Amidst It All

by Kantrips

Summary

Stolen moments between war and conflict in the slow, sometimes awkward, sometimes sweet and sometimes terrifyingly confusing progression of a relationship. A series of consecutive one-shots that take place linear to the game plot. Chapters can be read in order or as stand-alone stories.
Evelyn had left on foot not more than half an hour ago with no weapon, no companions and no goodbye. Cullen found himself pacing, distracted from the drills he had consigned the recruits too. Already there would be more bruises than usual the following morning, now that his inattention had led to rampant incidents of uncorrected posture and poor grips on shields.

She would have told someone something of what she was up to surely. She must have a good reason for setting off into the woods alone. But what?

Cassandra was nearby as usual and had had the most to do with the woman. She lowered her sword reluctantly at Cullen’s approach.

“Did she tell you where she was going?”

“Who has gone where?”

“Evelyn. Went into the woods.”

Cassandra let out an irritated grunt and refocused on her training dummy. “Into the woods then I imagine.”

If Cassandra was unconcerned Cullen supposed he should be too. But the question of what on earth she was up to continued to niggle at him, pestering him to the point of distraction.

Before he had even registered that he was doing it he had set out into the trees after her in a moment of uncharacteristic rashness. The boot prints in the snow weren’t difficult to follow, she had made no effort to conceal her tracks and he was upon her quickly. On the ground at the edge of the clearing, she was fussing with something at the base of a pine.

“Evelyn?” His voice carried loudly through the relative silence of the forest. She jumped a little, apparently not having heard him approach, and rose from her crouch, a bundle of greenery in her arms.

“Cullen?”

“Elfroot?”

“Yes?”

“You’re collecting Elfroot.” Of course there was a simple explanation.

“Yes, I am collecting Elfroot. As you see.” With the armful of herbs she gestured helpfully in his direction.

“Elfroot,” he said once more, running a tired hand over his face.

“It is medicinal,” she explained with a patient smile as if to a simpleton.

“I am aware.”
There was a long silence and Cullen tried desperately to think of a way to leave that didn’t involve running. Evelyn shifted the herbs uncomfortably in her arms. “And you?” she asked.

“What?”

“Why are you roaming about the woods?”

“I simply…wanted to…” Cullen floundered for a reasonable explanation.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Let me guess: you just happened to be taking a stroll? You’ve stumbled across me quite by accident? My what a spectacular coincidence.”

“Not exactly.”

“No, I didn’t think so,” she said with such smug certainty that he felt his spine stiffen with irritation.

He folded his arms. “What precisely do you think?”

“A lot of things. Mostly about kittens and cakes. But in this particular instance I think you were following me.

“It would not serve me to be dishonest. I was.”

“Why? Was I sneaking away in broad daylight? The cunning mage, creeping through the trees, laughing to herself and rubbing her hands in glee at her own reprehensible plot?”

“That’s unfair.”

“You thought I was running away with no luggage but a cloak and a keen sense of adventure. That’s unfair.”

He hadn’t really thought that, had he? It seemed pointless to argue at any rate. “I think you have very thoroughly demonstrated the foolishness of my actions already. I was concerned: the woods can be dangerous.”

Evelyn gave him a steady look. “I’m dangerous too,” she said with menacing calmness. Cullen frowned. Evelyn dissolved into laughter before putting on an exaggerated snarl, dropping the Elfroot to make her hands into claws. “The sneaky mage whooooo! Coming for your children in the night!”

Cullen shook his head and let out a breathy laugh despite himself. “Have you ever…”

“Ever what?”

“Ever held a single conversation in your life without resorting to the ridiculous?”

She looked pleased with herself. “Not yet.”

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely.

“What for?” she asked, laughter fading, brow creasing.

“I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“No, some templar instinct kicking in. Seeing a mage wandering about triggers your find-and-
“I’m not a templar,” Cullen said with practised calm. Evelyn’s eyes widened slightly before her surprise melted into a look more thoughtful. Cullen braced for ridicule but there was no other response: no witty rejoinder or joke at his expense. “You’re a valuable asset to the Inquisition and I was surprised to see you setting out alone. I was curious, more than anything.”

Evelyn pointed to her own chest. “Me? A valuable asset to the Inquisition? Goodness you do come on strong.” She fanned herself with her hand.

Cullen groaned. “You clearly wished for solitude; I will impose upon you no longer.”

“And surely you have recruits to go yell at?”

“I don’t yell at the recruits.”

“What do you call raising your voice and projecting it in their general direction then? Shouting?”

“I meant it isn’t just mindless yelling. I don’t shout: I instruct.”

“Loudly,” she said, drawing it out and smirking. Infuriating woman. Did she always have to have the last word?

“As you say then. I should return.”

“Once more: thank you.”

He had turned to leave but looking over his shoulder and saw her gathering up the Elfroot, using the corner of her cloak to form a bundle. “Of course.”

“For not subduing me I mean.” He let out a long sigh in response. “I will see you later,” she told him cheerily.

“Very well.”

“Probably anyway. If I don’t, you know…” She mimed running on the spot.

“You’ll never let me live this down, will you?”

“Honestly I’m touched that you wanted to check up on me. Thank you, truly.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You could be right. It is dangerous out here. I think I saw squirrel tracks earlier.”

“I really am leaving.”

“Oh abandoning me just when I was starting to feel frightened of the woods!” she called after him. He threw up a hand, partly in surrender, partly to wave goodbye. “Don’t worry, I’ll call you if I need you. ‘Help! Help! Your valuable asset needs help! I’m being attacked by a rogue sparrow! Argh, it’s tiny beak is upon me!’”

The sound of her giggling seemed to follow him further through the trees than was possible.

A mystery, she was a complete, baffling, frustrating mystery to him. One that he was in equal parts mildly afraid of and intrigued by.
Posting this is both kind of overdue, and kind of spur of the moment. I have a whole
big bunch of 'scenes' sitting written that I didn't quite know what to do with and I
suddenly realised I could fill the gaps and make them into a kind of linear, one shot
compilation. Thought I might as well get it over with and post rather than letting them
languish any longer! I'm thinking of this as a kind of companion to 'Between the Lines'
and there are a couple of allusions to that piece in later chapters but this can absolutely
be read alone. Thanks so much for reading! :)
He was pacing back and forth at the opposite end of the room. Evelyn couldn’t tell if it truly was unconscious or if he was doing it for dramatic effect. She nudged Josephine and lowered her voice. “Is that normal? For him?”

Josephine’s quill stopped scratching for a moment, twitching feather growing still. “Hm?”

Evelyn gestured towards Cullen with her chin. “The pacing. Or is he losing his mind?”

“Oh, he gets like that when our meetings run long. Or when he hasn’t had a chance to exercise that day.”

“When he feels shut in and restless.”

“So it would seem,” Josephine said, already sounding suspicious.

“Like a dog?”

“That is not the comparison I would have drawn.”

“Is he about to start whining? Scratching at the door?”

“You’re being rather hard on him.” Cullen stopped at the table, scanned a document, muttered to himself, paced a few more steps then stared intently into the fire, his back to them.

“I’ve never had a chance to examine a templar in the wild. Fascinating creatures.”

Josephine let out a disapproving sigh. “Try to get along.”

“That sounds like a thinly veiled accusation.”

“You bait him. I’ve noticed. Leliana has noticed. *He* has noticed.”

“Doesn’t stop him from rising to seize it.”

“You may be enjoying yourself but we need to work…” Josephine paused to think, looking towards the ceiling and tapping her chin gently with the end of her feathered quill.

“Yes?”

“Harmoniously,” Josephine finished with emphasis.

“I’ll be on my best behaviour. So long as he doesn’t do any templar-ing in my direction.”

“Impossible,” Cullen said abruptly, turning to them and making a slicing motion through the air. Josephine and Evelyn stared at him in bafflement: he couldn’t possibly have overheard their conversation. Could he? “Have they taken leave of their senses entirely?” When he still failed to garner a response from the two women before him he said: “What do you make of the letter? If he could only overcome his own self-interest momentarily to see the bigger picture… The Duke?” he finally prompted impatiently.

“What Duke?” Evelyn asked having lost track of the actual meeting in her studies of Cullen’s behaviour.
Cullen’s lip curled in irritation. “We have been discussing this already for…If I’m the only one actually trying to resolve anything here I would suggest we adjourn this meeting.”

“Forgive my inattention, Cullen. I am in negotiations with him and in the event that that fails, Leliana is seeking leverage against the man as we speak. Something we can hold against him if need be. It would not be my choice, but I can’t deny it may be the only way to deter his intervention.”

“The timing is appalling. It stretches our resources thin but I’ll have troops ready, should he march,” Cullen said with an air of finality. But Evelyn wasn’t done.

“Or if that too fails,” Evelyn said, “maybe I could go around to his manor and summon a few demons? You know, spook him into acquiescence.”

Cullen straightened his back gave her a stern look. “That is hardly something to jest about.”

Evelyn matched his stance and nodded approvingly. “Correct response: that was a test. Just making sure.”

Cullen folded his arms and Evelyn mirrored him. She saw his jaw clench. “Whatever you are hoping to accomplish –”

“We shall adjourn, good suggestion Cullen. I think we are finished here. Evelyn?” Josephine interrupted, addressing Evelyn with a vaguely threatening tone.

“Quite finished.” She smiled angelically at them both and left the room on what was nearly a pirouette.

Mind already wandering to lunch, Evelyn hadn’t expected Cullen to catch up to her as she left the chantry. Responding to his voice calling her name with a: “What?” so startled it gave away more than she would of liked, she attempted to regain some composure, bracing for an argument.

But he didn’t seem angry which only threw her further off balance. “I know what you’re doing,” he said, sounding resigned.

“And what am I doing?”

“Trying to taunt a reaction out of me.”

“You specifically? I’m sorry you feel singled out but I really am this irritating to everyone.”

To her infinite surprise he exhaled with the slightest chuckle. Thoroughly confused by this whole interaction and his unpredictable behaviour Evelyn began to leave. Flee even. But he spoke once more. “I don’t find you irritating. Just challenging. Wait a moment. Please.” She paused, still disliking the lack of control she had over the conversation, intrigued and concerned over where exactly this was going. “I don’t blame you for feeling antagonised by my past. Words of assurance or beseeching you too look beyond it would be useless I realise. But allow me the opportunity to… I hope that given a chance my actions will speak for themselves.”

Evelyn felt heavy with unexpected guilt in the face of this sudden earnestness and found herself staring at her boots, unable to meet his eye. “I’ll admit I’ve been a little difficult around you. I suppose I’m just curious as to your motivations.” She forced herself to look up at him but now he looked away, staring at something past her shoulder.

“Motivations? Similar to yours I’d imagine: I’d rather not see Thedas pulled inside out through a
gaping hole in the sky,” he said with a shrug.

He was…making a joke? She couldn’t fight back a smile. “It seems like we have some common ground to work from after all.” She meant it in a broader sense which by his relieved expression he clearly picked up on.

“Good.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“What for?”

“For not judging me as harshly as I have obviously been judging you.”

“As I said: you have reason to be wary. I understand that.”

“As do you. What of me proving my motivations to you?”

Meeting her eye he said without hesitation: “You were willing to sacrifice your life to close the breach when everyone around you falsely accused you of creating it. You have nothing left to prove to me.” Then cleared his throat and looked away again.

“Oh,” was all she managed to answer after a long pause.

He looked with almost longing up at a small patch of sky visible through one of the high chantry windows. “If you don’t mind my abrupt departure: I’m desperate to go for a walk. I find those meetings suffocating.”

“By all means,” she gestured towards the door and watched him leave, troubled by a peculiar state of agitation as if she had a puzzle half complete and was already pretty sure she was missing a piece.
It was late, too late for him to be sleeplessly wandering outside the walls, let alone her. She cut a lonely figure on the Haven dock, her lamp casting an orange glow around her while she stood as still as the frozen lake that she gazed upon. He felt drawn to that lamp light, to her, and approached without really considering his actions.

His approaching footsteps, crunching through the new fallen snow, were enough to announce his presence. Evelyn put her lamp at her feet and quickly swiped at her cheeks, a motion that he was clearly not meant to notice. “How odd,” she said, a bit too loudly, a bit too cheerfully when she realised it was him. “Whenever I can’t sleep at night I see candlelight from your quarters and now here you are. Can it be that the fates have conspired that our restless nights should align perfectly? Or is it that you simply never sleep?”

Cullen shrugged and joined her, leaning against the dock railing. “Either could be true,” he said noncommittally. Conversations about his disturbed sleep could lead into dangerous territory. There were topics he did not wish to breach, not with her, not now.

“I suspect the latter.”

“I guess we’ll never know for sure.”

“You will, but clearly you have no intention of telling me.”

“So it seems.”

They fell into silence, both looking out over the lake, weak moonlight glinting off the ice, shadowy pines looming at its perimeter. Despite the peaceful night landscape, Cullen’s mind was working desperately through a set of increasingly complicated rationalisations. Evelyn had tried to hide that she was upset, so it would be civil to pretend he hadn’t noticed. He would say nothing. But it was also true that it felt callous to notice, and then ignore her distress, even if his intent was to be discrete. So he should say something. But was it then more callous to notice her distress, notice she didn’t want to be asked about her distress, and then interrogate her regardless?

“Is there something on your mind?” she asked suddenly without looking at him.

“What?”

“You keep glancing at me. Did I dip my braid in my soup again? Maker I wish people would mention it when it happened.” She reached out reflexively and touched her hair to check.

Well, it was an opening and Cullen suspected her wouldn’t get a better one. “Are you alright? Something was troubling you when I approached.”

“Troubling me?” she asked in an exaggerated, theatrical voice that he was beginning to recognise as a sophisticated and well-practiced defence mechanism. “Why I was merely in awe of the beauty of the landscape! The wonders of nature, so touching. It moves me truly.”

“I see,” he answered evenly neither encouraging, nor discouraging the ruse.
She let out a shaky sigh. “Either that or that or all my friends died at the conclave, my hand now glows and closes sky rifts. Also there are sky rifts? What is that about? And suddenly I’m meant to be out there accomplishing things for the greater good when only months ago no one would have entrusted me to coordinate so much as a piss-up in a tavern.” There was a pause in which she took a deep breath. “So the beauty of nature or overwhelming, crippling self-doubt in the face of chaos. One of the two,” she finished lightly.

“I suspect the latter,” he said, echoing her earlier words.

She turned to smile at him. “I guess we’ll never know for sure.”

Cullen hesitated. “The conclave was a tragedy. And that you as a victim of it have had to wear the blame was -”

“I’ve worn worse. When I was seven I demanded a bright yellow frock for the Midsummer Festival. It did nothing for my skin tone. Washed me right out. Blame on the other hand? No, blame quite suits me.” Cullen leaned back as if to peer around her. “What? What is it? What are you doing?” she asked.

“I was looking to see if there was a serious side to you. For a moment there I thought I glimpsed it.”

“Ha. You’ll have to look harder than that.”

“I swear you work twice as hard as anyone in the Inquisition: both in the field and in hiding what you’re going through.”

She scoffed in objection. “As if I’m the only one in the Inquisition hiding things.”

Now that he certainly couldn’t argue with. “All I’m saying is don’t underestimate the burden of… he struggled for the wording, “keeping up a brave face.”

“And stoicism comes naturally to you does it? Don’t answer that. We both know I don’t have a choice. None of us do.”

She scrubbed roughly at her face with the heel of her hand. Too roughly. He wanted to take her wrist, tell her to stop but instead he said: “You’re doing well.”

“Keeping up a brave face?”

“Working for the Inquisition.”

“It doesn’t feel like it. The more certain I am about any given course of action the more awry it seems to go.”

Cullen considered this carefully. “Nothing ever has an entirely neat solution.”

“It makes me wonder what the point of trying is sometimes. I try to make things better and I make them worse.”

“That’s not true.”

“Sometimes it is.”

“I believe our intentions hold as much importance as the results we achieve.”
“Oh? So I should never have to explain myself beyond ‘I meant well’?”

“We must take responsibility for the outcomes of our actions. Part of that is justifying our motivations. You’re restoring order, you’re saving lives and doing a lot of good along the way.”

“I’ve done a lot of harm along the way.”

“Some humility is essential. Too much self-flagellation can be crippling.”

“And is that something you templars are very keen on is it? Self-flagellation?”

“I’m not…” he began, the response coming almost automatically now.

“No, you’re not. That was careless of me: I forgot myself.”

He frowned, more in confusion than true irritation. Evelyn seemed genuinely apologetic, but she had raised his previous rank in conversation to tease him so often in the past it was difficult to tell if it had been a sincere slip or not. “If anything, the templars have traditionally lacked self-reflection. Grievously. In my opinion…,” he said, voice trailing off at the end.

Evelyn didn’t seem to know how to respond to that so made a humming noise and leant her elbows on the dock railing, resting her chin in her hands. “So what you’re saying over all is that if I burn down a village it’s absolutely fine as long as my intention was to warm everybody up? Fight off that winter chill and keep them nice and toasty?”

“No exactly,” he said before adding a dry: “Obviously.”

“No, I know what you’re saying. And I thank you for it.” Evelyn tilted her head and smiled at him and Cullen felt an urgent need to turn away and examine the horizon.

“I seem to have a gift for disturbing you when you want to be alone.” He pushed away from the railing.

“I never said I wanted to be alone.” He faltered, then resumed his position beside her. “Oh, don’t look so frightened,” she told him. “You don’t pester me like some of the others do: I appreciate that.”

Minutes passed, and Cullen gazed out where she did, wondering what held her attention, wondering what burdened her mind. Neither of them spoke until he noticed Evelyn shivering. “It is too cold. You should go inside, try once more to get some rest,” he said softly. When she didn’t react, he wondered if she’d heard him. “Evelyn?” he gently touched her elbow and feeling her jerk in response withdrew his hand quickly. She seemed almost surprised to see him there.

“Yes,” was all she said and for a moment he wasn’t sure whether it was a question or not. But she gave a him a quick smile, wrapped her cloak tightly about herself and walked towards the gate without further comment, disappearing into the night as if she had urgent business to attend to, leaving her lantern still glowing at his feet.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter in which our heroes have a conversation? How incredible!!! How fresh! When will I run out of ideas? Can you tell I love writing dialogue? :p Thanks for
reading!
Evelyn couldn’t remember much of the attack on Haven and perhaps that was for the best.

There were flashes: celebrations coming to an abrupt halt, songs cut short mid-verse, laughter fading and newly poured drinks left untouched.

At the alarm adrenaline had surged through Evelyn’s veins, her senses growing sharper and combat ready in a way that she was unexpectedly becoming used to. Any anxiety was tempered by a readiness. An eagerness even.

In hindsight, it was obvious she had grown dangerously accustomed to winning. Sure, the odds seemed impossible on the surface but that was kind of the Inquisition’s speciality. Something would turn up, something to shift the course of the battle in their favour. It always did.

The blind optimism had lasted right until Cullen had all but spat: “At this point, just make them work for it,” and she realised he had given up hope. Inquisition soldiers swarmed and stumbled around them in blind terror towards the Chantry, Cullen looking on with the stoicism of a pall-bearer.

Her expression must have given away her fresh panic. Cullen turned to say something else to her but stopped himself, mouth opening and closing wordlessly. How was he to know that Evelyn’s own confidence was apparently linked so intrinsically to his? Were her voice not utterly failing her in that moment she would have told him that is was okay, that she preferred to be realistic. If they were all going to die better she know it now. The fear subsided and she had felt her emotions shift again. Quite a night: ignorant confidence, suffocating dread and finally a timely pragmatism. It allowed her to distance herself from the danger she was walking into while the dregs of Haven’s survivors limped to safety.

They must have thought her brave when really she was just completely disconnected from the reality of the situation. Evelyn’s path was clear, and detached as she was from her own body in that moment it was remarkably easy to face her fate. Was that a kind of courage? That her mind protected itself only so far as to allow her to act as she must to protect the others? If her mind truly wanted to protect itself surely it would have instructed her legs to start running and never stop as Varric had once suggested. Perhaps she owed herself some credit. After all: she was the girl so afraid of the dark that she cried when her father said she couldn’t sleep with a lit candle, screamed bloody murder when her foot brushed a reed while bathing in the river, wouldn’t enter a farmstead until the barking dog was leashed.

Now she faces down dragons. What a difference a conclave explosion makes. Had she the energy to spare she would have laughed. Evelyn knew her life depended on focusing on the task at hand. At that moment that meant prising herself up from the cold ground from where she had fallen, not laying there self-reflecting. Courage did little to combat freezing to death.

Truth be told she was worried that moving would reveal she had broken something crucial in the fall. As long as she remained still she could pretend she was okay. She began exploratory flexing: gently, gradually, limb by limb.

“Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way.” Those had been Cullen’s words. She had been touched by the obvious lie when he clearly thought her imminent death as certain as she did. Unless he truly had some hope: a faith in the impossible? In her? In saying “find a way” had he meant ‘collapse a mountain upon your own head and hurl yourself down a disused minshaft’? Probably not, but
nonetheless, there she was alive: bones surprisingly not shattered. Head throbbing, calf muscle twinging, wrist tender but nothing broken.

No. Too quick of an assumption it had turned out. Sitting up quickly brought on shooting pains in her torso. A rib or two at least. She sacrificed a bit of magic. To take the edge off only, none must go to waste. Ahead was blackness and uncertainty. But first a quick rest. Laying down for just a few minutes. Or longer?

Getting up again had felt suddenly crucial. Evelyn’s head swam from the motion, prickles of white light distorting her vision. She was on her feet, leaning against the wall for support and couldn’t quite remember how she got there. She must have hit her head. Perhaps a few times. That would explain the throbbing.

Then a shock of encountering demons, a flash of green light (had she done that?) and she was somewhere else in the tunnel. Evelyn knew she must be running on the basest survival instinct because she kept losing blocks of time but was still miraculously inching forward. Outside now. A cold campfire here. Keep going. The same direction? Wind so strong it altered her path, sent her staggering this way and that. A broken wagon? Might have been there for years for all she knew. People in the distance, she thought, but only scraggly pines, outlines made blurry by the falling snow. An understandable mistake, she had tried to rationalise, rather than admitting she was getting desperate.

Her boots were sinking deeper into the snow with each step and she kept pitching forward and nearly falling. Starting out Evelyn thought she had an idea of what way the others must have gone but now the weather was so thick it blotted out the vaguely familiar mountain ranges, the stars, the moon and all possible reference points. Maker she hoped she was walking in the right direction. Maker she hoped there was a right direction. The only testament to the survival of the others she had was the solitary flare hours ago. Days ago? No, she couldn’t have been unconscious that long for the cold surely would have killed her. That was comforting. Sort of.

Evelyn recited as much of the Chant of Light as she could remember, unable to hear her own voice over the wind. It was less of a prayer, more a distraction. In the same manner she tried to recall poems she used to have read to her as a child. The nug that dug? How did it go…?

That story about her in the river, frightened by the reed wrapped around her ankle, scrabbling up a sheer rock face to try and escape. Shrieking while her siblings splashed to the shore panicked and thinking she must have been bitten by a turtle at the very least. Why had she never told Cullen that story? He would have liked that one. And come to think of it why hadn’t she taken that last piece of blackberry pie offered to her not long before Haven came under attack? Or taken the time to think of some better final regrets? The pie though…

Distracting herself in this manner of thinking became unsustainable, the cold ache of her body growing too insistent as the magic she was using to sustain and protect herself in these inhospitable conditions began flickering, faltering…it was then the bargaining had begun. ‘Get to that tree stump,’ she had told herself. ‘Get to that tree stump and you can have a rest.’ But when she arrived level with the stump she would find herself thinking ‘now to that rock…just a little more’ and on she went, bit by bit, working her way up a hill. An outcrop ahead had become her new goal, perhaps it would prove sheltered enough to afford some true respite from the weather.

Cresting the hill Evelyn blinked rapidly to assure herself she wasn’t suffering from hypothermia induced hallucinations. Campfires, tents and people pacing far below. Before she had even had time to process this impossibility, a group rushed towards her. Evelyn couldn’t see his face clearly, nor could she make out what he said but she recognised Cullen’s voice and relief drained the
strength from her trembling legs as she fell to her knees.

He was at her side, asking her if she could walk, not waiting for an answer before lifting her out of the snow. Limp and unprotesting she wrapped her arms around his neck, turning to bury her face in his shoulder to protect it from the wind.

“I’m cold,” she managed to mumble stupidly through half-frozen lips.

“I know,” he said and then, with that assurance, Evelyn felt her muscles slacken and everything went black again.

The next thing she remembers is being woken by Cullen spitting a particularly vicious “Move,” at some bystanders gawking at the edge of the camp. Jumping a little at the volume and his tone, Cullen must have realised he startled her and said more quietly: “We’re at the camp,” which was a blatantly obvious statement but Evelyn assumed was his attempt at being reassuring.

Then she was being lowered onto a rickety camp bed and Mother Giselle was using an excessively soothing voice that confirmed to Evelyn that she really must be quite a mess. For some unknowable reason this provoked her to argue “I’m fine,” which in turn prompted an audible sigh from Cullen who Evelyn suddenly realised was bent over her, gently trying to detach himself from her grip around his neck. Reluctantly she released him. He was warm. The first warm thing in hours. The first warm thing in what felt like forever. How dare he remove himself.

Cullen surveyed Evelyn critically as she sat up, shivering violently, flexing her stiff fingers to assure herself they still worked. “She’s freezing,” he said, turning to Mother Giselle and gesturing at Evelyn almost angrily. What exactly he expected the Chantry Mother to do until the healer arrived Evelyn wasn’t sure but he seemed insistent something start happening which she appreciated.

Responding with only a distracted tut, Mother Giselle began to help Evelyn unbutton her sodden jacket, speaking softly as if to herself while Cullen watched on impatiently: “So many lost. And too many injured, too few supplies salvaged. If the elfroot wasn’t growing here…Lucky to have the shelters but clean bandages are scarce and not enough blankets to go around.”

Someone outside called Cullen’s name interrupting Mother Giselle’s troubled muttering.

“Take this,” Cullen said, shrugging off his cloak and offering it to Mother Giselle, striding away before he could be argued with.
Haven: The Aftermath

Even now it plagued him. He had been a fool to let his composure slip when people were depending on him, when she was depending on him. As a Commander it was his place to project unshakeable resoluteness. To lead by example not fall into a swoon like a Val Royeaux noble. He had faltered, that was clear from Evelyn’s disappointed expression at the time and it was not an error he intended to repeat.

It seemed he had grown unused to people depending on him. How had that happened? Was he so jaded by experience it was compromising his professionalism? Or could the drain of lyrium withdrawal be already proving greater than his resolve? He shook his head as if to clear it of the thought. Whatever the reason it needed to change: he needed to remember his responsibilities if the Inquisition was to survive.

Already it was a miracle they had survived the attack on Haven earlier that night. That night? It was disconcerting to think of it having been so recent: it already felt a lifetime ago. They must have been waiting months, weeks at least to see if she had survived. Not mere hours surely.

Cullen’s gaze fell to Evelyn, relaxed at last in sleep, curled contently on the camp bed as if it were equipped with down pillows and the finest silk sheets. Her exhaustion must be absolute. If they had not found her when they did, only minutes from the camp…

It was a troubling thought, one that made him feel uneasy at the pit of his stomach, but he did not believe it. Evelyn would have made it on her own had she needed to: as persistent, as unwaveringly determined she had already proven herself to be. He was starting to believe she could take flight if she wanted it badly enough.

What an image. Maker, when had he become so fanciful? Relief and fatigue had made him ridiculous.

And that confirmed it for him. He was in no rational mind to be attempting to decide the future of the Inquisition. None of them were. Yet lingering adrenaline and mutual worry kept bringing them together to bicker until the argument stagnated and at least one of the party had stormed off. It had been his turn apparently, throwing up his hands in surrender, the healer’s tent proving too quiet, too sheltered and peaceful to resist. Yes, it was the relative solitude of the tent that had drawn him here. Checking on Evelyn was as good as an afterthought. A largely redundant one too, as what information could his untrained eye possibly draw from seeing her. Alive or dead was about the best a soldier could do.

Evelyn moved in her sleep. She stretched slightly and winced, face creasing in apparent pain, before she relaxed and lay still once more. Cullen shifted uneasily on his stool, suddenly realising he had been staring at her, and fixed his gaze on the wall of canvas instead. He let out a long breath and kneaded the muscles in his thighs with the heels of his hands, stiff from the strain of the fight and the hours of cold. He shouldn’t be sitting still like this either he should be…doing something.

And there again, the thought that had been marching in circles about his head reared once more to the forefront of his mind. Had his failing tonight been far greater than revealing a brief lack of composure when all hope had seemed lost? Perhaps his true lapse been somewhere in the field: an order he had given or not given, an opportunity left unexploited that might have changed the course of the battle and spared lives, not to mention prevented Evelyn from ever having to place herself in such a position of sacrifice. Or perhaps it was not during the battle but an inadequacy in his training methods over the months that left soldiers vulnerable, or some flaw in Haven’s
defences he should have recognised that would have slowed the seemingly endless tide of red templars and bought them time. There must have been something, something he had overlooked, something more he could have done.

Evelyn’s cheeks were rosy now, flushed with colour from the warmth of the tent. She had been so frighteningly cold when he had picked her up from the snow. He could remember the feeling of her violent bursts of shivering against his chest, her icy fingers on the back of his neck as she searched for purchase…he was staring at her again. He tipped his head back and averted his eyes to the roof of the tent this time.

Cullen had already tried to speak Cassandra, someone he thought would have insight, and would understand the necessity of urgently examining the Inquisition’s defensive and military shortcomings. But she had grunted with displeasure and told him: “Now is not the time.” And then more kindly after a long moment of consideration: “Given the circumstances, the outcome could have been worse. It would be unconstructive to attempt to pinpoint one responsible factor.”

He could not have disagreed more. Cullen had failed to recognise his true responsibilities before in his life and he did not intend to let the Inquisition fall victim to his hubris in the same way. A comprehensive analysis of every aspect of the battle would be required from the condition of the weapons and armour, to the materials of the barricades, to the effectiveness of the watch and every other matter which may reveal inadequate preparation. There would be no detail too small to escape his scrutiny. Though Haven was lost there was much to be learned moving forward and every lesson could prove crucial to their survival.

He would have begun the work that moment, were his brain not so fogged from lack of sleep. Cullen’s gaze fell to Evelyn once more, her expression untroubled, her plait coming loose, strands mussed across the pillow and falling over her face. Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the persistent tension behind his eyes. He had to concentrate. To try to figure this out. He had to fix it. Whatever ‘it’ was that had lead to her grievous endangerment could not be allowed to…he would not allow it to –

“Keeping her company, I see?” Mother Giselle had returned.

“Hardly. She’s asleep,” Cullen said more gruffly than he had intended, defensive at having been startled by the woman’s arrival.

“Nonetheless…” she said and trailed off with an enigmatic smile before busying herself with the blankets of another patient and pouring them a cup of water.

Cullen felt conspicuously unhelpful and with the sanctuary of the tent destroyed by Mother Giselle’s well-meaning presence he rose to leave, glancing down at Evelyn one final time to reassure himself that she was…that she was there. He let out a short laugh of relief, so quiet Mother Giselle didn’t register it. Despite his shortcomings she was alive, and he didn’t intend to fail her – the Inquisition – again.
Though she personally had no idea what he was doing (never mind why) it obviously wasn’t completely random. Evelyn rationalised that there must be some method in the madness.

