Transit Umbra, Lux Permanet

by kawakaeguri

Summary

Shadows Pass, Light Remains

She falls through a rift, into a place she only thought existed in games and books. But the timing is odd. The Inquisition has already won. So what the hell is she supposed to do? Why is she here? Chance? Or fate? At least she has no one left back home to really miss her, not anymore.

Commander Cullen Rutherford has always given his all to his duty. But each time, his devotion to his cause has left him with scars. Demons from Kinloch, blood magic from Kirkwall, and now... lyrium from the Inquisition. Except this time, he might not make it out alive. To think that the woman who swore she loved him could do this to him...

What else is left for him now?
New fic! Starting this one out with no buffer pretty much, but once my other fic is done, I plan on working on this one as my primary fic (with a few chapters for Rise from the Ashes and Distant Lands sprinkled in as inspiration strikes). So hoping for an update a week, maybe more. Hope y'all enjoy!

Polished boots echoed off the dark gray stone ramparts, the clang of his armor muffled by the crimson cloak that fluttered around his tall frame. As the ring of soldiers that had gathered around the wagon parted to allow him passage, a deep furrow creased his high brow, cold, amber eyes squinting as the glaring noon sun glinted off a nearby helm. “Report.”

“Commander!” One of the men stepped forward smartly, saluting with hand over his heart. “The scouts reported that she fell out of a rift, near the shores of Lake Calenhad, about a day’s south of here. None of the villagers recognized her. No weapons on her person, nor any other supplies.”

Nodding absently as the soldier stepped back into formation, the Commander gazed down at the woman who lay unconscious on the bed of the wagon, hair black as obsidian draped across her face. Her breeches were snug around her legs, created out of some stiff blue fabric that was unfamiliar to him, as was her thin, dark teal tunic that brushed the top of her thighs. The quality, at least, of the material was high, indicating that she was more than likely of the nobility, perhaps a wealthy merchant’s daughter, or wife. Yes, wife. Although her ring was missing, he could see the pale band of skin around her fourth finger on her left hand, indicating that she had recently worn a ring for quite some time.

“Take her to the infirmary for now. Post guards by her bed. When she awakes, send for either myself or the seneschal.”

“Yes, ser!”

A familiar scent of lilies drifted by on the breeze, the cadence of her footsteps familiar to him. “Who was that?”

“Yes, ser!”

A familiar scent of lilies drifted by on the breeze, the cadence of her footsteps familiar to him. “Who was that?”

“A woman,” he replied, clipped and courteous as he always was. “Our people say she fell out of a rift not too far from here. She’s unconscious, so hopefully she will have answers when she awakes.”

“Another one?” The woman laughed, glancing down at the emerald green glow embedded in her left hand. “Well, now I don’t feel quite as special.”

“She had no visible mark, so there’s that, at least. If you’ll excuse me, Inquisitor, I have work I need to finish.” Offering the woman a short bow, he started to head back towards the stairs that would lead him up onto the battlements, where his office was.

“Cullen,” her soft voice called after him. Had he turned around to face her, he would have seen her bright blue eyes, filled to the brim with regret and pain, eyes that he had once loved to stare into for hours deep into the night. But now, all it did was remind him of his chains, cold and hard around his throat, so he kept his gaze focused on scraggly patch of weeds by the wall instead.
“Did you need something else, Inquisitor?”

“I… No.”

“Then I shall take my leave.”

Day by day, the army that he led grew, the ranks swelling to fill the valley below until it overflowed down the mountainside. From every corner, men and women of all races flocked to the Inquisition’s banner, having heard of the Inquisitor’s might, how she had sealed the Breach twice, toppled a self-proclaimed god, forced mighty Orlais to heel and ended the civil war. And day by day, even though the true threat was over, his own stress continued to mount. There was the neverending stream of recruits to train, rations and requisitions for weapons and supplies to maintain, countless bases and fortresses scattered across Thedas to man, and he was in charge of it all. Anyone else would have been honored to be called Commander of the Inquisition. And once, he had as well. But now, all he felt was…


Pushing the door open, the heavy wood swinging smoothly on well-oiled hinges, he barely noticed the neat, immaculate piles of books and reports, organized and waiting for his attention. That too had once been different, parchments scattered across the massive desk, random quills used to bookmark passages in the books that laid haphazardly on every surface. Now there was only order, as he had been taught.

The chair creaked under the weight of his slim bulk and his armor as he settled down into the worn leather, one hand reaching for the bottom drawer of his desk. Pulling out a smooth wooden box, the lid engraved with a sword wreathed in flames, Cullen stifled a sigh, his hands moving through the movements by rote.

He was so tired. At least the nightmares weren’t as bad as they had been, before… Well. It didn’t matter anymore. Holding the pale blue powder in the spoon over the candle, he stared as the lyrium melted down into a viscous puddle, mixing it quickly with the other crushed herbs and pouring it into the vial before it cooled. The metallic minty liquid spread over his tongue, familiar, yet not comforting, not like it had used to be. Now, it was just a reminder of how far he had gotten, only to relinquish his freedom once again. All for this.

His eyes roved over his office, staring out the narrow window slits at the castle on the other side of the courtyard. All for the Inquisition, all because of her. She had asked him, and he had agreed, wanting to give his all. But had it been worth it? What was left for him, after his duty was fulfilled?

Sliding the next report off the top of the pile, Cullen rolled his neck, heaving a sigh as the worn bones cracked back into place, and dipped his quill’s nib into the pot of ink to resume his work. This was all that mattered now anyhow. This, at least, made him useful.

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It was the flickering of candlelight and the straw of her mattress, stabbing her through her clothes that finally roused her. Wincing at the throbbing of her head, she slowly pushed herself upright, blinking at her strange surroundings. Was she in a monastery of some sort? The walls were thick stone, what looked like hand dipped candles resting on brass stands throughout the room that was filled with cots identical to hers, all bearing thin linen sheets and lumpy, crude bedding, with a rough woolen blanket spread over one end.

“Oh, you’re awake. Lucas, send for one of the advisors and let them know, will you dear?” An older
woman in a simple roughspun gown kneeled by her bed, dabbing a wet cloth at a stinging pain on the side of her head. “You took quite the fall, my lady. How are you feeling?”

Licking her parched lips a few times, she managed to croak, “Water. Please.” A small wooden cup appeared to her left, and she took it gratefully, trying not to gag at the musty taste of the mostly clear liquid within. Had they dredged this water from a nearby pond?

“Do you think you can eat something, dear?”

Suddenly exhausted, she fell back onto her pillow, nodding tentatively as a bowl of what appeared to be watery stew was placed onto the table next to her. The lukewarm broth was greasy, and in dire need of seasoning and salt, but still she managed to devour half the bowl. When was the last time she ate? And where exactly was she?

“Thank you,” she rasped to the woman attending her. “Where-”

“Good evening.” A slim, redheaded woman in her mid-thirties strolled into the low building, smiling warmly at the women, but when her gaze settled on her, it was anything but friendly, the sweet, lilting accent belying the ice within.

“Good evening,” she attempted a wan smile. “Do you know where I am, miss?”

Raising one delicate eyebrow, the woman perched on the bed opposite hers, studying her. “You are in Skyhold. Might I have your name?”

“Ari, well, Arianne. Arianne Iseri,” shaking her head, she frowned down at her fingers that were plucking at the loose threads of her blanket. “Skyhold?” There was no way. Did that mean this was…?

“Yes, you were found by our men. This is the home of the Inquisition.” Ari maintained a neutral, blank expression for now. “In the Frostbacks, on the border of Ferelden and Orlais. Does any of that seem familiar?”

Deciding that her silence on exactly how familiar those places were was best for the time being, Ari slowly shook her head. “I’m sorry, nothing rings a bell.” She knows I’m lying. Of course she does, I can’t outsmart fucking Leliana.

“Well, then. Let’s talk about you. Where are you from?”

“Born and raised in South Carolina,” she replied easily. “Although I’ve been living in Georgia for the past few years.”

Not bothering to hide her confusion or distrust at this point, Leliana leaned in closer, her dark green eyes narrowed in suspicion. “And where is that exactly?”

“Southeastern part of the United States of America. It’s a country,” she supplied uselessly. “A big one? Sandwiched between Mexico and Canada, between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans?”

“I do not think I’ve ever heard of any country in Thedas by those names,” Leliana spoke slowly.

“Thedas? What are you talking about?”

“This world?”

“...Our world is called Earth.”
“She is awake?”

Ari barely was able to restrain her shock as Cullen Rutherford ducked inside the room, his russet fur mantle appearing almost black in the dim light. His eyes flickered from one woman to the other, waiting until Leliana spoke, “Her name is Arianne Iseri, she says. And she claims to be from another world.”

“That’s impossible,” his scowl was even more impressive in person, Ari noted. And terrifying when she realized these people held her life in their hands. What if they thought she was a threat, a spy?

“I promise, it’s true,” she whispered in her best frightened voice. Luckily, she didn’t have to act very hard to be convincing.

“What should we do with her, then?”

“If only Solas was still here, or Dorian,” Leliana mused, one finger tapping idly against her knee. Solas is gone? And Dorian? Does that mean Corypheus has been defeated? I wonder what year it is.

“We could simply keep her in the dungeons for now,” Cullen suggested.

“We could,” Leliana agreed. “Or… What was your job, back on this Earth?”

Startled by the sudden question, Ari took a second before answering, “I was a nurse in the ER. Oh, they don’t have that term here. I helped heal sick people, cared for them whenever they came to me with an emergencies,” she amended. “Broken bones, lacerations, stabbing wounds, poison, things like that.”

“You’re a healer?”

“Where I’m from, yes, I suppose you could call me that. But I think,” she glanced nervously around the room, finally recognizing that this was the infirmary she was ensconced in, the smell of dried herbs filling the air. “I think the tools and medicine I’m used to are very different from here.” No soap, for one. Bleh.

“Commander,” craning her neck back to where the imposing man stood near the wall, Leliana asked, “What do you think about letting her work here? I can spare one of my scouts, or perhaps one of your soldiers can guard her. For your own safety, of course,” her wolfish smile hid nothing of her true intent.

She wants me loose and somewhat free, so she can catch me doing whatever it is she thinks I’m here to do.

“That can be easily arranged,” Cullen agreed.

“Well, that settles it,” the Seneschal chirped brightly. “Welcome to the Inquisition, Mistress Iseri.”
“So Sister Nightingale said you were a healer of sorts where you’re from?”

Smoothing out her new woolen dress, her old clothes tucked safely into a chest in the tiny room she had been given, Ari nodded. “I can help with any suturing that needs to be done, setting bones, things like that. I’m afraid I don’t know much about,” glancing at the side wall, shelves lined with dozens of flasks and vials filled with colors ranging from dull brown and ocher to substances that almost glowed in the pale dawn light, she licked her lips, “Alchemy.” That’s what they called it here, right? It had been awhile since she had played the game.

“That all can be learned,” the woman waved away. “I’m Renna, by the way.” Tucking an errant strand of curly, mahogany hair behind her ear, Renna offered one hand that Ari gladly took. “Here, you can start with reading these. Most days, all we have to worry about here is accidents from training, but those keep us busy with the amount of new recruits that are still pouring into Skyhold.”

“How?” Ari stared down at the pile of books that found themselves in her arms, warily glancing at the title, knowing she couldn’t read the runic language of- Oh. Apparently she could. Pulling up a nearby chair, she opened the first book she grabbed and quickly scanned the page. It wasn’t like reading English, more like when she read Spanish, or Japanese, but her mind knew this alphabet and vocabulary. How?

“Mm, still,” Renna remained unaware of the shock rolling through her new charge as she shuffled through a few more tomes under the table. “That’s right, you don’t really know anything, do you? The Elder One was defeated last year, by the Inquisitor. You’ll see her walking around. Curly red hair, blue eyes, weird green glowing hand. Can’t miss her. But anyways, she resealed the Breach- a large tear in the sky into the Fade- and since then, people keep coming. There are still smaller rifts to close all over Thedas, so I suppose it’s good to have extra men to help, but still.” Mumbling something about ‘unnecessary’ and ‘too many people’, the woman crawled back out, holding two more books out for Ari to take. “Start with those, they’ll give you the basics. Any questions so far?”

“Um. What year is it?”


When was the Exalted Council? Wasn’t it 44? So, next year? Thanking the healer, Ari wrapped the thick cloak she had been given tightly around her body and clutched the stack of books to her chest, wincing as a gust of biting wind cut through her clothes. Of course, she had managed to land in the middle of the Ferelden mountains in the middle of the fucking winter. And all those stories of how Skyhold was so much warmer than the surrounding land was a goddamn lie. It was freezing. Even with her layers of scratchy wool and thick cotton, she was shivering, her teeth chattering behind the chapped and dry skin of her face.

Skyhold was so much larger in real life than in the game, harsher, less inviting somehow. Maybe it was the myriads of guards stationed every five feet along the battlements, or perhaps it was the gloominess of the snow heavy sky that let not even a single ray of sunlight through. Snippets of muffled conversation passed her, the silent elf that was her guard always close on her heels as she ventured back inside the keep, sighing in relief as the wind finally faded away. “Is it always this cold
The scout snorted, the skin around his pale gray eyes wrinkling ever so slightly. “This isn’t bad right now. Wait until the spring storms hit.”

“Fuck me. I’m Ari, by the way.”

“I know,” he grinned. “Revin.”

For a second, Ari was startled that he would even be talking to her, figuring Leliana would have required him to remain the stoic, watchful guardian. No, it would be easier to get me to relax, that way I might slip up. If I was a spy. Which I’m not. Just have to be careful not to reveal how much I know about everyone.

Revin took up a post outside of her room while she went inside to deposit the books on her small table, only taking what appeared to be an introduction to alchemy along with recipes for basic potions along with her. The lead healer, a grim faced older woman named Marguerite, had told her to take a few days to recover from the head wound she had sustained when she fell from the rift, so Ari figured this was a good a time as any to read up on her new position, and try to figure out how to survive here.

Finding her way up into the library, she cast a fond smile at the place where Dorian had always sat in the game. I suppose he’s back in Tevinter now. And Varric’s back in Kirkwall. Vivienne in Orlais. Who else stayed? Is Blackwall still here, or was he sent to the Wardens? Or worse? Sera? The Iron Bull? Glancing out of the paned window, she could just make out the tavern below. Cole should still be here, at least. And Cassandra.

Finding a comfy chair, Ari flipped open the first page of the book. Time to figure this shit out.

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Thank goodness the infirmary was warm, as was the library and the kitchens. Those were the only places she really spent her time in, as she was either working with the other healers, using what she had learned to help make the different potions and poultices they used, pouring over different tomes about Thedosian medical techniques and general world history, or begging the cooks to teach her how to cook over an open flame, instead of the microwave and electric stove to which she had been accustomed. Ari had no idea why she was here, or what she was supposed to do, but if it was already 43, that meant the Inquisition might be disbanding in another year. And if she was to survive here on her own, she needed the skills.

It was easy to drown herself in her new work all day long, barely taking the time to eat, doing everything she could to distract her mind from the problems she recently had. But they weren’t significant anymore, were they? Her divorce was finalized. Her condo had been sold, her goodbyes said to her friends, and her new apartment in Oregon was waiting on her. A new life, a new start. Somewhere where no memories of her failure as a wife would haunt her. Again.

And then, her car had broken down along a back road somewhere in Texas as she took a detour around an accident that had the main interstate blocked for miles. She had been following the other cars who had decided to do the same, but somehow, she had gotten lost instead. In the country. At night. With no cell service. What an idiot she was.

Deciding to spend the night in her car, and set out in the morning to find help, Ari had snuggled down into her chair…
And woken up here, with no memory of the time in between. The authorities would have found her car by now, with her missing. But they would never find her. She really wasn’t sure how that made her feel yet. After all, hadn’t she wanted a fresh start? Even if her plans had involved on staying on Earth, sans magical creatures, maybe this would be good for her. Maybe she could be happy here.

If nothing else, by the summer at least she had finally convinced the other healers to wash their hands and sterilize their tools between uses.

“Ooh, look at that crust! I think you finally got the hang of it, dearie,” the cook beamed as she pulled the golden brown pie from the oven.

“It’s about time,” Ari muttered, poking the flaky crust with a fork. “I thought I was hopeless.”

“Looks just as good as any pie I’ve made myself,” the other woman declared. “And it tastes heavenly,” giggleing at her exaggerated moan, Ari speared a small forkful for herself, burning the roof of her mouth as she quickly swallowed. It was rather good, she smiled to herself. “Tell you what. Do old Maggie a favor and take this tray up to the Commander’s office, then we can sit here and gossip like old women. I think that Blackwall’s got his eye on you,” she giggled.

Blushing, Ari grabbed the tray, shoving the covered plate aside to make room for the hefty slice of pie Maggie plopped down into the open space. “He’s just been friendly to me, Maggie. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Sure, sure, young and naive, that’s what you are,” the older woman chortled. “Now go and hurry back! Blueberry’s the Commander’s favorite. Maybe the sight of it and a pretty lass will finally put a smile back on that man’s face.”

“Lass,” Ari grumbled under her breath as she shouldered the door open. “Young and naive. I’m 32 years old, hardly any of those things anymore.” Turned out Blackwall was one of the few of the inner circle that still remained within Skyhold, and Ari found he was just as kind and courteous as she had imagined him. The Iron Bull and his Chargers also had stayed on, the hulking Qunari much larger than anything she had pictured, especially to her small 5 foot 2 inch stature. And every now and then, she caught a glimpse of Sera, the elven archer constantly slipping in and out of the keep on her own missions. Cole was nowhere to be found, and Ari counted that as a good thing, as the spirit would probably have been able to read far too much from her mind for her comfort.

Balancing the tray in one hand, she knocked firmly at the thick wooden door, nudging it open with her elbow at his muffled, “Enter.”

“Commander? I have your supper, along with a slice of blueberry pie. Mistress Alden thought you would like it.”

Glancing up from his desk, recognition widened his eyes ever so slightly as she walked in. “Thank you. Mistress Iseri, correct? Are you running errands for the cooks now as well as the healers?”

“Mistress Alden is teaching me to cook. I thought it would be a useful skill to know,” she replied with a smile that faltered when she spied the tools in his hand. “What is-”

“Lyrium,” he replied curtly. “I thank you for the food, Mistress. If you’ll excuse me now?”

Nodding mutely, Ari stumbled back out into the warm, breezy night. Lyrium. Everything made sense now. The Inquisitor, a noblewoman from Ostwick named Evelyn Trevelyan, hadn’t gone unromanced like she initially thought. Those looks she shot Cullen when she thought no one was looking weren’t filled with unrequited longing. Ari was willing to bet they had once been together.
Until the Inquisitor had put Cullen back on lyrium.

And the Exalted Council was next year. Which meant, if the Inquisition was disbanded…

Cullen would soon find himself on the streets of Val Royeaux, wasted away into a husk, begging for the stuff. Until the day he died, more than likely by Lace Harding’s merciful hand.

But if he had already gone through withdrawals once, a second time could kill him just as surely, judging from what she knew about the nature of lyrium. It might already be too late.

*But I have to try to help, don’t I?*

The question was, how did she gain the Commander’s trust to the point where he would be willing to listen to her?

Sliding back into the kitchen, Ari sunk onto a nearby stool, smiling as Maggie ladled a dollop of fresh whipping cream onto her slice of pie. “Say, Maggie. Does the Commander ever smile? He seems so… abrupt all the time.”

“Aye,” Mistress Alden’s head swiveled to stare sadly out into the night, up to the single candle still burning in the top tower. “He wasn’t always like this. Back when, well. It’s old gossip now.”

“Back when?” Ari prompted.

“When he was with the Inquisitor. Now don’t you go repeating any of this,” shaking her fork at the younger woman, Maggie speared a bite of blueberry. “There’s a lot of pain between the two still. You know the Commander was a templar before right? Word was, he was trying to be one of the rare ones to actually wean himself off lyrium. Nasty stuff, that is. But the withdrawals,” she sighed. “I guess it got to be too much, and the Inquisitor ordered him back on. He hasn’t been the same since. Used to smile, laugh even, play chess with that fancy Tevinter mage that used to lurk around here. Now, all he does is work. He’s going to run himself into the ground at this rate.”

“Does he not think about trying again?”

“It’d kill him, dearie,” Maggie patted her hand. “Look at you, ever the healer. Some wounds you just can’t fix though.”

*It’s going to kill him regardless. I guess the question is, Cullen, how do you want to die?*

“But enough of that gloomy talk. Now about that Blackwall…”

Reaching over the table, Ari giggled as she stuffed another heaping serving of pie into her friend’s mouth. “What? I can’t understand a word you just said!”

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Every spare second of the next few weeks was spent with her nose buried in every book she could find on lyrium. She knew it was alive. She knew it was the blood of the Titans. That was probably the reason why withdrawals were so violent and drawn out; the organic matter had more than likely bound itself to his nervous system. The closest drug she was familiar with that could cause such long acting symptoms was heroin- recovering addicts would sometimes feel the cravings, aches, nausea, and tremors for years.

All she would be able to do without more information on lyrium would be to manage the symptoms, and pray his body would be strong enough. *Hell, if I just get some decent food in him, that might*
give him the chance he needs. Everything here is so grain dense. He’ll need more nutrient rich foods, fresh vegetables and fruit more than anything.

Throwing the last book onto the growing pile of what she had designated “Chantry crap”, Ari slumped back into the high back chair. There were too many variables involved, and it was almost overwhelming to think about. Maybe I’m doing all this research for nothing anyways. Not like we’re exactly buddy buddy, and if I try to broach the subject, he’d probably just throw me out of his office.

“Mistress Iseri? What is all this?”

Shrinking as far as she could into the cushion, she winced at the familiar baritone. “Commander. I’m, um, reading.”

Cullen raised one eyebrow as he flipped through the stack of books gathered on the side table. “Interested in magic? You are not a mage.”

“No,” she murmured. “It’s- it’s lyrium. I was researching it.”

Instantly, his already guarded eyes shuttered into something more akin to a statue than man, fists subtly clenching by his sides, a vein in his temple ticking in time with his pulse. “...Any particular reason why?”

“Ser Thomas,” Ari risked a quick glance up at the Commander. “He’s not doing so well. And then I found out this is normal, and-” her voice caught in her throat. Ser Thomas was one of the other templars that remained in Skyhold, a kind, gentle man in his early 40s. And he was in the last stages of losing his mind to the lyrium he had ingested since he was 19 years old, confined almost the entire day to his bed, too weak to walk or even feed or relieve himself. Sometimes, on his more lucid days, he would tell her stories of his time as a templar, scandals from the Circle he had served in, back in Starkhaven.

“It is a fate that awaits us all,” Cullen muttered. “You need not concern yourself with it.”

“How can you say that?” Jerking to her feet, heedless of the fact that she barely reached the center of his breastplate, or that he was the Commander and she just a stray they had taken in, Ari thumped her fist against the solid metal. “I’m a healer, I can’t just sit by and not do anything! I swore an oath to devote myself to the welfare of those in my care. Don’t tell me I don’t need to concern myself with it. He’s only 42. He has so much life left, and for it to end like this, for it to end like this for all of them, bound…”

Cullen had remained stoic in the face of her impassioned retort, his hooded eyes slightly narrowed down at the slight woman. “Bound?”

“Addiction,” she sighed. “It’s a form of slavery. In my world, drugs taken for fun, for sport are relatively common. I saw a lot of people detoxing- er, dealing with withdrawals- and it’s the same. The drug grabs hold of them, like some sort of demon, consuming them until it’s their only god. Until nothing else matters except the next hit. Some of the strongest people I’ve known are the ones who managed to successfully cast off their chains. It takes a lot of courage to break the ties.”

Her words, this time carefully chosen, hit their mark, evident by the way his nostrils flared as he sucked in a sharp breath, the tendons of his neck straining as his muscles clenched to hide the trembling of his body. Now or never.

“I… had heard you attempted to wean yourself off lyrium before,” Ari spoke slowly. When he said nothing, she continued softly, “If you wish to try again, I would be more than happy to assist,
Commander.”

His gaze snapped up to lock onto hers. “The Inquisition needs-”

“The Inquisition’s job is finished, is it not?” she interrupted. “Its mission has been fulfilled. What will you do when this is over?”

“That is none of your business,” Cullen gritted out quietly. “And I will thank you to keep your offers of help to yourself. If the others wish for your aid, I will not stand in your way, but I beg you, leave me be. Good day, Mistress.”

His boots ground into the dusty stone floor as he spun sharply on his heel, the tension rolling off his tall frame in palpable waves. Releasing a breath she hadn’t even known she was holding, Ari sagged back into the chair. That went well. What else did I expect, prying into his innermost fears like that? It was rude and unfair, using this advantage I have to try and sway his mind. Ugh. I’m horrible.

Why did it matter so much to her anyways? He was a stranger to her, cold and indifferent.

Because you know what he could be, what he could have been. And after all that man had endured… He at least deserved a chance.

Hefting the next book in her unread pile to her lap, Ari muttered under her breath, “To work?”

Chapter End Notes

It makes me sad to write Cullen like this.
His hands were calloused, almost like leather compared to her own. Keeping her fingers wrapped around his, Ari carefully tilted the elfroot laced tea into his mouth, being careful not to spill any down his chin.

“You’re too good to me, lass,” Ser Thomas wheezed. “Were I a younger man, I’d marry you in a heartbeat.”

Feeling her lips tug up into a small smirk, she set down the earthenware mug on the side table. “Better be glad you’re not younger then. I’d make a horrible wife.”

“Lies,” he coughed, his failing body seizing at the sudden pain that shot through his body. Blinking rapidly as the tremors faded, the templar’s pale, watery gray eyes darted around the room before settling on her. “What are you doing out of bed at this hour? You should be in the dorms, mage.”

“Apologies, ser,” Ari murmured, knowing it was futile to try and reason with him. “I’ll go back now.”

“Aye, there’s a good lass,” his voice, barely rasping like a winter’s breeze through bare tree branches, faded as he slipped back into sleep.

“How is he?” Glancing up from where she sat, Ari released Thomas’ hand and wearily pushed herself up to stand.

“Worse today, ser,” her teeth nibbled on her bottom lip as she studied her patient. Thomas had been such a healthy man just a few short months ago, his frame study and well-muscled from the decades of training, and now it was nothing. Skin sunken in where firm flesh used to swell, hugging the sharp angles of his bones.

Exhaling a long breath, Rylen, the Commander’s second-in-command, and a former templar himself, laid a hand on her shoulder. “It won’t be long now for him, will it?”

“No,” she whispered. “Any day now.”

Feeling his fingers momentarily tightening against her skin, Ari turned back to the captain. “I- forgive me,” pulling his hand back, Rylen offered her a wry grin, the dark lines of his tattoo stretching as he smiled down at her. “I was just thinking. He’s not that much older than I.”

“Have you ever thought about stopping lyrium?” she asked softly.

An unknown emotion fluttered behind his turquoise eyes. “Aye. But after… Well. I wasn’t sure how it would go. And I had my responsibilities, so I couldn’t be indisposed for very long.”

“What about now?”

Staring at her, something akin to hope bloomed in his face. “Do you think I could?”

“There’s always a chance, Captain. Of failure or success. What will matter the most is how badly you want it,” squeezing his arm, just above his bracer, Ari smiled gently. “You’re a strong man, in
the prime of your life. I think if anyone could do it, you could.”

“The Commander. He tried, you know. Said it got to be too much and went back on.”

“I think,” she said carefully, “Had the Commander had better support, he could have done it. Just as you can.”

“And you would help me, lass?”

“I’d stay by your side the whole time, ser.”

“Well, I don’t think that would be necessary,” he chuckled. “Although I definitely wouldn’t complain. Be a damn sight better to see your lovely face every day rather than the ugly mugs of my men.”

A rosy blush flooded her cheeks, the heat burning just below the surface. “I, um,” he chuckled at her embarrassment. “Just let me know when you’d like to start. I’ll devise a schedule for weaning you off, and arrange for a more private place.” At the waggle of his eyebrows, Ari rolled her eyes, and explained, “I doubt you’d want to be in here when the worst of it hits.”

“Tell me.”

Biting her tongue before she could ask him if he was sure, she heard the steely determination in his tone. It would do him no favors to soften the blow. “Nightmares, vomiting, tremors, fever, cramping, trouble breathing, increased heart rate. And the cravings will be harsh.”

Whistling under his breath, Rylen tried to hide his growing distress. “That’s a hell of a list. You don’t pull your punches, do you lass?”

“I didn’t think you were the type of man who would appreciate being coddled, Captain,” she replied.

“Aye,” he nodded once, firmly. “I’m not. And it’s Rylen. If you’re willing to help me through all that, least you can do is use my given name.”

“Ari,” she took his proffered hand. “Or you can keep calling me lass. I think I rather like it.”

His laugh was warm and rich, sky blue eyes twinkling with delight as he grinned, “Well, Ari, lass, let me talk to the Commander about all this. I’ll let you know later.”

“You know where to find me,” inclining her head, she watched him duck back out of the infirmary. I wonder how Cullen will react. He did say that if his men wanted my help, he wouldn’t forbid them, but will he?

***

Ser Thomas passed that night, just before the sun set over the towering, snow-capped peaks beyond Skyhold. He went quietly, a gentle slip into sleep, never to wake again.

“He was one of the lucky ones,” a low voice called from the doorway. Kneeling beside the cot, Cullen carefully arranged the templar’s arms across his thin chest, bowing his head in an unspoken prayer. “Some of us go out violently, others, freezing to death on the streets.”

That’s your fate, you stubborn man, unless you let me help you, Ari silently begged.

“Rylen tells me he wants to try,” he sighed. “And that you offered to help. He could die from this,” his eyes lifted to stare almost accusingly at her.
Placing her hands in her lap, Ari met his hardened gaze head on with her own quiet determination. “We all die, Commander. The only thing we can really choose is how we meet that death.”

The stress of the past few years were evident on his lined, creased face, dark circles marring his golden skin, making him look much older than the 32 or 33 years old he was supposed to be. We’re the same age, she realized. And yet he could pass for a man easily a decade my senior.

Unaware of her thoughts, of her examination, Cullen held her eyes for the span of several more heartbeats, before stepping back, carefully lowering the hand he had begun raising to his neck. “I want detailed reports, at least every other day, on his progress, do you understand?”

“Of course, Commander.”

“Why do you care so much? I feel as if it’s much more than just doing your job.”

Because I saw you happy, and whole, and healthy. But that was just a game, wasn’t it? This is real. “I watched him fade, day by day, for months,” Ari motioned to the emaciated body next to where they stood. “If I can help prevent that, give people back their future, give them hope, how can I stand by and do nothing?”

Cullen seemed to accept that answer this time, for now. With a last nod, he disappeared back out into the darkness outside.

There was much to be done before starting Rylen’s weaning process. Slipping a fresh piece of parchment onto the small desk in the corner, Ari dipped a quill into a pot of ink, grimacing at her handwriting. It had never been particularly neat, even with a pen or pencil, but using a feather to write made her print look worse than it had as a child. Let’s see. A week at three quarter rations, reducing by a quarter every week. Best to take this slow at first. That would put his first day with no lyrium right at the first week of Kingsway. I’ll need a room, probably somewhere inside the castle, in the lower levels if there’s room. What herbs… Elfruit, obviously. Embrium. Crystal grace. Spindleweed, for his fever. Prophet’s laurel, for his aches. Dawn lotus.

How fortunate had she been to fall into the Inquisition’s reach when she arrived here. At least here, she had work, a purpose. And you ignore everything else in your life that’s fucked up while you’re at it, her subconscious muttered. It was true. She had never been good at facing her problems, preferring to bury her worries and issues under more mundane things. It’s why her marriage had ultimately failed, hadn’t it? Because she never wanted to communicate with him, tell her husband what was bothering her, until everything came spilling out at once in an implosion that rivaled a warzone. That’s why your first marriage failed too.

Shut up.

The first hadn’t been completely her fault, that much she knew. It was hard to care when the your partner didn’t give two fucks about where you were, what you were doing, or if you were even dead or alive. She could have disappeared for days and he would have barely noticed. I might as well have been a houseplant.

And yet, she should have known. Or been more cautious, more discerning in choosing her life partner. Turned out, character wasn’t as easy to judge as she had once thought. People were too capricious, too changing.

Never again. I think I’ve had my fill of serious relationships and marriage for one lifetime. I guess it’s a good thing I’m on Thedas, and not Earth. Less lonely being here, rather than sitting in my apartment alone every night, binging movies and drinking myself into oblivion. At least here, there
was always people about, things to do just to survive- hunting, cooking, gardening. She already was learning how to cook from Maggie, and Renna was teaching her to sew and knit. If she could do those on her own, and use her skills as a healer, she might just have a chance at surviving on her own here, if the Inquisition did disband. Where would she go, though? Somewhere warmer, please, dear God. I wonder if Antiva is as stabby as I picture it. Maybe Nevarra? Or somewhere in the Marches. Isn’t Ostwick supposed to be fairly nice?

“Ari? Are you still here?” Rylen’s head poked inside, scanning the room until he spied her in the corner. “Brought some men to take Thomas away.” Motioning a few other soldiers to the cot, the captain softly padded across the floor, his boots faintly crunching on the dust and grit underneath. “Commander gave me to go ahead to start as soon as I like, by the way. I was thinking soon?”

“We can start whenever you like,” pointing to the timetable she had scribbled down, Ari tapped the first line. “I’d like for you to start decreasing your dosage by a quarter at a time, for a week each. You should be relatively functional until that last week, on quarter rations, and then the first few days with nothing will be when you need to retire for a bit.”

“Oh? I had thought I’d just stop taking it,” he frowned down at her notes. “How can you read that?”

“I wrote it,” she mumbled, snatching the paper away from him with a scowl. “That’s how. No, if you stop out of nowhere, the shock might kill you. Better chance of success this way.”

“Makes sense. So when I’m finally off the lyrium, that’s when you and I go find a nice, secluded hidey hole?” She laughed at the suggestive dance of his eyebrows.

“Exactly, Captain. Who should I talk to about finding a room?”

Stroking the dark lines on his chin, Rylen hummed, “The ambassador, probably. If not her, she’ll at least know who to ask.”

“Alright. I’ll do that first thing tomorrow.”

“Are you off for the rest of the night?” Humming an affirmative under her breath, Ari glanced up from the hand he laid on her forearm. “Come have a drink with me? I’d, uh,” scratching the back of his head, Rylen sheepishly smiled down at her. “I’d like to get to know you before I start vomiting all over you and turn into a raging lunatic.”

Ari barked a sharp laugh, and laid down her quill. “A drink sounds nice.”

The Herald’s Rest was packed like normal, soldiers and staff, all off duty mingling with the various merchants and the occasion noble who deigned to slum with the commoners. In the corner, she spied the Iron Bull and his men in their usual spot, raucous laughter filling their small part of the tavern. “Here,” Rylen held out a glass filled with dark crimson liquid. “You seem more like a wine person than an ale person.”

“Actually, I’m a whiskey person,” she grinned. “But I like wine, too.”

“Duly noted,” he chuckled. He really was a striking man, Ari mused. The way the firelight reflected off his brilliant aqua eyes almost made them seem tinged with gold. And his accent- She had to forcibly lock her knees more than once to keep herself from swooning like an idiot. Didn’t you just say you swore off men?

 Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate.

“So how are you settling in? Still hard to believe that you’re from another world,” he shook his head.
Taking a seat at a small table off to the side, Ari took a sip of her wine, the heady liquid instantly warming a path to her belly. “You’re telling me. Reasonably well. There’s so much I don’t know, just about daily life. And don’t get me started on life outside of Skyhold. I don’t even know where I would start, if I wasn’t here. But I’m learning! I think I’m becoming a decent healer now, and my alchemy skills are much better. And I’m learning to cook and sew.”

“More than decent, is what I heard,” the dark lines of his tattoos creased as he smiled back at her. “From how the other healers talk, and the men, it seems like infection rates are down, recovery times are up. You may as well be Andraste herself to some of them.”

“I don’t know about all that,” she flushed under his praise. All she had done really was teach the others how to wash with soap, and how to sterilize their equipment in an open flame. And the infirmary was much cleaner now that it had been when she first arrived. “But I’m glad to have helped, however I could.”

“Do you miss it? Your home, your world.”

“Sometimes. It’s the little things I miss. How easy life was, how spoiled I was,” she murmured, staring down into the ruby liquid. “But I was looking for a new start anyways, so I supposed Thedas is as good as place as any for a new life.”

“You don’t miss your family? Friends?” Glancing down at the pale stripe of skin around her finger where a wedding band had once lain, Rylen’s voice dropped, “Husband?”

“I had already said goodbye to the friends I had. I was on my way across the country, moving to a new place. And I didn’t really talk to my family anyways, I wasn’t close to my parents or siblings. And- I’m not married. Not anymore.”

“I- I didn’t realize he had passed, I’m so sorry-”

“Oh, no, he’s alive,” she reached out a hand to reassure him, the embarrassment on his face giving way to confusion. “Um. I guess you don’t have divorces here?” His long blink confirmed it. “Where I’m from, you can make your marriage void by going before a court. For whatever reason. Sometimes people just fall out of love. Or get tired of trying,” she whispered. “Sometimes forever means only until you get bored and jaded.”

Flipping his palm over so that her slender fingers were wrapped in his sword worn hands, Rylen squeezed her, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she sighed. “I’ve made my peace with it. Anyways. What about you? You’re from Starkhaven, right? You have the same accent as Ser Thomas.”

“Aye,” releasing her hand, Rylen took another swig of his ale. “Father was a stonemason. I was the youngest of five, with no urge to learn the family trade, so I decided to join the templars as a lad.”

“Did you enjoy it? Being a templar, I mean.”

Leaning back in his chair, Rylen cocked his head to one side, studying her from underneath his hooded eyes. “For the most part, aye. I learned discipline, was able to serve and use my skills to protect and defend the innocent. Both mage and non-mage, mind you. We weren’t just jailers, despite what many think. It was about keeping the mages safe as much as the rest of the world. But after everything’s that’s happened,” he heaved a drawn out sigh, scrubbing at his face with one hand. “I’m not sure anymore. The future is so uncertain. The Divine declared the mages free, so there isn’t a circle for me to return to. Not that I really wanted to go back, but… Some of the city guard are
bringing templars into their ranks. That seems most likely for me, if the Inquisition ever doesn’t have a need for me.”

“And without lyrium, you’d have more options,” she replied softly.

“And more years to live,” he nodded.

Tracing the rim of her glass with one finger, Ari smiled, and lifted the cup. “Well, I propose a toast then. To your success.”

“I can drink to that, lass,” he chuckled, gently clinking his mug to her glass before draining the last of his ale. “Can we start tomorrow?”

“I need to talk to the head healer first. If it’s alright with you, I’d like to be in charge of your dosing from here on out, to make sure you’re getting the correct amount. But yes, tomorrow should be fine to start,” she nodded, setting her now empty cup on the worn table. “I’ll send a runner when it’s time for your first philter. Have a good night, Rylen.”

“You as well, lass.”

Strange, he thought, watching her slip out of the tavern door. How could someone so small and unassuming give him so much hope and courage? She spoke as if his success were guaranteed already. Like she would refuse to take any sort of failure. Now all he had to do was not disappoint her.

Chapter End Notes

Since the Order is no more, and Rylen's not Commander of Griffon Wing anymore, I made him a captain. *shrugs*
Doubts

The sheets clung to his clammy skin, a thin layer of sweat glinting in the cold moonlight. Peeling the damp linens off his body, Cullen violently rubbed the last of the lingering visions from his eyes, almost as if he could banish the memories from his psyche itself.

It was impossible.

Nightmares, he was used to. Demons as well. Despair and desire constantly stalked the Fade around his dreams, and tonight was no exception. Showing him her, some ethereal mirage—pale, creamy skin writhing in his bed, burnished copper waves splayed out like a halo around her angelic face.

No. He had been the one to end their relationship. He was too unbalanced at the time, and she—she obviously valued the Inquisition more than his health. As she should. The future of the world lay at stake, and he would not have seen them fail because of his shortcomings.

Yet, it still hurt. Somewhere, in the deep recesses of his mind, he had hope—prayed—that she would have championed his cause. Supported him, like he did her. Convinced him that what he was doing wasn’t insane, that it was feasible. But it hadn’t been, had it? The stresses of withdrawal had been too much for him to handle, and eventually, he had accepted his fate with stifled resignation. He had lived as a templar, and he would die as a templar.

But ever since that damn healer had spoken to him, it seemed as if his nightly torment had intensified. Now his dreams showed him what could have been had he continued on the path he had determined for himself before. A life, free from the chains the chantry had given him. Laughing, caring, feeling. A home, a family, even. And now, all that was left for him was darkness and the cold. Maker, he was so cold now.

Wrapping another blanket around his trembling frame, Cullen leaned back against the headboard, staring up through the hole in his ceiling at the starry sky beyond. Perhaps it is finally time to get that fixed.

What did that healer know anyways? She was still new to Thedas, unfamiliar with their history and customs, although he acknowledged that she was making every attempt to learn. But she did not know him. Know of what she spoke. And yet, Rylen had believed her sweet, honeyed words, was taken in by the firm conviction and passion in her dark, fathomless eyes. When his second had come to him and told him of his intentions, it was all Cullen could do to not to grab his second by the shoulders and shake him, beg him to reconsider. He had almost died himself; must he watch his best friend die, as well?

‘We all die, Commander. The only thing we can really choose is how we meet that death.’

Was it worth it? To cut short the few, precious years they had left just to die free? Rylen apparently thought it was.

And yet maybe…

They would find out soon enough.

Maker, he would miss Rylen.

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Pressing her hand to his forehead, Ari frowned, muttering a few things under her breath before rifling through the potions on the workbench. “Any other symptoms I should know about?”

“Besides the fever, nausea, tremors, aches, and nightmares,” Rylen chuckled through his grimace. “No, that’s all so far, lass. Tomorrow’s the last day, isn’t it?”

“It is. Are you ready?” Pulling a small vial out from the back, Ari uncorked it and held it out for him to drink, watching from the corner of her eye as his hand shook and the violet liquid sloshed over the sides.

“Aye. The Commander has a letter for my family just in case, and I…” Wiping his mouth, he wordlessly handed the empty vial back to her, his normally bright eyes dulled and heavy.

“You can’t think like that, Rylen,” she softly chided. “Picture how you’ll feel off of lyrium. Going back to your family and telling them you did it. The first templar to successfully wean completely off of it. Negative thoughts will only breed failure.”

“I’ll try, lass,” mustering up his best, most charming smile, Rylen offered her a mock salute. “When should I swing by tomorrow?”

“Come here after supper,” she leaned against the wall, watching as the dark lines that crossed his body flex as he pulled his armor back on. “Make sure you have a few changes of clothes, whatever else you think you’ll might need. I have a room ready for both of us. It’s in the lower levels, with a nice view of that waterfall. Pleasant breeze, too.”

“And the water will be loud enough to drown out whatever Void damned sounds I make,” he snorted. “Right. I’ll see you tomorrow, Ari.”

Please, please let me be doing the right thing, she begged. Let this work. Giving her braid a sharp yank, she sighed, resting her head on the stone behind her. I need to give Cullen an update tonight. Make sure all my potions and tonics are in order. And pack a bag for myself. The next few days are going to be hell.

Grabbing her thin, cotton cloak, Ari made her way out into the courtyard, shivering just slightly as a chilled breeze ruffled through her skirt. Even in the summer, it’s cold up here. What is with this place? Apparently though, she was the only one who thought so. Everyone else walked around with their sleeves rolled up, ladies fanning themselves against the heat of the evening, whispering to themselves about the odd healer who was still bundled up. For the most part, she ignore the looks people gave her, but still, she was gratified when she passed the occasional Antivan or Rivaini, wearing just as many layers as she.

“Come in,” a low voice intoned at her knock. “Mistress Iseri.” Cullen’s face clouded over as she pushed open his door, her hands clasped neatly in front of her. “Do you have a report for me?”

“I do,” she murmured. “Captain Rylen’s last dose of lyrium on quarter rations was today. Tomorrow begins his first day off of it. He reports symptoms nausea, muscle and joint aches, and a fever, among other things.”

Nodding, his eyes warming ever so slightly in sympathy for his second, Cullen leaned back in his chair. “And what of your plans for him?”

Ari straightened her spine under his piercing gaze. “We will be retiring to a room deeper inside the keep. I have an array of potions to help him through the worst of the side effects, and meals will be brought to us regularly. I estimate it will take anywhere from three to five days for him to get through
“And then?”

“And then… If he is able to withstand the total lack of lyrium to his body, I would expect him to make a full recovery, Commander. You understand that my assumptions are based on what I have observed in the older templars and my own limited knowledge of lyrium. The drugs we had back in my world were unlike this,” she said slowly. “But I believe it can be done.”

“It is very likely he will die,” Cullen muttered, hunching back over his desk. “The pain is… immense.”

“Would you mind telling me about your own experience?” Ari’s dark brown eyes begged him. “It would help more than anything.”

Cullen did not speak for several moments, his gaze focused on a spot of his office somewhere in the vicinity of her boot. She stood patiently with bated breath, watching the vein in his forehead throb in time with his pulse. Then, “I quit taking lyrium once we reached Skyhold. I had much of the same symptoms as Rylen at first- a fever, nausea, pain. Eventually, the headaches become intolerable, interfering with my sleep. The pain radiated through every joint, every muscle in my body. My mind was clouded, I could not concentrate on the most basic of tasks. Four months later, I decided to resume lyrium use.”

Four months… “When you quit taking it, did you wean yourself off? Or did you just stop all at once, Commander?”

“All at once.” Ari sucked in a sharp breath, Cullen raising one golden eyebrow at the sound. “What?”

“Honestly? It’s a miracle you even survived,” she shook her head in disbelief. “It’s no wonder your symptoms were so severe.”

“Is that why you decreased Rylen’s dosage so gradually? To reduce the side effects?”

She nodded. “It helps the body acclimate to the lack of lyrium over a longer period of time, increasing the odds of success. Hopefully.”

“I suppose we’ll see, won’t we?” Laying one arm across his desk, Cullen reached for his discarded quill, tapping it on the edge of his inkwell. Sensing her dismissal, Ari lowered her head, and turned to leave. “Mistress Iseri?” She froze with one hand on the doorknob. “If anything happens to him, I shall hold you personally responsible.”

Ari stiffened her body against the shiver that threaten to slither through her skin like some frozen snake, his tone icier than a winter in the Frostbacks. “You and me both, Commander.”

Am I doing the right thing? Pausing to rest against the wall just outside of his office, she asked herself the same question for the millionth time. Should I even be trying to meddle? Maybe I should have just kept my head down, concentrating on surviving. All those fanfics I read, everyone always came to Thedas at the start of the Inquisition, or before. Helped with their knowledge of the game and the choices. But I’m flying blind here. All I know for sure is that Solas will try to tear down the Veil. And the Qun is probably going to invade. Maybe another Blight. And there be dragons. Yarr. Shaking her head, Ari pulled her cloak around her and slowly began to descend the stairs. Maybe this is what I’m supposed to do. Help them see there’s a future outside of lyrium. Cullen was successful in the game if the Inquisitor had supported him, right? So it’s possible. I’m not on some
Or maybe I’m not here for any specific purpose. Maybe I’m just here because... Am I unconscious back home? Is this a dream? Glancing down at her hands, she ran one finger over a bandage that covered her forearm. Yesterday, one of the potions another healer had been brewing exploded, and a shard of glass had embedded itself in her arm. No. Pain and blood are real here. Which means, so is death. This isn’t a dream, this is my new reality. But how?

“My dear Iseri?” Glancing up, Ari stared into the tawny eyes of one Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast. “May I have a word?”

“Oh, of course, Seeker,” she all but squeaked in response, trying to ignore her inner voices screeching in utter adoration. So far, she had only caught fleeting glimpses of the famed Nevarran within the keep. Never had she actually had a conversation with the woman, or even a greeting. Following Cassandra, marveling at how even her stride was intimidating, each step calculated and radiating power and competence, Ari stepped into the armory, closing the door before heading up the stairs. Sounds of the men and women working the forges below, hammers crashing down on steel, drifted up to where they stood, Cassandra leaning against a window.

“I have heard that Captain Rylen intends to stop taking lyrium, under your observation. Is this correct?”

Trying not to flinch under the harsh set of her jaw and the weight of her stare, Ari nodded. “It is, Seeker.”

A small smile spread across her lips. “I am glad to hear it.”

Oh, that’s right. Cassandra was one of Cullen’s most fervent supporters when he was trying to wean himself off. She probably still has hope for the rest of the Order. “Was there something in particular you were concerned about?”

“Rylen knows all of the risks?”

“I’ve tried to prepare him the best I can,” Ari sighed, fiddling with the hem of her sleeve. “I believe the Commander has spoken to him as well. At this point, I believe he has a strong chance for success.”

Running a hand through her cropped hair, Cassandra stared out of the window across the courtyard to the tallest guard tower. “I once thought the Commander also had a strong chance to succeed. I still believe he could have done it, if fear and uncertainty had not overtaken him.”

“If he had more support,” Ari supplied quietly.

“You heard about that?” She snorted as the healer nodded. “Skyhold is much too small to keep such matters private, I suppose. The Inquisitor was also afraid. I don’t believe she knew quite was she was asking, either, when she asked him to resume lyrium use. The Order guarded the secret of long-term lyrium effects closely. By the time she realized it…” Cassandra shook her head. “It was too late.”

“It may not yet be.”

Her head snapped up, gaze narrowing at the smaller woman before her. “You think the Commander could still be free of this?”

Chewing on her bottom lip, Ari released a tense breath. “I will have a more definitive answer for you after I observe the captain and the severity of his withdrawals. From what I understand, Captain
Rylen has been on lyrium for longer, but the Commander has taken more over the course of his career. Not to mention the damage caused from the shock on his body when he completely quit lyrium all at once last time. It may be too late,” she shrugged. “But I have faith.”

“Faith,” the Seeker murmured. “If you can do this, for them, give the templars hope… Perhaps your arrival here was not by chance. Perhaps there was a divine hand in guiding you here.”

“It won’t be what I can do for them, Seeker,” Ari shook her head, tugging on her braid with one hand. “All I can do is ease their symptoms. The true battle will be fought entirely by them.”

“Still. That you are willing to help, that you have confidence- it makes all the world of a difference,” Cassandra smiled. “I look forward to hearing of the captain’s success.”

“As do I.”
Setting her bag down on the crisp sheets, Ari studied the small room. A single folded wooden divider separated the two beds, leaving just enough room for a stand with a washbin, a chamber pot, and a copper tub that she had requested. Her potions lined the table at the foot of her bed, a box of candles tucked into the corner next to the wall along with a flint along with a set of fire runes for the tub. It was spartan furnishing, but it had everything they would need for the next few days. Just beyond the door, through the thick granite slabs and the narrow windows set into the walls, she heard the faint roar of the waterfall, and the strike of Harrit’s hammer against the anvil.

“This is it then.” Rylen leaned heavily against the doorframe, dressed in a simple tunic and cotton breeches that had seen better days. Taking his satchel from him and stowing it under his bed, Ari rested her hands on her hips.

“Don’t act like it’s the end of the world,” she huffed at his lopsided grin. “Pretend like this is a vacation.”

“Worst vacation ever already,” he chuckled. “Except for maybe the company. What ever will we do to pass the time, eh, lass?”

“You could read,” she replied, pointedly ignoring his jab. “However, I would prefer you to rest as much as possible. I would suggest cards or chess, but I’m a horrible player at both. You’d have to teach me.”

“Could be fun.” The mattress groaned as he settled his weight down on the bed, each movement deliberate and an obvious struggle. Kneeling next to him, Ari began unlacing his boots. “Hey now. You don’t have to do that for me, Ari. I can-”

“Hush,” she ordered, slapping his hand away. “You’re going to have to get used to me caring for your basic needs these next few days, Rylen. Better start now. You need to conserve as much energy as possible.”

“I feel like a babe in the swaddle still,” he grumbled. But still, he leaned back, and let her finish removing his boots.

“I know. But it’s just me, okay? And whatever happens here, stays between us.”

“Now there’s a thought,” he grinned up at her.

“Oh for-” Rolling her eyes, she stood up, and threw a pillow at him. "Sleep, Rylen.”

“Hey, that’s no way to treat an invalid!”

Swallowing her giggles, Ari merely smirked at him, and pulled up a chair, resting a book across her lap. “Sleep, Rylen.”

“As my lady wishes.”

***
His muffled pleas woke her up sometime after the moons had risen, casting their cold, pale light across the shadowed room. Every muscle in his body corded in tension, the veins in his firm arms bulging as he grappled with his sheets. “There’s more, still inside,” he muttered, thrashing his head from side to side. “The smoke, I can’t- No!”

_The fire at the Starkhaven Circle_, Ari realized. _He was there_. Wetting a cloth, she scooted her chair closer to the edge of his mattress, and tentatively laid it across his forehead. His skin felt as if he were aflame, searing to her touch. “Rylen, wake up, it’s-”

“Fire!” His body shot out upright in a violent lurch, his eyes wild and unfocused. Then, “...Ari?”

“Just a dream, Rylen,” she soothed, picking up the cloth from where it had fallen.

“Maker,” weakly scrubbing at his face with one trembling hand, he released a long exhale, and laid back down on his sweat soaked sheets. “It seemed so real.”

“Night terrors. They’re like nightmares, except more vivid. How are you feeling?”

“Like a gurgut chewed me up, then sat on me,” his eyes flickered to hers as she laid a hand across his head, then his neck, moving down to his chest.

“Rylen,” she warned as that mischievous twinkle lit up in his smirk. “I’m checking your pulse and temperature, not feeling you up.”

His laugh melted into a wince as his headache flared in a sharp burst of agony. The first bout of vomiting wasn’t long after. Grabbing the chamber pot, Ari rubbed firm circles into his back as the former templar expelled whatever he had eaten that evening for supper, and then some.

“Feel better?”

“Not really.”

“Do you feel like going back to sleep?”

“...I’d rather not. Tell me about your world.”

Selecting a potion from her collection that should help settle his stomach and reduce his anxiety, Ari leaned back in her chair. “Thedas and my world were fairly similar once. Maybe three to four hundred years ago. People used to ride in carriages, fight with swords, live in castles. But there’s no magic. No Fade, no darkspawn, no demons. The only race is humans. Dragons are legends, not something that anyone has ever proven really existed. Also, no nugs.”

“Sounds peaceful,” he murmured, his eyelids already drooping yet again.

“There are still wars,” she replied softly. “Still illness, still famine. Just because we don’t have Thedosian problems doesn’t mean it’s peaceful. But yes, it was easier. Safer too, or at least it was where I lived. How easy it was to take all of that for granted.”

Reaching out to grasp her hand, he smiled up at her from under hooded eyes. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re here, Ari.”

Squashing the butterflies that were threatening to set her stomach astir, Ari patted his arm in the most platonic way possible. _Why does he have to be so handsome?_ Go figure you’d land in a world with literal knights on horseback. _But you know you’re not in a good place to start something, girl. And you don’t do casual well, remember?_ “I’m just glad to be doing something useful. And thankful to
Taking the hint, Rylen withdrew his hand, casting a rueful smile up at her. “Sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable, lass, I—”

“No, you haven’t,” she assured him. “I’m just not… emotionally available, I suppose is the term.”

“I can respect that,” he nodded, shifting to the side so that he could see her face better by the moonlight. “Well, if you ever decide- Andraste’s flame, I must be truly addled in the wits if I’m attempting to sweet talk you like this,” he groaned as another wave of pain and spasms slammed into him. “Making a fine case for myself, aren’t I?”

Ari giggled, and replaced the compress on his brow. “Actually, you are. What you’re doing is a very brave thing. Anyone with an ounce of sense would realize that. Once you’re out of here, you’ll be making all the ladies swoon.”

With a wry chuckle, Rylen tried to relax his limbs against the cool sheets, sighing in relief as Ari scooted onto his mattress and began massaging his cramped legs. “You think so?”

“Aye- I mean, yes,” she huffed to his delight. “Yes, I do.”

“Forget trying to sweet talk you, I think I’ll just skip straight to asking you to marry me,” pure bliss radiated from her hands, sent by the Maker himself, Rylen was positive, talented fingers soothing knots from muscles he hadn’t even realized were there.

A snort escaped her, amusement twinkling behind her dark eyes. “You know, you’re the second person to say that. I suppose I should be careful, else I find myself married off before I know what hit me.”

“There’ll be a line soon enough,” grinning up at her, he gradually felt his body slacken under her tender ministrations, exhaustion reaching up to claim him once again. “Maybe I will just shut my eyes for a bit more.”

“Sleep well, Rylen.”

***

The worst of it hit the next night. Ari and Rylen had spent most of the day with him trying to teach her how to play chess, before giving up and declaring her hopeless, and switching to cards instead. “Every good Marcher lass should know how to play Wicked Grace,” he had proclaimed, ignoring the fact that she wasn’t a Marcher, or even Thedosian. “Semantics,” he waved away her protests.

But eventually he had been barely able to hold his cards, his tremors too severe and his body too weakened to even hold his torso upright. *This is it*, Ari thought to herself as she helped him strip his sweat soaked tunic off.

“Lass, I—”

“Shh,” she murmured, tilting a potion into his mouth that would hopefully lessen his fever. “I’m here. You’re going to be fine, understand? Think of what you want to do after this. What do you dream of, Rylen?”

For a minute, he said nothing, merely laid on the bed, panting for air, his eyes glassy and fogged. Turning his head towards the sound of her voice, his hand slunk along the sheets until it found hers, clenching her fingers as if it were his anchor. “Settle down, I think,” he murmured, his voice faint
and wispy. “Find a nice lass, get married, have a family. Lots of kids, like my par-.”

Trying to keep her expression neutral, Ari fought back the urge to panic as a seizure abruptly overtook him, instantly springing to her feet to roll his bulk onto his side. *Fuck, he’s heavy.* Propping up his back, she finally released a breath she hadn’t even realized she was holding when he stilled a minute later, his body heaving, muscles cording under her fingers. As gently as she could manage, she turned him back around, and held up the bucket for him to vomit in, lightly running her nails along his scalp until he leaned back, winded as if he had just run a gauntlet.

“Water?”

He managed a slight nod.

And so it went, for hours, far into the quiet hours of the night. For the most part, she was able to keep his fevers to a reasonable level, but still, he slipped in and out of delirium, moaning in pain, begging for just a taste of lyrium, and ranting in his sleep about everything from quillbacks to darkspawn to demons to the lack of fish pie in Skyhold. It was the spasms and convulsions that worried her the most, for there was no way to determine how much damage they were doing to his heart. *I wonder if a mage could see? I’ll have to get one in here tomorrow.*

Ari slept fitfully, in five minute bursts, barely nodding off in the rare moments he was silent and still. But she knew that she would do it all over again in a heartbeat. It was worth it.

The sun was close to noon by the time he open his turquoise eyes, bright and lucid for the first time in a week. The weight of his agony and stress still lurked in the depths of his gaze, but his mind was mercifully clear. “Ari?”

“Mm?” Blinking the exhaustion from her eyes, she blearily glanced up from her lap.

“Am I alive?”

Her eyes crinkled as she breathlessly giggled. “It seems that way.” Yawning, she stretched out her stiff, aching back and sat next to him, checking his fever and the beat of his heart. “How do you feel?”

“Like a newborn foal,” he muttered.

“That’s to be expected.” Tilting a mug of water up to his lips, Ari smiled down at him, wiping his chin. “Looks like the worst of it has passed.”

“So I’m cured?” he breathed, his eyes widening in hope.

“Not cured, no,” she smoothed his hair down with a soft sigh. “I’m afraid you’re going to be feeling the effects for some time yet. But it will get more manageable. The cravings,” biting her lip, she turned back to where her potions lay. “They may never leave you. But the rest of your symptoms should lessen a great deal, or fade completely. Only time will tell.”

“Works for me,” he murmured. “I can live with that.”

“Yes, you can.”

For the rest of the day, Rylen dozed, only waking to grumble about his newfound fragility, and sip on the broth Ari sent for, until she was ready to throw him out of the window.

“For heaven’s sake, are all templars this impatient?”
“We’re not used to idleness, lass,” he chuckled, only a hint of an apology in his smile, at the sight of her, hands planted on her slim hips, glaring down at him with all the wrath she could muster. “It’s chafing to be this helpless.”

Groaning as she fell back into her chair, Ari glanced around the room, trying to think of something he could do. “How would you like a bath?” His face lit up. Poking her head out of the door to flag down a passing servant, it wasn’t long before the copper basin was full, and steaming thanks to the fire rune she tossed in. “Alright, let’s get you up.”

“I need to-” motioning to his breeches, Rylen blushed under her impish grin.

“If I let go of you, you might fall. I’ve seen plenty of naked men before, and- oh for heaven’s sake! Not like that, you lecher!”

Smirking down at her, he laughed as she smacked his broad chest, her eyes rolling as she led him carefully, step by step, to the edge of the tub. “Hold on.” She resisted the urge to giggle again when he closed his eyes as she swiftly untied his laces, and pulled down his smalls. “Easy now, take it slow.”

Inadvertently, her gaze drifted a bit lower than she intended, down to the juncture of his thighs. Noticing her perusal, Rylen scowled and cupped himself. “It’s cold down here.”

“Rylen- you’re literally getting into a steaming tub full of hot water.”

“So my foot’s warm, but the rest of me isn’t,” he muttered petulantly.


“Maker, this is the best thing I’ve ever felt in my whole life,” he moaned, sinking down until only the top of his head was visible.

“Hey now,” jerking him back up, Ari frowned, “It wouldn’t do to have you drown just when you’re getting started. Stay above the water, if you please.”

“Yes, Ma.”

Settling herself behind him, Ari lathered up his hair, scrubbing away the past few days from his mind and skin, humming tunelessly under her breath as she worked.

“Thank you, Ari.”

“What’s that?”

Leaning his head back against the rim, he gave her a crooked smile. “For doing this for me. For being so patient with my whining, for helping.”

“It was a bit of a chore to put up with your peevishness,” she teased. “But worth it, to see you healthy and free in the end.”

“When do you think I can go back to work?”

Raising one eyebrow, Ari flicked his nose. “When you can stand without my help, idiot. Unless you want the Commander to carry you through drills.”

“Alright, alright, I can take a hint.”
Leaving him to soak for a few minutes longer, she grabbed a spare piece of paper and a quill, and scratched out a quick note, before passing it to the man who brought their lunch. “Ready to get out?”

There was no answer. Turning back to the tub, a gentle smile tugged at her lips at the sight of him, snoring softly, resting against the edge. *Should let him sleep for a bit, at least until the water gets cold. He did it. He’s going to be okay.*

***

*“He will make a full recovery. -A”*

Crumpling the scrap of parchment in one gloved hand, Cullen pressed his fist to his forehead. Rylen did it. The old bastard really did it. A strange, tickling urge bubbled in his chest, the Commander belatedly realizing it was the sensation of laughter. Instead of indulging in the foreign act, he settled for a small smile, the muscles in his cheek tensing at the unfamiliar motion. How long had it been since he smiled last? Too long, probably, but-

Rylen did it. That meant there was hope for the others.

Was there still hope for him?

Chapter End Notes

Rylen likes to tease. Here, have a sketch of this gorgeous templar.
By Yuhime Barbara. Go check out her tumblr, and Patreon. :)
Ari would have preferred to keep him under observation for at least another day, but she could tell the convalescence was wearing on the active soldier, so reluctantly, she let him go, under strict orders to not do any sort of training or other strenuous activity until she cleared him.

“That includes sex!” she yelled down the corridor at the retreating, slightly wobbling man, only receiving a hand wave in response. *Stubborn man.*

Throwing the rest of her supplies into her satchel, cushioning the empty vials and flasks with her laundry, Ari swung the bag over her shoulders, and started the climb back into civilization. Rylen had gotten through the worst of it. He would live. She knew he wasn’t out of the weeds yet; the next several weeks would be a test of willpower for him, as his cravings would still plague him for time to come, but the immediate danger had passed. Was it just a fluke? Or could similar results be produced with the rest of the templars?

Pushing the heavy wooden door open, she raised one hand to shield her eyes from the glaring sunlight.

“Went well, huh? Saw the captain practically dancing out of here a minute ago.”

Ari jumped at the sound of the voice, precariously close to her ear. “Stop sneaking up on me like that!”

With a low chuckle, Revin moved in front of her, an impish smile curling at his lips. “But you make it so easy. And I didn’t sneak. I literally just walked up behind you.”

“You walk too quietly,” she grumbled. “But yes, it went as I hoped. Time will tell the rest.”

“It’s a good thing you’re doing,” the faded wrinkles around his smile from the years spent in the sun crinkled. “By the way, Inquisitor wants to see you. In the war room.”

“The Inquisitor?” Ari stopped in her tracks. “For what?”

Revin shrugged. “Probably asking about the captain. Rest of the advisors are in there, too. Better get going.”

With a cursory glance down at her appearance, Ari nodded to the scout and set off towards the main hall, combing through her hair as she walked and replaiting it into some semblance of professionalism. *Wrinkled dress, greasy hair, haven’t bathed in four days- perfect time to meet the Inquisitor. Couldn’t she have at least waited an hour?*

The interior of the keep was so much larger than the game portrayed; the throne room itself was closer to a massive cavern than the narrow chamber she had always seen depicted. Dozens of long tables lined the edges, while sconce after sconce burned brilliantly to give light to the nobility that still lingered within Skyhold.

Wishing she had more time to ogle the stained glass murals set into the back behind the carved, gilt throne, Ari paused a passing servant to ask directions to the war room, as there were several more doors set into the stone than she had expected.
“Thank you,” she murmured, taking the entrance the woman indicated. *At least this part looks familiar.* Josephine’s office was pristine, bookshelves filled with scrolls and books lining the walls, and completely devoid of life or movement, save for the crackling flames in the large hearth. *They all must be waiting on me. Eep.*

At the low voice that bid her entry to the war room at the end of the hall, not a crumbling stone in sight, Ari straightened her spine, smoothed her skirts, and pushed the smaller door open. Four sets of eyes tracked her every movement as she entered the spacious room, late afternoon sunlight flooding in through the paned glass, casting harsh shadows on their faces.


“Of course,” the healer murmured. “What can I do for you?”

Evelyn Trevelyan, Herald of Andraste and Inquisitor, spoke in a cultured, clear voice, her palms braced against the worn oak table. “I saw Captain Rylen leave the lower levels just a little while ago. He looked well. Will you give me a report?”

*God, she’s so young,* Ari realized. Only having seen the other woman from a distance, she had always assumed the noble was at least in her late 20s, maybe early 30s, but Evelyn was no older than two or three years past twenty. *And she led all of this?* “The initial attempt to wean the captain off lyrium went well,” she replied. “The symptoms he experienced were expected, and within normal severity of what I had predicted. The most dangerous part of his withdrawals has passed. Although he will still suffer from the effects for quite some time.”

“What sort of effects?”

“Headaches, body aches, nausea,” Ari ticked each one off on her fingers. “But of manageable levels. Simple potions and elfroot should help relieve the suffering from them. Oh, and cravings. An urge for lyrium will probably always remain with him. At this point, it’s all up to him and his willpower.”

“But he will live?”

Josephine gasped, clapping her hands over her mouth as Ari nodded. From the corner of her eye, she could see Cullen gripping his pommel, hear the leather of his gloves creak, his eyes boring into the map between them.

“And do you believe these results could be replicated?” Cassandra shifted to one side, pointedly staring at the Commander.

“I do,” Ari said.

“And you would be willing to repeat this with any of the other templars who might wish to do the same?”

“Absolutely. As long as they know exactly what they are getting themselves into. The younger templars, who have ingested less lyrium than Captain Rylen, will probably have an easier time. Templars older than he,” Ari sighed. “I’m not sure, honestly. If they come to me and are similar to how Ser Thomas was at the beginning of the year, I would say they would have a fair chance of success. But if mental deterioration has already started to occur…”

“Then it may be too late for them,” Evelyn nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll have someone debrief the templars. Mistress Iseri- thank you, for doing this.”

“Anything to help,” Ari bobbed an awkward curtsy, and turned to go. As she laid her hand on the
doorknob, she realized-

Cullen had never once spoken, nor even looked at her.

*Hurry, Commander, before it’s too late.*

***

And so it began. The first of the templars, a teenager who had just taken his vows a week before the Lord Seeker had severed the Nevarran Accord, approached her the next morning, asking for her help. He was barely in convalescence for a day. The next was a younger woman, in her mid-twenties, from Montsimmard, who raved in her fever dreams about the demon that had killed her little sister at her Harrowing. And on, and on.

Ari treated each templar who came to her individually throughout that winter, leaving her precious little time for herself, or any sort of socializing. On the rare nights when she wasn’t holed up with a patient, she found that she liked a take a bottle of something that would warm her belly up to the ramparts, find a cozy spot, and stare up at the night sky, swaddling herself in blankets. Tonight it was whiskey. God knew she needed something strong.

Watching her breath solidify in front of her as she breathed out, Ari tilted her head back, eyes searching the fathomless sky for answers, or solace, or anything, really. But all she saw were the two moons that were wholly unlike anything she had ever seen before, a constant reminder that, coupled with the unfamiliar starscape, she was in an alien world. Alone. *It’s nice though. Peaceful. I’m doing something meaningful, helping people. And I can see so many stars here.*

“Hey, there’s the healer. Come on, go say hi.”

“I don’t think she wants to be disturbed, she’s-”

“Eh, just go.” A muffled thud, followed by a soft ‘oof’, echoed through the frosty air as two pairs of booted feet steadily approached her. Ari squealed inside of her head- she knew those voices.

