoe, plain as unsalted butter.

“Yes, love?”

“There’s no need to be an arse about it.”

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Adeline’s more blonde than strawberry head lolled to the side and bounced against Belle’s chest with the rhythm of the horse’s footsteps. The little girl had long since tired after her vigorous retelling of her day and a half of games with Duncan. Every game was nearly identical in structure and rule. Only the subject matter changed. They went from playing dragons to playing Wardens versus darkspawn to playing Inquisitor versus Corypheus, and every game involved them slamming into each other and screaming their happy little war cries. Belle gave an affectionate squeeze to her daughter’s waist where she held her up.

At odd, flat intervals in their ride home, Sadie insisted on urging her pinto pony to run ahead a hundred yards and wait. Belle watched Sadie’s legs flop about on the pony’s round ribcage as it jerked into a rough, stunted gallop, and she consistently admonished her daughter against such recklessness upon catching up. But Sadie was wily, and she always came up with some new rationale on why she hadn’t disobeyed what her mother said in the previous warning. Belle recalled the story her parents told of how she began to clap in her crib in the early morning after being told to stop talking while they slept. Shit.

Familiar eagerness filled Belle’s lungs and stomach when she caught the verdant scent and flavor of ancient alder and oak on the breeze. The scent and flavor of home. Their land was covered in the massive trees, and she basked in their shade in her occasional unoccupied moments.

The sight of a particular jagged boulder at the base of a hill spurred Sadie’s barn sour pony into a gallop again, and this time Belle gave chase. Adeline stirred against her chest, awakened by the rough change in gait. As they crested the hill, Belle saw her home spread out before her.

On one side of the midsized road sat the house. Cullen had helped construct it with his own hands, and had somehow managed to build it into a stone, brick, and wood replica of their home in Washington. He even commissioned a stained glass skylight for the living room. He also made her a new table.

On the other side loomed the much larger building that housed their Templar rehabilitation facility. It looked like something straight out of Skyrim, massive and detailed in its design. Tiny wooden and steel flourishes made by some of the former Templars who had passed through dotted the interior and exterior like children’s artwork held onto a refrigerator with plastic magnets. They served as proud displays of the home’s many successes.
Cullen was indeed quite proud of all he and Belle had done to improve Templars’ quality of life through the years. He’d told her as much many times. He was especially proud of the reform resolution they created with Divine Leliana Victoria which allowed for five-year fixed periods of service. It made joining the Order more enticing for young men and women throughout Thedas, and gave them a way out before the lyrium addiction reached the point at which withdrawal could be fatal. Some Templars elected to stay on, of course, making careers and rising in the ranks. Cullen helped them, too, although sometimes all he could do was provide them with a comfortable place to die and dignified funerary rites. Sadie and Adeline were, thus, more accustomed to and at ease with death than Belle might have liked.

Charles and his somewhat recently acquired counterpart, Jane, lazed in a heap near the front door of the facility. Belle named the younger, silvery mabari, and took to calling Charles, “Charles Bingley” in lieu of “Charles Barkley.” The two dogs were rather fond of each other, and could almost always be found together. Cullen disapproved, at first, Mr. Darcy that he was, but their adorable canine companionship grew on him after a while. He even had matching collars made for them.

Cullen, Spencer, Branson, Marcus, and Rylen had leveled off three rows of tree stumps next to the building. A tremendous pile of cut firewood leaned against the outer wall nearby. As Belle and her daughters approached, she saw Cullen and Rylen at two of those stumps. Seven or eight of the new additions to the facility—it was next to fucking impossible to count while moving so fast—took up their own stumps. All of them were chopping wood. The recovering lyrium addicts seemed to enjoy the physical exertion required for the activity, and it was just destructive enough and just constructive enough to be a worthwhile endeavor for everyone. The home provided firewood for at least half of South Reach.

“Daddy!” said Sadie and Adeline, still a ways away.