Not so long ago she would have assumed all combat training of this kind was just an elaborate form of anger management. But having taken some opportunities to watch him training since the move to Skyhold, Evelyn had noticed that he wasn’t just striking out erratically. Instead, Cullen would give the training dummy several measured blows then pause as if to reassess before commencing again: hitting in a different pattern or adjusting his footing.

Cullen shifted his stance, turning slightly and caught a glimpse of her, doing a doubletake then hesitating, his thought process clearly interrupted.

“Don’t let me stop you,” Evelyn yelled apologetically before leaning on the fence of the training yard to continue watching. Disappointingly however, her presence seemed to deter him, or at least signal an opportunity for a break. Breathing deeply, he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand before walking to join her at the railing. He rested his back against it so that they were taking in the same view.

“Was there something you needed?” he asked, tossing his sword casually from hand to hand a few times as if to weigh it before leaning it against the fence. From anyone else Evelyn would have assumed it was showing off but she had observed Cullen enough to know it was just a habit.

“No, nothing. Just picking up some tips.” He shot her a sceptical look. Or you know, maybe she was curious to see if he would take his shirt off again like once before when she stumbled across him training here. As if reading her mind and to taunt her, he plucked at the fabric a few times where it had stuck to his chest.

“Considering a foray into melee, are you?”


“A bit precious of you, Lady Evelyn,” Cullen teased. Evelyn rolled her eyes at him but he had lapsed into a thoughtful silence and seemed not to notice her. “What would you do then, if an enemy was upon you? Or in a situation where you were somehow rendered unable to cast?”

“Call for Cassandra,” Evelyn answered as if it were obvious.

“And if she were out of earshot?”

“Call louder?”

“Evelyn, be serious a moment. This could be cause for concern. The demons from the rifts spawn erratically. Templars will aim to ambush you. Beasts will stalk you. Mages can be unpredictable. It is only a matter of time before you find yourself flanked. There are countless scenarios in which you could find yourself vulnerable.” He reeled of the scenarios with such precision she wondered if he had rehearsed it.

She tilted her head and looked at him with exasperation. “I don’t know what you expect me to say, Cullen. Kick them in the shins?”
Cullen appeared to ponder this as he began to roll up his sleeves. “It isn’t a bad starting point, depending on the circumstances.”

“It was a joke! Honestly, if you are trying to convince me I am incompetent it’s working.”

Cullen looked alarmed and turned to her. She stared defiantly back. “That was not my intention.” He continued to look thoughtfully at her for a moment. “Maybe it should be. There is considerable risk in your being unprepared.”

“I’m managing,” Evelyn mumbled, looking away, disgusted by how petulant she suddenly sounded.

“Of course,” he said with reassuring sincerity. “But our enemies grow only stronger and I would like to know you were equipped with every possible advantage. You’re always the first to admit you weren’t trained for a life of combat.”

“True enough. But what exactly are you getting at? That I should hold Cassandra’s hand at all times in the field to ensure we are not separated? Honestly, I’m not convinced she will tolerate it. My palms can get a bit clammy.”

“What if I…I could run through some fundamentals with you. I wouldn’t expect you to start doing daily drills with the recruits but any basics may help you defend yourself, buy some time in an emergency.”

“Until Cassandra comes to save me?”

“Yes,” he said with a brief laugh. “Until Cassandra comes and brutalises them all.”

Evelyn thought for a long moment, wavered. “You may find me unteachable.”

Cullen looked undeterred. “Some of the recruits have been challenging. We will figure something out.”

Evelyn jabbed a finger at him. “If you yell at me I will leave. And fire you. Seriously. Both from your role in the Inquisition and I will actually set you on fire. I’m not doing this if you start yelling.”

He put a closed fist over his heart and fought back a smile. “You have my word. Shall we begin?”

“What? Right now?”

“If you have nothing more pressing to attend to?”

Evelyn climbed over the fence ungracefully, pretending not to see the hand he offered.

“So um, where do we start?” she asked, tugging at her tunic self-consciously.

He gave her an evaluating look which didn’t help the matter. “Your stance.”

Evelyn scoffed. “Are you trying to tell me that the enemy will run in fear if I stand intimidatingly at them?”

“Not exactly. But it might make them think twice and it will make you harder to knock over.”

“How so?”
He took a step to one side of her and swiftly thrust a leg out, somehow hooking it behind her knees, not causing any pain but making it impossible not to topple heavily backwards into the soft dirt. After a moment on her back in shock induced paralysis, Evelyn glared up at him. Cullen looked down impassively and shrugged. “I didn’t yell.”

Evelyn sat up. “Okay,” she said in surrender. “You obviously know what you’re doing. I promise I won’t keep questioning every little thing you tell me.”

“Good, that will save us some time.” Cullen offered her a hand to help her up and this time she took it. Once upright, he seemed to hold on for just a moment too long. Probably to make sure she was steady on her feet, Evelyn rationalised.

She brushed herself off. “So, my stance?” she asked seriously and Cullen looked immeasurably pleased.
Skyhold: Headache

Evelyn looked so genuinely delighted to see him he wondered if he was imagining it. But she had been walking by, seemingly glimpsed him from the corner of her eye, and nearly tripped over in her haste to alter course, beaming all the while. His imagination could only be credited with so much.

“Hello Cullen,” she waved in greeting as she approached his bench. “Not like you to be lazing about in the sun.”

A pounding headache had come upon him sometime after midday and leaving the stuffy confines of his office, he had ventured out to see if some fresh air would do him good. Not, as it turned out. “I didn’t realise you were arriving back today,” he said, concentrating on keeping his tone neutral, voice even.

“I’ve barely just dismounted. Josephine wants to see me urgently but I was trying to slip to the kitchen first. I’ll surely perish if I have to wait all the way until supper.”

Cullen managed a weak smile. “I’m sure Josephine could order you a tray.”

“Josie means well, but she would order chilled tea, wafers and daintily cut fruits. I need an entire loaf of bread, something dead and roasted and at least half a wheel of cheese. And honestly I don’t particularly feel making her watch while I gnaw at it: she deserves better.”

He nodded. “Understandable.” Evelyn continued to hover by him uncertainly and for the first time of their acquaintance Cullen desperately wished she would just hurry up and leave. “I have lingered here too long already,” he said, “and I shouldn’t keep you if Josephine requires your presence.”

“Your office is on my way to the kitchen,” she said, clearly intending to walk with him. Any other day he would have been thrilled. Any. Other. Day.

“Very well,” he answered curtly. Evelyn could see he wasn’t pleased and at once the smile fell from her face. Cullen felt sick to see it. He rose with considerable effort, trying to make it look unforced, trying to hide the way it made his head throb and his vision blur, the world fading and swimming before his eyes.

“You look awful,” she said, slightly aghast, and instinctively reached out to steady him.

“I thought they raised nobles to be polite.” Cullen shrugged away her attempt to help and she quickly released her grip on his arm.

“Alright then. You look like you got clubbed over the head and dragged behind a horse down a cobblestone road.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Was that supposed to be better?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Don’t look at me: I got hauled off to the circle before I graduated from ‘noble lady training’ remember?” She shook her head as if to shake off the trail of thought. “Don’t try to change the subject: what’s wrong with you?”

“Just a headache.”

“Why?”
“I don’t know. Perhaps it wasn’t a good idea to repeatedly bang my head against a stone wall earlier,” Cullen snapped.

Evelyn’s brows shot up. “And you say I’m the sarcastic one? Fine, it was a stupid question.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it.

“No don’t apologise. You’re in pain, you have a right to be prickly when people bother you.”

“You’re not bothering me I’m –”

“Cullen, it’s fine. I’ll see you back to your office. Please, for my own peace of mind.”

Cullen didn’t object, just followed, as it was clear it would be impossible to dissuade her. At his door, a message runner approached him but before he could open his mouth to speak Evelyn was shooing the man away. “Not now! The Commander and I have business. Go!” She gestured for Cullen to go inside.

“That might have been important.”

“Your wellbeing is important.”

“It’s not as bad as you are making out.”

“It looks pretty bad. Go and rest. I mean it: you should lay down. Your work will keep for one day, once in a blue moon.”

Cullen suppressed a cynical response that would have given away the frequency of his headaches. Like a mabari with a bone she would have wanted to know what caused them in the interest of providing help. There was no need to trouble her over his lyrium withdrawals. She had enough to contend with. “Josephine is waiting for you,” he said instead.

Evelyn folded her arms. “Go and rest.”

“You won’t have time to eat anything if you don’t leave now.”

“Rest,” she told him once more, firmly, before leaving, making sure to close the door quietly.

Inside, Cullen let out a long sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose again in an attempt to relieve some tension, and began to shuffle through the papers on his desk. He should get back to work and try not to think about how badly that had gone. There was a report from Scout Harding who had made little progress in Crestwood. He scratched out a reply instructing her to forgo any further progress and to make camp in the most suitable location they could find to await the Inquisitor’s arrival. Where had he put that map of the region? Was the headache affecting his memory now? As if the pain were not enough and now Evelyn had witnessed him…pathetically feeble. Not to mention hostile. What must she think?

Cullen put his face in his hands, then rubbed his temples, unsuccessfully trying to relieve the throbbing pressure in skull. He needed to push on. The least he could do was keep on top of his work.

Evelyn appeared, framed in his doorway and carrying a tray not ten minutes later. Cullen jumped in guilty surprise.

“What now?” he asked, more rudely than intended.
She tutted a little. “You have a funny definition of ‘laying down’.”

“I made no promise. I’m perfectly alright.”

“What is the point of being Inquisitor if people don’t obey my commands?”

“I have things I need to attend to. If it was your intention to catch me in the act of doing my job you have succeeded.” Cullen hated how cold he was being towards her but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. To his surprise, instead of turning heel and leaving she walked to his desk and placed the tray down.

“Drink this.” She pointed at the little silver teapot as if it wasn’t obvious what she was referring to.

“Am I to be poisoned for my insubordination?”

Undeterred she began to reel off ingredients. “Feverfew, ginger, cinnamon and elfroot. A little liquorice root too: I know sometimes a nausea comes with the worst of headaches.”

“You made me tea?”

“Yes, in a teapot. With hot water and everything. The breadth of my talents truly is astonishing.”

The teapot looked innocent enough but Cullen narrowed his eyes with deeply ingrained suspicion.

“Did you cast on it?”

Her lips tightened and she gave him a peevish look. “No. I don’t use magic on people without their permission.”

“What about in combat?”

Evelyn took a deep breath and released it again in a slow, measured fashion. “Obviously I don’t ask people’s permission before I set them on fire in combat. Are we in combat?”

“I feel like we are about to be if I don’t stop disagreeing with you.”

“You’re more perceptive than I give you credit for. It’s just herbs.”

“And they will…”

“It may provide some relief.” Cullen continued to stare at it with scepticism. Truth be told his head was aching with increasing ferocity and a persistent ringing had started in his ears. ‘Some relief’ sounded incredible. Evelyn suddenly put her hands on the table and leaned towards him, expression concerned. “You’re pale.” He glowered at her, self-conscious under her scrutiny but she ignored it, continuing to study him. “It would provide more relief if I did cast on it.”

“I may…” he started haltingly, “I would welcome that,” he finished, voice barely above a whisper.

Deftly, her hand glowed the blue of a hot flame and she briefly touched the side of the teapot. “Now drink,” she snapped bossily, pouring some of the steaming liquid into the accompanying cup.

“Another command.”

“I doubt I could force you to do anything you truly didn’t want to. And I wouldn’t have much respect for you if I could,” she told him, matter-of-factly. He looked at her inquiringly. “But for the love of the Maker drink the bloody tea and lie down before I really do club you over the head and
drag you to your bed myself.”

“Up a ladder?”

“Don’t. Don’t underestimate me,” she threatened shaking a not entirely teasing finger in his direction.

“There is no risk of that,” Cullen answered sincerely, and sipped the tea. It was mild, with a little warm spice, and altogether unexpectedly pleasant.

A brief smile flickered across her face and then she examined the mess of papers across his desk, leafing through a couple of sheets on the surface and sighing. “You work too much.”

“And yet these never seem to diminish.”

“You must long for the field. Out there when the enemy is dead your task is done for the day. Here, the work constantly regenerates and you don’t even get the satisfaction of stabbing anyone.”

“That is…certainly one way of looking at it.”

Still distracted, Evelyn’s expression seemed to darken and she turned her attention back to him. “Please take care of yourself. For my sake. I need you at your best.”

His best? Cullen’s stomach became suddenly leaden. Growing very still he cast his gaze downward. If only she knew. He felt his guilt shroud him, his weakness, his failings.

He should thank her. For the tea. For her resilience in the face of his disagreeableness. For coming back. For not giving up on him.

He looked up and found she had already left.
“What is it you’ve lost?” Varric finally asked Evelyn as she swivelled on her seat to peer around the tavern.

“Nothing,” she answered a bit too quickly.

“Really? Because you’re twitching this way and that like you’ve dropped your coin purse.”

“I’m just…looking about the place.” Evelyn raised her chin to better stare down her nose at Varric who was not deterred for a second.

“What do you expect? It’s the Herald’s Rest. Same walls, same chairs, same dried patch of vomit over in the far corner that no one ever seems to get to cleaning.”

“Okay. Fine. I was seeing who else was here.”

“The same Skyhold lowlifes, dullards and drunks who are always here.”

“I realise that now. I was just curious,” Evelyn said defensively and turned her gaze back to her tankard.

Varric looked at her with an affectionate, patient smile playing on his lips, like a parent might watch a toddler struggling and failing to feed themselves. “Cullen rarely descends from his tower to join us common folk, and usually only when you’re here. So, while I grant you there is a better chance tonight than usual, I still wouldn’t hold your breath.”

In her urgency to protest Evelyn swallowed her ale too quickly and coughed violently before objecting in a hoarse voice: “I’m not! I mean I wasn’t looking for him specifically. What would make you think I even…I wasn’t looking for anyone. I was just…looking.” There was a beat while Evelyn considered, chewing her lip, and Varric let out a longsuffering sigh. “What do you mean usually only when I’m here?” she asked.

“Transparent as a pane of Serault’s finest glass,” Varric muttered with a shake of his head.

Evelyn threw up her hands in flustered surrender. “Oh, I’m so, so sorry. I had no idea it was apparently against the law to cast one’s eyes innocently about a tavern. I will endeavour not to make the same mistake again, given it offends you so.”

“Leaning around her, Varric squinted towards the door then whistled in amazement. “Would you look at that! Cullen is here after all.”

Evelyn spun to follow his line of sight with naïve enthusiasm. No one was there and the tavern door remained firmly shut. Shoving Varric’s shoulder so hard his drink sloshed onto the table only earned a chuckle out of him. “What? Just proving the point that you have an unusual amount of interest in the man.”

“So? He is interesting.”

“Fascinating even?”
Evelyn gave him a warning look. “Don’t push it.”

“I don’t get it. There are a lot of words I would use to describe Cullen: stoic, dull and uptight for instance. Interesting you say? There must be something I’m missing…” he trailed off as if in thought, all the while watching his drinking companion carefully from the corner of his eye.

Unfortunately, Evelyn missed this detail as she stared down at her hands, folding and unfolding them on the table restlessly.

“It’s just he is the first templar I’ve ever conversed with without them looking like they are itching to put a muzzle on me. I swear some of the templars at the Circle got so bored they wanted us to dabble in a bit of blood magic here and there. You know, just so they could partake in the pleasure of striking down a few mages for a change of pace. But he doesn’t seem to think I am up to anything untoward. Ever. Which is kind of irritating actually. Not that I am being devious and blood magic-y. But shouldn’t he think that I am? I mean I could be, couldn’t I? Isn’t that the whole point of templars? To think like that? Sure, he has a general distrust of the rebel mages but honestly so do I to an extent –” she realised she was rambling and stopped abruptly, turning a self-conscious shade of pink.

“Hold up. You lost me there. Are you a blood mage or not?” Varric asked.

“No!” Finally realising she had tumbled headfirst into some kind of trap of Varric’s making Evelyn mumbled: “You’re intentionally missing the point.”

“But you’re thinking of trying blood magic out to get his attention? Is that it? Unconventional: I like it. Let me know how that works out for you.”

“I’m just trying to figure him out,” Evelyn attempted to clarify with exasperation.

“Figure what out? His strong jawline? His caramel eyes? His muscular –”

Evelyn let out a hiss of frustration. “Figure out if he is genuine or not.”

“Cullen may be a lot of things: irritable, stilted–”

“I think we’ve been through this part,” Evelyn told him tersely.

“But he doesn’t strike me as particularly deceitful. I think what you see is what you get. Unless he is hiding someone with an ounce of joviality under all that woodenness.”

Evelyn frowned. “You don’t seem to hold him in particularly high regard.”

“I like him just fine.” Evelyn nodded approvingly and Varric’s smile broadened. “Just not as much as you do.”

“Why? Why did I let myself get tricked into this conversation?”

Varric gave her an innocent look and spread his arms out in an open gesture. “I don’t know what you mean. I’m just here to help.”

“And why do I feel like this is going to come back to haunt me?” Evelyn asked, but Varric was suddenly distracted.

“Maker, Cullen really is here,” he told her in a low voice, looking past her shoulder once more towards the door. “You didn’t actually use blood magic to summon him, did you?”
“Do you think I’m an idiot?” she scoffed.

“Absolutely not. Doesn’t change the fact he is walking over.” Varric waved at someone behind her.

Evelyn tutted and folded her arms. “I’m not turning to look. Not again.”

“Well you really should.”

“I don’t want to. A child wouldn’t fall for the same trick twice. Let it go.”

“Don’t you want to see those golden locks and that handsome look of unshakeable disgruntlement?” Varric asked her, voice growing quieter with each word.

Evelyn let out an annoyed huff. “Varric! What do you want me to say? I have absolutely no desire to see, nor speak to Cullen. Not now. Not any time soon. He is the last person I want to…to have anything to do with! There: are you happy?” Evelyn said firmly.

Varric’s eyebrows shot up and he gave an apologetic grin to the person standing behind her. “That’s a shame.” He slid from his seat and strolled away, his work clearly done for the evening.

“Oh,” Evelyn said, terrible realisation finally dawning, turning to see Cullen who looked in equal parts perplexed and uneasy, glancing at the door as if trying to decide if it was too late to leave. “Hello Cullen. Good to see you.”

“Is it?” he asked drily as Evelyn rapidly downed the rest of her drink.

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**Bonus scene: Still at the Tavern**

Cullen gave Evelyn a generously long moment in which to explain. “I should leave you,” he told her as she continued to stammer. There was something in him that wished to relieve her embarrassment, an instinct to help her in whatever capacity he was capable of, but his injured pride effectively quashed it. If his arrival at the tavern was so vehemently opposed, he was more than happy to leave. He had only come to speak to her. He had thought she may welcome speaking to him too.

A mistake, as it turned out.

“Wait!” she said with some urgency, though he hadn’t actually moved to leave yet. Cullen folded his arms. “Wait. Just wait. Sit?”

“Should I really impose myself?” He was being standoffish and he knew it, though he could hardly reprimand himself. It was not the first time a joke had been made at his expense but this was different…she was different. He had truly thought…

“Turnips,” Evelyn said very seriously. “It was turnips.”

“What?” A fool. She must think him a complete and utter fool.

“I was telling Varric that I want to start planting some turnips in the Skyhold garden but I don’t know much about growing them. He said: “You should ask Cullen about it” and I was just saying…very emphatically I admit, that you would be the last person in Thedas I would consult
“About... turnips.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Quick as lighting Evelyn chirped: “Oh, you do know about growing them? Are they frost tolerant at all?”

“No of course I don’t know about turnips.”

“See? Like I told Varric! So, we won’t discuss them any further. But do sit. Please.”

It was tempting, he had to admit. Her eyes were wide and imploring and there was something so obvious and intentional about the lie that it put him at ease despite himself. Maybe there was a reasonable explanation although she clearly had no intention of sharing it with him.

Turnips? Honestly? Cullen repressed a laugh. Maker, she really would try and talk her way out of anything wouldn’t she? Instead he held firm, frowning and said: “I don’t believe you.”

“Fine. It’s too complicated to explain: Varric was being a troublemaker. Don’t believe me on the turnips. But do believe I mean it in asking you to stay. Begging you really.” She crossed her hands over her heart in a show of solemn honesty and smiled disarmingly at him.

And though still a little wounded, he truly did believe her, especially as he sat down and she sighed with undisguised relief. “I’ve never much liked turnips actually,” Cullen told her as he flagged for a drink.

Evelyn laughed. “Never mind, I’ve already gone off the idea.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year and thank you to all who continue on this journey! Sigh, just when they were making progress right? Don’t worry: I’m sure she’ll talk her way out of it! ;
Chapter Summary

Hello to any regular readers! Just letting you know I added a little bonus scene to the end of last chapter so you may want to go back and read that before proceeding.

Deeply concerned, Cullen had left his office at the sound of wheels on the cobbles and confused yelling. He found Skyhold’s courtyard in chaos and the Inquisitor in the thick of it.

Evelyn and her party hadn’t been expected back for another two weeks at least but here they were, and with over half a dozen wounded Inquisition soldiers draped in the back of a wagon that looked better suited to transporting cabbages.

“Cassandra? What happened?” he asked, struggling to attract the attention of the woman who seemed in a hurry.

Cassandra tutted and didn’t pause, striding away from the scene. “You talk to her: she is being irrational.”

Cullen waded through the new arrivals, and those milling around assisting them, until he reached the Inquisitor. “What -?”

“Our camp was ambushed,” Evelyn told him, hardly glancing in his direction, frowning and waving the wagon through, signalling with a broad sweep of her arm to the surgeon. There were dark thumbprints under her eyes and she looking somehow much thinner than before she had left Skyhold. “This woman is bleeding internally. I have stemmed it to buy time but I’m not sure the source, if there is only one,” she told the surgeon who nodded. Evelyn kept on, pointing at different people. “This man has a knife wound: lower back, concussion here, an arrow wound and the head shattered: can’t find the other shards, she has lost an eye and I think the socket may be infected.”

“We’ll do what we can. Let me prioritise the cases.”

“Prioritise them? Where are the healers from the rebel mages?”

“They were sent to help the refugees in Redcliffe.”

“What?” Evelyn said with unconcealed fury. “All of them? Who authorised that?”

“You did,” the surgeon told her bluntly.

Evelyn took in a sharp intake of breath as if she had been kicked. “Maker! I did. Do what you can then.”

Evelyn stepped back so that the wounded could continue to be unloaded and wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist leaving a streak of fresh blood across her face.

“Are you alright?” Cullen asked and she looked at him startled as if she had forgotten he was there.
“Yes,” she said curtly, then she let out a frustrated sigh. “I wasn’t there. We set up camp and left the following morning. We thought the area had been cleared. All the intel said the area was cleared. I don’t…I thought we were thorough but we left them with a contingent of red templars at their backs. It was my fault, I wanted to press on. I rushed leaving.”

“It’s not –”

Evelyn cut him off sharply and with a dismissive shake of her head. “Don’t tell me it’s not my fault.”

“You’re being –”

“Don’t tell me I’m being irrational either.”

Cullen let out a breath. “You’re being too hard on yourself,” he told her but she wasn’t listening, watching the soldiers being helped from the wagon and chewing on the edge of her thumb anxiously.

“What was I thinking not leaving some of the healers here?”

“The refugees are in a dismal state. We all agreed they needed the assistance.”

“They need the assistance!” Evelyn hissed, gesturing broadly at the soldiers.

“Our resources are stretched thin. You’re doing everything you can…Evelyn wait.” He had never seen her so frantic and her lack of composure left him rattled. She must have been torturing herself with guilt and worry the entire trip back. And now she had fixed her gaze on a young soldier who had been helped as far as a tree stump and left to sit against it, doubled over in pain and clutching his abdomen. Evelyn assessed him from a distance before marching towards the surgeon.

“What about him?” she asked impatiently.

Unintimidated, the surgeon glanced where Evelyn was pointing and snapped back: “And who do you want skipped instead?” she said, pointing towards the other wounded, already being laid out on stretchers.

Evelyn moved closer and lowered her voice. “This is urgent. He’s worse than most of them, surely you can see that.”

“Exactly. We have to focus on those with the best chances, not the lost causes.” Evelyn looked as if she had been struck and the surgeon softened. “We’ll make him as comfortable as we can, just as soon as I get a spare minute” she told her, then hurried back to her charges.

Evelyn looked at the man still slumped against the stump, then back desperately at the surgeon who was ignoring her and busy unwinding a bandage. Knowing as he did, that Evelyn had basic competency as a healer, Cullen could see it coming a mile away.

“You’re exhausted,” Cullen said, stepping in front of Evelyn in a half-hearted attempt to block her.

Evelyn brushed past him. “I’m fine.”

“You can’t do everything,” Cullen called after her, with no small amount of exasperation.

“No, but I can do this,” she said with a familiar authority that reminded him why she was the Inquisitor. Evelyn knelt by the stump and the man raised his head to look blearily towards her.
“Bellin? Bellin? Hello,” she said, voice warm and gentle like she was greeting a shy child. He nearly was a child, Cullen realised, younger still than he had first assumed. Evelyn continued speaking: “Do you remember me? I’m Evelyn.”

Even through the pall of blood loss and pain Bellin’s face lit up at the sight of her. The man spluttered a laugh which left flecks of bloods on his chalky lips. “I remember you alright, Herald of Andraste.”

Evelyn laughed lightly too and Cullen smiled to see the patient so quickly put at ease by her presence. The amount of trust the troops had in her still astonished him. “Well done, that was just a test. I’m going to help you lay down alright? Make you a bit more comfortable.”

Cullen stepped forward belatedly to help but she managed alone, so slight was the young man. “Is there anything I can assist with?” he asked.

Evelyn turned to snap at him, hand already glowing with focused magic. “Back up and give me some space.”

Cullen didn’t need telling twice and promptly left, despite his reluctance. Evelyn was set on her course and there was no stopping her and certainly no helping her. It was part of what made her so formidable. It was part of what made her so frustrating.

It was hours until he saw her again. She entered cautiously through his office door and seeing he was alone, closed it but moved no further into the room. Cullen said nothing, leaning back in his chair and giving her an assessing look: the safest option as he attempted to gauge her mood.

“I wanted to apologise for being short with you earlier.”

“It’s not necessary.” Cullen waited to see if she had anything else to say but when she remained silent, leaning her back against the door, he continued: “I had the supplies salvaged from the camp audited for damage. Equipment requiring repairs is being attended to. Leliana has also been informed that sensitive documents or maps may have been looted by the enemy. I would like to attempt to recover them using soldiers already posted in the area but Leliana has suggested using the information they have to create a false trail and lay a trap. This of course, we can discuss later at the War Table.”

“Thank you.” Evelyn stepped closer and he was relieved to see in the light of his candles she looked more herself. Though still obviously tired, her frame seemed lighter and the nervous energy and adrenaline that had been sparking off her at her arrival had finally dissipated. Even as he concluded this she unexpectedly looked up and smiled, almost shyly at him. “What a mess.”

“No more than…everything else in Thedas currently.”

He was rewarded with another smile. “I’m just grateful I have people around me I can rely on to keep their heads, even when I lose mine.”

“You’re not…alone in this.” Evelyn looked at him for a long time, blinking and impossible to read, giving Cullen time to reflect on the stupidity of his own statement. Of course she was alone, in so many ways.

“I appreciate it,” was all she said in response, pushing back a strand of hair from her face with a slightly shaking hand. Without meaning too, or quite knowing what he intended, Cullen stood up, the suddenness of the movement startling them both. “I um, should speak to Leliana about what you said. About the missing documents,” Evelyn said quickly.
“You can speak to her later: get some rest.”

Evelyn smiled and raised an eyebrow. “I will speak to her and then get some rest. You sound like my old nursemaid. Next you’ll be telling me to take a wool wrap with me ‘just in case’ in the middle of summer.”

Well, that certainly hadn’t been the angle he had been going for but it was too late now. “It can get quite chilly when the wind picks up,” he told her seriously.

Laughing and rolling her eyes Evelyn began to retreat. “Noted,” she told him, fingers on the door handle.

“How is he?”

“Who?” she asked without turning.

“Your patient?”

“He didn’t make it,” she said and slipped out of the room.
Cullen had not been looking forward to it.

Frankly he had been dreading it.

Apart from the imposition on his schedule of the event itself, he had wasted precious minutes of his time trying (and failing) to formulate ways to avoid the damned thing. But he had skipped too many of these formalities recently and it was creating a regrettable burden on Josephine to make excuses.

While Cullen didn’t like Josephine’s work, he respected the significance of it enough to brave the dinner, this time at least. They were at the home of a noble, several days ride from Skyhold and Cullen, already seated in his assigned chair, was occupying himself by surveying the exits to the building and imagining different scenarios in which the gathering could be attacked. Though he and Leliana had already made extensive emergency plans using blueprints of the location before departing Skyhold, it was still helpful to familiarise himself with the reality of the situation.

Plus, anything that allowed him to imagine picking up a weapon and fighting his way out of this place was preferable to the small talk that people kept trying to engage him in.

Thinking of potential emergencies reminded him to check on the whereabouts of the Inquisitor who was naturally, always the primary concern. Evelyn was as she had been the last time he had looked: deep in conversation with a group of fawning guests. Telling an elaborate story, illustrated by wide hand gestures, much to the amusement of the onlookers who stared on enraptured, even lightly applauding her at one point. He couldn’t blame them: she had a way of monopolising his attention too when she spoke. No wonder Josephine prized her.

Evelyn always performed her part at these gatherings with equanimity, even when she would rather not be there. Her noble upbringing had clearly qualified her well for the tedious socialisation of her role as Inquisitor, even if she did claim to have been unacceptably wild in her parent’s eyes. Evelyn told him stories of escaping through windows and hiding in the forest overnight to avoid formal gatherings, arriving to greet guests with an intentionally ruined dress and of once releasing a fennec in the middle of dinner to induce chaos. It was hard to imagine, looking at the woman who was charming diplomats, nobles and staff alike, dressed in the kind of formal mage armour that someone who had never seen combat even from a distance would design. But somehow, instead of being rendered ridiculous, Evelyn managed to look dignified in it, even beautiful. And with just the barest whisper of power and danger hinted at by the military trimmings.

Yes, no wonder Josephine prized her.

Distracted momentarily by a servant who was trying to top up his wine glass, Cullen returned his gaze and was surprised to find Evelyn looking back at him. The man beside her was pointing and she nodded, before weaving her way through the milling guests. “Hello,” she said, slipping into the seat beside him. “Looks like we are to be dining companions. I must forewarn you: I’m a messy
Cullen was too cynical to be immediately pleased. Evelyn was *never* seated beside him at formal events. At Skyhold she was seated firmly amongst the guests of honour, and away from Skyhold always with the hosts. Anything else would conventionally be thought of as an insult. Perhaps Josephine sought to reward his participation and arranged it somehow, or perhaps it was the Maker intervening in a show of divine mercy. “Aren’t you expected to be at the beck and call of our magnanimous hosts all evening?”

“Not tonight. See that man over there?”

“The one covered completely in feathers? I wish I could unsee him.”