“Hello,” craning her neck, she gave a small wave to the approaching Qunari mercenary and his Tevinter second.

“Hey,” the Iron Bull grunted. “Mind if we join you?”

“Boss, she’s up here by herself. Do you really think she wants company?” Krem shook his head, offering her a rueful smile. “Sorry, mistress. He just gets really excited. Like a puppy.”

“Ari, please,” she patted the cold stone next to her in clear invitation. “And I love puppies.”

“See?” Bull rumbled. “She likes us already. The Iron Bull, at your service. This is Cremisius Aclassi. Or Krem, as he prefers.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he nodded.

“Drink?” Ari held up the still mostly full bottle next to her. “Plenty to go around.”

“Don’t mind if we do. So, Ari,” taking the bottle from her, the Iron Bull tossed back a shot, barely wincing at the burn of the whiskey, “You’re the one helping all those templars, right? Good for you. About time someone helped them.”

“I do what I can,” she muttered as she ran a hand through her thick hair, unbound and wild around
her shoulders.

“Is everything alright?” Glancing up, she smiled thinly at Krem, his face drawn in concern at her uncharacteristic morose tone.

“I have… I probably shouldn’t be talking about it,” she sighed. “But one of the older templars wanted to wean herself off of lyrium. She’s already having trouble with her memory, and we’re down the last bit of rations before the end and…”

“And her outlook isn’t good,” Bull finished for her. Ari nodded, wiping away a tear that had snuck down her cheek.

“I’ve lost patients before,” letting her head back fall back against the stone wall, she stared sightlessly up into the velvet sky, the distant echo of beeps as someone coded still ringing her in her memory. “But this is different.”

“Because if it weren’t for your suggestion, they wouldn’t have even tried,” he nodded, voice low and quiet for such a large man. “Look at it this way though. How many lives have you saved compared to this one? How many years have you given back to the men and women you’ve treated successfully?”

“Logical me knows that,” Ari murmured. “But the heart is harder to convince.”

“I know the soldiers appreciate you,” Krem handed the bottle of whiskey back to her. “They say you’re one of the best.”

“One of the best…” The Iron Bull rubbed one of his hands against his chin. He could probably crush my head with that hand, she thought idly. “We’re going to Halamshiral soon, did you hear? Divine’s calling for an Exalted Council to decide the fate of the Inquisition. Could use a good healer with us. Want me to put in a word for you to go? Might be good to take a break from all this lyrium shit anyways.”

The Exalted Council? Oh, that is coming up already. God, have I been her so long already? Do I want to go? Wait. Is Bull still Qun? Or Tal-Vashoth? If I go though, I’ll be able to see the palace up close. As long as I stay with the rest of the Inquisition, I should be safe enough. And the Inquisitor might need me after… “A break sounds good,” she smiled. “I’d like that, thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the short meh chapter. Trying to bust my way out of this writer's block, so I figure this is better than nothing, yes?
It was worth it to go to Orlais simply for the journey there. Ari had been worried riding in a carriage or wagon would make her motion sick, so Krem and Blackwall had helped her out with learning how to ride a horse in the weeks before the caravan set out. The sores were a small price to pay for the view. Between the spring weather, the warm sun bearing down on her face, a cool, crispy breeze ruffling through her hair, and the picturesque countryside rolling by, all sparse, green forests and charming little hamlets, Ari felt better than she had in months. Maybe years.

Unable to suppress the wince or faint groan as she slid off her horse, Ari paused for a minute as soon as her feet hit the ground, patting the mare’s neck in thanks for keeping her upright. “I never going to be not sore again,” she muttered to herself.

“The elfroot and elderflower liniment should help with that. You packed some, did you not?” Ari jerked at the sound of his smooth voice, stumbling backwards on the rocks that littered the clearing they had stopped in, only to be saved by a firm hand against the small of her back. “Pardon me, I did not mean to startle you.”

“It’s not- I startle easy,” she blushed. “Not your fault, Commander. And yes, I did pack some, although I’d rather not waste any of it on myself. It’s just a few sore muscles. I’ll live. I think.”

Cullen nodded and dropped his hand, slight approval at her thriftiness visible in the tilt of his head, but he did not move away from her. Instead, he stood near her mount, gently stroking the mare’s nose, watching as the servants and scouts scurried around to set up tents and stoke fires for their campsite. His face was more drawn in the flickering light, harsh shadows dancing over his chiseled features, like some dark sculpture hidden away in a museum alcove. “Ser Marianne,” he said finally. “She died.”

The death that had been weighing so heavily on her heart flooded back into her mind. The templar had been only 44 years old, but already in the first few months of mental degradation when she had approached Ari, asking for her help. Ari had tried to warn her, but… “She did,” the healer whispered, fingers tightening around the leather strap of her satchel.

“Do you regret it?”

Whipping her head around so fast her braid whipped her in the eye, she stared slackjawed up at the man. “Are you fucking kidding me?” she spluttered. “Not a day goes by when I do not regret it. I keep telling myself there was something else I could have done, lowered her doses more gradually perhaps, some other concoction I could have tried to keep her heart more stable,” Ari spat with more than a considerable amount of venom at the sheer audacity of his question, “But there was nothing at that time that came to mind. What’s done is done, and-” Shaking her head, her lips pressed into a thin line, she began to walk away, kicking at the grass and rocks with her boots only to halt a few steps out, her back still turned to the Commander. “She knew. She knew the risks going in, but she still wanted to do it. Should I have refused her, ser?”

The sounds of the people around them seemed so far at that moment, as if she were underwater, the clang of pots and shouts muffled by the roar of her blood. *How dare he-* “Forgive me,” he sighed. “I did not mean to offend.” Ari snorted. *Unbelievable.* “It was her decision, and you honored that. I merely wonder if it was worth it. For her.”
“She believed it was.”

His boots crunched over the ground, until he stood once more at her side. “Are you religious, Mistress Iseri?”

“I don’t believe in your Maker, if that’s what you’re asking,” cocking her head, she eyed him from the side. His back was straight as it always was, but yet somehow still radiated an air of defeat. Perhaps it was in the way his fists clenched a bit too tightly behind his back. Or the way his eyes dulled as he surveyed the bustle of camp. “I was raised in a religion not too unfamiliar from your own, although I’m not sure I believe what I was taught. I try to find my faith in other things these days.”

“Other things?” His brow furrowed as he turned to look down at her. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure if some all-powerful being that created all life exists. I’m not sure if there’s an afterlife, or if our souls or consciousness moves on after we’re gone. But I do know the sun will rise tomorrow. And that winter will fade into spring that will give way to summer. That the ocean will still beat waves against the shore. That the mountains will continue long after I’m gone, no matter what. Permanence,” she murmured. “It gives me some comfort, especially when I’ve lost everything familiar. That the world will continue, in some way, shape, or form, no matter what.”

“For the better?”

“That’s up to us, isn’t it? To do what we can, no matter how small, to leave the world a better place than the way we found it?”

Cullen’s gaze remained locked onto her face, his dark amber eyes with that eerie shade of lyrium blue wallowing in their depths searching for some sort of answer to the questions he did not, or could not, ask yet. “You are a very strange woman, Mistress Iseri,” was all he said eventually.

Ari lips twisted up into a lopsided grin. “You’re not the first person to tell me that, Commander.”

Huffing something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, he averted his face from hers, and started to leave. “Mistress,” Cullen called back over his shoulder. “Orlais. It’s a dangerous place, under all the gilt. Be careful.”

“You too, ser.”

***

Ari tried not to stare, she really did. A memory of the day she visited Paris, and was so caught up staring up at the splendor of Versailles that she didn’t notice the curb under her feet, and fell flat on her face came to mind. And the Winter Palace was even more beautiful. Nobles prowled the grounds, their silks and jewels catching the early morning sunlight, shattering the rays like dozens of tiny dancing rainbows across the gravel drive. Rich bowers of every sort of flower imaginable hung from the balconies, intertwined with lace and gold. Every petal, every rock, every leaf was exactly where it was supposed to be. This was Versailles, but at the height of her glory.

Nervously adjusting the cobalt sash across her chest, her uniform a simpler, toned down version of the advisors’, Ari kept close to the rest of the staff, following one of the scouts into the garden where a building had been given to them for the Inquisition’s use. Bright and airy, with lattice windows that overlooked the expansive, perfectly manicured grounds, she found herself wishing for a home like this. Open, inviting. Maybe with a few less of the nobility. And definitely with less threat of death.

She took an hour or so to set up her workbench, laying out her meticulously labeled flasks and vials,
stacking the few reference tomes she had brought to the side. *Wasn’t there a merchant here who sold pretty much every herb in the game? I could go stock up, see what else I’m missing.*

Ari left the other junior healer that had accompanied her, a younger woman by the name of Shayla, in charge as she left to go wander around, giddy at the thought of finally catching a glimpse of Varric, or Dorian. Passing the small tavern, she paused on the other side of the walkway, hand pressed over her mouth to hold back her laughter as Krem and the other Chargers attempted to shove a massive dragon skull through the narrow entrance while the Inquisitor chatted with the Iron Bull within. Only to be grabbed around the waist and shoved backwards into the rough gravel.

“Get down!”

The small explosion rumbled through the ground, smoke rising in faint tendrils from the base of the skull, a stoic, hooded dwarf shrugging noncommittally at Krem’s hisses.

“Sorry about that,” the elf- *Dalish,* Ari remembered- pulled her back to her feet. “Rocky gets a little carried away sometimes.”

“No worries. Is that…?”

‘Dragon skull. For the boss’ birthday,” she grinned. “Hey, you’re the healer right? The templar healer?”

“Is that what they’re calling me?” Ari giggled. “I suppose I am.”

“Good for you. Stick it to the Chantry,” the elf winked, before turning back to the chaos of her company. “Hey, let me try next!”

Intent on getting away before *that* spell was cast, Ari slipped into the main courtyard. There, by the center fountain, was Varric, regaling a small group of noblewomen with some lurid, embellished tale, she was sure. And over there, lounging on the chaises at the far corner, were Dorian and Vivienne, both of them the epitome of casual decadence. *It would be weird to introduce myself, right? Don’t be weird, don’t be weird.*

Passing by the pools and the cascading waterfalls, Ari leaned over the water and scooped up one of the lotus flowers drifting by on the glassy surface. Everything here was just so beautiful and pristine, like some fantasy world. *Well, it was fantasy for me up until last year, at least. But I can’t forget this is really Orlais. The Game, and scheming, machinations, politics and- “Oh. Hello.”*

A cold, dark nose poked at her hand, two chocolate brown eyes staring back at her expectantly. “A *mabari*,” she murmured, reaching out to scratch behind one furry ear. “You’re supposed to find him, not me.”

The dog woofed softly, as if he were agreeing with her.

“Can’t find him, hmm? Come on, then.”

“Is that a *mabari*?”

Ari glanced up, only to see the Commander approaching. *God, he really is handsome in that uniform.* “Um, I think so? I think he’s a stray. Friendly guy.” Bounding up to the man, the dog sat back on his haunches, whining as he pawed the air in front of him. “He likes you.”

“Me?” Crouching down, Cullen patted the massive dog on his head, once, twice. “Are you all alone here, pup?” The dog barked louder this time.
“Looks like you have a new friend, Commander,” Ari smiled slyly.

“No, I couldn’t,” he shook his head. “I have no time for a-” Catching the dog’s eyes, his features melted ever so slightly at the devastation he saw within. “I don’t,” he murmured. “I’m sorry, pup.”

Ari pursed her lips, and tried to resist the urge to walk over and box the man’s ears. Stubborn ass.

“Do you think anyone would mind if I take him, then? I’d hate to just leave him here,” she explained at the quirk of his eyebrow. “He doesn’t belong here. Like me. Besides, a Ferelden left alone in Orlais? It’s a travesty,” she smirked.

“I suppose it is,” he nodded slowly. “I don’t have any problem with him coming back with us. Provided there’s somewhere for us to go back to, after all is said and done.”

“What do you think will happen?” Clucking her tongue, she called the dog back over to her side, giggling as he put his paws on her lap and began licking her face in his excitement. “Hey, now,” she spluttered, trying to dodge all the slobber, “You’re excited, I get it, just- ack! There. Good boy. Yes, you are a good boy. The goodest boy ever, yes you are,” kissing the top of his head, she remembered she was still in the presence of the rigid Commander, who was observing their antics with something akin to... amusement?

“You like dogs, I take it?”

“Love them. Always wanted one. And now I’ve got you. I do, yes I do-”

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen groaned. “You do realize he’s a war dog, not an Orlesian lap rat, correct?”

“Of course,” Ari replied. “But he still likes it. See?” She pointed to the enthusiastic wag of his tail, thumping against the fountain wall.

His immaculately groomed hair barely moved as he shook his head, heaving a deep, pained sigh. “I’m not entire sure what will happen. Orlais wishes for us to continue, but Ferelden does not.”

“And what do you want, Commander?”

Opening his mouth, the click of his teeth was audible even to her as he snapped his mouth shut again, staring vacantly at the pool of water behind where she sat. “It is of no matter what I desire,” he muttered. “I am merely a servant of the Chantry. Whatever is decided, I will abide by. I should get back. Good day, Mistress.”

Ari snaked her arms around the mabari’s neck, laying her head against his as they both watched the former templar stride away, both of them holding the same forlorn, aching expression in their eyes. “I know,” she tried to soothe his whimpers. “But we can only do so much, right? Well. I haven’t given up hope yet. So this arrangement between you and me may only be temporary, okay?” The dog cocked his head to one side. “I’ll have to at least give you a name. Let’s see… How about Atlas?”

His loud woof echoed loudly enough to startle a few nearby birds from their roost.

“I guess that’s it, then. Fitting,” she mused. “Your future master has the weight of the world on his shoulders, as well. Alright, Atlas, let’s go see about those herbs. And a collar for you. Leather, right? With studs?”

Dancing around her feet as she stood up, Atlas grinned up at her, his tongue lolling to one side.

“I think we’re going to get along just fine, boy.”
Ari was tired. There were so many little wounds to treat as the scouts exited the eluvian, everything from little scrapes to jagged spear wounds and scorching burns. Dorian and Vivienne had entered her little makeshift infirmary at some point, along with Stitches from the Chargers, both of the mages and healer rolling up their sleeves and offering whatever help they could. At least the Inquisitor’s arm had been cauterized when Solas had removed it, so there was no risk of infection or bleeding out, although Ari could not predict what sort of mental trauma the amputation would leave behind.

“Thank you,” she sighed, as Dorian handed her a skin of water. “I couldn’t have done this without any of your help.”

“I’m sure you would have still tried,” the altus chuckled. “Until you passed out yourself, I daresay.”

“You would have done quite well without us,” Vivienne added. “You’re an exceptional healer, Mistress Iseri. I’ve heard what you have been doing for the templars. Remarkable work. I’d like to talk to you later about your methods, if you can spare a moment, darling.”

“Of course, Madame de Fer,” Ari nodded. “I’ll be here until we leave.”

Thanking them once more before they left her to her solitude, she sank into a nearby chair, the adrenaline finally draining from her system, leaving only a bone-deep exhaustion in its place. *I need a nap. For like, three days.*

Just outside of her door, she heard the rustle of Atlas’ collar as the dog perked up, along with the sound of heavy boots echoing off the polished marble entryway, crisp and precise with each step, only faltering slightly just as the person paused to knock. *Great, someone else that needs my—*

“Commander? How may I help you?” Ari jerked upright, smoothing back the flyaways from her bun.

“You offer,” he replied brusquely, without any sort of pretense, not quite meeting her eyes. “Does it still stand?”

There was no need to specify which offer; there was only one thing she had ever asked of him. “Always.”

“The Inquisitor plans to disband the Inquisition,” gazing at some point beyond the tip of her head, Cullen’s eyes glazed over, myriads of thoughts rolling through his mind. “I confess, I am not sure what I plan to do now. I had thought to… Well. Not anymore, at least. I have been considering retiring to the countryside, somewhere in Ferelden. I would pay you, for your assistance, should you wish to accompany me.”

Go live in the country with Cullen? Sounds like every fangirl’s dream. “You wish for me to stay with you until you recover?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I can hire other help too, if needed. A cook, or a servant, if you think it necessary.”

“I can cook, and clean,” she shook her head. “Monitoring your progress won’t take up the entire day, there will be time left for me to do other chores as necessary.”

“Excellent,” his shoulders barely sagged as he released a breath, a wave of relief and apprehension flitting across his face. He was a private man, she knew, and the idea of having others witness what he considered his shame and weakness had not sat well with him. “I will arrange things, and let you know.”
Ari barely retained her composure as he offered her a clipped bow, and left, stooping to pet Atlas before he walked away. *He’s going to do it. He’s really going to try.* Oh, hell. *This is going to be the most awkward roommate situation ever.* Like living with a robot. *But that’s not how he always was, right? Not what he could have been.* Well, at least I don’t have to figure out what I’m going to do now. *Not immediately, at least.* And I’ll be able to save whatever he pays me. *Ok. You can do this.* *Just don’t let him die, and it’ll be fine.* Right?

Chapter End Notes

woo, a chapter!

Ignore the chapter title. Everything else sounded equally dumb, so...
Ari shoved the last bundle of her clothes into her large satchel, double checking yet again that all of her herbs were secure in her leather case, and that all of her glass flasks were properly cushioned for the journey. Let’s see. Extra corks, mortar and pestle, knife, clothes, smalls, needle, extra thread, cloak, extra boots, hair ties, where, oh there they are. I think that’s everything.

It had been close to six weeks since the Exalted Council concluded, and the Inquisition had begun the trek back to Skyhold. In that time, most of the soldiers and staff had already been dismissed, while a skeleton crew had remained to help pack up the vast quantities of stuff that had accumulated over the years. The night before, Maggie had bundled up all the kitchen supplies Ari would ever need, along with some rations for the road, that lay tucked into a crate in one corner of her room. At the foot of her bed sat a locked chest, filled with meticulously measured draughts of lyrium for Cullen.

_Last night in Skyhold. Then, on to Ferelden. And after that, who knows?_

The next morning dawn bright and clear, a good omen for the adventure that awaited her. Shoving the crate of pots and pans into the small wagon that waited by the main gate, two horses patiently waiting for the stableboy to finish harnessing them, Ari threw her bag on top, making sure the chest of lyrium was safe and contained, before sliding back down to the ground.

“Cullen, just wait!”

“Inquisitor.” His freshly shaven face looked as if it were carved from stone. "There is nothing left to say. I’d like to get a head start on my journey, if you don’t mind.”

“I know, I just… I wanted to say goodbye,” the auburn haired woman sighed, twisting her remaining hand into her tunic. “And I’m sorry. For whatever it’s worth, I’m so sorry, Cullen.”

“Apology noted, Inquisitor. Have a safe journey back to Ostwick.” Never meeting her eyes, Cullen bowed to the exact degree as befitted her former station, and swung himself up in one smooth, graceful move onto the high wagon bench. “Is everything ready, Mistress Iseri?”

“Yes, Commander. Atlas, come on boy.” Grabbing ahold of the wooden frame, Ari placed one foot on the step, watching to make sure the mabari made it up into the wagon bed.

“Healer?”

“Yes, Inquisitor?”

Evelyn stared at the Commander’s armored profile, pointedly refusing to look down at her. He looked strange without his fur mantle around his neck, almost like he-

Like he was a templar again.

“Take care of him. Please?”

“I’ll do my best, Inquisitor.”
Blinking back her tears, Evelyn offered her a watery smile, casting one last glance up at her former lover. “Safe travels.”

Ari pulled herself up into the empty space next to Cullen, adjusting her seat and the small cushion that had been placed there for her.

“Ready?” His voice rumbled through her this close, their arms almost pressing against each other. Scooting ever so slightly off to the side, she nodded, bracing herself as the wagon lurched into motion at the flick of the reins.

*This is going to be a very, very long trip.*

***

It would take about a week to reach South Reach, he had told her. The cabin he had purchased was about half a day’s ride away from the small town, surrounded by lots of land, both woods and fields, perfect for Atlas to run free in. For the first two days on the road, neither spoke much, the former Commander lost in the maelstrom that was his mind, preferring to ride in silence, only speaking when absolutely necessary when they stopped at night to set up camp. Not that she minded too much; she was used to solitude and silence by now, although not usually in such close quarters with another person. At least the views were entrancing. The Ferelden summer was well underway, and everywhere they passed, she saw fields in full bloom, wildflowers covering the grassy carpet that lined the roads, and little cottages dotting the countryside. It was peaceful in these parts, finally.

It was on the third day, when the shimmering waters of Lake Calenhad had finally disappeared behind them, that he began to open up. “My siblings live in South Reach,” he said out of nowhere that morning. “I wrote to my sister to let her know that I was coming, but I’m not sure if I want to see them. Not yet, at least. It should take, what, four, five weeks was how long it took Rylen to get past the worst of it, correct?”

“Mm,” Ari hummed an affirmative around the mouthful of bread she had just taken. Wiping the crumbs from her lips, she replied, “Yours will take longer though. I want to reduce your rations more gradually than I did his.”

“Why is that?” He didn’t seem offended, she noted, just curious.

“Age is a factor, for one. Physical condition,” she began to tick off reasons on one hand. Cullen scoffed at that. “I daresay I’m in better shape than Rylen. And I’m younger than he.”

“What?”

“Is it that hard to believe?”

“You just—look so much older—Seem so much more mature than Rylen.”

“Just because I don’t flirt with every woman in skirts that passes in front of me—”

“Touch a nerve, Commander?” Ari pressed her lips together to keep herself from giggling at his obviously ruffled feathers. She could almost see the hairs on his neck bristling, just like Atlas’ did when he was perturbed. “Either way, I think your body has suffered more stress than his. And that can have an effect on recovery as well.”

“You didn’t touch a nerve,” he grumbled, more to himself than anything. “I was merely stating facts.”
“I was teasing, Commander,” Ari sighed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have.”

“No,” shaking his head, he rubbed the back of his neck in frustration, the first of that gesture she had seen from the normally poised man. “I apologize. It’s… been awhile, since anyone felt comfortable enough to tease me, I suppose.”

“I can stop, Commander, if you’d prefer.”

“I don’t mind. Perhaps it will even help,” he snorted. “And you can call me Cullen.”

“I can?”

“It is my name,” glancing aside at her, he raised one golden eyebrow. “I’m not a commander of anything anymore, after all. Not a templar, not anyone of note. Just… Cullen.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” Ari placed one hand around his forearm just above his bracer and squeezed before she realized what she was doing. “Sometimes it’s nice to get back to basics. Just be yourself. And please for the love of God and your Maker, call me Ari. Or Arianne, if you must. Mistress Iseri is so formal.”

“I’m a formal person,” he replied mildly. “And I’m not even sure what being myself would look like anymore.”

“Well, good thing we have time to figure that out, isn’t it?”

Ari decided she liked Ferelden, despite its reputation for being brown and smelling like dogs. The weather was calm, the sunlight warm where it filtered down to her through the lacy tree canopy overhead, a soothing breeze swirling around them to keep them both cool and comfortable. Or her, at least. Cullen wore his typical armor, as always, minus the mantle and tabard, as bandits were always a threat, even on the Imperial Highway. Every now and then, another rider or caravan would pass them, the driver calling out their greetings.

“You know,” Cullen frowned down at his hands just as a friendly farmer passed them, shouting out a ‘good morning to you and your pretty wife’, staring where his gloves gripped onto the reins, “People will talk. About you living with me. Your reputation may suffer.”

“I don’t care about that,” Ari laughed brightly.

“I’m being serious, Mistr- Arianne. You’re still young, and have a future ahead of you. You could marry, and you living with a man, well,” his shoulders slumped as he considered the ramifications his request would have on her life. “Your prospects may be lessened.”

“And what, I’m young, but you already have one foot in the grave?” Biting her lip to keep her smirk at bay, she asked, “How old exactly do you think I am?”

He studied her face, those golden eyes roving over her features. “About the same age as the Inquisitor? So twenty-three, or there about?”

“And you are…?”

“Thirty-four, this summer.”

“So old,” Ari sighed dramatically, a hand flung over her heart. “I’m a year younger than you, Cullen.”
“What?” His head jerked up. “That’s impossible.”

“But it’s true. And I’m not particularly worried about my future suitors. I’ve already been married, and I don’t care to repeat the experience any time soon.” Tossing the rest of her lunch down to where Atlas trotted next to the wagon, circling under her like a shark, Ari wiped her hands and popped open her waterskin.

“So you were married,” he said softly. “I thought you might have been, when the scouts first brought you in. Your hand, it looked like you had worn a ring recently, and for quite some time.”

Idly rubbing the spot where her ring had sat, the indent and tan lines long since faded now, she shrugged. “I was. But I’m not anymore.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” leaning back, she gazed upwards towards the trees overhead, watching a few birds flit in and out of the branches. “My life is much better off now the way it is. I have my work, a purpose. And now I have a dog. Set for life.”

“Is that the secret to happiness?” Is he- Huh. Ari glanced at him from the corner of her eye. *Almost sounded like he was smiling.*

“Didn’t you know? A thick blanket, a nice fire, a glass of perfectly aged whiskey, a thrilling book, and a dog are all you really need in life,” she grinned. “All I need to find is the whiskey now.”

“I’m sure I can arrange something,” the edge of his mouth twitched up, his eyes following Atlas’ path of destruction as the dog tore through a flock of pigeons. *He is smiling! Holy shit. I should mark this in my calendar.*

“I look forward to it.”

***

As peaceful as the journey was, Ari was more than relieved when Cullen told her they would reach South Reach that evening. Riding on horses was one thing; the constant, jarring rumble of the wagon was another. Fortunately, the ride had just created a vague sense of nausea the whole trip, instead of actual vomiting. *Probably the fresh air. I remember rolling down the windows on road trips always used to help me when I was little.*

Cullen had been more verbose the last few days of their trip, telling her histories and stories about the various towns they passed through, asking her about her home world, but the closer they drew to his family, the more withdrawn he became. Ari could only imagine how he was feeling, finally seeing his family again for the first time in over 20 years. If she stayed on Thedas, and had a chance to go back to Earth for a visit in another two decades, would she even want to go back? Everything and everyone would have changed. Even after only being here for a little over a year, she had gotten used to the pace of life here, the rhythm of the people.

Ari stole a glance towards her employer after the road began widening leading up to the small, bustling town. His jaw was held rigid in place, clenching, the muscles in his cheeks flexing, every inch of his body poised and ready as if they were walking into an ambush. *Maybe he feels like we are.*

“Cullen?” Gently laying a hand on his arm, Ari yanked the appendage back as he visibly flinched at her touch. “I’m sorry, I-”
“No, it’s alright,” he forced his limbs to relax against his leg, letting the reins go slack in his hands. “Just a little nervous, that’s all.”

“It’ll be okay,” she hoped her voice sounded reassuring and soothing, “They’re probably excited to see you.”

“I know they are,” he muttered. “But I don’t think I’m what they are expecting. He doesn’t think he’s worthy, she realized with a start. He thinks he’s changed too much and doesn’t want their side-eyes, or pity.

“It’ll be okay,” she replied, this time with more conviction in her voice. Swiveling to face her, his eyes widened slightly at her tone, his voice faltering as he stared down at the stubborn lilt of her chin.

“Alright.”

“Cullen, it- wait, alright?”

He smirked as he turned his attention back to the road. “I have a feeling trying to change your mind would be akin to changing Cassandra’s mind. That is to say, nigh on impossible.”

Grinning, Ari leaned back in her seat. “As long as you realize it now, I think we’ll be fine, Commander. How else do you think I survived Rylen as my first patient?”

Cullen did laugh finally at that, a soft, low chuckle that made her heart warm from the inside out, sending a shockwave of flutters through her belly. Oh, that’s a dangerous sound. Nope, nope, nope. Get your shit together, girl. He’s got more baggage than you are equipped to deal with, not to mention that you’d probably just break his heart when you eventually got bored, and left. And then where would he be? Same as all the others. The very thought was sobering. In her last marriage, Ari had just stopped communicating with her husband, telling him the things that were weighing on her mind, because she had simply stopped caring. About him, about them. They were in a rut, she knew that, but instead of trying to do something about it, she had decided it- that he, wasn’t worth the effort. Maybe she was just too burnt out by his drama. Too tired to do anything to fix their relationship. Same old thing, over and over again. No, it’s better this way. You’re better off alone.

“There,” Cullen said after another mile, pointing towards a windmill that dominated the idyllic scene below the crest of the hill upon which they sat. “She said their stead was to the left, just before the mill.” Following the line his finger traced, Ari spied a modest cabin encircled by a few other smaller buildings, storage and stables more than likely, smoke from a hearth rising up lazily through the golden haze of the sunset, surrounded by neat rows of some sort of crops that were indistinguishable at this distance.

“Ready whenever you are, ser.” If he noticed her slip back into formality, he did not show any outward sign of it. Instead, he inhaled a deep breath, and then another, his entire focus transfixed on that thin plume of smoke and the amber waves of wheat, drifting the in the wind.

“I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Ari meets his family next!
If someone had lined up the entire population of South Reach, and asked Ari to pick which ones were members of Cullen’s family, she was sure she could have done it with her eyes closed. The two women waiting at the end of the drive with two children peeping out from behind one, a toddler on the hip of the shorter woman, and the man standing behind both of them sported the same blonde riot of curls that Ari knew Cullen was hiding under the pomade he typically used. Closer to the house, two other men and an older boy stood leaned against the doorframe, his sisters’ husbands, maybe?

“Cullen!”

Before the wagon had even come to a complete stop, the youngest woman was already racing towards them, practically dragging her errant brother off the high seat in an attempt to half strangle, half hug him.

“Maker’s breath, Rosalie! At least let me get down before I break my neck.”

“You can’t blame her, Cullen,” the other woman called out, arms crossed over her chest. “It’s been years, brother. Let me get a look at you.” Tugging his bracer towards her, his sister swept her gaze over him, studying every last wrinkle and scar that she could see on his face. “You look tired.”

Cullen snorted. “Thanks, Mia. Branson,” he nodded at the man that could have been his twin, had Branson been two inches taller and slim instead of stocky.

“Cul,” his brother nodded back. “And who’s this?”

Sliding as quietly as she could off the wagon, Ari froze with one foot on the step and the other on the ground, her boot crunching against the rocky dirt. “Um, hello. I’m Ari.”

“Mistress Arianne Iseri,” Cullen interjected. “She’s my- my… housekeeper,” he finished, casting an apologetic glance her way.

Schooling her features into a neutral mask to hide her amusement, for of course, he wouldn’t have told them about her, or be willing to divulge the true nature of her employment, Ari bobbed a polite curtsy. “Please to meet you.” Besides, it wasn’t a lie; she was technically his maid for the next several months.

Mia’s eyes narrowed sharply as she swung her gaze from the newcomer, down to her belly, to her errant brother, her lips pursed in obvious disbelief. “Welcome,” she replied after a long moment.

“It’s not like that,” Cullen muttered, his cheeks burning a darker shade of pink when he realized what conclusion his elder sister had reached. “She works for me, nothing more.”

“If you say so. Come on, I want you to meet my husband.” Meekly following at what she hoped was a respectful distance from the others, Ari merely smiled and repeated her stilted curtsy every time she was introduced to a new face, knowing that she would never in a million years remember the names of all the children. Mia had three of her own, Rosalie had two, and Branson had one, the older boy she had spotted earlier, Aiden, at least I can remember one of their names, she thought. And Mia’s married to Allan, the darker blonde with the full beard, and Rosalie to Graham. And Branson to- is his wife not here? Or is he not married?

“So, maid? I didn’t think Cullen was the type,” falling into step beside her, Branson offered her a warm smile, his eyes a shade darker than his brother’s vivid amber. He’s what Cullen would have
looked like if he hadn’t had the life he had. No wrinkles, lighthearted, open, still devastatingly handsome. All that thought did was strengthen her resolve to do whatever it took to help the Commander recover.

“He has really hasn’t had the need to cook his own food, or do his own laundry for years, between the templars and the Inquisition,” Ari pointed out with a crooked grin. “I don’t think it was his wish as much as it was a desire to not starve.”

“Mia invited him to stay with us,” he frowned. “But he refused, said he didn’t want to be a burden.”

“It’s been a long time,” she murmured. “A lot has happened for him.”

“A lot’s happened for all of us,” heaving a sigh, Branson gazed wistfully over at his son, who’s lanky body was draped over the end of the sofa watching his uncle, gaping in open admiration at the armor that Cullen was meticulously stacking in one corner of the open living room, chattering away and nearly overwhelming the older man with his rapid questions. “So anyways, tell me about yourself? I find it hard to believe that my surly brother managed to convince such a pretty young woman to come out to the middle of nowhere just to clean up after him.”

Biting her lip to keep from inelegantly snorting, Ari shrugged nonchalantly, trying to keep from rolling her eyes and failing miserably. “Charmer, aren’t you? I happened to need a job, and your brother offered me one. It’s as simple as that.”

“I can be,” Branson winked down at her. “Well, luckily you won’t be too far from here. So maybe we’ll get to see more of you? I mean, both of you. Not that I wouldn’t want to see just you, it’s just-Maker’s breath.”

And there’s the infamous awkwardness. Looks like it runs in his family.

A soft giggle escaped her, drawing the attention of the others in the room. “We’ll see.”

“Mistress Ari, was it?” Mia’s voice rang out over the din of the children. “Would you mind helping me with supper?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Cullen cut in, glaring at his elder sister. “We’ve just had a long journey, and I know you must be tired.”

“I don’t mind,” Ari smiled, pushing herself off the wall she had been leaning against. “It’ll do me good to move around after all that sitting, anyhow.”

She could feel his eyes, boring into her back as she followed Mia into the spacious kitchen. Did he not want her to help? Or was he worried about his sister, for whatever reason?

Taking the large bucket of potatoes and the small paring knife she was handed, Ari sat down a nearby chair and began peeling, the motion familiar and comfortable for her, while Mia began roughly chopping up carrots on a massive chopping board.

“So, Mistress Iseri, are you married?”

Quirking one eyebrow up at the blunt question, Ari barely glanced up as she replied, “Please, Ari is just fine. And no, I’m not.”

“So the nature of your relationship with Cullen is…?”

Setting down the knife in her hand, her eyes calm and set, Ari said quietly, “It’s just as the Commander said. I’m his help, nothing more. I have no designs on your brother, nor he on me.
When he no longer has a need for me, I will be leaving.”

Mia nodded once, a jerk of her chin. “I’m sorry,” she sighed after a minute. “I know I must come off as extremely rude. He’s just been through so much, and I know there’s a lot he’s not telling me. I can’t help but worry about him. He’s changed so much since he was a boy.”

“It’s understandable. He’s lucky to have family such as you.” With a low grunt, Ari hefted the peeled potatoes up onto her hip, and, giving them a quick rinse, began quartering them and dropping them into the pot of boiling water Mia indicated. “What are we making?”

“Farmer’s pie. It used to be one of Cullen’s favorites.” Shepherd’s pie, Ari realized was what Mia was referring to. Well that sounds simple enough.

“Do you mind sharing some other recipes with me? I learned a few, back in Skyhold from the cooks, but I’m sure the Commander would prefer to eat his old favorites. Might help him adjust back to a normal, civilian life, to have memories of his youth.”

Mia raised one blonde eyebrow, pushing one lock of escaped curls behind her ear as she stirred pan of browning vegetables. “You care about him.”

“Pardon?”

“I don’t know of many newly hired servants that are that interested in making their employer happy,” she replied with a tilt of her head and a small smile playing at the corner of her dark green eyes.

Biting her bottom lip, Ari crossed her arms around her chest, hugging her body close, and leaned against the counter. What did she feel for Cullen, anyways? Back on Earth, when she had thought him just a fictional character, it was easy to admit she had a bit of crush on the idea him. After all, he was handsome, honorable, working towards redemption- who didn’t love him? All those fanfiction romances she had read hadn’t helped in that regard either. But here…

He was real. And truly struggling. Closed off, in pain, inflexible. Here, she was more than aware that the video game character she had admired and the man that was currently sitting on the opposite side of the open room were two wholly different people. “I respect him,” Ari finally sighed. “He’s endured so much, given his all to his cause. All I want to do is repay him for his part in what he’s done for Thedas. So yes, I care for him as a person. But anything more than that,” she shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

Nodding, Mia glanced toward the living room, her tiny frame slumping ever so slightly. “He is a good man still, I just know it,” she murmured. “He wrote once to me, speaking of the Inquisitor, but then, nothing. I had hoped… Well. He’s home now. And you seem like a good sort. Please come by here anytime when you have a day off. I’d be happy to show you whatever I know, introduce you to some people around town.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you.”

“You help him,” she jerked her head towards her brother, “I’ll help you. Whatever you need.”

Branson watched Ari as she bustled around the kitchen, her laugh ringing out through the house. “Pretty lass,” he commented.

“Hm?” Cullen was preoccupied with the chess game Aiden had insisted they play almost as soon as they had walked into the house earlier, one hand idly rubbing between Atlas’ ears. “I suppose so.”

Snorting, his younger brother leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together, calloused from the
years he had spent at the forge. “You suppose so. I’m assuming she’s single, right?” Receiving only a noncommittal grunt as an answer, Branson’s eyes took on a gleam of intrigue. “You make sure you give her days off, you hear? That way she can come to town and I can get to know her better.”

“I doubt she’d be interested, but stranger things have happened.”

“Are you making fun of me? Son, I’m going to need you to beat your uncle now,” Branson called over to Aiden. “And make it hurt.”

“Supper’s ready! Oh, Ari, will you take the baby for a minute while I set the table?”

“I uh- sure?”

“We’ll finish our game later, Aiden. You’re doing well so far,” Cullen smiled down at the lad, rolling out the stiffness in his neck as he looked up-

And froze. Ari giggled as she spun in a circle with Rosalie’s youngest on her hip, making the child squeal in delight. She looked so carefree, so lighthearted, so normal like this. With his family, who already apparently adored her, judging by the way his sisters chatted with her as if they had known her all their lives, and how his brother was all but drooling at the sight of her. Even the children were enamored by the petite healer, shyly tugging on her skirts.

It was all wrong. Once, he had dreamed of bringing Evelyn here. Introducing her to his siblings. Settling down in a cottage nearby. Starting their own family. But now, all he had were memories of a time when he hadn’t been so cold. When he had love, friends, laughter, a future with a woman he worshipped.

How much of it had been a lie?

No, she had loved him, hadn’t she? Just in the wrong way. Just not enough. And now, instead of a woman he had hoped to make his wife one day, he was sitting in his sister’s house with a person he barely knew, and yet somehow trusted with his life. It made no sense to him how comfortable he already felt around Ari, given the limited time he had spent with her. But she was so unguarded, and free with her smiles, and yet cynical in a way that he understood completely.

“Cullen? Are you going to come sit down and eat, or keep staring at your pretty maid all evening?”

“I’m not staring,” he protested, flushing a tinge a pink, Ari coloring an even darker shade than he. “I was thinking.”

“I’m sure you were,” Rosalie’s husband winked.

“Stop teasing him, Graham.”

“Yes, dear.”

Maybe, just maybe, this would all work out. Maker, he hoped so. To be normal again… Could he do it?

Ari smiled at him from across the table, a basket of rolls held out in her hand.

She seems to think I can. Maybe that’s all I need. Faith. “This smells delicious. Thank you, Mia.”

“Welcome home, little brother.”
The Road Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ari could tell that the constant chaos of his family was beginning to wear on Cullen. Ducking her chin down to hide her smile, she finished rinsing the pan off, watching from the corner of her eye as the tall warrior stood motionless in the midst of a ring of three hopping children, singing some nonsense song as they twirled around his legs. “That was, er, lovely,” he told them after they finally collapsed on the ground. “Ari, are you ready?” His voice held a note of desperation as his eyes begged for her to say yes.

“Just finished, Commander,” she called out.

“Are you leaving?”

“You’ll come back, won’t you?”

“Please say you will!”

“Children,” Mia huffed. “I doubt she’ll want to come back at all with you lot hanging off of her like that.”

“I’ll come back as soon as I can,” Ari assured them.

“When? Tomorrow?”

Shaking his head to clear it of the racket that was ricocheting throughout his skull, Cullen answered for her, “Not tomorrow, unfortunately. But we’ll have to come back in a week or so to stock up on some supplies from the market. So not too long. Are you all set?”

Ari patted her thigh, beckoning Atlas over to her side, watching as all the children piled on top of the ever patient mabari, pressing kisses all over his slobbering muzzle. “Ready whenever you are, ser.”

Hugs were given all around, with Branson slyly pressing a kiss to Ari’s hand as his siblings watched with no little amusement.

“Maker’s breath, he’s relentless,” Cullen muttered under his breath.

“Can you blame him? He’s been all alone, just him and Aiden, since Marie died a few winters ago,” Rosalie elbowed him. “And Ari seems nice. And she’s pretty.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Cul,” pulling his larger frame into her, Mia clutched her younger brother tightly, almost as if she were afraid it would be another two decades before she saw him again, if ever.

“I won’t,” he promised softly. “I’ll see you all around.”

Ari set the baby down upon seeing Cullen climbing up into the wagon, handing the child back to Rosalie. “Thank you again for everything,” she waved, wistfully smiling as the house slowly faded from view. “Your family is so sweet.”

“And loud,” he grumbled.
“In the best way,” she laughed. “I think I like it.”

Finally feeling like he was able to relax for the first time in the past few days, Cullen leaned back against the rough slats of the wagon bench, the reins lax in his hands, comfortable in a simple pair of breeches and a plain cotton tunic. He did, however, still wear his bracers and had his sword strapped to his belt, prepared as always. “Were your siblings different?”

“I was an only child. So it was quiet most of the time,” she shrugged. “Are you glad you stopped by?”

“I can’t imagine what it would have been like to be an only child. I bet you were closer to your parents than I, at least. And yes,” his lips curved into a soft smile, “I am glad we came. It was good to see them again.”

“I told you it would be okay,” a finger jabbed him in his side, causing Cullen to jump in his seat only to see her smirking back at him.

Lifting one hand to rub at the abused skin, he raised one eyebrow. “I told you so? Really?” he asked dryly.

“I’m the epitome of maturity, yes,” she agreed. “I wasn’t particularly close to my parents. They both worked a lot, so I was on my own mostly. It all worked out though. I’d think if I was closer to them, coming here and leaving them behind would have been even harder.”

He frowned. “There is no one else you miss?”

“I think about my friends from time to time, whenever I see things that remind me of them, but honestly I was a pretty private person. I worked a lot, and didn’t really have much time for a social life. Maybe that’s why you tolerate me so well,” her eyes crinkled as she teased him, “Because we’re both two peas in a pod.”

“Except I’m obviously more mature.”

“Is Cullen Rutherford making a joke? Should I record this in my diary?”

“You have a diary?”

“No, but I’m thinking I should get one now,” Ari mused, tapping her chin with one finger. “Just for occasions like this.”

“Maker’s breath, I do know how to joke,” he groaned, burying his face in one calloused hand.

“It’s good to know. I think all this fresh air and family and normalcy will be good for you, Cullen.” Leaning over the edge of the cart, Ari grabbed a dangling stick from an overhanging tree, and called out to Atlas, before throwing it ahead of them.

He was inclined to think she was right. Already, he felt better than he had in years. But the trials that lay ahead of him still cast a dark shadow over his mind. At least there was no one else who relied on him now. No world to save, no men to train. Just himself. And that was frightening enough. What if he didn’t make it? Would anyone besides his family mourn him? With furrowed brow, he watched as Ari giggled, praising the mabari in that absurd childish tone that they both seemed to love. *Peas in a pod, indeed.* Would she mourn him? How? As a patient? Or a… friend?

“You’re thinking gloomy thoughts again.” At the questioning light in his gaze, Ari pointed to the bridge of her nose. “You wrinkle your nose and brow whenever you’re thinking depressing things.
Want to talk about it?”

“No, I’m no-” His words caught, forcing him to clear his throat, mock glaring at her from underneath hooded eyes. Maker’s breath, she was right yet again. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Know what I’m thinking? It’s eerie.”

“You’re actually pretty expressive, with the glaring and scowling all the time,” Ari grinned. “Plus, I read people fairly well. Most of them, at least.”

“It’s disconcerting. It reminds me of a young… creature that stayed with the Inquisition,” he muttered. He’s talking about Cole, Ari thought. I wonder where he went.

Drawing her bottom lip into her mouth, she cupped her chin in her hands, and rested her elbows against her knees. “I’m aiming for eight weeks between beginning the first day, and the first day with no lyrium at all. You took a full dose this morning, right? So, we can start tom-”

“Shhh.” Throwing one hand up, Cullen’s eyes narrowed as he surveyed the dense forests around them. Besides the wagon, Atlas’ chest rumbled with a low growl. “Get low.” Instantly, Ari dropped to the floor of her seat, scrunching her body up, her heart hammering against her ribcage, gripping her legs close with clammy, shaking hands.

“Ah, guess you saw us first, mate,” three men in mismatched leather armor sauntered out of the treeline a hundred paces ahead, the burliest one twirling a pair of daggers in his hand. “I s’pose you know what we want? Just stand to the side, let us have a looksee at your wagon, and no one gets hurt.”

“Ari, get down and hide behind the wagon,” Cullen murmured. “Atlas, protect her.” As she scrambled to do as he bid, the warrior casually swung himself down onto the ground, unsheathing his sword with a quiet ring that reverberated through her head. “I’ll give you one chance- leave us be, and you can leave here unharmed.”

“Y’hear that, boys?” The large man leading them chortled, the others snickering behind their dirty, ragged hands. “He’ll let us leave. Looks like we’ll have to do this the hard way. Ah, well. At least your missus is a pretty little thing. She’s gonna look even prettier on her knees when we’re done gutting you. Get ‘im!”

With a low growl, Cullen’s sword met their steel in a ringing crash that echoed through the clearing. It was easy to see how he had earned the nickname Lion of Ferelden. Every strike of his was calculated, no movement wasted as he held off all three attackers at once, easily meeting their slashes and swipes with an easy grace that made her heart skid to a halt. They were no match for the former Commander of the Inquisition, and within the span of three heartbeats, the fear pulsing in their eyes was obvious as their fatal mistake dawned upon them.

It was too late for them. One by one, they stumbled in their terror, leaving them wide open for Cullen to take the final lunge, dispatching them with ruthless finesse, his blade carving their life’s blood from their defeated bodies. Barely panting, not even having broken a sweat, the tall warrior surveyed the carnage around him, before glancing back to where Ari stood, flattened against the side of the wagon, her eyes wide and trembling at the sight of the mangled bodies.

She had seen blood. Bones. Organs, hanging out of torn skin. She had held people as they died in
her arms, from gunshot wounds, knife wounds, drug overdose— but this was beyond her. He had killed those men, and logically she knew it was to protect them, for if he hadn’t defended her, she would likely have been raped, or killed. And this was Thedas; slaying bandits and mercenaries were a normal thing here. But seeing it on a monitor, and hearing the squelch of his sword being pulled free of a man’s chest were two entirely different experiences.

“Ari, are you alright?” Cullen approached her slowly, making sure to stay in her line of sight, as if she were more a spooked halla than human. “Talk to me.”

“I- I-” Blinking down at his hands that were cautiously reaching for her own, she gasped at the sight of blood, clutching her fingers under her chin. “I’m sorry,” she choked out. “I’m not…”

“You’ve seen death before,” he murmured, clearly dumbfounded by her unexpected reaction.

“Yes. But not like this. I’ve never seen anyone kill so easily,” Ari whispered.

“I- I see,” finally noticing the blood splatters on his gloves, Cullen yanked them off, and stuffed them in his back pocket, out of sight. “I had to, you understand, right?”

“I do. It was just,” she exhaled noisily. “A shock. I’ll be fine. Thank you, by the way.”

Nodding, he reached down to pet Atlas, the dog still sitting pressed up against his mistress’ legs. “Go ahead and get back in the wagon and rest. I’ll be just a minute.”

It took him only a few minutes to pile the bodies just off the side of the road, covering them with an assortment of leaves and branches. After they had gotten settled in to their house, he would return and burn the corpses, but for now, this would have to do, for he was eager to reach the end of their journey.

Glancing up to where Ari sat on the wagon’s high seat, her arms wrapped Atlas’ thick neck, face buried in his fur, Cullen frowned. He hadn’t realized the woman had never seen battle. Surely, he had thought, with her profession, she would have been used to blood and gore, but he never expected that she would not have experienced such violence before. It was rather disconcerting.

The healer had always presented herself to him and the other members of the Inquisition as this bastion of calm, collected, confidence, but underneath it all, she was still naive in the ways of the world. Of his world. With how easily she had assimilated into Thedosian culture, he sometimes forgot that she was not of this place. Before, he had always just pushed the notion of other worlds out of his mind, having other, more pressing matters, to which he needed to devote his mental focus, but now he found himself curious. What was her world like? How did she get here? Why was she here? Did it even matter? Whatever the reason, it was finally clear to him that she had not come with him out of any sense of pity, as he sometimes thought during his darker moments. No, she needed him as much as he needed her. He would protect her from the harshness of his world, and she would aid him. The idea was... oddly comforting.

Pulling himself up next to her, Cullen took up the reins once more, unsure of what to say or how to comfort her. If this were one of his men, he would sympathize while at the same time, finding a way to strengthen their character and conviction, preparing them for more of the same. If she were a commoner, or even a noble, well, almost everyone here had witnessed a life being taken at the hands of another. And he was certain she would not appreciated being consoled like a child, if he pulled her into his lap and rocked her. Shaking his head, trying to get rid of that image, and the tightness in his chest from the thought, he simply decided to lay one hand on her arm, as she had done to him earlier.
“Ari? Will you be okay?”

Mutely, she nodded, never taking her hands off the dog. Forcing himself to be satisfied with that for now, Cullen flicked the reins and sent the horses trotting back down the road.

“We’re almost there,” he murmured, torn between wondering if he should give her time to process what had happened and suddenly hating the stilted silence that had sprung up. “I had thought this road to be clear and safe. I’ll have to talk with Branson next time we go to town, see if this is a common thing.”

Repressing a groan, a thought came to him. Once he began to wean himself off of lyrium, towards the end, he would be in bad shape. And during the weeks after the initial “detox”, as Ari called it, he strength would be that of a newborn kitten. If a need arose, and she had to go to town, he would not be in proper form to protect her, especially if it was against a band of several men. He remembered vividly the days and nights where he could barely function, unable to even sit at his desk and read, much less fight against highwaymen. If she suffered for his shortcomings- if she died because of him, he would never forgive himself. There was only one solution.

“Ari, would you be interested in learning to fight?”

That drew her attention. Raising her head, her skin pale and wan, she blinked her dark eyes several times at him. “What?”

“I thought it might be best if you at least knew the basics of how to defend yourself,” he replied. “If there is an emergency, and you have to go to town alone, and I am… incapacitated, or dead-”

“Don’t talk like that,” she snapped. “You’re not going to die, Cullen.”

There was the fiery woman he had known. Hiding his smile, he merely nodded in agreement. “Apologies. It would make me feel better if you knew how to handle a blade. That is all.”

“And you would teach me? While you’re in the process of weaning yourself off lyrium?” she asked dubiously.

He snorted. “I’ve gone on half and quarter rations before, as a templar, and still maintained my duties. If I can’t teach one slip of a woman the basics of combat just because of a headache and some body aches, I might as well hang up my sword now and just weave baskets for the rest of my life.”

“Slip of a woman, am I?” Her lips twitched up in the closest thing to a smile that he had seen since the attack. He hadn’t noticed how much she actually smiled before, until it ceased. He found that he missed it. “Alright. It makes sense. I’ll learned whatever you want to teach me, Commander.”

“Excellent. And I believe we’re here.” Pulling up into a small clearing, stopping the horses in front of a modest cabin, the pair surveyed the area. The house was similar to the others they had seen scattered throughout Ferelden, on the smaller side, with a water pump and a small storage shed off to the right and the sound of running water coming from somewhere behind it all. “I’ll have to convert that shed into something sturdier for the horses,” Cullen mused, raking a critical eye over the surroundings. “But the cottage looks to be in decent shape. What do you think?”


Chapter End Notes
<3 I love everyone's comments, btw. I don't know if I've said that yet. I LOVE ALL YOU GUYS. And now, they're finally home! So the fun can begin. :D
Ari was grateful that Cullen was not the type of man to balk from housework, for the place was beyond filthy and she definitely needed the extra help. It was obvious that no one had lived there for quite some time, and a thick layer of dust and grime coated every surface, cobwebs and nests scattered throughout. Tying a scarf around her mouth and hair, she set to work almost as soon as they walked in, for they could not bring their belongings into this.

Taking up his own rag, Cullen set to dusting the rafters, dislodging the small creatures who had been making themselves comfortable in the absence of humans, and scrubbing the beams down. “Ari,” he called out, “Um, there’s a mouse, just by your foot.”

“Oh, hello there, sweetie. Let’s get you outside, okay? Atlas, down. He is not your snack. You leave him alone, you hear me?”

Cullen just shook his head. Most women screamed at the sight of mice, or at least demanded their bloody and gruesome deaths. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought she was considering keeping the thing as a pet. She was a strange one, indeed.

By the time the sun had set, they had at least gotten the ceiling and the kitchen mostly clean and swept. The two small bedrooms, on the opposite ends of the cabin, would have to wait until morning. And the doors needed to be replaced, hinges oiled, new mattresses stuffed, windows scrubbed- the list was endless and exhausting. Still, there was satisfaction to be had in a day of simple, honest work. And there was immense gratification to be found in watching Cullen rinse his arms off, his shirt sleeves rolled off to show toned, cording muscles that flexed and glistened in the fading golden sunlight.

Stop that, she chided herself. Ugh, but he was so worried about me earlier. It was so sweet. No, he was just being practical. If I have a mental breakdown out here, or if I get stabbed by some bandit, he’ll have to go through his withdrawals alone again. He needs me as a healer, that’s it. He doesn’t even like you like that. Biting her lip, Ari handed him a towel before stepping up to the bucket herself, and started scrubbing her hands vigorously. I can at least look though, can’t I?

Unfurling their bedrolls for what was hopefully the last time, Cullen and Ari made themselves as comfortable as possible on the kitchen floor, passing the food that Mia had packed for them that morning between them. This time, the silence was borne of sheer exhaustion, both of them too tired to do much else besides chew and swallow.

“Oh, I have something for you.” Her curiosity peaked, Ari watched as he fumbled around in his bags, muttering under his breath until he found what he was looking for with a triumphant noise. “Allan recommended it, the local tavern owner distills his own. Apparently it’s pretty good.”

“Whiskey!” Laughing, she took the bottle of amber liquid from him, popping the cork out and inhaling the warm, heady scent with a pleased sigh. “You remembered.”

“The secret to happiness, if I recall. Although I think we’re missing a few elements,” he cast a rueful glance around the house. “Namely, everything besides the whiskey.” Atlas shoved his nose against Cullen’s shoulder, whining in protest. “And the dog.”
“We’ll get there.” Digging two cups out of the crate they had brought with them, Ari poured them both hefty shots, handing Cullen’s portion to him. “What should we drink to?”

“Getting this house in livable condition,” he sighed.

“Psh,” she waved that idea away. “How about… to your success.”

Staring down into his cup, the surface of the whiskey rippling in the light of the single candle that sat between them, Cullen pressed his lips into a thin line. His success. They had decided tomorrow would be the start. And then the symptoms would start up again, and- No. This time, he had Ari. Ari had promised to help him. This time, he would make it through. Wouldn't he? Or die trying, I suppose.

“To our success.”

***

It took two more days before she declared the house fit for habitation. Her back was stiff and aching, her fingernails were nothing more than torn nubs, and she was pretty sure she'd never get the stains out of her skin or clothes, but everything was finally spotless. It turned out that she hadn’t had time to sew new mattresses the second day, so they had to resort to their bedrolls a few more times, but now that the bulk of the cleaning was complete, Ari sat sprawled across the porch in the most unladylike manner possible, two linen sheets stretched out between her legs, meticulously sewing the pieces together, two bales of fresh hay waiting nearby. In the front yard, Cullen kept himself busy chopping trees, stripping the bark off the fresh wood, hewing planks, and sanding them down until he had a sizable pile of lumber, all destined to become part of the stables and new doors.

Watching him work, a thin sheen of sweat covering his face and arms, Ari briefly wondered how he knew how to woodwork. Was in an innate skill all Ferelden boys were just born with? She snorted at the mental image of one of Rosalie’s toddlers carving a chair.

“Something funny?” Picking up the ladle from the bucket of water nearby, Cullen took a sip, stared down into the depths, then dumped the rest over his head. Ari choked.

“Um,” she wasn’t sure if she should be staring, but she found it physically impossible to look away. His thin, cream cotton tunic was now plastered to his chest, hugging every defined ridge and bulge across his upper body, making her want to run her hands over-

Stop, stop, stop. You’ve seen pretty men before. You’ve seen dozens of naked templars now, and all of them were just as ripped as him. Where’s your professionalism? Tearing her gaze back down to her fingers before he could see her gaping like a teenage girl, Ari cleared her throat. It’s just because I haven’t gotten laid in forever. That’s all. “Where did you learn to do all that?”

“When I was a child. My skills are rusty, as I expected,” he sighed, glaring at the wood as if he could intimidate it into doing what he wanted. “My uncle was a carpenter. I used to spend my free time in his shop, helping him for extra spending money as a lad. If I hadn’t joined the templars, I probably would have apprenticed to him. It was enjoyable work, making things with my hands, seeing the final creation put to good use.” His face grew distant, pensively drifting to the axe he had left propped up against the porch frame. “I wonder what my life would have been if I had stayed instead.”

Ari set down her needle and thread, leaning against the side of the house. “More peaceful, perhaps. But think of the good you’ve done.”
“What good?” he scoffed, his amber eyes cutting and harsh. “All my life, all I have been trying to do is atone for my failings, my prejudices. Traits I would never have known had I just stayed in Honnleath with my family. I might still be whole. Able to function as a normal person, instead of this, this half of a shell left.”

“You are whole, Cullen,” she replied gently. “And a damn good Commander, from what I saw and heard. It was your training regimen, your conviction, your example that inspired your men to work harder, to keep sharp, saving their lives many times over. I read Tale of a Champion. Talked to the Seeker a bit about it. The way you stood up to your superior, helping the mages, serving the Inquisition, going out of your way to make sure that everyone was treated fairly and with respect-you’ve more than atoned for whatever crimes you may have committed in the past.”

“How can you know?” He asked bitterly. “You weren’t there, you didn’t see-”

“No, I wasn’t. But I see the man in front of me now. Whoever you were then, you are a good person now. Compassionate. Honorable. Fierce. Tired, perhaps, but that’s to be expected. And you still have hope,” her voice grew softer.

“Do I?”

“Yes. Otherwise, you would not have asked me to be here. One day, all of this will be a distant memory. I promise you.”

“You promise?” His scar pulled up in a faint smirk, the light returning to his eyes. “Ambitious, Healer.”

“You told me I was more stubborn than Cassandra. Shall I prove it, Commander?” she teased.

“Maker, no,” he chuckled. “I suspect I’ll see that side of you in full force soon enough anyhow. Are you almost done with those?”

“Mm,” she nodded, biting off the end of the thread with her teeth. “Just need to stuff them now.”

“I can help with that later. Come on, I fancy a break.” Bemused, she watched as he disappeared into the house, reappearing scant seconds later with two swords, the second one devoid of any markings or crests.

“This is going to be a disaster,” she groaned, even as she pushed herself to stand. At least she was wearing leggings today, instead of a skirt.

“It won’t be that bad. I’ve watched the way you carry yourself. You have good posture and balance,” he held the blade out to her, hilt first.

“You’ve been watching the way I walk?” Ari repressed a grin, cocking one eyebrow up and resting one hand on her hip out as he suddenly flushed a darker red, rubbing his neck in that awkward, endearing way that she found adorable.

“I meant, I’ve seen you walking, and I- Maker’s breath. You’re just teasing me again, aren’t you?” he huffed.

“Always,” she giggled. “Alright, command me, Commander.”

Cullen felt his skin burn even hotter at her words, and he was grateful she had preceded him out into the yard and didn’t see his reaction. It’s just the proximity, he told himself. And she isn’t unattractive, and kind, and- I need to stop acting like a teenage lad. She works for you, man. It’s just been awhile
since I was this close to a woman, that’s all. Not to mention that neither one of them was looking for a relationship, and to add in a physical liaison while they lived together in such close quarters would be disastrous. If he was tempted to do such a thing. Which he wasn’t.

Taking a second to splash more tepid water into his face, he took up the spot opposite her, hefting his own sword in his hand. Studying her stance with a critical eye borne of years of training recruits, he came up beside her, showing her his hand. “Grip the hilt like this,” he said. “Feet like this. A little wider. Good. We’ll start simple. Defense, first, how to block a swing. Arm up, elbow solid. I’m going to come at you, I want you block my blow. Ready…”

She was exhausted within ten minutes. Between the toll scrubbing the entire house had taken on her muscles, and the lack of physical activity she had engaged in since arriving to Thedas, Ari was in terrible shape. And she could feel every ounce of exhaustion flagging down her weary body. The sword itself was surprisingly light, maybe two or three pounds, but at that moment, anything heavier than a quill was too much for her.

“Ah!” Caught off guard by his advance, Ari clumsily dropped her weapon with a squeak, staggering back a few steps before plopping down in the dirt, hard enough to make Cullen wince. “Ow.”

“Perhaps we should continue this when you’re better rested,” he grinned sheepishly. “I didn’t think about how stiff you must be from the past two days.”

“We can’t all be chiseled Greek gods like you,” she mumbled under her breath, grasping his hand and allowing him to pull her back up to stand with dizzying ease.

Well, that’s sexy. “It’s starting to get dark, anyways, and I’d like to sleep in an actual bed tonight. Help me with the mattresses? Then I can start supper.”

“Go ahead and start, I’ve got these,” Cullen replied. “Atlas will help me, won’t you boy?” The mabari barked in agreement, hopping around both of them in his excitement.

She really does have nice hips. Just the perfect amount to grab and—Shaking himself, Cullen dropped to the creaking wooden porch with a groan, tucking his head between his knees. What is wrong with me? I’ve gone longer without a woman. It didn’t help that the effects of the reduced lyrium were already making its way through his body. A headache had been lingering at the back of his skull all day, his muscles a little bit more sore than he would normally expect them to be, along with a vague sense of general queasiness that came and went. That must be it. Just addled from the heat and exhaustion. She’s not even my type. Do I even have a type? Images of curly auburn hair and fair, creamy skin flashed across his mind. No. Anything but that now.

A large head dropped onto his leg with a soft whine. “Right, the mattresses. I bet you plan on hogging the entire bed, don’t you?” Despite Ari having taken ownership of the dog, Atlas had evidently decided that Cullen was the perfect bed partner instead of the much smaller woman, and had curled up next to him almost every night since they had left Skyhold. Despite his annoyance, he couldn’t find it within himself to eject the beast, and let him stay, since, somehow, the gentle rumble of the mabari’s breathing was soothing to him. “I did always want a dog, didn’t I? Looks like I got one even without trying. Alright, time to get these done.”

Chapter End Notes
I think mice are cutest things in the world. FIGHT ME. I really want one as a pet, but my cat would eat it. I had a squirrel I rescued when it was a baby once, and he used to come inside every night to sleep, and my cat killed it. :(

Fun fact. Medieval swords were actually fairly light, 2-4 lbs. Greatswords and claymores were about 5-6. Battle armor weighed about 50 lbs, which is still less than what a fireman in full gear carries. Everyone thinks they were super heavy, but nope.
Errands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Life quickly settled into a comfortable routine for each of them. Every morning, Cullen would take his allotted portion of lyrium then head outside to practice drills in the front yard, determined to not lose his skills during his retirement, while Ari cooked breakfast inside. After that, he would spend an hour or two guiding her through the steps of basic combat, trying to teach her how to use a sword to at least block properly. After lunch, she would do whatever other chores necessary, cleaning, laundry, mending, while he steadily worked on improving the house and stables, trying to ensure that everything would be completed before the worst of his symptoms began. At night, once they had eaten and the dishes were washed and dried, Ari would often curl up near the hearth and they both would read in companionable silence, or sometimes, like tonight, she could be persuaded to play chess with him.

“This game is absolutely ridiculous,” she huffed, glaring at the pieces so intensely, Cullen was mildly surprised they didn’t burst into flame.

“It’s a game of strategy. You’re supposed to look a few moves ahead, not just blindly pick pieces and slid them around.”

“How am I supposed to predict what you’re going to do? I can’t read your mind,” she grumbled, crossing her arms over his chest and pouting like a child. It was hard to suppress the grin that wanted to creep across his cheeks. Rubbing the unfamiliar bearded growth on his chin instead, he leaned back in his chair, the new wood creaking under his weight.

“Getting better in chess will help you fight, as well. For someone as patient as you, I’m surprised you don’t take to it faster,” he remarked casually.

“We can’t all be dazzling warriors like you, Commander Rutherford,” sticking her tongue out at him, Ari slid from her chair, flopping across the ground in front of the fire. “I’m hopeless.”

To be perfectly honest, Cullen knew that she would be unsuited to the sword and shield after the second day attempting to train her. With her size and speed, and apparent, unexpected penchant for reckless, uncalculated moves, she would be much better suited as a rogue. Daggers, or even archery. But it amused him far too much to watch her flail around with the blade, her awkward swings at odds with her normally poised, graceful behavior. She was always more human to him when he trained, and he found he liked her like that—raw, unpolished, temperamental. It was a stark contrast to the Inquisitor, who had been all sweeping arcs and elegant parries, her nobility showing in the way she fought.

“You’re not hopeless. You just need more practice. Everyone starts somewhere,” he assured her, with only a small amount of guilt at his lie. When they went to town tomorrow, he would find her a pair of daggers, maybe a bow. “Don’t forget, we’re leaving at dawn tomorrow.”

“I won’t forget.” Yawning, she turned over onto her back, snuggling Atlas close to her stomach. “I should probably go to bed then. Good night, Cullen.”

“Good night.”

***
“Ari! You’re back!’

“Yay!”

“Ari! I lost a tooth! Wanna see?”

“Oh, hi Uncle Cullen!”

Cullen snorted as he swung himself down from the wagon, already forgotten as the children swarmed the healer, almost tackling her to the ground in their excitement.

“How’s the house?” Mia met him halfway across the yard, wiping her hands on a worn gray apron.

“Not bad now. All it needed was a bit of work to spruce it up,” he shrugged.

“Running around after Uncle Bevin had its benefits then, hmm? And you still remember how to do everything? I’m impressed,” she smiled, her eyes searching his face. “Cullen, are you feeling okay? You’re looking a bit pale.”

“Just a headache,” he replied smoothly. “Nothing more. I need to go to the market for a few things, and Ari has a list as well. Is Branson working?”

“He is. Why don’t I take Ari, and you go do your thing? You’d get everything faster. Plus, I don’t feel like prying the herd away from her. Leeches, all of them,” Mia smiled fondly at her children and nieces and nephews, everyone shouting over each other in an attempt to steal Ari’s attention for themselves.

“Sounds good,” he nodded, reaching into his bag to portion out some coins and handing the rest to his sister. “Give this to her, please? I’ll see you in a bit then.”

Shooing the tiny horde away so that she could reach the woman in the center, Mia threaded one arm through Ari’s, dropping the pouch in her other hand. “Cullen said you had a shopping list?”

“Yes. We need salt, sugar, tallow, soap, things like that. Most of the staples, actually. You want me to pick you up?” Glancing down at the 2 year old who was incessantly tugging on her skirts, Ari lifted the little girl up onto her hip.

“We’ll have to take all the children with us, I’m afraid. Rosalie’s doing some work for old man Gregory this afternoon, so I have all of them. Here, I have something that will make it easier.” Running inside, Mia appeared seconds later with a long length of cloth, expertly wrapping the child to Ari’s back. “There. Is that comfortable?”

“Yes!” the toddler chirped.

“It is,” Ari giggled. She had always loved kids, but both she and her ex had agreed to wait before trying to start their own family, wanting to work on their careers a bit more, establish themselves. Which had worked out for them in the end, as divorce was messy enough without children being involved. But still, she couldn’t help the slight pang that gripped her heart as the child snuggled into her back, wrapping chubby fingers around her shoulder. And now, it looked as if children would never be in her future.

“Alright, let’s go everyone!” Shaking herself out of her melancholy thoughts, Ari followed Mia out of the drive, and into town, only a mile or so down the road. The day was pleasantly warm, bees lazily buzzing as they drifted from flower to flower, fields of golden wheat that would soon be ready for the harvest swaying from side to side in rippling waves. The sound of the windmill sails churning
in the wind, the rumble of muffled wooden gears within clanking was her new favorite thing, she
decided. The entire scene, complete with the children shrieking with joy as they chased a few
chickens down the lane, the clang of a distant forge, and the shouts of the townspeople that were
going about their day was positively pastoral, and she couldn’t get enough. It was so different from
the life she had once known, filled with neon signs and cheap, greasy take out food and electronic
noise, wholly opposite from the somber atmosphere that had permeated Skyhold.

_I could live somewhere like this for the rest of my life and be perfectly happy. Maybe when
everything is over, I’ll stay here. Find a tiny cabin on the edge of town, get a pet duck or two._

It took almost no time to find the foodstuffs she was searching for in the grocer’s shop just off of the
town square with Mia’s help. And it was no trouble at all to bribe her two eldest children to carry the
goods back to the house with just a few pieces of honey candy.

“They’ll be okay on their own?” Ari asked anxiously.