Cullen paused mid-swing when he heard and saw them coming. He beamed at them before knocking aside the hunk of wood on his block and driving his axe into the stump. There would never be a moment, no matter how inappropriate, when Belle ceased to find his casual display of power arousing. Never a fucking moment.

Sadie’s pony ground its hooves to a halt at the barn, stopping so short it almost unseated the little girl. Almost. Belle’s horse slowed to a natural stop. Both her daughters leapt to the ground and sprinted to meet their father as he crossed the road, both calling, “Daddy! Daddy!” as they ran. He crouched and held out his open arms to catch and lift them when they smashed into him. They hugged and kissed him and bombarded him with tales from their short journey. He nodded and responded with a jumble of “ohs” and “yeses” and “reallys.” Belle crossed her arms and smiled. Charles and Jane barked and scurried over through the tall grass. Belle scratched behind their ears to keep them at bay while her husband approached.

“Hi,” she said when he reached her, and she pressed her lips to his. Sadie made a small sound of disgusted protest. Belle turned to her. “It’s time for you to unsaddle Roly Poly and put him up for the night, okay?”

Sadie sighed. “Ugh okay.” Cullen loosened his grip on her, and she slid down his side. She made sure to make her annoyance known with every begrudging step and the crude manner in which she took her pony’s reins. Charles and Jane followed her to the barn, stubby tails flicking from side to side in unison.

“Why don’t you get Uncle Rylen to take you inside the big house to find Grandma?” said Belle to Adeline.

“Yeah!” Adeline wriggled until Cullen set her down. She hustled over to Rylen, who called her
“Littlest Lass” and gave her a piggyback ride into the Templar house to retrieve Ilana. Belle’s stepmother had found her calling in that big house. She proved a great asset in her calming and motherly presence, especially for the younger ex-Templars.

Finally somewhat alone, Cullen wrapped Belle up in his arms. They clung to each other for a few long seconds, as if they had been apart for two years rather than two days.

“I missed you so much,” he said into her windblown hair.

“I missed you, too.” She breathed him in. He smelled of soft powder and spiced herbs, and he smelled of sweat and sun and oak sap. “You stink.”

He chuckled his three low chuckles. “So do you.”

She hummed and held onto him anyway. “Was everything okay while we were gone?” she said. Her lips brushed against the soft blue cotton of his tunic.

“It was. The new group is settling in well. Only a few had more severe symptoms. They’re all young. They’ll be alright.”

“Good.”

“Several letters arrived. One from Dorian and Bull. One from Varric, ‘requesting’ that we bring the girls to see him in Kirkwall soon. One came for you early this morning from King Alistair,” said Cullen, sounding a touch confused. “It arrived before you left the palace, I think.”

Belle breathed in her husband’s sweet stink and sighed. “Contrary motherfucker. That would be him telling me that he and Zoe approved the petition for the law school. He’s cheeky as hell, that one.”

Cullen withdrew from their embrace to look her in the eye. She was saddle sore and sleepy, and she could have melted under his honey whiskey gaze. “That is wonderful news. I thought you would be more excited.”

“I am excited. I’m also tired, hungry, and nervous as shit. And my ass hurts. There’s a lot going on in our lives right now. Huge changes and upheavals, not to mention our first trip to Minrathous to see Dorian and Bull and their sons since Adeline was born. That’s in a month. The school will be built in three or four. Then everything will be different.”

“Everything will be perfect,” said Cullen. “You were jumping out of your skin with boredom after the Inquisition disbanded. You practically ran out of the house in the middle of the night when the King requested your counsel. This school will give you a chance to do what you always wanted to do with your education. Make the world a better place.”

“Oh don’t you throw my quaint naivete back at me, jerk nugget. I know this was my idea, and I know it’s a good thing. But I’m allowed to be nervous. It’s a big fucking deal being the only goddamn lawyer Thedas has ever seen. And, I mean, is this—all this—really our fucking soft focus epilogue? Our cinematic happy ending? The one we deserve?”