Evelyn laughed lightly and reprimanded him with a shushing sound. “Gaël Lucien Deschamps,” she said with some relish. “He is considered one of the greatest living actors in Orlais and supersedes me as the guest of honour tonight. And thus, I have been demoted to dine amongst the common folk it seems. No offense intended.”

“None taken. But I’m surprised an actor should be deemed of higher standing. Is the Inquisition’s controversy fading? I can’t imagine it.”

Evelyn shrugged. “They worship the arts in Orlais and I certainly don’t mind. Impending chaos and doom are only secondary apparently. My responsibilities are largely over for the night.” She let out a tired groan. “It’s such a relief honestly.” Evelyn had arrived straight to this event from a long week spent cleaning up a bandit stronghold in the Hinterlands. She couldn’t even make it back to Skyhold without being intercepted by a society event it seemed. Cullen held no envy for her situation.

“I sympathise but this is ridiculous. An actor is considered of more significance than you? Does Josephine know of this?”

“The plight of the Inquisition quite pales in significance compared to the spellbinding quality of a tragic monologue recited by Gaël. Or so I understand.”

“The more I witness of these social machinations the less I understand them,” Cullen said with a dissatisfied scoff.

Evelyn gave him a thoughtful look through narrowed eyes that immediately made him nervous. “You seem to strongly object to sitting beside me. Perhaps you are concerned I will embarrass you? Or frighten away potential suitors?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Cullen swallowed. “I am simply perturbed that Josephine impressed upon me the alleged importance of attending this event, only to discover that our presence here has been supplanted by a half-man, half-bird.”

Evelyn leaned close and lightly nudged him with her shoulder. “Oh, it does more good that you realise to be visible. Don’t be discouraged.”

“If you say so.”

“Next time we will all have to wear more feathers to compete for attention.”

“Over my dead body.”

“So, can you endure it?”
“Dying to avoid wearing a ridiculous costume?”

“No,” Evelyn laughed. “My company for the evening.”

“That? With pleasure,” he said with warm certainty. It may have been his imagination, or the dim lighting, but Evelyn seemed to flush and made some sudden adjustments to her hair.

“I was impressed to hear you would be in attendance actually,” she told him.

“I try to make an appearance at least one in ten of the events Josephine invites me to.”

“And this was lucky number ten?”

Cullen considered for a moment. “More like seventeen.”

“Poor Josephine,” Evelyn said, shaking her head but failing to hide a smile. She tilted her empty glass. “Where are those servants all of a sudden? I’m parched from speaking.”

“Have mine,” Cullen said automatically, shifting it across the table.

“Oh? Not drinking?”

“No.”

“I would have thought you would need all the help you can find to get through the night.”

“I’d prefer to keep my senses undulled,”

“To better enjoy the stimulating debates over whether velvet is in this season?”

“Obviously velvet is in,” he said, completely deadpan and Evelyn snorted. “And should some threat arise,” he added, with a vague motion of his hand around the room.

“What do you mean a pack of assassins descending on me from the ceiling? Or the kitchen cat mistaking Gaël for a sparrow and attacking him?”

“Either I suppose, though I confess: I would only seek to intervene in one of those scenarios.”

“I worry which now!” Evelyn said, and glanced with feigned concern up towards the ceiling rafters. Then she bumped her shoulder against his again, moving close enough that he could smell the perfume of her hair, powdery and floral. “Are you constantly on duty? Don’t you ever relax?” she asked.

“Not in a room full of insufferable strangers I am supposed to feign politeness towards.”

Someone caught her eye at that moment and she smiled and waved courteously, only to pull a disgusted face as they turned away for Cullen’s benefit and he chuckled. “When then?” she asked, carrying on their conversation.

“Do I relax?” Cullen made an evasive humming sound and tried to think of an answer that wasn’t focused around spending time with her: when they played chess together, walked together, when she came to his office for work and they went broadly off topic in conversation or even their occasional melee training sessions. “I like to read,” he finally said, and it was true enough, though he rarely took the time to do it for leisure and only when he could not sleep.

“Interesting,” said Evelyn, seemingly satisfied by the response before a look of alarm overtook her.
“Wait, look like you’re in conversation with me,” she said, swivelling in her chair to face him better, her knees brushing his leg.

“I am in conversation with you?”

“More in conversation with me,” she said, shifting even closer. “Really deep in conversation, like it would be rude to interrupt us.”

“That is quite specific.”

“Yes, but someone I really don’t like to is coming this way and…” Cullen automatically began to turn to see who she was referring to and Evelyn took a sharp intake of breath. “Don’t look,” she hissed, and grabbed urgently at his leg to get his attention. Cullen nearly shot through the ceiling. “Just keep talking.”

It would be a lot easier to think of something to say if she would take her hand off his thigh but ever determined to serve the Inquisition in whatever capacity he was capable of Cullen muttered: “If Gaël moves any closer to that candle I fear one of his feathers will catch.”

“You don’t sound too distressed at the prospect. It wouldn’t take him long to go up in flames. I almost think he’d do it on purpose, just for dramatic effect.”

“Someone would throw a slop bucket on him before he came to any real harm.”

“Surely,” Evelyn said, looking nervously from the corner of her eye for whoever she was trying to avoid.

“People did used to do that on purpose, when I was training as a Templar.”

Evelyn turned her full attention back to him in surprise. “Really? Set themselves on fire?”

“Not fully. Though it has been known to happen. In each Chantry there is a brazier that burns in Andraste’s memory.”

“I recall. But burning yourself in it seems a bit of an extreme way to commemorate.”

“It was meant to be cleansing. Some of the faithful would put their hands in it.”

Evelyn looked at him with scepticism. “Charred flesh and a blistering, pus-filled burn seems rather more messy to me than clean.”

“I’m not arguing in favour of it.”

“And did you partake?” she asked, glancing at his hands as if to check for tell-tale scarring and finally removing her own from his leg in the process, his tensed muscles relaxing.

“No. But as part of our training we had to periodically write our sins on a piece of parchment and burn them under supervision to seek atonement.”

“Did you have a lot of sins to cleanse yourself of Cullen?” Evelyn asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Often I had to make some sins up, just to meet the quota: ‘I coveted a fellow recruit’s bowl of stew’ or ‘I thought hateful things towards the instructor during morning drills’, that sort of nonsense.”
Evelyn pouted a little. “A disappointingly honest answer. And lying was probably a sin in itself.”

“I should imagine so.”

She leaned close again so she could look over his shoulder and half-whispered: “Ooh, I think he’s gone. I couldn’t bear speaking to him right now, I just couldn’t.”

“I thought the whole point of these things was to talk to people you don’t like?”

“If that’s the case we’re not doing very well are we?” she said sounding amused, her eyes glittering in the candlelight.

Cullen smiled. “Odd then that I seem to be enjoying it more this way.”

“Me too,” she agreed as the dinner gong was rung and more people began to filter to their seats.

Some days later…

Josephine was silent as Evelyn signed letter after letter, barely pausing to skim the contents of each. Her trust in Josephine was absolute: the woman could write that the Inquisitor was declaring herself to be at war with all nugs and that no one should wear the colour green in her presence and Evelyn would happily put her name to it with an: “if you think it best Josie.”

When her task was complete Evelyn stretched, back stiff from leaning over the desk. “Anything else you need?” she asked and Josephine surveyed her with steepled fingers.

“You enjoyed the dinner?” It sounded like an accusation.

“It was unremarkable, which is good by our standards,” Evelyn said with a shrug.

“Well I hope you two are satisfied with your performance. You made quite the impression.” Josephine was adopting a tone of reprimand but seemed too pleased for it to be taken seriously.

“What are you talking about Josephine?”

“I am just curious as to what you attempting to achieve. Trying to divert attention from Gaël Lucien?”

“Hardly: I appreciated the break from being the chief exhibit to be gawked at in the room.”

“But people never stop gawking at the Inquisitor, as you surely realise? I thought perhaps you were contriving to create a counter spectacle to that striking feathered ensemble. I only wish you would have forewarned me of the strategy.”

“What spectacle? I only spilled food on myself once. Twice? I behaved myself, didn’t I?”

“You certainly behaved. Behaved like a couple of smitten adolescents.”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes. “What is this about?”

“Tittering over your little jokes, sharing a wine glass, all but sitting in his lap at one point of the night I heard?” Josephine hardly needed to explain who she was speaking of.

“That is…ridiculous.” Flustered, Evelyn took a long breath to calm herself. “And did you witness any of this?”
“Not as such. But I did witness Cullen in a good mood which must be a first for this kind of event and evidently grounds for commentary in some circles.”

“Josie, you should be well aware how gossip gets exaggerated with every retelling. Rumours have me paired up and married to every person I briefly make eye contact with for Andraste’s sake.”

“I am well aware, and it was not my intention to accuse you of anything. Only…”

“What is it?”

“You should be aware how cosy the two of you look together sometimes. If you don’t want people to talk.”

“Cosy? Cosy! For having a conversation? What am I supposed to do? Ignore him? Pretend we’ve never met? Slap him if he presumes to look at me?”

“It is a warning only, so that you should not be caught off guard if a rumour or stray comment were to reach you.”

“It’s absurd!” Evelyn objected defensively, and more angrily than she had meant to.

“It was never my intention to offend you. I am not implying anything but you should know as well as I do that the way things are means nothing compared to the way things look. Just a friendly reminder,” Josephine said delicately, voice pacifying.

Evelyn huffed and pushed her hair back behind her ears. “I know this isn’t coming from you. And I can admit: I may have forgotten myself for a moment.”

“Forgotten yourself?”

Evelyn shook her head. “Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I remembered myself. Evelyn. Just Evelyn. I had forgotten ‘The Inquisitor’ for a moment.”

Josephine sighed and nodded sympathetically. “It is a more difficult role than Gaël Lucien could ever dream of performing and you do it beautifully.”

Embarrassed by the praise, by the whole conversation, Evelyn frowned. “It’s just…the scrutiny is frustrating. I can’t have a moment to… to…”

“Flirt with the Commander?”

“It was nothing,” Evelyn said quickly, real irritation making her voice sharp.

Josephine raised an apologetic hand. “Regardless, romance is an eternally favourite flavour in Orlais and this has become widespread. It is diverting attention from our more important messages.”

“Maker help me.”

Josephine made a consoling tutting noise. “But it will be old news, in a matter of weeks I dare say, with the first distraction that arises. Or distraction that I create. Not worth troubling yourself over further.”

“I just can’t begin to understand it. I spoke plenty to you as well that night yet there are no rumours?”
“Yes, but you and I do not look at each the way that you and Cullen do.”

Evelyn folded her arms. “Now you are implying something.”

“I’m not prying. As I said: I thought it would be preferable to hear it from me first.”

“Fine. Thank you. But don’t mention this to Cullen. The speculation would only upset him.”

Josephine looked appalled and reeled back from her desk. “Of course not! I would never be able to convince him to emerge into society ever again!”
Cullen had already decided she wasn’t in the stable and was about to leave when he heard movement from one of the stalls. Investigating, he found her tending to her favourite horse. Leaning on the stall gate to watch she looked up and gave him a quick smile in greeting before returning to her task. “There you are,” he said.

“Was I hiding?” Evelyn said with a laugh that made his heart leap for not having heard it for so many weeks. “Just giving this one a rub down. The roads were dusty.” She gave the horse a fond pat on the rump and the resulting cloud of dust attested to her statement. Cullen didn’t need to ask why she hadn’t just asked a groomsman to see to the job: she saw caring for the horse as the responsibility of the rider. As far as her schedule allowed, that is. In hindsight this should have been the first place he looked.

“People kept telling me you had arrived back and I was starting to think they were mistaken.”

“Someone else with a glowing hand waltzed into Skyhold and they just gave her my room and called her ‘Inquisitor’? Can’t say it’s not fine by me.”

“You’re not that easy to replace,” he told her firmly.

“Oh,” Evelyn turned to him with a worried look. “Oh dear. What’s that voice for?” Cullen simply continued to stare evenly at her. “The dragon. This is about the dragon, right?”

“Yes, the dragon. Had you forgotten?”

“No, no. It’s uh…it’s coming back to me.”

“Teeth the length of your arm? And emitting lighting by all reports?”

“That does ring a bell.”

“Yes, the dragon you engaged in combat recently. I understand during which battle it began bearing down on Dorian and you intervened by throwing a rock at it. You ran towards a dragon and threw a rock. You threw a rock at a dragon, in case it requires any further clarification.”

“It was lucky there were rocks about. My back up plan was my boot.” Cullen did not laugh and Evelyn seemed to wilt, giving him a guilty look. “You’re angry.”

Cullen let out a sigh and finally moved to pat the nose of the horse who was desperately stretching towards him for attention. “No, I’m not angry.”

“I think you might be.”

“Why would I be angry? You’re not a child.”

Evelyn, grimacing, looked unconvinced and returned to brushing down the flank of her horse, a little more urgently than before. “It was attacking travellers. Before it just took livestock, which was trouble enough, but it had started after people. Our soldiers were stationed dangerously nearby, children from Crestwood were being kept indoors –”

“Evelyn, I understand your justifications for wanting the beast despatched with. What I don’t understand however, is why this happened on what was scheduled to be a ‘scouting mission’.”
“I was worried you and the others would tell me not to if I made my intentions clear.”

Cullen felt his heart thudding more loudly as he struggled to read her expressionless face as she avoided looking at him. “Would it have stopped you if I had said no?”

Evelyn moved to the other side of the horse and Cullen heard a quiet “No,” in response, muffled by the bulk of the animal. Her head popped into view suddenly. “And would you?”

“What?”

“Have said no?” she clarified sounding suddenly irritated.

“Only because we have other priorities,” he told her brusquely and honestly.

“Ha,” Evelyn responded with heavy scepticism. There was a new tension thickening the air. Even the horse shifted uneasily as if it could sense the change and Evelyn made soothing, shushing noises as she brushed.

“I’m not immune to the suffering of the people of Crestwood, even not having been there as you were. I want to assure their safety as much as you do.”

“But?” Evelyn prompted, anticipating the rest of his statement and crouching to brush out the fine feathers of hair near the front hoof.

“However,” Cullen began begrudgingly, “The rest of Thedas is depending on us too. Depending on you. Unnecessary risks are…indulgent at this time, in light of the greater threat.” Cullen waited, wondering if he had offended her with his reprimand.

After what felt a lifetime, Evelyn stood, stretching her back with her hands on her hips. The horse abandoned Cullen and immediately turned to her, nosing at her with snuffles of enthusiasm. It became obvious why when Evelyn produced a small apple from her pocket. “Is this what you’re after?” Evelyn asked the animal with unmasked affection, resting her cheek against the horse’s neck for a moment. “You’re right,” she finally told him, still not looking at him. “But everything is a risk. I could fall off my horse or choke on a fish bone.”

“Riding a horse and eating supper hardly fall into the same category as starting an argument with a dragon.”

“And I could be taken by a stray arrow in combat any day of the week,” Evelyn said nonchalantly while fishing out another apple.

“Precisely,” Cullen said. “Highlighting why we should minimise the combat you participate in. I don’t mean wrapping you in cottonwool, just prioritising your exposure to only the most crucial of engagements.”

“But when we have the resources and the power to do something, to help people, how can we just walk away? People could have been killed and that would have been on my conscience.”

When Evelyn failed to produce any more food, the horse snorted and turned its attention back to nudging Cullen. “I’m not saying you did the wrong thing.”

“Then what are you saying exactly, Commander?” she asked with a mocking, sceptical tone.

“Only to be careful. But not as the Commander. As...” he trailed off, fumbling for words.
Evelyn looked taken aback, eyes widening. “Yes?”

“I…” Lost, Cullen gave her the desperate look of a drowning man, but it was not Evelyn who rescued him. The horse having nosed around his cloak let out a loud, frustrated snort that startled both of the people present.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Evelyn reached deep into her pocket and pulled out a final apple. “You’re right, I’m sorry. There was another one,” she told the horse consolingly, while it took an eager chomp of the fruit. “I’m in trouble with everyone today,” she finished, speaking more to the animal than to him.

“You’re not – I’m just glad you’re back. And reasonably unharmed.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn said, something softening in her voice as the horse noisily licked her hand. Cullen relaxed his shoulders. “Perhaps we shouldn’t discuss the matter any further.”

Evelyn smiled and nodded in agreement. “That may be for the best. Although I am curious: who told you about me throwing the rock?”

“If you honestly thought Sera would keep that quiet… I must know. Did you really yell ‘Oi scalebrains cop a load of this’ as you threw it?” Cullen asked, affecting a vague approximation of Sera’s accent for a moment.

Evelyn laughed and rolled her eyes. “What do you think?”

“I didn’t really believe it. But some part of me had hoped.”

Cullen moved aside and opened the stall gate for her as Evelyn pondered. “I think what I might have been saying at that point was ‘shitshitshit’ under my breath and then yelled ‘Watch the bloody tail!’ Is that too disappointing?”

“A little, but perhaps more appropriate given the circumstance. If you have the time, I would like to hear exactly how it transpired. From your perspective of course. Sera’s involved mounting the creature and flying about for a time.” Cullen told her as they moved towards the courtyard.

“Really? It won’t frustrate your finely-honed military sensibilities too much to hear of our chaotic, slapdash approach?”

“Improvisation is to be commended in some circumstances. I may learn something from this.” Evelyn stopped in her tracks to give him a pleased look. “That is very large of you to admit.”

“And you must never, under any circumstances, let Sera know,” Cullen insisted.
They had spoken at length that morning at the stables so he hesitated to stop her. Especially given she was so clearly on her way back to her quarters for the night. Except that she looked troubling dishevelled. Her hair was lopsided and falling from its fastening, he was pretty sure her coat was inside out and she was walking slightly bent over, as if in pain.

“Evelyn?” he asked carefully, trying not to startle her.

She looked about bewildered, staggered closer, and then snorted upon seeing him. “You,” was all she said, sounding a bit disgusted.

“Me?”

“Of course you’re here,” she snorted again.

“I left a reference book with Josephine earlier and was collecting it from her office.”

“How convenient.”

Cullen squared himself, a little baffled. “Are you implying I conspired to be here at this time in order to…intercept you?” Not this time. Other times yes, he had done exactly that, but not this time.

“So indignant!” she managed to splutter out before choking slightly. When she had finished laughing heartily, hand over her heart, Evelyn shook her head. “No, you didn’t conspire. The Maker cannot seem…to let me suffer one moment of indignity without a witness. And naturally,” she hesitated, stumbling over the pronunciation of the word, “Naturally, it would be you,” she clarified, jabbing in his direction with her pointed finger.

The laughter seemed to have set her off balance and she swayed slightly. Taking a step closer Cullen realised she was drunk. Quite drunk.

That would explain it.

With a bemused smile he offered his arm. “Given I am here, may I escort you the remaining distance to your quarters?”

“You might as well make yourself useful for once,” she said haughtily, taking his arm lightly as if she were doing him a favour. Upon attempting a single step, she immediately tripped and clung onto him, grabbing a fistful of his shirt in her panic as Cullen quickly reached to wrap a supportive arm around her. “Who put that there?” she asked him accusingly, staring at absolutely nothing on the ground in front of her.

Cullen chuckled. “I am not certain. However, should I happen to encounter the culprit I will be sure to see them imprisoned under the harshest of terms.”

“Very good then.” Looking up at him with a dazed expression, Evelyn became suddenly aware of their awkward embrace and shoved him half-heartedly away. “I’m doing fine. Stop fussing.”

“Yes, you’re doing fine,” he reassured her, taking her arm again when she seemed distracted, just in case she encountered any other imaginary trip hazards.

“I made it up the stairs alone.”
“Yes, you did.”

“I only fell four times,” Evelyn informed him proudly.

“That is…very impressive.”

“I did it on my own,” she told him again and then halted their slow progress forward and looked suddenly downcast, shadows on her face emphasised by the low light of the hall. “I have to do everything on my own.”

Feeling vastly underprepared for this sudden change in tone Cullen quickly tried to reassure her. “That’s not true. Josephine, Leliana and I are all here to support you in whatever capacity we can.”

Evelyn sighed and leaned heavily against him, staring down at her boots, then began babbling so rapidly he had to strain to understand her. “You don’t understand. I have to do everything! Something needs doing? The Inquisitor does it. The Inquisitor wants something? The Inquisitor has to be the one to go out and get it. Why can’t someone else do it for a change? Do they not want it too? Is that it? But I would really like it if someone else would just do it. I think they want to do it? But they never do anything.” She tilted her face upwards and looked expectantly, almost desperately at him. “When are you going to do something Cullen?” she asked and it was the most sober she had sounded yet.

Cullen became suddenly aware of how close she was to him, and how she seemed to be radiating heat. Evelyn tightened her grip around his arm. Her cheeks were rosy from the drink and her lips were stained burgundy from the wine. He cleared his throat, awkward in the face of her unflinching gaze. “Is this about the works you ordered in The Storm Coast? Because I’m expecting a report presently.”

Evelyn looked disappointed and sagged against him. “No, it isn’t about anything,” she mumbled, sounding exhausted. Confirming this she added: “I’m really tired,” and yawned. “I’m not surprised,” he replied sympathetically. They walked (staggered) in silence to the door leading to her quarters from the main hall and Cullen hesitated. “You had better come in. I’m not sure I am actually doing so well. I fell four times on the stairs outside.” There was no trace of pride this time, just weary resignation.

She was right: the stairs proved tricky as Evelyn kept dragging her feet. Giving up, Cullen all but lifted her up, hefting her step by step, arm bracing her around the waist. It would have been a lot easier if he had just picked her up properly and carried her the remainder of the way but he sensed her pride would trigger a protest were he to attempt it. At least this way she would allow herself to be helped.

He led (hauled) her to the edge of the bed which she immediately collapsed happily onto face first. Rolling onto her back, Evelyn groaned and covered her eyes with her arm. “Bull really insisted on celebrating the dragon kill properly…but the fourth round was definitely a mistake.”

“What makes you think that?” Cullen said wryly.

“The fact that the two after that was three too many,” she mumbled.

Cullen chuckled despite himself. “The drink evidently hasn’t impaired your wit.”

Evelyn removed her arm and smiled a slow, broad smile at him that made his chest feel like it was constricting. “You can go now, you and your judgemental frown,” she told him in a low voice.
“I’m not being judgmental.”

“But you are frowning. Go on, I’m fine now. You’ve enjoyed the spectacle long enough.” She raised an arm into the air and flapped her hand at him. “Shoo.”

Cullen tutted and raised his eyebrows which only made her flap her hand more vigorously. “Very well,” he said and began to leave.

“Unless…you want to stay and help me undress?” she asked coyly and for what felt like the ten thousandth time since they met Cullen had to wonder if she was actually flirting with him or just teasing. Either way it mattered not at that moment: she was completely soused.

“Good luck with that,” he managed to answer bluntly, despite the prickling heat rising up his neck. Evelyn let out a burst of cackling laughter. Cullen made for the exit, trying to appear unflustered.

“Thank you for your help,” she called as he reached the first step, not laughing now, her voice sincere, even a little sad, and once again he felt caught off-guard by the change in tone.

Cullen turned. Evelyn had sat up and was watching him go, perched on the edge of the mattress, rumpled clothes and hunched shoulders. She dropped her gaze to the floor. He was not accustomed to seeing The Inquisitor so vulnerable. Suddenly he didn’t like to leave. Suddenly he wanted to take her securely up in his arms again. He swallowed. “You should really drink some water: for your head tomorrow,” he told her, matter-of-factly.

Evelyn rolled her eyes and groaned. “Shoo!” she yelled once more before falling back onto the mattress.
Skyhold: Overtime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cullen had wondered if she might be busy, but the servant he had passed at the door had waved him in with confidence. He certainly hadn’t expected her to be in her robe, hair loose in waves about her shoulders, skin glowing in the dusky pinks of the sunset. Evelyn barely looked up as he walked in, scratching at a page with furious speed. “You look…” he began unguardedly.

“Extremely casual: I know and I am sorry.” He was glad she had interrupted him: he had been about to blurt out ‘beautiful’. She looked like a painting someone would have in Orlesian parlour, soft but still somehow self-possessed. Regal even. Cullen didn’t speak, waiting for her to finish whatever train of thought she was so frantically scrawling. Evelyn did a distinct, almost aggressive full stop and dropped the quill as if it were suddenly burning hot. “There. That should shut them up for one whole week,” she muttered, more to herself than him.

“Trouble?”

“Just self-important pests of minor nobles squabbling like boundary disputes matter when the rest of Thedas is falling to pieces. But Josie says we need them on side. Honestly this is a space the size of a chicken coop and they have shed blood over it already. What if I went out there and opened a rift over the patch of grass in question, hm? I would like to see them fight over who owned it then, with demons frolicking about and...” she broke off into a yawn.

Cullen, smiling at her disgruntled ramblings, attempted a serious expression. “Would you like me to arrange for Inquisition forces to claim and occupy the disputed area? A single tent should suffice.”

“I can’t tell if you’re serious or not but don’t tempt me. I’m truly so cross. I was about to get an early night too, a really early night, just before this arrived.” She shook the letter as if she hoped the nobles responsible might feel it. Cullen meanwhile, became suddenly self-conscious of the conspicuous papers he was carrying and shifted trying conceal them. She must have read his thoughts because she laughed and said: “That is kind but I can see them already.”

“It can wait.”

“I want you to stay,” she told him. Cullen reflexively tried to rub the back of his neck but had forgotten he was still holding the papers and stretched awkwardly instead. Oblivious to his discomfort Evelyn continued: “Besides, I’m too riled up now to sleep: we may as well go over whatever it is.”

“Very well,” he told her, “But let the record show I feel bad for it.” Worse than she could possibly know given this wasn’t even urgent and he had just wanted an excuse to see her. She had been back at Skyhold three full days and they hadn’t crossed paths yet except at a war table meeting. This was an act of desperation. A clumsy one, as it turned out.

“Truly Cullen,” she reassured him, “It will be refreshing to speak to someone rational. I need to restore my faith in humanity before I can even consider sleep.”

“I would be glad to be of service then, as best I can.”

Evelyn stood up, moving away from the desk even as he walked towards it. “No, I can’t sit there a
moment longer. Have you eaten?”

Cullen was suffering minor whiplash from the topic change. “Yes?”

“Well, you’ll be ready for dessert then.”

It sounded strangely provocative with her walking towards him, dressed as she was and he cleared his throat loudly and far too obviously. Evelyn gave him a sideways, perplexed look in response as she passed. Moments later she flomped down on her settee with a snort of satisfaction in what was possibly the least seductive manner imaginable.

Cullen attempted to moderate his thoughts. She deserved better. She deserved the respect her position entitled her to. He asked: “Would you like me to fetch something?” A walk would do him good.

“What? No. I just ordered some cakes and they always bring me enough for about eight people so it will be nice to have some help with them for a change.” She pushed herself more upright, gathering her hair back from her face, winding it and tucking it over one shoulder. “Otherwise my horse might actually refuse to let me on his back when I next need to leave Skyhold.”

His stomach sank a little at the thought. “Do you know when that will be?”

“Pardon?”

“When will that be?”

“What? Oh, leaving Skyhold? Not tomorrow, day after. Come over here will you? I don’t have the energy to yell across the room.” She patted the seat beside her and Cullen felt a small surge of panic that was born mostly of guilt. Would she be so at ease if she knew how he felt about her? She patted again then pointed at the papers he held. “I can’t read those from here either.”

Cullen relented and sat, leaving a strategic distance between them that he hoped was close enough to make it seem like he wasn’t trying to avoid sitting directly next to her without giving away that he would very much like to be sitting closer.

He was aware he may be overthinking it. Maker, who put him in charge of an army?

Evelyn, humming softly and wholly ignorant of his internal struggle, prised the papers from his hands when he forgot to give them to her. He sat rigidly while she read, skimming the first couple of pages then leafing through the rest. Suddenly she leaned over to bump her shoulder against his, jostling him. Cullen, who had been determinedly staring out the window turned to look at her in surprise. “This,” she said, rustling the papers in his direction, “Is incredibly boring.”

Cullen let out a startled laugh. “Had I known they would be insufficiently entertaining I would have brought you a novel instead.”

Evelyn put the papers on the floor and pushed them away with her foot. “Or you could just talk to me for a while?” she suggested with a beguiling smile.

“About what?” asked Cullen, whose traitorous mind had gone blank of all possible avenues of conversation.

She swivelled towards him with earnest enthusiasm. “About what it was like training to be a templar? How often did you take history classes? What kind of sparring exercises did you do? Did you ever go to the White Spire? Was the food good? Is it hot in the helmet?”
Amused, Cullen shook his head. “This again? It is fortunate you are a mage given your passionate interest in templar life. Did you spend all your time in the Ostwick Circle studying the templars there like research subjects?”

Evelyn gaped at him for a moment. “You really think I just happen to have some peculiar, lifelong fascination with templars…” she laughed, and patient smile not fading said: “If you were a farmer I would be asking a lot of questions about livestock care and crop rotations right now.”

“I don’t know anything about –” he began but she cut him off.

“Cullen. I’m not interested in templars: I’m interested in you.”

“That…” Cullen stammered. There was a knock, sparing him the need to answer.

The cakes had arrived and Evelyn busied herself assessing and ranking the options, filling her plate with practised efficiency.”Why do they even bother making these? Not even worth the chewing. These are nice if you don't mind lemon. Ooh, the jam ones!”

Cullen, never so relieved for the arrival of a servant in his life, was considering slipping the man an entire purse of gold the next time he saw him.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting close. Really. Truly. No, honestly. Just trust me. ;)
Thanks so much for reading - so good to have you on this journey with me!
Frowning, Evelyn considered her options, finally shifting a rook. She let out a huff of irritation when he chuckled at her choice. “What?”

“That was brazen.”

“You mean desperate.”

“Your strategy is your own,” he said with careful neutrality.

“There is nothing to this but blind panic, trust me.”

Cullen tilted his head and gave her a sceptical look. “I learned very early on in our acquaintance that you always have a strategy.”

“You’re making me sound devious.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “And I don’t necessarily mind it.”

“As if I needed confirmation…” he trailed off with a smirk, turning his attention once more to the game. She liked watching him slip into deep focus like that, the way he could give his full attention to something, applying an intensity that she felt her own easily distracted mind could only aspire to.

Chess was certainly good for concentration. He on the game, she on anything in the world but the game, her mind wandering in a peaceful, ambling way. Evelyn liked the long, thoughtful silences, the quiet conversation and most of all the way she could stare at Cullen and pretend she was only trying to discern his next move.

It was her turn again and he looked up at her, endearingly pleased with himself. Evelyn scrunched up her face as if disgusted. He laughed. “Stop trying to distract me.”

“It’s all I have to fall back on right now,” she said truthfully and shoved another piece across the board almost at random. Cullen made the slightest jerking motion and Evelyn knew that she had definitely lost the game already.

“That was either reckless or genius.”

Evelyn abruptly changed the subject without even realising she was about to do it: “Why were you always so forgiving of my clumsy attempts to expose you as some kind of mage-hating fanatic? I am amazed you held your temper. I was so…”

Cullen, after a moment of surprise at her outburst, smiled and moved a pawn. “Persistent?”

“That is a tactful way of putting it.”

“Where has this come from all of a sudden?”

“Me ‘always having a strategy’. Being devious. Persistent. Your words.”