“This close to town, yes. It’s not like the city here. They’ll be safe,” Mia replied. “Come on, I want
to show you the rest of the town.” The town they lived in, she explained, was part of the South
Reach arling. There was a larger city that surrounded the arl’s castle, about a day’s ride away, that
the Rutherfords would travel to every six months or so to get necessary supplies and sell the excess
of their harvest. “We actually need to go soon, if you want to come along. There’s a shop that has a
lovely selection of fabric.”

Frowning down at her skirts, Ari ran a hand over the coarse material. Her clothing she had brought
with her was serviceable, but not particularly pretty. And she didn’t have many outfits to choose
from, so everything was worn from the constant wear and tear over the past year and a half. But- “I
don’t know how to sew clothing. I can mend things, and make simple repairs, but that’s about it,”
she sighed.

“There’s a seamstress in town,” Mia pointed down one lane. “My brother is paying you enough,
right? Or do I need to have a talk with him?”

“He is,” she hurriedly replied. “But I’m trying to save as much as I can. When he doesn’t need me
anymore, I want to have enough saved so I can find a place of my own.”

“Already planning on leaving?”

“Not really. It’s nice here,” Ari paused under a massive oak to adjust the now sleeping toddler on her
back. “I think I could stay here. I had thought about traveling north, maybe into the Free Marches, as
well. As of now, I have no set plans though.”

“Hmm.” Pursing her lips, Mia’s hazel eyes took on a gleam. “Well, we’ll just have to find a way to
convince you stay then, won’t we? The children would so sad if you left. Oh look, there’s the
blacksmith’s. Branson should be working.”

“He’s a blacksmith?” Ari should have expected it, remembering how well built the other man was, as
opposed to the longer, slimmer frame of his older brother.

“Yes. He makes most of the town’s plows, shears, horseshoes, knives, along with one other woman.
It keeps him busy most of the time, which I suppose, is a good thing. He’s not been the same since
Marie died,” Mia sighed, shaking her head. “He’s been quieter, laughs less, doesn’t smile as much.”

“Marie was his wife? I’m so sorry to hear that,” stepping up to the gate that led to the forge, Ari
added, “But he seemed really friendly when I met him.”
“He did, didn’t he?” Mia grinned. “Come on, let’s go say hi.”

Cullen was there as well, leaning against a cluttered table as he talked to his brother, watching him work. *It should be illegal for that much muscle and gorgeousness to run in one family.* Both of them tall, the younger just a few inches shorter, one with the lean, sculpted muscle of a warrior, the other with wide, chiseled arms. Ari’s mouth went dry. Luckily, she could blame the glow of her on the heat from the heat emanating from the forge.

“Found you,” Mia sang out, all but dragging her companion inside, while the rest of the children waiting in the yard, finding a puddle just perfect for splashing in.

“Oh, hey,” Branson’s face lit up as the two women entered. “Ari, it’s good to see you. You’re looking lovely.

This time, there was no denying the blush the spread across her face. Ducking her head, she stared shyly at her hands. *Something is seriously wrong with me. Now I can’t even take a compliment without acting like a teenage girl? Although, it has been a long time since someone told me I looked nice, especially when I know I don’t. When was the last time? Rylen, maybe? I’m just out of practice. Oh jeez, now they’re all staring at me. Crap, I haven’t responded yet, have I?!!* “Thank you,” she finally managed to squeak out to everyone’s amusement.

A wrinkle creased Cullen’s brow as he watched Ari flush under Branson’s attention, his brother more than enjoying her company, flirting shamelessly with the woman. *I thought she said she wasn’t interested in relationships,* he huffed to himself. *Or maybe she just wants a casual dalliance? Is he that sort of man? No, I think he’s looking for something more. If she’s not careful, she’ll hurt him.

Feeling his old testiness rearing to the surface, Cullen interrupted their laughter, “Did you get everything you needed, Mistress Iseri?” Mia’s eyebrow rose at the formality.

Instantly sobering, Ari nodded, her hands crossed demurely in front of her. “I did, ser.”

“‘We’d best head back then. I don’t want to be on those roads too late after dark.’”

“Oh, of course. It was nice seeing you again, Branson,” she smiled at him. Taking her hand, he pressed smiling lips to her skin.

“Don’t be a stranger. You’re more than welcome up here anytime you please. See you later, Cul.”

As Mia gathered up the little ones, Cullen fell in beside Ari, leading the way back to the house. “He’s younger than you, you know,” was the first thing he blurted out.

“I figured that?” She craned her neck back to stare up at him. “What does that have anything to do with anything?”

“I… just don’t want him to get hurt,” Cullen muttered, rubbing his neck. “He’s been through a lot, and I think he’s looking for something more permanent in his life. A wife, a mother for his son. And you…”

“Cullen, I’m not trying to lead him on,” Ari’s voice carried a tinge of exasperation that immediately made him regret his outburst. “He’s a nice man, and admittedly handsome, but I have no intention of bedding him or marrying him.”

“You… think he’s handsome?” Cullen glowered.

“I do. Must run in the family,” she shrugged, oblivious to his reaction. “But I don’t mean to string
him along. I’m here to help you, and that’s it.”

He watched as she paused, waiting for Mia to catch up, before linking arms with his sister, and heading back down the road without him. Maker, what was wrong with him? I’m just worried about Branson. He was so sad when he spoke of his wife, and if he got involved with Ari, and she broke his heart—Did she say his attractiveness runs in the family? Does that mean she thinks… I’m handsome?

Clenching his fists, Cullen all but stomped down the dirt lane, his bag of newly acquired tools clanking against his back. What does it matter anyways? I’m being ridiculous.

Still, the notion that she maybe found him attractive stayed with him the rest of the day, leaving a lingering sense of curious warmth in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Cullen letting Ari suck at swordfighting for his own amusement makes me giggle.

If you’re curious how she wrapped the toddler, or just want to see the world’s grumpiest toddler with epic side eye, I posted a pic of me wearing my daughter on my tumblr, because FB memories is trying to drown me in hormonal, nostalgic tears today. Find it here.
The first day in years he had truly laughed was the day he admitted to her that he knew that she would never make a proper swordswoman, and that he had been continuing her lessons for his own amusement. Her face was a frozen mixture of shock, annoyance, fury, and surprise at his humor. “You- I- fucking- what?!” she spluttered when he presented her with the daggers. “You knew this whole time, when I was making a fool of myself and falling everywhere?”

“Yes,” he grinned, wholly unrepentant.

“I- you- gah!” Throwing her hands up in the air, Ari glare down at the blades in her hand, contemplating throwing them at him. “Infuriating, stubborn, sneaky, Ferelden-”

Cullen pressed his fist to his mouth to contain his mirth, but was unable to. Huge, aching guffaws burst from his chest, his hands resting on his knees as he bent over, laughing harder than he could ever remember laughing, until tears streamed down his cheeks. It really wasn’t that humorous, but for some reason, he found he could not stop, for every time he regained his breath and glanced up at her, her scowl would set him off again.

Unable to help the smile on her face as he collapsed into hysterics, even though it was at her expense, Ari started giggling herself. It was so good to hear him finally laugh, a warm, rich baritone that melted her heart and sent warm tingles into every part of her body. He had been fairly closed off since they had returned from town, worry over her interaction with his brother, and the lyrium, she had assumed. But now, it seemed as if he were starting to open back up to her. To be the man she knew he could still be.

“It’s not that funny,” she finally grumbled after a few minutes and he hadn’t ceased his laughter.

“I know,” he managed to cough, “But I can’t stop.”

Biting her bottom lip to hide her smile, Ari examined the daggers in her hand, tracing a finger over the simple scrollwork, glancing between them and the bow and quiver of newly fletched arrows that were laying on the ground next to his boots. “I think I might prefer the bow, to be honest.”

“Probably,” he agreed, wiping his eyes. “But you need to learn how to at least defend yourself in close combat, just in case. So we’ll do both.”

It was then she noticed the plain leather sheaths strapped to his belt, two matching, ordinary daggers of similar size within. “You fight with daggers too? Of course you do. And you’re probably a crackshot with a bow, too. You probably know how to fight with every weapon ever created.”

He grinned at her petulant tone. “I know the basics of most weapons, although I’m most comfortable with the sword. But I can hold my own with a pike, quarterstaff, mace, and axe as well. Templar training is very thorough. Come on, daggers up. We’ll go through his slow.”

The shorter blades were much easier to her to wield than the sword. Her weight was more centered over her feet, her body no longer in danger of tipping over with the encumbrance of a long blade in one hand. She expected she would be proficient enough for Cullen’s tastes soon enough; what she didn’t realize was how fun it was.
In and out of his longer reach, she darted, weaving her smaller frame around him as if she were
dancing, her blades trying their best to tap the man on his person. Except she couldn’t even get close.
Noting her frustrated scowl, Cullen chuckled at her. “Did you think I would make it that easy?
You’ll have to try harder than that. You may be smaller and nimbler than me, but I—” He whirled
around, pressing her back to his chest, wrapping one arm around her waist, the other holding a
dagger against her neck. “I have the advantage of years of training.”

“Show off,” she huffed, trying to ignore the growing warmth in her belly, or the masculine scent of
his skin, so close to her- pine, earth, sweat, and a hint of elderflower and oakmoss buried beneath.

“Allow me the indulgence,” he laughed softly, his warm breath tickling her ear.

“I think you’ve had enough indulgences where it comes to mocking my battle prowess,” giggling,
she sharply elbowed him in his stomach.

“Ow!” Releasing her, Cullen rubbed his abused skin, a sheepish smile on his lips. “Perhaps you are
right. Although Maker knows you’ve teased me enough. I have to do something to return the favor.”

“Yeah, yeah,” tossing her braid over one shoulder, Ari planted her feet in the way he had shown her.
“More teaching me to knock you on your ass, less talking.”

Cullen was more than happy to oblige her.

***

Two days later, Ari dropped his lyrium to three-quarter rations. It was then his symptoms became a
little more obvious- his fork would tremble in his hand, a cry at night would rouse her from her sleep,
he would poke at his food, leaving more and more uneaten.

“Where are the potatoes?” He asked one night, frowning down at his plate.

“You haven’t really been eating them anyways,” she pointed out. “Plus, the combination of
vegetables and meat will be better for you. More nutrient dense.”

“More what?” Cullen shook his head. More of her Earth nonsense, he was willing to bet. Along with
her insistence on washing his hands with soap several times a day, her habit of bathing in the nearby
stream more than once a week, and a dozen of other little odd things that he had never heard of
people doing until she came along. “The plate looks empty without them.”

“I’m not going to cook things you’re not going to eat just to make the plate look normal,” she
snorted. “Now, eat.” His temper was another thing that was more noticeable now as well. The
irritability she was expecting had finally surfaced, and she found he complained a lot more than she
would have thought. Maybe I’m just being harsh on him. After everything he’s been through, he
deserves to complain at least a little.

“Are these beets? I really don’t care for beets.”

Never mind. I’m going to smother him in his sleep. “I’ll remember that for next time. Any other
requests, my lord?”

Snapping his head up at the acid in her voice, Cullen had the grace and presence of mind to blush.
“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I have been acting like a child, haven’t I?”

“A bit,” she chirped, pleased that he was apologizing. “But it’s to be expected.”
“I’ll try to be more mindful in the future,” he grimaced. Back in Skyhold, he remember how his moods used to swing violently from high to low. He vividly remembered the day he yelled during the war council, slamming his gauntlets so hard on the table that he fractured the heavy oak, stunning both Josephine and the Inquisitor into frightened silence. Several times, he had made recruits cry with his scathing words, terrifying most of the scouts until they resorted to drawing straws to see which one of them would be his runner for the day. Maker, he hoped he never reached that level again. To see fear in her eyes, to know that it was he that caused it-

“It’s okay, Cullen. You don’t have anyone to impress here. It’s just you and me. So you can tantrum all you like. Just know if you do,” stabbing a bite of roasted vegetables, she waved it as menacingly as she could, “I’m going to cook beets for supper every night from now on.”

“Fair enough,” he chuckled. “I’m fairly sure that my mother used the same tactic on me.”

“Smart woman.”

But Ari wasn’t like the others he had known, not the type of woman to be cowed by sharp words or a fierce, unruly temper. No, he had seen the steel that lay underneath her soft exterior. If anything, he was sure that she could deliver anything he pressed on her tenfold back to him. Not that he cared to find out. She was too kind and patient with him already for him to test her any further.

“You’re getting the hang of your daggers,” he thought back to their sparring session earlier that day. She had finally managed to land one small blow against his shoulder, shocking her into stilling long enough for him to sweep her feet from out under her, knocking back into the dirt. Her glare had been worth it. He knew that some of the templars that accepted her help back in Skyhold had been sufficiently intimidated by the tiny woman, but he- he just found amusement in her frustration. When was the last time he had laughed and smiled so freely as he had these last few weeks with her? And she never stay irritated for very long with him either. “Tomorrow, we’ll try out the bow.”

“Now that sounds like something I can do,” Ari said. “I took a bit of archery years ago in school. I don’t think I was too bad? But I guess we’ll see.”

“I suppose we will. Play a game of chess tonight?”

“No.”

“Please? I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

Staring up into his dark, amber eyes, wide and open and pleading, Ari could feel the way his voice tugged on her heart. Why does he have to fucking love chess so much? Why can’t he like checkers, or go fish? “Ugh. Stop looking at me like that. You’re worse than Atlas begging for food. Yes, you,” she scowled down at the dog, who innocently cocked his head to one side as if to say, ‘who, me?’ “Fine. One game.”

***

To no one’s surprise, Ari had lost that game of chess, so Cullen had retreated in his victory to his chair by the window, bent over a small piece of wood, while Ari had resorted to grumbling while she viciously mended one of her skirts.

The next morning, she finally saw what he had been up to, since he wouldn’t tell her the night before. He was always the first one awake, a force of habit, he had told her, and that morning, while he was out on his morning run, she had stumbled across what she thought was a rock. Bending over to pick it up, she smiled. It was a piece of wood, whittled into the crude shape of a mouse. A gift for
me? When was the last time anyone had gotten her a gift just because? She couldn’t even remember.

Cullen found her humming an unfamiliar song when he returned, standing over the stove, her hair covered by the scarf she sometimes wore, the ends swaying against the small of her back. Leaning against the doorframe, he drank in the quiet serenity the scene offered. Once, he had imagine this exact view. Except, instead of a dark haired healer, it had been a curly redhead with the Fade written into her left hand. Evelyn, who would have been cooking breakfast, maybe with a belly swollen with his child. Normally, the idea of the Inquisitor and the lost future he had mourned that he thought he’d share with her sent a suffocating wave of pain through his tight chest. But today, he felt… nothing. Only a gentle contentment that this is where he ended up. “Smells good.”

Ari jumped at the sound of his voice. “God, you scared me,” she gasped, startled from her reverie.

“Sorry,” he grinned. “You frighten so easily.”

“Is that why you chose a mouse?” Ari cocked one eyebrow at him.

Flushing underneath the layer of sweat that covered his face and torso, his skin and shirt soaked from the dip he had taken in the stream, Cullen brought one hand up to the back of his neck. “You found it? Did… you like it?”

“I did,” she pointed to the windowsill in front of her, where the little mouse now resided. “I’ve named him Pico.”

“Pico? You named a piece of wood?”

“He’s a mouse, not just wood,” brandishing her spoon like a weapon, Ari scowled up at him. “And I love him.”

So strange. “In that case, I’ll make you more, if you’d like,” Cullen promised. “Any special requests?”

“Maybe a mabari? Oh! A nug!”

“A nug? But they’re so-” he stopped short when he saw her face. Maker, it was like Leliana all over again. “Lovely,” he finished dryly.

“You’re a horrible liar, Cullen,” Ari giggled. “But yes, a nug. Or a fennec.”

“I will try. It’s been awhile since I did any whittling, I’m surprised the mouse came out looking like a mouse at all.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you,” she smiled sweetly. “Breakfast is done, if you want to take a seat.”

He always appreciated that Ari never made a fuss over his withdrawal symptoms. She simply ignored most of them, the only sign that she acknowledged he was struggling shown in the array of potions she left by his plate at every meal. Downing the yellow, minty tinged concoction she had set on the table that morning, Cullen sighed in relief as the pounding of his head began to recede, the tension in his neck lessening somewhat. It would be enough, to help him keep his focus during her archery lesson after breakfast.

“Alright,” pushing himself away from his mostly empty plate, Cullen motioned for her to follow. “Let’s see what you got.”

Outside, Ari took up the bow, stringing one of arrows and standing in front of the makeshift target he
had placed by the stables. Raising it to her shoulder level, she pulled back the string and-

Groaned as the arrow flopped to the ground.

Stifling a laugh, Cullen walked up behind her. “Hold it like this.” Warm hands gripped her arms, sliding down her skin until they reached her wrist. Ari froze as he stepped even closer to her, feeling the steady beat of his heart through the thin layers of linen and cotton that separated them. *He can feel my heart. I know he can, I can barely think, it’s so loud.* “Wrap your fingers around the grip this way,” his voice dropped to a soft murmur. “And when you pull the string back, keep your elbow high, that’s it.”

This close to her, he could smell the sweet scent of her hair, lemons and lavender, filling his senses. And her body, soft, molded to his torso. She fit against him perfectly. “Like this?” Her voice vibrated through his chest, filling him with a sweet ache that made him want to bury his face in the crook of her neck, drink in her presence, taste her skin- “Cullen?”

“Y-yes,” lifting his face from where it had been steadily drifting down, he gave himself a little shake. “Now, release.”

Exhaling a deep breath, Ari let the arrow fly, squealing as it hit the very edge of the target. “I did it! Cullen, look!” Spinning around and giggling, practically bouncing in her excitement, she turned towards him, and faltered.

They were standing mere centimeters away from each other, her breasts just barely grazing his broad chest. Staring up at him, her dark eyes widened, pink lips parting in surprise as she took in the flaring of his nostrils inhaling a sharp breath, the intense, topaz gleam of his eyes, searching her face. “You did,” he replied huskily.

“I…” *Kiss me. Or I should just kiss him. No. Don’t do it, don’t do it. Dammit!* With every ounce of self control she had left, Ari swallowed, and took a step back. “I suppose I need more practice though,” she shifted, suddenly nervous and uncertain.

Lowering arms that he hadn’t even realize were still raised, Cullen took a deep, shaky breath. “Yes, you do. But it was an excellent first attempt. Can you do it again?” He hoped not. Then he would have an excuse to wrap his arms around her again, and- *And what? We’ve been through this before, he growled to himself. It’s just the withdrawals and lack of a bed partner that’s playing with my mind. You cannot think of her like that. You can’t.*

Meanwhile, Ari was engaged in her own self-flagellation as she attempted to recreate her first hit. *He’s your patient! Stop ogling and swooning over him. You have a job to do, and sleeping with Cullen Rutherford will not help anything and you know it. You’re not what he needs. Not today, not ever.*

Whining softly, Atlas laid his head on his paws, watching the two humans as they struggled against their urges. Huffing his breath, almost as if he were sighing in frustration, the dog closed his eyes, and decided to sleep rather than witness the painful awkwardness in front of him.

Chapter End Notes

*I'm loving their interaction this chapter. It all flowed so easily. And lol, even the dog is fed up with their shit.*
Things changed after that. Both of them withdrew into the professional relationship they had once carried on, the Commander to the healer. Like the pressure and electricity from an incoming thunderstorm, so did the heavy tension in the air hang between the two, both of them unsure of what to do, what to say to ease the stifling atmosphere. The comfortable camaraderie they had once shared had faded away, leaving only silence amidst stilted conversation.

And yet, every few mornings, a new carved animal would appear on the windowsill. First a nug, then a fennec. A mabari, a horse, a rabbit. It was a way for Cullen to try and focus his mind at night, when the craving were at their strongest. He could hear the faint song of the lyrium, though it was locked away in Ari’s room and muffled by the pile of blankets she kept over the chest. But he knew, he knew it was there. His hands shook more as the days passed and his rations decreased, his body rapidly descending into darkness.

The week she finally put him on quarter rations was perhaps the worst. He remembered this feeling all too well- his mouth, dry and stuffed with cotton, his stomach, constantly rolling and churning, every joint in his body aching no matter what he did. Her potions helped take most of the edge off. Sometimes, he wondered, had Ari been there the first time, if he would be past this by now. Or if he had been stronger. Or if the Inquisitor had more faith in him.

His mood could be described best as atrocious. Barely speaking to Ari, ignoring the pain and uncertainty in her eyes when he would snap at her over frivolous matters- this was not who he was. But the only other option was allowing himself to feel again, and that just brought with it a maelstrom of emotions that he was not prepared to deal with yet, not with everything else going on.

Thumbing the little sheep that he had carved the night before, Ari watched him through the kitchen window as he forced his stiff body through his old routine, pausing frequently to catch his breath. He had lost so much weight these last few weeks, she sighed, much more than any of the others she had treated. From her perch, she could see the outline of his ribs, the gauntness of his body where firm muscle once lay. His nausea and recent vomiting were more severe as well. It worried her. He needed to be strong, going into these last critical days, at least mentally and emotionally if not physically, but there was that damn wall that had sprung up between them that she had no idea how to even begin breaking down.

Was this her fault? Did she make him uncomfortable that day? Should she say anything? Where would she even begin? I apologize if my raging hormones made you feel awkward, Commander. I swear I’m trying to be professional. Ugh. But she had to do something. The way he was now, closed off, trying to be the same stoic man he had once been- he was putting too much pressure on himself. He needed to know it was okay to ask for help, to lean on her if he needed. That’s what she was there for. Although you’ve been pretty clipped and curt around him too, her mind pointed out.

I just don’t want to hurt him. Not that he even sees me like that. But, still.

A loud clang jerked her from her thoughts, Cullen’s sword and shield falling to the ground as he dropped to one knee, his entire body trembling. Racing outside, Ari tripped down the stairs, almost falling over her skirts as she sprinted towards him.

“I’m fine,” he gritted out before she even reached him.
Slowing her pace, she steadily kept approaching him, and kneeled in the dirt beside his discarded weapons. “It’s pretty warm out here,” she remarked casually. “The house is much cooler, if you’d like to come inside.”

“I said I’m fine,” Cullen all but spat at her. Maker, how he hated himself like this. But try as he might, he could not get past the shame of it all. His weakness. His failure to-

“Alright, that’s it. You’re coming inside, now.” One small hand, surprisingly strong for its size, wrapped around his forearm, tugging him upwards. “I’m not going to let you exhaust yourself at this stage. Training can wait.”

“I need-”

“You need to listen to me, Cullen,” Ari glared back at him, ignoring the clenching of his jaw and fists. “This is why I’m here. To help you through this. But if you don’t listen to me, there’s not a damn thing I can do.”

The tic in his face jerked and twitched as he ground his teeth, thinking of something to retort. But upon glancing up and seeing the fire in her eyes, he thought better of it, and sagged against her. She was right. He had to help himself before anything, and wallowing in self-pity would get him nowhere.

“Alright.”

Ari sighed in relief. While she waited for his response, the petite healer had been contemplating on how best to knock his stubborn ass unconscious, and whether or not she could drag him inside. The very idea was daunting. “Thank you.”

Staying close in case he needed her, she followed him back inside the house, setting a basin of water and a cloth on the table so he could clean up a bit. “What?” he asked when he finally noticed her staring at him with an odd expression on her face.

“Your hair,” she replied. “It’s getting long.”

One of his hands reached up to brush a lock of curls behind his ear. It was true, he hadn’t had a trim since the week they had left Skyhold. He honestly hadn’t really noticed it until now, either. “I don’t suppose you know how to cut it, do you?”

“Not the foggiest,” Ari shook her head. “I could ask Mia, or Rosalie to come out here and do it. I’m sure neither would mind.”

“No,” vehemently shaking his head, Cullen scowled down at the dirty cloth in his hand. The last thing he wanted was for his family to see him like this.

“Didn’t think so,” she sighed. “Well, I could just tie it back for now.” Pulling an extra leather thong from her pocket, she moved to stand behind him, combing through his curls with her fingers, lightly scratching the scalp as she went. Ari swallowed a giggle. The man was practically purring under her hands. Massage might help him relieve some of the tension, too. Slowly, methodically, she worked her way over his head, pressing her fingertips into each of the pressure points she knew, easing up when she felt him tense beneath her, rubbing deeper as he relaxed into her touch, making her way over his brow, across his temples, and down his neck.

“Andraste preserve me, but that feels amazing,” he muttered as his head lolled against his chest.

“You carry so much stress and tension around, like everything is only your weight to bear,” Ari
softly murmured. “But you don’t have to, not anymore. I’m here; let me help.”

“I… don’t know how,” he admitted.

“Well,” sweeping her hands over his shoulders, Ari dug her thumbs into his upper back, grinning as he yelped at the sudden pain. “You can start talking to me, for starters. Tell me how you’re feeling. Usually, I can guess, but it’d be easier if you tell me.”

“I think I can do that.”

“…Well, Ari,” she continued after a moment’s silence in a mock baritone, “You see what’s been ailing me is…?”

“Right now?” Peering back at her, Cullen groaned at the determination in her face. “Fine. Headache, joints ache, nausea is bearable right now, dizzy, my chest feels like it might explode, and I feel like I just ran fifty leagues in full plate.”

“And the cravings?” The withering look he gave her was answer enough. “Okay, okay, don’t look at me like that,” she grumbled. “I was just asking. Your pulse is a little high. I’d like for you to lay down for a bit. I’m going to make something, see if that helps with your chest and breathing.”

Resisting the urge to protest, instead Cullen shuffled obediently to his room, throwing his shirt into one corner and collapsing onto the mattress. This did help, some. Perhaps he was overextending himself. Late summer in Ferelden was always rather humid, while he was used to living in the Frostbacks these last four years. At least it wasn’t Kirkwall, in his full templar regalia.

Ari softly padded in a few minutes later, pausing to pop a window open and draw the curtains over it, blocking out as much sunlight as possible. “Feel any better?” she asked quietly.

“A bit,” he cracked one eye open to watch her. “More potions?”

“Your favorite,” she smiled, perching on the edge of his bed. “This one first. Then this.” Knowing he wouldn’t accept her help, no matter how much his arms shook as he took the vials, she kept her hands folded in her lap. “Maybe I shouldn’t go to town tomorrow. We should be able to make do with what we have on hand.”

“No, go,” Cullen insisted. “You deserve some sort of break from me. And we don’t know when you’ll be able to go again.”

It was true. In just another week, he would take his last dose. And then she wouldn’t be able to leave his side for anything, until he began regaining his strength. It would be better to go now, while he still had the ability to feed and relieve himself without her help, but she couldn’t shake the feeling of dread that was twisting her heart. “You’re not a burden, Cullen,” Ari rolled her eyes. “I don’t need a break from you.”

“I would beg to differ. And take Atlas.”

“No. He should stay here with you, in case. You’ve taught me enough that I should be able to defend myself long enough to get away, if bandits do come after me.”

“You are the most difficult, stubborn woman I have ever met.”

“I’d have to be, to put up with grouchy, thickheaded templars such as you,” she stuck out her tongue at him. Unable to help himself at the childish display, Cullen chuckled.
“I yield, my lady.”

“About damn time. Now take a nap. I’ll have something light for supper made by the time you wake up.”

***

Luck was on her side for the journey into town, for she passed no other travelers on the road. Most of the townsfolk were busy with the harvest, almost the entire population out in the fields, cutting and bundling the sheaves of grain, including the entire Rutherford clan, save the youngest children, who were staying with an elderly widow within the village proper.

Mia had left her an envelope, tucked under the mat, with an apology that they would miss her, including a sneaky hint that Branson would still be in town at the forge. Oh good lord, Ari shook her head as she read the letter. They are bound and determined, aren’t they?

Tucking the rest of the envelope that contained several of Cullen’s favorite recipes from his childhood into her bag, she headed the rest of the way into town, gathering the supplies she needed in record time for that worrisome itch, like a shadow, still lingered in the back of her mind, a constant drone of what if, what if. What if bandits come and he’s too weak to fend them off by himself? Or a bear? Do bears attack people for no reason in real life? Or what if there’s a fire? Or if he falls, and hurts himself? Her mind was running in overdrive with all the possible worst case scenarios running through her head. Logically, she knew he was a grown man, a leader who had led one of the greatest armies Thedas had seen, a fully trained and capable warrior. But he was so much more than that to her. He was-

No. Don’t even go there.

Securing her purchases in her saddlebags, Ari glanced towards the town square. It would be rude to just leave without at least stopping by to say hello, wouldn’t it? Then again, she remembered Cullen’s admonition to not break his little brother’s heart all too well. I’ll just pop in for a second. I need to hurry back anyways.

With one hand, she grabbed the reins of her horse and led the docile mare towards the sound of the blacksmith’s shop.

“Ari! You came by!” Branson strode out of his shop almost as soon as she was within view of the yard, grinning widely at her. Draping his scorched and stained leather apron over one post, he ran one hand through his sooty, close cropped curls. “I wasn’t sure if you would, with the girls being out in the field.”

“I figured it would be rude to just skip town without at least saying hi,” she smiled. “How is everyone?”

“Good, good. Amelia lost a tooth two days ago and she’s desperate to show you,” he chuckled. “Can you stay a bit? I have a bit of a break right now.” Warm amber eyes with the same cajoling, hopeful gleam as his brother’s gazed down at her as he shyly took one of her hands. “Please?”

If Ari were anyone else, if she had any less self-restraint than what she possessed, she would have stayed. How could she not? Besides the fact he was physically attractive, Branson had proved himself to be a kind, considerate man, an excellent father to his son, with a disarming charm that could bring a woman to her knees.

"I can’t, I’m sorry,” she squeezed his hand. “I need to get back before sundown."
“True,” he sighed. “Best for you not to be on those roads after dark. I’ve talked to the guard, and they have patrols out, but that far out, they can’t do much. Well, maybe next time you come to town? I was hoping I could,” his voice trailed off in a mumble.

“Sorry, didn’t catch that?”

“I was hoping,” he sucked in a deep breath, studiously avoiding her face, “I could… court you. If you would let me. I- You’re a beautiful woman, Ari. And sweet, gentle. Aiden and the rest of the clan adore you. I adore you. I know I don’t have much to offer in the way of material things, but I have a steady trade. You would want for nothing, I swear to you.” The rest of his words tumbled out, one on top of the other, in a breathless rush.

“Branson…” She should have seen this coming, shouldn’t she have? After all, things like marriage and courting were so much more serious here than they were back on Earth, especially out here in the country. “I’m flattered, honestly.” Her heart clenched as his face dropped. “But,” taking a step back, she stared down at her hands, fiddling with the fraying laces on her dress. “I’ve already been married. Twice, actually. I don’t think I can do it again. Relationships and I, well,” she barked a sharp, mirthless laugh. “We don’t work out so well. If I did want to settle down again though, you would be my first choice.”

“Truly?” A little of the light returned to his eyes at that. “Well. I guess I can understand that. I had hoped… Doesn’t matter. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me.” Holding up on her hands, he flourished a grand, courtly bow with a crooked smirk for added effect. “Safe ride back, Ari.”

“I’ll see you next time, yeah?” With one last, lingering touch against his arm, Ari smiled, and turned to leave.

Of all the cursed luck., Branson groaned as he watched her mount her horse. Oh well. Win some, lose some. Maybe I can get Cullen to help change her mind. Suppose I better get back to work now.

***

There was maybe a mile left before she reached the cottage, when she saw a chocolate brown streak racing toward her at breakneck speed.


Her heart hammering against her ribs hard enough that a part of her mind wondered if her ribs would shatter, Ari kicked the horse into a frenzied gallop, pushing the mare faster and harder than the poor creature had ever worked before. The wind streamed through her hair, pulling tendrils loose from her bun, the only sound left in her world the steady beat of hooves against packed dirt and the frantic litany of no no no no no in her mind.

The cottage was dark. There was no candlelight coming from any of the windows. Making a brief, fleeting mental note to give the horse an extra portion of oats later, Ari didn’t even bother securing her reins, practically throwing herself down onto the ground, her boots scrambling in the gravel as she fought for purchase and sprinted inside.

“Cullen! Where are- No!”

She found him almost as soon as she passed over the threshold. Lying face down in the kitchen. Not moving. Not breathing.

Maker, God, if you exist, if you ever existed, don’t let him die.
Chapter End Notes

:O
“Cullen? Cullen!”

The light filtered in through his eyelids as he slowly blinked them open. Shielding his face from the sun, he tilted his head up from where he lay, cocooned in the tall grasses of the meadow.

“Evelyn? There you are. I was waiting on you.” Giggling, the former Inquisitor threw herself down next to him, dust motes puffing up into the air and dancing around her like a golden halo. One palm rested against his sternum, idly carding through his chest hair that was visible through the open necked tunic he wore, a lazy smile on her lips.

“Apologies, darling. I got caught up with your sister. How are you feeling?”

“Good,” he sighed at the sound of her smooth, cultured voice. “That cloud looks rather like a bunny.”

“Such nonsense,” she laughed. “You’re being awfully silly today.”

“It’s a good day for it.” Wrapping his arms around her lean, muscled frame, he rolled over with her until she was pinned beneath him, auburn curls almost glowing in the light, splayed out across the trampled grass. “I’ve missed you.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

His breath caught at the sound of her voice, at the raw desire he heard thickening her accent. It was odd. Evelyn really wasn’t bold when it came to physical affection; in fact, her attitude towards his displays were always bordering on indifferent. But perhaps it was just her stress and worry? And now that everything was over, maybe she would respond-

Like this. Groaning, he felt her fingers tug on his hair as she finally grew impatient with his hesitancy and dragged his face down to hers.

He was drowning. Never before had a kiss felt like this, like he was standing in the eye of a storm, lightning and waves crashing all around him. His blood burned and all he wanted was for it to never end.

“Cullen,” she moaned into his mouth. “More. Please.”

Tightening his grip around her waist, he felt her silky, obsidian hair brush his face, her hands clutching the front of his shirt closer, closer, as if she were trying to meld their bodies into one being. “Ari, love, I need you.”

“Cullen.”
“Yes, Ari.”

“Dammit, Cullen!”

“What?” Pulling back from her, he frowned as she slapped him in the center of his chest, hard. “What was that for?”

“Don’t you dare do this to me, Cullen Stanton Rutherford! Wake up!”

Ari jerked back as the man finally gasped, his throat constricting around the sudden breath of air, limbs flailing, body shuddering, and promptly threw up all over them both. Wearily, she shoved him onto his side, keeping him propped up with her back, dropping her head to rest on his shoulder. Her arms felt like lead, the massive influx of adrenaline seeping out of her body as the knowledge that he was alive permeated her fogged mind.

God, that was close. Far too close. Minutes that felt like hours passed while he finished purging his stomach of whatever was left inside, his skull thumping against the wooden floor as he rolled back over, his breaths harsh and labored. At some point, Atlas had crept back in through the still open front door, and laid his head on Cullen’s leg, quietly waiting.

“Water?” She eventually murmured. He nodded, a tiny twitch of his chin. Pushing herself up, Ari found several wet cloths and brought that to him, along with a cup of water. “Slowly, now,” she held the rim to his lips, half of the liquid sloshing down his chin instead of into his mouth. Dabbing his mouth clean, she set herself to work wiping off the rest of his soiled skin, carefully pulling his shirt over his head and balling it up, tossing it to one side. Her own clothes could wait until later. “Can you stand? The bed would be more comfortable.”

“Think… so,” he rasped.

For once, he didn’t protest or grimace at the offer of help, and simply wrapped his arm around her shoulders, letting her bear their combined weight into his room. His mind was still hazy, the images he had seen before waking quickly slipping away like sand through his fingers. He could remember a laugh, warmth, fire, and-

His eyes met hers as he laid down upon his bed, guilty at the sight of exhaustion and his own sick written all over her. “Sorry,” he croaked.

“Hush,” she ran a cool hand over his brow, brushing his hair back from his sweat slicked forehead. “You have nothing to apologize for, Cullen. I’m just glad you’re okay. If anything happened to you, I…” She shook her head. “Sleep for a bit. I’ll go start some broth, in case you feel like eating in a bit. Any other symptoms? Your heart is still racing.”

Reaching up, he covered her hand where it lay against his neck. So small, he marveled. And yet so strong. “Just tired,” he muttered.

“Alright. Rest, then. I’ll be in the other room if you need me.” Her fingers slipped away from his, leaving him to the muffled silence and cool darkness. It should have been comforting, and yet all he wanted was to ask her to stay.

Rubbing his bruised chest- what had she done to him anyways?- his dream came rushing back in a flood of colors. Evelyn. The field. The kiss. Ari. Why had his mind turned to her? Just a fever dream. It doesn’t mean anything. It makes sense that I would have thought about her, since it’s just been us two these last few months, and I haven’t seen the Inquisitor in just as long.

Still, he couldn’t get the feeling of her in her arms out of his head. The way she had responded to his
kiss, the tempestuous ardor that rippled beneath the surface. Would that be how she would return his affection in reality? Unbridled passion, dark desire borne of desperation? He couldn’t imagine her being passive in anything she ever did, especially in love. She wasn’t a noble, bred to be restrained and calm. Not like Evelyn. Closing his eyes, he could hear her moan into his mouth, her tongue teasing his lips, fingers pulling him closer, the scent of lemons and lavender almost overwhelming his senses. What kind of sounds would she make with that sweet voice of hers if he tasted her?

*I’ve officially gone mad. I don’t want to kiss her, much less bed her. It wasn’t real. Just a dream. Just a dream.*

But why could he still feel the imprint of her hands against his face?

***

Ari collapsed in her bed that night after she checked on Cullen for the final time. He still slept, albeit fitfully, only waking once since his ordeal to take a few small sips of broth before slipping back into the Fade once more. Despite her own exhaustion, she knew that it would be awhile before she found rest tonight. Her mind kept replaying the sight of him, hollow, unmoving, spread out across the floor.

It definitely wasn’t the first time she had performed CPR. It wasn’t even the first time she had to resuscitate someone she cared about, for she still remembered in perfect clarity the day her little cousin had fallen into the pool, and almost drowned. So why had this occasion struck so much fear into her heart? It didn’t make sense, how much Cullen had come to mean to her in such a short amount of time.

*He’s not even my type. I like outgoing men. Charming, with a goofy sense of humor. Like Branson. Cullen is too much like me. It’s just because he’s handsome. And he’s been through a lot. Oh, who am I kidding. It’s so much more than that. I’m in love. Fuck.*

Staring up at the ceiling, Ari debated what to do with her new revelation. She felt excited, for new love was always a wondrous thing. Anxious, for she didn’t know how he felt about her. Dread. Because she knew she couldn’t do a damn thing about it. How much of her failed marriages were more than partially her fault? If by some miracle Cullen did feel the same way, how long would it be before she got bored? Or until she messed up in some other way, and they fell apart? The man had lived through enough trauma and heartbreak; she would not be the one to add to it.

*I’ll just have to suck it up and ignore it.* That thought she firmly planted in her mind, steeling her resolve as she drifted off to sleep.

Only to forget it just a few short hours later as soon as she was roused by a crash, and a sharp cry.

Skidding barefoot across the house, Ari burst into Cullen’s room, expecting to see him on the floor, in the midst of a seizure, or something of the like. But he was still in bed, still sound asleep, the sheets tangled around his bare torso and legs, a pewter candle holder askew on the floor, the entire scene appearing as if a struggle had taken place. “Nightmare,” she muttered to herself. *Should let him sleep it off.*

If only she hadn’t looked at his face.

Agony was etched into every line surrounding his eyes and mouth, his tendons stark, straining against his sunken skin, hands clawing at the blankets, grasping for something he couldn’t find. *What are you reliving every night, you poor man? Kinloch? Kirkwall? Haven?* She knew it would be risky to wake him up, but neither could she walk away. Not anymore. Not knowing what she knew.
Gingerly, she perched on the edge of his bed, close enough to where she could touch his face. "Cullen," she murmured, running her fingers through his soft, golden locks. "It's not real. Just a dream. Cullen, wake up."

Still, he slept. His limbs thrashed around, head jerking from side to side. "Leave me," he gritted out. "No, I will not listen. You will not have me, demon!"

*Kinloch, then.* Scooting closer to him, Ari slid his head onto her lap, continuing to trace gentle circles into his scalp, smoothing the furrows in his brow as gently as she was able. It seemed only natural to hum an idle tune as she waited for him to relax, for his nightmare to pass, and somehow, the song gave rise to words that drifted back to her from her life before.

_I remember all of the things that I thought I wanted to be_
So desperate to find a way out of my world and finally breathe
Right before my eyes I saw that my heart it came to life
This ain't easy, it's not meant to be
Every story has its scars
But when the pain cuts you deep
When the night keeps you from sleeping
Just look and you will see
That I will be your remedy
When the world seems so cruel
And your heart makes you feel like a fool
I promise you will see
That I will be, I will be your remedy
No river is too wide or too deep for me to swim to you
Come whatever I'll be the shelter that won't let the rain come through
Your love, it is my truth
And I will always love you

***

Ari was roused the next morning by Atlas' nose in her face. She had never left his room, her muscles cramped from sleeping curled up in the small chair in the corner, where she had moved to after he finally fell into a peaceful slumber. A pair of amber eyes watched as she stretched, yawning and rubbing her bleary eyes.

“Ari?”

“Oh! You’re awake,” she smiled drowsily over at him. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than I have in awhile, to be honest. I think I actually managed to sleep last night,” he replied, his muscles still drained with fatigue. His head and body hurt as always, but it was a dull ache instead of the usual sharp, stabbing pain that he had grown accustomed to over the last two weeks. “Did you… sleep there?”

“You were, um, having a bad nightmare,” she blushed. *Why is she blushing?* “So I sat with you for a bit until you calmed. I’m sorry, I know you prefer your privacy, but I-”

“Ari. It’s alright. I imagine it’s because of your efforts that I feel so well rested, especially after yesterday,” he interrupted her rush of apologies with a rueful smile. “I’m sorry about everything,” Cullen winced at the memory of his vomit staining her skirts and the floor. She must have bathed him at some point while he slept as well, for he could detect no sour stench on his skin or hair.
“I told you, you have nothing to apologize for. Things happen. It’s normal during the withdrawal process.” Bending over him, she quickly checked his vitals, bobbing her head in a satisfied nod, pleased with what she found. “Much better this morning. I’ll go make some tea and reheat some broth. Sit up if you like, but I’d like you to take it easy today. Stay inside, rest.”

Cullen looked positively horrified. “Stay inside all day?”

“Yes,” she smirked. “All day, Commander. I’ll even play chess with you, if you behave.”

“I suppose I have no choice now,” he smiled. “Are we still moving ahead with next week?”

His last day on lyrium. She didn’t even want to think about it now. “We’ll see. If your body seems like it’s doing well enough between then and now, yes. But we’ll take it day by day, okay?”

Nodding, his eyes followed her as she slipped out from his room, his head turning to one side to stare at the wall, nose pressed into his hair. It is ridiculously long right now. Maybe I should just ask her to hack whatever she can off. Not like anyone else is here to- Why does my hair smell like her? Lavender and lemons. Closing his eyes, he took a deeper breath of the sweet, light scent. He could almost remember…

There were demons, as usual. Taunting, tormenting. The glow of lyrium, casting shadows on bloodstained walls, the screams of his brothers echoing in the chamber above. But then, light. Soothing hands. Warmth. A promise that he didn’t understand, yet trusted implicitly. And… music? Frowning, he tried to grasp at the last vestiges of the memory, but it faded as soon as it was within reach.

Nothing made sense anymore. Not his dreams, not the fact that he had been so pleased to see Ari in his room that morning, the fact that she was that worried over his sleep that she would subject herself to even more discomfort than she already had. A smile crept across his face as Atlas leapt into bed with him. "Worried you too, didn't I?" The dog woofed. "Good thing she's here, isn't it?" Cocking his head to one side, the mabari gave him a disapproving look, then curled up next to him. Idiot, the look seemed to say.

***

Ari stared down at his body, her hand hovering just above his brow, the heat from his skin blistering even without contact. His first day completely off lyrium had started off normally. A slight fever. Vomit. A small seizure. Things she had expected. But the fever had not responded to any of her attempts to reduce it. What she wouldn't give for Tylenol. Or even some damn ice. Instead, it had risen, steadily, until now, when she feared the worst if she could not get it under control. Permanent brain damage, or... We're so close to the end. Not now, please, not now. What else can I do?!

There was one thing left she hadn’t tried. But if nothing else had worked, the chances of this working weren’t in his favor either. It’s all I have left.

And so she stripped out of her clothes, down to her smalls, as Atlas laid down at the foot of the bed to watch over them, and tucked her body around his, trying to cover as much of his scorching skin with hers as possible. “I’m trying, buddy,” she whispered to the mabari, who whined softly in response. “Come on, Cullen. Come back to me.”

Chapter End Notes
He's alive! And another cliffhanger! Weee!
His mouth felt drier than the deserts of western Orlais, his head stuffed with cotton. Blinking the crust from his eyes, Cullen squinted his eyes against the thin ray of sun peeking through the curtains. He was warm, but not unpleasantly so. Fumbling about in the sheets, his hand grasped a slender arm.

Ari was pressed up against his side, snuggled into the arm that he had wrapped around her, familiar and soft, but something was different. Shifting his legs, he realized he could feel all of her. She was clad in only her smalls. Blushing at the primal response of his body, Cullen tried to force the sensation of her smooth skin from his mind, until it was of course the only thing he could think about. The last time he had woken up next to an almost naked woman was…

Evelyn. But Ari was nothing like the woman he had once thought he loved. She was soft, where the Inquisitor had been hard, with dark hair like silk and golden, unblemished skin instead of auburn curls and alabaster limbs. She was all fiery passion and cool water, burning and yet soothing all at once. He could never have pictured, though he had tried and almost tricked himself into seeing, Evelyn in a tiny, rustic cabin such as this one, singing under her breath while she prepared supper the way Ari did, nor could he imagine the Ostwick noble on her hands and knees scrubbing the floors, darning socks, or happily rolling around on the ground with Atlas, giggling at the mabari’s affectionate kisses.

How had he never truly seen it before? The delicate strength of this woman laying next to him. He had known, objectively, that she was pretty, with her long, straight black hair, her high, chiseled cheekbones, her dark, warm brown eyes. But this morning, he was made aware of how devastatingly beautiful she was to him, the sunlight illuminating the faint splatter of freckles that covered the bridge of her nose, how fragile she felt, her tiny figure tucked against his bulk, and suddenly he was overtaken with an overwhelming need to wrap his arms around her, protect her, to keep her safe from-

From what? I’m as weak as a newborn pup. If anything, she’s the one protecting me. Caring for me like, like-

Like what? A healer to her patient? He felt it was more than that, the lengths that she went to, ensuring he was comfortable and content. Bringing back recipes from his sisters just so she could cook his favorite meals that reminded him of his childhood. Making sure he always had a collection of wood, keeping his whittling knife sharp and ready. Playing chess with him, even though she was terrible at it. Did she… care for him? What did he feel for her?

Could he even trust his intuition? He had thought he knew that Evelyn was the one for him, the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. What if he made the same mistake with her?

Shifting in her sleep, Ari’s nose brushed up against the hairs of his chest, her warm breath fluttering over his skin. Maker’s breath, what is that smell? Is that- me?

Cullen groaned at the realization that yes, the stench that filled the air of the tiny bedroom was indeed, his. The odor of stale sweat and vomit lingered in the sheets and in his mouth. “Ari,” he spoke through clenched teeth, trying to keep his breath away from her. “Wake up.”

“Mmm?” Lifting up her head, she blinked sleepily around the room, “Oh. You’re awake.”
Praying that she didn’t feel his heavy erection that was currently straining against his smalls, Cullen shifted his hips. “I am. Um. Why are you- why are we…?”

“Your fever,” she said matter-of-factly, apparently completely unperturbed that she was practically naked in bed with him. “I was at a loss as to what else I could do to help bring it down, it was so high last night. Skin to skin contact can help regulate body temperature in children, so I figured it was worth a shot and I slept next to you.” Laying her cool hand against his forehead, and then pressing her fingers to his pulse, Ari nodded to herself. “Looks like you made it through the worst of it. Do you think you can eat a little something?”

“I could try,” flopping his head back onto the sweat stained pillow, he could feel the exhaustion weighing down his limbs, as if a druffalo sat on top of him. Everything ached, and while he felt like he should be dead, he was somehow still alive. Thanks to her.

“I’ll go heat you up some broth.” His breath caught in his throat as her legs brushed up against his groin, his cock jerking from the contact. She had to have felt that. But her expression gave away nothing, besides- was she blushing?

He could feel the heat from his own face spreading down his neck as she stood up, the faint muscles of her back that she had gained from her training shifting as she stretched. Unbidden, he reached a hand out, one finger tracing down the line of her spine and murmured in a voice much huskier than he intended, “What’s this?”

“What’s- oh. My tattoo? It’s a phoenix.”

“That is most certainly not a phoenix,” he scoffed. “I’ve seen the drawings of the four-legged, scaled beasts that live in the desert. That is a bird.”

“It’s a phoenix where I come from,” she laughed softly. “A legend from my people. Well, lots of cultures have their own versions. It’s a symbol of grace and virtue, of fire, justice, fidelity, the sun. It was the emblem of the empress, while the dragon was for the emperor. It was said the phoenix would only appear to mark the beginning of a new era.”

“Grace and mercy. Sounds like you,” his amber eyes were soft and warm when she turned to meet his gaze. This time, he saw the flush spread down her skin, her lips twisting up into a lopsided grin.

“The other version of the phoenix is a different story, although my people have tales that are similar. Legend states that every 100 years, or 1,000 years depending on the speaker, the phoenix builds itself a pyre, and burns itself to death. And from the ashes, a new phoenix is born.”

“That’s rather morbid.”

Leaning down to smooth an errant curl from his face, Ari smiled, her dark eyes sparkling in the early morning light. “Rebirth. A new beginning. It’s not morbid at all, Cullen. It’s a second chance.”

A new beginning. He could see it now, with her. From his bed, he watched as she slipped a tunic over her head, the hems just barely brushing the middle of her thighs, and padded into the kitchen on bare feet, pulling her hair up into a loose, messy bun. A vision swam before his eyes of this exact same scene, except in his mind, her belly hung low, full and round instead of smooth and flat, and she was giggling as he pressed kisses to her neck, his arms wrapping around her body, fingers grazing over her swollen bump. He wanted-

What? It was obvious she wasn’t interested in him like that. Ugh, the withdrawals were still addling his brain. Had he ever even complimented her before? Been kind to her? He knew he had at least
been polite, bordering on friendly, but his manner could best be described as formal on a good day, curt and abrupt at other times. There was a time he had been kind, and open with the woman he had loved. Could he be that man again? For her?

Balancing a tray on her hip, Ari toed a chair over to the bedside, setting the bowl of soup on the small table. “I can feed myself,” his hand rose limply to try and swat away hers.

“I know,” she murmured. “But let me? Please?”

She was doing him a favor, he knew. In all honesty, it was obvious to him that he was too weak to lift the spoon himself, but here she was, once again allowing him his moment of childish petulance without demeaning him. Stifling a sigh, Cullen opened his mouth obediently, his heart skipping a beat as she smiled radiantly at him. “‘S good,” he mumbled around the broth.

“I’m glad you like it.”

Neither spoke as she fed him, Ari pausing only to dab at the liquid that occasionally dribbled down his chin with a napkin. Could she feel the change as well? Her eyes kept flicking up to his, then away again, as if she were nervous for some reason. Was she afraid of him? Glancing down at his chest, he almost laughed at the notion. He was wasting away, the bones of his ribs clearly visible under his once firm chest. The woman had cleaned up after his loose bowels, for Maker’s sake. There was no way she was afraid of him, or attracted to him. He was a mess. And yet…

“Thank you.”

“For what?” she blinked in surprise at him. Had he never said it to her before? His mother would have been ashamed.

“For this. Feeding me. Taking care of me. Doing all the little extra things you do to keep me comfortable. You don’t have to do all this, but you do. I’m sorry I never said if before. I couldn’t have made it this far without you, Ari,” squeezing her hand with the little strength he had, he watched as she set the half eaten bowl to the side.

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for, Cullen,” her fingers wrapped around his. “And I don’t mind it at all. Now,” he mourned the loss of her hand as she stood up. “How do you feel about a bath? That way I can change these sheets. And I’m sure you’d feel better being clean.”

Ari immediately bustled off when he nodded, hauling bucket after bucket from the stream outside into the cottage, setting the embers under the tub to glow just enough to heat the copper basin and the water within.

Useless. Making her run around like this, just so you can bathe, a voice inside his head hissed. The once great Commander of the Inquisition, lying abed while she scurries about like your servant. And you think she could ever care about you? You pay her to be here, or have you forgotten?

“Cullen? What’s wrong?” He felt the mattress dip, her weight settling next to him. “Hey, now. Talk to me.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, to his eternal horror, he felt the hot tears slip down his cheeks, disappearing into the overgrown scruff that now covered his chin. He shook his head. He didn’t deserve her kind words, her tender touch on his burning face. Useless. Pathetic. What kind of man are you? Addict. Broken. A broken sob escaped his throat.

Ari paused only for a moment, before kicking off her boots and crawling back into bed with him. Feeling the pressure of her arms wrapping around his shoulders, he turned to bury his face in her lap,
and for the first time since he was a child, cried.

Minutes, maybe hours passed as his body trembled, heaving, wracking sobs filling the tiny room, his
 tears soaking her shirt all the way through. But she never made any attempt to move or hush him;
 instead, she sat there, running her hands through his limp, greasy hair, and hummed softly under her
 breath, every soothing song she could think of.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was almost lost in her thighs, where his lips were pressed into her soaked
 shirt.

“Don’t apologize.”

“But I-”

“Cullen.” With a gentle, yet firm hand she pushed up on his chin, cupping his cheeks between her
 palms as her thumbs brushed away his tears. “You’re not weak. You never have been. You’re one of
 the strongest people I’ve ever met.”

Licking his parched lips, he tried again, “But this-”

“This just proves that you are human, underneath the armor you still wear,” resting her forehead
 against his, she whispered, “You’re safe here. Trust me.”

“...I do.” More than you know.

“Good. Now get in the bath.”

Huffing a small chuckle, Cullen let her pull him up onto his feet, eternally surprised at how strong
 she was in her efforts to keep him upright and steady. Or had he just lost that much weight? “I can
 remove the rest,” he grumbled as her hand reached for his smalls.

“Alright. Be careful, please.” As she turned her back to him, bending over the bed to tug at the soiled
 sheets, Cullen struggled out of the rest of his clothes, using the edge of the tub to support him as he
 slowly eased into the cool, tepid water. It felt like heaven.

“I feel terrible that you did all this for me,” he frowned down at the depths of the basin.

“Tell you what,” she laughed. “When you’re all better, you can draw all my baths for a month.”

“A month?” he scoffed. “I should do it for the rest of your life and that still wouldn’t repay the debt I
 have to you.”

“Are you offering to be my manservant?” Glancing up, he smiled at the teasing light in her eyes.
 Maker, she really was beautiful.

“If you’d like,” he replied loftily. “I’ve been told I give excellent foot massages.”

“Oh, do you now? Don’t tempt me,” her laugh faded as she carried the bundle of bedding away.
 What was wrong with him? The only person who had ever told him that was Evelyn. I give great
 massages, he groaned at himself. I sound like an idiot. Still, she had laughed.

He didn’t even realize he had drifted off until he felt her hands in his hair yet again, rubbing soap into
 his oily scalp. “You don’t have to do that,” yawning, he made to reach up to his head, only for her to
gently slap his hands away.

“Rest, Cullen. Your body needs it.”
“Just this once,” he mumbled, too far gone in bliss to protest any further. Her hands soothed the aching in his skull away, skilled fingers finding all the right spots in his tense neck and shoulders, rubbing away the knots and pain until he was nothing more than a boneless heap floating in the dirty water. Pouring a fresh bucket of water over his golden locks, Ari wrapped a towel around his hair and squeezed the water out.

“Can you stand for me?”

It took all of his effort to pull himself to his shaking legs, barely aware of his nudity as she ran a cloth over his dripping body, scrubbing at his skin until he was finally, blissfully clean for what felt like the first time in months. Helping him into a fresh pair of smalls and soft, cotton breeches, Ari guided him back to bed, tucking him into the feathered mattress with tender care. It was a strange and foreign feeling, being cared for like this. You're safe here, he heard her voice echo in his mind. Safety. Comfort. Home. Just as she turned to go, Cullen grabbed her wrist.

“Stay. Please.”

“You need to sleep, Cullen,” she murmured.

“I love the way you say my name,” he sighed, already halfway gone into the Fade. “Stay? Please?” He could feel her hesitation, her pulse fluttering against his fingers. “I’m sorry, I—"

“Hush,” a triumphant smile spread across his face as she climbed into the bed next to him. Snuggling in closer to her, he breathed in her now familiar scent- lemons, lavender, with a hint of honey on her breath from the tea she had drunk earlier, the sweetness making him want to kiss her, revel in her touch more than anything. Instead, he gripped her tighter.

“Thank you.”

“Anything you need, I’m here, Cullen.”

You. I need you. But the words wouldn’t come as his exhaustion finally overtook him. He would tell her, later. This would be enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

Few notes- I am by no means a medical professional. The extent of my knowledge is googling shit, and helping my RN best friend studying for her exams 10 years ago and listening to her complain about work. So to all the medical people going THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS, I apologize and ask you to suspend belief because I just wanted her to get in bed nakey with him. :) 

Also, if anyone notices any disconnects in this chapter/plot holes, let me know please. I wrote this chapter first before anything else, so the plot has changed since then (they weren't supposed to get friendly at all until starting now, dammit), and I think I caught everything, but might not have.

C. thank you all for reading and commenting!
There were a hundred other things she knew she needed to be doing, but for the life of her, she couldn’t think of a single one. All she could feel was his arms, wrapped securely around her, the smell of his clean skin enveloping her. Smiling to herself, she snuggled in closer, resting her cheek against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. *Selfish, you know, using him for your own ends*, a voice scolded her.

*But he asked me to stay, so am I really?* He had asked her to stay. He had turned to her, trusted her, when he was feeling vulnerable. That, more than anything, made her giddy with joy. Not to mention the worst of it was now behind him. From now, the focus would be on recovery. Getting him stronger, back to his former ability. Helping him find the man he was, free from lyrium and the templars at last. She couldn’t wait to see him like that. Happy.

But it also meant that one day, he wouldn’t need her anymore. Then she would have to leave him. It had only been a couple of months, but already, she thought of this little cottage as home. Her, Cullen, Atlas— it was perfect. But it was only temporary. She needed to remember that.

*I guess I should enjoy this while it lasts then. Strange, he’s not twitching as much as he usually does.* Usually, his sleep was punctuated with jerks, mumbles, evidence of the nightmares he suffered each night. But his face was smooth, his jaw relaxed, his eyes still. Only the slight rise and fall of his chest gave evidence that he was alive still. Pleased that he was actually getting rest, that he would heal that much faster, Ari gave herself into her exhaustion, and slept.

***

He was roused by the sound of birds chirping noisily just outside of his window, a ray of bright citrine sunlight streaking across the room, illuminating a wide strip across his floor. Maker, how long had he slept? Ari—

She was nowhere to be found, but the rumpled sheets next to him, the faint indent still slightly warm told him she had just left his side fairly recently. She had stayed the whole night with him. And he, he had dreamed of nothing. No blood magic. No rifts, spewing brimstone and demons. No hollowed voices of the Tranquil, no blazing red eyes of his former Knight-Commander. Just nothing.

*Was it her? I should ask her again to sleep by my side. Would she agree? If i tell her it’s for my health- You’re the worst sort of cretin, Rutherford. Using her like that.* But he couldn’t help himself. The way she had molded to his body, how right it had all felt- he craved it now, more than ever. He only wished he had woken at some point while she still lay next to him, so he could have seen her, watched her. *Now you’re just being creepy.*

“Good morning, sleepyhead. I cooked something light for breakfast, eggs and hash, if you think you’re up to it.” Her hair was still a tangled mess, pulled back into a rough braid, with dark circles on her eyes that told him she had not been sleeping enough these past few days. *And here I kept her from her own bed for my own needs.* His face burned with his shame. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Pressing his lips together, he ducked his face from her outstretched hand. *I don’t deserve you or your kindness,* he wanted to say. But the words stuck in his throat at the sight of her beautiful face, her nose scrunched up with concern for him. *You’re the strongest person I know,* she had told him. He
rather thought she must not know many people that well, if he was her measure of bravery and strength. “I despise feeling weak,” he replied instead.

“I can only imagine. But with enough rest,” she emphasized that last word with a stern glare, planting her hands on her hips, “You’ll be back to your warrior He-man ways soon enough.”

“He man?” Cullen raised one eyebrow. “Is that something from your world?”

“He was… a fictional character. Incredibly strong, blonde, ripped muscles, swung a giant sword around. And smart. Not your average barbarian prince,” she laughed.

“Are you calling me a barbarian?”

“Is that really all you got from that?” Ari rolled her eyes at his mock scowl. “I just complimented you nine ways ‘til Sunday, and all you heard was barbarian. Men,” she scoffed.

Chuckling, Cullen pushed himself up to sit, his arms slightly wobbling. “Well, thank you my lady, for the compliments.”

Her face immediately burned when he called her ‘my lady’, her inner voice squealing in delight. “Um,” her voice broke, “So, food. Right. I’ll bring it. Here. One sec.” Spinning on her heel, she fled back out into the kitchen, no doubt leaving the man very confused. Get your shit together. Nothing has changed, remember?

And yet everything had changed.

Ari did her best to hang back as much as possible, knowing Cullen was already pushed to the limits of his dependence on her, letting him feed and dress himself, although she gladly lent a hand whenever he faltered. During those moments, he would gaze up at her, as if contemplating whether or not ask for her assistance, before frowning down at his limbs, cursing his condition silently in his head. It was always easy to tell what he was thinking then. So that’s when she would appear at his side, offering him a gentle smile and her arm, which he accepted with more and more ease as the day went on. And he’s not even grumbling under his breath. Miracle of miracles.

Atlas stayed plastered to his side as well, the mabari close on Cullen’s heels no matter where the man went, always carefully observing his every action just in case. Every now and then, he would reach down to absentmindedly rub the dog’s ears, or throw him a bit of food. Maybe he’ll finally realize Atlas is his dog, not mine, Ari smirked to herself. As much as one can own a mabari.

Rinsing the last dish of the night, Ari glanced out the window to where Cullen sat on the porch with his head leaned back, lightly snoring. He had just been watching Atlas chase lightning bugs in the clearing a few minutes ago, and now, he was out. Softly, she crept up to the door, wiping her hand on her apron with a wistful smile. Despite his gauntness, the former Commander was still devastatingly handsome, with those deep-set topaz eyes, that high, proud nose, the jaw that was sculpted by the gods themselves. And when he smiled-

She was dizzy just thinking about it. How had she let this happen? They were supposed to be professional, she was supposed to keep her distance. Are you really surprised though? Always fucking up, causing yourself more pain.

Worth it, she shot back at her conscience. As long as I don’t cause him pain, I’m fine with whatever I get. Hurting herself, she was okay with. After all, she only had herself to blame. But others? She was a nurse, a healer. It went against everything she was to even make someone else upset. Especially him.

How much it would kill her to walk away when the day came.
To say goodbye to him, pretend like she was happy to leave his side.

But what other choice would she have?

Shaking her head, she crouched beside his chair, gently laying her hand on his. “Cullen, come inside. You’ll hurt your back sleeping in this chair.”

Slowly, he stirred, flexing each of his fingers in turn as he looked around. “Hey, you,” he murmured huskily. “I was just dreaming about you.”

“Oh?” Ari tried to ignore the rattle of her heart, her breath hitching in her chest. “Was I finally kicking your ass in chess?”

“I believe that’s too fantastical, even for a dream,” he chuckled. Taking her hand, he wrapped one arm around her shoulders, ostensibly to help keep him upright. But really, he just wanted to hold her.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Cullen stripped off the clothes he was wearing down to his smalls, still unable even after all this time to help the blush that sprang to his cheeks as he did so, despite the fact that Ari was studiously avoiding looking at him. Am I that unattractive now? He had never been particularly vain, but after his time spent in Skyhold amongst all the nobles, he had an idea of how others perceived his appearance. Handsome, they had called him. Striking. The Lion of Ferelden. Lion. I’m barely a housecat right now. Or maybe she’s just disinterested. Or being courteous. Racking his brain, he couldn’t ever recall if she had ever looked at him with desire in her eyes, as he had seen before in other… individuals. Not that he had been paying much attention to her before. But that is going to change now. I’m going to, to woo her. Court her, as she deserves to be courted.

Maker, this was going to end in disaster. Cullen barely had experience in flirting, much less wooing a woman. Evelyn had been the one to approach him before, to confess her feelings. Coward, even then. Never before had he taken a risk like this. What was he supposed to say, to do? Think, man, think!

“Cullen?”

“Yes!” His head shot up. Startled by his uncharacteristic yelp, Ari slowly stood up from his dresser.

“Um, here’s a clean tunic? If you want it,” she held out a folded, crisp garment.

“No, that’s alright. I, er, sleep better without it. Because it’s so warm, and humid, and—” Andraste’s flames, now I’m rambling.

“I suspect the weather won’t last much longer though, will it,” she sighed. “Does it snow as much here as it did up in Skyhold?”

“Not as much, but it does get cold. We’ll have to get you some warmer clothes.” Or I could just keep you warm.

Maker’s breath, he never should have thought that. Now he couldn’t get the image out of his head. How would she taste, he wondered, if he-

“I have a few things from last winter I brought with me. I should be fine,” she smiled, turning to leave. “Sleep well, Cullen.”

“Wait!” His hand shot out, wavering slightly with his entreaty. “Will you sleep with me?”

Ari froze on his threshold, her hand unconsciously gripping the frame until her knuckles faded to
“Uh. Come again?”

“N-Not like that,” he stammered, wishing the ground would swallow him whole. *Actually, yes like that. Maker, what is wrong with me?* “Just next to me. Like you did last night. I think it helped with my nightmares. I didn’t have any the last two nights when you were here. I- I can’t remember a time I was without them,” he admitted.

Shyly, she approached him, the tiniest of smiles curling the edges of her lips. He wanted to kiss them. “I… helped? With your nightmares?” He nodded. “Alright,” she replied after a moment. “Let me go lock up, and I’ll be back in a minute.”

Scooting over in his bed, Cullen rolled over onto his back, throwing one arm over his eyes. He felt it all- shame, excitement, guilt, hope- barreling down his gullet, stuck in his throat like a heavy weight. Maybe he should put a shirt on. No, he wanted to feel her. Was that too forward? Would she think him a lecher? Maybe he should put a shirt on. Desires he thought long since dead roared to the surface, sending shockwaves down his skin. Dryly, he chuckled. Not like it was doing much anyways, besides driving him to distraction. His body was still too exhausted to show off his arousal. The day before must have just been a fluke. *It’s for the best. I don’t want to frighten her away. I need to do this the right way,* and-

All coherent thought left him as she stepped back into his room, Atlas on her heels. She had changed into a thin shift, the silhouette of her body illuminated by the light of moon, the warm glow of the single lit candle glinting off her unbound raven hair. She was ethereal, some fey creature come to tempt him, to lead him astray. There were stories that the old women and men in the country told, of mythical creatures that took the shapes of beautiful women, luring hapless travelers into their embrace before dragging them down into the deepest recesses of the Void.

All he knew is that, if she were one of them, he would gladly follow her anywhere she led him.

“Ari,” he breathed, one arm reaching up towards her.

Sliding under the thin sheet and laying her head down on the pillow next to him, she brushed a curl away from his eyes. “Comfortable?”

“Almost.” She tensed for a split second as he lost the fight to his baser urges and tucked his arms around her, pulling her in closer, forcing his legs to remain where they were and not intertwine them with hers, like he wanted to do so desperately. He wanted to lose himself in her, to not be able to tell where he ended and she began. “There. Is this alright?”

Inch by inch, Ari gradually relaxed into his embrace. Keeping her gazed fixed upon the dark blonde dusting of hair in front of her, she murmured a very soft and hesitant, “Yes.”

Releasing a fraught breath, feeling the tension spreading through his chest, Cullen muttered, “You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to, Ari. You’re doing so much for me anyways, I know your own bed is probably more to your liking. And I don’t want to make you feel obligated, or uncomfortable.”

Her fingers tightened and tangled in his chest hair, her fingernails scraping lightly against his skin. Clamping his mouth shut, he willed himself not to hiss at the thrill of pleasure that simple act elicited. “I want to. Be here. Our beds are the exact same anyways, but you- You’re warm. I like it.”

“Yes.”

“Using me as a furnace, hmm?” He grinned. She wanted to be here. With him. In his arms. In his bed.
Ari’s giggle was muffled from where her face was buried. “Well, Atlas sleeps with you. How else am I supposed to not freeze at night?”

“I do recall always finding you in the library buried under half a dozen blankets,” he grinned at the memory, simultaneously cursing himself for not appreciating how adorable she had looked, like a tiny bird in a nest.

“Library was one of the warmest places, besides the kitchen. Heat rises and all. I liked it,” she yawned.

“Sleep, Ari.”

“That’s my line,” she mumbled even as she slipped away.

Counting his breaths, he waited until he was sure she was asleep, her body lax in his arms, before lowering his head to hers and pressing one featherlight kiss against her hair. “Sweet dreams.”

Chapter End Notes

Husband is insisting we do outdoorsy stuff when he’s off, then my parents are coming into town for a week, so updates are going to sporadic for the next week or so. I'll try to at least get one or two chapters up. <3
Something had changed with Cullen and Ari couldn’t quite figure out what it was. He complained less, for one. Was more willing to accept her help. God, he had even asked for her assistance a few times. The first time he had, she had dropped the bundle of laundry she had been carrying and just stared at him, until Atlas had run up and stolen her smalls out of the pile and gone streaking across the yard with them.