He kissed her on the forehead. She felt their sweat mingle there. “Yes,” he said, and swept her into his arms again.

The tension in Belle’s shoulders dissolved. Her horse nickered behind her and lipped at the back of her shirt. She held out and absent arm to pet his nose. “We need to have Dawn over to train Sadie and that asshole pony some more. He’s still too barn sour for how small she is. He’s going to toss her soon.”
Cullen chuckled his three low chuckles again. “Alright,” he said.

Their family, replete with too many related and unrelated aunts and uncles, had an ordinary dinner that night. Just the four of them. Spencer, Rosalie, and their two boys ate with the parents, Branson, Alden, and Branson’s new-ish wife. Mia and Marcus had a few members of his family staying over, and they kept their children at home for dinner. Rylen ate with the ex-Templars and one of the volunteers from town to whom Belle suspected he had taken quite the shine.

This little branch of the Rutherford clan ate stew and bread and listened to its youngest members recount their fun in Denerim just once more. They shared an orange after dinner. They watched *The Fifth Element* on Belle’s laptop for the millionth time—an anachronism within an anachronism. Sadie improvised an idiosyncratic dance to the Diva’s song. They all cheered. When the movie was over, they went to bed.

Belle watched Cullen sling the girls over either shoulder and cart them upstairs. Laughter pealed out of them as they demanded he put them down. He obliged them, plopping them into their beds one at a time. She helped him tuck them in and kiss them goodnight. Charles and Jane hopped up onto the foot of either bed. The girls begged for a goodnight song, too. Belle and Cullen sang them a one about the moons. They left on a tiny nightlight Belle’s father made for his granddaughters, and they closed the door behind them.

They began to change for bed, and Belle fell back on the sheets with a long exhale. Her spine righted itself. Her bones settled. Sleep tugged at her eyes.

Cullen left off changing into anything. He doffed his tunic and pants, and he crawled between her legs to kiss her neck. Compelled by a kind of primal instinct, her hands crept along his back and neck and into his hair, and his hand crept up the inside of her thigh.

“You still stink,” she said, barely breathing under the press and sweep of his thumb.

“So do you,” he said as he slipped inside her.

They came together, and they came together. They were soundless in their soundless house, quiet to match quiet. There was no less relief in it for the silence of their unravelling, no less pleasure or faith or love. They were simply together in the seclusion of one another. Alone in their muted utopia.

She beheld him as he slept, his lips parted just so, handsome features he’d passed along to their daughters all relaxed. Time and circumstance had changed his body. He was still the classical ideal, still carved from sunbaked marble, but he was softer now. Pliant and cozy in places that made him seem more human than demigod. She realized that, no matter her apprehension at the future she’d set into motion, no matter her concerns for their causes, this was the soft focus epilogue they deserved. Their cinematic happy ending. They had each other. They had their daughters. They had blood-bound and chosen family all across Thedas. They were okay.

A little snore snuck through Cullen’s throat, and he crinkled his nose and adjusted his head on his pillow. Belle smiled. She shut her eyes, dipping her forehead into the space between his collarbones. Still asleep, he wrapped his arm around her to hold her tight.

They were okay.

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Chapter End Notes
And with that, fair reader, we have reached the end of our story. Will *you* be okay? ^_^

This has been a massive endeavor that has taken a lot of time and creative energy to complete, but I'm so glad I did. I'm grateful to everyone who has read this far, everyone who has stuck with me through this journey, everyone who has left kudos, and especially everyone who has commented. This became a thing because I was super fucking pumped about it, and it stay a thing because you kept me super fucking pumped about it!

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I have so many people I feel like I need to thank personally, but I'll start crying like an asshole when I do. Suffice it to say, I think you probably know who you are, and ILY. Thank you from the depths of my soul for being here.

Thank you, fair reader. Thank you. <3<3<3

End Notes

Thanks for reading.

As always, kudos/comments/con-crit are welcome and encouraged.

Come on over to my Tumblr and talk it up with me if you'd like!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!