“Don’t tell me I’ve hurt your feelings?” his tone was light but a flicker of concern passed over his
“Not at all. I was just reflecting,” she gave him a reassuring smile and found herself holding his gaze for a long moment as she considered. “I admit, I was a little single-minded in targeting you. I’m not sure I’ll ever understand how you let me get away for so long being so…impertinent.”

She expected a laugh. Instead, he let out a heavy sigh, expression clouding over. “I was ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” Evelyn let out an involuntary bark of laughter. “Ashamed of what? I was wrong, I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“Your assumptions about what a templar is, everything you alleged…They are what I was. Once was.”

Evelyn waited expectantly for the punchline, for him to explain the joke. “Not you,” she said quietly when he did not speak but Cullen flinched as if she had yelled. Uncertainly, Evelyn moved a pawn, more to give herself something to do than to pursue any kind of strategy.

“You know that I was Knight Captain in Kirkwall. A templar does not rise to that rank accidentally.”

“I know that you turned against your superior to do what was right: to protect innocents.”

“Barely,” Cullen said curtly.

“I don’t understand.”

Cullen exhaled impatiently. “You’ve been given the abridged version of events: the bard’s version. There were actions I should have taken sooner. Things I was blind to when I should not have been. Much suffering could have been avoided if I had only…” he looked at her searchingly, “risen above my own prejudice sooner.”

The conversation had taken an unexpected, confusing turn and Evelyn deeply regretted raising the matter at all. “We all see differently with the benefit of hindsight,” she tried to reassure him.

But there was no clawing back the serenity of earlier. Cullen let out a frustrated groan in response. He picked up one of his bishops. “This was different,” he said, and placed the chess piece down firmly on a new square.

“How so?”

“In your teasing, you painted a portrait of a templar who would lash out at the slightest suspicion, who distrusted mages unduly. Someone who would value pre-emptive action over fair judgements, and caution over justice, even if it destroyed lives.”

“I never meant to accuse you of anything. Then or now. It was just nonsense, honestly Cullen. I feel awful for bringing this up.”

“You shouldn’t,” he said firmly, watching impassively as she moved a pawn in a way that she suspected was against the rules but wasn’t well versed enough in them to be certain. “I’d rather you know, than be misled by a false idea of who I am.”

“You never gave me cause to behave the way I did. I was too hard on you.”

“Yet there was cause, whether you knew it or not.” Evelyn leaned back from the table slightly.
There was vitriol in his voice.

There was a lot she wanted to say. And there was much she wished to ask, endless questions so she could try to comprehend the two disparate versions of the man: the one she knew and cared for, and the impossible one he was alluding to… a stranger, who would have looked at her and seen only a potential threat to be treated cautiously and held at a distance.

Questions bubbled fretfully in her mind but when she looked at him and saw what his honesty had cost him, her questions faded away.

“It doesn’t matter to me who you were then.”

In response he only looked more burdened, shoulders lowering under an invisible weight. “You shouldn’t try to forgive what you don’t understand,” he said in a low voice.

Evelyn reached across the table, placed her hand over his as he reached to select his queen. He froze, and fixed his gaze not on her face but where their hands joined. “Now is not the time to discuss it but I hope that you understand that I will be willing to hear whatever you have to say, whenever that time comes.”

Cullen carefully lowered his queen, moving his hand away from her touch. “That is more than I deserve.”

Unsure of how to respond to that Evelyn attempted to plot her next move, studying the chess table with some considerable focus. “I’ve completely lost track of this game,” she said, laughing a little and then quickly finding she couldn’t stop. Cullen sat suddenly upright, and gave her a baffled look. Finally, he laughed to.

“Shall we call it a draw?” he asked.

“I mean, obviously I was about to win, but sure: a draw it is,” she said, affecting an aloof manner as he let out a derisive snort but restrained himself from disagreeing further.

“As you say Inquisitor,” he said, shaking his head slightly and smiling warmly at her.

Delighted he seemed more himself again, Evelyn tried hard to quash the tiny, fluttering unease that lingered in her gut.

Chapter End Notes

She is chipping away at those walls of his...if he would just stop being so stubborn... I think I have majorly rewritten this chapter more times than any other in this fic so I am putting this up now to get rid of it so I can move on to editing and writing others. The full on fluff spectacular will be back soon too I promise. Thanks for reading as always! :)
Distracted by her tumultuous thoughts, Evelyn dressed quickly, tugging her clothes on roughly, not bothering with all the fastenings.

There was no plan. If she tried to plan anything, she would only lose her nerve. But Evelyn had woken inspired by a strange kind of reckless determination and had resolved to seize on it.

She pulled on her boots, getting them the wrong way around the first time and becoming irrationally frustrated over it, throwing the offending boot across the room before having to fetch it.

Perhaps the timing wasn’t the best, to attempt to broach the subject now? After all, she was leaving Skyhold tomorrow, as they were all scheduled to discuss in this coming meeting. She scrunched her hair up and out of her face carelessly, forgetting to brush it first. Or maybe that made now the perfect time. That way if things went poorly and she was humiliated, she wouldn’t have to face him for weeks…

No. That kind of thinking was counterproductive. Evelyn reprimanded herself for stooping to it as she left her quarters. If she submitted to her doubts again and failed to do this, the whole exasperating cycle would start over: she would arrive back at Skyhold and there would be valid reasons for her and Cullen to meet. Then they would begin to formulate more flimsy excuses to spend time together: the pointless revisions, the obviously fabricated ‘urgent’ questions and with those came the brief touches, the long looks, the undeniable tension and then…she would have to leave again and they would start from scratch at the same awkward distance the next time she returned.

Evelyn pushed through the door to Josephine’s study but it was empty: her advisors must already be gathered without her. She picked up her pace, still strategizing, but not about the forthcoming War Table meeting as she probably should.

The next time she had him alone she was going to say…something. Drop all the clever wordplay, and the subtle hints, and the flirting-that-could-be-joking. Evelyn was going to make her growing feelings, inescapably clear to him whether he welcomed them or not. Yes, she was resolved, the very next time they were alone she would do it or else she would demand Dagna have ‘coward’ branded on her forehead.

Evelyn entered the War Room there he was: alone, smiling broadly at her and suspecting nothing. She froze and her stomach dropped in sudden panic. “Where are they?” she asked faintly.

“Josephine and Leliana? I don’t know. We can send a messenger out to them if you are in a hurry,” Cullen said, reaching for a piece of parchment.

This was…a bit sooner than she had expected but she had promised herself: the next time she was alone with him. It was now or never. “No, it’s fine. Good actually.” Cullen looked up at her curiously, confusion furrowing his brow. “I was hoping we could speak,” Evelyn finally said, conscious off the fact she was staring at him and somehow managing to sound much more grave than she had intended.

“Oh?” Cullen said, looking suddenly uneasy. He had either clued in to her intentions or thought she
was about to have him executed. It was difficult to tell, based on her less than smooth start. “Speak?” he added, as if it was the first time in his life he had encountered the concept.

Evelyn swallowed. It was less than encouraging.

Still, there was no turning back. Conscious of the lack of time, Evelyn closed the door and got straight to the point. “I wanted to tell you… I enjoy spending time with you. More than enjoy it.” It was something. It was a start. It was what she should have told him weeks ago.

“It means a lot to hear you say that,” he said sincerely but his frown deepened nonetheless.

She let out an almost inaudible, impatient hiss. “But your face tells me you doubt it. Cullen, do you think me stupid?”

He looked at her with surprise. “Of course not.” She was circling the war table, moving gradually closer to him and he had noticed, shifting his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Then why do you act like I couldn’t possibly know my own mind?”

He turned his gaze and focused on the war table. Evelyn recognised that he was fortifying himself, mounting his internal defences. “There is much to take into consideration. I would not wish to be the cause of any regret –”

“This,” she gestured broadly between them, “whatever it is, has been going on since we met. I am not being rash about it, am I?”

“At times you can be very rash,” he reasoned.

That she couldn’t deny. “But not right now I’m not. Trust me if I were being rash this conversation would be going very differently.” It would be significantly less verbal for a start, Evelyn thought. If only she wasn’t so concerned about frightening him away. Maker give her strength!

“There is your position as Inquisitor to consider: I would not wish to compromise it.”

There were a lot of positions Evelyn would like him to compromise her in. She tilted her head, examining him, chewing at her lip in frustration and then let out a sigh. “Never mind. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. Just sometimes…I feel like I’m seeing something that isn’t there.”

“You’re not,” Cullen said quickly. Surprised by this flicker of assurance from him, Evelyn’s breathe caught in her throat and she waited expectantly, heart thrumming, but he lacked the will or the courage to continue.

No, it was not a lack of courage, she could see that now. It was as if two parts of him were at war with one another. She could see how tense he was, gripping the edge of the table with one hand, and yet, he did not back away from her even as she moved closer still.

He was deeply conflicted and Evelyn was frankly sick of trying to find the words to reassure him. She reached out, put her hand against his cheek, used it to gently turn his face towards her. Cullen’s troubled expression immediately softened. He opened his mouth as if he were about to speak but said nothing. Evelyn took a final step towards him, so that there was only a hairsbreadth of space separating them. So close she could see the flecks of gold in his eyes. He swallowed. “Evelyn –” he started, his voice hoarse.

Voices from the corridor leading to the War Room. Josephine speaking animatedly and Leliana laughing. Evelyn withdrew her hand, fingertips brushing against stubble, and stepped away,
retreating to the opposite end of the room. She watched as Cullen let out a groan and leant against the war table with both hands, rolling his shoulders and stretching out the tension in his neck.

As the meeting commenced, Evelyn remained flustered and tried to look busy reading notes that may as well have been in elvish for all she could comprehend. While Josephine was reeling off the names of nobles who had pledged allegiance to the Inquisition, Evelyn chanced a glance in Cullen’s direction only to see him quickly looking away from her. Knowing he had been caught, he tilted his head to towards her, hint of a smile on his lips. It was Evelyn’s turn to look away smiling, the pink rising in her cheeks, stuttering when Leliana asked her a question.

Maybe she was mistaken, maybe she was just dreaming it (because really the whole conversation couldn’t have gone much worse) but almost impossibly, that had felt like progress.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know: I’m the worst! Worse than Jim! I wallow duly in my shame at treating you all thusly.
Some hours later…

He didn’t seem surprised to see her when she knocked, placing down his quill without speaking, looking at her steadily across the room. Evelyn tried to convince herself that this was a good sign.

“Are you busy? Or is that a stupid question?” she asked, keeping her voice light, trying to sound casual.

“No more than usual, and your questions are never stupid.”

Evelyn let out a derisive snort. “Debatable. As long as I’m not disturbing you then?”

“No at all.”

Evelyn rested her hands on her hips, felt uncomfortable, let her arms drop to her sides then folded them instead. “I wasn’t sure if you would be glad…I thought you may not wish to see me.”

“That would be a first,” he answered without hesitation.

Evelyn smiled despite herself before adopting a look of scrutiny. “Is this flattery because of the budget request you raised in the meeting?”

“It is not,” he said simply, his face still unreadable and his gaze direct. Evelyn’s neck suddenly felt very hot.

“Fresh air,” she told him. It was not a question. He raised an eyebrow at her and she made a beckoning motion at him. “Come on: you’re the one who told me you find those meetings suffocating. I know you must be longing for a walk.”

He laughed. “You remembered that?”

“Unless it has changed and you now love being locked in for hours discussing the minutiae of politics and intrigue? Because by all means, I can see to organising more meetings for you.”

“Maker have mercy. Don’t jest on the matter.”

“Then come and walk with me?” Evelyn left the ‘or else’ implied.

He looked at her, then back at his papers, and when they offered him no rescue, he relented and followed without further hesitation: a small victory. Somehow, Evelyn rationalised, a change of scene might be helpful, especially if it took him out of his own territory, with that defensive barricade of a desk between them.

They emerged blinking into the bright daylight, Cullen immediately taking a deep, grateful breath and stretching his arms. It was a clear day, and while the sun was warming, a crisp breeze made the flags hanging from the battlements twist and snap.

Cullen gave her a concerned sideways glance that she pretended not to notice. “I must apologise for leaving after the meeting without speaking to you.”
“Your exit was a little abrupt.”

He gave her another guilty look. “I needed a moment to think.”

“You’ve had a lot of moments to think already,” Evelyn told him dryly.

“I know.”

Evelyn looked out over the mountains, but quickly had to turn away, the glare from the snow making her eyes water. “Sometimes you act like you’re scared of me.”

“Your control over your capabilities as a mage is excellent. I have no concerns—”

“You know that isn’t what I mean,” she said, cutting him off.

“I suppose I do,” he said, with resignation.

“Then what is it? That is troubling you?”

“I am unaccustomed to the prospect of – I had not allowed myself to consider…”

Evelyn looked at him with an offended jerk of her head. “You’ve never once thought on it?” she asked impatiently.

“I do think on it, on you, to the point of distraction,” he answered quickly, and possibly with more honesty than he had intended judging by the blotches of red forming high on his cheeks.

It gave Evelyn a moment of pause and she failed to respond immediately, her flash of irritation dissipating into immediate embarrassment. Embarrassment and hope. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It seemed impossible. You’re –” he stopped speaking as they passed a soldier who was keeping watch. Cullen cleared his throat. “It’s a nice day,” he attempted, voice uncharacteristically high as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“What?” she replied, unimpressed by his heavy-handed attempt to change the topic. Oh no, he was not getting out of this that easily. She was going to settle this. They were going to settle this.

And she was trying to be patient as they spoke. As she reasoned out his doubts with him, assured him for the thousandth time, watched him grapple with the unfamiliar concept of being judged and found worthy.

She was trying. Truly. But her inner voice was begging her to start screaming in his face at the top of her lungs and just shake him until he saw sense. Instead, she nodded thoughtfully as he spoke in broken sentences and only ventured so far as to touch his arm reassuringly.

Still he hesitated. This was beyond patience. This could take forever. If it ever happened at all.

No. Something had to happen. Evelyn had had more than enough of his handsome face and amiable conversation. Of his endearing awkwardness when she flirted with him, and the unexpectedly charming responses he would occasionally catch her completely off-guard with. And she was sick of his sharp humour, and his hearty laugh that was rare but so contagious it would leave her giggling uncontrollably. And of his kindness, his thoughtfulness and genuine concern for her. Not for the Inquisitor: for her.

It wasn’t fair that he should be allowed to be so bloody attractive. And it wasn’t fair that he should
look at her the way she sometimes caught him doing and then just waltz off and leave her with nothing. Nothing! If this thing between them wasn’t going anywhere, she was going to start making him wear a hessian sack over his head in her presence in an effort to preserve her sanity. Evelyn may be the Inquisitor but she was only human and there was only so much she could endure of that smirk he sometimes deployed with devastating effect, leaving her weak-kneed and slightly winded. Did he even realise what he was doing to her? Was it intentional? Was he a sadist?

No, he was stuttering way too much for sadist. Where was he going with this? Was he…?

Evelyn’s mind went momentarily blank, the inner monologue finally silenced and replaced by something like the sound of the ocean, a deafening rushing in her ears as Cullen moved towards her, backed her against the parapet, put his hands on her hips. She felt the heat of his palms even through the fabric of her tunic. Her stomach fluttered with anticipation as he…suddenly backed away, turning to scowl at the source of the interruption: some messenger that she intended to personally maim later with whatever weaponry was available. Her bare hands if it came to it. Evelyn’s racing heart could have blackened and shrivelled in disappointment. She swallowed a lump in her throat.

Could they not have one moment to speak privately without a someone bursting in and ruining it? Evelyn wasn’t particularly superstitious but maybe this was a sign. A sign to stop trying so hard. If he wouldn’t…

Maker he was kissing her. He was kissing her? Her body rigid with shock, it took a moment for Evelyn to react before she melted against him, letting out an encouraging hum. Coming to her senses she ran her hands up his back, drawing him closer as he cradled her face in his hands, deepening the kiss.

Caught unprepared, she was breathless when he pulled away, her eyes fluttering open. Cullen dropped his hands, began to speak, hesitantly, his voice hoarse. Evelyn quickly sought to reassure him with another swift kiss, right on the scar across the corner of his lips. Finally, he returned her smile and she could see her own relief mirrored in his eyes. He gently held her by the waist, sighed her name like a prayer before resting his forehead against hers. Months of uncertainty and frustration felt worth it at last for even this one moment of blissful contentment. Evelyn closed her eyes again, leaned against him and held on tightly, trying to memorise it all.

Chapter End Notes

Hope this deviated enough from the game without deviating too much if that makes sense… I did replay it a few times, strictly for research purposes. I hope you continue to stick around - plenty more to come!
“Well, spit it out. You’re driving the rest of us mad. Madder than we were to begin with that is,” Dorian said as he joined her on the rocky outcrop she had scrambled up.

Evelyn, who had been examining the horizon hoping to spot the dragon rumoured to be in the area, gave him a confused look. “Spit what out?” she asked, startled by his arrival.

“Whatever the matter is,” he said deliberately slowly, as if it were obvious.

“Nothing’s the matter? I’m fine. I want to see the dragon.”

“Why then, did Varric ask me to come and check you weren’t planning on pitching yourself off the edge of this cliff?”

“Excuse me?”

“You clearly want to talk about it or else you wouldn’t keep drawing attention to it.”

“What is drawing attention to what?”

“Your face.”

“Is?”

“Flickering between looking like you’re about to burst into song and then into tears.”

Evelyn folded her arms defensively. “My face? Seriously? Of all the crimes I have been accused of this must surely be the strangest! I’m guilty of thinking as we walk and that is suddenly intolerable for you all? Could it be too obvious to suggest that if my face is the cause of such distraction that you choose to look elsewhere and leave me alone?”

“And if I needed any further confirmation something was wrong, you’re getting flustered and babbling.”

“I’m not getting flustered! I’m getting annoyed at you for being…maddeningly nonsensical.”

Dorian tutted. “Red as a fresh boiled beetroot. Which I understand is considered a Fereldan delicacy actually.”

“I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to foster intrigue for your own amusement.”

“I’m not the one moping about like a lovelorn maiden from a ballad. That tends to invite comment you know.”

“I’m not lovelorn,” she dissolved into spluttering protests before attempting to compose herself. “Could anyone blame me for having a lot on my mind? The world is sort of ending in case it had escaped your notice.”

“No, I know what you look like when you’re thinking about Corypheus. It’s more…” he adjusted his expression into a kind of snarl which made Evelyn laugh despite herself. “This is something else. This is more…” he clasped his hands together and stared off into the distance wistfully, fluttering his eyelashes and completing the impression with a sigh.
“I don’t look like that! You’re being ridiculous.”

“Come now, you can share with me. Truthfully, I never joined the Inquisition to save the world from certain catastrophe. No, I joined it in the sole hope that I could counsel you on your relationships. I’m quite the expert in the field of romance. Helping people with their love life is both my enduring passion and my speciality.”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes at him. “Really?”

“No,” Dorian said with a scoff for added emphasis. “Not in the slightest, couldn’t be less interested frankly. I am however, the only person on hand presently, so you can talk to me or you can continue to torment yourself in moody silence.” Dorian tutted. “And everyone else in the process.”

“Fine!” Evelyn chanced a look over her shoulder in the direction of the camp to ensure that no one else had decided to creep up and share in her embarrassment. “Fine,” she said again, more wearily.

“Really? That easy? I pray the fate on the Inquisition never rests on you not giving in to questioning.”

“I can tell you aren’t going to let this drop. Do you want to listen or not?”

“An interesting dichotomy of options,” he said, pondering with a few scratches of his chin. “Speak then,” he added quickly when he could see he was pushing his luck too far.

“It’s Cullen.”

“Well I knew it wasn’t knitting. Go on. What has he done?”

“He hasn’t done anything. Well he has. Kind of. In a manner of speaking…It was…He…”

“In the common tongue please? Or Tevene if you can manage it. Maybe just trying starting with a full sentence.”

“We…kissed.”

Dorian let out an unnecessarily exaggerated gasp then proceeded to clutch at his chest. “When you are yet unwed? Scandalous.”

“Oh, be serious.”

“Let me enjoy this even if you won’t. It has been a long time coming. A long, long time.”

“We are taking things slowly,” Evelyn said curtly.

“Any slower and I would be concerned we were falling into another time warping rift.” Evelyn was not amused and Dorian spent some time studying her troubled expression. “But you are not pleased by this…liaison?”

“I am, of course I am. I just don’t know where to go next.”

“Perhaps Cassandra could lend you a copy of Swords and Shields if you need a guide to the particulars? Not fine literature by any standard, but it could be instructive in this instance. Things get particularly detailed late in Volume Three when they’re hiding in a cave after being caught in a storm and -”
“Obviously that is not what I mean,” Evelyn said, frowning. “Just… it happened -”

“‘IT’ happened,” Dorian said with a snigger. “And how did it happen? Did he suggest a course of action to you in a military brief ten days in advance? Was there a recommended field of engagement? Did he assign resources and specify required personnel?”

Evelyn, realising the conversation would not progress unless she forced it to, chose to ignore him. “We kissed and then not twelve hours later I was on horseback riding away and I didn’t even get a chance to speak to him again.”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “You two do enough speaking: roaming endlessly about the ramparts, hogging the chess table, cosying up over reports for hours on end. What could you possibly have left to talk about? Have you not yet covered every topic imaginable twice over?”

“Topics like whether he finds the idea of being with a mage repellent?”

“Ah.” Evelyn remained silent. “Obviously he doesn’t or….” Dorian gestured at her.

“I know. Or at least I think I do. Did. Perhaps he has been conflicted and now regrets it.” Evelyn sighed, her shoulders lifting and falling in resignation. “I could have accepted it easily if he had despised me from the very beginning but if he turned on me now… I don’t think I…”

“It would be wise, I think, to let the man speak for himself instead of putting words in his mouth from a hundred miles away.”

She let out a little self-conscious laugh. “I know. You’re right. I just wanted to ready myself for the worst-case scenario, in case it is reality.”

“In case he is a complete and utter fool you mean.”

Evelyn made a broad gesture with her hands. “There is more to it than that. If we had met at a different time, or under different circumstances…”

“He might have been herding you back into your cage and sliding you a bowl of cold gruel each evening you mean?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Ostwick Circle wasn’t like that as I have told you. How did you even persuaded me to go into this? You wouldn’t understand: it’s complicated.”

“I understand complicated pretty well as it happens. ‘Complicated’ and I are more than acquainted.” Dorian snapped. Evelyn flushed a little and gave him an apologetic look. “I just don’t think this is as complicated as you are telling yourself.”

“If you say so,” she said, mollified but not entirely convinced.

“If it were but as obvious to the two of you as it is to everyone else,” Dorian said quietly, turning his head away so his voice was lost in the wind.

“I didn’t catch that last bit.”

“I said that it will be nice when we do less walking. Walking leaves too much time for thinking. Fighting things is what you need to perk up,” he told her enthusiastically.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Bull! Honestly, fighting things as a cure-all?” Evelyn laughed after her initial shock.
“There: a laugh! Back to your old self.”

“What, come on! I was fine before and I am fine now. You’re making me seem pathetic.”

“No, you definitely were moping and I, with my usual grace, insight and tact, have rescued you from your self-destructive misery.”

“You are not taking credit for this! There is no ‘this’ to take credit for!”

Dorian feigned surprise. “You’re denying my almost supernatural ability to console the lost souls of this world? How extraordinary.”

“I’m not a lost soul. You’re the one making an issue out of all of this.”


“Do you see this? How I am walking away from you now? Do you?”

“You’ll thank me one day. They all do!”

“I’m gone. I am away now! Stop talking please!”
Evelyn’s return to Skyhold was, as ever, impossible to miss. Even if he failed to overhear the excited greetings being yelled from the battlements directly outside his office, there was something about news of the approaching Inquisitor that sent the entire stronghold into a flurry of activity at least a full day before her arrival. Everyone from the engineers, to the soldiers, to the cooks seemed to rise to the occasion, attending to their tasks with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. A greater cynic than he might suggest they were simply trying to look busy for when their leader arrived, but the mood was far too celebratory for Cullen to think that.

In contrast, after long weeks of unrelenting work serving wholly as a distraction from Evelyn’s absence, for Cullen the first shouts of recognition from the Skyhold watch meant he could finally put down his quill and breathe out in relief.

He could still hardly comprehend what had happened on the battlements. What he would have given to speak to Evelyn again before she left but their last exchange had been a brief, impersonal wave as she had ridden out and Cullen had no intention of waiting a single moment longer than necessary to see her again. He had spent far too much of their time together foolishly waiting already. Thank the Maker she hadn’t given up on him. How had she not given up on him? Perhaps he should write to the Chantry to let them know of this miracle.

Evelyn had not written ahead to warn of a matter that urgently needed discussing at the War Table which meant he knew exactly where she would go.

The stable was empty when Cullen arrived but Evelyn appeared only moments later, walking very slowly, encouraging her horse with gentle clucking sounds. She stopped still and let out a quiet ‘Oh’ of surprise when she realised he was there. Cullen immediately forgot not only what he had been planning to say, but every single word in the common tongue. Both frozen, they stared at each other in bewilderment for a long minute until Cullen came to his senses and moved towards her.

Evelyn immediately broke into a wide smile that seemed to wash over him and erode away all his doubts and fears in an instant.

Or nearly all his doubts and fears.

“I wasn’t planning on seeing you until I was a little more composed,” she told him, dropping the reins and rushing forward to return his embrace.

Her face was grimy and she smelled of horse sweat and the coppery tang of blood. “I don’t mind,” he murmured into her hair.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, leaning back and looking up at him.

“You are – I –” he swallowed. “I was…worried you might have changed your mind.”

“Hush,” Evelyn said, touching a finger to his lips before pulling at his cloak and standing on her toes so she could kiss him, swiftly and decisively. She pulled away, resting her hands against his chest and gave him a fond look that sent a rush of warmth throughout his entire body. “I didn’t force everyone to ride hard for three days straight just to endure nonsense from you.”

She kissed him again and when there was opportunity, he smiled and murmured: “You’ve convinced me.”

“Good. Thoroughly, I hope.” Evelyn held his hand for a moment then returned to the horse and he
realised she was still moving very slowly. Sluggishly even. As she bent slightly to grab the reins, he saw an unmistakable flicker of pain pass across her face.

“Evelyn, are you hurt?” he asked, automatically moving towards her.

“Unfortunately I got a little graze from getting too close to the melee, just like you told me not to.” She put her hand to her side to indicate where the wound was.

“How badly?”

“It is bandaged but I think it will need stiches,” she said with a grimace.

“Then it can’t wait. It should have been done in the field,” he said, concern making his voice brusque.

“Don’t overreact: it’s fine.”

“Evelyn,” he said warningly.

There was a long pause and her face twisted in consternation. “I really dislike getting stiches.”

“No one likes getting stiches: it is a necessary medical procedure, not a fun fair.”

“You don’t understand. I really don’t like it.”

“I’m not following.”

“It’s the needles: I find them a bit unnerving. Quite terrifying actually,” she finally admitted.

Cullen gaped at her in disbelief. “You have fought dragons.”

“Exactly. Dragons can be fought.”

“You’re going to the surgeon.”

“You know what? I actually don’t think it is that bad after all. I probably just need a good night of sleep.”

“We’re going. Now.”

“But…” Evelyn said but could mount no further protest. Cullen strode to the courtyard where the groomsmen were tending to the other horses and sent one to the stable to care for Evelyn’s mount. He knew she would refuse to be seen to until her horse was looked after.

Then came the more challenging part: herding Evelyn to the surgeon. She grumbled all the way.

“And you’re going to escort me? Like a prisoner? Really?”

The surgeon, with whom Evelyn had a friendly but markedly argumentative relationship, greeted their arrival by rolling her eyes. “And what has the Herald of Andraste gone and done to herself now?”

“Unless you’re implying I stabbed myself just to get to spend time with you Myrtle, I haven’t done anything.”

“Stabbed? Well, you did do something then: failed to dodge,” Myrtle said, completely deadpan.
Evelyn was sufficiently riled. “You’re a combat expert now too are you? Going to go fight yourself a demon Myrtle? Going to go out there and start closing breaches?”

Myrtle shook her head and looked at Cullen. “The ego on this one. She closes a couple of rifts and won’t shut up about it.” Evelyn let out an exasperated huff at the older woman who only beckoned her towards a bed. “Come on, let’s have a look at it then. From the way you keep protectively clutching the left side of your abdomen I’m guessing that is the problem area?” Myrtle asked as she encouraged Evelyn to sit.

Evelyn gingerly raised the edge of her tunic and Cullen glanced towards the door. “No,” Evelyn told him firmly. “You made me come here, the least you can do is see it out with me.”

Cullen gave Myrtle an unsure glance. “If that’s what you want.”

Myrtle scoffed as she helped Evelyn strip to her breast band. “So glad you’re putting the time of our head of forces to good use. Part time Commander, part time nurse. If you’re staying, be useful hand me those scissors.” Cullen did as he was asked and Myrtle cut carefully through the bandage around Evelyn’s torso.

“How is it?” Evelyn asked, flinching as the fabric was pulled away and Cullen let out a sympathetic hum. Even Myrtle must have been a little bit impressed by the still weeping gash because her prickly manner immediately softened. “Not bad. Nothing crucial got hit. It is shallow, but what a mess they’ve made.”

“A mess? What does that mean?” Evelyn asked uneasily.

“It means that no one sharpens their weapons properly these days. What were they using? A butter knife? A pointy stick? What I wouldn’t give for a nice clean cut, just once,” Myrtle grumbled as she assessed it. Evelyn’s face creased with worry. “Don’t fret, we’ll have it sorted in a jiffy,” Myrtle assured her, reaching for a tray of tools that Cullen quickly pushed into her reach. She contemplated what she needed while Evelyn looked determinedly in the opposite direction. “This wound needs a good clean. Might sting though. I assume you’ve been doing a bit of magical pain management already?”

“Yes, and to prevent infection,” Evelyn said tentatively, likely expecting to be scolded for it.

Cullen leaned against the wall, arms folded as Evelyn endured the cleaning of the wound stoically. It was only when Myrtle carefully selected a needle and held it in the flame of a candle to sterilise it that Evelyn started to look a little panicked. “Maker isn’t there a smaller one?” she said breathlessly and held out a hand towards Cullen. He stepped forward automatically to take it and she pulled until he sat beside her. However belligerent Myrtle’s manner may be, at least she could be relied on for her professional discretion: the woman was no gossip.

Myrtle snorted, waving the needle in front of Evelyn. “Honestly? It is smaller than the sword that got you by a long shot. The great hope of Thedas, quivering in the face of a tiny pin prick,” she said making a tiny jabbing motion with the needle.

Evelyn paled a little and closed her eyes. Cullen, though feeling terrible for her, fought back a laugh that might have ended their new relationship before it had really begun. “Just get it over with,” she hissed at Myrtle.
"I plan to," Myrtle assured her. "I’m sure we all have better things we could be doing." She gave Cullen a pointed look.

Evelyn didn’t make a sound as the needled pierced the skin at the edge of her wound but her eyes were still firmly closed and her lips tightened into a grimace. "Your potted herbs are all doing well in the garden," Cullen told her, hoping to provide a distraction. It worked and her eyes sprang open. "I think the Prophet’s Laurel cutting may have taken."

"I didn’t think it stood a chance. It was so limp and sad when I left. You’ve been keeping an eye on them?"

"Well, when I walk through the area I can’t help but see them."