The days were beginning to get colder, which suited her Ferelden companions just fine, not so much her more delicate constitution. He was still too weak to resume his training, but he took advantage of the brisk weather and stayed outside most days, carving random things for them to use around the house. Today, he had decided to make his own chess set.

Cullen’s eyes followed Ari as she strung up their laundry up on the line, a thick woolen blanket pinned around her shoulders. With the tune she was humming drifting faintly to where he sat on the porch. Snorting in amusement, he glanced down at Atlas, the dog apparently unperturbed by the various wood shavings that now covered his head. “You’re getting lazy,” he scolded the warhound. “Then again, so am I. It’s not a bad thing, right? We’ve earned our rest. Well, I’m not exactly sure about you. Then again, you were living with the Orlesians, so I suppose this is a welcome change of pace, hmm?” Atlas woofed, his lips blowing out in response.

“There!” Dropping the basket by her feet, Ari blew the loose strands of hair from her face, surveying her work with her hands planted on her hips. “All done. Still a bit of sunlight left. How do you feel, Cullen?”

“I’m glad. Do you think you’re up for a walk? Just a short one,” she called back.

Atlas’ ears immediately perked up. Chuckling, Cullen rubbed his ear, “I think Atlas has decided for me. Come on, lazy. Let’s go chase some rabbits.”

Automatically, Ari held out her arm for him to take, pleased to note he was leaning on her less and less. As the mabari bounded happily into the woods before them, she took a deep breath, tilting her head back to stare at the canopy of leaves above her. “What’s your favorite time of year?” she asked suddenly.

“Hmm. Winter, probably.”


Laughing, he stepped over a large root, this time helping her over the obstruction in their path with one hand braced against the tree for support. “Not just winter, though. The first snowfall. When that sharp bite is in the air, and the world gets quiet for the first time in months. Everything is so peaceful,
silent.”

“And cold.”

“That’s why you have me,” he grinned, wishing he could kiss away the wrinkles from her scrunched up nose. “And Atlas. And about thirty-seven blankets in the house.”

“Is that it? I should get more, make it an even forty.”

“At this rate, I’ll be pushed out of our home to make room for all the blankets,” Cullen teased. And froze as Ari’s head snapped toward his, her eyes wide and almost… frightened? Our home, he had said. Well, it was true. He couldn’t imagine living here without her, a recluse in the woods. All his life, he had been alone, even when surrounded by others, but with her, it was different. She never made him feel lonely. Quite the opposite. With her, he was home. “Ari, I-”

Whirling away from him, Ari grappled with the rising tide of emotions that were bubbling within her, quickly stepping a few paces deeper into the woods. He can’t be, not with me, he can’t! Maybe it’s just a crush? It’s pretty common, for patients to fall in love with their caretakers, and vice versa. Especially since we’ve been in such close quarters. Yes, that’s it. It’s not real, it- it can’t be. “Is that a toad?”

“Ari, wait, I- a what?” Cullen stared down at the ground, completely bemused as to why she was crouching by the stream, her hand held out toward a brownish lump.

“Toad. I’d have thought they all would have gone into hibernation for the winter. Are you one of the last ones, little guy?” Picking up the fat, bulbous creature, Ari cradled it in her palm, holding it at her eye level, doing everything and anything she could to avoid looking up at the man that was the source of her inner turmoil. What the hell am I going to do? I need to discourage him from thinking about me like that, if he is. Maybe I’m reading this all wrong. Maybe he’s just being more friendly. I mean, seriously? Cullen Rutherford in love with me, of all people? I’m literally a nobody. I don’t even belong here.

Hearing him kneel in the leaves next to her, Ari shifted slightly on her heels. “Ari. That’s a toad. You’ll get warts.”

“I know he’s a toad. And the warts is just a old wives' tale. They’re harmless. It’s curious seeing him out this late in the year, that’s all. Here. Do you want to hold him?”

Cullen stared at her as if she had lost her mind. Which wasn’t entirely inaccurate. Her brain was having an awful hard time forming coherent thoughts lately. “I…”

“Maybe if you kiss it, it’ll turn into a prince. Or a princess, in your case,” her giggle held a slightly hysterical note to it. Oh God, I’m losing it. “Never mind. We should keep walking. Don’t want to be lost out here after dark.” Setting the toad down, she took off at a brisk pace, following the curve of the creek.

What had just happened? Cullen glanced down at Atlas, who would have shrugged if he could, the man was certain. He knew she had heard him, but her reaction was nonchalant, to say the least, brushing it off like it was nothing. Perhaps it was nothing to her. After all, she lives here too. It technically is our home. It probably didn’t mean anything to her.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to walk so far ahead of you,” she flew back down the path towards him, smiling apologetically, her earlier awkwardness seemingly forgotten. “We should head back. I need to get supper going.”
“We should do this more often,” gesturing to the woods, he threaded his arm through hers, whistling for Atlas.

“Take walks? It’ll be good for you,” she agreed. “We can do it every night before supper, if you like. Or first thing in the morning.”

“Morning,” he decided. “I’ve always enjoyed being outside in the early hours of the day.”

“Because it’s quiet?” she teased.

“Partly. A different kind of silence, though. You hear birds and the wind and trees. And toads,” he smirked at her embarrassed blush. “When I was a templar, there was only ever the sound of my brothers when I awoke. And in Skyhold, the noises the soldiers and staff made to get ready for the day. But here… It reminds me of when I was a child. Back when things were so much simpler.”

“We’ll take our walk in the mornings then.” Pausing at the edge of the clearing, Ari stared longingly back into the dim light of the forest, listening to the rustle of the leaves and the small creatures as they scurried around, preparing for the night. “I used to love being outside as a kid, too. Chasing frogs and fireflies and squirrels, climbing trees. I suppose it’s normal as you get older to spend more time being busy, and you forget about things like that. The woods were always where I would go when I wanted to reset myself though. Just to walk around, not hearing a single other person except for your footsteps. I miss it.”

His fingers tightened around her arm as he quietly asked, “So you like living out here? In the middle of nowhere?”

“I never thought I’d say this, but yes. I do,” Ari smiled. “I am getting an itch to go to town soon though.”

“The harvest festival should be coming up soon I think. In farming towns such as that one, it’s common that at the end of the harvest. Everyone comes together to celebrate. Next time you go to town, ask Mia.”

“I could make the trip later this week,” she mused. “Would you come? To the festival, I mean.”

Gazing off into the distance, Cullen reached up to scratch the back of his neck. He had wanted to avoid seeing his family until he was fully recovered, but… There would be drinking and dancing at the celebration. Other men would be looking at her. And if she were to be there alone… Branson, he thought sourly. His brother had a soft spot for his little healer and would probably leap at the opportunity to ask her dance, paw her like she was some common female, not to mention all the other boys who would be fawning over her. “I will. If you want me to, that is.”

Ari beamed up at him. “I think some socialization would be good for you. You’ll turn into a hermit living out here with no one else but Atlas and me.”

“But that’s all I need, he wanted to protest. “Is that such a bad thing?”

Goosebumps pricked her skin at the sound of his low voice, suggestive and husky. God, no. We could just stay out here forever, and have mad, crazy sex every day for the rest of our lives. Totally cool with that. “It- you should, I mean,” she gave up. “I just think your family probably misses you, that’s all. Come on. It’s getting late, and I still have to cook.”

Left standing in the yard on his own, Cullen furrowed his brow, entirely befuddled with her behavior. One second I think she might be interested, and the next…
It was a mystery that he didn’t know where to even begin solving.

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It was strange to not have Ari here. He had seen her off that morning, disappearing down the path that would lead her to town, and now, the house was eerily still. Even Atlas was more prone to sleeping the day away without her bustling about the house, humming cheerfully under her breath, with those little twirls and skips she did when she thought Cullen wasn’t watching. The woman was always moving, always doing something. Even when she read, her toe tapped, one finger twirling around a lock of hair. It was as if she would fall apart and cease to be if she ever stilled.

The only time he ever saw her truly at rest was when she slept. He smiled as he thought of that morning, in the gray hours before the sun began to rise. The way her back had molded to his chest, her pillow abandoned in favor of his left arm, while his right, she snuggled like a child’s stuffed toy. Beautiful didn’t even begin to describe it; she was utterly adorable like that. Serene. Restful. Drooling. What he wouldn’t give to spend every morning waking up to the same sight for the rest of his life.

Sometimes he wondered if she really would have preferred to sleep in her own room. And then, the guilt would crash down around him, for how much had she already done for him? Given up her life to come out here to help him, spend almost every waking moment cleaning and cooking for him, catering to his every need. She had virtually no time to herself except when she slept, and now he had taken even that from her.

But then she would curl herself around him, and he would forget everything- his shame, his mistakes, the pain, the demons. It would all cease to exist, only the calm of her breathing and the beat of her heart left in his head. At least she seemed honest when she told him she didn’t mind at all.

*Anything I can do to help you, I will,* is what she had told him.

One day, when he had been feeling particularly sorry for himself, he had asked her, *Why? Why am I worth your trouble?*

Ari had leaned over his chair and gently cupped his face in her hands, her eyes burning with an intensity that stole his breath away. *Because everyone deserves a second chance and a helping hand. And because you are worth everything. You’ve suffered enough, Commander. Your past is behind you now.*

What he couldn’t tell her was that his sins would never leave him, no matter how much he tried to atone, how much time passed. But when she looked at him like that, at least he had hope. Hope that maybe, she was right. And that maybe one day, he would see it too.

Grabbing the axe from the shed, Cullen carefully maneuvered it onto his shoulder. *Time to stop moping about. She’ll be back soon enough. Maker, if anything happened to her on the road… No. Can’t think like that. She’s a smart, capable woman. A smart, capable woman who threatened you with beets for the rest of the week unless I chop more firewood so she won’t freeze to death,* he chuckled to himself. Firewood, he could do. It was slow going, but it was nice to feel useful again. And he had all day to get it done.

“Come on, Atlas. Time to start earning our keep before the lady gets home.”
O LOOK ANOTHER CHAPTER
Some days it felt like he would never get better. The nausea had finally eased, but the tremors and fatigue lingered, his joints and muscles aching as if he had spent the entire day rolling a boulder up a mountainside. And the cravings, Maker, the cravings. If he closed his eyes, all he could see was the blue, glowing in his hands, taste the sharp, acrid metallic tang of it coating his tongue.

There had been a blessed respite for about a week after his fever had broken where he actually felt human again, his symptoms mild and fleeting, with the exception of his general frailty and exhaustion. But now that his strength was returning, so was everything else.

Gripping his sword hilt tightly, the weight familiar and comforting after what had felt like an age without the weapon, Cullen jerkily forced his limbs into the stances that were long since ingrained in his muscles, his body screaming in protest. Guard, parry, jab—"Bloody hell!"

His sword clattered to the dirt as his knee buckled underneath him, lurching him down onto his hands and knees. Snarling, he weakly punched the ground.

Weak. Pathetic. Has been. Useless. Invalid. Coward. His vision blurred with the rise of his tears, hot and shameful, threatening to burn a trail down his cheeks.

From the corner of his eye, he saw her boots slowly approaching him, her slim hand wrapping around his sword. “Get up, Cullen.”

“I- I can’t,” he gritted out. “Not anymore, I-”

“Yes, you can,” Ari insisted firmly. “You just need to stand.”

What kind of man was he? He was supposed to be strong, courageous, unyielding in the face of danger, not sniveling in the dirt like some-

“Stand, Commander.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“I’m not.” Lightly smacking his shin with the flat of his blade, Ari heaved a weary sigh, and dropped to sit next to him. “You’re allowed to be weak sometimes, Cullen. It’s part of being human. Nobody can be a fortress all the time, you’d burn yourself out. It’s okay to need help. It’s okay to fail. So lay here, curse at the fates, cry if you want— I’m not judging you. As long as you pick yourself up in the end, and try again.”

Covering his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, he blinked back his tears, wanting to glare at her but finding he now lacked the conviction. There was no lie in her eyes, only a sweet acceptance. You’re safe here. He glanced down at the sword, and nodded once, and grabbed it, letting her help him to his feet.

“And take it slow. You’re still recovering. If you push yourself too hard, it may work against you. You’ve got this, Cullen,” she squeezed his forearm with one hand, cupping his cheek with the other. With a small, slight smile, he leaned into her touch.

“What would I do without you?”
“Injure yourself, probably,” she snorted, “And undo all that hard work we both put in.”

*We, she says. Like it wasn’t all her doing.* All he did was lay there, and throw up on her, and scare her half to death, and- Right. No more wallowing in self-pity.

Sheepishly grinning at her stern glower, for of course she could sense his dark thoughts as usual, Cullen hefted the sword in his palm. “To work, then.”

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He still faltered and fumbled most of the time. It created a bone deep agony, how slow he had to move, restricting his pace to that of a snail, when he used to tear across a battlefield in full plate, cutting down demon after demon without nary a thought. As opposed to now, when he could barely keep his shield upright.

But he got better. Stronger, every day he practiced. And so did Ari. At least she was delighted by the change, finally able for once to land her taps against him. “Don’t get used to it,” he had growled the first time she giggled. She had just laughed, and waved off his complaints, that impish light in her eyes spurring him on to try harder, be better. For her.

Cullen imagined that, if it had been anyone else with him, he would have come to resent what he considered coddling. The encouragement, the praise. He was not a child, or a dog. But to hear those words from her lips… She was proud of him. Everything little thing he managed to accomplish on his own, she acted as if it was her own success. The genuine delight that would light up her dark eyes, the way she would bounce in place with unbridled glee- *she was proud of him.* Happy, even, because of what he was doing. And Cullen came to realize that he didn’t care about anything else.

And everything became easier, with her by his side. Easier to train, easier to fight, easier to smile and laugh and talk. Easier to feel like he was finally alive.

Ari was in the bedroom that morning- *their bedroom,* she giggled to herself- finishing packing the last of Cullen’s clothes for their stay in South Reach while he finished his morning run. Since the festivities would last into the night, he thought it would be best if they stayed overnight with Mia, so Ari made herself useful, gathering the things they would need, scrawling out a list of supplies to purchase, and tidying up. She was securing the last of their saddlebags when Cullen emerged from the cabin, freshly scrubbed, fastening the buckles on his plain leather brigandine, the sleeves of his dark green woolen tunic peeking out underneath. He looked every bit like a knight out of legend, off to take his lady out for a ride. Like those tales of King Arthur and Sir Lancelot that Ari had devoured as a child.

“You left your hair curly,” she smiled, lifting her own leathers over her head.

“I ran out of pomade,” he admitted with a grimace. “Does it look ridiculous?”

“No, it doesn’t. I like it like that,” reaching out she tugged on one curl, giggling as it sprung back into place. “Heh. You and Branson could almost pass for twins now. Except the height difference. And your scar.” God, how she wanted to touch his scar.

Cullen scowled at the mention of his brother. *I swear by Andraste’s holy flame, if he tries to bring his lips anywhere near her hand again, I’ll- I’ll do something.* “Sorry,” he mumbled at her questioning tilt of her head, “Headache. Ready?”

“Do you need something for it? I packed several tonics for you as well.” Pressing her hand against his head, Ari pursed her lips, her fingers gently rubbing his temples, trying to seek out the tender
spots.

“I’ll be fine,” he murmured as his eyes drifted close, a slight smile on his lips as he reveled in her soft touch. “Come on, we should get on the road.”

The day was pleasant enough, with a cloudless, crisp blue sky, the sun providing the last rays of warmth before the first frost set in. At first they spoke of inconsequential things, what improvements still needed to be made around the cabin before winter set in, different training techniques he wanted to try, but the closer they drew to South Reach, the more Ari fidgeted. Was she nervous? Why? Was it the prospect of seeing Branson again? The last trip she made, she told Cullen that she had only seen his brother, as the women were out in the fields. Had something happened between the two?

He was going to drive himself crazy before they ever reached town.

“So,” Cullen cleared his throat, praying he sounded nonchalant enough, “Excited to see everyone?”

“I am,” she nodded. “It’s been awhile. I bet the babies have grown quite a bit since we saw them last.”

“I bet Branson will be happy to see you.” Cullen held his breath, his head faintly buzzing while he waited for her response.

Ari shrugged. “Probably. I don’t know. I hope things won’t be awkward.”

“Awkward?” He swiveled to face her. “Why would things be awkward?”

“Oh, that’s right, I never told you,” sighing, she plucked listlessly at her reins. “He asked to court me, last time I came up.” Cullen’s heart froze. “Obviously, I told him no–” A wave of relief washed over him, so intense, he almost fell off his horse, “I just hope he doesn’t harbor any ill will towards me for it.”

“He’s a grown man, he’ll live,” biting his lip to keep from grinning, or doing something even more embarrassing, such as giggling, Cullen stared off into the treeline ahead. She said no. She doesn’t want him. He almost felt a twinge of pity for his brother. Almost.

The sun was just beginning to drop in the sky when they arrived at the homestead, a pile of shrieking children hanging over the fence, giggling and shouting as soon as they caught sight of the horses trotting down the lane. Pushing her way through the chaos, Rosalie sent the little ones off on an errand, one hand on her hip as she surveyed Ari and her brother.

“There you are! We were worried you wouldn’t make it in time. You can change in children’s room, Ari. Come on!”

Leaving Cullen in the yard, Rosalie bustled the other woman inside into a smaller room, and immediately began tugging Ari’s braid loose while she pulled out the dress she had packed for the dance.

“Ari, don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re not wearing that tonight, are you?”

Ari shook out the cotton dress she was holding, smoothing out the wrinkles with one hand. It wasn’t the prettiest dress she knew, but out of all her clothes, it was the least worn and mended. “It’s the nicest one I had,” she shrugged. “I haven’t had a chance to have anything new made yet.”

“Hmm.” Poking her head out of the door, Rosalie shouted for her sister to bring something else for Ari to wear. “Mia’s about the same size as you,” she said when she closed the door again. “She
might have something.”

“She’s also a good bit taller than me,” Ari pointed out.

“We can just pin up the skirt. It’ll be like one of those fancy dresses from Orlais,” she giggled. “Now, let me do your hair. Maker, you have such pretty hair. All straight and silky and black.”

“When I was little, all I wanted was curly hair. My hair is so boring,” Ari laughed. “Grass is always greener on the other side, I suppose.”

“This should work,” Mia slipped inside, holding a bundle of dark plum fabric in her arms. “I made it for myself a few seasons back from some fabric Alan got me for Satinalia, but the color is horrid on me. It’d be perfect for you. I also brought an extra corset, I wasn’t sure if you had one. But the dress was made to be worn with it.”

“Alright,” Ari replied dubiously, staring at the bone lined contraption. “But if I faint, I’m blaming it on you.”

The dress was made from a lightweight muslin, with tiny ivory flowers and vines embroidered along the hems, sleeves that laced up the sides, and a sweetheart neckline that did wonders for her bust, along with the corset, which was surprisingly not as uncomfortable as she had been expecting. How long had it been since she wore something nice? Even a pair of jeans and a blouse at this point would have been an extravagant luxury.

“There! Last pin. Ooh,” Rosalie squealed, practically vibrating in her excitement, her hands clasped under her chin, “Look at you! You’re going to have all the men lining up asking for a dance.”

“Too bad I’d just step on all their toes,” Ari grinned. “I have no idea how to dance.”

“Branson could show- Ow, Mia!”

Withdrawing her elbow from her sister’s ribcage, Mia rolled her eyes. “Stop that, Rose. If Ari isn’t interested in Bran, she’s not, so leave them both be.”

It felt as if heavy chains had suddenly been dropped on top of Ari’s chest. Guiltily, she poked the rug with one toe. “He told you about that, huh. He wasn’t too upset, was he? I never meant to hurt him, I swear.”

“I know. He just got in a bit over his head. He has a tendency to do that,” Mia snorted. “He’s fine, don’t you worry about him. Just enjoy yourself tonight. I have a feeling Cullen’s been working you to death. You’ve lost weight since we saw you last.”

“It’s from training,” following the other two women out into the main room, Ari poked one of her biceps. “He’s been teaching me to fight, so I know I’m less squishy now. Did everyone else leave already?”

“Yup, they’ll meet us there. Come on, we’re going to be late!”

Chatting about everything inconsequential under the sun, Ari realized how much she missed this. Wearing nice clothes, having friends, other women she could talk with. It had been so long, since before she came to Thedas. And back home, I was always blowing my friends off for work, or because I was too tired. Taking them granted. At least I have these two now.

“Looks like the vultures already found Cullen.”
“Rosalie, be nice!”

The party was inside of one of the more wealthy resident’s largest barn, a massive wooden building set on the edge of town that smelled strongly of clean, fresh hay. Along the edges were rows of tables piled high with food, reminiscent of the great hall back in Skyhold with probably as much food. Breathing in the delectable aroma, Ari’s eyes searched the room for Cullen. It was ridiculously easy to spot the man. Just look for the most stiff, uncomfortable human in the room, surrounded by every single woman in attendance, and more than a few men. All eager to meet the famed Commander at last.

God, he was gorgeous. At some point, he had changed into a crisp burgundy tunic that was a cut a little more snug than his others, showing off his slim physique and hinting at the growing muscles that lay underneath. His eyes were tense, she noted, as was his jaw as person after person shoved their way in front of him, batting their eyelashes and exposing more than good amount of cleavage to the exasperated man. Not flustered. I suppose he’d be used to this after all that time spent among the Orlesians. Branson was beside him, a smaller cluster of his own admirers gathered in a circle around the widower as well.

Nudging his brother, the younger motioned to where Ari stood unsure and slightly awkward near the doorway, drinking in the music and sights and smells. Cullen's mouth went dry. She was a vision, in a dark purple dress that must have been one of his sister's, her raven hair piled elegantly on top of her head. Rosalie's doing, no doubt. Excusing himself from the growing crowd that threatened to suffocate him, he began to make his way over to her, intending to sweep her into his arms. But he wasn't the only one with the same idea. Within seconds, several of the villagers noticed the newcomer, and rushed to welcome her, with one young man in particular eagerly drawing the reluctant healer out onto the dancefloor.

Cullen wanted to deck him.

“She sure is pretty,” Branson sighed. “Do you think she’d dance with me if I asked her to?”

“I’m not certain,” Cullen replied stiffly. “She mentioned earlier she didn’t know how to dance.”

“Well, that’s alright. I just want to hold her, anyways.” Before Cullen could retort, or punch his younger brother, Branson slipped away into the crowd, grinning as he stole Ari away from the other man. With clenched fists, Cullen watched as her carefully neutral expression gave way to a sweet smile, and then laughter as Branson whispered something in her ear.

You could go over there, take her away and dance with her yourself. Except for the fact that he wasn’t a good dancer, at all. He had learned the basics at Josephine's insistence years ago, and then promptly forgot everything. Knowing him, he’d just make an idiot out of himself in front of everyone. Plus, she looked happy; the way her face lit up as Branson twirled her across the floor, both of them grinning as she stepped on his toes, repeatedly, tripping over her skirts.

“Commander Rutherford! So glad you could make the dance.”

“Commander, would you dance with me?”

“Commander, there is—”

He had had enough of the simpering and sly glances to last him a lifetime. “That is not my title any longer,” Cullen hissed at an affronted man, stalking off towards one of the open doors, his boots crunching against the straw and dirt that lined the wooden floor. Just need air. Andraste preserve me, why did I come? I should have just let Ari come alone.
“Cullen? Are you alright?”

Leaning against the outside wall, he closed his eyes, sensing her careful footsteps as she came closer and laid one hand on her arm. “Fine,” he managed to spit out.

“You look slightly feverish,” she murmured. “I think I may have somethi-”

“I said, I’m fine,” he stressed the last word, ignoring the traitorous burn of his skin and the pounding of his head. *Lyrium. If I just had a drop- No. No, can’t. “Enjoying yourself?”*

Ari paused before answering, her eyes wide at his sharp tone of voice. “Yes, ser, I am.”

“I thought you said you weren’t interested in Branson.”

“I’m not?” Taking a step back, she frowned up at him. “He knows about my feelings for him, or lack thereof.”

“So, you’re just in there, flirting with him and leading my little brother one because… what? It amuses you?”

Ari jerked her hand back from him as if his skin scorched her, her eyes, black as the night, narrowing in a scornful glare. “I did not realize having a good time and being nice to someone was considered to be flirting. If my actions have been taken the wrong way, I apologize. Ser.” Her voice wavered as she spoke her last words despite her best efforts to keep her tone level and calm. Curtseyng before him, ignoring the wince that flashed across his drawn face, Ari spun away and all but ran off into the night.

“Dammit,” he groaned, letting his head fall back and hit the wall with a dull thud. *Looks like you f**ked up, big time Rutherford. I should go after her, beg for her forgiveness. Maker’s breath, why am I such a fool?*

“Did Ari come out here?” Branson poked his head out of the side door, examining the darkness beyond the torchlight.

“I’m afraid you just missed her,” Cullen muttered glumly.

“Good, wanted to ask you something. I was wondering if you’d put in a good word with her for me. Y’know, since you see her all the time.” Was his brother insane? Did he want to get throttled? Cullen stared at him in disbelief, but Branson, oblivious to everything besides his own excitement, continued on. “I know she told me she didn’t want a relationship, and never wanted to remarry, but come on, pretty young lass like that, she needs a good man, right? So you could help convince her. I mean, with bandits and wolves and bears about, once she gets her own place, it’d be a good idea for her to have a husband. So? Will you?”

Cullen wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry, so he settled for a sound that was a cross between an incredulous cough and an amused snort, one eyebrow raised in challenge. “Firstly, Ari is older than you. We’re almost the same age. And she’s more than capable of defending herself now. She’s brilliant with a bow, and getting better with her daggers every day. And last of all, no. If that was her decision, I won’t disrespect her by trying to convince her that her own opinion is wrong. Besides, she deserves better than-”

“Than what, me?” Branson cut in angrily. “I don’t know who the hell you think you are. Maybe all those years of servants and nobles bowing to you has left your wits addled and you think you’re so high and mighty over the rest of us, but I’ve got a job and a son. Which is a hell lot more than what you have, *Commander.*”
“Branson,” Cullen held up one hand in weak protest. Maybe he should have taken that potion she had offered him. He could barely think straight, between the throbbing of his head and the aching of his heart. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry, I just- Maker, why can’t i ever say anything right?”

“Ever say- You’re the reason she’s not here, aren’t you? What did you say to her, Cullen?”

“Many things I should not have,” he muttered from behind his calloused hands.

Branson shook his head, heaving a weary sigh. “You never were good with words, but you’d think after so long leading others, you’d be better at it by now.”

“You’d think. But no, I’m even worse. And now Ari is furious with me,” Cullen slumped even further down the wall. The other man eyed him curiously.

“You’re in love with her.”

“I- what?”

“Ari. You love her.” Branson stared at his brother. “Huh. I should have seen it. Maybe that’s why she turned me down. For you.”

“No,” Cullen whispered. “Whatever her reasons were, they have nothing to do with me. I’m certain she doesn’t think of me like that.”

Stroking his chin, Branson leaned against the wall in an identical pose to his brother, and crossed his massive arms, idly thumbing a long burn scar that ran up his forearm. “How upset was she when she ran off?”

“Very.”

“She cares, then. If she didn’t, your words wouldn’t have affected her so much. But if she was very upset, she probably has feelings for you. You should talk to her.”

“I can’t,” Cullen groaned. “I’ll just make things worse.”

“Send her a note then. ‘Do you like me? Check yes or no.’”

“Branson, this isn’t funny.”

“Kinda is,” he grinned. “My big brother getting all flustered by a woman, even in his dotage.”

“Please don’t mention this to her,” Cullen begged.

“I won’t. Not my business. Besides, maybe she’ll get over you, and move on to better things. Like me.” Branson waggled his eyebrows. And laughed when his brother snarled wordlessly at him.

“You’ve got it bad, Cul. Tell her. Worst she could do is say no. I’m going back inside. Don’t brood out here too long.”

Worst is her saying no? I cannot think of anything more undesirable than that. To live so close to her, loving her, and knowing she does not feel the same... It’s hopeless. Her words on the initial journey rang in his ear:

“I’ve already been married, and I don’t care to repeat the experience any time soon.”

There was his answer right there. She had no interest in relationships. With him, his brother, anyone. What about just a physical relationship? An image of her, bare in his bed, flashed through his mind,
hitting him in his gut like a warhammer. He could feel her smooth skin under his hands, hear her voice as she breathlessly cried his name, almost taste- No, he growled to himself. I could not know her like that and then let her go. If I bed her, I would fight everything in this world to keep her. To have her, and then lose her- I can’t.

He should at least apologize. Pushing himself to stand, Cullen ran a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling much older than he did a few minutes ago. Hopeless.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Ari is fine. But she's pissed. And now Cullen is sad. Also, long chapter that is kinda disjointed because I wanted to get it out before my parents got to town tomorrow, since I'm not sure when I'll update next. (hopefully by the end of next week, at latest). Hooray angst! lol
Cullen found her back inside the stuffy barn, standing in one corner with the smaller children while Mia and Rosalie twirled around the dance floor with their husbands. Making his way toward her, he brushed shoulders with a man, despondently dragging his feet against the dusty ground as he walked away from Ari, his friend patting him on the back, consoling him, “Maybe ask her again later? She does have her hands full right now.”

Was she turning down every dance now? Because his sisters had asked her to watch the little ones? No, that didn’t sound like Mia or Rosalie; if anything, his sisters would have been shoving the poor woman out to the rabble, insistent that Ari be enjoying herself. Which meant-

Maker, this is all my fault. Stopping a few steps away from her, watching her twist and turn with the barest hint of a smile on her lips as the two youngest played peekaboo amongst her skirts, Cullen cleared his throat. “Ari?”

“Hmm? Oh. Did you need something, ser?” He winced at her carefully neutral tone.

“I wanted to apologize, for what I said. I didn’t mean to imply that you were… trifling with anybody. I’m not the best with words,” running a hand through his curls, Cullen sighed. “I know I hurt your feelings. I’m sorry. Branson is a grown man, able to deal with his own life. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Casting her dark eyes upwards for a second that felt like a lifetime to him, Ari’s lips tightened before reverting back into that smooth mask she used to wear around him, back when he was still the Commander and she, only a healer. He hated it. “No apology needed, ser. You were just looking out for your family. I understand.”

“Dammit,” Cullen swore, ignoring the twinge of guilt as the toddlers stilled, staring up at their uncle with wide, bright eyes. “Ari, you- You’re-” You’re my family, too. But for some reason, the words stuck in his throat. “You look nice, by the way,” he finished limply.

“Thank you, ser.”

He wanted to punch something, maybe scream. Shake her, kiss her, throw himself at her feet and beg. Instead, he nodded, and turned to leave, resisting the urge to bow or salute at the dismissal in her voice.

Slipping back outside into the crisp night, Cullen draped himself over the fence, staring vacantly across the now bare fields that surrounded them. Empty. Devoid of life. Branson was wrong. There was no way she harbored any romantic feelings for him at all; there was no possibility.

Yet for some reason he couldn’t fathom, that night after they all returned back to Mia’s home, Ari had still slipped into the room he had been given while he slept, and sat with him until his nightmares calmed, the first he had endured in weeks since she had started sleeping next to him. Cullen had never actually seen her enter, or leave, but he smelled her scent on his pillow. Lemons and lavender, lingering in the air when he finally opened his eyes. Did that mean she did care? Or was she merely just doing her job?

The rest of the time they had stayed in town, she had all but ignored him, electing to devote most of
her attention to his sisters and the children. But she also did not speak to Branson much either, in
deferece to his comments, perhaps? Trying to determine her thoughts and mood was suddenly the
most complicated thing he had ever done in his life. He was certain that planning the siege of
Adamant had not been this stressful, with his newfound tendency to analyze every little flicker of her
eyes, the cadence of her tone, the quality of her laughs.

“You’re so hopeless.”

“Pardon?”

Mia snorted, leaning against the doorframe as she motioned out to where the healer stood in the
backyard, giggling as the children chased the chickens in circles around her. “You love her. Any
idiot with eyes could see that,” she held up a hand to forestall his inevitable protests. “So the question
is, why haven’t you said anything to her?”

“I…” The bench beneath him creaked as he shifted his weight, his eyes following the motion of
Ari’s braid. Fingers twitching, he could remember how her hair felt against his skin. It seemed like an
age since he had last had her close enough to him. He missed the feel of her in his arms, her softness,
her warmth. “She does not see me like that.”

Stepping the rest of the way out onto the porch, Mia shoved her brother over to make room, and
plopped down next to him. “Bet you she does.”

“Why-”

“I see the way she looks at you, Cul. The way you look at her. She told me a bit about her past, how
she was married before, what happened. My guess? She’s scared. It’s obvious she cares about you,”
she smiled slyly. “And worries about you.”

Cullen snorted, crossing his arms and slumped a bit further in his chair. “She’s a healer. It’s her job to
care and fuss.”

“A healer?” Mia swiveled to pin her brother with a suspicious glare. “I thought you said she was
your maid.”

He froze. “She’s… both?”

“Cullen Stanton Rutherford-”

“I’ll tell you everything Mia. Just not now,” he sighed. “Not yet.”

“Fine,” grumbling as she crossed her own arms in an identical gesture to his, Mia asked in a slightly
softer tone, “But everything is okay, right?”

“Yes,” he squeezed her hand. “Everything is.”

“Besides your atrocious people skills, obviously.”

“Mia…”

“Just tell her, Cul. The way she looks at you, that is not the look even a caretaker would give to their
patient. There’s more to it, I’m sure. I know you want to make endless plans and strategies and what
have you, but love isn’t predictable like that. Sometimes, you need to take a leap of faith and just
pray you end up where you want to be.”
A leap of faith. Do I even have faith anymore? Sighing, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on top of his knees, his shoulders drooping ever so slightly. “I’ll think about it. I can promise no more.”

***

Ari could feel the awkward tension in the air, stifling both of them as they rode back down the road, evident in the stilted small talk they had resorted to in order to break the silence. It wasn’t that she was upset with him and what he said, not anymore. It was just that…

Was that how he truly saw her? As the type of person who would string someone along for her own amusement? Did he think her that cruel? It didn’t help that she liked Branson and genuinely enjoyed his company. Or that she loved Cullen. Even more evidence that anything between the two of us isn’t going to happen, no matter what. He doesn’t care about me, not like that. Still, it hurt. It would be better to keep my distance, wouldn’t it? I’ve been letting myself get too close to him. Although, technically, he was the one who asked me to sleep with him. It’s just a job. I need to remember that. It’s just a job. If she cared too damn much, well, that was her own fault.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Cullen fidgeting with his reins, uncharacteristically shifting restlessly in his saddle. As the horses trotted into their yard, Ari studiously kept her gaze away from the Commander, hyperaware of his eyes following her as she led the mount into the stables.

“Ari,” he finally blurted out. “I’m so sorry for what I said the other night. I… wasn’t thinking.”

“You’ve already apologized, ser,” she replied smoothly. “No harm done.”

“No,” he shook his head, slipping the bridle of his horse’s head before moving to do the same to hers. “I don’t know why I said why I did. I know you, better than I know almost anyone else right now I dare say. You’re not that kind of person. I let my-” He couldn’t tell her he was just jealous. Could he? “Temper get the best of me.”

“Headache?” she asked softly.

“I- yes,” he sighed, berating himself internally for his cowardice. “I should have taken up your offer for help before that.”

“It’s okay,” Ari shook her head. “I mean, I should have known better. I’ve had my friendliness misconstrued as flirting more than a few times before.” A small frown flitted across Cullen’s face, but was gone before she had a chance to ponder why. “Branson didn’t think I was leading him on, did he?”

“No, he did not. I’m sorry I ruined your night. I know how much you were looking forward to it,” he muttered.

“It’s okay, Cullen. It probably wasn’t the last dance of my life,” she smiled, reaching out to touch his forearm. “If you want to make it up to me though, you can finishing putting up my horse too,” her eyes twinkled in the fading light as she teased him. He didn't think she was that type of person. It was just his withdrawals. The relief she felt at that knowledge threatened to drown her.

Dropping his hand over hers, Cullen stared down at the sight, marveling to himself at how much smaller than he she was. “Anything,” he promised in deep, fervent voice that sent shivers up her spine.

Inadvertently, as if pulled by an invisible string, Ari took a step closer to him. “Anything?”

Cullen’s eyes widened, his nostrils flaring as he sucked in a sharp breath. “Ari…”
What the hell am I doing?! Tearing her mortified gaze away from the obvious surprise on his face, she forced out a nervous giggle, staring at the bag of feed near her feet. The last thing she wanted to do was look up and see the rejection, or worse, pity on his face. So instead, she stammered a quick, “I- I should get started on supper,” and spun away, scurrying inside the house as quickly as she could without flat out sprinting.

Leaving him standing alone in the dim shed, gripping an empty bridle in one hand, with just a few rays of the darkening sunset to cast long shadows across the dirt floor.

She had been about to kiss him, he was sure. Hadn’t she? Or had she realized she was making a mistake, and that’s why she fled?

Maker’s breath, why was this so bloody hard?

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter to get back into the swing of things :)


The first frost quickly blanketed their corner of Ferelden just a few short weeks after they returned from South Reach, and winter followed closely on its heels, blanketing the world in a sheet of white, pristine snow. Ari had to admit the view was pretty, although she infinitely preferred to admire it from inside, with a massive fire roaring in the hearth, from underneath at least three blankets.

Cullen, for his part, loved it and spent almost every waking moment when he was not tinkering and carving in the shed outside in the yard, pouring all his energy into training and honing his skills. And it showed. His symptoms had greatly diminished over the last two months, and it was rare that he trembled like he used to, his strength returning with each passing day. Smooth, firm muscle now filled out his once gaunt frame, the drawn, tense lines on his face fading as his pain lessened to a shadow of what it once was. He was almost back to his former self. Pretty soon, he wouldn’t need her anymore.

And as he recovered, news from the outside world began gradually trickling in, carried by ravens from Divine Victoria, the Seeker, and the former Ambassador for the Inquisition. Ari could only guess as to what was happening, assuming it was all information on either Solas or the Qun, since Cullen remained tightlipped about the contents of the letters, as she expected. Who was she anyways? Just a nobody who fell out of a rift, who didn’t even belong here.

Sighing to herself, Ari crouched down in front of the oven, running a finger over the dark cast iron and glaring at the build up she saw within. Better clean it today, while I have time. Might help take my mind off things. Rolling up her sleeve, she grabbed a bucket and a stiff brush, and set herself to work.

Things between her and Cullen hadn’t necessarily been strained, but she could tell he was slightly confused by her demeanor. She had done her best to keep some distance between them, at least during the day, trying to hold herself back from teasing him so much, bringing back some semblance of professionalism back into their relationship. Nights was when it became a trial. She still slept by his side, as he insisted that her presence helped ward against his nightmares. And, sucker that she was, happily agreed. Inevitably, he would fall asleep with his arms wrapped tightly around her, and she would wake with her limbs tangled up with his own, his face tucked into the crook of her neck, breathing steadily. Cullen still wore only his smalls to bed, even though the nights grew chillier and his own body temperature had regulated itself, claiming that he slept better that way. Not that she particularly minded. To feel his skin, warm and firm, sliding against hers- it was all she could do to hide the smile on her face from him, while simultaneously reining her other urges in. Especially in the morning, when she could feel him, all of him, through the thin cotton of his clothes.

Quick, stolen moments while he was out for his morning run were all she had to alleviate the desire that always burned within her. Sometimes, she wished she could retreat to her own bed at night, if only to take care of her needs more thoroughly. But with the lack of locks on the doors, and the thin walls, she knew she would never risk it. But oh, how she wanted to. Needed to. Especially since her dreams were determined to torment her with images of him, gloriously devoid of every stitch of clothing, that smirk twitching at his lips as he devoured her core, pinning her to the bed with those damn arms of his, his substantial girth stretching her, filling her, making her scream, beg for mercy-

Ugh. The result was a very sexually frustrated Ari. Cleaning the oven would, at least, help to alleviate some of her distress, so, she got to work.
His muscles burning pleasantly, sweat soaking his tunic, breath fogging in the frosty air, Cullen dragged the training dummy back inside the shed, satisfied with his efforts for the day, short though it had been. The snow was starting to fall in fat, thick flakes, so he decided it would be best he retire for the rest of the day, at least until he could see more than a few feet in front of his hand. Thank the Maker he was well enough to train at a higher intensity now. His self control around Ari was wearing thin, especially after how he had woken up that morning.

It had been dark outside still, the edges of the sky just barely starting to lighten with the approaching dawn. The blankets had been kicked off the bed at some point during the night, probably by Ari, since she tended to move a bit more than he during her slumber. But in her restlessness, her shift had hiked up around her chest, exposing the smooth, silky length of her belly and legs to his gaze, offering him just a hint of the curve of the undersides of her breasts. And she had been dreaming something salacious, judging by the way she was writhing in his arms, moaning and muttering in her sleep. Cullen had never take a woman without her full consent, but never before had he been tempted to the brink of the Void, either. It had taken every iota of discipline in his body to force himself out of bed, and into the freezing night to regain himself, when every nerve in his body screamed for him to return to her warmth, and bury himself between her legs. Awaken her, and fill the room with her moans, make her shout his name in her pleasure, force her to look into his eyes, rather than whoever she was dreaming about.

His fists involuntarily clenched just thinking about her unknown dream man. Who had she been thinking about? Branson? Blackwall? Someone else from the village, or her past, perhaps? Whoever it was, Cullen was sure he hated him.

Sheathing his sword, he shook his head to clear his thoughts, fingers gripping the scabbard securely as he made his way back inside, Atlas on his heels, as he always was. Ari was lost in her own world, scrubbing the oven with an intensity that bordered on violent, so Cullen decided it would be best to leave her be, and quickly washed up, changed into clean clothes, and sunk into his chair with a blissful sigh. Picking up the most recent letters Leliana had sent him, he began to reread the elegant script, only to gently set the parchment back down on his lap as Ari began to softly sing, her words tugging him far into the depths of his mind.

*Give me something brighter*
*Give me something I can see*
*Give me something vicious*
*Give me something I can be*
*Give me all the love and peace*
*To end these wars*
*Give me something sacred*
*Something worth fighting for*

Something worth fighting for. What did he have left? When he had taken his vows and served as a templar, he had his sworn duty to protect innocents from the evils of magic, both mage and nonmage alike. When he had taken up the mantle of Commander, his goals had barely shifted. Still, he had wanted to protect, to help the Inquisition, to defend Thedas’ innocent against the Venatori, the red templars, demons, and Corypheus. What about now? What did he have left to fight for? Solas was out there, it was true. But the elf’s goals were still hazy, unknown. Whatever was going to happen, it was very likely it would occur without him. What would he do?

*It's clear enough to me*
*The ugliness I see*
*Is evidence of who I need*
He needed... He no longer relied on lyrium. Who did he need? Before, he had relied on his superiors. The Revered Mothers at the Chantry he trained at, Knight-Commanders Gregoir, Meredith, the Inquisitor. Now there was no one left in charge of himself, save the Maker. It was an odd feeling, to be beholden to no one.

*Give me an answer*  
*Give me a way out*  
*Give me the faith*  
*To believe in these hard times*

Faith. *A leap of faith*, is what Mia had told him. Cullen had his faith in the Maker and Andraste still, and would always, but his faith in people- the Chantry, the Inquisitor, his Knight-Commander- that had long since been shattered. Perhaps it was for the best, if he no longer put his faith into others. But Ari... She had never faltered from his side, even through the worst of him. Could he have faith? In her?

*Give me motivation*  
*Give me all my heart's desires*  
*Show me something gorgeous*  
*Show me till my eyes get tired*  
*Give me all the drums and*  
*Show me how to play them loud*  
*Show me how to move*  
*When I can't feel that you're around*

Ari. Ever since she came into his life, she had opened his eyes to what it was like to really live, rather than merely existing, filling his heart with her infectious laughter and the simple joy she found in everything. Her dark eyes sparkling, like the starry night itself had been captured within its fathomless depths. The nonsensical rhythm her feet beat out as she danced across the house when she thought he wasn’t looking. Her bright smile as she found a new sort of flower, the way she lit up when he carved her another crude wooden animal, the kitchen windowsill now filled to almost overflowing with the tiny creatures. The way she adored his family, especially the children, and how they loved her in turn. She loved life, was possessed of what the Orlesians called *joie de vivre*, letting that lighthearted attitude permeate every fiber of her being. Even when she was down and upset, or when he was being as ass as he was wont to do, somehow she always managed to pick herself back up and forgive him with a sweet smile and an easy grace that was secondnature for her. And for the first time since he was a child, he felt himself enjoying life as well. All because of her, and the sunshine she brought to his world.

*We hide like thieves in shadows*  
*Scared of the sun*  
*We know the light will find us*  
*Us and all we've done*

No matter how hard he tried to atone for his sins, Cullen knew that there would be a reckoning when he finally fell at the feet of Andraste. There were so, so many things he could never forgive himself for. How he let his fear guide him, consume him. The harsh words he said, the atrocities he allowed to happen, the crimes he himself committed- how many lives were destroyed because of him? The Maker would judge him one day. Cullen was at peace with that. Until then, he would keep striving to do as much good as he could, praying that one day, he might find forgiveness.

*Give me an answer*  
*Give me a way out*
Give me the faith  
To believe in these hard times

Faith. Faith in the Maker, his Bride, and- Ari. He had faith in her. She would always show him the way, with her unwavering conviction and gentle smile and vivacity. A comforting hand, extended in aid, offering her support, should he choose to accept it. She was his everything now. His reason for fighting, the very air he needed to live. He knew her, down to her very soul, and yet... She knew nothing about him still. How would she react when he told her what he did, who he was?

Sweat instantly drenched his palms at the thought, the papers in his lap fluttering to the ground. She would hate him. There was no other option. Someone as good and pure as her... Once, he had been the exact opposite of she. It was true, that he had been trying to change, but would it be enough for her? Would she look at him differently?

It didn’t change anything; he had to tell her, before he confessed his feelings. And if he didn’t let her know how he felt about her, Cullen knew he would regret it the rest of his life. A leap of faith.

Groaning, Ari ran her cloth over the inside of the oven one last time. “Take that, you stupid iron behemoth,” she smirked in victory, throwing her rag down. “Clean at last. As soon as I wash up, I’ll start supper,” she called over to Cullen, who vacantly nodded at her words. Bad news from someone? His face was almost ashen, his knuckles bleeding white from the way he clenched the armrests of his chair so tightly. Pieces of parchments littered the floor beneath him in a haphazard mess. “Cullen? Is everything alright?”

“Hmm? Oh, um, yes. Everything is fine. Quite alright.”

Frowning down at the grease and soot lining her skin and clothes, Ari decided to let his lie slide for now, at least until she was clean.

Cullen barely moved from his spot the entire time it took her to scrub off, bake a fresh loaf of bread, and prepare a thick, hearty stew for their meal. He sat there, staring, unseeing at some point on the floor, the letters in his hand forgotten, his eyes pained and vacant. Was he perhaps suffering from something lyrium related?

“Cullen,” she set two bowls down on the small table. “Supper is ready. Do you need anything else right now?”

Jerking his head up, he shook his head stiffly, ignoring his cramped muscles protesting as he pushed himself to stand. “No. It smells delicious.”

“Are you sure? You look like you’re in pain.”

“I’m fi-” he started to snap, then fell short when he saw the concern written in the crease across her forehead, the faint lines at the corner of her eyes. Don’t be an ass, don’t be an ass. Taking a deep breath, he managed to dredge up a shaky smile. “I’m fine. Honestly. I just... How much do you know about my past?”

Ari kept her surprise well hidden as she continued to set the table. How much should I know? “I know you were a templar, obviously,” she replied carefully. “A Knight-Captain in Kirkwall, right? And in Ferelden, before that.”

He nodded. “I was. There are some... things about my past I keep hidden. You read Varric’s book about Hawke?” Grimacing at her confirmation, Cullen slumped a bit in his chair. “So you know a bit about how I used to be. Maker, what you must think of me.”
Reaching across the table, Ari laced her fingers through his, a warm smile curving her lips. “I think you’re a strong man, to have come as far as you did. Changing deep seated perceptions and overcoming prejudices is not an easy feat, but you did it. How could I have anything but respect for you?”

Cullen stared at her hand, and turned his palm over, gripping her fingers tight. “There’s more,” he whispered hoarsely. “I want to tell you. I want-” choking on his words, he swallowed thickly. “I want you to know everything.”

“So tell me.”

Chapter End Notes

Song is These Hard Times, by Needtobreathe.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Cullen said he wanted to tell her everything, he literally meant everything. The stew grew cold as they both picked at it, Ari remaining mostly silent as she listened attentively to him describe himself as a child, his reasoning for wanting to join the templars, the joy and peace he found in training, the eagerness with which he accepted his first assignment at Kinloch, the subsequent horrors he had faced when the Circle fell to Uldred’s madness, the chaos that was Kirkwall. Together, they slowly polished off a bottle of wine that had been gathering dust, moving to the living room once the meal was finished, and sat in front of the fire, twilight blending into the small hours of the morning.

In the end, nothing had surprised her, besides the sheer magnitude of his guilt. How he carried around the weight around his neck like a millstone, convinced that his soul was damned for his fear and cowardice and hate. How could he not see all the good he had done?

Eventually, his tale reached the Inquisition, and his voice finally gave out, unused to speaking so much for so long. But it was enough. Ari could infer the rest from what she already knew from having met him while he was still the Commander, and what little she remembered from the game. “Cullen,” stretching her limbs, she stood up and crossed the room to where he sat, weary and drained from all the emotions and memories he had forced himself to relive. She dropped onto the floor, next to his knee, and laid her hand upon his thigh. “You were so young when you survived Kinloch. Yes, you made mistakes during Kirkwall. But given your fairly recent trauma, and Meredith, it’s not surprising. The man who chose to stand up to her in the end, the man who has been toiling away since then to atone, the man that earned the respect of nations and armies- that is who you are. You give yourself far too little credit.”

He raised his head, eyes bloodshot and wide. “Y-you don’t despise me? Even after all that I told you?”

“How could I?” she tried to stifle her yawn, to no avail. “Sorry,” she smiled ruefully.

Instantly, he was on his feet, sweeping her up into his arms in a move that had her swooning with his chivalry. “Don’t apologize,” Cullen murmured huskily. “I’m keeping you up far too late.”

“I don’t mind,” Ari yawned again. “I’m glad you told me everything. Not that it changes anything, except giving me more respect for you. You’re a good man, Cullen Rutherford. Regardless of what you think about yourself. I’m glad I met you.”

Losing the battle to her heavy eyelids, she snuggled further into his chest, lulled by the sound of his heart, thumping wildly within his chest. Standing in the middle of the room, Cullen stared down at her, drinking in the view of her face, the way her lashes fluttered against her sin, the slight rise and fall of her chest. She didn’t hate him. She was glad she met him, thought him a good man. Could that mean- could she come to love him? Love him, as he now knew he loved her? He had once thought he loved Evelyn, but this- This was so much more. He felt his love for her in every fiber of his being, making him want to do ridiculous things, like sing for no reason and, Maker forbid, even dance. He wanted to fly.

With the greatest care, he gently laid her down in bed, slid her boots off, tugged the ribbon binding her braid loose, knowing she preferred to sleep with her hair unbound, and crawled in next to her, laying by her side like he had done dozens of nights before. Except tonight, it felt different.
He loved her. And she knew everything about him, and still smiled at him with that blinding light within her spirit. He would tell her how he felt tomorrow.

If he managed to work up the nerve.

***

Ari paused on the porch, a basket of clean and frozen laundry tucked against her hip. Cullen really was magnificent. She watched as he battled his way across the yard, every movement calculated, precise, the forms engraved into his memory as he swung his sword high above his head, parrying invisible enemies, flakes of white swirling around him as if he stood in the middle of a snowglobe from her childhood. His was a skill that rivaled few others.

“Looking good,” she called out.

Grinning boyishly at her, he spun elegantly on his heel, offering his sword in a crisp salute. “My lady,” he bowed.

Her giggle floated through the air to him, her skirts disappearing into the cabin, making him feel lighter than he had in years, especially after unburdening himself to her last night. This could be their life. He could build things, she could make her potions, and they could make a living off of that. Maybe have a family. They could be happy out here. Would she be happy? With him? Sometimes he was certain that she felt the same about him, by the way her entire face would light up when he entered the room, but other times, she would almost shut down. Revert to the professional healer he originally knew, hiding behind whatever wall she had constructed around herself.

Either way, he couldn’t take being in limbo like this, not knowing, being so close to her and yet unable to show her how he truly felt. But what if she didn’t feel the same? Could he bear it?

The hours dragged until she called out of the window to come inside. Shuffling inside, he quickly washed up, groaning as he smelled the sweet, warm scent of blueberries, bubbling away in the oven. “Did you make pie?”

“I did,” she set two plates on the table, with roasted rabbits from the snares he had checked earlier, and a pile of crisp vegetables, not a beet in sight. He smiled. “Should be done in another twenty minutes or so.”

“You are an angel,” he sighed, tearing into his food eagerly. It was a miracle he hadn’t gained 50 pounds with the way she cooked, he mused as he devoured his meal. “I could die a happy man like this.”

“What, stuffed with rabbit and pie?” Maker, he loved that teasing glint in her smile, the way her eyes danced in delight.

“Good food, lovely company. All I need is a worth chess opponent.” After supper, he told himself, I’ll tell her then.

“Maybe you should train Atlas,” Ari laughed. “He’d probably do better than me.”

“Probably.”

“Hey!” Her lips poked out into the most adorable pout he had ever seen. “You weren’t supposed to agree with me!”

“You can’t be suggesting I lie, my lady,” he grinned impishly at her.
Grumbling under her breath, Ari couldn’t help but smile at Cullen. He just looked so happy and content and relaxed. She never wanted to see him any other way than this.

With the frigid air seeping through the cracks in the house from the ice and snow that covered the land outside, the inside temperature steadily dropped and so he threw a few more logs onto the fire, knowing how much she hated the cold. Shoving aside the pang of irrational jealousy towards the blanket that she wrapped around her shoulders, wishing he could be the one to keep her warm, Cullen finished washing the dishes, and brought her a glass of wine.

“I had been meaning to ask you,” he settled himself gingerly into the chair opposite hers. “Now that I’m capable of doing things for myself again and regaining my strength, what do you intend to do?”

Ari froze, tendrils of icy steel clamping around her heart and throat. She had been dreading this day, when he realized he was back to normal again and no longer needed her. Her job was done, and she…

She had fallen in love with him. Despite trying not to, despite distancing herself whenever she had the presence of mind to, his warm eyes and wry smirk always drew her back in with the way he made her laugh. *I have no reason left to stay. And he’s probably anxious to start his life again. “I thought about venturing up north. Somewhere warmer, maybe. It should be easy to find a job for a healer, right?”*

“It should be, but—” he cleared his throat, rubbing his neck awkwardly, his voice stilted, almost forced, stifled under his nerves. “You know you don’t have to leave. You could stay here, with- with me.”

*Ever the gentleman,* she smiled wistfully. It was beyond obvious to her that he was hoping she would say no by the tightness of his eyes, the subtle clench of his jaw. “Perhaps,” she tried to keep her voice casual and light, unsure if she was succeeding or not. “I—” Atlas suddenly bounded off the rug and skidded toward the door, plaintively whining at her with those chocolate brown eyes of his, scratching at the wood lightly with one paw. “What is it, boy? Do you have to go out?” Grabbing her wine, Ari rose and crossed the living room, watching as the giant mabari sprinted across the field and down the road.

Cullen moved to stand behind her, peering into the darkness, frowning as they both heard the sound of thundering hooves, racing towards them. “Ari,” he muttered. “Grab my sword, and your bow.”

Adrenaline pounding through her veins, she sprinted off to do as he bid, passing his scabbard to him, gripping the smooth wood of her bow, one arrow held at the ready.

“Wait,” he squinted. “Is that-?”

“Branson?” Ari called out. “Graham? What’s going on?”

The two horses threw up a cloud of snow as they were pulled to an abrupt halt, the two men tumbling from the saddles breathlessly, their breaths fogging thickly in the air. “The baby, Sinead,” Graham gasped out. “She’s sick. Mia said you were a healer?”

Ushering both of the frozen visitors inside, Cullen passed them both a shot of whiskey to warm their blood. “Thanks,” Branson sighed. “She’s had a fever for two days now, and it’s not going down. The healer in town says she can’t do anything else, but we were hoping, maybe, you could.”

“I’ll try, of course,” Ari replied instantly. “Let me go get my things.”

Running to the bedroom, she immediately began to stuff her bag with herbs, clothes, potions she
already had made, making sure to wrap her mortar and pestle securely. *And a few alchemy tomes, just in case I need to look something up. How much should I pack? Enough for several days, probably.*

“Ari…” Cullen hovered at the edge of her door, skittish and unsure.

“I’ll be back in a few days, if everything goes well. There’s leftovers enough to get you through until I come back. If I’m running late—”

“Ari,” he interrupted impatiently with a faint scowl on his brow, his tone tinged with irritation, “I do know how to cook and care for myself.”

Oh, how she knew. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she nodded, tears burning behind her eyes. Did he want her gone as soon as possible? *Surely he would let me stay the winter.*

“I know,” she murmured. “But I’ll always worry. I’ll be back as soon as I can, Cullen.”

Silently, his eyes clouded with some unreadable emotion, he nodded, turning toward his brothers. “Take our horses. I’ll bring yours back in a few days, if you don’t come first. Keep her safe on the road,” he muttered in an aside to Branson, who raised an eyebrow.

“Oh course we will. Come on Ari, you can ride double with me. Or,” he amended, noting his older brother’s glare. “Graham. Yeah, you should ride with Graham.”

*Fuck.* Cullen leaned against the doorframe as the trio raced out into the night, almost overshooting the saddle as they threw themselves up onto the horses in their haste before disappearing into the quiet woods. Everything had been going so well tonight, and now… Well. He couldn’t begrudge her going to save his niece’s life. And the horses were too exhausted to carry him as well, so he would have to stay here until they were recovered. A day or two, perhaps, and then he could return them and fetch her back home.

Home. With him. He knew it now, more than ever. This is where she belonged, with him, and he with her.

Sighing, Cullen ruffled Atlas’ fur. “Come on boy. Let’s go back inside. She’ll be back soon enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Unintentional cliffhanger, sorry! It was going to be one super long chapter, so I split it up into 2.
In a way, Ari was glad for the distraction and the excuse to get away from the cabin, although she wished it wasn’t because of the baby’s illness. She had been certain Cullen was about to ask her when she would be ready to leave, and she didn’t trust herself enough to remain calm and composed while he did so. Probably would have made a fool of myself, crying or something. This way, she would have time to come to terms with her termination, and figure out a plan for whatever came next.

Maybe she should stay in South Reach. She loved Mia and Rosalie and their families, and at least if she did, she would get to see Cullen every now and then. Watch from afar as he continued on with his life, without her. Maybe fall in love with some other woman. Get married. Have babies. While she stayed alone, and-

No. She would have to leave. But where?

The horses didn’t even come to a stop before Ari threw herself down on the ground, shaking the snow from her hair and cloak, snatching up her pack and sprinted inside the smaller house where Rosalie and Graham lived. “Which room?” she demanded of Mia as soon as she entered, heading in the direction the other woman pointed.

The young toddler was trembling violently, unconscious, her skin burning to the touch, not unlike Cullen during the worst of his withdrawals. As luck would have it, Ari still had some of the infusions she had made for him left and had brought them with her in her pack. Uncorking the vial, she carefully tilted Sinead’s chin up and open, letting a few drops pool under her tongue. “Get me some fresh snow, and towels and a basin of water,” she ordered whoever was standing behind her, footsteps slapping against the floor as they hurried to do her bidding.

“If you- will she live?” Rosalie crept up behind Ari, her voice exhausted and hoarse, whispering through her tears.

“I don’t know yet,” Ari murmured. “But I’ll be damned if I don’t try everything possible first. She’s a fighter, Rosalie. Don’t give up hope.”

***

It took over a day, in which Ari barely slept, for Sinead’s fever to finally break in the early hours of the morning, just before sunrise. Blinking bright hazel eyes up at the healer, the little girl sniffled, clutching her teddy bear tighter to her chest, and immediately began crying for her mother, at which Rosalie had burst into the room and started sobbing herself, clutching her daughter in a vice-like grip. Taking the rich bone broth that Mia had made the night before, Ari gave a bowl to the woman and left them both with instructions to get as much of the nourishing soup in her daughter as possible.

After a quick nap, she checked back in on Sinead, who was now sleeping peacefully, her mother curled around her on the small trundle bed. So sweet, Ari smiled even as a familiar ache spread through her heart. And not meant for me. This wouldn’t do. She needed to get out for a bit, maybe take a walk to clear her head.

Throwing her thick fur lined cloak around her shoulders, Ari left under the pretense of going to grab
a few supplies from town, for once barely feeling the cold as it seeped through her sturdy boots and into her bones, the soft breeze ruffling her hair. Definitely, I should go somewhere warm. Maybe head up to the Free Marches. Starkhaven sounded nice. Or Ostwick was by the ocean, right? Probably not Nevarra, those death mages sound creepy. Antiva sounds nice, as long as I don’t get stabbed or poisoned.

Okay. You can do this. When you get back, ask him if it’s okay to stay until spring at least, then you’ll be out of his hair. If not, maybe Mia would let me stay with her. Or maybe I should just ask her now. How would I get to the Marches, anyways? It really isn’t safe for me to ride alone across Ferelden. Maybe Branson would take me? Or I could hire a mercenary.

Pausing in the town square, Ari perked up at the sight of a traveling merchant that had his wares spread across two long tables. There was always interesting trinkets and rare herbs to be found from journeymen like him.

“Mistress, welcome, welcome,” the man grinned as she approached, spreading his hands over his goods. “Anything particular I can interest you in? A pretty necklace, perhaps? Dwarven made, direct from Orzammar.”

“Have you got any herbs for sale?” she asked, fingering the amulet he held out for her. It was pretty, but what use did she have for jewelry right now?

“Herbs? For cooking?” Ducking down, he pulled out an oiled length of rolled leather.

“Potions. I’m a healer,” she explained.

“Ah, I see. I’ve a few, but nothing too rare I’m afraid. Some black lotus, rashvine, witherstalk. If you need anything in particular, next time I pass through here I can see if I can bring you some. My caravan will be heading out tomorrow, to Denerim, and will be back around the first thaw next spring.”

“We?” Her head jerked up. “You don’t travel alone?”

“Oh, heavens no,” the merchant grimaced. “Far too many brigands on the road for me to keep protected with just myself, especially during the harsh winter. No, there’s a few of us traveling to the capital for various reasons, and we hired several mercenaries to keep us safe on the trip up.”

“Are you- could- would you be willing to take one more?” Ari held her breath. The smart thing would be to ask Cullen if she could stay until spring, or stay with Mia, but the truth was, the longer she lingered near him, the harder it would be for her to leave when the time finally came. If she could leave tomorrow, with this caravan, she could get to Denerim, and then take a ship across the Waking Sea to wherever. But could she leave him without saying goodbye at all?

“You yourself?” Twirling his thick mustache around one finger, the man nodded. “Always have room, provided you have the coin. Having a healer along will be added security as well.”

Handing over the amount of coin he asked for, Ari headed back to the house, with the assurance that she would meet them at the northern entrance to the town at dawn tomorrow.

It was time to go, wasn’t it? He was more than able to take care of himself now, he didn’t need her anymore. Selfish of her, to want to stay, just because she loved him. But she always knew this day would come. This would be better, to make a clean break, slip away. And maybe, it was because she was a coward who couldn’t face him in person.

Mia and Rosalie were predictably distraught by Ari’s announcement that she would be leaving.
tomorrow.

“But- but your things!” the younger sister cried. “You can’t just leave with nothing! And what about Atlas?”

“I have most of my clothes with me already, and most of my tools,” Ari replied. “Everything else I left is easily replaced.” Except her wooden menagerie. A pang of regret gripped her heart when she realized she would have to leave them behind. *Maybe Cullen would mail them to me?* “And Atlas is more Cullen’s dog now than mine.” Good thing, too. That way he won’t be so alone out there.

“Cullen will be upset if you leave without saying goodbye,” Mia said gently. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind taking you himself wherever you wanted to go, later on.”

“I know he wouldn’t mind,” Ari mustered up a smile for her friends, balling her hands in her lap to keep them from betraying the deep, soul crushing agony within her chest. “But it’s better this way. Trust me.”

“I don’t think it is,” Mia sighed. “But I don’t think anything I could say would change your mind.” *Cullen called me stubborn as well, even moreso than Cassandra. That was on the way down to South Reach during the summer. How things have changed since then.*

“Andraste preserve me, what are we going to tell the children?”

***

On the third day, Cullen decided he didn’t want to wait any longer for her to return. Saddling up the horses, he locked up the cabin and whistled to Atlas, his heart pounding the entire ride up to town. This would be it. He would see her, and tell her how he felt. No more excuses, no more wasted time. She *had* to know.

He just prayed she felt the same.

The horses trotted into the yard shortly after noon, and Cullen felt his heart drop instantly. The sound of crying and wailing could be heard from where he stood outside, and immediately, he assumed the worst. Throwing the reins loosely over a nearby post, he raced inside, flinging the door open, his pulse roaring in his ear as he took in the chaos before him, children sobbing on the floor, the adults drawn and haggard.

“Rosalie, I’m so-” He stopped short. There was Sinead, awake, curled up on the sofa in a pile of blankets. If she was alright, then what…?

“Cullen,” Graham rose, wincing as another of the children let loose an ear piercing shriek of despair. “You brought the horses back?”

“Yes, I, ah, left them in the yard, I thought-” The other man scurried off before Cullen even finished his sentence, eager to get away from the din inside the house. “What’s going on?”

Raising her head slowly, Mia blinked, once, twice, then sighed. “Ari left. This morning.”

No. No, she couldn’t have. She- “Left?” Cullen croaked. “Why? Where?”

“She said it was time to move on. Left a letter for you, and apologized for not getting to say goodbye in person. Did you tell her…?”

Shaking his head, Cullen dropped to the floor, his limbs suddenly weighted with lead, staring silently
at the letter held in Mia’s outstretched hand. Ari was gone. Left him. But why?! “I was going to tell her, the other night when Sinead got sick, right before she left,” his voice whispered through his head, sounding as if he was listening to himself from the bottom of a ravine. Distant, hollow. Rather like how he felt at the moment.

“Read it, Cul.”

“Does it matter?” he barked a sardonic laugh. This shouldn't have surprised him. Happiness, love- he should have known these things were out of his reach. He should just be grateful he had his health back now. Thanks to her. No. She was just doing her job. A job she had now completed. Had he been such a burden, that she wanted to escape him in the middle of the winter? “She left, of her own volition, right? Whatever her reasons are, I’m sure they were good enough for her. Excuse me, I need to get back. Are my horses in the barn?”

“Cullen,” catching his arm as he turned to leave, Mia gripped on tightly. “We have room here. The children would love if you were near. And I would worry a lot less about you living out there, all by yourself.”

“No, I’ll-” Living out there alone. Could he go back to that cabin? See her touches in every room? Vision of her dancing in her bare feet, cooking supper, snuggled up by the fire, sprawled out in his arms in his bed raced through his mind. Even that morning, the scent of her still lingered on his pillow. Could he go back and live there with her ghost haunting every crevice of the place?

It would surely drive him mad.

“That’s a good idea,” he nodded, the rest of his thoughts numb, to his sister’s surprise and delight. “Just give me a few days to get my things.”

Ari wanted a new life. It only made sense for him to start one as well. Maker, how was he going to live without her? Gritting his teeth against the sharp lance of pain that pierced his chest, ignoring his struggle to draw breath, fighting against the wave of emptiness that threatened to consume him, he took the letter from Mia and crammed it, unread, in his back pocket.

What choice do I have?

Chapter End Notes

*kawa runs and hides*
Maybe she should have stayed until spring. Huddling further into the wagon, Ari clutched her cloak and the blanket she had been given tighter around her small frame, wishing for the hundredth time that she had the power to summon a fire. Remember how warm Cullen was? Especially at night, tucked into his bed, his arms and legs wrapped around you? She shook her head. That part of her life was over now, right? Dwelling on it would do her no good.

The caravan made slow progress up the King’s Highway, stopping in the smaller towns that received less traffic every now and then for the merchant to ply his trade, then setting off again. But finally, they would reach Denerim, probably in the next two days, the head mercenary assured her.

Trudging off that night from camp a short distance into the woods, Ari scanned the area for a dense enough area so that she could relieve herself. God, how she missed indoor plumbing. Toilet paper. Heat. Hiking up her leggings, she continued the litany of creature comforts she wished she still had. Like chocolate. Hot chocolate. Hot, steaming, scalding, boiling-

“Unngh…”

Her head whipped up at the sound of a pained groan. Careful, her mind warned. Could be a trap. Still, the healer in her insisted she go find the injured person. When did I start thinking of myself as a healer instead of a nurse?

Peeking over a low bush, Ari spotted a woman in a type of leather armor, inlaid with metal scales that glinted a faint red in the pale moonlight. Her head was thrown back against the tree she leaned on, eyes squeezed shut, one hand clamped over her thigh. Scanning the area, Ari took note of the sword, pair of daggers, and bow and quiver, all within easy reach of the stranger.

“Excuse me? Are you hurt?” The woman’s eyes fluttered open. “I’m a healer. I can help.” Holding up her empty hands, Ari slowly approached when the woman made no move.