Evelyn laughed lightly. "I wasn’t suggesting you should start pruning and watering them, don’t worry. Though I am impressed you are starting to know them by name?"

"You do point them out every time we go to play chess."

"Yes, but I didn’t think that when you stood there nodding you were actually listening and you know, remembering things."

"I can’t seem to help it."

"I’ll have to be more careful with what I say," she said wryly just as her faint smile faded into a frown, brow furrowing once more with pain. He put his free hand on her knee and she looked at him in surprise.

"One of Leliana’s ravens flew into a window while Josephine was meeting with dignitaries from Orlais. Made quite the impression."

That made Evelyn laugh with enough force to prompt Myrtle to reprimand her patient with a sharp: "Stay still!"

"Was it alright, poor creature?"

"Just a little stunned. But not as stunned as the dignitaries I understand. Wine was spilled."

"Must have been a shock: I wish I had seen their faces! Nothing fun happens in my meetings."

"Don’t say that too loudly around Sera: she’ll try and arrange something."

"Ugh, you’re absolutely right." Evelyn thought for a moment. "Flying into a window…and I heard Leliana brag that those birds are more intelligent than most humans."

"Yes, but she also refers to her pet nug as both ‘beautiful’ and ‘majestic’ so her assessments can hardly be considered accurate."

"To be fair we’ve never seen the nug in question so the description of her may be very accurate." Myrtle tutted over something and Evelyn squeezed Cullen’s hand very tightly.

"When I try to picture a ‘majestic nug’ I get an instant headache. It’s absurd," Cullen protested.

"Perhaps you’re right but she does adore her: naturally she has a soft spot."

Myrtle rose and turned her back to the pair, putting some of her tools into a pot near the fire to be boiled. Cullen took the opportunity to give Evelyn the swiftest of kisses on the forehead.
“Naturally,” he said as she blushed.

“All finished,” Myrtle told Evelyn as she returned her attention to the pair. “You must be feeling better Evelyn, nice to see a bit of colour in your cheeks.” Myrtle paused, assessing the two of them for a moment longer before tutting. “I think you can let go of her now Commander.”
“I hope you are only practicing tacking up, Inquisitor,” Cullen said sternly.

Evelyn jumped guiltily, which startled her horse slightly in turn when she inadvertently yanked on a strap. She took a moment to soothe the animal before replying in a lofty voice: “I’m in no need of practice: Master Dennet can vouch for me,” she said, looking at the Horse Master for support. The man gave her a brief nod but (wisely perhaps) seemed unwilling to get involved any further.

“That may be so, but it remains the only logical reason why you would be getting that horse ready. You couldn’t possibly be considering riding out alone,” he reasoned, his calm tone only thinly veiling obvious irritation.

Evelyn let out a little snort. “Well, prepare yourself to be astounded Commander.”

“No,” Cullen replied bluntly.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” Evelyn bristled, returning to her task with a new, stubborn urgency.

“The roads grow more dangerous by the day: you’re not going anywhere.”

“I can handle a few wolves or amateur bandits.”

“What if you encounter Red Templars?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Then I will offer to draw them a map, marvelling at how they managed to wander so far off course.”

“We’re at war. You need to start taking this more seriously,” he said, moving closer and lowering his voice. Nonetheless, from the way Dennet cleared his throat, it was obvious he could still hear their bickering. Two groomsmen who were polishing saddles had stopped pretending not to listen and were openly gawping. A woman’s head poked up from a stall to watch, her rake abandoned.

“At war? I had noticed. But forgive me for not submitting to your level of paranoia. Should I be checking under my bed for monsters each night?” she responded in a loud whisper.

“Agents of Corypheus are actively seeking any opportunity on your life, even as we speak. Leliana has told us as much. The least you can do is not serve yourself up on a platter by setting out on… frivolous joy rides,” he finished, with undisguised scorn.

“It is not frivolous! My horse needs the exercise.”

“Get one of the groomsmen to take it.”

“No, they teach her bad habits.”

“This is irresponsible Evelyn. Irresponsible and reckless, even by your standards.”

“Stop underestimating me.”

“Stop underestimating our enemy.”
“I’m going Cullen, so you might as well walk away before you burst a vessel.”

“You’re not going. This is non-negotiable,” he told her firmly.

Evelyn rounded on him, spinning quickly to face him and getting very close as if she was truly considering giving him a shove. To his credit, Cullen did not flinch. “What are you going to do? Physically restrain me?”

“No. But if you do insist on riding out then it won’t be alone. I am coming with you.” Evelyn let out a few angry splutters as Cullen turned to the Horse Master. “Dennet? A horse.”

“Right away, ser.”

“Hold on that order,” Evelyn snapped and Dennet paused arm stretched towards a hanging bridle.

“Proceed, Dennet.”

“Don’t. He’s not coming.”

“Quickly now,” Cullen told him.

“Inquisitor, I don’t know what to do,” Dennet said, still frozen mid-reach and giving Evelyn a pleading look. She sighed and folded her arms, glaring at Cullen.

Cullen met her gaze. “Your options are to tolerate me, or to wait for me to arrange an escort of soldiers. I won’t be swayed on this: it is my duty to ensure your security,” he told her impassively, unmoved by her furious expression. When she didn’t speak, he prompted her with a: “Well?”

“Alright, come if you insist,” she nodded at Dennet to continue saddling up the other horse. “But you will ride behind me.”

“Very well.”

“And you will not speak so that I might pretend you aren’t there.”

Cullen raised a dismissive eyebrow. “Do not alarm yourself in imagining I have any interest in making small talk with you.”

“Fine,” Evelyn spat with all the hostility she could muster. “It is settled.” Evelyn turned back to her horse, began checking over the fastenings.

“Fine,” Cullen said coldly.

Progress was slow due to the difficult terrain of the steep, rocky mountain trails but they had been riding for nearly half an hour. “Careful up here,” Evelyn called back to Cullen, “it is a little icy. Watch her footing.”

“Are we far enough?”

Evelyn glanced over her shoulder to assess the distance they had travelled. “I think so.” She slowed her horse so that he could catch up.

“Did they believe it?” Cullen asked.
“How could they not have?” She laughed and then forced an exaggerated frown and lowered her voice to imitate him: “This is non-negotiable Evelyn.”

Cullen groaned. “I thought you were actually going to hit me at that point. I was bracing for the blow.”

“Really? I was trying not to laugh.”

“Was it that bad?”

“No, you were perfect,” she told him enthusiastically.

He shifted self-consciously in the saddle. “I still can’t believe you convinced me to go through with it.”

They had arrived at an outcrop that overlooked a valley, sparkling white with fresh snowfall. Evelyn slowed to a stop and slipped gracefully from her horse, loosely wrapping its reins around a branch. “I think you must have secretly enjoyed it. You’re a natural.” Cullen scoffed and followed her lead, dismounting and walking to stand behind her.

“I would disagree but I feel like we have ‘argued’ enough today, even if it wasn’t real.”

Evelyn let out a contented sigh, leaning her back against his chest as they took in the view. “You have to admit: it was worth it though.”

The wind picked up and Cullen felt her shiver. He wrapped his cloak around both of them, sheltering her. “That I will concede. I would do a lot worse for a moment like this.” She hummed happily and he gently rested his chin on top of her head.

Dennet looked up, surprised to have another visitor. It seemed like half the Inquisition was gathering in his usually peaceful stables that afternoon. “My Lady. Are you also hoping to ride out today?”

Leliana gave a polite shake of her head. “No, thank you. I was seeking the Inquisitor. I know she often keeps you company.”

“Keeps the horses company more like. Not that I can complain: knows her way around a brush and a hoof pick. She was here earlier. So was the Commander, if you’re after him too.”

“The Commander?” Leliana said with curiosity. “Don’t tell me he was mucking out a stable?”

“No, just…raising a few concerns with the Inquisitor.”

“And where are they now, do you know?”

“They went out riding together. Or she went out riding and he insisted on escorting her. Not sure they’ll both make it back to be honest: at each other’s throats like fighting dogs they were.”

Leliana suppressed a smile. “Is that so? How interesting. More bark than bite I’m sure.”

“Must be a challenge to work with them like that, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Actually, when it is called for, they manage to put aside their differences and work together
very…closely.”

Dennet was confused by how delighted she sounded. “I’m relieved to hear it. I was about to ring the alarm, thought blood would be spilled.”

Leliana’s closed lipped smile grew very wide. “Oh I’m more than certain that they’ll thoroughly reconcile, if they haven’t made up already. Can you ask the Inquisitor to call on me when she returns?”

Sure he was missing something now, but resolving not to dwell on it any further, Dennet answered with a simple: “Will do.”

Chapter End Notes

Did I have any of you worried? I hope not. :) I can imagine Evelyn especially relishing the challenge of coming up with increasingly elaborate plans for them to sneak off together.
Cullen was pacing across the loose sand of the small training arena as Evelyn watched on, making no effort to hide her boredom. He had persuaded her to do this at last, but she clearly had no intention of making it easy for him. “Templars are in every way superior in combat directly against mages,” he told her.

“That is a bit rude,” Evelyn said, folding her arms.

“It is not an insult: it is reality. Templars are literally the antithesis to a mage. If the mage were a flame, the templar is water.”

Evelyn scoffed. “I had no idea you were a man of such poetry. Go on then, tell me how I’m going to be extinguished.”

Cullen continued to pace, speaking as if she hadn’t interrupted. “They are combat masters who are trained in specialised skills to defend against and subdue mage abilities.”

“And the mages themselves.”

“It follows,” Cullen said brusquely. He stopped pacing and gave her a direct look. There was no point being coy about it. Evelyn stared back, raising her chin slightly. “What’s more, in addition to being skilled warriors, templars are educated in mage spells and tactics, making them difficult to outmanoeuvre or surprise.”

“What if I suddenly presented them with a nice gift? Or began to serenade them? Would that surprise them?”

Cullen continued to ignore her. “If you are isolated from your party and you encounter templars, you have two options.”

“Fire or electricity?”

“Survive until help arrives or flee.”

“Those sounds less fun.”

“As I have said: even a novice templar will be equipped with enough skill to be an incredible threat to you. With your abilities, you may be able to succeed against one, or a small group of inexperienced templars, but if they are lead by a higher-ranking officer, or if they are red templars, your rapid defeat is nearly inevitable.”

“Only nearly inevitable? Is that a note of sunny optimism I hear Cullen?”

“Nearly inevitable as you have a few potential advantages, depending on your context. Firstly, unless you broadcast it, a templar will not necessarily recognise you as a mage.”

Evelyn snorted. “Even if I’m wearing robes and carrying a staff? What are they going to think? I am just an eccentric dresser with a particularly elaborate walking stick?”

“It has been known to happen.” Cullen said defensively, thinking of Hawke. “I meant in a more casual setting, not when you’re in the middle of combat and obviously casting spells. If a templar walks into a tavern –”
“I think I’ve heard this joke before.”

Cullen rolled his eyes. “If a templar walks into a tavern they’re not going to know which civilian is a mage, and which is a pig farmer.”

“Which gives me the element of surprise.”

“No, it gives you the element of keep your head down and hope that your notoriety hasn’t made you recognisable to every soul in Thedas. Your celebrity puts you at risk.”

“Right, so don’t scream ‘I can do magic’ in their face or offer to sign an autograph. Got it.”

“Secondly, while some templars may have the ability to dispel your area of effect or defensive spells, it is a difficult skill to master and not every templar you encounter will be capable of it.”

“So I just pray whoever I’m up against didn’t pay attention during that particular lesson at the templar academy?”

“Do pray, if it comforts you,” Cullen told her dryly and Evelyn laughed. “Dispelling is also taxing, and those able will need to recover between uses, just as your spells have a cool down period. If you delay casting defensive or buffing spells until after you see them cleanse the area, it will provide you with a window where they cannot retaliate for a time. Can you cast a barrier now?”

“Why? So you can just ruin it?”

“Yes, so I can show you what it looks like when a templar is dispelling.”

“Fine.” Evelyn obliged, huffing when Cullen immediately dismantled her barrier seemingly effortlessly.

“Remember what that action looks like. If you hold your nerve for longer than they do it will give you an opportunity to cast defensively or aggressively as the situation calls for.”

“And what if more than one templar in a group does know how to dispel?”

“Then if you don’t have the support of your party you should be considering option two.”

“Fleeing?”

“Yes. Even when encountering templars while with party support you should be backing up rapidly and seeking cover.”

“The bards will surely sing of my courage.”

“If you don’t, the bards will sing of how you were rapidly overwhelmed and violently killed.”

“Oh. That was blunt.”

“Forgive me: I am trying to make a point,” he said, without any true repentance: her life could depend on her remembering this.

She folded her arms. “Consider it made.”

Cullen got straight back to the lesson. “Your environment may be strategically utilised. While magical flames can be dispelled, anything that catches on fire as a result will stay burning unless tempered by traditional methods of sand or water. You can use this defensively if crates, wagons or
shrubs are in the combat area, creating an obstacle between you and your aggressors.”

“Catch things on fire, got it.”

“It may buy you time. Catch things on fire and run away, keeping your head down, moving erratically where possible and aiming for cover in case of archers. Which brings me to my next point: speed.”

“Speed? Need I remind you I’m not exactly the most athletic individual Cullen.”

“You would have to be moving intentionally slowly to be outpaced by a fully equipped templar. Their armour is designed to maximise resistance to elemental damage, whatever acid or flame may be splashed around by an apostate, and is bulky and cumbersome as a result. It takes incredible fitness to move at all, let alone swiftly.”

“Was this really about helping me? Or were you just looking for an opportunity to talk yourself up? Incredibly fit, hm?” she gave him an assessing look that made him swallow and move his arms uncertainly, suddenly unsure of what to do with them. He settled with putting his hands on his hips, and immediately regretted it, but felt it was too late to shift.

“I would like to go through a few mock combat scenarios now, using the melee skills we have practiced in the past. Imagine I was approaching while you were alone in the woods.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Evelyn told him, a hint of a smirk forming.

Cullen cleared his throat. “If I were an enemy templar.” He picked up his practice sword and began to walk towards her. Evelyn clasped her hands and began to whistle, gazing up at the sky in a daydreamer’s fashion. “What are you doing?” Cullen asked, exasperated.

“Pretending to not be a mage. Wasn’t that the first strategy?” Evelyn said airily.

“Assume I know that you’re a mage, and that I am a hostile templar,” he said through gritted teeth. Evelyn pretended to startle, as if noticing him for the first time. “Why hello there. You come to these woods often?” She punctuated this with a wink.

Cullen rubbed at his face with the palm of his hand. “Evelyn, you’re not taking this even remotely seriously.”

“Ser, you must be awfully strong to be walking around in all that armour. It is ever so impressive.” She fanned herself with her hand. “And it must be very…hot.”

“I get it: you’re not in the mood.”

“Who said I’m not in the mood?” she asked with exaggerated innocence.

“You can’t just flirt with the templars. I hate to disillusion you but it isn’t going to work unfailingly on all of them.”

“As long as it’s working now, that is all that really matters to me.”

“You know it is.” She looked pleased with herself. He held up his blunted training sword. “If I start swinging this at you is it safe to assume you will react? Because right now I’m not certain self-preservation is going to kick in.”

“Self-preservation? Cullen, I have every confidence you’re not going to just start attacking me.”
“It’s not meant to be me. I’m the enemy, remember?”

“You’re really set on this roleplaying business, aren’t you?” she said with a laugh.

“I know you hate discussing this –”

“The various ways in which I can be killed? Whatever makes you think that?”

“I don’t request these sessions in an attempt to torture you.”

“A happy side effect then.”

“I’m only concerned about you, Evelyn,” he said gently.

Evelyn’s face fell and she sighed. “I know.” She picked up her staff from where it lay at her feet and adopted one of the defensive stances he had taught her in a previous lesson.

“Good,” he told her appreciatively. They sparred, Cullen holding back significantly, actions deliberately slow and demonstrative. He wasn’t interested in besting her, but allowing her to practice how to react to different attacks and approaches. “Yes: like that. Now back up, and reposition your staff or they’ll have you on your unprotected side. The shield can be a weapon too,” he explained. Despite her earlier flippancy, Evelyn moved well now that she was making an effort, and it was clear she had been absorbing his lessons. “Better, much better. Always stay vigilant for any weaknesses to exploit. Your enemy will likely be overconfident which may provide you with an opportunity if you watch for one.”

“How can…you…do…this…and…talk?” Evelyn asked, panting. Cullen chuckled and she swiped at him particularly ferociously with her staff which he easily countered.

They continued like this for some time. Evelyn saying nothing, but a sheen of sweat making her face glisten as she squinted with concentration. Cullen felt his shirt sticking to him, but neither signalled to stop as they found a rhythm that was almost meditative.

Sometime later he struck out at her, as he had been doing, and she blocked the attack, but something about the angle sent her reeling off balance. Evelyn stumbled and fell heavily into the dirt. She let out an immediate cry of pain and sat up, clutching her ankle. Horrified, Cullen cast aside his sword and hovered over her, torn between being at her side and fetching help. “Are you alright? I’ll get the surgeon.”

“No, I think it’s…it’s okay.” She flexed the injured foot a little and winced. “Just help me up.” Evelyn stretched out her hands towards him. Leaning over he took them both. He felt her fingers wrap firmly around his wrists and before he could move to pull her up, she yanked with what must have been all her strength. Cullen overbalanced, fell forwards, Evelyn releasing his hands in time for him to catch himself and spare his face from making impact on the ground.

Stunned, he lay still for a moment trying to process what had happened. When he turned his head, Evelyn was standing above him, sword pointed at his neck. Fairly certain she wasn’t actually going to kill him, he rolled over and sat up, knees bent in front of him, leaning back on his hands. “Your ankle is fine, isn’t it?” It was less a question, more a realisation.

“Perfectly.”

“Did I miss something? Am I being punished?” he asked.

Evelyn shrugged. “You told me to look for a weakness.”
“You found one. Maker, I thought you were really hurt,” he said breathlessly and leaned his head back, face turned towards the sky, the racing feeling of panic slowly subsiding.

“I’m sorry: I was getting tired.” She dropped the sword and sat heavily on the ground beside him.

He gave her a disbelieving look. “Then you could have just asked to stop.”

She adopted a low, gruff voice which he could only assume was supposed to be an imitation of him. “The real templars won’t just stop when you get tired, Evelyn.”

“The real templars won’t be concerned if you get hurt either.”

“Well, I assessed the context and saw an opportunity. Maybe I’m just tried of you always winning.”

“You’re impossible,” he muttered.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “I thought that was one of the things you liked about me?”

“It is,” he admitted face breaking into a broad smile. He looked past her towards the fence line. “I would kiss you to prove it but we appear to have gathered an audience.”

Evelyn put her hand on the ground, agonisingly close to his. “Shame. I find myself in sudden need of proof.”

“I intend to compile a considerable, detailed portfolio of evidence that I will present to you at the nearest opportunity.”

Evelyn laughed, eyes sparkling. “Diligent and thorough as always: thank you Commander. And I do appreciate all of this training. Really.”

“Yes. I can tell from the way you just threw me in the dirt.”

Evelyn pouted. “You’re not going to hold that against me, are you? You did it to me that first time we trained together. How about later I come by your office and try to make it up to you? I’ll bring a bottle of wine.”

“I certainly have no objections.”

“So we can toast to my victory with it,” Evelyn said, and sprang to her feet with surprising lightness for someone who had just said she was tired. She offered her hands and he gave her a incredulous look, refusing to accept the help.

“Fine, stay there then,” she said, completely unbothered by his rejection, and all but skipped away.

“There is always a catch with you,” he yelled after her, laughing to himself, before letting himself fall onto his back, putting an arm behind his head to rest on. The sky above him was a miserable woolly grey that promised certain rain later. He had stacks of work to do, the bulk of it tedious and unrewarding. His head was aching too, not badly, but enough to notice. Not to mention they were fighting an uphill battle against the end of the world…and somehow, despite all this, Cullen was happier than he could ever remember.
“I’ll be a moment,” Cullen told her. Evelyn pouted at him, intentionally and pointedly. Cullen felt his resolve falter. “Half a moment,” he negotiated. Folding her arms across her chest she tried to deepen her frown but when he raised an eyebrow and said “Evelyn,” in a drawn-out way, she had to stifle a laugh with the back of her hand instead.

“Alright, I’ll come back later,” she moved towards the door.

“It won’t be that long I promise,” he told her quickly, “Stay. It’ll just be…”

“A moment,” she finished for him with a smile. “I’ll gladly wait then.”

Cullen tried to return his focus to the papers before him but quickly realised that it had been a mistake to ask Evelyn to stay. His concentration had completely fled in her presence. The promise of spending time with her combined with seeing her move about the room from the corner of his eye was incredibly distracting. And she was certainly moving about, making no effort to conceal her own restlessness.

Evelyn stared out the window for some time, drumming her fingers on the sill. She wandered behind his chair, leaned over his shoulder to look at his papers and he tried to ignore the tickling of her breath on his neck. Then, she began to investigate different items from his desk, lifting them and examining them with the critical eye and fascination of an antiques dealer: a spare quill, his empty cup, a paperweight and a dagger sheath. All the while Cullen struggled to forge on with his urgent letter, knowing every break in concentration was just extending the delay to spending time with her.

Concentrating was easier said than done however, especially now she was extinguishing and relighting his candle over and over again with magic.

When she ran out of items to fiddle with, and his desk was in complete disorder, she moved to his bookshelf, pulling out volumes at random, flipping through them at speed before shoving them back with tuts of unconcealed displeasure. Eventually he couldn’t resist: “You’re a remarkably fast reader.”

“I would read, if there was anything worth reading. These are all so…practical,” she said, voice scathing.

“This is an office, not a summer parlour. All texts should be constructive to my function here.”

Evelyn did a prolonged fake yawn and it was Cullen’s turn to laugh. “Stop talking so we can get out of here before I fall asleep,” she scolded him, miming writing.

“As you wish.”

After a few more minutes of shuffling Evelyn let out a small squeak. “Hold that thought,” she said in a high, excited voice. “What is this?”

Cullen could almost smell the danger. “What?”

Evelyn spun around and thrust a book towards him. “‘The Ballad of Sir Humphry’? Except ‘Humphry’ is crossed out and it says ‘Cully Wully’?”
He stood up rapidly. “No. That is not – I have never even heard of that let alone seen…No.”

“And so he rode gallantly forth, through the night, wretched and bleak.
No companion save for his horse, towards the treacherous mountain peak.”

“Stop.”

“It has a dragon in it!” Evelyn told him excitedly, flipping through the pages eagerly and continuing to read:

“He brandished his blade defiantly, his heart devoid of fear,
For his strength was in his piety, and the thought of his true love dear.”

Cullen groaned. “Sera. It has to have been Sera.”

Evelyn peered at him impishly from behind the book. “Are you sure it wasn’t…Sir Cully Wully?”

“You know my handwriting! That is not – Not to mention I would never vandalise a book let alone – ” he dissolved into spluttering and gestured wordlessly at her instead which left her laughing so hard she bent over clutching her stomach.

He strode over. “Give me that,” he said curtly, reaching for the offending text.

“No snatching!” Evelyn scolded, frustratingly just a hair too quick for him. She spun away and attempted to keep reading. “It’s the entire book! The whole thing is like that, wow. And it’s three hundred pages long!”

“Who knew Sera was so fastidious,” Cullen said, making another grab for the book which Evelyn evaded, backing away from him.

“Not quite. Look here! This doesn’t work: ‘Cully Wully’ doesn’t rhyme with ‘monthly’.” Evelyn said with the seriousness of an alchemist analysing a complex formula.

“What a shame,” Cullen said sharply. He had cornered her. Evelyn glanced towards the door and he put his arm out to block her path, leaving her all but pinned against the bookshelf, still doing all she could to shelter her prize.

“Oh, let me keep it. Please?” she begged.

“No. You’ll take it to the tavern and then people will be reciting it to me for weeks.”

“But -but you’ll burn it or something!”

“Burn it? Brimming with good ideas, as always Inquisitor.”

“You just said that you would never vandalise a book, didn’t you?” she tried to reason.
“That isn’t a book anymore: it’s a monstrosity.”

She couldn’t move and they both knew it. With Cullen inches away, looming over her, and her back against the bookshelf, there was nowhere left to retreat to. In desperation Evelyn raised the book above her head with both hands as if to put it out of reach of a child. “I’m taller than you are,” he told her in a low voice as he plucked it from her hands.

“It was worth a try,” she whispered, letting her arms fall around his neck, tilting her face towards him and parting her lips slightly. It was enough of an invitation for Cullen who quickly closed the gap that remained between them, using his free hand to cup the back of her head so that when he pushed her against the bookshelf she didn’t knock it. Evelyn took a sharp intake of breath as he pressed against her, arms tightening around his neck. It was still always a surprise that she wanted this. Him. She noticed his hesitation and whispered: “Hurry up,” with a tiny smirk. He dipped his head, Evelyn’s smug expression fading and eyes fluttering closed as his lips found hers.

Cullen longed for a day when they didn’t have to hurry, when there would be no risk of being interrupted, free from the fear of being caught. As his fingers twined in her hair, mussing her plait, Evelyn’s hands ran down to his chest. Cullen broke away from the kiss, looking towards the door where he thought he had heard a noise. Evelyn let out a moan that made him quickly forget it as she determinedly took two fistfuls of his cloak and pulled him back. Kissing him with more breathless urgency than before, Evelyn’s hands slipped to his hips. Then, not even her exploratory tongue could distract him from the fact that she was reaching for the bloody book again.

He pulled away abruptly and she gave him a guilty look of surprise that confirmed his suspicions. “I know what you’re doing.”

She let out a huff of irritation. “Damn. I thought it was working.”

Cullen smiled, tightening his grip on the book. “Believe me: it was.”
As if assassins, ambushes and political manoeuvrings weren’t enough to deal with at this party, now she was on a rescue mission.

It had made her laugh at first, the growing amount of attention Cullen was receiving each time she passed him. And could she really blame the fawning nobles? Just look at him honestly. But now she was getting increasingly irritated by it which was a completely ridiculous use of her focus when she clearly had more pressing concerns to deal with.

But she just couldn’t seem to help it.

It wasn’t that Evelyn felt threatened by their attempts to gain his attention. Besides the fact that she trusted him, she could hardly entertain thoughts of jealousy when she had nearly lost her mind from the amount of effort it took to try and convince Cullen to flirt with her. After months of struggling against his steadfast reservations it would be ludicrous to entertain the notion that he was going to suddenly form an interest in seducing strangers at parties.

So it wasn’t jealousy that had made her attitude towards the situation shift from poorly concealed mirth to annoyance. No, it was the discomfort Cullen was broadcasting clearly across the room that his potential ‘suitors’ were happy to ignore. No one had expected Cullen to enjoy this evening, but when Evelyn finally found the opportunity to pull him aside and have a quiet conversation, he sounded tense and exhausted, his mood clearly brittle.

She watched as a woman grabbed his hand. Cullen deftly pretended he was reaching for a drink to free himself. The woman, moved closer to him and put a hand on his lower back in a completely overfamiliar gesture. He made an effort to shake her by doing an exaggerated shrug in response to something someone said to him but the woman was undeterred. The others, encouraged by her brazenness, began to shift closer. Cullen dodged as someone tried to touch his hair.

Evelyn was fuming. How dare they be so inconsiderate to someone making so clear their lack of interest? It was like they could sense his weakness, his inability to navigate these social waters and were taking advantage of his determined politeness. He had been instructed to be on his best behaviour and had obviously taken that to heart, the poor man. And he lacked the skills to deftly extract himself without causing offence.

Josephine would have created a distraction, drawn attention to a celebrity or introduced someone who would dominate the conversation to allow her to slip away. Leliana would have played along for a time, then undermined their confidence with pleasant comments that disguised scathing insults until they fled to lick their wounds. But Cullen – her wonderfully honest, straightforward Cullen – was utterly defenceless, nodding with his face fixed in a strained smile as they tormented him.

It was intolerable. Cullen must be protected.

But how?

Maybe she could electrocute them, just a little?

Tempting, but would probably be frowned upon by polite society. Plus, they were too close to
Cullen: she couldn’t risk hitting him too.

Evelyn stopped fantasising, disengaged from her own conversation and hunted down a servant with a tray of drinks. Spying a young man, barely more than a boy, who already looked terrified as he weaved through the guests, Evelyn’s plan began to cement itself. She accosted the server when he reached a quiet corner. “How would you like to be promoted?” she asked him.

He looked shocked to be spoken to directly, jumping a little, glasses rattling on his tray. “I’m a waiter ma’am…Um, My Lady Inquisitor. With respect, I don’t think there is anywhere to be promoted to,” he said with a nervous quaver in his voice.

“What about if I arranged for you to be…Head Waiter,” Evelyn bluffed.

“That would be Miss Grennor ma’am. She is mighty fierce and I wouldn’t want to do her job besides.”

“Oh, um then…Head Wait Assistant to the Head Waitress then?”

He looked confused and defaulted to the script he had obviously been indoctrinated with for the night. “Can I offer you a drink? It is raspberry and liquorice wine.”

Evelyn peered at the liquid in the glasses: thick and syrupy looking, a maroon so deep it was nearly black. Perfect for her needs, in other words. “How about I give you five gold if you do me a tiny favour?”

The glasses on the tray shook again as the young man reeled in surprise at the amount. “I…that…w-what do you want me to do? Can I fetch you something to eat?”

Evelyn shook her head. “Nothing like that. See the group over there? Around the man in the red coat?”

“Yes?”

“All I need you to do is walk up to them and kind of…” She made a jerking motion with her hands.

“Sorry, I don’t understand, miss. Ma’am. Your Ladyship?”

“Just you know…throw the drinks at them. But make it look like an accident.”

He paled and began frantically shaking his head. “It’d be my job. I can’t, I’d be whipped! They’d probably have my head!”

Evelyn let out a long sigh. “You’re right. Not such a tiny favour is it? Okay. Five gold base pay, an additional gold for each of them that gets splashed and you have an offer for a job at Skyhold. In the kitchen, running messages, taking up a trade apprenticeship: whatever you fancy really.”

Looking overwhelmed, he tried to process the information, eyes glazing over at the possibilities. “I always dreamt of leaving this place…doing something different with my life than what my Pa, and his Pa before him did. And people, they say the Inquisition are heroes and will save Thedas, they do.” He looked dreamily past her and then frowned. “Then some other people say they are sinful power grabbers come to think of it, but…begging your pardon ma’am,” he quickly apologised as if remembering she was there.

Evelyn flapped a dismissive hand. “Focus on the hero bit. Now is your chance…Um, what was your name?”
“Podly, ma’am.”

“Podly, just think of it: one moment of courage for a chance at a new life. How often do opportunities like this come along?” Evelyn tried to tempt him. Opportunities and not to mention probably all the gold she had on her, depending on how good his aim was. She might have to borrow some from Josephine.

His face fixed with a sudden look of determination. “I’ll do it.”

“Brave lad!” she told him and then dropped her voice back down to a whisper. “Your tray is nearly full which is perfect. When you get the opportunity, go for it. After the fuss dies down, tell the Commander…the man in the red coat…Hold on.” She yanked a button off the cuff of her own jacket. “Give him this and tell him that Ev- The Inquisitor has put you under the immediate protection of the Inquisition and that you will be returning to Skyhold with our party. He’ll take care of you.”

“Drinks, button, under protection, returning to Skyhold,” he said, face creased with careful concentration. “Is that everything?”

“Tell him…” she glanced towards Cullen who was looking desperately towards a window as if he might hurl himself through the glass. “Never mind. That is everything thank you. Best be quick,” she encouraged him, worried he might lose his nerve if he thought about it for too long.

Podly performed beautifully: it was nearly a work of art and Evelyn thought it worth every gold piece just to witness the boy in action. First he stumbled quite believably, then added a convincing moment where he nearly saved the tray, juggling desperately as he staggered about, before it flew from his hands violently, spraying droplets over most of the group, splashing some of the unluckier ones with an entire cup-full. Glass shattered over the stones in every direction and women in thin silk slippers panicked and danced around the shards towards safety.

In the extended fuss, with men and women shrieking and brushing at their fine clothing, yelling for napkins, fleeing for the powder rooms to clean up, Cullen was frozen. For a moment, he was the sole still-point in a flurry of chaos, then Evelyn was gratified to see him seize his chance and edge away. Podly, abandoning his pretence of cleaning up, followed him and spoke. Cullen turned to look at the boy curiously. He held out his hand when the button was offered and examined it with a smile on his face that Evelyn could see from across the room. He closed his fingers around it, put his closed fist over his heart and to her shock, looked directly at her. Evelyn had no idea how he knew exactly where she was in the room. He must have been watching her from the corner of his eye, even as she watched him. Giving her an amused look, he shook his head at her in apparent disbelief. Once she got over her surprise she smiled innocently, performed the slightest curtsey before turning on her heel to get back to work, finally able to concentrate on the task at hand and the whole reason they were there.

Chapter End Notes

The Inquisitor makes a joke in Trespasser about being there (at the Winter Palace) to rescue Cullen…so I had to write something along those lines of course. :) Also spent way to long trying to figure out what historical bathroom set-up there would be in this context and decided to go with a ‘powder room’ anyway. You can't tell me the Orlesians wouldn't have specially delegated rooms at parties for guests to touch up
their makeup and dress!

This was a fun chapter to write. And a landmark chapter in the plot - we have made it all the way to 'Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts'! Thanks so much for reading!
It didn’t take much for Cullen to be in a bad mood at this kind of formal event. But this particular party being held at Skyhold by Josephine to charm nearby land owners? He was finding this was even worse than usual.

He hadn’t slept well, then, after drills this morning, he had been forced to wade into a dispute among some new recruits over bunk allocations of all things. Didn’t they realise what was at stake in the grander scheme? Couldn’t they be relied upon to resolve this one issue like adults? He had made his disappointment with them eminently clear and was expecting more than one resignation on his desk in the morning. Which was fine by him: better they withdraw now if unsuitable, than panic in the heat of battle at some crucial stage. If they couldn’t tolerate him yelling at them, they would certainly find facing down a demon overwhelming. The Inquisitor needed only capable soldiers at her back.

The Inquisitor: the other reason he was irritable. Or the lack of the Inquisitor more accurately. He had lost sight of Evelyn in the surging crowds of the party. While he didn’t actually stoop to casing around, following her like a guard dog at events, he had made a habit of being aware of her location. Maker, he had best ensure to never tell her that: he sounded obsessed. Cullen could tolerate her leaving Skyhold and participating in uncountable combats by seeing to it himself that she was equipped with the best training, resources and support. Here however, he was wholly incapable of helping her in any fashion against the challenges and dangers she faced amongst these nobles and politicians. The least he could do was keep an eye on her. It reassured him, if nothing else.

And it didn’t hurt that she looked stunning tonight, smiling radiantly, hair glossy in the candlelight. His breath had caught in his throat when he had first seen her, his chest suddenly full of his own pounding heart.

But now she was lost somewhere in the fray of tedious conversation and false pleasantries and Cullen felt irrationally apprehensive. He could pinpoint this specific anxiety to the recent ball at the Winter Palace, when Evelyn kept disappearing and he, Josephine and Leliana had nothing to sustain them about her progress except the most alarming whispers. When it became clear Evelyn had been ambushed, the wait was near intolerable, especially in a situation where impossibly, he was expected to continue to pretend that he was enjoying himself.

Evelyn’s life had been in real danger and the fate of Orlesian politics hung in the balance yet all around him people continued to brag and flirt and overindulge in every capacity without any sign of concern. An act, Josephine had assured him. All part of the game, Leliana had agreed. Yet Cullen had found the whole display revolting.

So he could forgive himself for his immediate concern at losing sight of Evelyn on this occasion, and permit his gaze to roam about the room with the sole purpose of locating her again. When this failed, he excused himself from the person that was talking at him he did a lap of the hall, his worry amplified.

But it was irrational, he told himself, even as he searched, elbowing past groups and dodging eye contact with those who might intercept him. Evelyn could handle herself, and here at least as hosts at Skyhold, they were surrounded by friends and Inquisition soldiers. There were no ambushes for
her to walk into. Except conversationally perhaps, and he was hardly in a position to assist her there. There would be many more events like this, and Cullen couldn’t afford to start letting himself indulge in even this degree of alarm every time she was out of the room. He needed to get a hold of himself.

He needed air.

Just as he had made it into the cool, welcome quiet of the garden, he heard Evelyn whisper behind him. “Cullen?” He turned to see her slipping through door he had just exited from, her skirt making a quiet swishing noises against the stone floor. In his amazement he failed to respond, remaining still and stunned. Evelyn caught up to him and taking the initiative, grabbed his hand to lead him to one of the alcoves where they could embrace in relative privacy.

“It’s a relief to see you,” he finally said.

“A relief is it?” she asked, instantly and characteristically curious, head cocking in a curious tilt.

Wary of giving too much away of his ridiculous paranoia and overprotectiveness Cullen caught himself. “You’re the only one in there I want to speak to and you are constantly preoccupied. Having you to myself for even a moment feels too good to be true.”

“I hope you know who I would rather be spending the evening with.” Glowing happily, she swiftly kissed him, perching on her tip toes to make up for the height difference.

“Someone might-” he began and she scoffed, putting a decisive hand at the back of his neck to pull herself up and kiss him again. Cullen immediately lost the will to object further.

“Right now I don’t care,” she grumbled.

“Difficult night?”

She sighed and leaned back to look at him while he held her loosely around her waist, unwilling to release her yet. “I shouldn’t complain: we’ve been to worse events.”

It was obvious she meant the Winter Palace, and Cullen felt some selfish vindication to know it was playing on her mind too, though obviously he took no pleasure in her worry. “I have been dwelling on that night. Many of the same people are here, though the scale is obviously significantly smaller.”

“They must be hoping I put on a show to rival my last.”

“They’ll be disappointed I assume?”

“I have every intention of letting them down on that front. No controversies scheduled for tonight.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.”

“Unless someone walks out and sees us like this. Now that would be quite the controversy.” Cullen didn’t break the embrace but couldn’t beat the urge to cast a nervous glance around the empty garden. Evelyn looked briefly triumphant before she asked: “And you? You’re having fun?”

“Couldn’t be more overjoyed. I wish it would never end,” he said flatly.

Evelyn let out a snicker. “Josephine on the other hand, is quite in her element tonight.”
“You mean frantic internally, but gracious and unflappable externally?”

“Exactly. She complained to me about the number of moths flying about the hall and wondered if it would reflect ill upon the gathering.”

“Well if that is the biggest of our problems…”

“Then things must be going smoothly indeed, yes. Though I did just show Lady Ferron to her quarters after she took a bit of a turn. She and Lord Ferron still made the ride here, despite the advanced state of her pregnancy,” Evelyn said, sounding amazed and a little disapproving. “It’s incredible: some of these people wouldn’t miss a party if they had to prise themselves out of their death beds.”

“That is certainly no exaggeration. Fortunate that Josephine always caters for at least twice the number of guests we are expecting.”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Disapprovingly. Josie knows what she is doing.”

“I don’t deny it. It just troubles me that the gold could have been spent elsewhere in a more… practical fashion.”

“We would be sabotaging ourselves completely to appear an ungenerous host. The over-catering is unfortunate, but essential. Or else we may as well not even bother having an event at all.”

“All I meant is that it could have fed a lot of refugees.”

“Yes, and then the well-fed refugees could be slaughtered on their journey by bandits if they are not offered sanctuary in the keeps and estates of the nobles Josephine is currently leaning on for support.”

Cullen exhaled slowly. “Of course. I understand why it must be so. I just I find the excess, especially at these times, disturbing.”

“I’m glad you didn’t see me excessively eating five of those little glazed pastries when they came around then.”

He had actually. And it had been six, not five. “You’ve been out there doing something, earning it.”

Evelyn scoffed. “Earning it? Well, that is very generous of you to say. This must be what a dog feels like when it gets thrown a biscuit.”

Cullen let out an involuntary snort as Evelyn tried and failed to look disapproving. “Those were your words, not mine.”

“Besides, you know the extra food doesn’t go to waste.”

Cullen smiled. “Yes, they are waiting eagerly at the barracks for the leftovers even now I’d wager.”

Evelyn’s expression faltered and her forehead creased with concern. “The soldiers don’t find it condescending, I hope? To get what the nobles won’t eat?”
“Not at all: they’re pleased you think of them. And if any do take offense they can go hungry. Was she alright?”

“Who?”

“Lady Ferron?”

“Oh, I think so. I returned via the kitchen to arrange a tray of broth, with bread and some fruit to be sent to her room. I’m sure the banquet must have been far too rich to appeal to her right now.”

So that explained the lengthy absence. “You’re a good hostess.”

Evelyn made an unconvinced, humming sound, moving closer and adjusting the collar of his formal jacket. “What am I doing hiding out here with you then?”

“Maintaining your sanity with a brief interval away?” Cullen suggested and Evelyn laughed, and still holding his collar, pulled him down for another kiss.

“Are you reading my mind now?”

“No, simply admitting my own motivations. Though I confess: had I known I would be joined by you, I would have left sooner. Much sooner.”

“I saw you escaping just as I returned to the hall. It was too tempting to resist. I have been finding it difficult to -” A door opened nearby and Evelyn slipped from his arms. They stood rigidly, side-by-side, probably looking incredibly suspicious. A young couple ran past their alcove without seeing them, and Evelyn waited until their giggling had faded into the night before speaking again. “I’ve been wanting to see you the last couple of days, but haven’t been able to set aside the time. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. I understand: I see your schedule remember?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t make it easier. I know you’re busy too.” She chewed her lip, and frowned at him, brushing a hand over his cheek. “And you’re keeping well?” she asked, voice anxious. “Without the lyrium are you still…How are you sleeping?”

He caught her hand gently in his. “Well enough. You have enough to concern yourself with without worrying over me.”

“But I like to worry over you,” she said softly. “And I do realise that ‘well enough’ means badly by the way.”

“Harding has written to say your disruption of Red Templar activities in the Plains continues to have lasting impact,” he said to change the subject.

“It was almost incidental: we just kept stumbling across them. Pretty awkward actually. But I am pleased to hear it has caused them more trouble than it has us.”

“There are so few viable roads and the carts of lyrium they have been transporting prevented any deviations or more stealthy alternatives. It was inevitable you should cross paths.”

“All the better you helped me train then. It has been invaluable. Hesitating until they use dispel before I cast support work on the party has certainly saved me much frustration although can be nerve-racking.”
“Good. And?”

She rolled her eyes. “And I am keeping well back.”

“I know I lecture you on it, but it remains the most crucial point in ensuring your safety when engaging with templars. You must keep your distance.”

She shuffled closer until she was pressed up against him and Cullen swallowed. “Good thing you’re not a templar anymore then. I can’t seem to keep my distance from you,” she said coyly.

He tried to keep a straight face. “Are you listening?”

Evelyn ran her hands slowly up his chest, before she dragged her fingers over his shoulders, behind his neck and began circling them in distracting patterns at his nape. “I am captivated, believe me,” she breathed. She smelt sweet from the pastries she had been eating, of honey and nutmeg.

“Evelyn, I’m being serious.”

She scrunched up her face. “When are you not?”

“You’re making it very difficult right now,” he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling and she attempted an innocent look. “This is important.”

Evelyn tutted. “And you tell me off for worrying?”

“Guilty,” he admitted and finally broke into an inevitable smile.

Evelyn looked pleased, but quickly stepped back as the door opened again and light, music and conversation spilled out into the quiet sanctuary of the garden. A man stepped out, emptied the contents of his glass into a potted plant, then re-entered the party without looking in their direction.

Evelyn made a disgusted noise. “That wine was expensive.”

“I’m sure the plant will appreciate that fact and enjoy it accordingly.”

Evelyn let out a small snicker then sighed, still gazing at the door. “I should head back in. And so should you, but maybe wait a few minutes before following.”

“As you say.”

Evelyn took a reluctant step towards the party but hesitated, turning only partly back towards him, so that he could see her face in profile. “I wish that at least one of us was less responsible so that we could just abandon this whole thing and make a break for it.”

“Were that we could,” he said, shooting her a rueful smile.

Evelyn smiled back then turned fully and gave him an assessing once over. “Hold on,” she said, and reached to smooth his hair a little. “Now you’re ready.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Cullen said drily.

“You’ll be fine. And I’ll see you soon? Properly, before we head out again, I mean.”

“I certainly hope so,” he said quietly, as she walked away.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry I didn't write the dance! Consider this my alternative post 'Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts' chapter. I did ponder over it but in the end couldn't bear to meddle with it - that bit of the game is perfect and I have nothing of value to add. ;) Thanks for reading!
“And our final item: other matters of business,” Josephine said, making a few sharp, scratching motions with her quill.

Cullen made a hostile, scoffing noise. “Other nonsense you mean. Can’t we just conclude this?”

“Cullen,” Evelyn reprimanded, surprised at his sudden change in demeanour. He had seemed in reasonable spirits the rest of the meeting and she couldn’t imagine what had prompted this sudden turn.

He glowered at her from across the table and folded his arms. “You have yet to witness this spectacle.”

Evelyn looked at each of her advisors in turn, seeking an explanation that was not forthcoming from any of them. “What spectacle?”

“I don’t know what he’s fussing about,” Josephine said with a shake of her head, placing a small stack of envelopes on the war table.

Leliana’s smile was broad and cat-like. “Nor I. This final item is a crucial time in which we can discuss miscellaneous correspondence.”

“Who are those letters from?” Evelyn asked, peering over and seeing that the top envelope was decorated with intricate, hand-drawn vines and roses.

Cullen snorted. “No one of relevance.”

“Quite the opposite!” Josephine disagreed quickly. “These come from some of the most influential and wealthy families in Orlais and Fereldan alike.”

“Isn’t it enough to ridicule me? Must you drag The Inquisitor into this?” Cullen asked, gesturing at Evelyn.

“Is there any particular reason you object to The Inquisitor hearing these Commander?” Leliana asked, eyes wide and voice like honey. “I’m having some difficulty understanding your protestations, given she oversees every other matter we discuss here.”

“No I just – It isn’t – I would have thought this would be beneath her.”

Evelyn, thoroughly intrigued, skirted around the table a little more so as to try and see the highly contested documents a little better. “What are they? Death threats?”

“As good as,” Cullen answered drily making Leliana laugh.

Josephine however, tutted. “There are some very fine offers here. And these are not the half of them: I did curate only the most viable.”

“That just means you picked out the worst ones,” Cullen snapped.

“What are they?” Evelyn asked again, even though it had had no effect the first time.
“Proposals,” Josephine answered simply.

“Proposing what?” Evelyn asked.

“Proposal proposals,” Leliana told her slowly, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes but proposing wha- Oh!” Evelyn let out a breathy laugh as it finally clicked. “Who could think of such a thing at a time like this?”

“Exactly,” Cullen said.

“Lady Constance Variem has offered you the hand of her daughter Sybil, Cullen.”

“No.”

“Consider it at least. She is described as obedient, demure, in robust health and keen to please.”

“Obedient and robust? She would make a very fine horse then.”

“Isn’t an obedient wife what every man dreams of?” Leliana asked.

“Not at all,” he replied firmly.

“What do you dream of then, Cullen?” Josephine quickly interjected. “Because I have plenty of very pleasing candidates vying for your attention so I am sure we can find someone suitable. What is it you seek?”

“We are not doing this.”

“Come now,” Leliana said. “Surely you must have in mind the kind of partner that would most please you? Something quite specific perhaps?”

Cullen’s eyes flicked nearly imperceptibly across the table towards her and Evelyn felt her cheeks redden. “If I did, I can guarantee you wouldn’t find her in there,” he said, gesturing towards the letters.

“How intriguing. Then you do have something in mind! Now you must give us some details!” Leliana was delighted to have trapped him so easily.

“Do share Cullen,” Evelyn said, responding with a shrug when he glared at her with a betrayed expression.

Josephine shuffled through the envelopes. “Actually, there are some for you here too, Inquisitor. Though perhaps that will not come as a surprise?”

“Ooh,” Evelyn said. “Anything good?”

Cullen recoiled slightly from the table. “Please don’t tell me you find this as entertaining as these two?”

“Entertaining?” She pondered the notion seriously for a moment, tapping her chin before grinning at him. “Absolutely.”

Cullen dragged a hand down his weary face. “You all make sport of it.”

“If you’re concerned that we will hurt their feelings then don’t. They will be well accustomed to
“I see: it is like turning down a chipped pot at the marketplace to you all. Just another transaction,” Cullen snapped.

“Well,” Leliana smiled gleefully, “I think we’ve uncovered the identity of the romantic in the room.”

Cullen put up his hand defensively. “Just because I don’t see the humour in wasting our time on such nonsense?”

“Cullen, I was receiving offers like this before I was born. A side effect of having a family name like mine. There is no point taking it seriously,” Evelyn tried to reassure him.

“But did your parents ever take any of those offers seriously?” Josephine asked.

“Yes. I was engaged once.”

Josephine and Leliana turned to face Evelyn with renewed interest and Cullen made a quiet choking sound.

“And what happened? Was it a good match?” Josephine asked.

“Of course it wasn’t!” Cullen objected then froze when they all stared at him. Evelyn, finally finding some pity in her heart, spoke when he clearly couldn’t.

“I was formally introduced to him when I was twelve, though it was some years until we were expected to be wed. He was twenty-four years my senior, kept asking me to twirl for him, treated his servants like animals and had a habit of wiping his mouth on his sleeve after he downed ale. Which he did a lot. I despised him.”

Josephine shook her head. “And your mother and father? What did they think after meeting him? Were they dissuaded by his inadequacies?”

Evelyn’s lips tightened into a grimace. “My parents found him to be suitably wealthy. Better matches were more of a priority for my older siblings. They just wanted the expense of my upkeep transferred away from them as swiftly as possible.”

“But obviously the event did not take place or I assume we would have heard the ‘happy’ news.” Leliana said. “What happened?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I hated him so much I decided I had to kill him before the wedding.”

“Did you?” Josephine gasped, caught firmly in the middle of horror and delight.

“Nearly. The next time he grabbed my hand at a dinner he started convulsing and screaming. When they finally pulled me away, they realised he had been electrocuted.”

“And they realised you were a mage,” Cullen said, the understanding clearly dawning on him.

“Yes. I believe I was quite late in displaying my abilities. I guess I was saving them up.”

“But he lived?” Josephine asked.

“He did. My parents were furious at me for missing the opportunity and humiliating them in front of guests. I’m only sorry he probably ended up marrying some other poor girl less capable of…”
deterring him.”

“It is often the way: the magic reveals itself in times of extreme stress,” Cullen said, sounding distant.

Evelyn shrugged and looked down at the table. “Guess I had never really had cause to be stressed before then.”

Josephine looked at her thoughtfully. “Now that you are no longer situated in accommodations at Ostwick Circle, I imagine that your parents have serious expectations of you again.”

“Yes,” Evelyn said wearily. “Specific ones. I intend to disappoint them again. Maker knows they should be growing accustomed to it.” She looked up and found Cullen staring at the ceiling.

There was a long silence then Josephine sighed. “I hate to admit it but you’re right Cullen: this wasn’t as much fun as I had hoped.”

He folded his arms looking smug. “Finally, some sense on this matter. Let that be an end to it.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Evelyn said, stretching to lean across the table. “Oh look! This envelope is gold!”

Cullen and Evelyn both lingered in the War Room by mutual, unspoken agreement. Leliana had long since left to tend to her own affairs, and Josephine finally flapped away after she suddenly recalled that she needed to speak to a travelling merchant before they left Skyhold. Increasingly frustrated, Evelyn may have seen fit to gently and strategically remind Josephine of this urgent task in order to speed her exit.

As the door closed behind their colleague, Cullen and Evelyn both dropped their own pretences of work and looked across the table at each other. “Well,” Evelyn said in an exhale, unsure of where to begin.

“Are you alright after that?” Cullen asked.

“Am I alright?” she laughed in disbelief. “Are you?”

“Of course. I have grown to expect it from them. Just not when you’re here.”

Usually by now, one of them would have crossed the room to close the distance between them, and Evelyn considered doing so. They were never so tardy to steal a moment alone together. But she felt something unspoken amiss, and conflicted, it caused her to hesitate. She picked up a map marker instead and pretended to examine it. “Then why do you still look so troubled?” she asked him.

“I don’t believe I do.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean I’m not.”

“Your face is all scrunched.”

“I’m tired.”
“They shouldn’t make jokes at your expense like that.”

Cullen sighed and folded his arms. “It’s not that.”

“So there is something?”

“I was just curious about why you had never shared the full story of your magic reveal before now. The version you gave me early in our acquaintance was very different.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Evelyn said waspishly. “I told you it was at a party my parents were hosting and it was.”

“Yes, true enough, but greatly simplified. I thought like most mages you had emitted some sparks or floated the gravy boat through the air, that kind of thing. I never thought to ask for details.”

Yes, she had known that was exactly what he had assumed, and it was precisely what she had intended with her vague account at the time. “Are you upset that I didn’t tell you?”

“Absurdly not,” he said quickly and sincerely. “You were by no means obligated to share it, even now.”

Evelyn believed him. He looked thoughtful, but not angry and she was grateful for it. “You’re not upset but you are curious?” she guessed.

He shifted his stance uncomfortably. “A little.”

“It wasn’t the engagement I was trying to hide. Although I don’t go out of my way to speak of it generally.”

“Understandable.”

“It was more... Back then, when we first broached the topic I... I barely knew you. But I liked you and I didn’t know if... I didn’t want to tell you about my loss of control. That I hurt someone with magic accidentally. I thought you might see me differently.”

“Based on your first expression of magic and under such circumstances? I am not so unreasonable.”

“Ah, I know that now,” she told him, flashing him a small smile. “I just didn’t want to frighten you off.”

“You thought me a zealot. You had no reason to think otherwise at that point.”

“You don’t need to be a zealot, or even a templar to recognise that my example perfectly illustrates the inherent risk a mage poses. Even me.”

“I consider your example self-defence.”

For reasons beyond her own comprehension, this simple answer frustrated her. “Then you think it would have been right, if had I killed him then? Justified even?” Evelyn was suddenly energised, illustrating her question with a sweep of her hand.

He gave her a questioning look, frowning and shaking his head. “I don’t believe you truly intended to kill him. Or that you would have.”

“But I could have. If I had really tried. You know that as well as I do. Don’t you?”
“Yes.” Cullen let out a weary sigh as she looked at him expectantly. “I don’t know why but you want me to say that a mage’s powers, without training and regulation, are dangerous.”

“Self-regulation or regulation by templars in fortresses?”

“Evelyn, you already know how I feel about this. Mages need opportunities to receive education in a way that keeps both them and civilians safe.”

“Receive an education? Is that what you would have thought if you were one of the templars sent to collect me after I nearly killed a man? If we had met then under such circumstances? That I was just in need of some lessons?” The words came out in an urgent rush, with no thought of what she was trying to accomplish.

Cullen raised an eyebrow but did not flinch from the implied accusation. “No. At the very least I would have considered you to be a greater threat than usual and treated you with heightened levels of suspicion…and I dare say hostility. But that was a different time. I was different. I have never sought to conceal my past views from you.”

Whatever she had been planning to say, wherever she was hoping to take the conversation, evaporated into nothing.

“You haven’t,” Evelyn said quietly, feeling deflated, ashamed even. He had been open about his past prejudices, and more recently his suffering and struggle with lyrium. And what was she doing with that trust? Throwing it back in his face and treating him like the enemy. “No, you have been very candid and I am rewarding that by using it against you. I’m sorry: I don’t know why I am going on the offensive all of a sudden.”

“It is a sensitive topic. It always will be.” They were both silent a moment, equally unsure.

“And I’m tired of going over it. I wish I hadn’t pushed you into this conversation.”

“It is unavoidable. I’d rather you were open about it.” He paused, lips tightening for a moment and Evelyn could tell he had more to say. “I am grateful I know now what happened, and that you felt able to speak of it.”

“So it doesn’t appal you? It disgusts me sometimes when I think of it. Not that I hurt him: I hated him. Just that it happened without me knowing it, without me meaning to. It is not…it was an awful feeling.” Evelyn shuddered, recalling the moment she realised that her fizzing rage had become actual electricity, coursing through her body and into his. She remembered seeing the whites of his eyes as they rolled back into his skull, foam at the corners of his lips stained pink with blood where he had bitten his tongue, his whole body twitching and jerking. She remembered being scared and wanting to stop but not knowing how, not even being able to let go in her panic until her brother had wrenched her away.

Concerned, Cullen finally crossed the room but when Evelyn, lost in the memory, didn’t move away from the table, he only put a reassuring hand on her lower back. She leaned against his side.

“I wouldn’t presume to judge anyone based solely on their weakest moments.” His voice was steady and quiet, reassuring Evelyn and grounding her back in the present. “Maker knows I would not wish to be judged on mine.”

Chapter End Notes
These two have come so far but are still figuring each other out (and themselves) in a huge way…Sorry for the whiplash in this chapter! It couldn’t decide what it wanted to be and I didn’t seem to have a say in the matter!

Did I tag this fic ‘fluff & humour’? I meant ‘mutual uncertainty & endless soul-searching conversations’ obviously whoops! Thanks so much for reading - it is incredibly motivating and encouraging to have you putting up with me as I crawl along with this story. :)
They were away from the campsite, far enough to not be intruded upon easily. The scant light of
the waning moon through the trees worked in their favour too. Cullen had not expected to snatch
some time alone with her so quickly and was pleased. Or he had been pleased, before Evelyn had
let out a horrible, heaving groan and fallen against him as soon as they were out of earshot. “Just
give me a moment,” she had muttered when he had gingerly spoken her name. She was not
weeping, but her voice sounded so faint he wondered if she was ill. So he held her, supporting her
weight as she shook slightly, apparently unable to form any further explanation.

Cullen had absolutely no idea what was going on.

In most instances, Evelyn was the one to take him by surprise. The notable exception being when
he had finally kissed her on the battlements in a rush of courage that he was still equally astounded
by and grateful for. On a day-to-day basis however, it was Evelyn who caught him unprepared by
dropping in to visit at all hours or turning up to ‘supervise’ him training the troops. And when they
were alone: with swift kisses or a suggestive comment that left him stumbling for a response.

Maker knew as much as it pleased him, her attention was often still unexpected, and that made her
gleeful. “Yes Cullen,” she had told him recently, “I liked you yesterday and I still like you today. I
dare say I’ll like you tomorrow too so perhaps try not to look so stunned?”

He adopted a thoughtful expression before saying: “I was rather hoping you might still by the end
of the week, but perhaps I ask too much.” Which prompted her cluck her tongue.

“I’ll have to check my schedule,” she said with a laugh and when he feigned worry added: “But I
expect so.”

If his uncertainty frustrated her, or Maker forbid it, gave her cause to doubt his own affections, she
did a good job of hiding it. It was more than he deserved, and it was why he had thought it would
be a good idea to visit her in the field without advance notice, arriving at the Inquisition camp with
a contingency of reinforcements.

‘Had thought’ being the operative phrase. She was obviously distressed which was not good, and
not what he had been picturing when he had devised this plan. But then again, she was pressed
against him, holding him with a kind of ferocious determination that wasn’t entirely removed from
what he had been imagining for the entire ride here either.

“Evelyn,” he said again, stroking her hair in repetitive, soothing motions and she let out and
exhausted sounding sigh, her grip around him loosening. On the Warden’s advice they were
travelling towards the Western Approach which was predicted to be chaos in itself, but enemy
resistance had increased tenfold before they had even arrived. The increased raids on the travelling
party indicated they were headed firmly in the right direction: someone wanted to stop them before
they arrived. But it was testing their soldiers and resources, not to mention Evelyn and her
companions. And all this was without yet having to grapple with the desert terrain and native
wildlife that awaited at their destination. “I heard things were difficult but I had no idea…” he
began quietly.

Evelyn’s reply was deadpan, though slightly muffled as she kept her face buried against his chest:
“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never had so much fun in my entire life.”

“Clearly. How could I have misunderstood?”
She groaned. “Don’t think I’m out here having breakdowns every day. You caught me off guard. I was maintaining my composure just fine until you turned up,” her tone implied jest, but he detected a real embarrassment.

“And I was the final straw?” he teased.

“Hardly. I thought I might cry, just to see a friendly face.”

“Dorian is here.”

“Dorian is a friend, true. But he is more of discerning, critical face than a ‘friendly face’. It doesn’t really compare.”

“The reports coming from this are have been so troubling. I have no doubt you will manage it –” he began and she let out an unconvinced hum, her brow creasing, “But I was…I missed you.”

Evelyn pulled back from her hold on him. “Maker, that was a shock to find you in the arriving crowd. But I am happy you’re here,” she told him sheepishly, looking up, her face earnest.

“It was meant to be a…” it sounded foolish to say it out loud.

“Nice surprise?” she finished for him. “It was,” she added with a smile that utterly convinced him, even in the half light of the moon.

He recalled the moment he had arrived at the camp, as Evelyn had been warmly and routinely greeting each of the new soldiers ahead of him. As she had scanned the group, their faces illuminated by the flickering torches, they had locked eyes. He had smiled despite his promise to himself to remain professionally neutral. Evelyn’s gaze slid away without registering him, before she looked back quickly, expression dumbstruck. Eyes wide, mouth slightly agape: he might have been a giant blue nug wearing a tutu for all her astonishment.

When he finally reached her, she had regained her senses enough to shake his hand and greet him as she had the others. The touch was necessarily (but painfully) brief. “Patrol duty Commander?” she said lightly, casual for the benefit of those watching. “Did I demote you and forget about it?”

“I considered it would be advantageous to gain a personal understanding of the terrain and conditions here, given the amount of military intervention the Venatori presence is likely to require of us.”

If Evelyn had an answer ready it was lost when Dorian responded for her: “How practical you are as ever. In which case I am certain you must be panting to see the perimeter defences of the camp. I’m sure the Inquisitor would be delighted to give you the grand tour.” Cullen was irritated by the heavy-handed intervention. And frankly grateful. Which returned him to the present.

He brushed a hand lightly over her forehead, then rested them on her cheeks, to test if they felt feverish. “You’re not unwell?”

“No, not at all,” she said quickly, looking up at him directly to reassure him. “It has been…difficult and I have just been thinking how much I wished I could see you. All week, each day, every hour…” It was impossible not to kiss her then, cupping her face gently. She sighed. “When I saw you, I half thought I had actually summoned you here by some power unbeknownst to me,” she whispered against his lips.