“Infected,” she whispered hoarsely when the healer got close enough. “Thought I could make it back to town before it got worse. So close to home, after so long. I-” Hissing as Ari gently pulled her hands off her leg, the woman gritted her teeth. “I’m an idiot.”

“I’ll be right back, let me get my things.” Racing back to camp, Ari snatched up her pack and skin of water and a few blankets and a small flask of liquor, moving as fast as she was able, ignoring the questions from the others in the camp. “I need to clean the area first,” she said as she settled herself next to the warrior. “This might hurt.”

“Do what you need to do,” the woman croaked. “Elissa, by the way.”

“Ari.” Working as quickly as she dared, Ari rinsed the wound until the water ran clear, using the rest of the liquid to make a paste from the herbs she had still stored in her satchel, and spread the gooey mess over the infection. “How did you get this?”

“Damn wolves,” Elissa sighed as the poultice began to seep into the cut, the elfroot working to numb the worst of the pain. “Came at me at night. Should’ve expected it, but this close to home, I got careless. I’ve been away a long time, and I just wanted to hurry back to my husband.”
Ducking her head, Ari busied herself with grinding up herbs for another poultice, doing her best to hide the shock written plainly across her face. *Elissa. Been away a long time. Trying to get back to her husband. Is this… the queen? Is this Elissa Cousland? Or Elissa Theirin? Warden-Commander, Hero of Ferelden? Wait. Did she find a cure for the taint?!

Gently, Ari scraped off the first poultice, rinsing the wound yet again, and packed it tightly with the new one, wrapping this one in a set of bandages. “Can you stand? The caravan I’m traveling with has a wagon, you could ride with us the rest of the way.”

“That would be perfect, thank you,” Elissa smiled through the dark circles under her eyes. This close, Ari could see the faint wrinkles that lay at the crease of her eyes and lips, evidence of the years spent outdoors and in the sun.

Sliding herself under Elissa’s arm, Ari slowly walked them both back to the others, supporting most of their weight, thinking how much easier it was to carry her rather than Cullen’s lanky frame. *Stop thinking about him.*

*Right. Should tell myself to just stop breathing too, while I’m at it.*

“Eh? Who’s this, mistress?”

Gently lowering Elissa down next to the fire, Ari replied to the merchant, “Elissa. She’s injured, and needs to get to Denerim. We have room in the wagon for one more, I thought she could come with us?”

“That’s all well and good, but if she comes, that’s just one more mouth to feed,” he pointed out. “She’ll have to pay, same as everyone else.”

“Oh for,” Ari sighed. “I’ll pay for her.”

Elissa grabbed her arm when Ari moved to pull out the small pouch of coin in her skirts. “You don’t have to, I can walk. I’d offer to pay myself, but I’m running frighteningly low on coin.”

“It’s alright, I don’t mind.” Ari’s smile melted into a frosty stare as she deposited the coins in the merchant’s greedy palms, her eyes sharp and disapproving.

“I can pay you back when we get to Denerim,” Elissa promised. “And then some.”

“I’m not worried about it. Now, I’ll need to change your bandages in another few hours. Until then, you should get some sleep.” Tucking a spare blanket around the Warden’s body, Ari smiled down at her. “You’ll be home in no time.”

“Why are you so nice?” she mumbled. “Did the Maker send you to me?”

“A full bladder sent me to you,” Ari giggled. “No, I know what it’s like to be away from home, just wanting to go back.” Oh, how she wanted to go back home, to him. But Cullen wasn’t her home. Nor was that small cabin they had worked so hard on, no matter how desperately she wanted it to be otherwise. “But since I can’t go home, least I can do is help you. Now, get some rest. I’ll wake you in a bit.”

***

“I should probably tell you something.”

The caravan finally had disbanded on the outskirts of Denerim, just outside the city gates, and Ari
was left with Elissa to find their own way. The Warden was healing nicely, although she still couldn’t put much weight on her leg, so Ari lent herself as a makeshift crutch. It would be slow going, but she wasn’t in any rush. She still had no idea which way the docks were, or who she should talk to about passage, or even if she had enough money on her to pay. *I should write to Cullen, tell him where I am, so he can send the rest of my pay, I suppose.*

“I’m, well, my last name is- Theirin.” Biting her lip, Elissa waited to see what Ari’s reaction would be.

“I had a feeling,” Ari shrugged. “Should I not call you Elissa, then? Would you prefer Warden-Commander, or Your Majesty, or-”

“Maker, none of those,” she laughed. “As long as you don’t start bowing to me, everything will be just fine. How did you know?”

“I didn’t know.” God, Denerim was so much bigger than she had imagined. Even through the snow, crowds of people made their way through the cobbled roads, bundled up against the cold so that they looked like miniature bears with baskets of food and clothes and whatever else they were carrying, the sound of dogs echoing all around. *I wonder how Atlas is doing. He at least is probably glad to have his spot back in Cullen’s bed.* “But you said your name was Elissa, and I knew the Queen’s name was Elissa, and you said you had been away from home a long time, and missed your husband, and I know the Queen has been gone quite awhile. It was just a hunch.”

“Is that why you helped me?”

Ari snorted. “You really think that?”

“Not really,” Elissa smiled. “But after living in court for so long, and then among strangers, it’s rare to find a real friend. Say, I’ve got an idea. How about instead of going up to the Marches, you stay here? In Denerim? As my personal healer?”

“I’m sure you have much more skilled healers at the palace though,” Ari frowned. “I don’t know a lot, just what I picked up from the healers at Skyhold in the year I was there.”

“Oh, you were part of the Inquisition? One of my best friends was there, Leliana,” grinning, Elissa adjusted her weight, shifting slightly. “Well, Divine now, I suppose.”

“I met her. She’s… intense.” Memories of the first day Ari had arrived in Skyhold flashed through her mind, and she recalled with crystal clarity the terror that had suffused her in the presence of the Nightingale. It was comforting to know that the queen and the bard were still good friends.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Elissa laughed. “And I don’t care how much you know. I mean, you knew enough to save my leg, and my life. Plus, I’m sure I can offer you a much better salary and accommodations that whatever you would find up north. So, stay? Pleeese?”

Unable to help herself, Ari nodded, giggling at the pleading monarch. *I bet she and Alistair are like two peas in a pod. Oh my god. I’m going to meet Alistair. Don’t freak out don’t freak out. Maybe freak out a little.*

Together, the two women slowly made their way through the city, Elissa acting as a tour guide and pointing out various buildings as they went, the Chantry, Fort Drakon, the Gnawed Noble Tavern, the alley where Alistair’s favorite shop, the Wonders of Thedas, lay. Twilight had fallen by the time they finally reached the palace gates, the guards eyeing them suspiciously.

“Hello,” Elissa smiled brightly at her men, who were slowly taking in her battered armor, the
bandages around her leg, her dust stained skin. “Could you please fetch the king for me? I believe my travel companion is worn about by now.”

“Right,” one man huffed. “Like we’re just going to go get His Majesty for a ragged traveler. And who are you supposed to be?”

Pulling a sturdy chain out of her shirt, Elissa held out a heavy ring that was threaded around her neck. “His wife.”

“Your Majesty!” Both men fell to their knees at the sight of the Theirin sigil, emblazoned on the signet ring. “At once, Your Majesty! Welcome home, Your Majesty!”

Stifling a giggle, Ari grinned as one of the men immediately scampered away, the other ushering the queen and her friend through the guardhouse, and into the inner courtyard. Whispers immediately spread throughout the servants and nobility that were present, some looking around with confusion, others staring at Elissa with recognition widening their eyes.

“It’s the Queen!”

“She’s back!”

“Move! Out of my way!”

“Your Majesty, at least put on a shirt!”

Letting go of Elissa, Ari took a step back, grinning so wide she thought her cheeks might split as the King of Ferelden burst through a side door into the yard, apparently having run here straight from his chambers where he had been changing, his chest heaving and bright eyes wild. Soft leather breeches had been haphazardly knotted just enough to preserve his modesty, only woolen socks adorned his feet, and he wore no shirt, exposing the dark copper hair that covered his chest and the old, faded scars that littered his skin. Skidding to a halt at the top of the stairs, he gaped down at his long lost wife as if she were a ghost.

“Lis?” he whispered. “Is that- Are you really here?”

“I am. I’m home, Ali.”

As she predicted, Ari instantly began crying as Alistair tumbled down the stairs and swept up his love, crushing her to his chest, his mouth locked over hers, both of them pressed so close it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. Even after all these years, and all this time apart, they still love each other so much.

“Ow.”

“Sorry, sorry! Are you injured? What happened? Are you hungry?”

“Alistair,” Elissa laughed, her face shining brighter than the sun. “One thing at a time. Food sounds lovely, but a bath sounds better. I, um, was injured, but Ari,” she craned her neck around and smiled at the healer, “Saved me. I told her she has to stay here now, as my personal healer. She has no choice.”

“Kidnapping healers, are we?” Alistair teased. “Thank you, Mistress. I owe you a debt I can never repay.”

“Just doing what needed to be done, Your Majesty.” Unsure of whether she should curtsy or bow,
Ari bobbed awkwardly in place.

“Well, then, come on you.” Bending down, Alistair scooped his wife up into his arms, motioning for the man that had been pleading with his king to don a shirt to come over. “This is my steward, Bevin. Bevin, get the lady settled, will you? And anything else she needs. You,” he nuzzled Elissa’s hair, “Are coming with me. And I’m not letting you out of my sight for the next age, at the earliest.”

True love. It’s nice to know that it still exists, Ari sighed happily, watching as the pair retreated further into the castle, stubbornly ignoring the image of a golden haired Commander, smirking down at her in her mind, and the empty ache where her heart rested.

“Mistress? I have a room I can show you to, and if you’d like, I can have a bath drawn for you as well.”

Yes, accepting Elissa’s offer had definitely been the right thing to do. A real bath. I suppose Cullen will never get to fulfill his promise of drawing my baths for me. “That would be lovely, thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

In the interest of appeasing the mob that seems to have gathered, I will go ahead and let y’all know that Cullen will be back shortly haha. Like next chapter. *waves white flag*

In the meantime, have a sappy reunion between Alistair and his queen.
Sometimes it felt as if the days and weeks crept by, but eventually, the snow finally melted, leaving behind a plethora of mud and the first buds of spring decorating the trees. The mornings, she was able to spend time with the actual palace healer, helping in whatever way she could, gleaning whatever knowledge she managed to scoop up from the elder woman. For lunch, if Elissa wasn’t eating with Alistair or another noble, she would swing by and steal Ari away, the women content with each other’s company, both of them starved for friendship and finding a kindred spirit in the other. And as often as the Warden could manage it, she would make time for them to spar together, insistent that Ari needed to improve her skills, saucily flipping back her hair as she sniggered, "Recruit."

Ari had never had a sister, but she imagined that if she did, she would have been like Elissa-kind, witty, sarcastic, with a tendency to be slightly annoying and whiny. Not that the healer could fault the Queen- Elissa didn’t have anyone else to complain to, as she tended to keep the rest of nobility, including her own ladies-in-waiting, at arm’s length. And Alistair, well, Alistair spent most of his time with his wife either ravishing her, judging by the blushes and bruises that covered Elissa’s skin, or ranting about court matters. So Ari let her friend use her as a sounding board, bearing her occasional tantrums with a grace and skill born of long years of practice, and honed by her time with the Commander. That still didn’t stop her from snapping at the Queen of Ferelden on occasion. Usually, only when Elissa really deserved it though.

Cullen. There was hardly a day when he didn’t cross her mind. She saw him everywhere, in the yard where the soldiers trained, in the small shrine within the castle, kneeling before Andraste, in the glint of golden sunlight and amber whiskey. Sometimes, she caught a whiff of his scent, oakmoss and elderflower and sandalwood mingling in her head, reminding her of all those night she spent curled up next to him, of chess matches she had lost, of sparring sessions that usually ended with her on the ground and glaring at him, of walks in the dusky woods, of those quiet nights they spent together in front of the fire. She hadn’t known it would hurt like this. Her logic said it would get better, that given time, the pain would lessen and fade, but her heart…

Her heart told her she never would.

It was toward the beginning of Cloudreach, and the weather was finally morphing into something fit for people to exist in. Taking full advantage of the sun and the warmth that it bathed the world with, Ari was wandering the gardens late in the afternoon. She loved this place, with its wild, sprawling rose bushes and flowering vines, a small creek artfully carved through the grounds as if it had always been there and was not planned.

Elissa walked by her side, or trudged, rather, her elegant slippers kicking at the new tufts of grass that grew along the gravel path, arms tightly crossed. “It’s been almost five months,” she sighed. “I know the taint is gone, I can’t hear that damnable song anymore and I can’t feel Alistair’s blood anymore. So why isn’t it happening?”

“Could be many factors,” Ari stopped next to a tightly wound tulip bud, dragging one finger over the velvety petals. “The body might need time to heal itself from whatever damage the taint did. Stress can be a factor as well. Timing of your cycle. Alistair’s… potency,” she grinned at her friend’s blush. For all that they had been married for years, and were well accustomed to bedroom activities, if Ari even whispered the word sex, both of them began fumbling like teenagers caught in the act. It was
hilarious. “Give it a few more months, and let me do some research. If we were back where I’m from, there would be other ways to figure it out, but…”

Leather crunched into the loose path as Elissa spun around, pinning Ari with a curious stare. “You never really talk about it much. Where you’re from. I mean, I get that you’re not from Thedas. Leliana said you fell out of a rift. I can’t imagine,” she murmured. “If you ever want to talk about it, I’m always here you know.”

“Oh no you don’t,” Ari laughed. “To get that story out of me, I’m going to need both of us to be not sober. Very unsober.”

“That’s not a word.”

“I totally think it’s a word.”

Grinning at both of the ladies, Alistair strode up the path, flourishing an elegant bow as he stopped crisply before them, a rolled scroll in one hand.

“What’s this?” Elissa pointed to the letter.

“Oh, from an old friend. You remember Cullen, right, love?” Ari’s heart stopped beating. “Well, I heard he wanted to open a clinic to help other former templars, so I offered him some land to build it, just two days’ ride northeast up the coast from here. They started construction just last week. I wrote back to check in, see what else they might need, and as it happens,” Alistair glanced over at Ari, who was crushing a tulip in one fist unknowingly. “There is one thing he’s lacking. All he needs are healers, bonus points if they know anything about treating lyrium. Ari, are you alright?”

“I- sorry,” releasing the mangled flower from her grip, she mustered up a wavering smile, and nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Riiiight,” he drawled. “Fine. Normally, people who are fine don’t suffocate poor, innocent greenery, but I digress. Anywho, I talked to Leliana, Divine Victoria, and she mentioned that during the last year of the Inquisition, it was none other than one Ariane Iseri who had taken the lead in helping the templars wean off of lyrium. She says you even helped the Commander. Did you?”

Ari nodded mutely. Was he-

“Would you maybe consider helping them out?”

“Alistair, you can’t just send her off like that!”

“I’m not sending her off! If she doesn’t want to go, that’s fine, they’ll make do, I’m sure. But if she does want to help Cullen out, I’m sure he would appreciate it. And she doesn’t have to stay forever, just long enough to train others.”

The rest of the sound of their bickering faded away as Ari’s thoughts chased circles around each other. Could she see him again? She had kept in touch with Mia and Rosalie, and she knew Cullen knew where she was. Not long after she had settled in Denerim, a courier had arrived with the last of her pay from the former Commander. But there was no letter, no word from him at all that accompanied the coin. Ari could only imagine that he was done with her, utterly and completely. Would he even want to see her again?

“We were friends at least, weren’t we?”

“…she’s obviously not thrilled about the idea-”

“I can see that, but Cullen needs her-”
Cullen needs me? Her head slowly rose, blinking slowly as she took a tentative step towards the couple. “Um. I’ll go. Just… tell him it’s me that’s coming, and if he says it’s okay, I’ll go.”

Alistair cocked one eyebrow up at her. “Why wouldn’t he say it’s okay?”


“No, it’s alright. I…” Ari huffed a rather helpless laugh. “I’m not sure why it wouldn’t be okay. I’m probably just being paranoid. Just, ask him please?”

“Of course.”

Glaring daggers at her husband’s retreating back as he hurried back inside, Elissa turned towards Ari, her brow furrowed in concern. “Ari, if you don’t want to go-”

“No, I- I do. If Cullen needs me, then…” With a groan, she sank down onto a nearby bench. “I’m not sure why I’m torturing myself like this. It would be better if I stayed here, away from him, but-” Staring down at her hands, she listlessly shrugged. “If he needs me, I have to go.”

“You love him,” Elissa murmured softly. It had been years since she last saw Cullen, a templar, trapped within Kinloch Hold, spewing nothing but hate and venom. She had heard the tales of Kirkwall, and those the Inquisition, of course, and of the illustrious Commander who had led them, but she never truly believed he had changed so much until now. If a person like Ari loved a man like that, he must be different. “And does he…?”

Ari shook her head.

“Oh, sweetie,” dropping beside her, Elissa gathered her up in a hug, resting her head against Ari’s shoulder, rubbing soothing circles against her back. “He’s an idiot if he can’t see what an amazing person you are. I’ve only known you for a few months and I can’t imagine not loving you. Even Alistair is smitten with you.”

Smiling weakly, Ari relaxed her head atop her friend’s perfectly coiffed brunette tresses. “Thanks. It’s okay, I’ll live. Heartache and I are old friends anyways.”

“You deserve to be happy, Ari. I wish I could help. Hey!” Perking up, Elissa sat straight, an impish grin on her full lips. “If you ever want me to find you a husband-”

“Liss…”

“I could totally do it! A fancy merchant-”

“Elissa…”

“Or a minor noble. Maybe a bann! Bann Edmond is nice, don’t you think?”

Ari burst out laughing at the very idea. Bann Edmond was the driest, oldest, most crochety being in all of Ferelden, maybe even Thedas. His list of dislikes ranged from oranges to the king himself to white wine to the sun and puppies and rainbows.

“He’s perfect! Oh, take me now, Bann Edmond,” Ari swooned, collapsing across the queen’s lap in a breathless sigh. “Into your sunshine hating, ancient papery arms!”

***

Is this going to be my new annual ritual? Every spring, head off to a new town to work? Stay in a
place close to Cullen? This place is near the ocean. I wonder if it’s similar to the Storm Coast. Oh God, I hope there are no giants. Or dragons. Or giants and dragons fighting.

Idly picking at the embroidery on her skirt, Ari leaned forward to scratch her horse’s ear as they trotted down the highway. Elissa had insisted on gifting her an entirely new wardrobe despite Ari’s many protests, both of them arguing for days over the matter until Alistair had stepped in and made a ‘royal decree’ that all healers who fall out of rifts must acquiesce to the queen’s request to buy said healers new clothes. Ari smiled at the ridiculous memory. She had to admit though, her new outfits were much prettier and softer and most importantly, warmer than anything she had previously.

Several wagons laden with supplies—tools, grain, dried fruits, bolts of fabric, jars of herbs, and several casks of ale and whiskey—along with eight of His Majesty’s handpicked guard accompanied her on the two day journey up the coast. She could just see the Amaranthine Ocean over the crest of the hills in the distance, sparkling a dark green in the light of the sun. A warm breeze, bringing with it the scent of lilies and the promise of summer, rustled through her cloak. All in all, it was a good start. Maybe this won’t be so bad. Maybe this won’t be so hard, and we can still be friends. Or courteous, at the very least.

Pausing at the top of the road, Ari surveyed the new little town below them, situated at a dip in the landscape, a wide stream coursing along towards the ocean just outside the perimeter. Several larger buildings were clustered together around what she assumed would be the town square, the newly hewn wood still pale yellow, while more houses were currently being constructed. The sound of hammers on nails, shouts, and the distinct sound of a forge and livestock echoed through the small valley, men and women scurrying about. One of them raised their head and spotted the supply train, raising a shout.

“Visitors!”

She could spot Cullen from a mile away. Sitting towards the back of the caravan, she watched as he glanced up from the woman he had been speaking with, offering her an apologetic smile and a squeeze of her arm as he strode out to the edge of town, waiting patiently for the guards to approach with his hands clasped behind his back, strong, healthy, and God, he was even more beautiful than she remembered. And that woman—

Glaring at the stranger’s impressive bosom that had been oh so artfully on display for the Commander, Ari sighed. You knew this might happen, she chided herself. That he might find someone. But did he have to find someone now? Here? Couldn’t he have waited until she was gone at least? I wonder if she helps keep his nightmares away. I wonder if she even lets him sleep.

“So, the supplies as promised by His Majesty,” the head guard crisply saluted. “Here’s a manifest for your approval, prepared by the king himself.”

Taking the parchment from the man, Cullen gave the list a cursory perusal, then handed it over to a darker, tattooed man at his side. “Rylen, check it off as we unload. I’ll help the men.”

“Oh, Cul,” Rylen smirked as he read over the inventory. “Says here ‘and 1 healer that better be kept safe and happy or else the Queen will end you and I won’t be able to stop her’?”

“What? Let me see.”

“Oh for the love of,” a giggle escaped Ari as she dismounted her horse. “Did he really write that?”

“Ari!” Rylen shouted, running up to meet her, grabbing her by the waist and spinning her wildly in the air. “You’re the healer that was coming?”
“Alistair didn’t tell you it was me?” I swear, I am going to wring that man’s neck.

“Nope, just said he knew someone perfect for the job. It’s good to see you, lass,” he beamed down at her.

“And you. You look well.” He really did. His skin had darkened even more from the outdoors labor, his muscles strong and corded underneath the thin tunic he wore, aqua eyes sparkling in delight. And Cullen…

Cullen stood as rigid as a statue, unblinking, his face a smooth mask that she had once known all too well. The only sign that betrayed his true inner state was his fists that were tightly clenched, one locked by his side, the other, crumpling the thick parchment and trembling every so slightly.

“Mistress Iseri,” he nodded. “Welcome. Dawna,” the woman from earlier stepped forward, “Will show the healer to that little cottage next to the clinic?”

“Of course, Cullen,” she all but purred. Rylen caught Ari’s eye and rolled his eyes, forcing her to press her lips together to keep from laughing.

“I’ll be by after I get this done to show you around, lass,” he called out as she headed into the village.

“Rylen,” Cullen snapped. “List?”

“Right, right. Let’s see here…”

Wincing at his sharp tone, Ari averted her gaze from the golden man who held her heart, shuffling obediently after Dawna. This was going to suck.

No, no. She could do this. She had survived his icy behavior before. She could do it again. But I wasn’t in love with him then. Either way, it’s just a few months, right? Train some more healers, then I can go back to Denerim, and stay with Lis, and help raise all the babies she’s going to have. That’s a good life, right?

Chapter End Notes

As promised, Cullen. And more awkwardness. Teehee.
Ari found that, despite everyone else around her thinking she was sweet and kind, she had a petty streak a mile wide when it came to Cullen. No matter how hard she tried, she could not be anything more than barely civil to Dawna. With her beautiful wavy flaxen hair, her twinkling sky blue eyes, her perfect curves. She couldn’t stand her. But it was okay. Because Atlas hated her too.

At least she got along with everyone else in the little sanctuary, finding a good friend in Rylen, and one of the other healers who had arrived the day after Ari, a sweet girl by the name of Beatrix from Ansburg, in the Free Marches. Her older brother was one of the templars who had decided to accept Cullen’s offer, and the young woman had immediately demanded to come with him, refusing to take no for an answer.

Atlas, for his part, had tackled Ari to the ground within a minute of her being in the village, sending Dawna running away screaming about the brute, all the other Fereldens chuckling at the scene. No amount of apologies had consoled the dog, and so he had remained plastered to her side every waking second since, much to Cullen’s chagrin, as if the mabari was making sure that Ari did not try to sneak off again.

Two others beside Beatrix had volunteered to come live in the sanctuary, a quiet man from West Hill with impressive alchemy skills named Camden, and a matronly older woman who had been married to a templar in her youth, called Moira, also an accomplished healer. For the first round of templars, Ari thought she would take on two, that way she could help coach her new associates through the weaning system she had established while at Skyhold. There was about eight templars already living in the village, and she knew that more would surely arrive throughout the upcoming months. They were about to be very busy.

Ari glanced up as the door swung open lightly, revealing a tall figure standing in the clinic doorway. “Are you doing anything? I was going to go patrol around the town, and thought you might like to talk a walk. You’ve been in here all day.”

“A walk does sound nice,” she agreed. “Atlas, you coming, boy?” With a woof, the mabari obediently followed his old mistress out, keeping a wary eye on her companion.

“He doesn’t like me much now that you’re here,” Rylen chuckled. “We were getting along just fine, weren’t we, boyo?” Atlas snorted, and pointedly swung his head away, relenting only slightly at Ari’s gentle touch.

“I have no idea why. He’s never had problems with anyone else before. Except Cullen’s brother.” *And Dawna, ha.* "He didn’t really care for Branson either. I wonder why,” she mused, pausing to turn around at the edge of village. “The houses are coming along nicely. Everyone’s been so busy and working so hard. So, tell me what you’ve been up to these last few years.”

“Aye. We had hoped to have most of everything up by Summerday, so we’ve been pushing it double time. Headed back up to Starkhaven for a bit after the Inquisition, spent some time getting reacquainted with my family, meeting my new nieces and nephews,” he shrugged. “Joined the guard for a spell, but it was boring.”

“Not exciting chasing drunkards and thieves after hunting demons and darkspawn?” Ari teased.
“Not nearly,” he readily agreed. “Then Cullen asked me if I’d be interested in helping him out here, and I figured it was the least I could do. Maker knows I owe that man a lot.”

“I’d think this place would be even more boring than being a guard.”

“Eh, maybe. So far I like it. It’s quieter than Starkhaven, for one. And with prettier lasses,” winking down at her, Rylen grinned, then backed away slightly as Atlas planted himself between the two, almost growling up at the former templar. “Hey, now, I wasn’t trying to pull a move on your lady. She’s yours, I get that.”

“Atlas, be nice,” Ari shook her head. “Oh. Hello, Cullen.”

A flicker of something rippled across Cullen’s face as he walked out of the woods, nodding to them both. “Ah, good evening. I was just resetting the traps. I’m not interrupting, am I?”

“No, just dragging Ari out for some fresh air, showing her the surrounding area,” Rylen replied. “Walk with us.”

Why did I just ask him that?

Ari groaned internally.

He’s been avoiding you like the plague the whole week since you got here. He obviously doesn’t want your company.

“I shouldn’t, I still have more work left to do tonight.” See?

“You still work too much,” Rylen chided. “Well then, Ari pet, shall we continue just the two of us?”

Bristling, Cullen took a step forward before he could stop himself. “You know, you’re right, Rylen. A nice evening walk would be pleasant.”

No one spoke for several minutes as they continued up the slope of the valley, but eventually, Rylen, as always unable to keep silent, began talking of everything under the sun, chattering on about some of the fun times he did have while in the guard, the trip back over to Ferelden, telling her some humorous stories of his time in the Western Approach. “You should’ve seen it,” he laughed. “One boot on, the other hanging from the quillback’s mouth, and me scrambling backwards on my arse trying my damnedest to not get eaten. I suppose it thought my shoe a tastier treat than me, in the end, a fact which I’m ever so thankful for.”

“And what about you, Cullen? What have you been up to? I know Mia said you moved to town with them. I was surprised, I thought you liked living out in the woods,” Ari asked as politely as she could.

“I did,” he muttered, rubbing his neck with one hand. “But-” but I couldn’t stay there without seeing you everywhere- “I thought it would be nice to spend some time with them, after being apart from them for so long. Plus, Atlas liked the children. And to terrorize Rosalie’s ducks.”

“I haven’t heard from them since just after Wintersend, actually. Has anything changed since then?”

“No particularly. Oh,” he added with an almost vicious smirk, “Branson is courting a young lady, Cara, I think her name is. A widow herself, with a young daughter. They moved to South Reach shortly after you- After you departed.” Would that ever get easier for him to say?

“Oh, that’s wonderful! I’m so glad for him. Is she nice?”

“Nice enough, I suppose. Mia and Rosalie like her,” he shrugged. She really was happy for his brother, wasn’t she? A genuine smile lit up her face, her eyes dreamy and far away.

“And there, my lady, is Amaranthine Ocean,” Rylen interrupted, drawing Ari’s attention towards the
horizon. They stood on the edge of a cliff, high above a sandy beach littered with boulders, the waves frothing as they crested on the shore. And for the first time she had gotten to Thedas, she felt it- a surge of homesickness so strong, it almost knocked her to her knees. The coastline here was nothing like the beaches back in South Carolina, but the sound of the water, the smell of salt, the wind sticky against her skin, the call of the gulls were almost identical.

*I wonder how everyone back home is doing. I wonder if they think I’m dead by now. My parents, my friends. I wonder if I’ll ever see them again.* She had thought she didn’t care much, that she was glad to leave and start over, but the ocean, the ocean brought everything back. Memories of her as a child with her family, running up and down the sand in Charleston with a neon purple kite that kept crashing into the ground. Cookie dough ice cream, so sweet it made her teeth ache just thinking about it, eaten on the most humid days of summer. Riding bikes with her dad through the streets. Her first kiss, stolen underneath the pier one lazy summer when she was sixteen. An entire lifetime, an entire world, just… gone.

“Lass? Are you well?”

“Mist- Ari? What’s wrong?” Cullen began to reach out for her, but thought better of it at the last second, clenching his fists by his side to keep them restrained.

“I… Sorry,” she mumbled, inhaling a deep breath of the sweet air. “I grew up near the ocean, did I tell you that? Basically lived there every weekend, and all summer long as a child, until I went away for college. But even then, I still made the trip back home at least once a month, just to go to the beach. I eventually moved away, and only made it back during the summer for a weekend or two, but I didn’t realize,” she swallowed, blinking back tears that burned the back of her eyes, “I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

“In another month, it’ll probably be warm enough for you to go swimming,” Rylen suggested. “Over there, see the dip in the rocks? There’s a path that’ll take you down to the shore. It’s steep and narrow, so be careful when you come.”

“Thank you,” Ari murmured quietly. "I think I'd like that."

“If you do come,” Cullen’s smooth baritone rumbled near her ear, igniting a whole other set of emotions that she wasn’t prepared to cope with at the present, “You shouldn’t come alone. It’s relatively safe out here, but there are still bandits in the area, and other unscrupulous individuals who would only see a young woman alone and try to take advantage.”

“Is Atlas not enough protection?” She smiled down at the mabari who was gazing up at her with concern shimmering in his liquid, dark brown eyes, his head resting against her thigh.

“I’d prefer it if you took an actual person who knew how to wield weapons with you,” Cullen snorted. “Don’t look at me like that, dog. You want her kept safe just as much as I.”

Both of them froze, Rylen oblivious to the tension suddenly crackling through the air. He wanted her safe? *Well, of course he does. I highly doubt he dislikes you so much as to want you dead, idiot. But as much as Atlas?* The dog loved her, she knew, as all dogs loved their person, adored her. And Cullen thought- *No, it’s just hyperbole. Right?*

Gulping down all the emotions swimming in her throat, Ari replied, her words hesitant, “I wouldn’t want to take anyone away from their duties. I know everyone is busy here.”

“Could always find me, lass,” Rylen winked. “I’d be more than happy to accompany you.”
“Slack off, you mean,” Cullen scowled. “I would also be willing.”

“You’re even busier than Rylen,” she laughed, almost incredulously.

“I would make time. For you.”

Ari’s heart stopped beating at his quiet, yet firm words. Swiveling slightly to face him, her dark eyes widened as her gaze found his, serious, and sure. “I… Thank you, Cullen.”

“Getting dark,” Rylen remarked casually. “Should get back soon.”

Linger ing one last moment to drink in the sight of the sunset, glinting like fire over the water, Ari sighed. It almost felt like home. “Alright, let’s go.”

***

She rather liked the communal style meals Cullen had implemented, everyone piled into one big room. At times, the noise could get to be a bit much, but for the most part, it was like one big, happy family. There were the templars, obviously, who had come for treatment. Several more former templars she had treated at Skyhold that had willingly volunteered to help their brethren. Two carpenters, one blacksmith, a farrier, a few farmers, two cooks, and all the above mentioned’s families also had made the move to the sanctuary. Husbands, wives, siblings, children who assisted in any way they could, from mending, tending the livestock, cooking, and other menial chores. It reminded her strongly of the little village the Rutherford clan lived in, except smaller, more intimate and cozy.

“I’ll take your tray back,” Beatrix offered as both women finished their supper.

“Thank you,” Ari smiled warmly up at the girl. Girl. You know she’s twenty-two. But she just felt so young to her. Despite the girl- young woman’s fiery nature, there was something so sweet and innocent about her that brought about Ari’s protective side. Like right now. Raising an eyebrow, she watched as Rylen approached Bea, deftly stealing the trays from her grip, insisting she was far too pretty to be doing such tasks herself. Only to laugh at his dismay, when Bea snatched the trays right back, raking him with an icy sneer that made even Ari shiver.

“What did you do to merit that?” She giggled once Bea had stormed away.

“I, er, ran into her earlier today,” he muttered sheepishly. “We both tripped and fell, and the way I landed, I sort of… touched her.”

“Touched her?”

“Her-“ Blushing for the first time that she had ever seen, Rylen motioned to her chest. “There. I may have gotten slapped. So I was trying to be nice, and help her in hopes she might forgive me, but,” he grimaced.

“You could have asked to help her first,” Ari replied bemusedly. “Without just assuming that she wanted help. Or, you know, not flirt incessantly with her.”

“How can I not? All that fire in her spirit,” he grinned. “I love a challenge.”

“Rylen,” pinning him with a stern, frosty glare, Ari hissed, “She’s what, fifteen years younger than you?”

“I look good for my age, don’t I?” He protested. “I won’t do anything the lass doesn’t want me to, I
“I don’t think she wants you to breathe at this point.” Her braid swung as she shook her head with an exasperated sigh. “Just behave. Please.”

“Anything for you, my bonny healer.” She rolled her eyes. “Say, heading to the tavern to grab a pint. Want to come?”

“I shouldn’t, I need to prepare my notes for tomorrow, and-“

“No excuses,” he declared, gripping one arm and steering her towards the loudest building in the square. “How else will I stay out of trouble if you’re not there to guide me?”

“Think with your head instead of other parts,” she replied dryly. “Or use some of that templar discipline.”

“But I’m not a templar anymore,” he grinned. “Just one drink?”

Seeing that refusing him would probably make him cry at that point, Ari gave up. “Fine. One.”

Besides, she could use a nice glass of whiskey. It had been awhile since she had anything besides water or the occasional wine.

Following him into the brightly lit tavern over to a table where several other templars already sat, Ari took the mug of ale he slid into her hands. “Rule number one for courting a woman, Ry. Ask her what she wants to drink. Remember what I said about assuming?”

“Ach, I’m sorry, lass, I didn’t think,” he glared at his friends, who were sniggering behind their hands. “Can I get you something else?”

“No, I’ll drink this. Tonight, at least,” she smirked, casting a sweeping glance over the rest of the room. There was Camden, with his wife, talking to the blacksmith and his youngest son. Beatrix’s brother, Marron was his name, in his own circle of friends. And-

*God dammit.*

Cullen at another table, sitting with one of the carpenters and Dawna, the woman leaning over the wooden surface, her breasts pushed up so high, Ari wondered if they’d fall out.

“You know what,” she stared down into the amber ale, trying not to think about how it was just a few shades lighter and duller than Cullen’s eyes, “I haven’t been properly drunk in years.”

“Could fix that tonight,” Ser Giselle’s cheeks split into a wide grin. “You could use it, healer.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means you’re always so polite and so damn nice,” Ser Paolo snorted, the Antivan templar brushing back his long, black hair, retying the thong that held it bound. “Let loose for once.”

“Right,” she sighed. “Well. Cheers.” Lifting the tankard to her lips, Ari tried not to laugh at the goggled eyed stares of her drinking companions as she downed the entire thing in one go. “Not bad.”


“Stronger, please, otherwise I’m going to be too full to get properly hammered,” she answered
primly.

Not surprisingly, it didn’t take much until the room around her began to spin, and everything was hilarious. Only Giselle on her right, and Rylen on her left, kept the wobbling healer safe in her chair.

“You have such pretty hair. I jus’ wanna touch it. Rylennnn,” Ari slurred, removing her hand from Giselle’s strawberry blond locks, draping herself over his arm. “Why’d you get those tattoos?”

“Lost a bet,” he chuckled at the old memory. “Sort of a hazing initiation right after I joined the templars.”

“Did it hurt? Looks like it hurt. Hey! I’ve got tattoos! Wanna see?” Scrambling off her chair, Ari began tugging at her shirt. “Jus’ gotta get this blasted thing off and-“

“Ari, I think you’ve had enough,” Giselle laid a firm hand on her arm, trying to prevent the other woman from stripping naked in the tavern.

“Nooo, I hafta show Ry my tattoooooo!”

“Maker’s breath, is she drunk?”


“Come on, Ari,” Cullen sighed. “Let’s get you home.”

“Don’t wanna! I can walk just fine.” In an attempt to prove her point, Ari pushed herself off her seat, standing in a huff only to fall immediately into Cullen’s arms. “Ok, maybe not. Hey, there’s two of you. When’d you get a twin?“

Ignoring her giggles and the others’ amusement, Cullen gently lifted her up, cradling her against his chest as he made his way out into the cool night air. “How much did you have to drink tonight?”

“Twentelventy.”

“Right. A lot, then.” Shaking his head, he couldn’t help the small smile that crept, and remained, on his lips. She was giggling at everything as they passed, the way the sheep in its pen was looking at her- “It knows,” she whispered- at the feel of the wind on her skin, begging him to pick a pretty weed that she spotted on the ground. Triumphantly snatching the pale purple flower from his hand when he obliged, she tucked it behind his ear.

“Purple is definitely your color.”

“It would look better on you,” he replied, smiling down at her for what felt like the first time in years.

“Nah. Look better on Dawna, probably.” Ari pouted at the thought of the pretty blonde. “With her stupid hair and stupid boobs. Genetics are dumb.”

Choking on his cough, Cullen stuttered out, "W-what? Her-"

Sighing, her words already forgotten, Ari went limp in his arms. "It’s so quiet out here."

“It would be, but I believe you’re making enough noise for a small herd of seagulls,” he answered, grateful the conversation was turning away from... breasts.

“I can stop talking, if you’d like.”
“Could you? I think it might currently be impossible for you to not talk right now. Besides,” he gulped down the knot in his throat. “I like it.”

“You like my incessant jabber? Ooh,” she flung her arms out, then wrapped them securely around his neck. “Wanna hear a song?”

“Of course. I always liked hearing you sing.”

Taking a deep breath, Ari launched herself into the opening lines of the Lion King, belting out words she had no idea the meaning of.

“Maker’s breath! What in Andraste’s name is that?!”

Giggling, she kicked her feet, swinging them to and fro. “A very respected song from my home. And one of my favorites from when I was a kid. Fine, fine, I’ll sing another.”

_Here come ol’ flat top, he come grooving slowly_
_He got ju-ju eyeballs, he’s one holy roller_
_He got hair down to his knees_
_Got to be a joker, he just do what he please_
_Here come ol_
_He wear no shoeshine_
_He got monkey finger, he shoot coc-

“Ari,” he interrupted her. “None of your words make sense. What does that song even mean?”

“Dunno,” she shrugged. “But I like it. You want something you can understand?”

“Something that sounds like a song, at the very least.”

“Booooooring! Let’s see…”

_You’re on the phone with your girlfriend, she’s upset_
_She’s going on about something that you said…_

Cullen smiled to himself, taking the long way back to her cabin, grateful that no one else was outside to call him out on it and that Ari was too far gone in her own world to notice. He was enjoying himself far more than he should, her weight in his arms, although the smell of her hair was mingled with the strong odor of alcohol, it was still familiar. Comforting.

...I can’t help thinking this is how it ought to be
Laughing on a park bench thinking to myself
Hey isn’t this easy?
And you’ve got a smile that can light up this whole town
I haven’t seen it in awhile since she brought you down
You say you’re fine, I know you better than that
Hey whatcha doin’ with a girl like that?

Oh I remember you driving to my house in the middle of the night
I’m the one who makes you laugh when you know you’re ‘bout to cry
And I know your favorite songs, and you tell me ‘bout your dreams
Think you know where you belong, think you know it’s with me

If you can see that I’m the one who understands you
Been here all along so why can’t you see
“Ari,” he whispered, unconsciously gripping her tighter.

“Mm,” she hummed, curling into his chest. “You smell good. Missed this. So warm. Hard to sleep without you now.”

“You have Atlas to keep you warm again,” he murmured, trying desperately to keep his voice from shaking.

“Not the same,” she mumbled. “Not at all.”

Asleep. Standing in front of her cottage, Cullen stared down at her, entranced by the way her full lips parted to allow her breath, only raising his gaze at Atlas’ impatient woof, the dog waiting by her door, almost glaring at his master. “I’m taking her inside,” he grumbled. “Don’t rush me.”

Nudging his leg, as if to say ‘don’t care, hurry it up’, Atlas herded Cullen inside, watching carefully as the man removed her boots, tucking her in to the bed in the far corner. Cullen remembered the last time he did this. It was the night he had planned to tell her how he felt. How nervous he had been, but then she had left. Just disappeared into the night, without a goodbye. Why? Thinking it was pointless to ask, he had tried to forget about it, but then tonight…

Missed this. Hard to sleep without you. Not the same.

Could she…?

Not daring to breathe, he leaned over her bed and brushed the lightest kiss across her brow. “Sweet dreams,” he whispered.

Leaving a glass of water and a restorative potion he found in her cabinet by her bed, Cullen stopped short as Atlas planted himself in front of the exit, plaintively whining, clearly wondering why his owner wasn’t staying.

“I can’t, boy. Keep her safe for me, okay?”

His shoulders drooped, but Atlas moved to let Cullen pass, glaring at him reproachfully over his shoulder before padding into Ari’s room.

Maybe… maybe there’s still hope. I just need answers first.

Chapter End Notes

Drunk Ari is like me. Everything is suddenly hilarious. Apparently, I laughed for like 20 minutes once because these branches were swaying in the wind and reminded me of jellyfish.

So, uh, this chapter ended up being super long lol. I was stuck at the doctor's office for a 3 hour glucose test, so I brought my laptop and just wrote and the last scene got away from me.

If y'all want, I could use some good vibes sent in hopes I pass my gestational diabetes test after failing the first one. Not that it's a huge deal if I don't, I just don't want to
restrict my Oreo consumption in my third trimester XD. I'm waddling like a ball shaped penguin, dammit. I want Oreos.
“I did what?!” Ari shrieked. Dropping her head down onto her arms, she buried her face, praying that the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

“Tried to strip to show me your tattoos,” Rylen was enjoying himself far, far too much, she heard it in his cheerful voice. “But Cullen made you stop, and dragged you out and took you home.”

So Cullen had been the one to leave her the water and potion, and Atlas magically hadn’t grown opposable thumbs last night. That was good to know. Oh no. What did I say to Cullen?! Do I even want to know? “Everyone probably is thinking I’m an idiot now,” she groaned. “I can’t believe I got that drunk.”

“Nah, no one thinks that. And besides, we’re templars. We’ve all done much worse things while drunk and on leave. Much, much worse. That was tame in our humble opinions,” he grinned. “And no one saw anything, because Giselle stopped you.”

“I should bake her a cake. To apologize for groping her hair all night, too. Lord have mercy.”

Shaking her head, Ari turned back to her workbench. “Last time I drink with you.”

“Hey, you were the one who wanted to get drunk, not me.”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t have wanted to get drunk if you hadn't dragged me into the tavern and then I wouldn't have seen-”

“Seen…?”

Snapping her mouth shut, she mumbled a quiet, “Nothing.”

“So there was a particular reason you drank so much?” A new voice asked.

God, could this day get any worse? “Cul- Commander,” keeping her gaze trained at a point just past his shoulder, Ari fidgeted with her quill, wondering if she should extend her prayer to disappear to Andraste and the Maker as well, as apparently the Earth version of God wasn't granting her request.

“I came by to see if you were feeling alright this morning,” he replied softly.

With a mischievous smirk and wink, Rylen quickly turned on his heel and slipped out. “I am,” she scowled at his retreating form. “Rylen told me you prevented me from doing anything too foolish, and took me home. Thank you for the water, and the potion. I’m pretty sure it saved my life this morning.”

“It was no trouble.” His smile was tight, eyes carefully guarded as he gazed down at her. “It was rather… entertaining, actually. Informative.”

God, I did say something. Please oh please let me not have started sobbing all over him. “I… regret that I don’t remember anything,” she mumbled. The heat from her cheeks was scalding. “Did I say anything inappropriate?”

“You-” Clearing his throat, Cullen shuffled his feet against the dusty, wooden floor. “No, you didn’t.
You did sing some strange songs from your home, and told me purple was my color. Also, the sheep in the inner pen knows something, but you refused to say what or how you knew. I can only assume you were a sheep in your past life, and that's how you understood it.”

Is he joking? With me?

“Perhaps,” she answered lightly. “It’s a secret I’ll take to my grave, unfortunately. No one can know the secrets of the sheep.”

A soft huff was his only response. “Ari, I…” Taking a step toward her, opening his mouth, Cullen gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. “I should let you get back to work. I know you have much to do. I’m glad you’re feeling alright today.” Quickly, his movements jerky, he set his fist down on her table, and hurried away.

Where his hand had been, a carved sheep with a tiny flower tucked behind its ear now stood.

It wasn’t one of her old ones, which meant that he had made this for her, recently too.

Does he…?

***

Frowning down at the scribbles she had jotted on the parchment, she sighed. This would be easier if I had my-

“Mistress Is- Ari?” Cullen paused at the threshold to the clinic, the setting sun casting a warm halo about his head. “I, um, kept these from when you- you left. I was going through some things this morning and found them. I thought they might be useful.” In one hand, he held out several leather bound notebooks that she instantly recognized.

“My notes! I was just thinking I wished I had them. Thank you, Commander,” she tentatively smiled up at him.

“You know that is no longer my title,” he murmured, shifting from side to side.

“I know. But it seems appropriate. Commander of this place, at least.”

Snorting, he raised his eyes to hers, millions of questions swimming in those amber depths as they did each time he looked at her. Why didn’t you say goodbye? Did I offend? What could I have done to make you stay? Why can’t you love me? But, as always, he said none of those things, merely shrugged. “It’s been a joint effort. I couldn’t have done it without Rylen, and the others, and the king’s generous gift. Which reminds me, I owe him an update.”

“Oh, I have a letter for Elissa as well. Can I give it to you later to send out?” His dreams hadn’t done her justice, he thought. Standing before him, her dark eyes tilted up at him, the curve of her face as soft as inviting as ever- the reality of her was so much better than the hazy versions of the Fade.

“But of course,” he nodded. “Just let me know, and I’ll get it sent.”

Outside of the clinic, Cullen paused behind the two story wooden building, leaning his head back against the wall that still smelled strongly of sap. He had been avoiding her these last few weeks, it was true, but that was only because it was something akin to torture to have her back here again. It had only been six months since she had been gone, and yet, it felt like a lifetime, every day spent without her dark and heavy on his soul. And now she was here, but not. Not living with him, not curled up in his- their- den with a book, not in his bed at night. Was this some kind of cruel joke? Or...
a punishment sent from the Maker?

Slowly, he dragged himself back to his little office, wearily falling into his chair. Reaching into the bottom of the drawer of the solid oak desk, he pulled out a small wooden box carved with sprigs of lavender, and popped it open, gently plucking out a dried purple flower and setting it aside. A necklace glinted back at him, a smooth silverite disc inlaid with runes with a miniature stylized carved sun in the center nestled on velvet. It had been for her, made by Dagna upon his request, for Satinalia. Fire runes, to help keep her warm. The sun, because she was the light of his world. *Was, Rutherford. She's not yours anymore. If she ever was.*

The rest of the afternoon he spent trying to sort through his correspondence, but mostly, he agonized over Ari, as he did every day, fidgeting with a small carved mouse she had once dubbed ‘Pico’. He was torn between wanting to keep her at arm’s length to protect himself, to make it easier on himself when she inevitably left again, and desperately hoping they could resume their previous, casual, friendship at least. He missed the way she teased him, the way her lips quirked up and her eyes crinkled. He missed the way she lost so ungracefully to him when they played chess, her grumbles and pouts. He missed sparring with her every day, watching her improve, delighting with her when she landed a hit or perfected a new move. But above all that, he just missed her.

Her presence, her scent, her smile. The way she cared for him, the way she did not think less of him despite seeing him at his worst. How she encouraged him, pushed him to be a better man. Just, everything.

Glancing up, he saw that the sunlight had mostly faded, and so, he dutifully left his work and headed across the square to the mess hall. Cullen figured it would be comforting to have something familiar for the templars, and so he had a mess hall built in the style of the circles, consisting of a couple of long tables in a building with a high, airy ceiling, tables laden with food at one end in a buffet style meal. Grabbing a plate, he nodded at the few others as he passed, filling his plate but hesitating when he got to the dessert.

Pie. He left it. It wouldn’t taste as good as hers, anyways.

Sliding into an empty place on the bench next to Rylen, Cullen frowned when he saw Camden and Moira, but didn’t spot Ari anywhere in the hall. Was she working still? Should he bring her a plate? Would she want him to?

“Ari and Bea are overseeing Ser Reginald right now,” Rylen explained. “Last drought was yesterday morning. She’s having the others sit in on shifts with her.”

“And is she not taking a break herself?” Cullen's brow creased.

“Said it’s her job. Maybe you could convince her to take a break,” the Starkhavener winked. "I'm sure she wouldn’t mind if you... distracted her."

“I- That is not- What I mean to say is-”

“You fancy her, I know.” With a leering grin, Rylen shoved a mug of ale at his friend. “How long?”

It was hopeless. Getting Rylen to abandon anything was akin to taking a bone away from Atlas. Groaning, Cullen lifted the tankard to his lips and took a long pull. Then another. And another. He’d need it, to talk about this. “Months,” he muttered as he wiped the froth off his lip. “Last summer.”

“So she’s why you’ve been acting like the Commander again recently.” Raising a hand in self-preservation at Cullen’s indignant glare, Rylen chuckled. “Hey now, it’s not a bad thing. Just slightly
obvious. Dawna’s been quite put out that you’ve been ignoring her, no matter how many times I assure her that you’re ignoring everyone, not just her.”

“I hate you,” Cullen muttered. Dawna was a nice woman, but not entirely his cup of tea. She reminded him too much of the simpering nobles, those coy looks, coquettish words, her… assets on display. Still, she was a hard worker, and Cullen appreciated that. Nothing else.

“Should do something nice for the lass. Get her a present, treat her to something,” Rylen mused. “I wonder what she likes?”

“Whiskey,” he replied automatically, a little too fast. “Animals, especially small nuisance ones. Blankets, the softer the better. Adventure books. What?” Glowering at the other man’s knowing smirk, Cullen downed the rest of his ale. “I lived with her for months. Of course I know some things about her.”

“Didn’t say anything mate,” Rylen chortled. “Say. Did she see you naked as a wee babe too?” Cullen choked, his eyes sparking with a jealousy he knew was irrational, but couldn’t bring himself to care about at the moment.

“I think I’m done here,” shoving his plate away, ignoring Rylen’s pleas and apologies, Cullen paused by the buffet table, and quickly piled food onto another tray before stalking outside into the chilly night, letting his feet lead him straight to the clinic. What was he doing? It was obvious she didn’t want anything to do with him, not like that. Still, he couldn't stop himself from knocking.

“Ser,” Beatrix peeked out the door. “Come in, come in.”

“How is he?” Cullen murmured softly.

“Sleeping now,” the young woman sighed. With her auburn ringlets, and fair skin, he rather thought she could pass as Evelyn Trevelyn’s sister. *Strange, that thinking about Evelyn now doesn’t stir a single emotion.* “I don’t know how Ari did this all by herself for months. She’s amazing.”

“That she is.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that hard.” Setting her quill down, Ari blushed in the low candlelight, tilting her head curiously at the tray in Cullen’s hand. “What’s that?”

“I didn’t see you in the mess, so I wasn’t sure if you had eaten,” he rubbed his neck sheepishly.

“Moira brought me something before supper,” Ari replied, almost-embarrassed? “Bea, you haven’t eaten yet, have you? Here, take this. It should only be a bit longer before the others come back.”

As if on cue, the door swung open to admit the other two healers, Beatrix retreating to a corner of the room to eat as the newcomers washed up in a low basin Ari had set up.

“Is it time for your break now?” Cullen asked.

“No, I’m not taking any breaks,” with a weary smile, she gestured to the two men at the end of the room, their beds cordoned off by sheets strung from the ceiling. “I have to be here to watch-”

“You can go for a bit, go home, relax a bit, child,” Moira tutted. “They’re both just sleeping now, anyhow. If anything changes, we can fetch you.”

“I really should-”
“For all your talk about taking care of others, you have a hard time following your own advice. How will you function dead on your feet?” Cullen asked archly.

Staring up at him, a small smile spread across her face. “You’re one to talk, Commander.”

“Yes, well, I was forced to changed my habits under the incessant watch of a tiny healer last year,” he shot back. This is what he had missed.

“She sounds like a lovely person,” giggling, Ari stood up. “Alright, I’ll go back to my place for tonight. If anything changes, come get me.”

Grabbing a cloak, she followed Cullen out into the night, falling into step beside him like they had done so many times before, Atlas at their heels. If he ignored their surroundings, he could almost imagine they were back in their tiny corner of South Reach, wandering through the wood, that none of the pain and heartbreak had ever happened.

“How did you like Denerim?” he asked suddenly desperate to break the silence.

“It’s nice. Very busy, especially the castle. And so many nobles,” he chuckled at her horrified groan. “But I have my work, and there’s so much to see in the city. And puppies!” Her eyes lit up. “Alistair has a whole kennel, and I went there a lot in the evenings to play with them. It’s amazing.”

“Are you amending the conditions for the secret to happiness?” he teased. “Instead of ‘a’ dog, now it’s a kennel of puppies?”

“Yes. Oh, sorry. A kennel of puppies, plus Atlas, I’m so sorry baby, yes I am,” crouching down to give the mabari a huge hug, Ari continued her litany of ridiculous words, stirring all sorts of memories within Cullen’s chest. He remembered how silly and childish he had thought her gibberish to be at first, and now-

Now it just made him smile. “He missed you terribly when you left, you know,” Cullen said quietly.

“I know,” she sighed, stopping in front of the stairs to her cottage. “But it was that, or wait months until spring, and I thought it would be easier to just leave when I did.”

Taking a step closer, his eyes boring into her back, he spoke through thick emotion, arms tightly crossed over his chest. He had to know. If he didn’t ask now, he would never find the courage again.

“And so you just decided to leave? I could have taken you anywhere you wanted to go, Ari. Was I that much of a horrible person to make you want to flee in the middle of winter? Without saying goodbye? All you left was a sparse letter that wished me well, thanked me for the opportunity, and asked me to take care of Atlas. Why?”

She remembered very well the words she had wrote- perfunctory, devoid of any emotion. Just a simple, Thank you for allowing me to assist you, I hope you take care of yourself. If you wouldn’t mind, could you watch after Atlas? I’m not sure how much he would enjoy the journey, if I do venture across the Waking Sea. Also, he’s rather fond of you. I will send word soon of where I settle. It had been cold and empty, but everything she wanted to say never made it from her head to her quill. “No, you weren’t horrible at all. Quite the opposite. I just thought… it was better that way,” she whispered, leaning against the column of her porch, unable to meet his piercing, tawny gaze.

“Better for whom?” he demanded.

All at once, every emotion she had held tightly constrained for the past year burst forth like waters from a broken dam. Whirling around, she cried, “Me! Why can’t you understand that?! I couldn’t stay there anymore, just pretending to be your healer, content with being your friend, not with how
Cullen saw her mouth moving, and was vaguely aware of sound coming from her, indicating she was still talking, but for the life of him, he couldn’t hear a damn thing. His entire world narrowed to a pinprick focus, her words echoing like a battle horn through his mind. “Y-you love me?”

Ari stiffened, biting her lip as she stared at the ground. “I do. I’m sorry, I know you don’t.”

Whatever else she planned to say was lost to the crash of his lips against hers, his arms crushing her against his chest, both of their hearts wildly beating and fluttering in a chaotic staccato. “You love me,” he gasped into her mouth. “I, Maker, I should have worked up the courage to tell you long ago, when I first knew. I’ve loved you for so long, Ari.”

“What?” Pulling back slightly, her lips glistening and her cheeks flushed, she blinked up at him, shaking her head in a daze. “No, no you can’t.”

He chuckled. “And why not?”

“Because,” her eyes shimmered in the bright moonlight as tears began spilling out. “I’ve done this before, Cullen. I don’t want us to end up a mistake, like every other relationship I’ve had before. I don’t want us to get bored, and jaded, and start ignoring each other and wondering what else is out there. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Ari,” he choked out, his fingers digging almost painfully into her arms. “Can’t you see? I would rather take whatever time we have now with you, than let you go just in case it doesn’t work out. You don’t want to hurt me? Finding out you had left nearly killed me. If I have to let you go again, knowing that you love me as I love you, it would surely destroy me. If we don’t work out in the end, then we don’t work out, but I don’t want to live with the regret of what if, please. Please, stay,” hugging her so tightly she could barely breathe, he whispered into her hair, “Stay with me. I will do anything I can to make you happy, I swear it on everything I am. Just, stay.”

Ari tried to think of a reason, anything, to refute what he was saying. But not a single thing came to mind. So instead, she did the only thing that made sense in that moment.

She kissed him.

Fisting her hands in his hair, dragging his face down to meet hers, pressing every inch of her body to his, she managed to string together a semi-coherent answer, “Yes. I’ll stay. As long as you want me.”

“Forever,” he growled into her, nipping a wet trail down her throat. Staring at the hollow of her throat, he gently licked where her pulse point fluttered, and was rewarded by a low moan, her fingers tugging his curls sharply, eliciting a low hiss from his chest. “Arianne. I want you with me forever.”

“Then have me.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I’ve been taking NSFW prompts on my tumblr, in case any of want to chime in. So far, I’ve written two for Cullen and Ari:

Louder and
If you want it, beg for it
Ahem. The prompt list is here, or feel free to make up and send your own, smut or fluff or whatever. Also open to other pairings I've done.

Next chapter will be pure smut. OBVIOUSLY. I think y'all deserve it after everything haha.
Moonlight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything passed in a blur. All she felt was his mouth against hers, hand tugging at the laces to her dress, her own fingers yanking his shirt up to feel the broad planes of his chest, both of them stumbling back blindly through her door. Eagerly, she pulled him through the house towards her bed, the very breath fleeing her lungs as she took in his face.


His carefully styled hair mussed and tousled from her hands, his lips swollen from her bites and kisses, his shoulders heaving as he struggled to rein himself in. That would never do. She didn’t want the calm, controlled Commander, the restrained templar. She wanted Cullen. She wanted the warrior inside of him. “Cullen,” she breathed as she slipped the rest of her dress off her shoulders, standing before him in nothing but her smalls.

Almost tripping over his pants in his rush to disrobe, his eyes never left hers. “Ari,” he croaked. “Maker’s breath, but you are stunning. Let me.” Gently pushing her hands away from her breastband, Cullen untied the laces, a broken moan escaping as the rest of the clothes that had been shielding her from his stare fell to the floor. She was beyond beautiful, complete perfection. Breasts that were an exact handful, topped with dusky fawn nipples that begged for his hands and mouth. Soft curves of her waist that flared to slim hips that would look so much better once marked by his teeth. A dark thatch of hair between her legs that concealed her desire. All that was left was to—

“There,” he murmured as he combed her hair free of her braid, lifting the silky strands to his nose and inhaling her familiar scent. Lemons. Lavender. Home.

With a mischievous grin, she sank to her knees, giggling at his yelp of surprise as she yanked his smalls off and down to the floor. “Ari, what are—”

“What I’ve wanted to do for months,” she quipped just as she opened her mouth, and drew the weeping head of his rigid cock into the warm depths of her mouth.

“Fuck,” swearing as his head jerked back, Cullen braced himself against the wall, unwilling to miss even a second of this. Gently, he pushed her hair back from her face, gathering it in one hand. And then yanked sharply as she plunged the rest of his length into her throat, her lips constricting around his shaft in a pleasure so intense, it bordered on pain. “I’m so sorry, did I—”

Her answering hum cut him off, sending the sweetest vibrations racing through his body, burning straight down through his toes. He had died. He had died, and gone to heaven. Evelyn hadn’t ever wanted to perform this particular act, claiming it wasn’t ladylike, and it had been years before since one of the women he had dallied with as a templar was willing. It had been nice, pleasant even, but nothing like this. He couldn’t feel anything besides her tongue massaging his ridges and licking the veins, couldn’t think about anything besides how much he wanted to fuck her mouth, bury himself deep inside of her. Ari’s eyes locked onto his, one hand working his slick shaft, the other teasing at his sac, sneaking back to massage a point just behind that made him see stars.

“Ari,” he gasped. “Love, I’m not going to last like this. Please, I need you.”

She smirked around him, but instead of withdrawing, intensified her efforts. The little-
Throwing one hand out, he gripped the headboard of her bed so tightly he heard the wood faintly crack, a hoarse cry ripping from his throat as pleasure overwhelmed him, feeling her throat tighten as she swallowed all of his seed, moaning as if it were the tastiest delicacy she had ever consumed.

“Ari,” he muttered when the room finally stopped spinning, “That was… Fuck.”

Licking her lips, she stood up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing the length of her naked body against his, looking entirely too smug for her own good. “You taste delicious,” she purred in his ear.

“You,” he growled, grabbing her by the waist and tossing her down onto the bed. “I wanted to feel you come around me.” Taking her wrists into one hand, he pinned her down, grinning darkly as she squirmed, her breasts heaving with each strangled breath she took. Desire was a good look on her. Especially since it was all for him. Skimming his other hand across her velvety skin, he gently teased one nipple into a point, then the other. “And now I’ll have to find something else to amuse myself with until I can take you.”

“Cullen,” she gasped, her hips writhing in frustration. “Please!”

“Oh no,” he chuckled. “You had your fun. It’s my turn now. And I am going to do everything I’ve wanted to do to you for months now.” His scar twitching up at her glassy eyed stare, he lowered his head to her chest, and began kissing and sucking a trail down her sternum, tracing his tongue around her sensitive nipple, blowing a gust of cool breath across the pebbled peaks, before carefully nipping them with his teeth. Beneath him, Ari thrashed, slowly unraveling as he took his time tasting her skin, reveling in every little sigh and gasp, steadily making his way down her body, until he could bear it no longer.

The heady scent of her arousal filled his senses, drowning out every other plan he had. “Maker,” he groaned, shoving her legs apart. “I can smell how much you want me. Look at yourself. Dripping,” he hissed, stroking her glistening folds with one featherlight touch. “What do you want Ari?”

“You,” she begged instantly. “Please!”

“You have me, sweetheart,” pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh, he glanced back up at her. “What do you want?”

Wailing as her hips bucked up, grinding against the air, she cried out, “For you to fuck me Cullen! Make me yours. Claim me.”

His blood burned at her words, and the implication behind them. Claim her. So that everyone would know she belongs to him, and he to her. Gritting his teeth, he closed his eyes, willing for his self control to hold out just a little longer. “Not yet,” he brushed his nose against the crease where her thigh met her hips. “Not until I feel you fall apart on my tongue.”

She wailed as he plunged his tongue straight into her heat, his arms wrapping around her legs, hands splayed out across her abdomen to keep her exactly where he wanted her. Licking, biting, sucking, teasing her everywhere except where she needed him most- that beautiful little pearl that was begging for his attention. Her words descended into madness, a litany of his name and pleas that were like an angel’s song to his ears.

Sliding a tentative finger between her lips, Cullen groaned as her walls immediately clamped around the single digit. Another just barely fit. “Maker’s breath,” he muttered into her. “You’re so tight. You are going to feel so good around my cock.”
Ari couldn’t take much more of this. Never before had anyone she had ever been with feel like this, like her insides were boiling, like she might explode through her skin. And this side of him, dominant, hungry, commanding- God, she wanted more. “Please,” she sobbed as the burn of his fingers stretching her faded, leaving behind only pleasure. “Please.” At this point, she wasn’t even sure what she was asking for, but fortunately, he did, and was merciful.

His fingers curled up, stroking that spot just inside, as his lips finally, blessedly fastened around her clit, and sucked. Ari’s back arched into a perfect crescent, her eyes rolling back in her head, unable to make a single sound as her world dissolved into light and heat and electricity, only his strong arms around her legs keeping her tethered to reality.

Vaguely, she was aware that he had released her, and was crawling up her body, his lips ghosting over hers, making her taste herself on his tongue. Pulling him closer, she sighed happily, smiling up at him as she brushed his curls back from his forehead. “I love you,” she breathed.

“And I love you,” he whispered back. “Are you ready?”

Glancing down, Ari thought her eyes might fall out of her head. She had known him to be larger, of course, as she had seen him naked, albeit in a flaccid or semi-erect state. And she had caught glimpses of his full erection through his smalls multiple times in the mornings she had woken up next to him. But she had never truly appreciated his girth until tonight, that moment when she first laid adoring eyes on him, and took him into her hand and mouth. Her fingers didn’t come close to meeting when she wrapped them around his shaft. Her lips and jaw were sore from where she had to stretch them over his size. And now… his cock lay on top of her stomach, nearly as thick as her wrist, the leaking tip of it reaching her belly button, showing them both exactly how far inside of her he would be in a moment. She froze.

“Cullen, I…”

“We don’t have to, if you don’t want to,” he hurriedly assured her.

“You’re huge,” she blurted out, biting her lip.

Understanding dawned on his handsome face, accompanied by a wicked curl of his lips. “I have faith that I’ll fit just perfectly,” he cooed, grabbing himself by the base and coating the tip in her juices. “I’ll go slow, love.” Sucking in a deep breath, she nodded.

Inch by torturous inch, he pressed into her, his muscles quivering with the strain of keeping his promise to go slow, Ari’s nails digging half moons into his biceps, hissing as she felt herself being split open by his throbbing cock, everything burning with a delicious ache. “So full,” she moaned as her body stretched to accommodate him. “Fuck, I… Fuck.”

“Ari,” he gritted out, balling his fists in the blankets. “Are you okay?”

“Better than okay. Fuck me.”

He didn’t have to be told twice. Instantly rearing back, he slammed back into her, keeping a close eye on her face, making sure her cries were those of pleasure and not pain, her hands clutching him tighter and spurring him on, faster, harder, more.

Sex had never been like this. It was always just a physical act of release. And with Evelyn, he felt that his baser, physical needs were almost a burden for her to bear. But Ari-

The way she moved was a sin, her body undulating, gripping him in all the right spots, her pretty noises and pleas echoing in his head, her touch searing his skin until he thought he would combust.
from the sheer intensity of it all. How she responded to him, her eyes shining with lust and love.

Love. She loved him. All this time, and she loved him. How had he been so blind? Wait, how had she been so oblivious to his own feelings for her? A grin crept across his face, even as he pounded her into the mattress. They really were perfect for each other.

Like a wave racing towards the shore, he felt his end rapidly approaching. Reaching to where they were joined, Cullen rubbed her aching bud in rapid, insistent circles, desperate to feel her unravel around him first. “Come for me, Ari. That’s it sweetheart, let go for me.”

Her mouth open in a wordless scream, only a strangled whimper escaped her as she obeyed his command, tumbling over the edge of her pleasure mere seconds before he found his own end, burying his face in the crook of her neck as he roared in her ear, his cock pulsing deep within her, filling her with pulses of hot, creamy spend.

Neither were capable of anything as mundane as speech for several minutes after, both content to lay there in each other’s arms, trying to find solid ground and remembering how to breathe. Ari’s hands traced idle circles across his sweat soaked back, while Cullen simply breathed in the scent of her skin, carefully supporting his weight as to not crush her beneath him.

“I love you,” he finally murmured, pressing dozens of tiny kisses to her shoulders.

“We’re idiots,” she sighed. Her smile was beatific as he pushed himself up, beaming lazily up into his face.

“And you’re beautiful,” he added. “Move in with me. I miss you in my bed.”

“Nightmares?” Ari asked softly.

“If I say yes, will you move in with me?” Grinning down at her, he ducked his head to avoid her halfhearted swipe. “They’re not as bad, but I still get a few every now and then. Nights were always so much better when you were next to me. I’d wake up, and feel you laying there, and know it wasn’t real. Plus, I miss how you used to toss and turn in your sleep.”

“You miss being accidentally kicked in the side?” Ari asked wryly, amusement heavy in her tone.

“Well, not that. But when you would move a lot, your shift would ride up, and…” his hand crept up her stomach.

“Cullen Rutherford,” gasping, she put on her best stern face, “Were you ogling me, ser?”

“Yes,” he replied, entirely unapologetic.

Giggling, she leaned up to kiss his nose. “Good. That makes me feel better for staring at you in the mornings. And yes, I’ll move in with you, silly man.”

“Thank the Maker.” Rolling off of her, he leaned over the edge of the bed to grab his shirt, cleaning them both off before he tucked her against his side. “I’m sorry I, ah, didn’t check to make sure it was okay to finish inside.” His blush was visible even in the dark, the only light filtering in from the pale moons high in the sky.


Healer… “Say, Ari. Your patients… is seeing them unclothed relatively common?”
“This is a new version of pillowtalk I’ve never encountered before. But, yes. Especially during and right after the worst of the withdrawals. It’s my job to change them, keep them clean and comfortable. You remember how it was, right?”