“Perhaps you did,” he told her in a low voice. “I certainly felt compelled.” And he had, finding himself drawn across the country towards her like a moth to a candle.
“Well, now you’re here.” Evelyn took a step to close the distance between them. He moved his hands to her hips to pull her nearer still, and heard her take a sharp intake of breath. She lapsed into an expectant silence, waiting to see what he would do. Cullen felt a recklessness coming upon him, where the visible flames of the campsite, flickering through the trunks of the trees, and the occasional, distant yells of soldier’s merriment seemed inconsequential. Evelyn shivered against him, perhaps from the cool of the deepening night.

He moved swiftly, kissing her more urgently than before. Evelyn let out a surprised moan, her lips parting in surprise which only served to encourage him further, his hands tugging at the edge of her shirt so he could press his hot palms directly against the soft skin at her waist. Evelyn was keenly receptive: standing on her toes and pulling him closer to deepen the kiss, her fingers combing through his hair in a way that made him break out in goose bumps. He moved his hands higher up her back, finding the edge of her breast band frustratingly in the way.

She bit lightly at his bottom lip, not enough to cause pain but it gave her the opportunity to break away, both of them panting slightly, her chest heaving against his. There was enough time before they were missed…there was time enough to…Cullen felt as if a fog was lifting and frowned.

Time enough for what? Push her against a tree and get it over with? They were not farm labourers stealing a moment together: she was The Inquisitor and he? He was supposed to be renowned for his self-control. Evelyn was kissing his neck in a very distracting way, and he felt the cool air keenly on each spot where her wet mouth had been. He tried to concentrate. She deserved better than hurried fumbling in the middle of a dark forest where their enemies may yet be moving towards their position. This was not something he intended to rush, or stumble into thoughtlessly, blinded by his own desire. He would not ruin this with desperate haste or impulsiveness. He withdrew his hands from under the fabric of her shirt, unable to resist running his fingers over the skin as he did so to extend the contact for just a moment longer.

Evelyn sensed him drawing back, and looked up with a curious expression. Cullen felt the sudden need to apologise for something, but as if pre-empting him, she kissed his neck lightly once more before falling back on her heels. She met his gaze, eyes twinkling, unreadable smile on her face. He swallowed. “Don’t Cullen. It’s okay,” she told him quietly and then her smile broadened. “I like you coming to visit.”

“Not as much as I like visiting, I suspect.”

“I have something for you.” She said, moving back from him, tugging the hem of her shirt into place as if nothing had happened.

“Do you?” he asked, perplexed. It wasn’t as if she had known he was coming so what on earth could she be carrying with her.

“A gift. Of sorts. Something I want you to keep for me.”

“Unless I blacked out during a meeting and skipped a couple months without realising: Midwinter is some time away.”

“Exactly. It is ages away and I could die before then so may as well give you this while you’re here,” she said with a shrug.

Cullen shot her a glare. “Don’t”

“Joke about dying or die?”
“Either.”

“Fine, then just because I am impatient. I was going to give you this when I got back to Skyhold but I can’t keep it anymore.”

“Can’t you?”

She pulled out a small piece of metal, shaped like a shield and with a very detailed insignia or crest engraved upon it that he could barely see in the darkness. “It has some minor protection spells on it and Dagna says it is interfering with my enchanted armour. Some kind of conflict that negates both effects. Not ideal. Learned the hard way. Anyway: take it.”

“What is it?”

“Just a cloak pin. Nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.”

She forced it into his palm and it was heavier than he had expected, and still warm from her hands. “Why are you so suspicious?” she asked, sounding suspicious herself.

Now he was holding it, Cullen took the opportunity to look at it more closely. “Is this your family crest?”

“Studying up on noble houses are you? Yes, just something that was given to me when I was born. We all get one passed to us, and our names are inscribed on the back there with the ancestors who held it before us. Very routine. See? There I am,” she said, pointing helpfully when he flipped it over.

“I can’t take this.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too…important.”

“You gave me your coin.”

“That is completely different.”

“How? It was a gift from your family as was mine.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, except I suppose if our family guards caught you with this on your person they would probably assume you had stolen a family heirloom from our treasury and execute you, whereas no one would know the difference between your coin and my ale money but other than that: completely the same.”

“Practically identical,” he said, holding the pin carefully away from his body as if it may attack.

“Please. I’m serious about this. I’ve had this all my life. I can’t bear the thought of just shutting it away in a drawer at Skyhold for months on end.”

“If you’re concerned about it being secure then we can arrange –”

“I’m not. I am. It’s not just that. Just look after it for me. It would mean a lot if you…just think of it as taking care of it for me for a while then. Please.”

“If you’re certain.”
“I am.”

He closed his fingers around it. “Then I will keep it safe.”

Evelyn looked relieved. “Thank you. Well, I hope you aren’t going to be this resistant to the actual Midwinter gift I have planned for you,” she laughed then, even more alarmingly, winked at him.

A soldier intercepted them with a salute as they returned to camp. Cullen tried not to look guilty.

“How did you find the perimeter defences, Commander? Any recommendations?” the woman asked sincerely as Evelyn shot him an amused look and sauntered away. Varric snorted and Cullen could see Dorian’s smile even from the other side of the fire. Cassandra at least, went on cleaning her sword seemingly unaffected by the exchange.

Cullen cleared his throat. “All was most satisfactory.”

To say the very least.
Moments before Evelyn and her companions had disappeared into the bowels of Adamant Fortress, he had been irritated with her. *He had been irritated with her.* How could he ever forgive himself if something…

Cullen couldn’t explain it: just the adrenaline of the assault on the fortress combined with the fear he kept trying to swallow down like bile was making him brittle. The gates had been breached and there was an opening in the defences that her party could steal to get inside and begin to weaken the wall defences. They had both hesitated, all eyes upon them. Cullen felt frustrated by his inability to speak his mind given the scrutiny. But what had he really wanted to say at that moment? To be safe? To be careful? Ridiculous when the very success of the mission depended on her being anything but careful.

Then she had said something foolish and earnest to him about looking after the soldiers. What did she think? They were here for a picnic? Everyone in the Inquisition knew what sacrifices might be required of them. What he had intended was to tell her to concentrate on her own mission and to trust the soldiers to fight their own battles. To reassure her that they knew their duty and that they fought in the hope she would succeed. Instead he snapped at her.

“Okay,” she had replied distractedly. Or it was something like that, he couldn’t recall exactly. It was not meekness; it was as if she was simply disengaging from him. She hadn’t even looked offended, only raising an eyebrow briefly then scanning the courtyard, flames reflected in her eyes. Cullen could see her mind working as she began to take in the surroundings, beginning to pick out a path. She pointed to a staircase with her staff, said something to Cassandra. Then they left, and he turned away before he could see if she looked back at him or not.

With the poor odds she faced each day, how many times could he beg the Maker to spare her and expect it to be so?

At least once more it seemed. The sheer size of the dragon’s shadow passing overhead caught his attention and as he watched it approach Adamant Fortress, his heart pounding and in no doubt of the quarry it sought. The yells of his soldiers returned him to the battlefield: a group had been sent reeling by a terror demon bursting from the ground. Weapons had been knocked from their grasp and they were not recovering them quickly enough to fight back. The demon was cutting them down with ease as they panicked and scrabbled to get away. The demon’s mouth stretched revoltingly wide and it let out a scream. Others of its kin, alerted to the easy prey, began flocking to the area. Tearing his gaze from the circling dragon, Cullen forced himself to focus on the enemies before him.

He moved swiftly, kicking a sword closer to one soldier who was crawling for it, and hauling another back from the fray by his shoulders to buy him time to recover. But the others were being overwhelmed too quickly to assist further except by engaging the demons.

“To me!” he yelled, voice hoarse from the relentless shouting of commands over the din of combat. But he was loud enough to be heard by those nearest him, who joined at his side, bearing down on the new wave of enemies.

Each demon offered new challenges. A despair demon danced out of their reach over and over and
imbued the surrounding wraiths with relentless, iced bolts of magic. “Your shield! Use your shield!” he yelled at a soldier beside him who obeyed just in time to block one of the ranged attacks. Many of the soldiers, though well-seasoned in bandits and shades, would never have encountered the likes of these horrors before. But they fought well, with unflinching determination and courage, reacting quickly to each new form of attack, responding well to his orders.

For Cullen, these foes were not so unfamiliar. He had encountered many of their kind at Kirkwall. And before that: The Circle Tower. He pushed that thought to the back of his mind. There he had been helpless. Here he could fight. And he intended to do so.

The battle was all consuming: it was impossible to wonder after The Inquisitor and her progress. He could not afford the distraction.

And yet…

“Commander? Something's happening!” A soldier drew his attention, pointing upwards.

Rapid flashes of light from the cliff edge could mean nothing but duelling mages. Was it Evelyn fighting? That would mean she was still alive at least. This thought, and any tentative relief it brought him lasted as long as it took for the dragon to return, bearing down on whoever was up there, letting out the most ear-piercing screech. Cullen yelled her name in warning, stupidly, as it was both impossible he should be heard, and impossible she wouldn’t have noticed the arrival of the beast herself. Some of the soldiers turned in his direction briefly, confused and wondering what command he had shouted. “Stay focused!” he told them, hypocritically it seemed. This distraction had left him prone to an advancing demon, that swiped at his head with enough force to dent his helmet and leave his ears ringing before he put his sword through its belly. His helmet was too damaged to keep wearing and when he removed it, he noted with detachment that there was blood trickling sluggishly down the side of his face.

Cullen thought he had seen a flash of green, just out of the corner of his eye, but by the time he had killed the shades he was engaged with and turned towards Adamant there was no sign of a rift. He blinked in the glare, sweat making his eyes sting.

“Commander!” yelled a soldier near him.

“You have something to report?”

“What do we do?” was all the soldier could reply with, a frantic edge to his voice.

“Are your orders unclear? Keep fighting.” Cullen put out an arm to shove the man aside as a demon loomed behind him. He brought it down and found the man still vying for his attention. And he wasn’t the only one, Cullen realised. The soldiers around him were losing focus on their quarry, turning to Cullen expectantly, dangerously inattentive. Yells were ringing out across the battlefield, but not the usual cries of warning or pain. There was mounting confusion, soldiers looking for guidance. He was missing something. “What? What is it?”

The soldier gestured towards Adamant with his sword. “The Inquisitor is gone.”

Cullen felt as if he had been kicked in the belly by a horse. “She’s dead?” he said in an exhale, his
throat constricting.

“No, she’s gone,” the soldier said again, his voice rising, eyes darting in fear.

Cullen dropped his shield and took the man by his shoulder. “Maker damn you is she alive or dead?”

“Ser I don’t know! She’s disappeared. Her and the group with her: Lady Pentaghast and the Warden and all.”

Cullen could have strangled him for not making sense. At that moment he could have strangled anyone. “Speak plainly. Where were they last seen?”

“Falling.” Cullen gave the man a warning glare that prompted him to elaborate. “They were atop that cliff there but the dragon…it crumbled and they fell.”

Cullen’s mind was racing and he turned away from the soldier to hide his mounting panic. No one could survive a fall like that. Not even her and her ridiculous knack of surviving anything that he had so begun to take for granted. How had he let her go in there on her own? How had he left her so vulnerable? Maker what had he done?

He couldn’t submit to this. Now was not the time.

Cullen steadied his breathing, in an attempt to hide his distress: an old templar trick to regulate emotions. But still he was conscious that so many eyes were upon him. So many eyes that were turned to him for guidance. He regretted removing his helmet. He managed to speak, in a voice that sounded cold, distant and wholly not his own. “The Inquisitor is dead. Next time make your reports in a timely manner.”

“Ser, I don’t think you understand.”

“What is there to understand?” Cullen hissed, rounding on the man.

“The Inquisitor, she…She opened one of them rifts as they went. They all fell right into it and then it was gone again in a blink. Forgive me for not finding the words. I still can’t hardly believe what I saw.”

Cullen froze and his mind began to race through a series of rationalisation. If she went in through a rift could she come back out by a rift? And if so would it be a rift nearby or on the other side of Thedas? Or in the same place? In mid-air? None of this made any sense to him. Solas may have some insight into the matter, but Solas was not in attendance and it would take weeks for a rider to reach Skyhold.

“Commander? Commander Rutherford? Commander?” He realised he was being spoken to, and from the enquiring look on the soldier’s face, he had been for some time.

“Yes?” he snapped.

“What are we going to do?” the soldier nearly whimpered and Cullen’s lip curled in a sneer. He found the man’s weakness pathetic, sickening even. But he knew he was projecting: it only revolted him because his own mounting fear was threatening to overcome him. He could not let it.

“What we came here to do. This place is still overrun is it not?” he shouted, loudly enough for the benefit of those listening on while picking up his shield.
“But without The Inquisitor we –”

“When The Inquisitor returns there will be work enough for her without picking up your slack.”

“We can’t close rifts without –”

“We push on. Steel yourself. That’s an order. Understood?”

“Understood!”

“All soldiers to me!”

The enemies had thinned, Inquisition soldiers picking out the stragglers as Cullen gratefully received a flask of water that was handed to him. His ears were still ringing and his head still ached from the blow he had taken to it earlier.

There was no news on the Inquisitor, though messengers had been sent from other battalions to him confirming the situation from others who had witnessed it. Did he know The Inquisitor had fallen? Did he know she might be trapped in the fade? Did he know she might be dead? “I’m aware,” he had told them, over and over again. “I’m aware, I’m aware, I’m aware.” How fortunate he had had a lifetime’s practice of compartmentalising pain.

But Cullen’s mind betrayed him, flashes of memories playing over his vision even as he had fought. Her laugh. The way she chewed her bottom lip when she concentrated. The way her hair caught the light when she let it down. Her holding his hand on her lap and tracing patterns on the palm with the tips of her fingers. Her losing a bet at the tavern to someone and standing on a table to sing ‘Havard’s Lament’ loudly and badly, but still managing to make it the best rendition he had ever heard. Them sharing a look over the war table and her smiling in way that meant she would wait for him after the meeting. A hundred little moments flaring and sparking then disappearing just as quickly, leaving him half-blinded in the aftermath.

Even as he told himself it wasn’t over, nothing was so simple with her, his heart knew, she was gone. And with her: every passing wish, every fanciful dream, everything he longed to share with her was rendered brutally impossible. He had been a fool to hope for…

Cullen was ready to tear the next messenger that disturbed him to shreds but it wasn’t just any soldier: it was Leliana. “You’ve heard?” she asked.

“Yes. You saw it?”

“She might have saved their lives. If they can find a way out of the fade again.”

“If,” Cullen said tersely. “We must have made more progress than I realised if your archers have advanced this far.”

“The Wardens largely rallied to the fortress when they realised the gate had been breached. But we were ready for them.”

“The demons are still spawning. At least two rifts are nearby,” he pointed in the direction the flow of enemies had been arriving from. “But we have them under control. For now. This can’t be kept up forever.”
They may be holding the field now, but they both knew that without Evelyn to close the rifts, they would lose in a war of attrition as soldiers grew tired at the endless flow of demons. Cullen was grateful when Leliana left this unsaid. “You’re bleeding quite a lot,” she told him instead, matter-of-factly.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.” In truth, he had no idea how bad it was but he didn’t have time to deal with it right at that moment. Josephine would have fussed but Leliana was more practical, whether she believed him or not. She shrugged and reached behind her to reflexively check the number of arrows in her quiver, her mind already returning to the fight. “We have to proceed under the assumption Evelyn will return.”

“I agree. Our soldiers are too scattered. We need to rally to a central point and draw the demons to the group, or else they’ll continue to pick us off one by one. Do you know of a good location to mass? Higher ground if possible.”

“Yes. I’ll arrange the messengers for any Generals left standing.”

“Very good.” Leliana seemed to be waiting for him to say more, in her typical way of letting people incriminate themselves. “We did account for this going wrong in vast multitudes of ways but this is…incomprehensible.”

She gave him a piercing look. “You do believe she will return, don’t you?”

Cullen, surprised at his own reaction, shook his head uncertainly. The action made him feel lightheaded and he put a hand up to tentatively explore the extent of his wound. “It doesn’t matter what I think. As you have said: we must proceed under that assumption.”

“She would never give up so easily. You should not either.”

Yelling distracted them both, then a bone chilling roar as two pride demons charged into view, parting easily through their soldiers, like wheat in a field. “Go,” Cullen told Leliana, who had already knocked an arrow. “Begin to gather the others. I’ll join you when I can.”

“You’ll need reinforcements here.”

“We’ll manage. Go.”

Advancing on the new enemy Cullen was vaguely aware that he was pleased by their arrival. It seemed insane but once he recognised his own relief it was undeniable. As long as he was fighting, he did not have to think.

His chest plate was off and he felt strangely light now he was moving without the bulk of it. A healer was insisting he sit and though he was reluctant, he complied. Cullen would have reprimanded one of his own soldiers for resisting treatment as he himself already had been.

He had been gripping a sword for so long he felt as if his hand did not know how to let go of it. He gingerly unclenched his fist, letting the weapon fall at his feet with a clatter. His shield had been shattered by one of the Pride Demons, but better it than him. Though the arm that had borne it felt as good as useless, something the healer had picked up on as they seemed to be torn between tending to it or his head wound first.

Cullen felt barely present as his injuries were cleaned and bound, staring into the distance
unseeingly.

Chest aching, throat tight, he was plagued by desperate thoughts, of what he would give if Evelyn would just come back to him. It wasn’t even proper praying: he couldn’t muster the energy for it. It was just pointless bargaining with an unknown entity. He’d give the use of his injured arm forever just to know she was alive, wherever she was. Both his legs to redo the conversation at their parting, so he could ignore the people watching on and just tell her he loved her while he’d had the chance. Ten years from the end of his life to see her one more time. Even from a distance. Even briefly.

“That should feel better,” the healer told him, as she carefully stretched out his arm, watching to see if it caused him any pain. But it was well, if stiff and aching at the joint. He should have thanked her, but his mind was sluggish and they had already moved on to the next patient.

Someone passed him more water and some food wrapped in a cloth: cheese and cold sausage on a slice of rye bread. Cullen ate and drank mechanically. Then, feeling dangerously hopeless, he rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. He was exhausted, but knew he would find no sleep. He should return to the battlefield: it was a choice between continuing to fight or giving in to the torment of his own thoughts.

The demons were only trickling in now, but he could relieve another soldier on duty who could better use the opportunity to rest than he could.

He picked up his sword, strode from the healer’s tent.

“Cullen.”

It was Cassandra’s voice.
Evelyn eyes opened slowly and Cullen’s face hovering over hers was the first thing she saw. She blinked blearily at him as he smiled.

“You’re awake.”

“You -” she managed, in a rasp before her voice gave out. She tried to clear her throat, then began to cough. It felt like half the sand of the desert was trapped in her oesophagus. He passed her a flask of water that rested beside the cot. Propping herself up, she drank gratefully, then lay back once more, exhausted by the effort. “You sound surprised,” she finally finished, as he took the flask and replaced the cork, taking a seat on the small stool at her bedside.

“I was told not to expect you to wake for hours.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Here I am,” he said with such conviction that she managed a small smile in return. “Do you need anything? Are you in pain?” he asked.

“Pain? No. Not really. Just a little…” she scrunched up her face and shook her head slightly to try and illustrate her feeling of mental fogginess.

“Tell me if that changes. I’ll fetch the healer.”

Shifting to look about she could see rows of cots on either side of her, all hosting injured soldiers and all resting or sedated. At least she assumed as much, from the quiet of the tent.

“What happened?” she asked Cullen, voice soft, so as to not disturb the others.

“While you were…away? The demon army was broken and the Wardens surrendered. Everyone is far more interested in what happened to you.”

Evelyn let out a groan and draped her arm over her eyes. What _had_ happened to her?

Her mind must have rationalised in a split-second that opening a rift mid-air would be a better alternative than them all plunging to their deaths. After that ordeal she wasn’t so sure anymore. It had been nightmarish in every sense. Trying to present a front of confidence for the sake of her companions, she had harboured no certainty they would ever be able to leave the fade again. To forever wander in that place of obscure horrors was unthinkable.

And the voice in her head. Icy, prying fingers into her mind, teasing out every anxiety and fear into disorienting taunts. “You’ll fail. You’ve already failed. Your interventions have only delayed the inevitable and extended the suffering of innocents. You’ve disappointed them over and over again. You never should have been the one to survive. They all wish that someone more worthy bore that mark. Especially him. And he’ll never see you as anything more than threat. He looks at you and only sees what evils you are capable of. You cannot be trusted. You cannot be loved.”

The whispering voice had come from so deep within that it had begun to seem like it was really Evelyn’s own, clouding her mind with lies, distracting her as she was fighting and making her lead
the group in circles.

Then that creature, the nightmare demon, had confronted them as they finally neared freedom. Evelyn thought she had seen all the fade had to offer. She thought she couldn’t be phased. But just to look up at this demon made her stomach swoop and head feel dizzy. The enormity of it would have given a giant pause. Evelyn could still hear the deafening chittering sounds it emitted and smell the rot of it, acrid and putrid enough to make her retch, eyes watering.

Her heart began to race remembering sprinting for her life. There was no defeating a creature like that: not with their small number and not with their drained stamina. They had fled.

No, not all of them had fled… She swallowed rapidly, trying to quell a surge of emotion. They had escaped, but for him, and then she had closed the rift which had cost her dearly, though she tried not to show it. Drained, Evelyn kept her face as blank as she felt, aware that as they walked, soldiers were turning to watch, awe on their faces, voices hushed but elated. They were congratulating her, praising her. Yet nothing that day had felt like a victory.

Cassandra had steadied her as they came towards camp. Had she stumbled?

“Cullen,” someone had said, but it wasn’t her. It must have been Cassandra. Cassandra who was beside her, but somehow sounded very far away.

And then he was holding her, before she even really saw him. His arms wrapped around her tightly, almost too tightly, crushed against his chest. But she didn’t mind, the lingering poison of the demon’s comments finally feeling insubstantial: tattered and fading like ribbons of mist. “I thought I’d lost you,” Cullen had said, voice thick.

“Not that easily,” Evelyn had tried to tell him. But she wasn’t sure if the words came out. She couldn’t seem to make her voice work. Then she could recall nothing more beyond waking up. With Cullen here, still here, and waiting patiently for her to respond.

She felt hot, stinging tears rising and was glad her face was hidden from him. “It was all the usual fade stuff. Boring,” she told him as glibly as she could manage but her voice cracked tellingly.

“You are the authority on that subject,” was all he said, deftly sensing not to press her for which she felt a rush of gratitude. She would tell him, when it wasn’t so crucial that she hold herself together. Perhaps he knew that.

“Was it intentional? Opening the rift at that moment. Did you do it on purpose?”

“I suppose I must have, but I have no memory of deciding… Some part of me must have realised it was the only way out. I don’t… I must have. I was just panicking.”

“I suspect most people would be when unexpectedly plummeting from a great height.”

Evelyn laughed a little at that, and feeling more composed, removed her arm to face him. Cullen was watching her carefully, brow creased with concern. She hated to see it. “Did you…I’m sorry, you must have been…I hope you weren’t worried.”

“No,” he said quickly, then stared down at the floor between his feet. “No. That is, we had no news you were gone out on the battlefield so I wasn’t aware of…We heard nothing, until you had returned.”

“Good. Better that way. I’m glad.” And she was, she realised. In the fade she had wondered what he must be thinking and it had made her sick to envision the confusion and the uncertainty, wishing
desperately she could reach out and somehow tell him she was okay. It was a relief to know he suffered nothing of what she had imagined.

“I’d still rather you didn’t do it again,” he said, voice strained, eyes still on the ground.

“I have no intention of building a summer home there, believe me.” There was a moment’s pause when a soldier in a nearby bed groaned, rolled over and fell immediately back asleep. Evelyn glanced either side of herself but no one else stirred. “This reminds me of Haven,” she told Cullen.

“Haven?” he said, head snapping back up to look at her with a perplexed expression.

“Yes. I think it’s all the snow,” she told him thoughtfully.

“Snow? But there isn’t any…” Cullen’s brow furrowed in confusion before he smiled and let out a reluctant laugh. “Not conscious for ten minutes and already making sport of me. Have you no mercy?”

She grinned at him. “Would you deny me my entertainment?”

“I would never deny you anything that made you smile like that,” he told her sincerely.

Evelyn let out a breathy: “Oh,” as warmth flooded her face and they were both forced to look away from each other for a moment. “It really does though, remind me of Haven I mean. Not Haven exactly. Afterwards. When you sat at my bedside for hours.” He looked incredibly taken aback and Evelyn couldn’t help but capitalise on it. “Lurking,” she added with emphasis.

He didn’t even attempt to refute it. “I wasn’t aware you were conscious for any of that.”

“I was, in drips and drabs. You carried me in from the snow. When I woke you were often beside me. And I had your cloak for a blanket.”

“Maker, you were awake,” he muttered, an unmistakable colour rising up his neck as he shifted on his seat.

“It is a bit late to be embarrassed. And it was nice.”

“Was it?”

“It was confusing when I came to: I wasn’t always sure where I was or what had happened. But seeing you there let me know I was safe.”

“Yes well, compelling evidence both then and now of how ‘safe’ I keep you,” he said drily.

“None of what was accomplished today would have been possible without you, Cullen. And I likely would have been killed in the fray if not for your support and the path you cleared.”

“It was the soldiers, not me. I-”

She gave him a stern shushing. “And you are their Commander. You’re not really going to argue with me right now, are you? When I’m so weak?” she finished in an intentionally simpering tone.

He gave her an exasperated smile. “Of course I’m not, Inquisitor.”

She responded with a smug smile, but it dissolved as she searched his drawn face. “And you’re alright? You weren’t hurt in the fighting?”
“Nothing noteworthy.”

She let out a sceptical tut, eyeing the bandage on his head then yawned. “What time is it? Late?”

“No very.”

“Perhaps you should be resting, even so. You do look a little pale.”

“You just got chewed up and spat out again by the fade and you’re telling me to rest?”

“Yes. I am. I’m insisting on it actually.”

Cullen hesitated. “I was waiting…I just wanted to speak to you,” he told her, voice low and with a focused look in his eyes that she couldn’t decipher.

Evelyn hummed as the lethargy threatened to overcome her once more. “Well, now we’ve spoken so go away and sleep.” She gingerly pulled her left arm out from under the blankets and checked the mark, more out of habit than genuine curiosity. It was as it ever was: glowing and strange. That confirmed, she let her hand flop beside her where Cullen leaned forward and held it in both of his. The warmth and pressure was comforting. She wished he would stay like that. She wished he could hold her properly. Instead she said: “I notice you’re not leaving.”

“Not yet. Just until you fall asleep.”

“Then you’ll go?” she asked, already feeling herself slipping, unable to fight her heavy eyelids any longer.

He squeezed her hand. “Then I’ll go.”

“Liar,” was the last thing she remembered saying before she drifted off again.

Chapter End Notes

I had some second thoughts about Cullen lying about knowing Evelyn was missing as I believe that fundamentally he is a very honest person. However I think that he has demonstrated that he is capable of some deception. There are some examples where he uses omission to simultaneously protect/avoid burdening others and to avoid discussing or confronting his own feelings/mental state such as hiding his lyrium withdrawal or not writing to his siblings. Further to this, Cullen also appears capable of deceiving or manipulating a situation to his advantage as there is the theorised possibility that he lets the Inquisitor win their first chess game (if you chose to play fairly the Inquisitor wins, if you try to cheat he beats you suggesting that he has complete control over the outcome of the game). Perhaps letting the Inquisitor win is a both a courtesy and a strategy to encourage her to play with him again... Therefore, I was drawn to keeping with this version of events with the logic that he may lie in order to a) spare Evelyn (who is already exhausted and stressed) from feeling guilty for having worried him and b) avoid having to discuss his own feelings about the whole matter and admit how much it impacted him (for now anyway).

In this 46 slide powerpoint presentation I will be exploring several more instances in which...Juuust kidding - thanks so much for reading!
Something fundamental had changed since Adamant. Something had shifted in their relationship. It couldn’t be just her thinking this. Evelyn knew it wasn’t. She had seen it in the way he looked at her across the War Table: more focused than ever before, as if assessing her. She wondered if she measured up. Then when they were alone, it was perpetually as if he were about to say something, before he would change his mind and look away. Evelyn hadn’t realised that words unspoken could ring so loud.

If the Nightmare Demon had intended to make her question his interest in her it had failed. When would her enemies learn that their attempts to undermine her confidence only bolstered her determination? ‘So what?’ she wanted to tell the stupid demon. ‘You’re wrong. He does want to be with me.’ And she believed it. Fully.

At least she would if he would ruddy do something.

Evelyn remembered the battlements and their first kiss, his surge of determination and found herself daydreaming on plots of how to trigger such a response again. Of course, she was hardly devoid of his attention. And he could be just as passionate, when the opportunity allowed it. His hot mouth crushing against hers, exploratory hands under her shirt, momentarily unselfconscious and a telling moan. Then nothing. Stepping back to a respectful distance with a slightly guilty look on his face despite her encouragement. But now she wanted more. And it was starting to feel urgent.

Evelyn was obviously more than aware that she could die at any time, as she was daily reminded. But something about Adamant had panicked her. If she took a blade to her throat or an arrow to her heart it would be the end of her troubles and she would be unlikely to have time to dwell on regrets.

But the fade would not have been a quick death, and in it she was confronted with more than enough time to wonder: ‘Oh Maker, is this really it?’

This was a difficult thing to convey however, without sounding flippant and insincere. “Cullen. I’ve confronted my own mortality so…in conclusion could you please rip my clothes off?” And selfishly she still wanted it to him to initiate something. Commit to something. She wanted him to want her. Was that too much to ask?

A soldier keeping watch on the battlements greeted her and Evelyn had to blink herself back to reality before she could respond. Resenting the interruption, she kept walking and moments later was at the door of his office, about to knock when the sound of Cullen voice gave her pause. He was speaking to someone, or several someone’s, from the way he was projecting. Evelyn wondered if she should leave, just briefly, then shrugged off the unappealing notion. Apparently her desire to see him was stronger than her desire to not disturb his work.

It usually was.

She lowered her raised fist and instead of knocking, opened the door just a fraction and slipped inside, flattening herself against the wall to try and avoid interrupting.

But her attempt to not pose a distraction failed. Cullen faltered upon seeing her, and seemed to cut
his speech short, ushering the soldiers from the room. It was an unexpected reaction, and with mounting curiosity, Evelyn decided he must have something on his mind.

Some days later…

It was a bright, clear morning and although he hardly expected her to be lingering in her quarters on such a day it was still the first place Cullen checked. Evelyn’s maid had been left with the instruction that if any of her advisors were seeking The Inquisitor, she could be found in the stables. Cullen smirked a little when he was told: Josephine was locked in land access negotiations that would tie her up for the rest of the day and Leliana was on a scouting mission. Both of which Evelyn well knew: she clearly meant if he was looking for her. Concerns that he may be disturbing her allayed, he needed no further encouragement and strode towards the stables, taking the steps to the lower courtyard two at a time.

Evelyn was alone, sitting on a hay bale, a pile of tack beside her that she was apparently cleaning and polishing, piece by piece. She looked up hopefully when he entered and gratifyingly, smiled when she saw him. “You got my message.”

“Yes, I was looking for you,” he said, offering no reason for doing so.