He remembered all too well the days after, although the during was thankfully a blur. _Weak, pathetic—No. She loves you. She loves me, just as I am. Despite everything._ “So… Does that mean you saw Rylen naked?” Ari shifted to glance up at him, her eyebrow cocked questioningly. “He mentioned it earlier tonight, and I, well—” Where the hell was he going with this anyways? Maker, he sounded like an idiot.

“Surely you’re not worried, Commander.” Letting his head flop back on the pillow, Cullen groaned. Why had he mentioned it all? That gleam in her eye could only mean one thing. “Because if you are, let me tell you right now.” Throwing one leg over his hips, Ari scooted up and straddled him, leaning down until her nose brushed his, as serious as he had ever seen her. “Templars are all in perfect physical shape, you know that, they have to be. But no one I ever saw, or have ever seen in my life, comes close to you. And you know why?” Softly, she pressed her lips to a particularly wicked, jagged scar that ran the breadth of one pectoral muscle. “Because they’re not you. They haven’t gone through all the horrors you did, and come out stronger on the other side. They don’t have your courage, your honor, your integrity. They don’t have your eyes, warm and beautiful. And they don’t have this,” resting her palm against his chest, she smiled at fluttering beat of his heart. “Or this,” she added with a smirk, kissing the scar on his lip.

“My scar?” he asked, bemused.

“It’s very roguish,” she shrugged, rolling back down to his side. “Suits you. I like it.”

“Well, that’s all that matters,” he laughed softly. “Maker’s breath, I can’t believe this isn’t a dream. You’re really here. You love me.” His voice was filled with wonder, quiet with reverence, as if he were kneeling before Andraste herself and not merely laying in bed with her. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“You were you. Just Cullen. And that, my love, is more than enough for me.”

Chapter End Notes

Alternate chapter name—"FINAL-FUCKING-LY"

Also, yes, size doesn't matter, but my version of Cullen is well-endowed because I can and it's my fiction so :p.
Promise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ari woke to hands, calloused and warm, gently running up and down the length of her belly, skimming over her thighs, and back up to her collarbone. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she smiled sluggishly up at Cullen. She had always loved him most in the morning. There was something about him that was just so much more relaxed, the boy he had once been shining through in his drowsy smirk, his golden curls tousled and scattered across his high brow.

“Good morning,” she murmured huskily. “I missed your curly hair. Why did you go back to using the pomade?”

A chuckle rumbled through his chest as he nuzzled her cheek with his nose. "It's rather silly. You don't like my hair slicked back like that?"

"I do, but," reaching her fingers up to scratch at his scalp, a lazy smile quirked up at her lips. "I like this more. More... free, I suppose. Were you watching me sleep?"

“Mm,” he hummed an affirmative, brushing a kiss across her forehead. “I suppose I can leave it be, just for you, although I make no promises. And yes, I was. You fully admitted to doing the same to me last night, so turnabout is fair play.”

“Speaking of play...” Ari grinned as his honeyed eyes instantly darkened, desire clouding the amber within.

Someone knocked at her door.

“Oh, for-” Cursing, Cullen buried his face between her breasts. “Maybe if we ignore it, they’ll go away.”

They didn’t go away.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, rooting around on the floor in an attempt to find his breeches, and failing miserably. Swiping a blanket off the bed, Cullen wrapped himself up and stormed toward the door, casting a glance over to the small sofa in the corner where Atlas lay, glaring at his master with a reproachful sneer. “What's wrong with you?"

“He probably didn’t think that us getting together would be that noisy,” Ari giggled from the bed.

Smirking at the memory of exactly how noisy she had been, Cullen swung open the door, perhaps a bit more violently than he intended. “What?”

Hand frozen in mid-air, Dawna froze, staring at the half naked man in front of her. “I…” she squeaked.

“Told you he was fine,” Rylen called from a few steps back with a grin that stretched from ear to ear. “Sorry, Cul. One of the lads couldn’t find you in your place this morning, and so Mistress Breck here got a tad worried and began the search.”

Wrapping the sheet around her body, Ari snuck up behind Cullen and wrapped her arms around his torso, trying to suppress her smirk, but judging by Rylen’s chuckle, she was failing miserably.
“Apologies for worrying you, Dawna,” Ari cooed.

“No, it’s fine,” the other woman’s eyes flashed icily. “I’m glad you’re alright, Cullen.” In a whirl of skirts and flowery perfume, the blonde stalked down the stairs and down the lane. Cullen shifted slightly, craning his neck back to raise one eyebrow at her.

“Really?”

“What?” Ari blinked up innocently at him.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Rylen waited until Dawna was out of earshot before releasing a guffaw that came straight from his belly, his shoulders shaking with unbridled glee. “Oh, Ari pet, you should watch out for that one. Sweet as sugar on the outside, but I think you may have just made the cat bare her claws.”

“How doesn’t bother me,” she shrugged. “Now, go away.”

“Aye, ma’am,” Rylen saluted with a wink. “Oh, Cullen. Travelers been spotted over the next ridge, king’s messenger with them, too. Thought you might like to greet them. With pants. Nice hair, by the way.”

Ari scowled at the man. "You hush. And shoo."

“I’ll be there,” Cullen sighed. “Now you heard the lady. Shoo.”

Firmly shutting the door in Rylen’s laughing face, Cullen turned back to wrap his arms around Ari, enjoying this moment of solitude with her. “I do have to go meet that messenger,” he grumbled. “They have horrible timing.”

“It’s alright. I need to get back to the clinic anyways,” Ari replied into his chest. “After I get off today, I’ll go ahead and move my things over to your place, okay?”

“That sounds perfect,” he smiled, kissing her head, then her lips. “Maker. I’m not yet convinced this isn’t a dream.”

Smirking, Ari reached behind him and pinched his ass, giggling as he yelped. “Convinced yet?”

“No. I may need more convincing,” his grin darkened, “Later tonight.”

“Later,” she promised, turning to head back into her room to dress, watching from the corner of her eye as Cullen scrambled along the floor, hunting for his discarded clothing, bare ass waggling so temptingly in the air. With a triumphant noise, he emerged from under her bed with his wrinkled breeches, grimacing slightly as he pulled them on, his dirtied shirt crumpled in one hand.

“I’ll have to go change, before I meet the messenger,” he said to himself. “Alright. See you later, sweetheart.” Ari couldn’t help the bubble of giddiness that erupted in her chest, giggling at the endearment. “Something funny?”

“No. Just happy,” she grinned.

“Me too,” he smiled, pulling her in for a proper kiss. She was even more delicious than he ever imagined, her lips softer than velvet. “If I don’t go now, I’ll never leave.”

“And then we’ll have to explain to the king why his messenger was kept waiting for hours,” Ari laughed. “See you tonight, lover.”
With a final kiss, on his cheek this time, Ari left, and for the first time since she arrived, Atlas didn’t follow her, electing to remain by Cullen’s side. “You’re looking far too smug for your own good,” Cullen remarked to the mabari.

Tail wagging, Atlas barked his approval, and shrugged, as much as a dog could shrug.

“You probably think this is all your doing.”

Another affirmative bark.

Shaking his head with a wry smile, Cullen quickly jogged back to his cabin, throwing on a clean tunic and breeches, rolling his sleeves up before making his way to the village entrance. And not a moment too late.

“Ser!” Hopping down from his horse, the man in the russet and gold of House Theirin saluted Cullen, hand over his heart. Several other men and women, former templars judging from their posture and stance, dismounted behind him. “I have an urgent missive from Her Majesty to a Mistress Arianne Iseri. As well as a letter for you from His Majesty King Alistair.”

“Thank you. Hughes,” he motioned to one of the other men standing close, “Take His Majesty’s agent and the others to find lodgings, will you? I’m sure they’d all like to rest and get settled. As soon as I deliver this to Mistress Iseri, I’ll be in to see if anything else is needed.”

“Aye, ser.”

The scroll held securely in his hand, Cullen strode back through the village, beyond curious as to what was so important. Pushing the door to the clinic open, he blinked a couple of times to let his eyes adjust to the dimmer light. “Ari?”

“Miss me already?” Her head popped up from behind a stack of crates, a smudge of dust smeared across one cheek. Maker’s breath, but she was adorable.

“Always,” he grinned. “Messenger brought you a letter from the Queen, said it was urgent.”

“Oh?” Wiping her hands on her apron, Ari took the letter and broke the seal with one nail, biting her lips as she scanned the contents. And screamed. “Oh my God!” With a bright, almost hysterical laugh, she threw herself into Cullen’s arms, clamping her hand over her mouth before she could blurt out whatever it was that had her so excited. Grabbing his hand, calling out a quick apology to Moira, Ari dragged him outside far enough away where they couldn’t be overheard. “Elissa!” she loudly whispered, bouncing up and down in place, “She’s pregnant! With a baby! Alistair’s baby! Inside of her!”

“Well, I certainly hope that’s where it is,” he chuckled. Clutching the letter to her chest, Ari silently squealed again, stomping around in a circle, rather reminiscent of an excited duck, he thought.

“Oh?” A slight frown marred her brow as she continued reading the letter, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth, “She wants me to help monitor her pregnancy.”

“Go back to Denerim?” She nodded. Frantically, Cullen wracked his brain trying to think of an excuse to make her stay. He had just found her again, even a distance of only two days would be far too much. “But the healers here, they need you, you just started, you shouldn’t-”

“Cullen,” Ari gently laid a finger against his lips, stilling him instantly. “I have no intention of abandoning my charges right now. Nor you, for that matter. I’ll write her back, see about just going back for a few days each month. When she draws closer to the end, I will want to go for a bit longer,
but that’s months away still. I’m not leaving you.”

A long sigh of breath deflated his chest. His fears alleviated, Cullen nodded, pulling her into his chest. “Maybe when you go, I’ll come with you. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen Denerim. And I’d like to thank the king in person.”

“I’d like that,” smiling up at him, she stretched up to kiss his lips. “I should get back to work.”

“So should I.”

Three long, swollen kisses later, Ari finally pulled herself from his embrace, her dark eyes dancing with mirth. “See you back at home tonight, love.”

Home. Their home. “Yes, you will.”

***

Moving in Thedas was so much easier than back on Earth, Ari grunted in relief as she let the crate thunk against the floor. She had a few more possessions now than she had before she went to Denerim, but it still only took three trips to carry all her things over, mostly clothes a few books and odds and ends she had collected. As opposed to the giant truck that she had barely managed to shut with all the boxes from her old condo, plus her entire backseat and trunk of her car. Smiling to herself, she surveyed Cullen’s house.

His was understandably bigger than hers, with an actual bedroom as opposed to the studio arrangement her own cabin had held, an office with a separate entrance on the opposite side, and a decent sized kitchen. Along with a fireplace that was twice the size of her old one. Sighing in complete and utter bliss, Ari slid the crates with her clothing into the bedroom, hearing the door open and click shut, a familiar booted gait approaching from behind.

“I’ll have to get a bigger dresser,” he mused, leaning against the doorframe. “I can start on one tomorrow.”

“Will you carve me a pretty one?”

“And what would my lady like on her wardrobe?” Cullen smiled down at her.

“I’ve always like the imagery of the sky. Sun, moon, stars, that sort of thing. What?”

Shaking his head, wiping what looked suspiciously like surprise off his face, he took a step inside the bedroom. “Nothing. Whatever you want, sweetheart. I’m going to go wash up before supper. Some of the hunters shot a few ram this morning, so we’ll have that for supper. And then we can come back here, and…” His hand drew her in closer, voice lowering to a husky, suggestive tenor. “Or we can just skip that and go right to the part where you’re screaming my name.”

Ari clutched his arms to keep her legs from giving out underneath her. “Charmer,” she half laughed, half whimpered. “I think I’m going to need my strength for that though, so maybe food first. I missed lunch and I’m starving.”

“You shouldn’t skip meals,” scowling as he released her, Cullen quirked one eyebrow up. “What?”

“You are literally the last person in the universe who gets to say that,” she snorted, her skirts swishing around her ankles as she walked back out into the main room. “How many meals in Skyhold did you…” Her voice trailed off, boots scuffing on the wooden planked floor as she skidded to a halt. “That’s- You kept…”
“I did,” he replied quietly, walking up behind her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

“I thought you threw them away.” Ari stared in wonder at the windowsill over the sink, all the little animals he had given her over the past year neatly lined up. “Wait, where’s my mouse?”

“Pico?” Cullen blushed into her hair at her giggle.

“You remembered his name?”

“I did,” he chuckled. “Um. Pico is in my office. He’s been there, well, since I first arrived here. I kept them locked in a trunk with the rest of your things, unsure of what I should do with them. I thought about having them sent to you, but… Perhaps it was selfish to keep your things from you. But I couldn’t. It felt like I would be purging your memory from my life, and while I thought it my best shot at moving on, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

Cullen had kept her trinkets. Most people would have thought them silly little trifles, the same way her ex had sneered about her little collection of ceramic animals on her dresser, but he had kept them. Cherished them himself. If she had any doubts that still lingered with regards to their newfound relationship, they had all fled now. Turning in his embrace, Ari threw her arms around his neck. “I love you. So very, very much.”

“And I you. I’ll go get the mouse and put him back with the others.”

“No,” she shook her head. “Keep him for me. He can keep you company while you work.”

“A good luck charm?” Cullen’s scar pulled up as he gave her that lopsided grin she adored so much.

“Yes,” Ari agreed, drawing her bottom lip in between her teeth, worrying the soft skin there. Her face grew pensive. “You know- You never wrote back to me. I know the letter I left you was curt and brief, but I thought you might respond when you sent my last payment to Denerim. Just to say you got it, at least.”

“I thought about it.” Resting his chin on the top of her head, he idly thought that she was the perfect height for this. “But the way you left… I thought you would have preferred to not hear from me at all.”

Her words were muffled from where her face was buried in his shirt. “This was all my fault, wasn’t it? I’m so awful at talking about things.”

“Yes, you are pretty terrible at it,” he smiled at her snort of disgust. “But so am I. This wasn’t all your fault, I believe at least half of the blame lies with me. I could’ve told you how I felt a hundred times, but I was too afraid, too unsure. But no more. No more hiding anything from me, nor I from you. I want to be able to talk to you about anything.”

“Me too,” she whispered. More than any other relationship she had ever had, Ari was desperate to make this work with Cullen. I can't hurt him again. I would never forgive myself. “You’ll have to be patient with me. Talking about my feelings isn’t my strong suit.”

“You were patient with me while I was a complete and utter ass all those months,” Cullen said wryly. “I think reciprocating that is the least I can for you.”

“Yeah, but that was just a few months. This might take years. Yeeears,” Ari replied with a slight whine.

His breath caught in his throat. Years. They would have years together. The rest of their lives. After
all, he was healthy now, restored because of her efforts to persuade and heal him. He owed her everything. His life, his happiness, his heart.

“As long I have you by my side, it can take the rest of eternity and I wouldn’t care. You are the only thing I need.”

Chapter End Notes

Next few chapters might come a bit slower, as I work out some plot points and stuff. Enjoy the fluffies!
Tightening the last strap on her saddle, Ari turned back to glance over at Cullen. “You know I’m only going to be gone a week at most, right? I mean, not that I don’t want you to come, I just know you have a lot left to do around here with the harvest coming to an end soon.”

“I know.” He carefully set his horse’s hoof back down on the ground from where he had been inspecting the shoe. “But if I don’t get out for a bit, I fear I may strangle Rylen. He’s has not ceased his prattling about… suggestions and techniques that we could try since he found out we were together, despite how many times I tell him we are both satisfied in that regards. You are, aren’t you? Satisfied?”

Pressing her lips together to stifle her giggle, his tone giving rise to a higher pitch, Ari gave him a quick peck on the cheek, her lips sliding against his freshly shaven cheek. “I am. I mean, I usually can’t feel my legs for at least thirty minutes afterwards, so that should answer your question right there.” Cullen released an almost imperceptible sigh of relief. “You know he just does it to get a rise out of you.”

“I had figured. I know I should just ignore him, but as I find myself unable to, and he finds it impossible to shut his damn mouth and keep his nonsensical tips to himself, we are at an impasse. And so, I’m coming with you.”

Ari did laugh that time, mostly at his adorable grumpy pout, his high brow furrowed in frustration at his best friend’s relentless verbal assault. “Well, I’m glad you are. I’d much rather travel with just you, instead of whatever people you originally decided to send with me.”

“I should hope so,” his scar tweaked the corner of his lips into a smirk. “Atlas! Come on, boy. We have a king to meet.”

She was thankful that Cullen had decided to come along. Besides the obvious fact that she loved him, and would have missed him far too much despite the fact that they had spent every single waking second possible together these last several weeks, the weather had begun to cool down and he was ever so warm at night. Snuggling down into their shared bedroll that evening when they stopped to make camp, Ari sighed in bliss as he wrapped his arms around her, his heat seeping through to her chilled skin.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were just using me as a furnace,” he chuckled in her ear. “Mmph. Your fault for being so perfect for cuddling. And smelling so good.” Breathing in the scent of his skin, Ari burrowed even further into his embrace, her face smushed up against his broad chest.

“Always happy to oblig-” Cullen cut himself off at the sound of a distant howl that was immediately answered by several more voices precariously near to where they had camped, his body stiffening around hers. “Ari. Grab your bow and daggers. Stay near the entrance of the tent, and do not make any sudden moves. Do you remember what I taught you about fighting wolves?”

Leaping out of their bedroll, Ari began throwing on her clothes while Cullen did the same, donning his armor in record time. Shoving her feet into her boots, yanking the laces tight, she nodded, her heart pounding in her throat. “Don’t run. Keep eye contact. Stand tall, don’t show fear.”
“That’s my girl. More than likely, they’ll move on,” his tawny eyes cut through the darkness as his gaze pierced hers. “Hey,” he tugged her close for a quick kiss to her forehead. “It’ll be fine. Just stay calm.”

“Right,” she muttered under her breath. “Stay calm when we’re surrounded by wolves. No big.”

Another chorus of howls greeted the couple as they stepped out into the chill of the night, steadily creeping closer to the clearing. To their left, the horses fidgeted, Ari’s mare’s ears twitching violently, hooves shifting in the dirt. To their right, Atlas softly growled, every muscle in his stocky body poised to attack.

“Stay, boy. Horses are tied securely, right?”

“I… think so?” Ari thought she had fastened their reins properly, but honestly, Cullen had been bent over at the time, preoccupied with setting up the tent, shirtless for some blessed reason, and she may not have been paying as much attention to her tasks as she should have been.

Head whipping around at the sound of rustling leaves, she gripped her bow tighter, her fingers loosely gripping one arrow at the ready. From the darkness, there was the briefest glint of moonlight on eyes and silvery fur, then-

Five wolves slowly stalked into the clearing, tails low, ears perked up, their yellow gaze sweeping over the travelers before locking onto Ari, the smallest and easiest target to the pack.

*Can they really smell fear? Fuck fuck fuck-*

Sucking in a deep breath, Ari squared her shoulders, trying to look more intimidating than her barely over five foot self, her fists faintly trembling and her knuckles bleeding white as she clutched her weapons, steeling herself for the inevitable attack.

It never came.

Almost as if they were of one mind, the massive creatures swiveled, their noses sniffing the air, before settling on their new target- the horses.

“Shit,” Ari breathed. “Cullen-”

“Shh,” he hissed. “Aim for the alpha’s chest, the largest one in front. Atlas,” the dog glanced up as Cullen motioned to the pack, “That one. Ari, stay back as much as you can, only use the daggers as a last resort, understand? Alright. On my count. One, two, thr-”

A shrill whinny cut through the silence. Rearing back on her hind legs, Ari’s mare shrieked in terror as the wolves advanced, tugging frantically on her lead line, her eyes showing only white.

“Now!”

Drawing her bowstring back, Ari took aim, breathing as steadily as she could manage while Cullen and Atlas charged the wolves from behind. Exhaling in a rush of air, she released the arrow, cursing when she managed to hit only air.

With a snap, the mare’s line finally tore free of the knot, the horse immediately whirling on her hind legs to take off at full breakneck gallop into the woods, the wolves close on her heels.

“Dammit,” Cullen swore, lowering his sword. The other horse, his old mount from the days of the Inquisition, stood eerily calm next to the now empty spot, but by the set of his ears, Ari could tell that he had been ready to do battle with the wolves himself. “Good boy, Batair,” Cullen sighed. “Looks like your horse is gone.”
Ari groaned, sinking down into a crouch, her bow slung across her knees. “I’m sorry. I should’ve tied her better.”

“Not your fault. The knot I showed you was designed to break loose, if enough force pulled on it. Poor thing. She was young, and not trained to fight, so it was inevitable. At least Batair stayed; he’s big enough to carry us both most of the way tomorrow. We’ll have to walk some of it, but it’s not a lost a cause. Looks like I chose a good name for you, hmm?” Scratching the war stallion behind his ears, Cullen patted his sleek neck, chuckling as the horse whuffed a pleased breath into his face.

“What does his name mean?”

“Strong warrior, in an old dialect of Ferelden.” Dropping his hand, Cullen studied the darkness beyond their campsite, Atlas’ ears twitching as he did the same. “Looks like they’re gone. Shall we attempt to get some sleep?”

“I’m never going to be able to get to sleep after that,” Ari stared at him incredulously. “We almost get turned into wolf snacks, and you want to go to sleep right after?”

“Almost is the key word,” he grinned. “I would offer to… help you relax, but I think I should stay alert, just in case. And you, my dear, are far too much of a distraction.”

Ducking back into the tent with a snort, Ari muttered under her breath as she stripped back out of her clothes. “Men. Thinking about sleep and sex right after a near death experience.”

Cullen laughed softly in her ear, throwing one arm around her bare waist, smirking at her shriek as he pulled her back into his chilled breastplate. “What better time to reaffirm that you’re alive, besides right after a battle?”

“That wasn’t even a battle,” Ari squirmed, trying to get away from the cold of his armor. “That was a standoff. Cullen, I’m cold.”

Relenting, he released her, stifling a groan as the sight of her nipples, hard and erect beneath her breastband. It was from the frigid air, he knew, but still… His mouth ached to taste her there. “Come on,” he tore his eyes away from her breasts. “We need our rest.”

“Are you sure that’s what you need?” A small smile played at the edges of her lips as she caught the direction of his gaze. Slipping her remaining clothing off of her body, Ari trailed one finger along the top edge of his armor. “Because it seems to me-”

Cullen caught her wandering hand in one iron grip. “Minx,” he growled, raking her naked form with a critical eye. “You’ll pay for that. Later though. When you least expect it, sweetheart.”

Ari shivered from the dark promise in his tone. Nodding, she took her hand back, threw her shift on and crawled into the bedroll, burrowing down under the blankets. “I look forward to it, Commander.”

A cocky grin met her words. “You say that now. Just wait.”

Yeah, like I’m going to sleep after that. I think I may spontaneously combust instead.

***

The temperature dropped the next day, a signal that the first frost wouldn’t be too far off in the future. Shivering under her cloak, Ari grabbed one of her blankets and threw it over Batair’s neck while she clambered up the large stallion’s back, scooting up to make room for Cullen before tucking the
woolen square around her lap. She only wore a simple leather chestplate over her tunic, while he still elected to wear silverite armor, albeit a lighter set, not the heavy plate of his templar days, and even simpler than his Commander garb. Worrying whether their combined weight would be too much for the horse, Ari said as much to her lover.

“He’ll be fine for shorter periods of time. We’ll stop earlier for lunch, and take a longer break. Once we get closer to the city, we’ll probably walk the reset of the way instead of riding in like I had planned,” he shrugged.

Mumbling her understanding, Ari leaned her head back against his breastplate and closed her eyes, smiling as he wrapped his arms tighter around her. Neither of them had gotten much sleep the night before, partly due to her fear that the wolves would return for seconds, and partly due to his barely constrained sexual frustration, Cullen tossing and turning most of the time, muttering curses under his breath every time his skin would brush up against hers. Biting her lip to hide her smile, she wondered how far she could tease him. He had been rather gentle with her so far, a kind, considerate lover, but she knew there was more to him. A darkness, that always lurked beneath his golden depths, hints of his possession and dominant nature giving her just a glimpse of what he truly was. And she wanted to see all of him.

A warm hand slowly crept up her thigh. Ari’s eyes flew open. “Cullen. What are you doing?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” His voice was far too innocent.

What the hell is he...

“We’re on a public road,” she craned her neck back to glare up at him. “Anyone could see.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, love. It’s a lovely day out, isn’t it?”

She was going to kill him. And yet, she knew that if she asked him to stop, he would in a heartbeat, but that note of desire in his tone, the feel of his palm, heavy and firm resting against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh made her want him to continue whatever it was he was planning on. Knowing him, he’s just going to tease me and drive me insane with want the whole way-

His other hand joined its mate under the blanket, deftly untying the laces that held up her loose breeches she favored for riding. Calloused fingers splayed out across her lower belly as the other drifted closer to her now aching sex, his breath tickling her ear as he leaned down and whispered, “I could stop if you’d like.”

“No,” she breathed. “Please don’t.”

So much for propriety.

“Good girl,” Cullen hummed his approval. For a time, he seemed satisfied to just tease her over her clothes, drawing the lightest pressure over the heat of her seam, grazing across the top of her smalls, sneaking lower and lower with each passing moment, stopping just short of where she wanted him before returning to where he had started and beginning all over again.

She could handle this. This was okay. It was enough to pique her interest and lust, but not enough to drive her over the edge into mindless-

One hand dove inside her smalls just as another wagon rounded the bend up ahead. “So wet,” he hissed softly. “Maker, you’re- Oh look, travelers.”

“You should say hello. They look friendly,” he remarked off-handedly. “Good morning!”

“Morning to you as well,” the other man called out. “Headed to the city?”
“Yes, visiting some friends,” Cullen chirped. In front of him, Ari managed a strangled sound as he slipped inside of her heat and simply rested his hand there. Fortunately, the other traveler seemed to not notice, his attention focused on Atlas who was happily plodding along beside them.

“Fine mabari you’ve got there. What breeder?”

"Not quite sure. He was a stray in Orlais and seemed to have adopted us."

"Aye, he did well to find a fellow countryman in that nest of vipers.” Both men shared a hearty laugh at that. "Well, it’s a fine day for traveling. Safe journey!!"

“And to you and yours. Ari,” he glanced down as the wagon lumbered away. “That was rude to not say anything.”

“I can’t, you’re, I’m- oh fuck.” He knew damn good and well that she couldn’t form coherent thoughts when he had his fingers buried deep, or as deep as he could manage with the awkward arrangement, inside of her, every clop of the horse’s gait lazily pumping them in and out. His thumb rested atop her pearl, idly massaging the sensitive bud. She needed more. “Cullen, please, I need-”

“I know what you need,” he murmured. Instantly, his fingers picked up speed, curling inside of her, stroking that perfect spot, his hand bringing her expertly closer to the ledge, forcing her breaths to come in sharp pants and muffled gasps. “Shouldn’t make too much noise, sweetheart. Someone might suspect something.”

If she listened closely, she could hear just how wet she actually was, the sounds coming from beneath the blanket obscene. “Cullen,” Ari whimpered. So close...

“Hmm?” Stilling his hand just as she was about to reach her release, he chuckled wickedly as her indignant squawk, withdrawing himself from her quivering folds. “Oh, you didn’t think it would be that easy, did you, love? You tortured me all night with images of you, thoughts of what I could do to you in that dark little tent, after I told you I had to stay alert. You deliberately teased me. And I promised you would pay, didn’t I?”

“I’m sorry,” Ari begged. “Please, I won’t do it again, just-”

“Oh, I think you will. I think you did it on purpose, didn’t you? Which means,” his voice dropped a register, sending shivers up her spine, “You wanted this to happen. Or something like this. Am I right?”

Her face flushed red, both with embarrassment at having been found out and wanton desire. “Y-yes,” she whispered.

“Ari, love,” he sighed into her hair. “I… Maker, the things I want to do to you. But we’ll talk about that later. For now,” his fingers resumed their torturous dance within her. “This will suffice.”

Her fingers dug into his thigh during the hours he teased her. Ari was barely aware of the other people they passed on the road, her mind having slipped into a tumultuous maelstrom of fogged lust. The only things she was aware of was his left hand, pinning her hips in place, and his right hand, drawing every ounce of pleasure out of her dripping core, alternating between soft, featherlight strokes that felt like electricity racing down her body, and forceful thrusts deep inside that always ended just short of her peak.

“Probably should stop for lunch soon.” Through her haze, she noticed that his voice was strained now, low and gravelled, his eyes dark and glazed, yet sharpened to a pinpoint focus that would have been more appropriate on a battlefield. Quickly, he scanned the side of the road, leading the horse
into a copse of trees several hundred yards off the highway. Far enough away where they wouldn’t be seen.

With a groan, he dragged his fingers out of her swollen sex, bringing up the drenched digits to her lips. “Suck,” he demanded hoarsely. Ari immediately twisted in the saddle and lunged forward to capture his fingers in her mouth, moaning at the taste of her on his skin. “I need-”

 Practically tumbling off Batair’s back, Cullen dragged her down to the ground with him, his eyes wild and chest heaving, stumbling over to the closest tree and bent her forward, placing her hands against the rough bark. Shoving her breeches and smalls down, he tugged his own laces open, wrapped his hands around his throbbing length, and plunged deep inside of her in one smooth motion, his hand cupping over her mouth to muffle her scream.

 It was too much, too fast, after edging her for so long. Her walls clamped down around the large intrusion, pulsing and fluttering, the sweet burn sending her flying over the edge, her vision flaring a bright white as her orgasm crashed down into every inch of her being. Behind her, Cullen muttered her name like a litany, thrusting like a man possessed, barely a few seconds behind her with his own release, cursing under his breath as he spilled within her.

“I meant for that to last longer,” he sighed after a moment’s respite. “Not just that, but the teasing as well.”

“If that had gone on any longer, I would’ve died,” Ari muttered into her arms, her head resting against the tree. Trembling, she slowly drew herself up, whining slightly at the loss as he pulled out of her.

“I almost did, I think,” Cullen laughed, unfolding a clean handkerchief from his pocket. Gently, he cleaned her off and helped her dress, smiling as he dropped to the ground and pulled her into his lap. “You did… Did you enjoy that?”

“I did. Very much so,” Ari wiggled happily in his lap. “I want you to be yourself around me, Cullen. Your complete self.”

“I…” Frowning down at her, he leaned his head back against the tree, staring past the canopy of leaves overhead. “I don’t want to scare you.”

“You won’t.” Ari pulled his face down to stare into his eyes. How she loved his eyes, warm and vibrant, like a glass of whiskey held up to the firelight, the rays of light scattered and sparkling. “I trust you. With everything I am.”

His nostrils flared, gaze searching her face for any hesitation or deception, and finding none. Opening his mouth, and snapping it shut several times with no success, Cullen finally gave up on whatever he was attempting to voice, and simply said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Ari leaned up to press her lips to his, letting herself drown in the taste and feel of him. “I also love food,” giggling as she jumped out of his lap, she made her way to the saddlebags, rustling through to find their provisions. “Did Atlas run off on his own?”

“Probably,” Cullen snorted. “I don’t think he approves of our activities.”

“At least someone in this family has a sense of decorum,” Ari huffed. 

 Family. He froze at that innocent word. They were a family of sorts, weren’t they? And while he knew she was taking whatever witherstalk concoction she had brewed up to prevent any new additions, he also understood that the sap of the plant was only so effective when it came to
prevention. If it didn’t work, what would they do? How would she react? Maker’s breath, she would be gorgeous with her belly, round and full with his child. A sharp pang gripped his heart and lungs. Never before had he wanted something so bad for himself. But that, her as his wife and the mother of their children, a little boy, no girl, with her dark eyes and hair and mischievous smile- it was so real, he could almost see it before him.

“Cullen, are you alright?”

Shaking his head to clear it of the tempting daydreams, he smiled lazily up at her. “Just thinking. Did you find the food?”

“Mm. Here. I can’t wait to see Elissa. I bet she’s absolutely adorable with her belly,” Ari plopped down next to him, handing him a part of a loaf of bread and some hard cheese.

_You would be more beautiful._ “We should be there by nightfall, as long as you don’t plan on distracting me again.”

“Me?!” She gasped in mock outrage. “Why, ser, how dare you! I would never do such a thing.”

Cullen snorted. “You’re a terrible liar, did you know that?”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo uhh.... yeah. I updated the tags. Because apparently this Cullen has begun writing himself. Lol. #sorrynotsorry

Updates are going slower, I knowwww. Third trimester is kicking me down hard, and my brain is a constant fog and the putting of the words into sentences is not flowing so well. Andplusalso, going to Cali on Monday for a week as a last vacay as a family of 3 before this little one makes her debut in 2 months or so. So hopefully this will tide y’all over until I get back and can start writing again. :)}
“Ari! You made it!”

“Elissa, please go back inside. It’s cold out here. Shouldn’t you be wearing more layers? Won’t the baby get cold? Can it get cold if you’re cold? Another robe, perhaps? You there! Fetch the queen another robe! And a blanket.”

“Alistair Theirin, I swear to the Maker if you don’t stop coddling me, I will stab you.”

Ari pressed the palm of her hand to her mouth to at least attempt to not laugh at the Queen of Ferelden, but it was rather hopeless. Alistair trailed after his wife, her royal baby bump barely showing at this early stage, his eyes fretful and brow furrowed, chewing his lip as he considered the possible ramifications as to whether if he listened to her or not.

“I don’t recall him being like this,” Cullen muttered softly from where he stood beside his horse, watching the king warily.

“Babies,” Ari shrugged. “It has that effect on some men.” Dismounting from Batair, she bobbed a polite curtsy. “Your Majesties. The baby is quite warm in there, sire. And during pregnancy, some women tend to run warm. More than likely, the cooler air is refreshing to the queen.”

“There! See! If you won’t listen to me, listen to her! I’m bloody hot inside that damn castle. I swear,” rolling her eyes, Elissa descended the last few steps down into the courtyard. “Men.”

“He’s just worried, Lis,” Ari smiled as her friend drew nearer. “You can’t blame him, not after everything you’ve been through.”

“I know, I know. I’m just tired of being treated like a porcelain dish. They won’t even let me train anymore!”

“Probably for the best.” Raising her hands, Ari braced for the other woman’s ire. “Only because training carries a risk that you might fall, or be hit in the stomach. Exercise is fine, training solo is probably fine. But no sparring.”

“And here I thought you would be on my side,” came the petulant whine.

“I am. That’s why I’m telling you this.”

“Ugh. Fine. Whatever. And here is Cullen Rutherford, famed Commander of the once-Inquisition.”

“Just Cullen these days, Your Majesty.” Sweeping the queen a surprisingly perfect and elegant bow, Cullen straightened his spine under her perusal.

“It’s good to see you, old friend,” the copper haired king smiled warmly at the new arrivals, grabbing Cullen’s forearm in a firm grip. “You look well.”

“As do you, Your Majesty.”

“None of that. Especially not from you. The amount of times you saved my hide from the sisters’ ire.” Alistair chuckled with the old memory.
“You knew each other back then?” Blinking at both men, Ari tried to search her memory for clues she had missed before in vain.

“We trained as templars together for a spell. Alistair had already been there for a few years when I showed up, and pestered his way into my company,” Cullen grinned, utterly remorseless despite the way his king scowled.

“I was good for you. You were entirely too serious for your own health,” he sniffed as loftily as he could manage, ignoring Cullen’s derisive snort. “Shall we go inside?”

Ari hadn’t truly realized how much she missed Elissa until now, when they were finally reunited. She loved Cullen, and adored Rylen and the others in the sanctuary, but with Elissa, it was like coming home to family. Like how visiting South Reach and Mia and Rosalie had felt. A sense of belonging, of friendship, of sisterhood.

With the travelers having changed into cleaner clothes, and the remnants of supper scattered behind them, the women curled up together on the sofa, pouring over the list of baby names while the men stood by the fire, quietly chatting about recent news they had both received from the Divine.

“Still no sign of him?”

“No,” Cullen ran a weary hand through his hair, the temples beginning to show gray, a sight that Ari delighted in for some odd reason. “The standard rumors, elves still dreaming and disappearing by the droves into the woods, never to be seen again. We sent a few agents through the eluvians, but soon learned it was a one-way trip. I suspect the next time we hear from him will be when he wants us to.”

Staring into his snifter of brandy, lost in his own whirlwind of emotions, Alistair’s gaze flickered to his wife’s swollen belly. “Hell of a time to be having a child,” he muttered softly.

“It may be the best time. Give us a reminder of what we’re fighting for.”

“Hope is all well and good, but this- How am I supposed to-” Knuckles clenched around his glass, his hand trembling ever so slightly. “Lis,” Alistair raised his voice to carry across the room. “How are you feeling, love? Need anything? More water? Ari, you said she should be drinking a lot of water, right? Here, let me just-”

“Alistair!” Elissa groaned, throwing her head back against the sofa. “I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are now, but maybe in a few minutes you’ll need-”

“Stop. Worrying. For the love of Andraste, Alistair, just- just stop,” she snapped.

“I can’t help it,” he muttered, his chin drooping to his chest, shoulders sagging where he stood. Over his head, Ari’s eyes met Cullen’s, his curls bobbing as he nodded his understanding.

“Come on. Why don’t we leave the ladies to their… whatever they’re doing? And go do something to get your mind off everything.”

“Like what?” Alistair scowled down at his drink.

“Go get drunk, wrestle the entirety of the guard, cuddle puppies, swim in the moat, make a puppet show, I don’t care,” the queen fairly whined from the couch. “Ow, don’t hit me, Ari!”

Rolling her eyes, Ari turned back towards the men. “Just go have a bit of fun, the both of you. We’ll be perfectly fine and safe in here. I won’t let anything happen to her, Alistair.”
“I know,” the former Warden sighed. “I just can’t help- hey!” An embroidered slipper fell to the thick rug, its mate held at the ready in his wife’s hand to also be flung at him, just in case. “Fine, fine, I’m going. More drinks sound good right about now,” he grumbled, shuffling towards the door like a sulking child, only to pause and turn back around to drop a kiss to Elissa’s hair, resuming his disgruntled stomping as he exited the room.

“Have fun,” Ari smiled up at Cullen, who also pressed a kiss to her forehead, albeit much more tenderly. “And be careful, whatever you do end up doing.”

“We’ll behave,” he teased. The door swung shut behind the two men with a soft click, leaving the women alone with only the sound of Atlas and Fenella, Elissa’s old mabari, snoring by the fire.

‘Alistair did seem like he was upset about something,” Ari frowned into the empty room. “It’s not like him to worry that much, is it? I mean, it’s kind of normal to some extent, but tonight it seemed… excessive.”

“He’s a mother hen, is what he is,” Elissa groused into her skirts, her knees tucked under her chin. “I know he means well. I just don’t have the patience right now for literally anything.”

“That’s to be expected.” Maybe Cullen can get it out of him, whatever is bothering Alistair. “So, Bryce Duncan is settled for the middle names for a boy, and Eleanor Leliana for a girl. Now we just need to pick a few first name options.”

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Ari blearily rubbed her eyes as a familiar shaped lump flopped down onto the mattress, her nose wrinkling as the stench of him wafted up to where she lay.

“Cullen, why do you smell like a sewer?”

“Because I had to fish His Majesty out of one.”

“You- what? For the love of-” Groaning to herself, she pushed up to sit, shaking her head at the disheveled, drunk man sprawled halfway across the bed. “Come on, out of those clothes, and at least wash off a bit before you go to sleep. And- is that a bruise? Are you bleeding? Cullen. Why do you look like you’ve been in a fight?”

Cullen sheepishly pressed his face into the covers, muttering something incoherent under his breath. Ari threw a wet rag at him. Lifting up his head, his hand fumbled for the cloth, grimacing as he wiped off the worst of the dirt from his face. “Alistair decided he wanted to get out of the castle for a bit, so we headed into town. Got ambushed by some thugs near the Gnawed Noble as we were leaving, and he fell into one of the sewer entrances during the… scuffle. Rinsed off the worst of it in the Drakon.”

“You know all those sewers lead straight to the Drakon.”

“I… yes. Yes, I do.”

Holding her breath, trying to ignore all the communicable diseases that were no doubt covering his body by now, Ari helped him shrug out of his clothes, pushed him down into a nearby chair, and began scrubbing at his skin, desperately wishing she had some antibacterial soap nearby. Or a hepatitis shot. Or bleach.

“You don’t have to do that,” he grumbled, his head bobbing a bit with the effort to stay awake. “Unless you just wanted to see me naked.”
“Humor me,” she replied dryly. “It’s either this, or you’re sleeping out on the balcony. Naked.”

“I can do it m’self,” his voice slurred, hands waving nonsensically in the air as he tried to grab the towel from her.

“You’re still drunk,” Ari pointed out. “And you’re about to fall asleep. I’m almost done, anyways.” Pushing his bottom lip out, Cullen slumped further into his seat. “Don’t like it.”

“And there’s my grumpy templar again.” Despite the situation, and her own annoyance at being woken up in such a fashion, a small smile crept across her face, his petulant tone identical to those months of withdrawals he had endured in their little cabin.

“No a templar anymore.”

“I know, love. Here, a clean set of clothes.”

Ignoring the breeches she held out for him, Cullen stumbled from his chair, flinging one arm around Ari’s waist and dragged her down to the bed, sighing happily as he nuzzled her breasts even as she squirmed in his near death grip. “Love you,” he murmured. “Don’t deserve you.”

Her efforts to escape halted by his sweet, unguarded words, Ari sighed, knowing she was defeated, and let herself be crushed by his weight. *At least he’s mostly clean now. I hope.* “I love you, too.”

***

“So what was Alistair upset over yesterday, anyhow?”

Cullen glanced up in the mirror, his eyes focusing on Ari’s lithe frame, currently bereft of any clothing as she gathered up their bedding and her night shift for the servants to wash. Or burn, she didn’t particularly care which. Maker’s breath, she was so beautiful, the late morning sunlight casting a warm glow over her skin, creating the most tantalizing shadows across her breasts and between her thighs and—“Uh. What?”

Snorting, Ari smirked up at him, giggling at his low whine as she pulled her smalls on, covering all the places he had been hungrily watching. “Alistair. What was he so worked up over? It has to be more than just worry over Elissa’s pregnancy.”

Dragging his attention back to the razor in his hand, Cullen resumed his shave, frowning at his reflection. Solas. The Veil. How was he supposed to tell her that their world might end, yet again? That he had no idea if he could keep her safe, should the worst come to pass? A physical enemy with a sword, or magic, he could protect her from, but this—

This was beyond anything in his power.

“There was an elf, an apostate,” he began carefully, “That was part of the Inquisitor’s inner circle, named Solas.”

“The one the Inquisitor found when she went through the eluvian at the Winter Palace, I remember. He took the mark and her arm.”

“Yes.” Setting down the thin blade, Cullen rinsed off his face, remaining bent over the basin, his hands gripping the sides as he stared down into the soapy water. “He’s one of the ancient Elvhen gods. Fen’Harel. He created the Veil, the barrier between the physical world and the Fade, and he intends to bring it down. If he does, we don’t- I can’t—” Ari’s arms snaked around his waist, her body
pressing into his back. A comforting enough weight to keep him anchored to the present. Taking a deep, shaky breath, he continued, “We don’t know what will happen if he does. People will die, certainly, but the effects are still largely unknown to us. I’ve been keeping in touch with others, the Divine in particular has been tracking his movements, but without much success. We’re in the dark. Alistair is afraid. Afraid of being unable to protect the ones he loves, afraid of losing them. I feel much of the same.” Turning around, Cullen clutched her to his chest, burying his face in the sweet scent of her hair. “What if I can’t keep you safe?”

“What if you can?” Propping her chin against his chest, Ari smiled up at him, lacing her fingers around his back, eyes dark and warm. “I have no doubt you will keep me safe, love, as best as you can. But the future is always unknown. I mean, I never expected to end up here. It worked out though, didn’t it? Whatever happens, it’s okay, because I have you right now, and you love me. And that is all that matters in the end. I have known what it is to be truly loved. Death will never take that from us.”

“Still,” he huffed softly. “I should like you to remain alive.”

“As would I,” standing on her tiptoes, Ari pulled his head down to hers, lips pressed fiercely against each other, her fingers curling through his hair. “Whatever happens, we’ll get through it together.”

“Promise?” His voice was a hoarse whisper, his heart beating wildly within his throat.

“Promise.”

Chapter End Notes

HEY LOOK I'M STILL ALIVE AND WRITING AND STUFF.

The plan is to get this done in the next 5-6 weeks lol. I have like, 9 chapters left that are outlined. Might turn into 10 or 11. Sooooo hoping for a bit more regular updates.
The door to the clinic flung open, one slim hand barely stopping it before it crashed into the opposite wall. A riot of crimson curls bounded through the door seconds later, Beatrix flouncing into the clinic in a pique along with the chilled night air.

“You're not on shift tonight.”

Flopping into the chair beside Ari’s, the younger woman stiffly threw her arms over her chest, glowering down at the mess of notes that was spread out across the worktable. “No,” Bea muttered. “I just needed somewhere quiet where I could clear my mind.”

Ari laid down her quill, shifting on her stool until she was facing the sulking woman. “Something happen tonight?”

“No. Yes. It’s- arg, I don’t know!” Letting her forehead thump against the wooden table, Bea groaned to herself. “It’s stupid. I don’t want to think about it.”

“Aright,” the healer replied, bending her head back to her work.

“It’s just-” Ari’s lip curled up in a smirk. “How- how did you know you liked Cullen? As more than just, whatever?”

Ah, so this is what it's about. Ari had noticed how much Bea tended to blush under Rylen’s gentle teasing that had grown more frequent as of late, and how often the fiery redhead responded with her signature biting wit, albeit it had been rather half-hearted compared to what it had started out as. “Besides the fact I couldn’t get him off my mind? Or that I was always staring at him?” Not like any of that has changed either. “I realized how much the idea of living in a world without him terrified me. He became everything to me. And I, like a fool, decided to leave rather than face my emotions because I was so sure he didn’t feel the same way about me.”

“But how do you know if they feel the same way about you?” Pillowing her head on her arms, Bea turned to blink dolefully up at Ari. “It’s so confusing. Sometimes it’s easy to tell, right? I mean, I’ve been kissed before, and it was always pretty clear to me that they liked me. But with him, it’s just- annoying.”

“Rylen, right?”

“Am I that obvious?” She winced.

“Not particularly,” Ari assured her. “I just spend more time with you here than anyone, and I’d like to think I know you fairly well by now.”

“He’s… Sometimes, I would swear on my father’s grave that he’s interested in me. But then he turns around and flirts with everyone else in this place! But I think it’s different with me. I can’t tell. Not to mention, he’s much older than anyone else I’ve ever had an interest in, so I don’t even know if I’m reading him right.”

“Is he actually flirting with other people? Or is he just being friendly? There is a difference, you know.”
He’s in the tavern right now, touching other people. Other women!” Bea squawked indignantly, even more outraged by Ari’s noncommittal shrug.

“But how? Is he touching them like a lover would? Or is it just light taps to the arm, back, what have you? Some people are naturally more affectionate than others, and Rylen definitely falls into that spectrum.” Not to mention she had just recently witnessed the man staring after Beatrix like some love-sick puppy, before attempting to revert back to his normal, jovial person when he realized Ari was watching him, just a bit too late. “Have you tried talking to him?”

“I talk to him all the time!”

“You yell at him all the time,” Ari agreed. “Not saying he doesn’t deserve it, with all that nonsense he tends to spout. But maybe, I don’t know, try having an actual conversation with him?”

“I can’t help myself,” Bea whined. “It’s like he starts talking, and my brain shuts off and all I can do is snark. I’m a horrible conversationalist anyways. I never know what to say.”

“You talk to me just fine,” Ari pointed out.

“Yes, but you’re different. With you, it’s like you’re my sister or something. That doesn’t bother you, does it?”

Smiling down at her earnest, hopeful expression, Ari reached out to brush the stray curls from Bea’s face. “Not in the slightest. I think of you as the same, actually. What if… Hmm. What if we took a day and maybe had a picnic on the beach? You, me, Cullen, and Rylen? A more intimate setting might be just what you need to loosen up a bit around him.”

“Do you think that would work?” One emerald green eye peeked up.

“Couldn’t hurt. Besides, a break would be nice for all of us I should think. It’s been a busy month. Let’s see. End of this week, Camden and Moira have the clinic. I’ll talk to the men about taking the day off.”

“Really? That’d be- What if it’s a total disaster? What if we go and I can’t think of a thing to say? What if…”

With a soft laugh, Ari pressed one hand to Bea’s mouth, stilling her rambling worries. “A day by the ocean with friends and food is never a disaster. It’s good for the soul. It’ll be fine, try not to worry.”

“Says you.”

***

The chair creaked under his weight as Cullen leaned back, dragging the feather of the quill against his stubble. Mia had written yet another letter, all but demanding he and Ari come back to South Reach for Satinalia. His sister had been her predictable smug, self-righteous self after learning the couple had reconciled and were now together, and was relentless in her requests that the two come back for a visit. There hadn’t been much time to be honest, between caring for the sanctuary and the needs of those within it, and the frequent trips to Denerim that Cullen always accompanied Ari on to check up on the queen. But perhaps they could make the time. Spend the holidays with his family, and then head to Denerim from there to await the birth of the royal heir. Unbidden, his eyes flicked down to his lowest drawer, the carved box still safely tucked away at the back. And maybe…

Calling out, “Enter,” at the sudden knock on his door, Cullen raised an eyebrow as Dawna slipped into his office with a bright smile, a tray balanced on one hip. The woman had been
uncharacteristically abrupt to both him and Ari since that morning she discovered the couple, but in the past week, she had reverted back to her normal, cheerful self.

“Good afternoon,” she chirped as she stepped into the dim office. “I swear, Cullen, I don’t know how you work in this mess.”

It really wasn’t that bad, was it? His brow furrowing as he frowned, Cullen surveyed his desk. The piles of parchment that had gathered, letters from other former Inquisition members, supply lists for the sanctuary, and things of that nature, were certainly more haphazard than when he had been Commander. But he had better things to do now with his time besides organize letters. “It grows on you,” he shrugged. “What’s this?”

“Lunch! Gretchen said you hadn’t come down for the meal yet, so I figured I’d bring it to you. Always working so hard, you deserve a bit of pampering.” Clearing a space in front of him, Dawna busied herself setting up his meal, completely unperturbed by the fact that the bodice of her dress was pulled dangerously low.

Maker’s breath, Cullen groaned to himself, raising his eyes to the ceiling, his face flushing deep crimson with his embarrassment. This is bordering on obscene. Ari is going to kill her when I tell her about this.

“There! Do you need anything else, ser?” The honorific dripped with innuendo that even he couldn’t mistake. Fluttering her long lashes, Dawna smiled enticingly down at the former Commander, making sure to stand in such a way that all her curves were prominently displayed.

Still keeping his gaze averted, Cullen shook his head. “No, thank you. I appreciate the lunch.”

“Are you sure,” Dawna purred. “You’ve been awfully tense lately, darling. I could help with that.” The scent of perfumed lilacs filled his head as she sauntered around his desk, perching on the edge of the solid wooden furniture, one hand reaching out to caress his chest. This time, Cullen met her eyes, grabbing her wrist gently, yet firmly, with one hand.

“No, thank you. Please leave.”

Dropping back to her feet in a huff, the voluptuous women pinned him with an intense stare. “You’re making a mistake, Cullen. I could satisfy you in ways that you’ve never even dreamed about.”

“I think I’ll still have to pass,” he replied dryly. “I happen to be quite satisfied with the woman I love, as it turns out. Good afternoon, mistress.” Maker’s breath, that woman is more trouble than I thought. Cullen groaned as she all but stormed out of his office. It was curious, however, how she had waited this long to attempt to initiate anything. Dawna had been with one of the first groups who had traveled to the sanctuary, along with the blacksmith and his wife, friends of hers, offering her talents as a seamstress and helping out the kitchen occasionally. There had been plenty of time before Ari had re-entered his life— why now?

Doesn’t matter. Either way, I hope that’s the end of it. Maker, Ari is going to be furious.

***

He had predicted correctly. After he had gone home, and told Ari about the events of his afternoon that had transpired, it had taken most of his considerable strength to keep his love inside of the house, rather than let her march across the village to strangle the other woman. Instead, after her temper had cooled, Ari had settled for glaring through the window, telling Cullen when asked that was she was
trying to set the blonde on fire with her mind, lack of Fade connection notwithstanding.

Luckily, his healer was a relatively forgiving person, or at least fairly nonconfrontational, and by the end of the week, had mostly let the incident go. She still ignored Dawna at every opportunity, resorting to clipped formality on the times where she had to say something, but Ari wasn’t the type to fan the flames anymore than was necessary, as long as the seamstress stayed away from Cullen from then on.

Lips quirked up in a half smile, he watched as Ari pranced around the cottage, gathering up the rest of the supplies needed for their picnic. Cullen wasn’t sure what he thought about the venture to get the younger healer and Rylen together, as he was of the opinion the Starkhavener was much too old for Beatrix, but Ari just shrugged off his concerns, telling him the picnic wasn’t to get the two together. Instead, she explained that it was an opportunity for everyone to simply relax, and maybe let the two others speak without their usual jibes and teasing to see if there was potential for anything else.

“Rylen is getting the food from the mess hall,” Ari called, tucking a bottle of wine into the blankets she had rolled up into the leather bag, along with Varric’s latest book that the dwarf had sent Cullen, that she had immediately appropriated from his grasp with a squeal. “Ready, love?”

Taking the satchel from her and slinging over his shoulder, Cullen whistled for Atlas. “Yes. You know it’s going to be rather cold by the water, right?”

“It’s cold everywhere in this stupid country,” she grumbled. “I packed a few extra blankets. And by few, I mean six. Besides, I have you.”

“Your own personal furnace, right?” He grinned down at her as she slid her arm through his, her fingers squeezing his forearm affectionately.

“My one and only.”

Beatrix was unusually quiet when they met up at the edge of the village, offering a polite nod to Cullen and Rylen before falling in line just behind the others, lost in thought. Rylen, as usual, more than made up for her lack of chatter as the group trekked up the hillside and towards the cliffs. “Hey now,” he chided Atlas, who was trying to snuffle his way into the picnic basket, “This food isn’t for you, boy.”

“Atlas,” Cullen snapped his fingers. “What has gotten into you?”

Plopping back onto his hindquarters, the mabari softly growled at the wooden basket, his eyes narrowed, the fur around his neck stiff and bristling. “Hey there,” Ari dropped to her knees next to the dog, “What’s wrong?”

With a low whine, Atlas nudged her shoulder, leaving a cold noseprint on her cloak, motioning to the food.

“Must be something in there he doesn’t like the smell of,” Rylen peered inside the container.

“We’ll check everything when we get to the beach. Maybe something’s gone bad?” Pushing up on her knees, Ari brushed off the hem of her skirts, running her fingers through Atlas’ fur. “Come on boy, we’ll figure it out later.”

It was slow going down the narrow path that led to the shore, the rocks that littered the way slick with spray from the waves and the remnants of dried kelp that the gulls had deposited. Despite the frigid temperature of the water and air and the general gloominess of the cloudy day, Ari smiled to
herself as she stepped out onto the sand. How many times had she escaped to the beach during the winter, huddling on the sand in her oversized hoodie, just listening to the crash of the waves, letting the water and wind carry away all her worries? It was like coming home.

Spreading out the largest of the blankets, Cullen anchored the edges down with a few heavy stones, sighing in bliss as he stretched his lean frame out while Rylen began inspecting the food, pulling out each neatly wrapped parcel and sniffing it.

“Everything smells fine to me.” Rylen glanced up to see if Atlas had anything to add, but the mabari had been distracted by the call of the birds further down the beach. “Here you go, Miss Bea. Cul. Oh, Ari,” reaching deeper into the basket, he pulled out a blueberry pie, already sliced and waiting to be consumed. “This piece is specifically for you.”

“That sounds suspicious. What’s wrong with it?” Lifting up the plate, she turned it this way and that, eyeing the dark, sweet filling, poking the flaky crust with one finger.

“Not a thing,” he laughed. “Apparently, it was made with extra care just for our lovely head healer.”

“I should taste it,” Cullen held his hand out for her slice.

“Oh uh,” slapping his eager fingers away, Ari held the slice out of his reach, “This is my pie, ser. Made with love for me. Not you. Get your own non-loved piece.”

“Aren’t you supposed to eat dessert after the meal? Not before?” Beatrix asked bemusedly.

“I’m an adult. That means I can do whatever I want. Like eat this pie right now.” Snatching the fork from a chuckling Rylen, Ari popped a piece of the pie into her mouth with a decadent groan. “This is really good.”

“Yours is probably still better,” Cullen replied with a wry smile.

“Flatterer. Then why were you trying to steal my piece, hmm?”

“Just to be safe!”

Laughing, Ari helped pass out the rest of the food they had brought, smiling as Rylen coaxed Beatrix out of her untypical bout of shyness that had struck her that afternoon. Before long, the two were trading quips as per their usual, but this time, there was an undercurrent of tenderness that both Ari and Cullen picked up on.

“Perhaps you were right,” he mused, idly running his hands through Ari’s dark hair as he watched Bea blush under Rylen’s affections.

“Haven’t you learned by now? I’m… always… ugh.” Grimacing, Ari turned over on her side, placing her book face down on the blanket. “Maybe something was bad. I don’t feel good.”

“Water?” At her slight nod, Cullen passed her the skin, frowning as he took in her unusually pale complexion, her face ashen, hands trembling. “What do you need? Ari? Ari!”

She heard his shout as if she were underwater, his voice muffled and lost to her ears. Vaguely, she was aware of gentle, cool hands touching her brow, of a shock of auburn curls dangling over her vision, of familiar strong, warm fingers curling around her own, of a bark laced with concern, rattling through her chest.

And then-
Only darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I debated on waiting to post this until I had more of the next chapter written, buuuut I'm evil so *mwahaha*. 
Rylen had lived through more than his share of bad days and terrible shit. There was that time when he had stolen his father’s brand new hammer to show his friends when he was a boy, and accidentally dropped it in the Minanter River. Or that time when the Starkhaven Circle Tower caught fire, and so many lives had been lost. Or the day the Conclave exploded. Or the night Corypheus and his fallen red brethren had attacked Haven. The Western Approach and those damn gurguts and darkspawn. Adamant. Halamshiral.

But being gullible enough to be tricked into poisoning his best friend’s lover? A woman he owed his entire life to? This was worse than facing the end of the world.

His entire body was still, a veritable statue, hands clasped over his knees as he sat in the corner of the clinic, watching as the other healers hovered over Ari’s prone body. She was still now, the worst of the convulsions and delirium faded at last as the others managed to finally sedate her, leaving her comatose. The lass was already so small, but seeing her lying there, as pale and cold as the first snow that had fallen the night before, it seemed as if she would shatter with the merest breath.

His fault.

“Rylen.”

His former Commander’s voice, devoid of all emotion, cut through his chest like a scythe. Clenching his fists by his side, Rylen rose to his feet and obediently followed him out into the frigid darkness, the gray light of dawn still some hours away. Forcing a sharp breath up through his lungs, he stepped back up to the wall, letting the back of his head hit the rough wood, eyes squeezing shut.

“I should’ve known,” he rasped hoarsely. “Or at least suspected. I thought- I thought she had mended things, that she wasn’t upset any longer. This is all my fault, Cullen, I’m so sorry, I can’t-”

“Who.”

“Dawna.”

The name hung heavy in the air between them, only a slight tensing of Cullen’s muscles indicating he even heard.

“She said-” Rylen’s voice broke, “She said they were friendly now. And that Ari had confessed that you both were trying for a babe. The pie, it was supposed to help with fertility, she had baked it especially for her. Said it would help. I didn’t know, I swear on my father’s life, Cullen, I didn’t-”

“I know. I don’t blame you, Rylen,” Cullen murmured quietly. “Come on. Let’s go find her.”

“H-how is she?”

“Stable. For now.” Pausing to turn back to stare at the clinic, watching shadows through the window move in the faint candlelight, Cullen gripped the railing of the fence next to him, the veins in his neck stark and pulsing in the moonlight. “I can’t lose her, Ry. I can’t. Not again, not like this, especially not like this.”
“Hey, now,” clasping his friend’s shoulder in one hand, Rylen shook his head, “Ari’s a fighter. And
stubborn as the Void. It’s how she put up with us for so long, right? And Moira and Bea and
Camden know their stuff. They’ll figure it out. And then Ari will be back to herself in no time, and
take down that harpy herself.”

Sucking in a shaky breath, Cullen nodded once, his chin jerking down. “Right.”

The little cottage that Dawna shared with one of the other women in town stood quiet at this hour,
only disturbed by the firm, bracing knock that seemed to echo through the valley. Clad in a simple
nightdress, a scarf around her curls, Dawna blinked up at the men, a slow, sultry smile crossing her
lips.

“Well hello there, gentlemen. And what brings you both to my door so late at night?”

It was all Cullen could do to not strangle her on sight. “Mistress Breck,” he spat, “You are accused
of attempted murder for Arianne Iseri. Rylen. Take the-” He raked a scathing glare over the woman-
“lady to the storeroom and lock her in there for the meantime. We’ll decide what to do with her once-
once Ari is well again.”

“Aye, ser.”

“Now wait just a minute! I didn’t try to murder anyone!” Dawna’s eyes flew open in horror. “What
happened to her?”

“Like you don’t know,” taking a step toward the simpering woman, Cullen towered over her shorter
frame, his lips curled into a sneer. “Of all the things I expected from you, conning a good man into
doing your dirty work all because of jealousy was not one of them. Rylen. Take her before I do
something I’ll regret.”

Grabbing her arm none too gently, Rylen marched her out into the night. “We’ll have someone bring
you a dress to make you decent later. If making you decent is even possible.”

“You have to believe me! It had to have been someone else who tampered with the pie! I swear I
didn’t poison anyone!”

Cullen stood in front of the cabin, arms crossed over his chest, one eyebrow lifted in almost
amusement. “I never said she was poisoned. Or that it was the pie, for that matter.”

Dawna’s face fell. “Cullen, can’t you see? I love you, I would be-”

Storming furiously down the path, he leaned over until his face was a mere handspan from hers, his
eyes like molten amber, shimmering in his barely contained fury. “I don’t want to hear it,” his voice
hissed between gritted teeth. “If I lose Ari, if your actions cause her any lasting harm, know this. You
will feel every iota of both her and my pain, tenfold.”

Finally falling silent, she let herself be led through the village, Rylen motioning for the people who
had poked their head out to see what the commotion was to go back to sleep, leaving Cullen alone in
the snow, head bowed, lost in his grief and rage.

Maker, Andraste, please. I have served you both to the best of my ability all my life. I beg you, don’t
take her away from me. If my wretched life is worth anything still, take me instead, but save her. She
still has so much to give, and I…

What am I without her?
“It’s too bad there wasn’t any of the pie she ate left,” Camden muttered for the hundredth time. “Then we might have a chance of figuring out what it was that poisoned her. Dawna still refuses to confess what it was?”

“Idiot girl still maintains her innocence,” Moira rolled her eyes. “Despite the fact that it’s well known she’s the only person in a forty league radius who dislikes Ari, maybe the only person in Thedas. And she’s the one who gave Rylen the specially wrapped slice. I don’t know how dumb she thinks the rest of us truly are.”

Listening to the others argue, Beatrix leaned against the wall next to Ari’s cot, watching as her friend’s chest struggled to rise with the effort of breathing, Cullen’s hands intertwined with her cold fingers, his head pillowed against the edge of bed, dozing fitfully. *If only I had been paying more attention. I might’ve realized something was off. But no, I was too busy fawning over Rylen, and Maker, what is wrong with me?! I call her my sister and then let this happen?*

“-go back through the list of herbs again. What could have been tasteless in a blueberry pie?”

*Stupid blueberries. Stupid Dawna, stupid picnics, stupid Ry*- “Wait, blueberries?”

“You were there, girl, didn’t you know what you were eating?” Moira glanced over at Beatrix.

“I knew, I just…” A frown flitted across her face, her nose scrunched in thought. “Blueberries. Ari’s slice wasn’t blueberries. I remember thinking the color was a bit darker than the rest of the pie, but I didn’t think much of it then.”

“Wasn’t blueberry? Then what was it? Blackberries, maybe?” Camden asked.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Beatrix muttered. “Why would Dawna make just one slice with blackberry, and the rest with blueberry? Unless…” Her hands flew to her throat as she stared down at Ari’s motionless form before whirling out of the clinic.

Tearing through the town like she had a demon on her trail, Beatrix skidded down the dirt path that led to Dawna’s cabin and into the little back garden plot. *Plenty of shade to get lots of filtered sunlight. It’d be a perfect place.*

“Bea? Lass? What’s wrong?” Stepping up cautiously behind the frantic healer, Rylen peered over her shoulder, watching her dig through the remnants of leaves and debris.

“Belladonna,” she gasped, holding up a handful of dried leaves in trembling hands. “We don’t have much time. I’ve got to get back!”

Cullen was jolted from his restless nap by the sound of a slamming door. Scrubbing the exhaustion from his face, ignoring the sounds of the other healers scrambling around in the background as they had been doing ceaselessly all night, his eyes searched Ari for any sign of improvement, any indication she would get better- and found none. This couldn’t be happening. Not after everything they had gone through to get to this point. The Maker wouldn’t give him his heart’s desire, only to rip it away after a few short months, would He? There was still so much he wanted to say, so much he wanted to do with her. Taking her much smaller hand into his, he pressed kisses to each digit, letting tears burning with searing agony drip onto her skin. He wanted to see a ring there. He wanted to ask her to marry him, to be his forever. There was no guarantee she would say yes; he knew that they had spoken of it in general terms before, and back then, the idea of marriage did not appeal to her, but perhaps her view had softened?
If she said no, it was of no matter. As long as she stayed with him. Did she want children? Maybe another dog? They could stay here, in the sanctuary. Or maybe, once enough people were trained, they could move back to South Reach. Or travel. Or do anything else she wanted to do, wherever she went, he would gladly follow. As long as she lived.

A flash of red passed through the corner of his vision as Beatrix moved to Ari’s side, clutching a vial in her hand. Motioning for Cullen to prop her up, the young healer tipped the pale orange concoction down Ari’s throat, taking care to not spill a drop.

“What was that?” he asked, his voice harsh with emotion and lack of rest.


Gripping Ari’s hands even tighter, Cullen’s eyes flickered from the young woman down to his unconscious lover, afraid to let even the smallest ray of hope shine through, steeling his heart for the worst. “So now we just wait?”

“No now we wait.”

***

Cullen saw it first, the slight tic of her finger, a gentle flutter of her eyelid. Holding a breath that he wasn’t even aware of, he watched as her dark lashes brushed against her cheeks, the color slowly leeching back into her ashen skin, the skin of her brow furrowing in confusion as she glanced around the room with hazy vision.

“Ari,” he rasped, clutching her hand to his chest as if he were afraid that if he let go, she would slip through his fingers. “You’re awake.”

Opening her mouth, only a soft groan came out, her tongue darting out to lick her parched lips. Grabbing a nearby cup of water, he held it to her lips, slowly tilting the cool liquid into her mouth, sighing in relief as she slowly sipped, her head flopping back down to the pillow in exhaustion when she was finished. “Wha’ happened?” Her speech was still slightly slurred, a lingering effect from the berries she had ingested.


“S’one tried t’kill me?” Her eyes widened. Grimly, he nodded.

“Yes. But don’t worry. The person responsible is well guarded for now, and will be dealt with later. The important thing is that you’re awake.” And alive. “Bea was the one who figured out what it was, and she made the antidote.”

“Smart girl,” Ari smiled. Curling her fingers weakly around his, she sighed, taking in the dark circles under his eyes, the riot of curls that stuck up in every which way. “S’ry to worry you, love.”

“It’s okay,” he whispered, kissing her hand. “You’re going to be okay now. Just focus on getting better. Rest a bit more, sweetheart, you’re still exhausted. I’ll be here.”

Rylen sagged against the doorframe, a wave of relief washing over him so intensely, his knees threatened to give out beneath him. She would be alright. Bea had done it.

Following the spunky healer out into the dawn to give the other couple a bit more privacy, the first rays of the rising sun scattering across the square and glinting off the fresh snowfall, Rylen caught her up in a bruising hug, burying his face in her bright ringlets. “Thank you,” he spoke into her hair.
“Thank you for saving her.”

“Rylen,” Beatrix wheezed. “Can’t breathe.”

“Oh, sorry.” Relinquishing his grasp only by a bit, he kept his arms around her waist, noting that she did not shove him away, keeping her hands flat against his chest. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” she murmured. “I care about her, too.”

“I know.” Heaving a sigh, he cast his gaze back towards the building. “I’m not sure how I could have lived with myself if she had died.”

“Oh,” Beatrix’s eyes widened as she sucked in a breath. “I didn’t know, I thought-”

“Eh? Know what, lass?”

“... That you love her.”

“That I-” Incredulously, he stared down at her, slowly shaking his head as a chuckle rumbled through his chest. “You think I’m secretly pining after the woman of my best friend? No, lass. She saved my life. Took a chance on this old, washed up templar-”

“You’re not that old,” she interrupted with a scowl. “Or washed up.”

“Was that a compliment?” he grinned at her fierce blush. “I care for her, it’s true, but not as anything more than a dear friend. I owe her much. Besides, she loves Cullen, and he her, and I’d have to be a daft fool to get between that sort of love. If we’re talking about me though-”

Beatrix snorted. “When are we not?”

“My affections have been claimed elsewhere.”

Peering up at him, wondering why his voice had dropped an octave with his last words, her breath caught in her throat. His turquoise eyes bored into hers with an intensity that she had never witnessed before, flashing like burning gemstones in the pale sunlight. “O-oh?” she managed to squeak.

“Who?”

“A certain fiery headed lass who caught my eye the very day she waltzed into town, and sealed my fate with her biting tongue and wild spirit. Bea.” Unconsciously, he tugged her closer to his chest. “I know I’m not… ideal for you. I’m older, without the prospects of a younger man, but I-”

“Rylen,” she breathed, reaching up to lace her fingers behind his neck, “Shut up and kiss me.”

His laugh echoed across the entire valley. “As you command, my lady.”

Chapter End Notes

belladonna translates to beautiful lady, in case anyone didn’t get the title.

Hey look 2 chapters in 2 days!
“I still think you were too lenient with her,” Cullen grumbled, more to himself than anyone else.

“The idea of killing her didn’t sit well with me,” Ari sighed. “I mean, I’m alive right? All’s well that ends well.”

“Ari, you almost died. She tried to kill you!”

“And yet I’m still here,” she soothed, leaning over in her saddle to cup his cheek. “At least she can’t ever hurt anyone again, locked up in Fort Drakon. And besides, did you see her face when Alistair and Elissa read her her crimes?”

“You mean when she realized she had poisoned the queen’s personal healer and friend?” Cullen laughed at the memory, the image of Dawna’s face frozen in abject terror flitting through his mind. “I’m surprised Elissa didn’t run her through on the spot. It was a fair idea though, to give her over to them to decide her fate.”

Ari shrugged. “I figured the crime happened on the king’s land, right? Since Alistair was the one who gifted it to you? So he’s the authority on the matter.”

“Mm,” nodding his agreement, he shifted on Batair’s back, the leather creaking softly beneath him. “So is the plan to just let her rot in Drakon for eternity then?”

“Er, no.” A sly smile quirked up the corner of Ari’s lips. “Did you hear? The Grey Wardens found a vein of stormheart, which is apparently an extremely rare stone, deep in some caves a few days west of Amaranthine, along the Storm Coast. So of course, as the Warden-Commander, Elissa decided it would be best to do everything to see how far the vein ran, and put out a job request for laborers to help mine it. But most freemen won’t go near those caves, due to large amounts of giant spiders that nest down there. It was Alistair’s idea to use some of the prisoners instead, guarded by a handful of soldiers and Wardens. It would be a shame if Dawna was one of the ones selected to go, don’t you think? She hates spiders. And rain. And dark, spooky places.”

Cullen threw his head back, his laugh loud and strong. “Oh, Maker. That is perfect. I confess, it’s a better plan than what I would have concocted. Leave it to Alistair to be sneaky like that. I’m not sure what I would have done to her in his stead.” The law of the land was clear, that much he knew. Dawna’s life was forfeit the moment she handed that slice of poisoned pie to Rylen. And as much as he would have liked to think he would not have executed a woman in cold blood, every fiber of his being demanded her death for daring to harm his Ari. Not to mention the rest of the inhabitants of the sanctuary were fully in favor of her demise, as their healer was well loved by all. But surprisingly, or perhaps not surprising at all, Ari was the only one who stood opposed to the death penalty, determined to find another fate for the woman. And so she had written to Elissa, asking for advice, agreeing wholeheartedly with the queen’s idea to send Dawna to court for sentencing instead.

“You would have done what was necessary,” Ari replied. “Hey, I see them. Oh, is that little Sinead? Look how big she’s gotten!”

“ARI!”

“And once again, I’m chopped liver,” Cullen grinned as his nieces and nephews poured out into the
drive, trampling Ari in their excitement to greet her, relegating him to the task of putting the horses away and taking their bags inside.

“I was wondering when you two would show up. The children were getting antsy and were about to set out down the road to find you.” Mia grinned up at her brother as he stepped through the door, wiping the slush off his boots. “Let me have a look at you.” Dragging him in front of her, she cast her critical eye over his frame, lingering on his face before nodding to herself. “You look well. Happy, even.”

“I am happy,” he smiled. “Happier than I ever remember being.”

“And I suppose that isn’t just because you’ve finally come home for Satinalia, is it?” Mia teased. Moving to the doorframe, she laughed watching the scene before them, Ari haplessly laying in the snow as the children shrieked and danced and climbed all over her, Atlas barking in happy circles around them all. It was pure chaos. “I’m sure Ari would appreciate it if you let her breathe, you lot.”

“Who needs air?” Ari giggled, dusting the snow off her riding gear. “Oh, I missed you guys so, so much.”

“We missed you, too!”

“Why don’t you come visit more often?”

“Are you and Uncle Cullen gonna get married?”

“Does he kiss you like Papa kisses Mama?”

“Ewwwww!”

Biting her lip, unsure of how to even begin answer that, Ari merely leaned over to ruffle their unruly mop of curls, smiling indulgently down at them all. “Come on, let’s go inside before I freeze into an icicle, and everyone can tell me all about what you’ve been doing while I was gone, okay?”

***

Mia and Rosalie shared a sly smile as Cullen gently tugged on Ari’s hand, leading her out the back door into the night. Neither of them had seen their brother smile or laugh so much in years, probably not since before he was a small child, before his desire to join the templars had manifested. Always so serious, so stern, his entire focus narrowed in on his determination and now it was like he was an entirely different person- joking along with Allan and Graham and Branson, playing with the children on the rug, sneaking affectionate gestures toward Ari, idly fiddling with the hem of her skirts, his eyes always coming back to rest on her. It was beyond reassuring to know that finally, their brother had found his happiness, within one of the kindest women they had ever met.

Pulling the thick, scratchy, woolen blanket tighter around her shoulders, Ari hummed in contentment as Cullen tucked her back against his chest, his chin resting on her head, both of them gazing out at the moonlit snow that covered the fields surrounding the homestead. There was something so peaceful and entrancing about the way the pale light sparkled off the icy crystals, the snow muffling all the sound so that it seemed as if they were caught up in their own world, just the two of them. If only she could freeze this moment in time forever.

“I have something for you,” he murmured after a few minutes of comfortable silence. “I had it made for you before. It was supposed to be your first Satinalia gift, but you escaped before I could give it to you.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small wooden box, carved with stars and pressed it into her hand. “Open it.”
Ari gasped as she did as he bid. A smooth, silverite disc engraved with a stylized sun with what she assumed were words in an unfamiliar language encircling the edge stared back at her, the necklace nestled snugly into dark velvet. It was- “Beautiful,” she breathed. “Help me put it on?” Taking the chain from her, Cullen pushed her hair out of the way, breathing deeply of her comforting scent, letting his fingertips brush along the back of her neck as he fastened the clasp, smirking slightly as he noted the goosebumps that arose from his touch. “It’s warm,” she murmured. “Warmer than I expected.”

“It was enchanted. See those markings around it and on the back? The arcanist from Skyhold, I don’t know if you ever met her, but I had her make this for you. These are low strength fire runes. To help keep you warm,” he nuzzled her ear.

“And the sun?”

“Because you are the light of my world,” Cullen whispered. “Sometimes, I’m convinced the Maker sent you here just for me. I wouldn’t have made it as far as I have without you. Your help, your love, your everything. You’ve made me a better person and given me hope, and for that, I will never be able to thank you enough.”

“You were always a good person,” Ari tilted her head back to stare up at him, her lips curled softly in a coy smile. “You just needed a little reminder, that’s all. And I don’t need your thanks, silly. I just want you to love me.”

“I will love you until the day I die, and probably then some. Ari…” His amber eyes seemed lit from within, searing the very breath from her lungs. “Marry me.”

“Cul-”

“I know,” turning her in his arms so he was able to see her face, Cullen took a shaky lungful of air, “I know you don’t have the best experience with marriage. And I know you mentioned before that you planned on never marrying again. So if you don’t wish to, I won’t be upset. As long as you stay with me and are mine to have and hold and love, I don’t care if we’re married or not. I just… I had to ask,” he finished sheepishly. “Just in case.”

Releasing a little sigh along with the tension in her chest, Ari leaned her head against him, listening to the frantic pounding of his heart. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to marry him- God knew she did. To claim him as her husband, to be called Mrs. Rutherford. But…

Thedas was nothing like Earth. What would happen if they fell apart? There was no divorce here. They would be stuck with each other for the rest of their lives, letting resentment fester until they hated the other. She had seen it before, with couples who didn’t believe in separation, how the apathy set in until both of them were miserable. What if that happened to them? What if Cullen came to hate her? What if she grew bored and bitter? What if-

What if bandits kill us on the way home? Or a dragon eats me? Or sickness takes him? Life is uncertain, you should know that better than anyone. You can’t predict the future.

What does my heart say?

“I… let me think on it? I’m not saying no,” Ari rested her palm against his rough cheek, rubbing her thumb over his warm skin. “And yes, I plan on staying with you and loving you for the rest of my life, so don’t fret over that, my dear ser. I just… need some time to think on the marriage part, okay?”

“Fair enough,” Cullen beamed down at her. “You know,” his gaze darkened a bit, “I sort of like it
when you call me ser.”

“Oh, do you now? Do you like having me at your mercy, ser? Helpless, unable to do anything but obey your desires?” Ari purred, snuggling up a bit closer to him. “You know, despite the lack of formal title claiming me as your wife, I already belong to you.”

“Mine,” his voice came out as a soft growl. “Ari…”

Ignoring the warning in his tone, she simply smiled up at him, letting her palm continue to trace a path along the waist of his breeches, trailing down to gently cup his already hardening length. “Yes, love?”

“Inside. Now.” Grabbing her wrist, Cullen all but hauled her bodily back into the house, silently sending up a prayer of thanks that everyone else had already gone to bed. He wasn’t sure how he would explain him hauling his lover around like a barbarian to his family. Locking the door to the small room they had been given behind them, he glared over at where Ari stood, her cloak and blanket now in a puddle around her feet, dark eyes wide and waiting. “You are-”

He couldn’t describe it. Words had never been his strong point, anyways. She was everything to him- the beat of his heart, the calming voice inside his head when his templar flared, a balm to his weary soul. And the fire to his life. Beautiful, stubborn, kind, generous, and all his. Throwing his shirt over to one dark corner of the room, he felt his scar tug at his lip at her sharp inhale, reveling in the way she hungrily eyed his body. Even as scarred as he was, she still wanted him. Maker, what had he ever done to deserve her?

Rubbing her thighs together, Ari softly whined, the laces of her dress tangling as she struggled to strip herself. She needed to feel his skin against hers like she needed her next breath of air. “Cullen,” she pleaded.

“Need help, love?” he smirked. Stepping out of his smalls, Cullen slowly circled her, like a predator eyeing his next meal, stopping behind her to finish unlacing her gown, pushing the offending material off her shoulders, barely resisting the urge to take her as soon as she was bare. Gripping her shoulders as she tried to turn, he lowered his lips to her ears. “We’ll have to be quiet, love. Can’t wake up the others after all. On the bed now.”

An electric wave flitted over her skin as she scrambled to obey him with a breathless, “Yes, ser.” Mesmerized by the way his lithe muscles rippled, the power contained in his strong frame, every bit the lion they had named him, Ari froze with her mouth slightly agape. No matter how many times they made love, she would never tire of this.

Nudging her legs apart, Cullen gave her an almost feral grin, settling his weight between her knees. Her desire was already evident, her core glistening in the faint light from the twin moons outside their window, her chest heaving with short, shallow, waiting breaths. He loved how much of an effect he had on her already, before he had even touched her, even after all these months. How would it be in a year? Five years? Twenty? He wanted to find out. But first-

“Ah!” Ari gasped loudly into the silence as he leaned into her slick and sucked hard on her clit without warning.

His palm smothered her mouth as two fingers snaked up to harshly pinch one of her pebbled nipples, drawing a sharp whine from her lips. “Ah,” he chided. “No sounds, remember? Or do you want the others to hear you beg for my cock, like the wanton slut you are for me?”

God, she couldn’t think straight when he talked like that. “No, ser,” she whispered, wiggling
underneath his weight, her skin burning where it grazed his. “Or yes. I’m not sure.”

Darkly chuckling, Cullen smirked up at her. “Well, I for one would rather my siblings not hear us. So hush.”

“And if I don’t?”

With a speed that belied his large frame born of his years of training, her lover shot up the rest of the length of her body until he hovered directly over her, his pulsing length pressed into her stomach, his lips mere centimeters from her own. “Do you really want to find out?” Cullen murmured huskily. “I could show you, if you like. Tie you up, keep you on the edge of wanting, deny you over and over again for hours, perhaps even days. What was it that you said? That I enjoy you helpless and at my mercy? You have no idea, love. You’re mine, remember?”

“I- I-” Ari stammered, her gaze held captive by the sheer intensity of his stare. Half of her wanted to obey him; the other half wanted to push him to see how far he would go for she knew it would be worth it in the end. But tonight, her cowardice won out. For now. “I’ll behave,” she whispered.

Cullen eyes searched hers for a moment longer, before breaking out in a wide grin. “Scaredy cat,” he laughed. “We both know you want to find out. But there’ll be time for that later, when we’re back home. And I can make you scream as loud as I want you to.”

She was going to faint, she could feel all the blood rushing from her head at his sultry tone. Sliding back down to the juncture of her thighs, Cullen resumed his position, wrapping his arms underneath her body, splaying his fingers over her abdomen and dove back into her, lapping and nibbling and teasing her like a starved man presented with a feast. Clamping her hand over her mouth to muffle her moans, her teeth biting into her lip almost hard enough to draw blood, Ari writhed under his grip and the relentless onslaught of his clever tongue, wringing every last ounce of pleasure out of her until she lay as a boneless heap upon the bed.

Stretching out beside her, practically purring in his satisfaction, Cullen watched hungrily, yet patiently as she slowly returned to consciousness, her blinks long and languid, lips swollen, her skin prickled with gooseflesh. “Hello,” he leaned down to capture her mouth with his, letting her taste herself on his skin.

“You’re trying to kill me,” Ari groaned hoarsely.

“Hardly,” he chuckled. “Don’t tell me you’re already tired? Just from that?”

"Just from-" With a snort, she managed to roll herself atop his hips, her body still tingling with the remnants of her orgasms, and gently began stroking him, smiling as his eyelids fluttered shut. It was a heady feeling, to have such a powerful man beneath her trembling at her slight touch. To have him trust her so much. To have given her so much. Love, home, family. It all lay within him. Her entire world and future.

“Don’t tease,” eyes narrowing at the impish smile on her face, Cullen scowled at the innocent way she cocked her head at him.

“Why, whatever do you-”

Calloused fingers dug into her hips as arms corded with muscle lifted her up and plunged her down onto his weeping cock, thick and erect and just waiting for her heat to envelope it. Ari’s eyes flew open, her jaw dropping into a silent scream, her fingernails digging into his forearms as she scrambled for a breath that he did not intend to let her have.
Holding her in place, Cullen thrust up into her, grunting as quietly as he could, fascinated by the way her breasts bounced as she took all of him into her and still begged for more with those fathomless eyes of hers. “Ride me,” he gritted out, releasing her.

Instantly, she obeyed, her hands braced against his chest, her gaze wild and frantic as she undulated atop him, impaled by his thick girth. It was all he could do to hold his own end back, his desire to have this last forever overpowering almost everything else in that moment. *Forever… if only she would marry me.*

No, she had promised she would stay with him. That she would belong to him, just as he was hers, heart, body, and soul. It was enough. “Ari, Ari,” he groaned, “Maker, you were made for me, the way you fit me.”

“Yes,” she gasped, her walls tightening around him. “Come for me, Cullen, I need to feel you, please-”

Grabbing her, he flipped them over in one smooth motion until she was trapped underneath him, her knees pressing into his shoulders. “You want to feel me, love? Feel the way I fill you up with my seed, until your belly swells with my child?”

“God, yes, until I’m overflowing and its dripping down my thighs, please, Cullen!”

The imagery of her words was too much for him to bear. Swearing under his breath, his thumb sought out her pearl, and with a few well practiced swipes, he let himself go as she convulsed around him, his body shaking as he emptied his spend deep inside of her, wondering if this night would, in fact, result in a baby. Their baby.

With his heart still pounding in his throat, Cullen pushed back a matted lock of her hair from her sweaty brow, smiling hesitantly at her pleased expression. “You know, I never actually asked you,” he began.

“How?” Holding out her arms, Ari sighed happily as he snuggled into her embrace, his softening cock still inside of her. “No, don’t pull out yet. I like feeling you,” she murmured into his hair, his face buried in the crook of her neck. “As you wish.”

“Kids?” Glancing down at him in surprise, Ari pursed her lips. “I was just wondering,” Cullen barreled on, suddenly more nervous than he had been in a long time around her. “Or we could just get another dog. Do you think Atlas would like a friend? I know a good breeder just outside of Redcliffe, and-”

“Cullen,” she laid a finger over his lips to halt his rambling. “I- yes. I always wanted children, actually. The timing was never right before, but… maybe I was just waiting for you to come along.”

“Do you want children? With me?”

“Don’t look so surprised,” she giggled. “You’d be an amazing father. I do hope they get your curls though. And your eyes. And your nose.”

“Nonsense,” Cullen mock scowled. “They’ll be identical replicas of you, and be perfect for it. When do you think would be a good time? To start trying?”
“No time like the present!” Ari pressed her lips together to keep from laughing at the rueful expression on his face. “I’m kidding, love. I think I’m too tired to do anything right now except exist. Because a certain someone,” she poked him in his ribs, “Decided to try and wear me out.”

“I regret nothing,” he shrugged. “I love you.”

“Love you more.”

“That, I seriously doubt.”

Chapter End Notes

So somehow over 500 of you have decided that you like this fic and I’m just floored. FLOORED. You guys are amazing, and I’m so glad y’all like my ramblings in story form and just *AHHHHHH*. All the kudos and comments give me life, seriously.

I’m still trying to get this thing done before I have this baby, but we’ll see. I’m really trying not to leave like, the last 2 chapters hanging with this for possibly months, but I don’t want to sacrifice the story and quality either just to rush things to completion. Also, I’ve been pregnant for 4109 weeks.
The Key

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cullen couldn’t tear his eyes away from Ari as she moved slowly through the vast room, swaying as she hummed a soft lullaby to the bundle of blankets in her arms. The way she looked, so serene and content, the firelight setting her skin aglow - she seemed as if she were the mother Andraste herself, regardless of the fact that the babe was not hers. Beckoning to him, she stole quietly out of the royal chambers, the sound of Alistair’s snoring barely audible through the thick wooden doors, both new parents already sound asleep.

“He’s so small,” Cullen whispered, peeking over her shoulder down at the little prince, smiling as two bright blue eyes stared back up at him.

“Well, he’s barely a week old, what did you expect?” Bending over, Ari nuzzled the wispy thatch of dark copper hair on the babe’s head. “He’s still perfect. Aren’t you, Your Highness?”

“It’s been awhile since I was this close to a child this young. Rosalie was the last I really remember, and that was a lifetime ago,” he sighed. “Baby looks good on you.”

“Mmm,” humming contentedly under her breath, Ari continued to rock the infant gently, a sweet smile on her lips, until Prince Evander Duncan Bryce Theirin finally closed his eyes and slipped into a deep sleep.

Cullen and Ari had arrived at the palace during the coldest week of the winter thus far, nine days before the queen went into labor, her water breaking in spectacular fashion in the middle of the throne room during court one morning, sending the staff and the king into a frenzy. Alistair had only calmed when both Elissa and Ari threatened to bar him from the bedroom if he didn’t behave, sheepishly taking his place next to the bed and following Ari’s directions on how to provide his wife with the support she needed to endure the rest of her ordeal. Turns out, there wasn’t much he could do besides be there and let her crush his hand, but he didn’t mind. Especially not when he heard his son cry for the first time, his jaw dropping open as a tiny, pink, squalling, wrinkly nug of a baby was placed in Elissa’s arms. He was the most beautiful nug child that had ever existed, Alistair was sure. His son. Maker, he was a father now. How the hell was he supposed to raise a child?

The king had found his answer in his wife, as he most often did, her hand squeezing his at the sight of his slightly panicked face, eyes glazed over, everything frozen in the moment. How he had ever gotten so lucky to earn the love of a woman like her, he would never understand, but he didn’t question it too much either. It was enough that she loved him, and that she had faith in him.

“Together,” she had murmured, somehow knowing exactly what it was that was troubling him without asking. “We’ll do it together, just like we always have.”

And so Alistair had thrown himself into his new role with a fervor that surprised no one, stopping every man that remotely resembled a father throughout the castle and interrogating them for advice, questioning a baffled Cullen multiple times a day about his own father’s methods, receiving completely opposing advice from every other person until he was sure he was going to lose his mind. Thankfully, Ari had finally stopped him with a gentle laugh one night as he was pacing his studying, muttering under his breath.

“Alistair, trust your own instincts. What works for one child won’t work for another. You’re doing
“I promise.”

“Trust my own instincts,” he had grumbled. “My only instinct right now is to not drop the baby. Beyond that, I’ve got nothing.”

“Well, that’s a very good instinct to have,” she snorted. “But seriously. Make sure Evander gets fed, changed, and that he sleeps. Be there for Elissa, this time can be rough for new mothers since her body just went through such a huge change. And love them both. That’s all you really can do.”

Alistair gulped. It sounded easy enough. Right, he could do this. He was the bloody Warden King, wasn’t he? He had helped defeat an archedemon, had killed a high dragon. He could do this. People did this every day, didn’t they? Without servants to help them. He wanted to do the same- be present in his son’s life, caring for his needs, not shying away from the dirty work. What he hadn’t been expecting was how utterly exhausting it would be.

Which was why both royal parents were now sound asleep in the early hours of evening, the former Commander of the Inquisition’s stern glare sending every and any messenger and servant scuttling away to return later, while Ari had joyously commandeered the baby, delighting in his sweet smell and muffled squeaks.

“Do you want to hold him?” Without waiting for his answer, she strode across the room to where Cullen was leaning against the smooth oak mantle of the fireplace, his eyes flying open in sudden trepidation.

“Ari, I-”

“Oh, hush. It’s just a baby. I swear, you’re as bad as Alistair. Besides, don’t you need the practice?” Unbidden, his eyes flickered down to her taut abdomen. “It’s far too soon to tell, love,” she grinned up him, placing the swaddled babe in the crook of his arm. “But if not this month, then we’ll just have to keep trying. Poor us.”

Huffing a soft laugh, Cullen adjusted the sleeping baby against him, smiling in spite of himself as tiny fists jerked through the air. New life, a future, family- this is what he had fought so long for. For decades, he had thought these things would never be his, but he was content to merely serve, ensuring the safety and well-being of others. But everything had changed now, hadn’t it? Now he had a chance at a family of his own, with a woman who had utterly captivated his heart. It was more than he ever dared to dream of.

Ari frowned at the sound of a soft knock from outside in the hall, grumbling obscenities under her breath as she cracked the door open to chase yet another servant away, wanting her friends to rest for as long as they could. Offering a crisp salute, the man on the other side of the threshold bowed, proffering a sealed letter marked with a seal she had seen dozens of times before- a simple feather stamped in dark purple wax.

“Lady Healer. This is for the Commander.”

“When will they cease calling me that,” Cullen sighed, taking the parchment with one free hand and nodding for the messenger to leave. Passing Evander to Ari, he broke the wax with one thumb, his brow furrowing more and more with each line he read.

“Bad news?”

“I’m not sure. The Divine has news.” Flipping the paper over, he studied at the coded map scrawled on the back for several minutes in single-minded silence, throwing the entire thing into the fire when
its contents were firmly etched in his memory. “There’s a meeting, just outside of Jader, in three weeks time. I’ll have to leave as soon as possible,” he sighed. “Traveling in this weather will be tricky. You’ll stay here?”

“Until the weather clears a bit,” Ari agreed. “You’re going alone?”

“I have to.”

Biting her lip, she slowly nodded her understanding. He had burned the letter and the map, which meant this meeting was secret, as was the location. They couldn’t risk Solas or one of his agents finding out where the former Inquisition was meeting and what they knew. Too much lay at stake. And Cullen was more than capable of defending himself, even if he didn’t train as much as he did in years past.

“Where are we going?” Stumbling through the double doors opposite where the couple stood, Alistair blearily blinked, rubbing his reddened eyes with one fist, his bare feet padding against the plush carpet. “Is he sleeping?”

“Like a baby,” Ari pressed a featherlight kiss to Evander’s head.

“There’s new information. I’m sure you’ll be updated afterwards,” was all Cullen said in response to the king’s first question.

Opening his mouth in confusion, Alistair slowly closed it as he realized to what the other man was referring, his eyes growing a bit harder with the knowledge. “Right. When are you leaving?”

“As early as I can first thing tomorrow.”

“Alright. I’ll have someone prepare supplies for you. I’m sending a few of my guard with you as well, the roads aren’t safe to travel alone right now.”

“You know I can’t accept, Alistair,” Cullen replied gently, running a hand through his hair with a weary sigh.

“I wasn’t asking,” Alistair snapped stubbornly. “If anything happened to you, Ari would be upset and then Elissa would have my head. Is it in Ferelden?” Cullen shook his head. “Figures. Take them to the border, at least. And they can wait there until you return.”

“Please, love. I know you can take care of yourself, but it would make me feel better,” Ari stared at him, her eyes soft and pleading. And that’s when he knew he had lost- how could refuse her anything?

“Alright,” he acquiesced. “To the border.”

“Good, that’s settled then. You should get some sleep then, it’s late. I think it’s late, anyways. I don’t think I’ve looked outside in a few days.” With a chuckle that was half grimace, Alistair took his son back from Ari, staring in wide eyed wonderment down at the delicate features. His nose. His son had his nose. Poor thing, he thought.

“We do need to grab a bite to eat,” Ari turned to Cullen, holding out a hand for him to take. “And he’s right, you need the rest. It’s going to be a long, hard journey.”

“That’s what she said,” came a muffled snort.

Raising her eyebrow at the king, she couldn’t help her own smile as both men broke down into
sickers, Cullen trying to hide his grin behind one hand, Alistair unabashedly giggling at his own quip.

“Men, I swear.”

***

Ducking through the low stone doorframe into an isolated cottage nestled deep in the woods in the middle of nowhere, Cullen sighed in relief as a wave of heat from the massive hearth at the other end of the room greeted him, passing his soaking cloak to one of the agents that lined the room. The weather had turned from the snow to which he was accustomed into an icy, torrential rain almost as soon as he stepped foot in Orlais, the winds from the Waking Coast buffeting him from every side, ensuring that he was drenched from head to toe for the remainder of his trip. Another reason to hate Orlais.

“Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

Glancing over his shoulder at Leliana, dressed in her familiar ensemble of chainmail and leathers, he made a moue of displeasure at her cheery tone, earning only a laugh and an affectionate touch to his shoulder. “It just had to be Orlais, didn’t it, Your Perfection?”

“But of course,” she giggled. “Only for you, Cullen.”

Throwing open the heavy door, Cassandra strode in with squelching footsteps, shaking the water from her hair with her usual scowl, her gaze only slightly softening as she noticed the pair standing near the fire. “Your Holiness, Cullen.” Stopping in front of the other warrior, he was met with the scrutiny of her sharp eyes, studying him in much the same way that Mia did. “You look well.”

“I told you I was, didn’t I?”

“You’ll forgive us if we didn’t quite believe you,” Leliana smiled. “You did have a penchant to overestimate your own health, after all.”

“So the healer was able to help, then?” Cassandra smirked as a blush spread over Cullen’s face at the mention of Ari.

“Ah, yes. She was, er, most helpful. Maker’s breath, stop looking at me like that, both of you,” he spluttered.

“We are just happy for you, old friend,” the Divine assured him. “You deserve all the happiness this life has to offer. Now, we are just waiting on-”

The door opened once again, albeit much more gently than before, to admit two petite figures both dressed in simple, yet elegant riding gear, one with a strong Antivan accent, and the other-

Bracing himself, Cullen was surprised to note that when the former Inquisitor turned to face him, he felt nothing. No anger, no pain, no sadness or bitterness or regret. Just… peace.

Finally. “Lady Trevelyan,” he inclined his head.

“Cullen,” Evelyn breathed. “You look-” Whole. Happy. Like how you used to be, before I...

All these things flitted across the tip of her tongue. Instead, she settled on- “Well.”

“I am, thank you. Shall we?” Offering her a half bow, Cullen waited until she passed him and took up her place around the solid table, a map of Thedas spread out across the rough surface, the edges curling from the damp, oiled leather case it had been rolled in.
Waiting until the room was empty save for the five of them, the agents taking up guard outside the secluded cottage, Leliana began without preamble, pointing at various points on the map. “The elves have begun converging in western Orlais, just past Serault, disappearing into the fringes of the Tirashan, with heavy activity also spotted in the Arlathan forest, in northeastern Tevinter. Before, they had been simply vanishing through the eluvians, but now it seems they are reemerging. Both sites are heavily warded- no one can get near. Scouts simply vanish, only to reappear days or weeks later, leagues away, with no memory of what happened in the meantime.”

“What is he doing in the Tirashan,” Josephine mused, staring at the vast swath of green. The forest that lay between Orlais and the Hunterhorn Mountains remained a mystery to the rest of Thedas- no one ever ventured past the edges, called the Deepwoods, where even sunlight dared not to shine. And if they did, none had ever returned to tell the tale. Except for one. The Hero of Ferelden, Warden-Commander and Queen, Elissa Cousland-Theirin.

Evelyn scooted closer to the table. “My guess? That’s where the elves are staying. The valley and sanctuary the eluvians linked to, the places I saw might have been sufficient to hold the elves after the fall of Arlathan, but their number has grown exponentially in the centuries since then. They would need more space. The Tirashan could provide them with that- a safe haven for all the elves of Thedas that heeded Solas’ call.”

“My thoughts precisely,” Leliana nodded.

“So what is he doing in Tevinter then?” Cassandra frowned.

Tracing the outline of the forest with one gloved finger, Cullen jabbed the center where the ancient Elvhen capital had once stood. “That’s where he’s going to bring down the Veil,” he murmured. “After so much destruction and death, no doubt the Veil is as thin and fragile as glass there. It would be a perfect place.”

“So how do we stop him?”

Five sets of eyes met over the table, each one devoid of answers, brains scrambling for a miracle solution that would not come. How were they supposed to defeat a god? Not a would-be imposter, like Corypheus had been, but an actual, immortal Elvhen god?

“What if-”

“You have the key.”

Evelyn and Leliana smiled even as Cullen and Cassandra leapt back from the table, the ringing of their swords sliding against their scabbards echoing through the room. Lowering her hand from her throat, Josephine breathed a sigh of relief. “Cole.”

“Hello,” the pale young man replied, cocking his head at the others. “I scared you.”

“It’s okay,” Evelyn soothed. “We should be used to it by now.” Snorting in disgust, more at her own reaction than anything, Cassandra sheathed her sword, Cullen following suit seconds later. He had never fully became comfortable around the spirit as the others had, his own experiences coloring his hesitance to accept the creature- boy- as the benevolent, helpful... being that he was. Still, he had tried. But it was hard, given Cole’s penchant for literally popping in out of thin air and blurting out whatever it was that was on his mind.

“What do you mean by ‘the key’?” Cullen asked.

“To defeat Solas,” Cole replied, clambering down off the table, happily snuggling up next to Evelyn.
“A fortress, immutable, binding, a vessel. To hold that which once was and still is. The only one that can defeat him.”

“And he makes no sense, as usual,” Cassandra huffed.

“I’m sorry. It’s hard to explain.”

“A vessel? Like for the Well of Souls?” Evelyn asked.

“Yes. But not to hold knowledge, not this time. To hold her, willingly. She’s the only one who can.”

“A vessel… a mage perhaps?” Leliana raised her gaze towards Cole, and groaned in frustration to find the spirit gone once again. “Dammit. I don’t suppose anyone else knew what he was talking about?”

Shaking their heads, only Evelyn remained impassive, her emerald eyes staring down at the space where her hand and the anchor had once lay. “A conduit,” she replied after several minutes. “To hold power, a ‘her’. Another spirit, maybe? A mage is the most likely answer. Immutable, a fortress… If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was talking about Cassandra.”

“Hardly,” the Seeker sniffed. “I’m not a mage, anyhow.”

“He did say it was a she. Both the vessel, and the power,” Cullen sighed. “So either way, we’re looking for a woman.”

“Well that narrows it down,” Evelyn snorted. “To just half of Thedas, instead of all of it.”

“I would hazard a guess we’re looking for someone powerful,” Leliana glanced up. “Someone with a strong will of mind and magic. We should start making lists of those we know that fit these criteria. I can send out a few letters to the College of Enchanters as well, Evelyn, can you get in touch with Dorian and...”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Cullen heaved a weary sigh. *So much for hoping it’s a quick meeting and getting back to Denerim. Maker’s breath, but I wish Ari were here.*

Chapter End Notes

Yay another chapter!
It was almost three weeks before he was able to return to Denerim, for he had been trapped between the preliminary battle strategies that he and Cassandra spent days drafting up, just in case this mysterious “vessel” could not be found, and the endless amount of names he had to dredge up from the depths of his faulty memory of every possible mage contender that he could think of, not to mention the heavy snowfall on the journey home. Still, he managed to make it back just before Ari left, letting him spend at least one night with her in his arms in a warm, comfortable bed before setting out back on the road again. Back home.

Ari could instantly tell that whatever the meeting had been about, it had left Cullen deeply troubled. That tic in his temple was back almost nonstop now, and his gaze was often far away from the present, his mind working in overdrive to solve whatever problem had presented itself. “I’ll tell you when we get home,” was all he would say when she asked if he was alright.

Wracking her brain for possible ideas, she could only settle on one conclusion on the mostly silent journey home- whatever Solas planned to do, it would be soon. What would happen? Would the world erupt in fire and magic and kill the humans? Or just the non-mages? Did he have that kind of power? Would Cullen let her stay with him when he went off to fight? The very notion of him being on some far-off battlefield while she stayed in the sanctuary was like she was scrambling to breathe under water, the panic rising with every second. No, she would go with him, regardless of whether he wanted her to or not. There was no possible way she could wait on the sidelines without knowing if he was alright or not. Besides, wasn’t she a healer? She could help, do some good.

Together. I promised to stay with you forever, you stubborn man, and I intend to keep my promise, no matter what.

Nosing the door open in front of the couple, Atlas immediately bounded into the familiar scent of home, happily bouncing in a circle around the living room before taking up his position in front of the hearth, staring dolefully into the cold ashes as if he could wish them alight by sheer force of will. With a chuckle, Ari grabbed the flint and knelt beside him.

“You and me both, boy.”

A dull thud vibrated through the floorboards as Cullen dropped their bags just inside the door. Taking a deep breath, he rolled his neck and stretched his back, turning his gaze over the little cottage, letting his eyes linger on the collection of carvings in the windowsill. “I’m sorry I haven’t been the best of company recently,” he murmured.

Smiling up from the rug, her hand idly scratching the mabari’s thick furred neck, Ari shrugged. “It’s alright. You’ve had a lot on your mind, I can tell. You know I’m here when- if you want to talk, right?’

“I know. I love you, did you know that?”

“Yes,” biting her lip, she glanced up at him with a sly smirk. “Although I never tire of hearing it. Let me go wash up and I’ll see about supper. I wonder if the mess has anything leftover or if it’s too late. Why don’t you lay down and take a nap for a bit? I imagine you’re probably exhausted, love.”
Opening his mouth to deny her, Cullen yawned instead, much to his chagrin and Ari’s amusement. “I suppose you’re right, as always. Just a quick nap, then. Wake me when you come back.”

Ari grabbed her cloak once more as he sprawled out on the sofa, and headed across the square to the dining hall, pausing here and there to chat with the few individuals that were still out and about at this later hour, sharing the good news of the prince’s birth and the queen’s health with all who asked. In the mess, she was able to pilfer a couple of plates of cold cuts and crusty bread, that would be perfectly toasty and hot after a few minutes in the oven, also snagging a bottle of whiskey from the cellar. They both could use something a little stronger with supper that night.

Popping the leftovers into the oven back at the house, Ari smiled to herself at the sight of Cullen asleep, one arm flung over his chest, the other hand brushing the floor, his mouth slightly gaped open. Even in sleep, his brow remained furrowed, the stresses of the past few weeks lingering in his mind and body.

“He’s scared. He doesn’t know how to protect you.”

Whirling around, Ari stared at the figure she had only ever seen through a screen before that moment. “...Cole?” He nodded, glancing up at her with those icy blue eyes from underneath the brim of his ragged, patched hat. Jerking her head towards the door, Ari wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and stepped outside, leading the boy-spirit-thing around to the side of the house, where no one else would see them. “What are you doing here?”

“To help. I like helping.”

“I know,” she sighed. “Do you mean to help Cullen?”

“No.” Cocking his head up, he stared at her with an intensity that made it feel like he was examining her very soul. “To help you help them. That’s why you’re here. To help.”

“Why I’m-” Ari started. “It- it wasn’t chance?”

Shaking his head, Cole replied, “She pulled you through. She knew no one else here could hold her. So she chose you.”

“Cole. You’re going to have to be a bit less cryptic with me. Can you speak more plainly?” Her head was already starting to throb slightly, the first tendrils of frustration taking root in the base of her skull. In the years since she had arrived, she hadn’t really spent much time contemplating why she was here, assuming that it was chance, some flaw in the space-time continuum, a wormhole, or something else with an explanation beyond her. The idea that she was chosen...

“Yes. Sorry. You don’t change. Not in the Fade. Your mind is like a wall the others can’t penetrate. So strong, unyielding. The only one who can hold her.”

“The others- you mean spirits?” That would explain why her dreams had never really changed much since she arrived here. They appeared as they always had, brief flashes of memories or fanciful nonsense. There was never a hint of a demon or spirit in her mind, but she had just thought it was because she wasn’t a mage. But Cullen had demons tormenting him at night, and he doesn’t have magic either. “And by her, you mean...”

“Mythal.”

“But she died. Solas-” even as the words left her mouth in a whisper, she knew she was wrong. Mythal was the All-Mother, the leader of the Elvhen pantheon. If there was a single god out of all of them that could not be completely killed, it was her. Probably had another part of her spirit, tucked
away in another amulet somewhere.

“He took just a piece,” Cole murmured.

Shaking her head, Ari slumped against the rough wood. “I thought- she had daughters, Morrigan, Yavana, those who were groomed to receive her. Why me?”

“Morrigan is bound to her now and cannot hold her. The rest are not suitable. And there is no one else who could hold her long enough to do what must be done.”

Long enough to do what must be done. “Cole…” Ari raised eyes that were dark and wide, clenching her hands tightly by her side. “Will this kill me?”

His eerie stare met hers with a finality that shattered her heart. “It will.”

Her vision faded, his words sounding like a gong through her head, before all she saw was the crimson red of her bleeding heart. “Why?! Why me? Of all the people on Earth, why choose me? Why bring me here and let me love-” Her voice cracked, the back of her head falling back with a dull thump as tears scorched a path down her cheek.

“Your heart,” Cole barely flinched at her outburst. “The kindness inside of you. Your desire to help. A soul must be given willingly. The love you have for your lion, and those you embraced along the way, it was necessary. There can be no hesitation, no regret.”

So I was brought to Thedas to love the people, just so I would offer myself up to save them. And she knew she would. Without a shred of doubt, she would give her life over and over to save those she called friend. Elissa, Alistair, Rylen, Beatrix. Mia, Rosalie, all the children. Everyone here in the sanctuary. Cullen. Cullen. I promised to stay with him. I promised. “...Was I destined to love him?”

“Not necessarily him. But the person you are, she knew you would love, and love deeply with everything you are, no matter who you chose.” Blinking once, twice, Cole eyes drifted back towards the porch. “He’s waking up. Supper will burn.”

Supper. He had just told her she was going to die, and now he was worried about their supper? No, she exhaled on a long breath. Normalcy. Nothing could change. “Cole. Don’t tell anyone else about this, please.”

“But he’ll want to know. He’ll want to-”

“I know,” she croaked, balling her fists at her side, feeling her fingernails dig into her palm. “But I don’t want the shadow of the future to hang over what little time I have left with him. I want him to be as happy as he can be, until I leave. So please, don’t tell him?”

“He’ll be sad,” Cole frowned.

“He’s going to be sad either way,” she muttered. "Let me give him what happiness I can before that.”

Pausing for only a second, Cole nodded, then disappeared. Ari stared vacantly into the space where he had been, dragging the edge of the rough woolen blanket across her face, trying to erase all evidence of her pain before heaving a trembling breath, plastering on what she hoped was a neutral expression, and stepping back inside.

It didn’t work.
The second the door shifted with her touch, Cullen’s gaze swiveled to fasten on her, his smile fading instantly as soon as he saw her. “Ari. What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” She chirped, just a little too brightly. “What do you mean?” Bending over the stove to see if their supper was still salvageable, she rapidly blinked her eyes, desperate to stem the flow of tears that threatened to spill out.

“Don’t lie to me, please,” Cullen said quietly, placing his hands around her waist. “Talk to me.”

Like a wet rag doll, Ari crumpled against his chest, shaking her head even as she sobbed into his tunic. “I can’t,” she gasped. “Not yet. Please don’t ask me again, Cullen, I- I-”

“Shh, hey, it’s going to be okay.” Swooping her up into his arms, clutching her shaking body to his chest, Cullen tucked her against him, settling her in his lap, murmuring nonsense words of love and comfort as he ran his fingers through her silken hair. “Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.”

No, she thought bitterly. It’s never going to be okay again. What would losing her do to him? After everything he had already endured, all the trauma and heartbreak and loss—would this break him? If the roles were reversed, she was sure it would crush her. He was her everything.

Maybe I should tell him, that way he would have time to prepare. No. He would just spend whatever weeks we have left trying to find another solution, or feeling useless. He hates feeling useless.

Eventually, her cries faded into muffled sniffles with Cullen’s hand warm and firm against her back, her fingers idly playing with what golden chest hair they could reach that peeked out of the top of his shirt. “I love you. More than anything. You know that, right?” she rasped.

“I do. Just as I love you.” Eyes of molten amber searched hers, a deep frown marring his handsome features. “Ari…”

Wiping her face with the hem of her skirt, she smiled sadly up at him. “I’ll be okay, Cullen. Tell me a story?”

“A story?” He blinked in surprise. “About what?”

“Anything. About your childhood, about your training.”

“Nothing very interesting ever happened back then, I’m afraid,” he replied in confusion.

“I don’t care,” Ari whispered. “I just want to hear your voice.”

Opening his mouth to beg her once again to tell her what was troubling her, Cullen pressed his lips together again with a stifled sigh. The woman was the most stubborn creature he knew; there would be no cajoling her worries out of her, not tonight at least. All he could do now was oblige her desire to hear him ramble. “Let’s see then. Did I ever tell you how I got that scar on my left leg? No, it wasn’t from training or battle like most of my others. It was from a stick, and Branson’s ridiculousness. I was six, and it was probably late summer…”

Snuggling in closer, Ari breathed deeply of her lover, trying to commit every scent, every fluctuation of the timbre of his voice, every freckle and hair to her memory. How much time did they have left together? Did she even want to know?

No. It’s better this way. It’s going to be okay. He’ll live, and so will everyone else. At least I can give them all that. It’s going to be okay.

Maybe if she said it enough to herself, she would begin to believe it.
Chapter End Notes

Dammit Mythal.
Cullen never did manage to figure out what had caused Ari to break down like that. That night, she had fallen asleep in his arms, exhausted from the trip and her tears, but when she awoke the next day, it was as if it had never happened. They both fell back into their usual routine with relative ease, with Cullen overseeing the town and spending all of his spare time pouring over military strategies, and Ari back in her clinic, helping the templars that never ceased arriving through their withdrawals.

And if she was a bit more affectionate to everyone, well, no one really commented. But Cullen saw. He noticed the darkness behind her smile, the pain in her eyes that she tried to mask. He felt the desperation in the way they made love, the longing in her kisses, and the despair in her caresses. The way her laughter was a bit too forced, even though it flowed more frequently than before.

A few days passed before Cullen finally told her of the recent developments with Solas and the elves, as he hadn't wanted to upset her further. Listening silently, Ari merely nodded along with his report, an odd look clouding her face when he told her about the supposed ‘key’ they were looking for per Cole’s clue, the mage that the others were still trying to hunt down to no avail.

“So, there will be a battle?” She picked at a loose thread on her blanket, her eyes focused on nothing at all.

“More than likely,” he sighed, the thick parchment bearing Leliana’s latest report crumpling in his hand, one thumb idly rubbing the dark violet wax seal. “The chances of us finding whoever it was Cole was talking about is very slim, so Cassandra and I have begun to prepare for war. Alistair has also pledged to send his troops, as will Empress Celene, a few of the Free Marcher states, and even a regiment from Nevarra and Antiva. Tevinter is staying out of it for the most part, but Dorian Pavus, I think you might have met him at the Exalted Council, has managed to convince a group of mages to join us.”

“When?”

“Whenever we get the word to march out. It’s all just a waiting game now,” he muttered. He hated this part, the calm before the storm. Not that he enjoyed the fighting, but this limbo of not knowing what was going on, with so many unknown variables hanging over their heads was almost unbearable.

“I’m coming when you go.”

Cullen’s head shot up like a snapped bowstring. “No,” he shook his head vehemently. “I need you to stay here, Ari. Where I know you’ll be safe.”

“So I can just twiddle my thumbs and fret about wondering if you’re safe or not?” She arched one dark eyebrow at him. “I’m a healer, I can help. And what if me being there helps save one more life? If we lose this war, nowhere will be safe, Cullen. Don’t leave me behind, please, I couldn’t bear it. If something happens to you, and I’m not there...”

It felt as if his heart was trapped in a vise, hearing the way her voice break as she pleaded with him, the beginnings of tears glinting off her lashes. He knew that if he refused her, she would still find a way to go anyhow. Better to have her next to him, where he could watch her and at least try and
protect her. “As you wish,” he relented with a heavy heart. “But you’ll not in battle. I want you to stay at camp, understand?”

The barest hint of a shadow crossed Ari’s face, but he blinked, and it was gone before he could question it. Maybe just a trick of the fire? “Of course,” she nodded. “I know I’m a terrible fighter anyways.”

Having wrung that promise from her, Cullen felt like it should have settled his anxiety. But it lingered still, even stronger than before. What the hell was going on in her head? And why couldn’t she tell him?

***

It was strange, how her perception of everything had changed overnight. Suddenly, she noticed that Atlas’ fur wasn’t just brown, but the shade of rich, warm chocolate tinged with the darkness of the forest at night, highlighted a few streaks of gold, like fireflies. Snow wasn’t just cold and white; it sparkled like thousands of shattered diamonds, reflecting the sunlight in a kaleidoscope of every color known to mankind. She even began recognizing the difference in the types of birdsong that was beginning to get more frequent as winter moved into spring, something she had never paid particular attention to before.

Death had never frightened her- everyone died eventually. Working in a hospital, she was always close to death, had seen it dozens of times and it was no mystery to her. If anything came after, well, that was anyone’s guess. She had lived her life the best way that she could, and if there was a higher power waiting to judge her, she would just hope that it was benevolent. No, she wasn’t scared, not for herself at least. She was, however, terrified for Cullen.

To that end, she realized it would be best if those he called friends stayed near him for some time… after. Ari wrote letter after letter, to Rylen, Alistair and Elissa, to Mia and Rosalie and Branson, Leliana, Cassandra, even to the ones she had not known as well, such as Varric and Dorian and the Iron Bull, knowing that he once called them friends. When the time came, she would send them off, and hope his friends would come for him and support him. It was all she could do, after all.

The letter she wrote to Cullen was the longest of all. She wondered if it would be kinder to keep it brief, but in the end, her own selfishness won out and she told him. Of her childhood, of her life before Thedas. About how she knew of this world from the stories, knew of him and his past before he had told her, knew what was in store for him if he had not turned away from lyrium again. She wrote pages about how much she loved him, listing everything about him that was good and kind and wonderful until she ran out of adjectives and words. She spoke of her hope that he would forgive her one day, that she did not regret one second with him, nor what she had to do.

You once asked me to marry me. I wanted to say yes. I want to say yes. If I did not have to do this, I would have said yes. There is nothing more I want in this world or the next than to be called your wife, to be Ariane Rutherford. But I would not leave you a widower so soon. It seems such a cruel thing to give us both that happiness only to have it ripped away.

I had such dreams for us, love. I thought we might move back to South Reach after all this was over, so we could be closer to your family while we raised our own. We would have three or four children, all with your curly hair and your smirk. At least one would be serious and calm like you, and the rest would be a rambunctious mess just to keep us on our toes. Boys, girls, it wouldn’t matter to me. They would be ours, and that would be all that mattered. Another dog, too. A puppy this time. Atlas would like that. You would open a woodworking shop, and I would continue to be a healer, and we would live in boring, mundane peace for the rest of our lives, watching our children grow up, spoiling our grandbabies until we were both gray and wrinkled and hobbling around on canes, but
it wouldn’t matter. Because we would still love each other the same as we do now.

But now I will have to hope you will find that peace and happiness with someone else. Don’t mourn me forever, love. I want you to live, to love, to be happy. Look back on me and our time together with fondness, not bitterness. Our friends will be there for you, as long as you let them. Please let them. Don’t close yourself off and grieve alone. You are stronger than you think, you always have been. Besides, Atlas needs you. Tell him I love him, too?

I love you, Cullen Rutherford. More than the stars or the sun. More than this world or the next. I have been blessed to know you, to have had you in my life. You made me a better person and gave me back faith in love and miracles when I thought such things weren’t meant for me anymore.

Live, and love again. If not for yourself, then for me. I’m so sorry. Know that you will be the last thing on my mind and it will be your face, smiling sleepily down at me in the mornings, with your curls all mussed and disheveled, that will be the last thing I see. The sound of your heartbeat the last thing I hear before I sleep. I will carry you with me, always.

I love you.

Staring down at the parchment, Ari listlessly threw some sand over the wet ink and the tear stains that littered the page. She had long since given up on trying to stem the flow of her tears, but thankfully, it was late at night and she was alone in the clinic, save for the steady breathing of the three templars behind their curtains. She knew Cullen was dying to know what was causing her distress. And sometimes, in her weaker moments, she thought of telling him. Or of letting him know at the very least that she was the key, so that the others could stop wasting their time and resources trying to find out who it was. But every time she tried, the words caught in her throat and her cowardice won out, unable and not willing to see the pain in his eyes before it was absolutely necessary.

Scrubbing her face clean with a wet rag, she neatly folded and sealed the letter, tucking it safely away in her things, and not a moment too soon. The door softly clicked open to reveal a set of auburn curls, attached to a giggling, bouncing Beatrix.

“Ari!” she whispered, her eyes sparkling in delight, “You’ll never guess what just happened! Rylen, he- he proposed to me!”

“Oh my!” Ari gasped. It seemed such a short time for a courtship in her opinion, only a few months, but she knew that things were different here in Thedas. Not to mention that Rylen knew of the danger looming just over the horizon, and well, who was she to deny them whatever happiness could be found in these times? “That’s wonderful! Tell me everything.”

Beatrix rambled for close to an hour in a daze, with the sweetest smile on her lips as she recounted the engagement- “I never knew he was such a romantic,” she giggled. “I mean, where did he even get all those flowers? And they were all over the house, along with the notes, each one leading me to the next until I found him out back, waiting on his knee. I swear, Ari, I’ve never seen him so nervous. I didn’t even think he knew how to be nervous!” Only when Camden entered to relieve Ari from her shift did she cease, grabbing Ari’s hands in her own. “You’ll be there? It’s just a small wedding, nothing fancy, at the end of the month. Unless Rylen has to leave beforehand, then we’ll just do a quick ceremony and put the celebration on hold,” she sighed as her voice began to waver. “He said you’re going as well? As well as half of the others. Maker, it’s going to be so empty here. What if- I mean, it’s basically war, isn’t it? And people die in war. Ry-”

“Bea,” Ari wrapped her fingers tighter around the younger woman’s, “Rylen is a capable warrior. And yes, it’s war, but he’s going to be okay. I’ll make sure he gets back to you, I promise.” As long
as he doesn’t do anything foolish, that is. But she knew, with his future family on the line, the Starkhavener would not take any unnecessary risks. He would do everything he could to ensure that he returned to his love, hale and healthy. And Ari would make sure of the rest.

Bidding goodnight to the others, Ari slowly made her way through the town square, stepping carefully down the gravel path, her eyes fixated on the sky above. It was a particularly clear night, both of the moons bright and pale in the velvety sky, illuminating the thousands of stars twinkling high above. She would miss them. There was always something about the stars that tugged at her heart. Smiling to herself, she remember her childish dream of wanting to be an astronaut. Anything to visit space, see the stars in all their glory. But this would do. There was hardly any light pollution here at least, nothing to dim the magnificence of the night sky.

“Lovely night, isn’t it?”

“Mm,” she hummed, climbing the porch stairs. Settling herself in Cullen’s outstretched arms, Ari curled herself up in his lap, nuzzling the crook of his neck. “Stars are particularly bright tonight.”

Minutes, perhaps hours passed as she lay there, safe and warm and loved, content to just listen to him breathe, feel the beat of his heart against her hand. Tightening his grip on her, Cullen eventually sighed and leaned forward, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

“A letter came today. It’s time.” Ari froze. “The elves are beginning to gather en masse near the ruins of Arlathan. We leave tomorrow for Denerim, where the king is waiting on us. From there, we’ll take a ship up to Trevisio, and march inland towards the forest. Are you sure you won’t stay here?” Feeling her shake her head, Cullen felt his heart slip a little further into despair. What she had said was true, of course. If the tables were turned, he would demand to accompany her wherever she went. It had been bad enough when he had been stuck in Skyhold while Evelyn gallivanted across Orlais, but she had been a more than capable fighter. If it had been Ari… His sweet, gentle, Ari… He would have said to the Void with it all and gone with her. And he agreed that her skills would be most valuable. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something terrible would befall her if she did come. But neither could he refuse her. She will be safe as long as she stays in camp. Maker, please keep her safe.

Tilting her chin up, Ari traced the line of his jaw with one finger, letting herself drown in his honeyed stare. He already looked so resigned, his eyes weary, face drawn so that it broke her heart. What she wouldn’t give to see him once more as he was back in Denerim, before he had gone to that accursed meeting, light and carefree. Damn you Solas.

“We should go to bed, then,” she whispered.

Placing his fingers over her skin, Cullen pressed her palm to his cheek, leaning down into her touch. “I have something for you first.” With his other hand, he fumbled around in his pocket for a second, pulling out something that glinted silver in the dying firelight that shone through the windows behind them.

His brother’s coin. Ari sat up a little straighter. “A coin?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Yes. Branson gave it to me, the day I left for the templars. For luck, he said. We’re not supposed to carry such things, our faith should be enough to see us through, but… still I kept it. I should have died, so many times,” he held the worn bit of silver up, the outline of a woman’s face just visible in the center, his gaze far away from her. “Kinloch, Kirkwall, Haven. And then the lyrium. But somehow, I’m still here. So perhaps… Indulge me.” Pressing the coin into the center of her palm, Cullen wrapped her fingers around it. “I know it’s trivial, but if it might help keep you safe, then,” he
exhaled, burying his face in her hair. “I cannot lose you. I can’t.”

A strangled cry ripped from Ari’s throat as she flung her arms around his neck, clutching him so tightly, she was sure she would leave bruises, but at that moment nothing mattered. Nothing mattered except for the fact that she would have to leave him, and he would lose her, and there was nothing she could do about it. *I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry*, she chanted in her mind, wishing for the millionth time that there was another way. But Cole had said there was no one else on Thedas who could take Mythal. And the goddess was the best chance they had at defeating Solas and keeping the Veil intact. If Ari refused, the world would go to war, and how many other people would die? How many others would lose their lovers, their parents, brothers, sisters, children? If there was a chance she could prevent all of that pain, she had to take it.

“I’m scared, Cullen,” she whispered into his shirt.

“Don’t be.” She could tell he was trying to be strong, for her, but his voice still quavered slightly with his own terror and anxiety. “I will protect you. I swear to you, I will not let anythi-”

“Don’t.” Pushing away from him, Ari laid one finger over his lips, gently dragging the tip over the line of his scar. “It’s war. Sometimes, things happen and there is nothing you can do. If something does happen, promise me you won’t blame yourself. You’re their Commander, love. You can’t be responsible for every life out there.”

“Yes, I can. For yours, at least,” he replied, with a mulish set of his jaw.

“No, Cullen. Even mine. Maybe especially mine. Promise me,” she begged, even though she knew he still would. It was just the way he was, shouldering the weight of the world on his shoulders even when it wasn’t his burden to bear.

With a heavy sigh, he leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers. “I promise I will try. That is all I can say.”

It would have to be enough. Releasing a breath of her own, Ari stared down into his eyes, glowing like twin topazes in the warm flicker of the fire and starlight. He had such beautiful eyes, she mused. Every part of him was gorgeous to her, from his scar covered body to his generous heart and keen intellect, but it had always been his eyes that drew her in the most, the color of aged whiskey streaked with molten gold, shifting with every flicker of his eyelids. “Take me to bed.”

They both moved slowly that night by some unspoken agreement, each one wanting to prolong this last peaceful moment with the other, unsure of if, or when it would come to pass once more. Skin sliding against skin, mouths wet and hot, peppering kisses everywhere they could reach, hands groping and grasping, pulling the other tighter, closer, deeper, until they were so tangled up, they ceased to be two separate people. The way it was meant to be. Soft sighs and gasps filled their room, quiet moans and shattered wails, chests heaving as they both struggled to stave off the inevitable end.

Oh, but when it came, it was glorious, as it always was, and yet, bittersweet, leaving an aching hole gaping in their chests. Neither talked into the silence after, letting their panting breaths fill the space instead, her legs tangled up with his, his arms curled around her body protectively, both of them slick with sweat and satiated desire.

It would be hours before either found the Fade that night.

And then, far too soon, sunlight bathed the room in shades of yellow and gray. The dawn had arrived.
*waves* I was considering waiting on posting the next few chapters until I had all of them complete, buuuuut I don't know when that will be. Because the baby came! On July 4th. :) If you want to see her, I posted a picture here. She's pretty much perfect.

I do have most of the next chapter done though!
Anticipation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Technically, she should have been at the back of column with the other healers. She definitely should not have been riding side by side with the upper echelon of the caravan, next to the King and Queen of Ferelden, the former Inquisitor, a Seeker, a magister of Tevinter, a Grand Duke of Orlais, and several other generals and captains hailing from Starkhaven, Nevarra, Ostwick, and Antiva. But as it was, the Commander refused to let her out of his sight on the trek through the Antivan countryside, so here she was.

Ari was glad for it. This way, she could get her fill of her lover, strong and proud astride Batair’s back, his silverite armor gleaming in the late morning sun. And she could spend more time with Elissa. The healer desperately wished her friend had stayed back in Denerim, as the trip was long and arduous, and who knew how long the new mother would have to remain separated from her infant son. Alistair was much of the same mind as Ari, alternating between scowling at his wife and scooping up her hand and pressing fervent kisses to her leather gloves. But Elissa had insisted upon doing her duty, refusing to let Alistair go alone, for the same reasons Ari had initially determined to accompany Cullen. No one wanted to be the one left behind.

At least Solas picked a nice time of year to make us march across Thedas, Ari snorted to herself. Everywhere, flowers and fields were in bloom, a riot of color that spread along with the new, verdant growth in swaths across the swamps and plains they crossed. It was a feast for her soul and heart, to be able to drink her fill of the myriads of scents and shades, before…

She tried not to think about what was to come; instead, she chose to spend the journey speaking with old friends, catching up on the past couple of years with the ones she hadn’t seen or heard from since the Inquisition disbanded. The Iron Bull had brought his Chargers along, and Blackwall had joined up with them just as they docked in Treviso. And every now and then, Ari caught glimpses of Madame de Fer back with the other mages, and a flash of blond hair and yellow plaidweave ducking in and out of the ranks. Varric had also decided to join the others, although Cassandra teased him that he had just wanted a vacation from his Viscount duties, a fact which the dwarf gladly acknowledged.

“So, you and Curly, huh?” Ari didn’t miss the way Evelyn’s ears perked up at the mention of Cullen’s nickname, the other woman trying her best to listen in from where she rode a few paces ahead.

“Mnhmm. Thank you, by the way, for sending your books to him. They’ve all been wonderful,” Ari smiled.

“Glad to be of service,” Varric grinned. “He looks happier now than I’ve ever seen him, I think. Minus the whole, we’re marching to our death bit. But he seems less… heavy, maybe is the word I’m looking for.”

“I hope so. He deserves all the happiness in the world.” Swiveling in his saddle as if his attention was summoned by their mention of him, Cullen caught her eye, winking mischievously at her before scowling at the dwarf.

“Whatever he tells you, it’s a lie. Ignore him.”

“You wound me, Commander!” Varric dramatically sighed, hand over his heart.
“I bet you do have some amazing stories about Cullen though, don’t you, Varric?” Blowing a kiss to her now stricken lover, Ari turned her impish smile towards the others, the Iron Bull and Blackwall eagerly joining the conversation.

“Did he tell you about that one time he lost to Josephine in Wicked Grace?” Bull asked with a leer.

“Oh, yes, that was one of my favorites,” Dorian called from up front.

“No,” gritting out his disapproval, Cullen sighed in defeat as he was summarily overruled and ignored, only accepting his fate when he heard Ari laugh at the tale, harder and more brightly than he had heard from her in weeks. *What is going on, my love?*, he wondered yet again.

Nudging her horse a bit closer to Cullen’s, Evelyn bit her lip, trying to phrase her words properly, knowing she probably shouldn’t, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. “You’re happy, with her?”

“I am,” he nodded serenely. “She’s wonderful.”

“That’s… good. Good,” Evelyn breathed. There were so many other things she wanted to say, things she wanted to go back in time and fix, but perhaps it was better this way. She had never seen Cullen so relaxed, especially considering their circumstances, nor had she ever seen him smile at her the way he smiled at the healer. There had always been a hesitation, almost a reluctance in his eyes when he looked at her. At the time, she had shrugged it off, and though it had broken her heart when he ended their relationship, she could see it now. They never were right for each other. Even if she hadn’t asked him to go back on lyrium, and they had continued the way they were, eventually, they would have fallen apart. She simply wasn’t right for him. “She seems like such a nice person.”

Glancing askew at her, Cullen’s eyebrow twitched, his lips thinning while he considered what to say, wondering what Evelyn was thinking. Instead, he exhaled, letting his shoulders relax under the weight of his armor. “And you…?”

“I think we both know we would have never worked out, regardless of circumstances,” Evelyn replied quietly. “I am happy for you, Cullen. And she does genuinely seem like a sweet woman. I wasn’t being facetious when I said that.”

His cheeks flushed red as he cleared his throat, fumbling for what to say in response. “I didn’t- that is, I… Thank you.”

“Well that was touching.”

“Thank you, Dorian, I rather thought so as well.”

Ignoring their banter with a roll of his eyes, Cullen turned his attention back to his love, who was now raptly listening to Blackwall with wide eyes, exclaiming and gasping over his recollections of his travels and all the different cities he had seen over his years. She wanted to travel, he remembered, see the architecture of Nevarra, stroll down a moonlit alley in Antiva, taste the spices of Rivain. *Then that is what we’ll do, once this is over. I’ll take her anywhere she wants to go.*

Everything he had endured over the years flashed through his memory. In the recesses of his mind, he heard the screams of his brethren as demons ran unchecked through Kinloch, smelled the tang of blood coating the stones. Kirkwall seemed so long ago now, but he still vividly remembered the looks of fear upon the faces of the mages in the Gallows, felt the stifling miasma of despair that had permeated the city, recalled the horrors of Meredith and that fateful night the Chantry had exploded. And Haven- demons pouring from the sky, the world torn asunder, bloody *Orlesians* everywhere.
And as always, the minty, cool bite of lyrium, that would haunt him until the day he died.

And yet, when he looked at Ari, he regretted none of it. Not a single day, not a single drop of blood shed. For all of it, the pain, the nightmares, the demons- it had led him to her. And she, for some reason that he would never fathom, loved him the way he was, scarred and imperfect, with everything she had. She was the calm to his storm, the light at the end of his dark tunnel. Maker, how he loved her. Yes, he nodded to himself, smiling despite himself as she laughed again at another one of Varric's ludicrous stories, it was all worth it.

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Ari hadn’t realized how much of a waiting game battles were. After their massive, sprawling camp had been set up, in record time she also noted, there was nothing to do until Solas showed himself. Soldiers trained, mages sparred, weapons were sharpened and honed, supplies were neatly categorized and stacked. But beyond that…

Elissa took it upon herself to continue Ari’s training, the queen’s formidable skill and strength having not diminished by one whit from childbirth. Twirling her daggers lazily in her hands, she smirked down at her friend, who was currently laying sprawled on her back in the dirt. “Come on, lazy bones, I’m going easy on you.”

“I can’t. It’s too much. I’ve died, tell Cullen I love hi-” Ari froze as the quip left her tongue in horror. How can I joke about this? Now, of all times?!

Unfortunately, Elissa noticed the slip before Ari could smooth over her features and mask her fear. “What’s that? No, don’t give me that innocent look. Something’s the matter. Tell me.”

“I- I can’t,” Ari shook her head. “Please don’t ask me.”

“Bullshit.” Offering one hand, Elissa helped Ari to her feet, steel gray eyes pinning her down in place. “I could command you, if you like, as your queen.”

“I’m not Ferelden,” she snorted, crossing her arms over her chest with a mulish expression Elissa knew all too well. After all, how many times had she seen the exact same set of the jaw on Alistair? Deciding a change in tactics would be more effective, the queen put on her best sad, pleading eyes, pushing her lip out ever so slightly. “You know that only works on your husband, right?”

Muttering under her breath about stubborn healers, Elissa blew out an exasperated breath, only relenting at the sight of Ari’s face. Never before had she seen her friend so despondent, so hopeless and resigned. “Please, let me help. Maybe there’s something I can do, someone I can-”

“No,” Ari smiled gently as she took Elissa’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “There’s nothing you can do. But thank you.”

For a moment, she debated on telling her friend the truth of it- it would be nice to unload some of her burden to someone she trusted. But Ari also knew that Elissa was horrible at keeping secrets from Alistair, and Alistair was an open book when it came to matters of the heart. It would only be a matter of time before Cullen found out and she knew that he would do everything in his power to prevent her from doing what had to be done.

Wrapping her arms around Elissa, Ari gave her a tight hug, trying to put all her feelings and words into the simple gesture. “You know I’m here for you, right?” Elissa murmured.

“I know.”
There was still nothing for her to do in the healer’s tent, so after she left the queen, Ari deciding to find Cullen, finding him predictably in the command tent, hunched over maps of the surround forest, papers scattered all around him, a few candles spluttering nearby.

“You’ve been at that for days now, love.”

Glancing up, the shadows casting even darker circles around his eyes, Cullen sighed, sweeping his arm out over the table. “And yet there’s still so much left to do.”

“A little break wouldn’t hurt though, would it? You’ll ruin your eyes, straining them in this dim light.” Moving around the makeshift table, Ari softly cupped his chin, tilting it up from the map until he shifted his focus to her. “Take a nap with me? Elissa battered me fairly well just now, and I’m exhausted. I’d sleep better knowing you’re taking care of yourself too.”

“That’s cheating,” he scowled without any real heat, gently setting down the quill in his hand. “Alright. A short nap might be nice, I suppose.”

Without a second thought, he took her proffered hand in his own, the soft, worn leather of his glove smooth against her skin, and led her through the camp, idly nodding at the soldiers who snapped to attention as their Commander passed. Pushing the rough canvas of their tent flap aside, Cullen held it open as Ari slipped into the chilly shadowed interior, chuckling under his breath as she cursed at the cold and unceremoniously dropped to her knees beside the brazier, alternating her grumbles between strikes of the flint as she lit the coals.

“Better?” he smiled. Sighing in pleasure as the heat suffused the tent, she nodded, one hand held out to him from where she had burrowed down into the bedroll.

Neither said much, both of them curling around the other, her back pressed against his chest. The weight of the future hung too heavily in this place, Cullen’s thoughts straying to the unknown, Ari’s fixated on what she knew would come to pass. Biting her lip to hold back the tears that seemed to flow much too freely these days, she once again fought the urge to confess everything. If she knew that he wouldn’t confine her to the camp, if she knew that he would let her go when it was time, if she knew that he wouldn’t doom the entire world to war just to keep her safe and whole, she would have told him.

But she knew his soul and heart better than she knew herself. Cullen would damn all of Thedas to its fate if it meant she would live. Wouldn’t he? In another life, another timeline, he would have let the Inquisitor go to Corypheus for the sake of Thedas, she mused to herself. If he understood the odds, he might not stand in my way when it’s time. But the Inquisitor had a chance of beating the Elder One, and returning alive. Ari would not. Yet... He was the Commander. Master strategist. A man who felt the death of every man and woman under his care keenly. If more lives could be spared with just the sacrifice of one person, wouldn’t he take it?

Would I?

Her hands involuntarily twitched once, then squeezed around his fingers where they lay, against her stomach. “Cullen,” she whispered to the dark canvas wall of the tent before she could question what she was doing. “I have to tell you something.”

Ari felt him stiffen behind her, his breath hitching faintly next to her ear, his heartbeat fluttering wildly within his ribcage. “You know-” his voice rasped. Pausing to clear his throat, she felt him suck in a sharp breath, “You know you can tell me anything.”

“I know, and I wanted to say thank you for not pressing me these last several weeks,” her fingers
gripped his even tighter, until she was sure she was cutting off all circulation in his hands, but Cullen didn’t seem to notice, or care.

“I figured you’d tell me when you were ready,” he murmured into her hair.

“I love you. So much.” Twisting in his embrace, Ari gazed up at his face, committing every wrinkle, every freckle to her memory. “More than I have ever loved anyone in my life.”

“Ari…” His golden eyes widened just a fraction, apprehension rolling off of him in nearly palpable waves.

“I- The person you were trying to find. The key? I know who it is.”

Whatever he had expected her to say, that was not it. “You- what?” He stared down at her. “How-who-”

Steadying herself, Ari drew in a deep breath, willing her quavering voice to steady. He deserved to know, to hear the truth from her in person, not from some damned letter afterwards. “The key. It’s-”

“Commander! Commander! The elves have begun mobilizing, ser!” Someone shouted from beyond the tent’s entrance.

Tearing his eyes away from her’s, Cullen called back, “Has Solas been spotted with them?”

“Yes, ser! Fen’Harel leads them.”

“It’s time, then,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes shut. “Sound the order to assemble, lieutenant.”

“Ser!”

“Cullen-”

“Ari, love,” he sighed, pushing himself up off the bedroll, his movements stiff and jerky, as if he were forcing his limbs to obey his mind through sheer willpower, “It doesn’t matter anyways. It’s too late to call for their aid, to figure out how to use them against the Dread Wolf. If you had told me before… Well. Why didn’t you tell me before? Actually. Tell me later, we’ve got to get moving as soon as possible.”

“Cullen,” Ari whispered. Dammit, could she stop crying for just three seconds so that she could say goodbye properly to him?!

“Remember, stay in camp.” Ignoring her now, he rushed about the tent, pulling on his armor in record time, securing buckles and fastenings as Ari watched him with a hopeless air. “Maker willing, the fighting won’t reach you here. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Cullen-”

Turning on his heel, he secured his vambraces with one hand, grabbing his helm with the other. “I know,” Cullen reached his hands up to cup her face, wiping away her tears with the leather of his glove, struggling to keep his own rising emotions in check. He had to be at his best for the upcoming battle, for the sake of his men, for her. “I know. I love you, Ari. You’ll be safe here, I swear it on my life.”

Unable to formulate another word, Ari merely nodded, letting her tears fall as he leaned down to capture her lips. Sweet, lingering, desperate, aching. It wasn’t enough. Although, I could have the
rest of my life to spend with this man, and it still wouldn’t enough, would it?

Silently, she watched from the entrance of their tent as he strode off, his formidable lion’s head helm tucked under one arm, his mantle fluttering in the brisk breeze as he snapped out orders to his officers, each one saluting their Commander as he spoke before scurrying off in whatever direction he sent them. This was the man she had first met when she came to Thedas- powerful, controlled, emanating confidence and security from every pore, not a golden hair out of place. Such a stark difference from the playful rascal that lurked underneath his stern facade that she had come to love. He was, in a word, magnificent. And she...

“Is it time now?”

“No.” Stepping out from behind her, Cole tilted his chin up to look down at her, his pale blue eyes swimming with sympathy for her pain that he felt as sharply as if he were the one leaving behind his lover. “I’ll come find you when it’s time. I’ve got horses waiting.”

“Won’t someone notice the horses are missing?”

“No,” his wide-brimmed hat flopped as he shook his head. “They’ll forget. And the horses would rather carry you than stay here and wait.”

Dabbing at her eyes with the edge of her sleeve, Ari let out a mirthless chuckle. “Well, that’s good to know. I guess just… come and get me then?” Well, fuck. Wait? What am I supposed to do until then? Casting her gaze around the bustling, almost frantic air that permeated the camp, Ari’s eyes settled on the healer’s tent. Suppose I can go help finish setting up. Stay busy. That’s best. Don’t think about what’s to come.

Chapter End Notes

Closer and closer...

This was supposed to be one chapter, but it was getting waaaay too long so I broke it up into 2. That means the next chapter isn’t too far away! :)
Hours passed, and all Ari had to show for them were stacks of perfectly stacked bandages that had been rolled and re-rolled dozens of times until every bundle of soft, clean gauze laid perfectly on the shelf. Elfroot and other necessary herbs had been ground into a dust so fine, she had to hold her breath lest she inadvertently blow the precious powder away. Everything in the tent had been organized to the last millimeter, thanks to her restlessness and desperation to keep her mind occupied. Thankfully, the other healers in the tent put her agitation down to nerves and worry for the Commander, not an inkling crossing their minds of what was truly disturbing her.

Only one observant soul knew something was going on, his dark brown eyes following her as she paced from corner to corner of the tent. Whining softly, Atlas rested his head on her knee as she sat down yet again to darn more blankets. “I’m sorry,” Ari whispered, laying one hand against his fur and scratching his ears. “I’m trusting you to take care of him. Can you do that for me, boy?”

The giant mabari whimpered, but the look he gave her was one of resigned understanding.

“You’re too smart for your own good, love.”

Finally, just as she was sure she’d shatter from the tension, or perhaps spontaneously combust, a hand touched her shoulder, the chill of his skin passing into hers. “She says it’s time,” Cole murmured.

Ari managed to keep her voice steady as she made her excuses to the others, told, then begged, and finally ordered Atlas to stay, the dog entirely unwilling and reluctant to leave his mistress alone, and paused on the edge of the circle of tents for one last, lingering look behind. Elissa and Alistair’s tent lay on the other side, the Ferelden banner placed atop the roof fluttering lazily in the wind. She hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye to them either, had she? There had been too much chaos as the troops readied themselves to march out, and she hadn’t even been able to sneak into their quarters to leave the let-

The letters! “Cole, I need-”

“I’ve got them.” In a blink of the eye, she was left alone in the fading sunlight, the encampment eerily quiet with the lack of soldiers. Ari decided there was no use in waiting on him and continued on into the woods, following the sounds of soft whickering and the faint jingle of bridle and reins. She had barely settled herself in the saddle, pulling her cloak around her tighter to ward off the dropping temperatures of the air, when the boy- Is he a boy still? Does he age? - reappeared at her side.

“I put them where they would find them,” he informed her solemnly, hoisting himself onto the horse next to hers. “Let’s go.”

“Cole, I…” Ari gripped the reins in her hands tighter. “Will you- will you stay with me? Until whatever happens, happens?”

“Of course,” glancing back to look at her, a tiny smile curved at his lips in an attempt to reassure her, one hand held out. She wasn’t sure if it helped or not, but still, she took his proffered hand. “I’ll be with you until the end.”
How did time pass in a way that felt like days, but also mere seconds? To Ari, it seemed as if she blinked her eyes and they were at the back edge of where the army stood in settling dust, but somehow aged years in that blink. No turning back now. Following Cole as he led her west, and around the bulk of the troops, Ari could appreciate just how large their force was...

And also how outnumbered they were by Solas and the elves.

Fen’Harel himself was clearly visible, standing atop a plateau where what appeared to be the ruins of an old altar on the highest ridge lay, overlooking the Inquisitor and her men in the valley below. All around, Ari could see the remnants of what was once the great city of Arlathan, now reduced to vine-covered rubble, the surrounding forest slowly overtaking the broken remains until almost nothing was left except a certain tingle that lingered in the air. Ancient magic, she realized. If she could feel it, how much magic was still held in this place?

“Your Majesty, a rider has been spotted!”

“A messenger?” Alistair turned in his saddle towards the soldier who was racing towards him.

“Not likely, sire. They’ve circumvented the army, and are heading towards the elves.”

A slight frown creased the king’s brow as he pulled out a battered spyglass from his pocket, raising it to his eye to see- “Ari?! What in Andraste’s name is she- Who is that with her?”

Whipping his head arm, Cullen all but mowed Alistair down, snatching the glass away from him without a second’s hesitation. Elissa hovered behind them both. “What do you see, Cullen? What in the Void is she doing?”

“That’s… that’s Cole,” Cullen muttered. Was he still standing on solid ground? His limbs didn’t want to work properly, almost as if he were being dragged underwater, his movements languid, the resistance of the air around him too much to overcome. Everything felt so heavy all at once, and cold. So very, very cold. “What are they-“

_The key. She said- No. No. NO!_

“Ari! ARIANE!!” His bellow echoed throughout the valley, every single soldier and runner freezing where they stood to gape at their Commander. With a frantic kick to his horse’s flanks, he ignored the shouts of those around him and tore off across the sparse grass, sending bits of rocks and grass flying in every direction.

Only for Batair to stop dead in his tracks halfway there, Cullen keeping his seat solely by his decades of training and the grace of the Maker.

“Cole?” Ari turned to the spirit beside her. Her heart had lodged itself firmly in her throat while she watched her lover race towards her, afraid he might reach her and stop her, terrified that he wouldn’t.

“He can’t interfere. We need to hurry.”

Tearing her eyes away from the sight of him, gauntleted fists pounding against whatever barrier Cole had erected around the Commander, Ari felt the last of her courage and resolve crumble. Even from this distance, she could see the agony in every line of his body, his horror when he had realized what she was doing mixed with his own paralyzing memories of the last time he was trapped within a cage of magic. _Damn you, Mythal_. “I love you,” she gasped through her sobs, and continued across the valley with trembling shoulders and hands, the wind carrying her tears and words away.

Upwards, the horses climbed, until Cole told her to leave them at the base of a steep trail that would
lead them straight to the altar’s ruins. Straight to the Dread Wolf. Ari had imagined this part a thousand times over the last several weeks. She had thought her mind would replay her life, show her the best and worst moments of her childhood, maybe the day she got her first dog, maybe the day she graduated college. Remind her of everything she did and still wanted to do. But now she found she struggled to remember anything of her life before Thedas. All she could think about was Cullen, one hand gripping the pendant and coin that she had strung on the same chain he had given her so tightly, until the runes were imprinted onto her skin.

“Cole. You’ll watch over him, won’t you?” Her voice cracked.

“Of course. He doesn’t trust me, you know.” Cole tilted her head to one side, as if listening to something, before offering her an encouraging smile. “The letters will help. Everyone will help. So will I.”

The tension she held in her shoulders fled with her exhale. The letters she had written would be found. He wouldn’t be alone. Their friends would rally to his side. Squaring her slight frame, Ari nodded. “Thank you.”

“We’re here.”

Frigid winds whipped her loose midnight strands of hair around her, icy tendrils reaching down into her lungs to steal away her breath. An old stone altar lay in a circle of columns, all broken and eroded by the centuries that had passed since Arlathan fell. Etchings and runes carved into the rough, pitted surfaces that had once been smooth and polished were now barely visible. Ari was certain it used to be magnificent. And at the center, the wolf waited.

Wrapped in his elegant furs, Solas’ piercing blue eyes were visible even at this distance, seemingly just observing her, as a hunter would his prey before he pounced. Just watching as she approached this sacred spot. He raised a hand, and hunters and mages that she hadn’t even noticed before lowered their weapons, stepping out of the shadows. No longer hidden, it was a show of his strength, and a reminder that she was still alive merely by his grace. Pride, indeed. I wonder why he hasn’t had them attack me yet.

“Curiosity,” he called, seeing the question plainly upon her face. “Why a human, who is neither warrior nor messenger, would dare to approach alone. Ah. Not entirely alone, I see. Hello, Cole.”

Cole tilted his head up, the brim of his hat quivering in the wind. Pale sky blue eyes met electric blue. Reaching out his hand, Compassion gripped Ari’s palm tightly. “Ready?”

“What are you–” Solas’ eyes widened almost imperceptibly, his face attempting to retain his mein of cool composure. He couldn’t afford to falter here, not this close to the end. “Mythal,” he breathed. “I assume she’s found her vessel, then? An entire other world. So it was possible. Did she warn you of the consequences?”

“I know,” Ari replied quietly. “Death. But it’s a small price to pay to keep those I love safe.”

“Death,” he chuckled mirthlessly. “Death is only a part of it. Yes, you will die, but it is so much more than that. She will demand your very soul. Destroyed forever. There will be no afterlife for you.”

“My… soul?” Tilting her head up, she studied Fen’Harel. He looked much the same as he did when she had played Trespasser. More weary and worn down by his trials over the last several years, for sure. But there was no hint of deception in his gaze, only the beginnings of an apology. He didn’t want to do this, she realized. He never had. But he saw it as the only way to atone for his sins of the
past. And as for the rest of them, well… Solas may have insisted the Evanuris were not gods, yet he still acted as one. Playing the Maker and God with their lives, scattering them across the board like forgotten pawns.

Souls. Ari wasn’t religious. She didn’t believe in a heaven, or hell. If pressed, she would have given some vague answer about how reincarnation made sense, but it was never a topic she spent much time debating. People lived, people died. So her soul would be destroyed? She never had much use for it anyways.


From somewhere beyond the crackling roar that filled her head, Ari heard Solas’ shouts, was faintly aware of the elves that were leaping into action around her and of the barrage of magic and arrows that slammed into her body. But nothing could touch her. For she wasn’t there anymore.

Instead, the world was filled with green mist, scattered broken rocks and mountains littering the space-like landscape. The Fade. And in the center of the clearing she was in-

“Mythal.”

A wraith in the shape of a woman approached, what could only be described as an aura rippling around her ethereal form, giving the impression of flowing robes and immense power. Every hair on Ari’s arm stood on end.

“Take her hand.”

An indistinct limb made of light reached out. Taking a deep breath, Ari raised her head and met Mythal’s piercing gaze where eyes would be, touching the worn coin and etched pendant around her neck once more to feel the warmth of the runes and smile at the memory of the him. Here's to luck and love.

And she took the hand.

Time ceased to exist. The essence that was once Ariane Iseri was swallowed by a maelstrom of surging electricity and rage, her human mind tossed about on the ebb and flow of magic long lost to the centuries. Restricted to just a small corner of her consciousness, Ari watched in awe and horror as the battle raged on atop the mountain. It soon became obvious that Mythal being the stronger mage by far, but the loss of her entire person had taken its toll, so that both of the ancient Elvhen were fairly matched. But Mythal had an advantage- the body she had commandeered was fueled by a human heart. A heart that was desperate to win.

The rest of the elves had retreated, realizing they stood no chance against the All-Mother, their own weapons dealing damage more akin to an ant bite than any serious wound. Instead, they watched from the surrounding woods along with the humans at the base of the slope.

The humans. Every once in awhile, Ari caught a glimpse of the Inquisition’s and Ferelden’s banners below. She couldn’t see Cullen, or Elissa, from this distance, not with Mythal’s entire focus on Fen’Harel, but she knew they were down there. Watching. Waiting. Praying. And all Ari could do was wait along with them while she burned from the inside out from the Elvhen’s immense presence.

Wait until she finally saw Solas drop to the ground, agony and fury suffusing his body, blood dripping down his robes. Wait until she heard Mythal beg him to reconsider yet again. Wait until he refused her pleas. Wait until she felt Mythal’s magic begin to converge in her soul, pouring every iota of mana into a spell so powerful, she could feel the very ground trembling beneath their feet.
Solas screamed.

The spell exploded.

And he was gone.

Not dead. Not reduced to ash. Just simply… gone.

Mythal’s voice, through Ari’s mouth, raised up over the armies that had congegated around the ruins. “Fen’Harel, who was once called Solas, is no more. For his hubris, he has been imprisoned with the rest of the Evanuris, beyond the Veil. What he had planned for this world will no longer come to pass.”

Her words were strong and clear, confident, but Ari could feel the intense anguish that wracked Mythal. He was once her friend, her confidant, her champion. And now…

Mutters spread amongst the elves even as cheers arose from the humans. Solas had promised them a restored Thedas, free from the persecution of the humans. What would happen now? Would the world return to what it had been? Elves reduced to second-class citizens, only good to serve?

“The eluvians,” Mythal continued in a softer tone, her warm gaze drifting out over the remnants of her once proud people, “Are all active once more. There are places between. Fen’Harel’s sanctuary was one. There are others. Restore the Inor’alas’en. Abelas,” she beckoned to the ancient Elvhen who remained on bended knee before his goddess, “My faithful servant. He and the other Sentinels will give you the knowledge you need, that which has been lost to the ages. Those among you who wish to go, go. The humans will not be able to follow you there. Ah!”

A sharp pain shot through Ari/Mythal’s chest, Your body is failing, dear child, the Elvhen sighed.

I know. This is it, then?

It is. As soon as I leave you, you will die.

And my soul…?

A pause. I am truly sorry, my child.

A small price to pay, Ari murmured. Can I see him at least? Just one more time?

Turning towards the steep, rocky path that led up the mountain, Ari watched as Cullen crested the ridge at that very moment, his eyes wildly searching for her, the others close on his heels.

“Ari!” he cried. “What-”

“This is Mythal.” Peeking from behind a column where he had stayed while the battle raged, Cole came forward. “Ari is almost gone.”

“Mythlal, what- Cole? What happened?” Striding up to the young spirit, Cullen grabbed his narrow shoulders and gave him a firm shake, jerking him around with more force than he intended while his eyes never left Ari. “What do you mean, Ari is gone?”

“Almost,” Mythal interjected, moving closer to Cullen’s suddenly frozen form until she was an arm’s length away. “She has until I depart.”

“I don’t understand,” he cried. “Ari? Ari, can you hear me?”
“She can. Take her, Commander,” the Elvhen murmured gently. "Know that her sacrifice will never be forgotten.”

“Her sacri… No. No, she can’t!” Releasing Cole, Cullen lurched to close the distance between himself and Ari, cradling her face with a tenderness borne of desperation. “Ari. Ari, love, look at me,” he begged. "Come back to me, please, Maker, don't do this, please, no.”

_I will leave you now. Peace be with you, Ariane Iseri. You have saved a world today. Ar lasa mala revas. Ma serannas._

Weak. So very weak. Ari was left with no strength at all in her body, everything that she was having been sapped dry by Mythal’s power. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open, to drink her fill of Cullen’s face, hovering a hairsbreadth away from her own. She couldn’t even hear him anymore. What she would give to be able to touch his cheek just one last time, to tell him she loved him, to hear him say he loved her. But there was nothing left.

Ari breathed once more, closed her eyes, and was no more.

Paralyzed, Cullen stared in horror at her still form. So peaceful, she could just be sleeping in his arms like she had so many times before. This couldn’t be real. It couldn’t. She could not be dead.

“She knew what would happen. She loved everyone. This was her choice,” Cole said quietly.

“A soul willingly given,” Evelyn gasped from somewhere behind.

“But why?! Cullen’s head snapped up, his once bright amber eyes dulled with disbelief and the impending tidal wave of grief. Everything in his body ached suddenly. And yet, he couldn’t feel a thing. “Was this why she was brought? Just to be a sacrificial lamb to a world that doesn’t deserve her?!”

“No. She was meant to heal you, too.”

“Me?” Cullen’s voice finally broke. “Why me? I’m not-”

Cole raised his eyes, pinning him in place with regret. “Thedas will need its Commander again. Soon.”

“So this- This is all my fault then,” Cullen stared down numbly. "If I had never asked for her help, if I had just accepted the fate I had been dealt-”

A sharp crack echoed across the ruined plateau. Twisting to look up at the queen, Cullen stared into the stormy, red rimmed eyes of Elissa Cousland-Theirin, his cheek burning red with her elegant handprint.

“Don’t you dare,” she spat through her tears. “Don’t you _dare_ dishonor her by taking the blame upon yourself. Ari knew, she made her choice with full understanding of what it would cost her. Cost us, and-” Her voice hitched with a choked sob. “She gave her life to save the rest. From our lives, down to the last man, soldier and civilian alike. I should have- Andraste, I should have pressed her further, _why_ didn't I... We need to- we need to respect and honor her decision.”

Alistair wrapped one arm around his wife, not bothering to check his own tears that flowed. “In war, victory, In peace, vigilance. In death, sacrifice,” he murmured. “She’ll be given full honors. She’s a hero.”

With the softest of touches, Cullen carefully gathered the limp body up in his arms, pressing his
forehead to Ari’s pallid skin, squeezing his eyes shut against the sight of his coin laying useless against her chest. Once so full of life, and hope, and now… “She was always my hero,” he whispered.

And from somewhere beyond the ether, he saw Ari smile, her head tilted up at him, dark eyes sparkling, and heard her words once more:

_We all die, Commander. The only thing we can really choose is how we meet that death._

_I love you._

Chapter End Notes

*whispers* just remember the fic isn't over yet, ok? ok bye *runs and hides*
“Ma’am? You okay in there? Ma’am? Rivera, get paramedics on the line, she’s not- Oh! There she is.”

Ari jerked upright in her seat, one hand scrabbling at her chest, gasping for air. The other hand flailed in the air for a few strangled breaths before coming to rest on her… steering wheel? She stared down at the smooth, black leather under her fingers, the shiny chrome Toyota symbol staring back at her.

“Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

A man. Not… No, he wasn’t blonde like- Like who? Shaking her head to clear it of the lingering tendrils of some strange dream that snaked its way through her memory, Ari blinked up at the dark-skinned, broad shouldered man in the khaki uniform standing outside her car. A cop. Of course it’s a cop. What’s going on? Flicking her keys into the proper position, she rolled down her window.

“Uh, sorry, I guess I was more tired than I thought,” she muttered groggily. “Is something wrong?”

The officer sighed in relief. “Nothing wrong, ma’am. Got a report that there was a car stranded on the side of the road early this morning. Something happen?”

“Yeah, car cut out on me last night. There was a detour off 20, and I got lost trying to find my way back,” she glared at the offending vehicle. “Then the engine died. So I just slept in my car, figuring I’d set out in the morning to find help.”

“Mind if we take a look?” At her head tilt, the other cop popped the hood open and began poking around, frowning as he muttered under his breath. “From Georgia, huh? Where you headed?”

“Oregon, ultimately. Just got a job up there, and thought I’d make a little vacation of it since it’s going to take a few weeks for my stuff to arrive. Make it to San Diego then take my time driving up the coast,” Ari shrugged.

“Got it,” the other man called from the front. “Belt’s missing, must’ve worn through it. Gonna need a tow into town, Stanton’s not too far away, there’s a good repair place there. Harold’ll set you up, don’t you worry ma’am.”

Ari stared at him. Stanton. Stanton. Why does that sound so…

“Cullen!” she gasped. What she had thought to be a dream came flooding back into her mind, days and weeks and years crashing around her mrem.

“What was that? You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Want us to call a tow truck for you?”

From somewhere within, Ari found the presence of mind to chuckle at that. I am a ghost. I think. “I just remembered something, that’s all. Thank you so much. A tow truck would be perfect.”

As the cops headed back to their patrol car to call into town, she collapsed back against the soft leather of her seats. Thedas. The Inquisition. Cullen. Had it all just been some crazy dream? After all, Solas had said her soul would be destroyed. And she had died. And it was just a game, right? It had to have been just a dream. Years passed there, but only one night here. It all seemed so real though, so detailed. I can almost smell… Elderflower and oakmoss. The scent clung to her hair, hidden
underneath the layers of pine and dust and wind. *Must just be my imagination, right? After all, I’m still wearing the same jeans and tee I put on yesterday.* Lifting up her hands, Ari rubbed the skin of her fingers. No calluses from training. No bruises from Elissa. It was just a dream. Just a dream.

For some reason, that conclusion brought with it a wave of gut wrenching pain stronger than anything she had anticipated. The love she had felt for Cullen, the future they had planned- No. *It was just a dream, and Cullen isn’t real. It’s just your mind reacting to all the stress of the divorce and the move,* she chided herself. Nothing there was real. *This* was real. This dusty road in the middle of Nowhere, Texas, just an endless pale blue sky and fields as far as the eye could see, her car dead with probably a decent sized bill looming in the near future- this was reality.

“Ma’am? Truck’s on its way. Should have you in town in no time.”

“Thank you.”

Oh, but what a dream it had been.

***


Sweat coated her skin as Ari fumbled around in bed, fingers scrambling for the switch to her lamp. Groaning to herself, taking a deep breath to steady her racing heart, she glared at her clock. 3:41 am. Damn. Another nightmare.

Swinging her legs around to the side of the bed, she slumped over, cradling her head in her hands. It had been his voice again. Over the last several weeks, ever since that damnable morning that she had woken up on the side of the road, she had been hearing voices in her sleep. Voice, to be exact. Cullen, calling out to her, crying her name, begging the Maker and Andraste for help and guidance, cursing both her and the Elvhen pantheon and his gods and everyone and everything else under the Thedosian sun. *Am I losing my mind?*

She staggered through the dark halls of her new condo, swearing loudly as she stubbed her toe on a side table before reaching her kitchen, all smooth, elegant granite and marble with polished steel accents. Grabbing a glass from the cabinet, Ari filled it with water from the filter and chugged it down in one go.

Why wouldn’t that dream leave her? She barely got any sleep anymore, considering how often the voice came back to haunt her, and the sleep deprivation was starting to show. Every day at her new job, Ari felt as if she could pass out from sheer exhaustion at any time. Not to mention it was affecting her appetite. She never wanted to eat anything anymore, and nausea was her new, constant companion. *I’ll ask one of the doctors tomorrow to prescribe me some Ambien. Maybe some Zofran, too. Fuck, I feel like shit.*

Flopping back down onto her crisp sheets, her firm mattress snuggling up around her body, Ari had a thought that it was all wrong. After all, she was used to sleeping on straw bedding now, soft linen sacks stuffed with fresh hay and- No! *It was a dream. A dream a dream a dream!* She rolled over to stare up at her ceiling. *Maybe I am losing it. No. Sleep. That’s all I need. Get some meds to help me sleep, and I’ll be back to normal. It’s just the stress from everything that’s happened this last year. Just need sleep.*

But sleep was far too elusive.

***
Ari coughed and rinsed out her mouth again, spitting the tepid water out into the sink in an attempt to rid herself of the sour taste of vomit. The sleep meds had helped a bit, but for some reason the nausea and vomiting refused to leave her for weeks now. She saw the looks her coworkers gave her, but as she exhibited no other signs of illness or infection, no one really said much. This new hospital was a nice change of pace from her last place of employment, and she loved her new city, but… It always felt like something was missing. There was only one place she ever truly felt at peace anymore. Maybe she should go there tomorrow. After all, she had the next few days off.

The rest of her shift was mercifully devoid of any excitement, which meant she could remain curled up in her chair and work on charts instead of sprinting about the floor. Reaching for another folder, Ari made a face at the rancid taste that lingered on her tongue and grabbed her purse instead, rummaging through the chaos inside for her little roll of mints. A tampon fell on the floor. With a curse, she leaned over to grab it-

And paused. When was the last time she used one? The last time she had her period? Her memory was still rather fuzzy, her vivid dream about Thedas interfering with her timeline, but… *Let’s see. I haven’t had one since I got here. So that means, it was back in Georgia, oh, wasn’t it around the time I gave my two week notice? So that’s—*

Four months. Four months she hadn’t had her cycle, and she was just now realizing it? Stress. It had to be just stress. And she had started a new type of birth control recently too, which would account for the nausea and vomiting and bloat and *oh sweet fucking God, this can’t be happening to me. How the fuck am I supposed to tell Daniel that I’m… Wait.*

Daniel, a friend of a friend, had been the last guy she had slept with, just a few times after her divorce had been finalized. No strings attached. But the last time she had seen him was almost 2 months before her move. She had had her period since then. Twice, in fact. Which meant that if she was- shit, she couldn’t even *think* the word, then the baby wasn’t his.

But who else could it be?

*Cullen.*

*No, it wasn’t real. It. Wasn’t. Real.*

*Then how do you explain this?*

“You okay there, Ari?”

One of the other nurses was eyeing her. Ari grimaced as she realized she had been scowling at the tampon that was still clutched in one hand, and scrubbed her face in frustration. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just thought of something, that’s all.”

One thing at a time. She would stop by at the store on the way home, and then, she would see what was what.

***

The salty wind whipped over her skin, tousling her hair into hopeless tangles but she couldn’t work up the energy to care anymore. She remembered now. The days she spent on the shore outside of the sanctuary, curled up next to him on a homespun blanket, reading or talking or simply enjoying his company in silence. The time she had eaten that God forsaken pie and almost died, Rylen and Beatrix lounging across the sand from them, him teasing her until the fiery redhead snapped back in exasperation. Months lost in time.
Everything ached. Her head, her back, her heart. God, how she missed him. The smell of his skin, warm against hers. The way he looked at her, as if she were the sun and moon all at once. His laugh, rich and full. His insufferable smirk when he won yet another game of chess. She almost wished she were dead. The pain of living without him, now that she had finally shaken off the delusion that it had just been a dream, was too much to bear. *Maybe this is the dream. Maybe I am dead.*

No. *It wouldn’t hurt so much if I were.*

She was supposed to be dead. That’s was her end of the bargain. Her life to keep everyone else safe. Her soul should have been destroyed, according to Solas. So did this mean she failed? Was everyone she had loved back on Thedas in danger? Had the world been plunged back into war?

Digging her toes more firmly into the sand, Ari let her head fall down onto her knees, ignoring the bright pain that spread through her forehead from the impact. It helped, to have something to feel. Because now she knew it had all been real. The babe inside of her proved that. Cullen’s child. And he would never know.

One hand idly rubbed the slight, rounded bump, pressed against her thighs. The cries of the seagulls were lost in the crash of the waves and the roar of her own heartbeat. There were so many questions to be answered- How did only one night pass here while she lived years in Thedas? What happened after Mythal had banished Solas beyond the Veil? How did she get back here? Would traveling between worlds or time or whatever had happened have any effect on her child? Was Cullen alright? Did her friends understand why she did it? But those weren’t the questions that filled her mind now.

Who would the babe look like? Would it take after its father, golden and tall? Would it have its father calm, collected nature? Hell, how was she supposed to raise a child on her own? Closing her eyes, she almost smiled as she pictured a little girl, no, boy, with Cullen’s mop of unruly curls and that lopsided smirk that she loved so much. Tears dripped silently down a salt-stained cheek.

“I would prefer if you had his eyes, you know,” she murmured to her belly. “But I figure that’s not likely. He had the prettiest eyes. The color of firelight glowing through amber. And his smile, oh his smile. He had the best laugh too, you know. I wish you could hear it, just once. He would have been so happy. The best father you could have ever dreamed of. But looks like it’s just you and me. Sorry excuse I am these days.”

Seven months along now. Three months had passed in a haze since the night she had found out she was pregnant. Her world had crashed around her the moment that little plus sign had appeared. Yet the world around her had kept on marching. There was still work, of course. And plans to made for a nursery and clothes to buy and budgets to make and childcare to figure out and how the fuck was she supposed to do this alone? Ari hadn’t even told her parents yet. Not like she kept in regular contact with them anyways. What was she going to say? *Hey mom, I’m pregnant. The father is from another world, by the way. Did I tell you that I got transported to another world? I died there though. But I’m back here on Earth now. Congrats, you’re going to be a grandmother!*

Ari groaned.

“Something the matter, dear?”

Raising her head with a startled jerk, Ari attempted to pull her hair into some semblance of combed decency before giving up and just yanking the tangled mass up into a bun atop her head. “Just a lot on my mind,” she smiled thinly at the old lady who had paused beside her. Funny, where had she come from? There weren’t many others out here on the beach this time of year. Then again, Ari had been fairly engrossed in her own thoughts and was blind to everything else these days.
"I can imagine," the elderly woman nodded sagely. "Pregnant, no father to help you. Must be hard."

"Yes, it- Wait." Ari shot to her feet as fast as she could muster. "How did you know the father isn’t around?"

"I know a great many things," the stranger shrugged. "I’ve seen much in my lifetime, and there isn’t much that surprises me anymore. But you. You are an anomaly."

Narrowing her eyes, Ari slowly dragged her gaze over the woman. She wore a nondescript gray dress made of what looked like wool, her silvery hair pulled into an elegant braid and pinned up on the back of her head. She was sort of a woman most people wouldn’t spare a second glance on, if they noticed her at all. Unless they saw her eyes. Sharp, piercing, glowing like sapphires in the warm sunset glow. No, not sapphire. Lyrium. Eyes that stripped away every pretense and laid you bare with one glance. Eyes that said their owner knew everything.

"Who are you?"

"Is that really important, child?" Ari felt as if her heart would burst when the woman smiled at her. But from excitement or trepidation, she couldn’t be sure. "You. One single mortal. And somehow, you have tipped the balance of worlds."

"I… pardon?"

"And you don’t even know. Remarkable," she mused, slowly circling Ari, who now stood with her hands clasped under her chin, eyes wide. The tide was coming in now, her feet sinking inch by inch into the softening sand, ice cold water numbing her skin. She didn’t move. Couldn’t move. "The balance. You were supposed to die, your soul destroyed, but even Mythal had her weak moments. When your soul somehow survived, out of gratitude for your service, instead of letting you spend the rest of eternity as a shade, she was able to use what mana she had left to restore your physical form and return you to the world of your birth. A world without magic. Horrifying, really."

"Why didn’t she just return me to Thedas?" Ari frowned.

"Souls," the woman waved a hand. "Messy business, if you ask me. It’s always easier to put things back where they belong. And you, my dear, belong here, whether you like it or not. And so here you came. But what she didn’t count on was her."

Ari’s hand flew to her belly. "Her?" she gasped. "It’s a girl?"

Ignoring her, the woman stepped closer and bent over until her nose was scant millimeters from Ari’s stomach. "A piece of the Fade, ripped away from where it belongs. A soul, tethered to another’s. It shouldn’t exist, you know. Oh, not the baby," she snorted at Ari’s horrified expression. "The tether. His love for you bound your soul to his. Impressive, really. A love like that… Well. It’s a one in a million sort of love. And the baby has the Fade within her, courtesy of Mythal’s temporary residence inside of you. Either one of these things would cause ripples no matter what, but both to tie the worlds together… Hmm. Yes." She straightened her back, standing far too straight for a woman of her advanced age. Or was she that old? The wrinkles said she was, but the more Ari looked at her, the less certain she became. Was she just an illusion? "There is no other way. The babe cannot be allowed to live."

"What?! No!" Ari jerked back, stumbling over the shallow waves. "You can’t!"

"If the child lives, you put both worlds in danger. The tether connects the worlds now, and her magic will pull the Fade here. She would unleash magic upon this place, and tear the Veil in Thedas to
shreds to do it. You gave up your life once already to save Thedas. Now you would condemn them and your home so soon after?"

There was logic behind those words, she knew. Ari was not the type to ignore the pain and suffering of others. To die in order to save Cullen and her friends had seemed a cheap bargain once, and she hadn’t even searched for another way out, but now...

“There has to be another option,” Ari glared up at the stranger. Straightening her shoulders, she laid one hand over her belly, curling protectively over the fragile life within. “I gave up my life for them already, but it was mine, and mine alone to give. I will not condemn my daughter to that fate before she has had a chance to live. There is always another way. Shame on me for not trying to find it before, but I will be damned if I do not to everything in my power to keep my baby safe.”

The old woman—were her wrinkles fading?—raised one eyebrow. “You would fight me? A mortal against me?”

“I do not know who, or what you are,” Ari retorted, dark eyes flashing. “Nor do I care, because as you said, it’s not important. What is important is that you understand you are getting nowhere near my child.”

“I could kill you,” the woman remarked off-handedly, in a tone better reserved for discussing the weather.

“Then do it. But that will be the only way you’ll take her from me,” Ari snarled, taking another step back. She couldn’t feel her feet at all anymore, the icy waves soaking her pants up to her knees now. What was she doing? It was obvious this… entity wasn’t human. Nor was she Elvhen. But Ari could feel the power emanating from her now, ripples of magic tingling against her skin. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except keeping her baby—Cullen’s baby—safe, even though she knew it was futile. If this thing decided they should die, what could she really do?

Cocking her head to one side, the woman stared at her, one elegant fingertip tapping the side of her jaw. “A mother’s love. Truly, the most powerful force in any world. Another way, you say? There might be.”

Warily, Ari watched as the woman turned to gaze out across the ocean, the sun barely peeking over the horizon now, giving way for the stars to appear.

“I could send you back to Thedas.”

“Do it.”

“Not even a little hesitation?”

“My baby would live and the balance would be restored?”

“She would be just a normal mage there,” she nodded.

“And I could see him again. Send us back.”

The woman, definitely no longer elderly, shook her head, a few reddish-gold curls that had escaped her chignon brushing against her cheek. “You will never be allowed to return here. And—”

“I don’t care,” Ari shot back. “All I need is Cullen and my child. Please, if you can—” Her voice cracked, terror giving way to hope. “If you can do it, send me back.”
Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she felt the cool touch of a hand slide along her cheek. “So much love,” the woman murmured. “A life devoted to serving others. Is this the first thing you’ve truly asked for yourself?” Sighing, she nodded. “Alright. Stand back.”

“What, now?” Shouldn’t she say goodbye to her parents? And let her job know she wouldn’t be returning? And her apartment, and all the stuff inside, and-

“Having second thoughts?”

Now or never. “No,” Ari replied firmly. “I’m ready.”

Hands wrapped around her shoulders as soft lips grazed her forehead. “Maker go with you, child.”

Ari cast one last look over the ocean, and smiled.

The world exploded into light.

And then, darkness swallowed her whole.

Chapter End Notes

I exist in a perpetually confused state, so I’m not sure if this chapter makes sense or not. Either way, here you go! Yaaay she's not dead!

Also, I find it amusing that we still say 'roll down the window' when I haven't actually rolled down a window in ten years.
**Home.**

Ari winced as she picked herself off the wooden floor, rubbing her sore bottom where a bruise would surely form from where she had landed after dropping out of thin air. It hardly matter though. She was back. She was here.

Glancing around their little cabin, she frowned at the thick layer of dust that coated all the furniture. No one had been here in quite some time, much longer that the few weeks it had taken for the army to march to the ruins of Arlathan. How much time had passed here?

Moving to a window, Ari stared out in shock at the trees, the bright golden and deep crimson leaves swaying in the wind. Spring had just begun when she di- when she left. *Looks like the six months I spent back on Earth passed here, too. So where was Cullen?*

Quickly changing out of her still wet and freezing cold jeans and hoodie, Ari found her chest of clothes exactly where she had left it and pulled out a pair of leggings and a thick sweater, the leather and wool more comforting to her than her denim and synthetic cotton had been. Running a comb through her tangles, she replaited her hair, took a deep breath, and stepped outside.

The town looked much the same, a neat little sprawl of cabins surrounded by fields that were full of men and women working tirelessly to bring in the year’s harvest. With most of the residents outside, most of the paths and buildings were empty. Ari needed to find someone who would know where Cullen was. Studying the deserted square, she quickly jogged down the hill to the one place where she hoped help would be.

“May I help- Ari?!” A flask shattered against the ground as a screech cut through the brisk morning air.

Ari stopped dead in her tracks. *Oh shit. I’m dead here. People are going to think I’m a spirit, or a zombie, or a necromancer’s plaything.* Words began flying through her mind, wracking her brain trying to find best way to explain her sudden presence, to soothe her agitated friend, but all that came out was, “Um. Hi. I’m alive. Where’s Cullen?”

“Y-you’re…” With a strangled noise caught somewhere between a sob and a scream, Beatrix launched herself into Ari, her arms crushing her upper body in a frantic hug. “You’re alive! You’re here! Maker, how is this even possible?”

“I don’t know,” Ari's laugh held a slightly hysterical note. People had begun to notice the commotion, and were flocking to the clinic, every last one of them agog at the sight of her. Raising her voice so that more could hear, she continued, “Mythal was able to return me back to my world. And then, just now, a woman, I don’t know who so don't ask, offered me a chance to come back, and of course I took it.”

“A woman? You don’t know? And- Ari. You’re *pregnant,*” Beatrix hissed, finally noticing her protruding belly.

“Hence my need to find Cullen,” Ari grinned.
“He’s in Denerim.” Pushing his way through the crowd, Rylen stumbled over his own feet, his jaw dropping open when Ari came into his view. “I can’t believe it. Ari, I saw you die. We were there at your- your funeral.”

“I know,” she nodded solemnly. “I would say I’m sorry for what I did, but I’m not.”

“I found the letter you left us in my pack that night,” Rylen sighed, his turquoise eyes still held frozen wide in shock. “I- we understand why you did it. But not why you didn’t tell anyone. Maker, how are we going to tell the king the fancy tomb he had built for you is useless now?”

“I’m a coward,” she replied simply. “I was too scared. And I’m shit at talking about my feelings. I was supposed to be working on it, but…” Ari shrugged.

“Aye, that you are,” Rylen snorted. “Well, like I said, Cullen’s in Denerim. I’ve been going back and forth between there and here myself recently. Trouble’s brewing in the north with the Qun, just one thing after another. But here’s me rambling on. Come on, lass, let’s get you saddled up and on the road. I can tell you’re about to explode with the waiting to get to your man.”

Grinning sheepishly, Ari bounced on the balls of her feet, one hand intertwined with Beatrix’s. “I am. And as soon as I come back, I’ll catch up with both of you, okay?”

“You had better!”

***

The two days it took to reach Denerim were the longest two days of her life. Not only was Ari about to jump out of her skin with the anticipation of seeing Cullen again, but it had been months since she had been on a horse last. Add in the extra pangs and weight of pregnancy to the disuse of her muscles, and she was miserable by the time they finally rode into the city proper.

“Ari,” Rylen paused just outside of the castle gates, his tattoos wrinkling as he pursed his lips in thought. “You should know. Cullen is… Well, your death hit him pretty hard, as you can imagine. We tried our best to do as you asked and be there for him, but the man is stubborn. He hasn’t been himself since. Just- Be easy on him, yeah? I almost wish we had sent a raven before us. He might keel over from the shock.”

“Let’s hope not,” Ari stared up at the turrets atop the ancient palace. Cullen was in there, somewhere. In minutes, she would see him again.

Motioning for her to follow him, Rylen trotted his horse up to the guards, and with a crisp salute, they ushered him in, one of them frowning as he held out his hand to bar Ari’s entrance.

“Ser?” Ari asked once they were out of earshot.
Passing the reins over to a waiting stableboy, the former templar grinned sheepishly. “For services rendered, His Majesty offered me a commission. Knighted just a few months ago. Cullen, too.”

“Well, if there were ever two men who deserved it, it’s you two.” Following him through the stone corridors, Ari’s breath froze in her lungs as they stopped in front of a set of carved doors, the dark wood gleaming softly in the torchlight. She could just make out voices, low and hushed, from beyond the portals. One in particular stood out to her—a light, smooth baritone that had haunted her dreams for months.

“Ready?” Rylen paused with his fist on the door, glancing down at her.

Ari forcibly released her fingers from their death grip on her skirts, and smoothed the rumpled wool down, a stray thought wondering if the material would felt with the amount of sweat she was rubbing into the fibers. Taking a deep breath, she barely managed to squeak out, “Yes.”

He knocked.

“He enters,” a deep voice, notable in its irritation called out.

Rylen stepped in first, grinning fit to split his cheeks. “Good afternoon, Your Majesties, ladies.”

“Rylen?” Cullen raised an eyebrow at his second. “I thought you weren’t due back for another three days? Did something happen?”

Reaching up to scratch his neck, Rylen cast a quick glance around the room. King Alistair and Queen Elissa stood just to his right alongside a long, polished oak table laden with dozens of maps and letters and notes hastily scratched onto bits of paper. Directly opposite them stood the Lady Josephine, along with the Seeker Cassandra and the Orlesian general that had accompanied them to Arlathan several months back. And at the very end of the table, on the other side of the room, Cullen waited with furrowed brow, his hands braced on the edge of the table.

“Aye. You could say that.” Rylen moved aside, and Ari cautiously stepped into the room, her eyes locked onto the Commander.

“Hi.”

The sound of several clipboards and books clattering to the ground and gasps echoed through the small chamber. No one spoke, then-

“Ari?!” Elissa lowered trembling hands from her mouth to stare with eyes that were perilously close to falling out of their sockets.

“What…” Cullen breathed, taking an inadvertent step back. His skin had blanched to the same shade of the pale ivory parchment that slipped from his fingers. “What is the meaning of this, Rylen? Who is this?”

“Cullen, it’s me.” Holding out a hand, Ari waited with bated breath.

“It- It can’t be,” he shook his head, taking another step away from the table. “What kind of game is this? Rylen, I did not think you could be this cruel,” Cullen snapped viciously. His eyes glinted like razors in the bright light of the fire. “I do not know who you are, mistress, but I know you are not she. And that-” His gaze shifted to her swollen belly, mouth still working but his tongue and words had run dry. “That- That…”

Wiping away the tears that were beginning to fall, Ari placed a hand on her stomach, oblivious to the
others as they silently filed out of the room, Alistair having to physically drag an unwilling Elissa out by one arm. Left behind in a silence so oppressive, Ari struggled to draw breath. “Cullen, it’s me, I swear. I—”

“Stop it.” His voice was low and barely audible.

“Cullen, I—”

“Stop it!” He roared. Slamming his fists against the table, he raised haunted eyes to hers, ignoring the inkwell that had tipped over. Black ink seeped across the papers. “I do not know who the hell you are, nor do I care. What are you playing at? What is your game? Months, I have struggled with my grief. Saw her everywhere, in every place, heard her voice until I was certain I was going insane. Struggled to find a reason to keep living, and now you— you with her face, and holding everything I ever wanted suddenly waltz in here and proclaim to be her?!?” Cullen stomped around the table, his boots echoing sharply off the granite stones, and stopped just short of where she stood. Refusing to even look at her, he glared down at her belly. “I lost the woman I loved,” he growled. “She died in my arms! I saw her body burn on her pyre. I don’t— I can’t—”

Ari pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle her sobs. Seeing him so broken, even after all this time—what had she done? She should have told him, disclosed her reasoning to him beforehand. This is your fault. You did this to him. She had wanted to protect him, but instead, she had destroyed him yet again. Left him alone once more. Had it been worth it?

I should have tried to find another way.

I should have fought harder.

We were supposed to be partners.

Didn’t I trust him?

Coward.

All my fault.

Minutes ticked by. Lowering her hand, Ari tried to speak through a cracking voice. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I was too scared to tell you. I should have talked to you about it, confided in you. We could have figured out a solution together, like we were supposed to. I… Well. We both know how horrible I am at talking about my feelings.”

“Yes,” he murmured, still avoiding her gaze. “You— She was supposed to work on that. I promised, though. I promised to keep her safe. And I—”

“No, Cullen. It wasn’t your fault. It was mine. Don’t you remember? That night before we left. I asked you to not blame yourself. It was war. You promised me you would try, at least.” Cullen finally met her eyes at that, his face haggard and drawn, limbs frozen in place.

“So I did.”

“Right.” Swallowing the lump in her throat, Ari realized he was going to say no more. Everything was lost. He didn’t believe it was really her. To be honest, if she were in his place, would she? After everything she had put him through over these last few years, she didn’t deserve him. Not now. Not ever. “I’ll just— I’ll go, then. I’m sorry. I—”

She couldn’t breathe. All around her, the world tilted and spun, crashing about her head, threatening
to crush her under the shattered weight of the future she had hoped for. It was only fair. After all, her choices had obliterated his hopes for the future, hadn’t they?

Turning on a booted heel, Ari blindly fumbled towards the double doors, flinging open the heavy panels, and shoved her way through the small crowd of friends that still stood outside, waiting. Someone screamed her name. She didn’t care. She just had to go, run, as fast and far away as possible.

What had she been thinking? That he would just welcome her back with open arms? Ignore all the months of grief and loss that he had worked through and just be happy? He had watched her die, watched her body burn into ashes. God, what was wrong with her?

Selfish, ignorant, stupid, stupid, stupid!

Elissa jerked her arm out of Alistair’s hand and started to sprint in the direction Ari had fled. And then whirled around instead, and marched back into the chamber where Cullen still stood, rooted to the floor, staring vacantly at the spot where Ari had recently been.

“What in Maferath’s forsaken name is wrong with you?” the queen screamed, vibrating with every emotion under the sun. “That was Ari, you blighted, Void taken, misbegotten son of a-”

Cullen didn’t hear the rest. Sprinting out into the hallway, he tripped over the thick, embroidered runner, frantically scrambling to his feet, and raced after Ari. Tapestries and priceless art and nobles passed in a blur of color and gilt; he didn’t even know which way she had headed. Only pure instinct guided him now.

Taking corridor by passageway at random, Cullen suddenly found himself in the gardens. She was here, he knew it. Where would she have gone? Studying the elegant, manicured paths, he heard a familiar sound in the distance. That way.

He barely noticed the roses, full and heavy and just starting to wilt on the bushes at this time of year, the petals already browning around the edges. As fast as he could muster on feet that were abruptly stiff and unwieldy, Cullen sped down the trail, letting the scent of the blooms wash over him, searching for the only thing he could think of.

Lemons and lavender. He hadn’t thought it was her. Thought it some horrible, cruel trick, a demon, perhaps. Until she had turned, and filled the room with the sweet notes that had lingered on all of his clothes and bedding for weeks after she had di- left. The smell that had haunted him day in and day out for months.

Skidding around a wall made of vines and thorny blossoms, Cullen ground to a stop. There, by the stream he had heard before, he saw her. Body crumpled over, head pressed into her palms. Sobbing. Pregnant.

“Ari.” His voice came out as a hoarse croak. “Ari. Is it really you?”

Her head raised at the sound of his voice. Blinking eyes rimmed in red and swollen, Ari wiped her nose with the hem of her skirt. “Yes.”

Unable to hold himself back any longer, Cullen choked out a strangled cry, sprinting to where she knelt on the sandy gravel and collapsed onto the ground next to her, hauling her bodily into his arms. Burying his face in the crook of her neck, fingers tangling in her hair, he cried. It was her. She was here. She was alive. “I’m so sorry,” he gasped in between constricted breaths. “I’m so sorry, Ari. I thought you were another dream. Another hallucination. I’ve dreamed of this every moment since the
day—since you—I’m so sorry. I failed you. I swore to protect you, and instead, you—Maker, how is this even possible? How are you here?”

Clutching him tightly, Ari lifted her face his chest, pulling back just far enough so that she could see him. His amber eyes, glimmering with tears in the warm sunset. Bright, golden hair, perfectly mussed from his exertions and her hands. Full lips, trembling under her fingertips. “You did protect me, my love,” she whispered. “My soul was supposed to have been destroyed. But you, your love, bound my soul to yours. Your love kept me whole. And so Mythal was able to send me back to my home world instead. Then, today I guess it was, a woman found me. I don’t know who she was, but I know she wasn’t human. She offered me a chance to come back. Otherwise, the baby…”

“The baby.” As if finally noticing her stomach for the first time in full, Cullen stared down at the rounded bump, his eyes bright and wide.

“Our baby.” Taking his hands, Ari gently placed them over her belly. “The woman said it’s a girl,” she smiled shyly up at him.

“Our baby,” he whispered. “I’m… going to be a father?” She nodded, a soft, hesitant thing. “Maker.” Squeezing his eyes shut, he closed the distance between them, and rested his forehead against hers. “You’re here. Alive, and you’re pregnant. With my child. Andraste preserve me, if this is a dream, I never want to wake up.”

“But dream, love. I’m here. And I’m never going anywhere again.”

Pushing off his knees, Cullen sat back into the sand, tenderly pulling her into his lap. With a featherlight touch, he carefully traced the curves of her face. “You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. “The others will be wanting to see you too. Especially Elissa.”

Ari smiled as she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in closer to him. “She can wait. They can all wait.”

His laugh was like liquid sunlight. Brushing his lips over hers, he grinned down at her. “Yes. They can.”

Of all the memorable kisses they had shared, from that searing first kiss outside of her cabin when they first confessed their love to the last, hurried caress they shared right before he had marched off to battle, Ari thought it would be this one that she would keep close in her heart for the rest of her days. The taste of his skin, salty from his tears, the soft sweep of his tongue against hers, his hands moving languorously in her now unbound hair, while hers roamed the contours of his stubbled jaw—it would all be indelibly imprinted on her memory forever. For they had forever now. A lifetime ahead of them. And she wanted was—

“Marry me.”

“What?” Cullen stopped moving, stopped breathing.

“I…” Suddenly uncertain, Ari blushed under his wide-eyed stare. “You asked me before. I wanted—if you still wanted to, I mean, I don’t know if you do or if you—”

“Yes. Yes yes yes yes!” Springing to his feet, his laugh rang out through the gardens as he lifted her up in his arms, twirling her around in dizzy circles. “I love you, Ari. For now and always.”

“And I love you.”

“Oh good, he found you,” Elissa burst into the little clearing, neatly evading Alistair’s attempt to
restrain her yet again. “What? Look, they’re fine, they made up!” The king merely rolled his eyes.

“Only because I held you back long enough for them to have the time to talk,” Alistair snorted. “Maker’s breath, woman, I thought I would have to sit on you!”

“Hush, you. I’m far too delicate for you to sit on, anyhow.”

“The Warden-Commander? Hero of Ferelden? Delicate? Perish the th- Ow! Hey!”

“Oh, that barely hurt!”

“I bruise easily!”

“Perhaps His Majesty is the delicate one?” a Starkhaven accent drawled.

Giggling, Ari slotted herself perfectly underneath Cullen’s chin, reveling in the steady thrum of his heartbeat and the sounds of her friends, teasing and bickering as they always did. No, not friends. Family.

“So, is there to be a wedding then?” Elissa sauntered up to her friend with a massive grin plastered across her face.

“There will be,” Cullen beamed down as his bride-to-be. “But even if there wasn’t, it wouldn’t matter. You’re here, you’re home. And I am never letting you out of my sight again.”

“Home,” Ari agreed. Finally, where she belonged.

“...And we’re going to sit down and work on this habit of yours of not talking about things, until I get it through your stubborn head that I want to know everything that’s troubling you.”

Ah, shit. “Yes, husband,” Ari replied meekly, biting her lip as Cullen rolled his eyes heavenward.

“Maker save me from stubborn women.”

“You do realize this baby is a girl, right?”

“...Maker, please save me.” Laughing as he ducked his head to pressed a kiss to her upturned nose, Cullen smiled down at her.

“A little girl just like her mother. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter of gooey, sickening fluff, if y’all are up to it. :)
Rolling over in bed, Ari sighed as she reached out a hand, blearily fumbling around only for her fingers to meet cold, rumpled sheets. She jerked awake.

*No, it couldn’t have been just a dream! It was so real-*

*No,* she breathed in relief. Rich brocade tapestries hung from the four-poster bed, the walnut paneling glossy and glowing in the faint candlelight. She was here, in Thedas. No granite or chrome or digital blinking microwave clock in sight. But still, no Cullen either.

Grabbing a robe that a servant had left earlier, Ari stuffed her feet into a pair of soft, fleece-lined slippers and set out to find him. The entire evening had been rather overwhelming, as she recounted the last few months of her life and skimmed over the tale of the mysterious lady who had sent her back to Thedas over a cozy, intimate supper with her friends. Cullen’s hand had never released hers during the meal, not once.

And then as soon as he could manage it, her lover had bundled her away to bed, insisting she needed to rest, despite her protests that she was fine and had been working up until the day before. “Please,” he had asked her softly, his eyes shining and earnest. “I need…”

He needed to protect her, to keep her safe, as he always wanted, as her promised her he would do. So Ari let him tuck her into bed, her reluctance turning to delight as he climbed in with her and wrapped his body around hers, one calloused hand resting on her belly, murmuring quiet words of joy and gratitude. It seemed she fell asleep soon after, more tired that she had realized.

The castle was entirely deserted in the wee hours of the night, only a few lone, flickering torches illuminating the dark stone corridors. There were a dozen places that Cullen might be, pacing and alone with his innermost thoughts, but knowing him, only one area would appeal to him tonight.

Silently on her soft slippers, Ari padded through the halls, pausing only for a second before a simple, carved door, and pushed it open. He jumped.

“Now who’s the easily startled mouse,” she grinned.

Cullen sheepishly chuckled, one hand rubbing the back of his neck in an endearingly familiar gesture. “Yes, well. I supposed you’ve rubbed off on me all these years. Speaking of mice,” he reached into his pocket. “I need to apologize.”

Closing the door behind her, Ari stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, her chin tilted upwards and resting on his sternum. “For what?”

He held up the small carved mouse from long ago, the wood worn smooth by constant handling. He had been using it as sort of a worry stone, she realized with a smile. “He’s the only one left,” Cullen murmured quietly, his mind far away from her in that moment. “After you… I went back home. I couldn’t stay, that much was clear to me within the first few seconds after I stepped into our house. I was angry. Furious. With you, myself. I… burned the rest of the carvings. Almost set fire to the whole damn place, had Rylen and Beatrix not stopped me.” A rough sigh escaped him.

“Oh, Cullen.” Ari buried her face into his chest, clutching the soft linen of his shirt as if it were a life
raft and she, cast out to sea. “I’m so sorry. I know I should have told you. I was just so scared. Scared you wouldn’t let me go. Scared I would lose you if you didn’t.”

His chin rested atop her head. “I wouldn’t have, you’re right,” he replied after a moment. “I don’t fault you for the choice you made, not anymore. I probably would have done the same. What’s done is done now, at least. You’re back, and Maker’s breath. We’re having a baby.” Shaking his head, he pulled back to gaze tenderly down at her, moving one hand to rest atop her bump. “Earlier. I feel like you left out something when you were telling us about that woman who sent you back. Something important. About the baby?”

“If I had stayed in my world, the baby,” Ari bit her lip, unsure of how he would react. “Mythal’s presence inside of me had some side effects.” She felt him suck in a sharp breath of air, his muscles going eerily still. “Something about the Fade. The baby would have torn open the Veil and brought the Fade to my world, which has nothing like it. No magic. It would have destroyed both worlds. But here, the baby will…”

“Will what?”

“Will just be a normal mage.” Tilting her head up, Ari watched him very carefully. His skin paled to a ashen ivory, dark eyes widening as his mind processed her words. “I know you, and magic, and your feelings on it, and-”

“A mage,” Cullen had stopped breathing. “That’s it? Just a normal mage? She’ll live and be healthy?”

“As far as I know.”

“Thank the Maker.” A long exhale brushed her skin as he slumped in her embrace. “I had feared the worst. But if she’ll just be a regular mage, she’ll be fine. I know,” smiling ruefully down at her, Cullen tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear, trailing his fingers down the curve of her jaw. “I should be terrified, but I’m not. I feel like we’ve survived everything that life has thrown at us so far. Parenting a mage will just be a new adventure. And since there is no more Circle, who better to help keep her safe than I? She’ll have all the best teachers I can find, I swear it.”

“She’ll probably be the most spoiled, coddled child in the history of Thedas,” Ari snorted.

“Yes,” Cullen agreed amicably. “What else would you expect?”

“Nothing at all love,” she grinned. Studying the small room they were standing in, she pursed her lips. “You know, I can’t decide if all the candles in here make the shrine look inviting, or just creepy. There is such a thing as overkill.”

He glanced up at the statue looming over them, his eyes following the story of the Maker’s Bride’s sacrifice that was woven in the tapestries on the wall, dozens of candles casting their fragile light in strange, dancing shadows throughout the chamber. “It does make Andraste look a bit ominous,” he said. “Shall we, then?”

Slipping her arm through the crook of his elbow, Ari paused for only a second to let her gaze linger on the tapestry nearest to the door, the corner of her lips quirking up ever so slightly as the light glinted off the crimson gold threads. “Not tired at all? You look as if you haven’t slept in forever.”

“I haven’t.” Drawing her into a secluded alcove, Cullen slid into the cushioned window seat, the silk lightly scratching against the rougher cotton of his trousers, and pulled her into his lap, tucking her smaller frame against his bulk. “I missed this. So, so much,” he whispered into her hair. “Sometimes,
I thought I was going mad. I would hear your voice every now and then, first at night, then throughout the day as well. I almost lost all hope, you know, after. Almost gave up entirely, despite the efforts of our friends.”

“What kept you going?”

“Something you said, a long time ago. Do you remember? On the way to Orlais, just before the Exalted Council. You said you weren’t sure if an afterlife existed, but that you found peace knowing that the world would continue to go on after death. And that the point of life was to leave the world a little better than we found it. So I decided that I hadn’t done enough good yet to quit, considering all the sins I have committed. That, if there was an afterlife, and I met you again, I hoped you would be proud of me.”

“Oh, Cullen.” Cradling his face in her hands, Ari stroked his rough stubble with one soft thumb. “I’ve always been proud of you. From the very start.”

“That’s right,” he murmured, his forehead wrinkling in remembrance. “You knew about me. Before you even came here. From a… story, your letter said?” She nodded. “So that means, you knew. About Kinloch and Kirkwall, even before I told you?” Ari nodded again, this time a bit more hesitantly. “And yet you still offered to help me from the start.” His head fell back against the smooth paneling behind him with a muffled thud. “Why?”

Leaning her own head against the glass window, the chill of the night seeping through the panes, Ari considered him, her chin tilting up. “What happened at Kinloch to you, it’s a miracle you survived intact at all. After all you endured there, for God knows how long, and yet you came out of it relatively whole and still wanted to help after. And you were so young, Cullen.”

“Whole,” he scoffed. “Hardly.”

“You didn’t go mad. You didn’t become cruel, or unfeeling. You made some terrible judgement calls, yes. But thinking about the way you were raised, how you were trained, your devotion to the Chantry—”

“Former devotion.”

“-Former devotion,” she amended with a slight smile. “It made sense. And you stood up to Meredith in the end, and helped Hawke. And then worked to rid yourself of your prejudices in the years following Kirkwall, even attempting to be the first to wean off lyrium in order to distance yourself from the templars and Chantry. I heard the Inquisition treated the mages fairly.”

“More of the Inquisitor’s doing than my own,” he mumbled. “I did not wish to recruit the mages. Too dangerous, too unstable, I said. Even now, I… I still have a ways to go.”

“Together. You’re going to be an amazing father, Cullen. She’s going to love you,” Ari poked his cheek until she prodded him out of the melancholia he had fallen into. “And if you start saying something stupid, I’ll be there to knock sense into that handsome head of yours.” He snorted at that. “Also, I saw,” her mind brought to the forefront a sketched picture that she had once seen, of a broken man. “What happened if you stayed on lyrium. No matter what you had done before, you didn’t deserve that fate. Not after everything you had been through. You deserved some sort of happiness.”

“What happened?” Ari shook her head. “Tell me. It’s no longer my future now, correct?”

“No,” she responded, with more force than she had intended. “It will never be your fate.”
“Then tell me.”

“You-” sighing, she fiddled with the ties on his shirt, intertwining the supple leather around her fingers. “You disappeared after the Exalted Council. Lost your mind and ended up begging on the streets somewhere in Orlais. It was hinted that Harding, I think it was, offered you mercy when she found you a year later.”

“Death,” he hummed. “Maker’s breath. I must really have lost my wits, if I chose Orlais to die in.”

“Cullen, it’s not funny!”

Chuckling at her petulant scowl, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I mean, I could at least have chosen a good Ferelden town to-”

“Cullen.”

“Like you said,” he smirked, smoothing over the lines in her face from her glare, “It’s no longer my fate. My future now is you, and this baby, and however many more children the Maker graces us with, and dying old and content after a rich and full life with you by my side.”

“Damn straight you will,” Ari grumbled.

Cullen shifted underneath her, pulling her back into him with one arm, warm and sturdy around her shoulders. “Tell me more. About the stories.”

“Hmm. There were options, choices that could have changed things. Like, the Hero of Ferelden could have been a dwarf, or an elf instead. Oh! Alistair could have remained a Warden. Or,” she grinned, “Married Anora.”

His low laugh rumbled through her chest. “Please tell him that tomorrow. I want to see his face when you do.”

“They actually would have been good rulers. Not sure about his personal happiness though. Marry Elissa was definitely the best option for him,” she mused. “Let’s see, what else. You could have been Knight-Commander, if Hawke had decided to side with the templars over Orsino.”

“Maker forbid.”

“Cassandra could have been Divine. Or Vivienne, for that matter.”

“That’s… terrifying.”

“The Inquisitor could also have been a dwarf, or an elf, or even a Qunari. One of the Tal-Vashoth.” Cullen’s eyes widened at the idea.

“The Orlesians would have eaten us alive, if that had happened.”

“No, it would have worked out in the end. You’d be surprised at what people will accept if their life and wealth are at stake. Or if you blackmail them,” she added wryly.

“True enough. So… If the Inquisitor had supported me when I told her about the lyrium…” She could feel the beat of his heart, thumping against his ribs, see his pulse thrumming alongside his neck.

“You would have been free,” she whispered. “Without my help. And then you would have helped others wean themselves off of it. No Ari necessary.”
Releasing the breath he had been holding, Cullen ran his fingers through her hair, watching the ebony strands slip through his fingers. “I guess it all worked out in the end, regardless. I much prefer the reality to the probable options.”

Ari snuggled in closer to him. “I’m glad.”

“Ariane Rutherford,” he murmured. A wide grin split his face as a stray thought came to him. “I can’t wait to tell my family. Mia and Rosalie are going to be besides themselves, not to mention the children. I especially can’t wait to tell Branson that you’re going to be my wife.”

“Cullen, be nice.”

“I’ll only rub it in his face a little, I swear.”

With a roll of her eyes, Ari huffed a small laugh and tugged on his shirt. “Come on, future husband. I’m tired still and need you there so I can fall back asleep.”

At once, Cullen stood up, carefully rearranging her in his arms, and carried her all the way back to their room. His wife. His child. His entire world, back in his life. Only one thing was missing.

Setting her down onto the plush feather mattress, a far cry from the rough, hay-filled sacks that they had once stitched together so long ago, Cullen moved to his trunk at the foot of the bed and rummaged through the clothing within. His hand closed around a small object that was buried at the bottom, carefully wrapped in a piece of silk black as obsidian.

“I… I thought about burning it, along with… Well. I couldn’t, though,” he confessed, sinking into the downy sheets next to her. “Despite the fact that apparently its luck had run out.” Shaking out the shimmery fabric, Cullen held out her necklace, the simple leather thong threaded with one carved pendant, and one well-worn coin.

“It felt weird,” Ari murmured. “Those months when I didn’t have it. I felt lost. Naked, without it.” Taking the cord, she slipped it back over her head, patting the silver back into its rightful place. “Maybe it was the coin that kept my soul alive. I don’t think it’s out of luck yet.”

Snuggling down under the quilts next to her, Cullen pulled her flush against his body, ensuring that every inch of him was pressed to every inch of her own skin. “I do think you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

“Except when you’re not.”

“Exactly.”

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Glass rattled as another fierce gust of wind blew against the windows, snow curling up in little whirlwinds outside of the house. The frigid air battered against the doorframe, but inside, it remained warm, the embers in the hearth glowing a steady scarlet, giving off just enough light for the child to navigate through the pile of toys that had been left scattered the day before. Pushing open the door, little hands tugged at the arm that was hanging off the large bed that occupied most of the room as a large mabari watched unperturbed.

“Papa? I had a nightmare. Can I sleep with you?”

Cullen opened one eye groggily, only to see wide, dark eyes reflecting the pale light of the moon
from outside the window behind him. He reached down to pull the little girl up next to him. “Of course, pup. Mind your mama, she needs her sleep.”

“Okay.” Snuggling down next to her father’s warm, comforting side, she laid a tentative hand on the swollen belly of the woman beside her.

“Pup. What did I say?”

“I just wanna say hi to my sister. It is gonna be a sister, right?”

“It might,” he craned forward to kiss her glossy, yet hopelessly tangled hair. “But would a brother be so bad?”

“I suppose not,” the little girl sighed. “Although I would prefer a sister. Sinead lives so far away, I have no one to play with out here. Besides you, Atlas,” she giggled as the dog licked her bare toes with a plaintive whine.

“We’ll be in town this weekend,” came a sleepy voice from the other side of the bed. “For Aunt Rosalie’s nameday. You’ll see Sinead then. And then we’ll be headed to Denerim, and you can play with Evander.”

“In the palace? Is Atlas coming? Can I play with the puppies, too?”

“Yes, Ellie. You can Ev can roll around with Alistair in the dirt to your heart’s content. And of course Atlas is coming.” A soft woof from the foot of the bed echoed in agreement.

“We didn’t mean to wake you, love.”

Ari smiled as she rolled over to face them both, groaning a little with the exertion. “It’s alright. I wasn’t sleeping very deeply anyways, this little one is very awake right now.”

“Can I say hi to her?”

“Or him,” Cullen added dryly.

Holding out her arm, Ari pulled the small child closer to her, her chest constricting with overwhelming fullness as her daughter pressed her lips to her mother’s belly, and whispered, “I’m gonna be the best big sister ever. I love you, little sister.”

“Or br-”

“Cullen, if you ruin this moment, I will kick you.”

“...Yes, dear.”

“Alright, Elspeth, it’s time to go to sleep now.” Pulling the blankets back over their bodies, Ari hummed softly as Elspeth drifted back into the Fade, a faint smile on Cullen’s lips as he watched them both. After all this time, through wars and withdrawal and turmoil and even death, he finally found his happiness. It laid, as it always had since the day she literally fell out of the sky into his world, in her slender, capable hands, the hands of a healer, and in the two tiny bodies caught between them. His family. His home.

“Something wrong, Cullen?”

Blinking back tears, Cullen shook his head and leaned forward to brush a kiss across her lips.
“Nothing is wrong. Everything is perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it folks. Thank you, for accompanying me on this crazy rollercoaster of a story. Thank you for all the kudos and comments and just everything. You guys are the best <3.

As for what's next, I'm going to be concentrating on Rise From the Ashes, the sequel to Phoenix of Minrathous, as I know some people have been asking about it, as well as From Distant Lands Untold. There is also an idea of a dark!Cullen/dark!Alistair/OC fic I'm tossing around. Or a super angsty/fluffy Cullistair fic. I can't decide. Maybe work on some drabbles and ficlets. I also realized I never created a Thedosian Inquisitor or Warden, so I might experiment with both. In short, I'm going to be bouncing around a lot for awhile lol.

Thank you all again for the love and support! >^..^<

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!