“I had hoped you would,” she replied, asking for none.

Neither of them seemed to be able to think of anything else to say and they just went on smiling at each other, ridiculously for a moment. There was no longer any awkward preamble between them when they met, and no shaky, transparent excuses for visiting, except when required for the benefit of watching eyes.

He sat on a nearby hay bale as she returned to her task. Cullen had thought he had sought her out with unsubtle frequency before Adamant, but now they both seemed to drawn to each other with waning caution. It wasn’t just the nights where she could slip to his quarters unnoticed, or they could abandon the pretence of their meeting when finally alone, leaving papers scattered across her room. Now more than ever he simply craved her company and her presence. Even in a group of people, even silent in the same room, even catching a glimpse of her across the courtyard was enough to lift his mood and feel like a blessing.

“Have you had a busy morning?” she asked him without looking up, working determinedly in the crevices of some stirrup leathers.

“Nothing unusual.”

“Yes then.”

“And you?”

“I’m avoiding things I should be doing,” she said, gesturing with the sponge in her hand before refreshing it in the bucket beside her.

“I guessed as much, and determined it was pointless to tell you that you don’t need to be doing that.”

Evelyn sighed, glancing at the gleaming saddle on the rack that she had obviously already been over. “I’m pretending that I am thinking about my actual work while doing this, but really I am just
“Putting it off.”

“Anything I can help with.”

“Do you want to write to my mother?”

“No,” he said a bit too quickly. He cleared his throat awkwardly and Evelyn laughed.

“It’s okay: neither do I. Josephine has convinced me we may require the leverage of my ‘good name’ shortly so I can ignore them no longer.”

“Are you struggling to phrase it? The letter?”

“Not really. I know what I need to say. Or at least, I know they will be keen to be involved, regardless of how I phrase the request. It is just the smugness in their response that I dread,” she poked her tongue out and then pretended to wretch, just in case her distaste hadn’t been clear enough. Cullen picked up the bucket and held it in front of her as if she might actually be sick into it which made her laugh.

“They’re not concerned about the mixed reputation of Inquisition?” he asked, replacing the bucket.

“About further associating themselves?”

“Any early concerns they might have held are long gone. Infamy is better than obscurity, or so I have been told. And Mother will relish any opportunity to feel like she may be able to take control of me once more.”

“Their influence would be minimal, as I understand it.”

“Yes.” Evelyn sighed heavily. “But she will remind me that I owe her something until the end of days.” She began to rub any soapy residue left on the leathers away with a dry cloth, perhaps more vigorously than necessary.

“And your father?”

“Father may disagree with her approach but he will say nothing. As ever, he knows who actually keeps his household running.” Cullen let out a sympathetic hum and Evelyn pursed her lips in obvious contemplation for a moment. “What were your parents like?”

Cullen smiled, to reassure her that the question was okay. “Kind. Patient with me. Although my father used to get frustrated that I didn’t want to work in the fields.”

Evelyn gave him a slack-jawed look of shock that was only half in jest. “You? Not wanting to work? I don’t believe it.”

“I would do my chores in full, and help on the farm when the season required it, but made it very clear I did not intend to pursue that life,” Cullen clarified and Evelyn looked satisfied. “My father thought that I was unrealistic to expect anything else. My mother was more supportive, or at least she humoured me. I expect she thought I would grow out of the notion.”

“Of becoming a templar?” Evelyn asked with no hint of resentment.

“Yes. I used to pester the templars at the chantry incessantly about it. My mother used to bake them cakes as apology for my getting underfoot there, or maybe she was trying to help persuade them, in her own way,” he laughed lightly. “The templars let me use a wooden training sword and taught me the most basic of ways to use it. I used to stand in the middle of the village square and practice
on this enormous stone statue that stood there, not caring who saw me flailing around.”

Evelyn laughed too. “That is a really sweet image: I can imagine your determination.”

“I must have looked absurd, but I felt indomitable.”

“And it obviously worked to persuade the templars. And your parents.”

“Mia carried more than her fair weight at home as always, and Branson was old enough to help when I finally got my way so they were happy for me to leave for training. I would be fed and clothed at no cost to them, and could send some coin back to them once I was initiated. It made sense.”

“But seeing you leave must still have been difficult.”

“My mother tried very hard to not cry when I was leaving. I think Rosalie shed all her tears for her. She was very young.”

“And was your father pleased for you, in the end?”

“And after protesting my pursuit of it for so long, Father was proud I would be a templar. He wouldn’t say it to me, but I could tell from the way he told our friends and neighbours.” Cullen let out a groan at the memory of leaving his parents. “I didn’t know then that it was the last time I would see them. I was just keen to be on my way at last, too full of my own self-importance, to look back,” he said with a shake of his head.

“It must have been hard for you as the Blight…Not knowing must have been…”

Cullen was silent for a time, and Evelyn feigned concentrating on her task, though Cullen was aware she was ineffectually rubbing at the same patch. “I do question what might have been different where I there,” he said eventually. “In all likelihood I would have been sent ahead with my siblings and nothing would have changed. Yet I…” he trailed off into a sigh, leaning forward and clasping his hands in front of him.

“You shouldn’t torture yourself over what might have been Cullen. You always assign yourself too much blame. You can’t know everything, be everywhere, control everything.” Evelyn reached out and placed her hand over his.

He took it between his own and then, completely unexpected to himself, admitted in a rush: “I lied to you. When I told you we had no news in the field of your disappearance into the fade at Adamant, I was lying.” He was so surprised by his own admission that he released her hand and sat quickly upright, watching anxiously for her reaction.

Evelyn looked startled; arm still outstretched towards him for a moment as she processed. Then she said in a calm voice. “I know.”

Now it was his turn to be surprised. “You do? How?”

“I didn’t at first. Not when you first told me. But I started to worry over how hollowed out you seemed by the campaign, despite our victory. You were exhausted Cullen. So I suspected it. And then Leliana told me.”

Cullen felt a stab of betrayal. “She did?” He had thought they had had an unspoken agreement.

“Well, she didn’t tell me exactly. But she did say she saw us go into the rift. And later she
mentioned that she had discussed regrouping the soldiers with you when the Wardens fell back. When I pieced together the timeline, I thought it odd, unlikely even, that she wouldn’t have told you. It made me question it all.”

Cullen frowned. He still was uncertain if Leliana had brought it to Evelyn’s attention intentionally. She was careful of her words, and must have known that Evelyn would rationalise her way to the truth. But there was so much to report in the chaos following the battle. Perhaps it was an innocent slip. “I was aware of your disappearance before I spoke to Leliana. I didn’t see it happen, but was appraised of it in the immediate aftermath.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen like that.”

He scoffed. “No one is accusing you of orchestrating the situation. Please, don’t apologise.”

“Still, it must have been troubling for you. The uncertainty around the Inquisition’s future –”

Frustrated, Cullen interrupted her. “I didn’t care about the Inquisition’s future, I cared about you.” Evelyn was startled, eyes wide. “I love you. And I thought then that I would never get the chance to tell you,” he said, voice cracking.

She shuffled over to sit next to him, wrapping her arms around him hastily, resting her chin on his shoulder. “I know. I know you do. If I was dead at the bottom of the cliff, or if I had been trapped in the fade forever, if you think I wouldn’t have known then you’re a bigger fool than I realised.” He could think of no response. He was a fool. Instead turned his head to kiss her. “And I love you too,” she added softly, holding his gaze for a moment before resuming her original seat on the hay bale picking up the stirrup leathers and rag once more and glancing at the stable entrance though they remained alone.

Cullen felt a weight lifted from his shoulders that he hadn’t realised he had been carrying. But still he struggled to understand: it had been weeks since the battle at Adamant and Evelyn had never confronted him over the matter. “You never said anything. You knew I was lying and you just…”

“I understand you didn’t want to upset me; I do realise your intention. And I figured you would get around to saying something eventually.”

“You had more faith in me than I had in myself then.”

“I find I usually do,” she said curtly but with a fond glance at him. “Can you hand me that?” she asked, returning her attention to cleaning her tack and pointing to a bottle of oil nearby.

Some weeks later…

‘Dear Evelyn,

I may have to concede that each time you leave, my sense of duty weakens further and it becomes more and more difficult to watch you ride away. There was a moment before your departure that the prospect of letting go of you felt like a frightening impossibility. There was an unreconcilable disconnect between the knowledge that I would have to release you from my arms and my ability to make it a reality. We might be standing there still, had you not shaken free.

And I am supposedly prided for my willpower? How quickly you undermine that and how little I resent you for it.
A look from you, the sound of your voice, one touch and I am tempted to cast away all obligations and prevent you leaving my side by whatever means necessary. I fear that it is only a matter of time before I am truly unable to resist your –'

Startled, Cullen jerked the quill and smudged the next word.

“What is that?” Leliana asked before he had even registered the sound of the door opening. She moved quickly towards his desk, peering at his papers with undisguised, terrifying curiosity. He had been reading reports, writing supply lists and studying maps all morning. All morning! And now, just when he had set aside a few brief moments to write to Evelyn, now was the ruddy time Leliana chose to appear. Naturally.

“Nothing. A military dispatch.” Cullen sounded guilty, even to his own ears.

“I only ask because I have seen you scratch off a hundred military dispatches, barely glancing at the page. But just now you were…wistful.” She dragged the final word out like she was enjoying it.

“You’re making that sound like an accusation.”

“Perhaps it is.”

Cullen fought back the urge to cover the letter: if he dragged a book over the parchment it would only confirm her suspicions. “I was merely contemplating. It is a matter of no small complexity and requires careful thought.”

Her smile widened. “That I can agree with.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“I’ve embarrassed you.” Obviously, but did she need to sound so delighted about it?

“I’m just curious as to why you have burst in here.” He leant back in his chair in what he hoped was a casual fashion. It was a bold move but he desperately hoped she wouldn’t call his bluff and use the opening to snatch at the damned thing.

“Burst in? Very defensive.”

“I was concentrating on my work. You interrupted my chain of thought.”

Leliana waited an agonisingly long time before replying. “Just a dispatch then. A simple military dispatch. I see.” The smugness was intensifying so rapidly it was nearly radiating off her. “Tell me, do you always look so wistful when you write to your Generals?”

Why had he ever tried to outmanoeuvre her on this? Cullen quickly resorted to his old, reliable tactic: ignoring it. “Was there something I can assist you with?”

“No no. I won’t disturb you if you’re writing to Evelyn,” she said, backing up to leave “Fine.”

Leliana looked triumphant. “So you admit it?”

Cullen gave her a reproachful look. “I admit that if you have no purpose to serve by being here then I would like you to leave. And I am ignorant as to why writing to the Inquisitor would require any kind of admission, were I doing so.” Too defensive, he was being too defensive and needed to
Josephine’s sudden arrival was much less silent than her colleague’s had been but hardly any less irritating given the circumstances. “Oh, you’re here already. Have you asked him?” she said addressing Leliana and adding a: “Hello Cullen,” as an afterthought without looking up from her sheaf of documents.

“No: he is in the middle of a very delicate matter and does not wish to be disturbed.”

Josephine gave Leliana a confused look then turned her searching gaze to Cullen. “Are you alright?” she asked him, genuine concern widening her eyes. “You’re very red in the face.”

“I’m fine.”

“Fine?”

“Well. I am well,” Cullen said through gritted teeth.

“As you say then,” Josephine said, sounding thoroughly unconvinced. “If it is a bad time, I will leave these with you…” she moved closer to place the paperwork on his desk. Before she was half way across the room, Cullen had slammed his hand on top of the letter so firmly that his quill rattled in its well. Josephine stopped immediately, face frozen in shock.

“On the desk is fine,” he said, voice strained, glancing at his hand to see if anything could be read between his fingers.

So much for toning it back.

“Cullen,” Leliana said gently. “Has anyone ever told you that you weren’t born for a life of espionage?”

“You’re the one implying I have something to hide.”

“You’re the one acting like you’ve been caught stealing fruit buns from the larder.” Leliana replied in a singsong voice. She was enjoying every minute of this, Cullen realised. Just in case he had forgotten she had a vicious streak...

Josephine, ever the peace keeper, stepped in. “Now I don’t think anyone is accusing anyone of anything. Cullen you seem a little disconcerted is all. Perhaps we,” she said the ‘we’ with considerable emphasis and a stern look at Leliana, “Should leave you to your work.”

“Thank you. There is much to attend to.” He raised his hand to rub the back of his neck before realising himself and quickly replacing it over the letter. This was apparently the final straw for Leliana who let out a long-repressed snicker. Josephine (who was also smiling but at least doing him the basic courtesy of trying to hide it) took her by the elbow and said firmly: “Time to go.”

“Send my regards to the Inquisitor,” was all Leliana said with a meaningful look at the half-concealed letter.

As they walked away, in a final, humiliating blow, he clearly heard Josephine say: “Stop torturing him.” Just before his door swung shut.

Chapter End Notes
Fun (?) Fact: that letter was originally in *Between the Lines* but I dropped it because I couldn't find an effective way to write Leliana & Josephine's interruption in the format that the rest of the fic was written in. Feels peculiar to finally post it three years down the line!
There must have been a great battle here, but it was long over, mutilated bodies scattered as far as the tree line, ravens noisily rising and descending over the corpses in flurries of black feathers. It was strange: Cullen couldn’t remember what the purpose of the fight had been, or even if he had participated. But that didn’t seem important.

The only thing that was important was that he was looking for someone. He was looking for someone? He was looking for someone. Cullen felt a surge of panic and tried to swallow it back. He had to stay calm, keep a hold of himself. When had he last taken lyrium? He felt an ache at the keen absence of it in his blood. Hands shaking, Cullen patted himself down but he wasn’t carrying any. Nothing to dampen his own weakness then, nothing to help mask his defects. How had he let himself get like this?

He needed to find lyrium, and fast. No. It wasn’t lyrium he was looking for here…There was someone he needed to…

Cullen began to wade through the chaos, skirting around bodies, stepping over discarded weapons, boots squelching where blood and urine and vomit had made the ground slick and muddy. When he reached what he guessed was the centre point of the battlefield he stopped. “Evelyn!” he called; hands cupped around his mouth. The ravens nearby him took off in fright, cawing their alarm at being disturbed. “Evelyn?” he tried once more, swatting at the birds as they flocked around him, wings battering his face, claws and beaks scraping exposed skin. The cawing was so persistent and deafening it made his head pound. Cullen tried to yell again but couldn’t hear the sound of his own voice. The birds flew thickly around him, their cries growing and growing in unendurable volume, now sounding more like screams. There were screams. He covered his ears with his hands, fell to his knees.

Suddenly there was silence. When he opened his eyes, the ravens were as before, listlessly picking through the carnage.

Desperately, Cullen resumed his search from the ground, crawling amongst the fallen, turning bodies, examining their faces. They wore Inquisition armour but he didn’t recognise them…that was wrong. He should recognise them. Shouldn’t he recognise them? Cullen seized a soldier’s shoulder, rolled him onto his back. Yes, this man he knew. It was Darek. Cullen pulled off his helmet, checked for a pulse but he was unmistakably dead: skin pallid, eyes clouded.

Cullen leaned back, heart heavy, and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. His head was aching. Darek was dead.

Darek shouldn’t even be here. Darek should be at the Circle Tower. Darek shouldn’t be here. Darek was…. Darek shouldn’t be here. Cullen had already watched Darek die, a long time ago. Darek had been among the last of templars to give in, despite being one of the youngest. As young as Cullen had been. Was? Cullen had watched Darek tormented, had seen him beg for the end. The throbbing in Cullen’s head intensified. But he was here. It didn’t make any sense…any of it…

There was a noise. A cry so faint he barely caught it. Barely more than a kitten mewling.

Cullen stood up. He was wasting time. “Evelyn!” he yelled but there was no response, not even
from the ravens this time who ignored him and continued to wrench and tear at the flesh of the dead. He ran towards where the sound had come from, skidding in the muck, stumbling through the carnage.

He froze when he saw her. Her body twisted on the ground and her head tilted back, too far back. Her mouth was open, as if she had been startled, while her eyes stared unseeingly towards the sky. And oh Maker, the arrows. There were arrows piercing her chest, robes stained scarlet. He had to go to her, he had to confirm what he already knew…but he found himself unable to move, frozen and fixated on the unnatural angles of her limbs, the chilling stillness of her form: so familiar but so unrecognisable.

His body felt locked in place, his muscles tense and frozen. Why was he hesitating? Why was he being so weak? Why couldn’t he do what he must?

Cullen let out a cry that sounded more like a roar. His throat was burning, he felt a surge grief so potent and acrid he was certain it was going to burst through his chest. What had she died for?

What had she died for? Why was she here?

Where was here?

“What’s the matter, are you hurt?” Evelyn’s voice came from behind him and he spun around, heart racing, throat raw. She stood some distance away, and with a look of concern, began to delicately pick her way through the battlefield towards him, holding up the hem of her robe to spare it the filth on the ground.

“Evelyn,” he said, voice strangled, “But you’re…you’re…”

“I’m fine. You’re the one I’m worried about.” She reached him and smiled. “Goodness, what a mess this is,” she laughed lightly, glancing around at the dead soldiers as if they were discarded papers.

Cullen frowned, trying hard to focus. “You’re not hurt?”

“Not at all! I’m just glad you’re okay. Maker, it is good to see you,” she told him fondly. Her body, Evelyn’s body was behind him. Cullen had seen it, he was certain. She was dead. He began to turn his head to check but Evelyn caught his chin and, with unexpected strength, forced him to face her. “Stay with me now, Cullen.”

“I thought I saw you. Over there…”

“But I’m right in front of you and I’m perfectly fine. You’re overworked. We should get you away from here. Let’s go somewhere nicer. Somewhere we can sit. I’d like some sweets, wouldn’t you? You must be hungry.”

“You’d been shot. There were arrows…” he looked down and so did she. Cullen recoiled when sure enough, he saw several shafts protruding from her chest. “Evelyn!”

“You mean these? Don’t worry about it! It’s nothing, I promise.” Nonchalantly, she began to wrench them out, letting them fall at her feet. The arrows made terrible sucking noises as she removed them and blood began to flow freely down her robes. Evelyn remained unperturbed.

“You’re always fussing, but enough now. Don’t think of it. Should we go for a walk? Play chess?” She looked up at him through her lashes as she dropped the final arrow. “Are you going to let me win just to see me smile?”
Cullen shook his head in an attempt to clear it. “You shouldn’t be alive. I don’t understand…”

“You don’t want me to be alive? Why would you say that?” she asked, sounding hurt.

“No, of course I want you alive, but I…” he took a hasty step backward, and turned before she could stop him. Evelyn’s body was still there, inert and broken. He turned back to the woman before him. “You should be dead.”

She pouted at him. “Cullen, I thought you loved me. Why would you want me dead?” When she opened her mouth to speak blood began to trickle at the corner. Despite his own reluctance, despite the strangeness of the situation, Cullen was instinctively drawn towards her. He cupped her face in his hands: her skin as soft as he remembered and every angle familiar. He used his thumb to wipe at the blood and only succeeding in smearing it across her cheek.

“I do love you,” he said softly, and caught her as she fell against him.

“Then come with me.” She draped her arms over his shoulders, and he let himself be pulled towards her as she leaned to kiss him. Her lips were cold and her mouth tasted metallic from the blood. He pulled away. “Cullen, it’s time to go,” she whispered.

“I can’t.”

Her face creased with irritation and he felt her arms tighten uncomfortably around his neck. “What in Thedas could be stopping you? There’s nothing here for you now. Nothing.”

“You’re a demon.”

At this proximity he saw her eyes flicker, turn dark yellow and feline. She stepped back from him. “Which Evelyn do you want? That one,” she gestured casually behind him, “Or this one. I’m alive Cullen, nothing else matters.”

“You are not Evelyn.”

“But I look like Evelyn. And I can laugh like Evelyn,” she let out a trill of laughter that made his heart ache. “I know how much you love that sound.” She took his hand and pulled, trying to lead him away. “Won’t you come with me? Cullen? Won’t you? Please,” she begged, just like she would if she was trying to persuade him to leave his work at Skyhold.

It sounded so much like her. It was just like her. But it wasn’t. It was all wrong. He felt strange. There was a terrible pressure growing in his skull. He felt he might throw up. Cullen wrenched himself from her grasp, turned back towards Evelyn’s body, took a few unsteady steps. “I can’t leave her.”

The demon let out a shriek behind him and the nearby corpses shuddered and began to crawl, latching onto his clothes, his ankles. He tripped, fell face first in the dirt. Winded, he tried to push himself up but the writhing corpses were pushing him down. Still he struggled towards Evelyn’s body, crawling on his belly. Then there was a great wooshing of air and the hungry ravens began to descend on her, flocking in such great number as to hide her from view. “No!” he cried but the birds ignored him, forming one huge mass, one pitiless, feeding creature.

And the demon laughed and laughed. Evelyn’s laugh, the sound making him sick to his stomach as he struggled, the undead moaning and massing around him, forcing him flat, his face pressed into the ground. He tried to cry out but couldn’t take in any air, all he tasted was dirt.

Just when he thought he would suffocate, they were gone: the pressure released, Evelyn’s laughter
silenced. Cullen cautiously opened his eyes as he took heaving, desperate breaths.

The room swam into focus with horrifying familiarity. The mutations seeping from the stone walls of the Circle Tower and the oily sheen of light bouncing from the magical cage that held him. He was back.

He was back.

_He had never left._ He rose, though the weight of his templar armour made it difficult in his starved and exhausted state.

“Cullen.” Still he was tormented by Evelyn’s voice, though he appeared to be alone in the room.

“Leave me,” he protested, barely able to choke out the words.

“Cullen.”

He had almost succumbed. _He had been tempted and he had almost succumbed._ How could he be so weak? Cullen felt revolted at himself. “I-I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Fade. For there is…no darkness, nor death either, in the Maker’s Light…” His voice was hoarse and barely audible, even to his own ears.

“Cullen!”

Heart thrumming from being abruptly woken by his tossing and turning, Evelyn hesitated. She tried saying his name, louder each time but he hardly seemed to react to her voice, shifting restlessly, muttering to himself frantically. Desperation mounting, Evelyn placed a gentle hand on his forehead. Instantly he jerked away from her touch but not before she felt his skin: feverishly hot and damp. Still, this seemed to finally rouse him, his eyes snapping open, struggling to focus on her in the dim light. “Who…?” was the only word he managed to pant out.

‘Who else are you expecting, you dolt?’ she might have teased at any other time than this, but instead she started: “Cullen, I…” but paused at the tremor in her own voice that she did not want him to hear.

Chest still rising and falling rapidly, he seemed confused, lost somewhere between reality and the nightmare she had woken him from. He heaved himself into a seated position, eyes darting around the room, searching for a familiar landmark to settle upon and seemingly finding none. She cautiously reached for him again, fingertips barely brushing against his cheek. He turned, and Evelyn could see there was a wild panic in his eyes. Cullen studied her face for a moment, recognition finally registering. His expression morphed into a grimace and he pushed her hand away. “Don’t,” he barked, voice ragged. He moved to the edge of the bed, swinging his legs over the side and sitting with his back to her. Shocked at his reaction, Evelyn wriggled away to give him more space. After a moment he muttered: “I’m sorry,” but he didn’t sound sorry, he sounded furious.

Evelyn didn’t speak, and was afraid to move further in case it provoked a reaction: upset him in some way. They remained that way for a long time as she watched his laboured breaths calming, his form growing still. Her stomach felt sick with worry and confusion. Suddenly he groaned and lurched forward to put his head in his hands.

Evelyn spoke, voice hardly more than a whisper: “I can leave if it would-”

“No,” he said quickly, voice still hoarse.
“Then what can I do?”

“Don’t be kind to me after I…I don’t deserve it,” he said, voice thick with sorrow, no trace of the anger of earlier.

“Tell me what is going on.”

He paused before answering: let out a heavy sigh, raised his head from his hands, rolled his shoulders. “Ever grappling with the fear that anything good in my life will be taken from me.” Still cautious, but judging it now safe, Evelyn rose and slowly circled the bed to sit beside Cullen, close, but careful not to touch him. “I’m here,” she told him.

He turned his face towards her, but kept his eyes on the ground. “I love you; you know that? Too much, I think sometimes.”

“Cullen, whatever it was, it wasn’t real. This is real.” She inched her hand towards where his rested on the mattress between them and was thankful when he didn’t recoil. Instead, he turned his hand over so he could hold hers properly, a familiar movement that made her heart swell with relief. His palm was clammy and she could see him shiver as the night air cooled the sheen of sweat on his skin.

“I woke you,” he said apologetically.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.”

Then he fell silent again, staring unfocused across the darkened room. Evelyn, lost for what to do, took comfort in the grounding feeling of his fingers interlaced with hers and simply sat beside him, saying nothing, as he processed whatever he had witnessed in his dream.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she eventually tried.

“I do not,” he said and abruptly letting go of her hand. He rose and moved across the room, pulling a discarded shirt roughly over his head. “Evelyn,” he said quietly when this was done, turning back to her, shoulders slumping.

Pre-empting his apology, she stood too, but did not follow him. “Don’t apologise. I’m glad you were honest.”

“I wish I could explain but I…”

“Cullen, you don’t owe me an insight into every part of your mind,” she told him calmly. He looked conflicted and didn’t respond. Instead, he moved to the wash stand, pouring water into the bowl and splashing his face. “But I can’t pretend to be blind to this either,” she added.

Cullen exhaled audibly. He scrubbed his face roughly dry and missed the railing when he went to replace the towel, letting it crumple to the floor in uncharacteristic carelessness. Slowly he crossed the room, back to where she stood and then hesitated before her. Evelyn was still as he looked down, feeling assessed as he raked his gaze over her as if searching for something. She chewed her lip, still resisting the urge to reach out to him until finally he frowned, shook his head and wrapped his arms around her. Evelyn sank against his chest, worriedly noting that his heart was still thudding. He held her firmly, kissing the top of her head once.

“You should go back to bed,” he said into her hair.
She leaned back so she could look up at him. “What about you?”

“I need a few moments; I’ll be down in my office.”

Trying to gauge the time, she glanced at the window but could see only darkness. “You won’t try to get any more sleep?”

He broke away, moved towards the ladder. “I’ll come up in a while. Later.”

And she knew he wouldn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing to say today except that the next chapter will be a follow up to this one. Thanks for reading! :)
Skyhold: Clarity of Dawn (Pt.2)

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place immediately after the events of the previous.

Evelyn gave Cullen what she estimated was an hour. The wait was a courtesy: Evelyn was labouring under no expectations he would actually return to bed that night. Staring up towards the roofbeams lost to shadows, the sheets bunched in two worried fists, Evelyn strained to hear any sounds below.

There was nothing.

It would have been a comfort somehow, just to hear a chair scrape, a floorboard creak or a cough: anything to make him seem closer to her. He was downstairs, she reminded herself repeatedly. If she called out she was sure he would answer.

But he might have been deep in the jungles of Par Vollen for how distant he felt at that moment.

Earlier that night everything had been effortless and easy. In his room, they had been laughing over something foolish...He needed to go out, only for a short while, but Evelyn was objecting. She had taken one of his shirts for a nightdress and was using it as an opportunity to impersonate him, voice low, strutting around looking as severe as possible. Dressed and about to leave, he had stood near the ladder, arms folded, pretending to be indifferent until she picked up a blanket and draped it around her neck to act as his cloak. He let out a bark of laughter and pursued her as she swept about the room, pointing at the chair, the dresser, the window frame in turn: “Recruit! In a combat scenario you’d be dead! And you’d be dead! You lad: you’d be dead twice over!”

Still laughing, he’d wrapped his arm around her waist from behind and begun pulling her towards him as she had shrieked in a distinctly un-Cullen way. She turned to face him, struggling in his grasp but with no real intention to escape it. They had wrestled with the blanket for a moment before he tugged it from her shoulders, letting it pool at their feet. “If this is the mockery I am to receive, you can forget borrowing my clothes.” He booked no further protest from her as he lifted the shirt over her head and cast it aside, leaving her completely bare once more.

“Thought you said you had something you needed to see to?” she had tried to say casually as he looked her over, though her heart was hammering and the mounting heat in her stomach was making her entire body flush.

“There is plenty to see here,” he had replied, stealing any opportunity she had to respond with a distracting kiss at the hollow of her clavicle. Then his lips tracing up her neck, hands on her hips, guiding her backwards towards the bed.

She could only smile at the time, having gotten exactly what she had wanted: for him to stay. Now, Evelyn reached out her hand, rested it on the place he had lain and felt her heart ache.

If only it had lasted: she felt more alone than if she had just stayed in her own room and never decided to come and see him.
Evelyn was aware that all people needed space at times. She herself often did, and for Cullen that went tenfold. Months ago, maybe even longer, she had known that loving him meant respecting his boundaries, never pushing him too far. She did not want to impinge on him, nor try to insert herself and her own needs before his private pain.

And what did that mean? Letting him change the subject without comment? Not acknowledging his flinch, or the telling rubbing of his temples? Watching him walk away at times she knew he was not well, not happy? He didn’t want her help or she didn’t know how to help him or there was nothing that could be done to help him so better to leave him be…Evelyn wasn’t sure what her reasoning was anymore. She wasn’t sure, because she was beginning to realise that being with him meant that his suffering was no longer his alone. He may dislike it, feel guilty for it, but there was only so much she could ignore. Space she could give him, but to see him hurt and do nothing had become impossible.

Determination surging, she finally rolled off the mattress, found the shirt on the floor where he had discarded it, and pulled it on again. Her mind was racing in an undirected frenzy as she descended the ladder. She had no strategy going into this, only unstructured worry.

“Evelyn,” he said simply as she climbed, no surprise in his voice. He did not question why she was awake, perhaps because he knew she would only turn the remark back at him.

She glanced through the final rungs and noted he was sitting at his desk. “I was –” she began gravely, then hesitated as she stepped off the ladder and stared at him in shock, mind completely blank. “What are you doing?”

Cullen looked confused, and held the fabric he was sewing higher for her to see. “Fixing this.”

“How are you…Fixing…What?”

He looked perplexed. “It must have gotten caught on something. The seam was ripped.”

“But how are you doing that?” she asked as she rushed to his desk, brimming with interest and watching on.

He paused before answering, clearly wondering if she was making fun of him. “It is simple enough.”

“Incredible. You should keep going.”

“You are teasing me,” he said, placing it carefully on the desk in front of him.

“No! Don’t stop on my account.”

“I can’t focus when you’re looking at me like I’m a three-headed wyvern.”

“I’m not! I just wanted to watch. Wow,” she said, leaning to peer at his progress. The stiches were so neat and even Evelyn was sure it would have made a royal seamstress doubletake. “I just didn’t think I would find you…doing this.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. When we’re apart I only ever picture you frowning at paperwork or training: I thought it would be one of those two.”

“And you thought the latter likely at this hour and in the confines of my office?”
Evelyn shrugged and grinned. “You’re a resourceful man.”

He made a dismissive noise, shaking his head at her. “I am still at a loss as to what you find so fascinating.” Warily, he picked up his work again, poking the needle through the fabric, tugging the thread behind it. Evelyn watched on as if hypnotized.

“It must be something about how good you are with your hands,” she told him, intentionally dragging out each word. He couldn’t help but smirk at that, though he kept his gaze lowered towards his task. “What else can you do?”

Cullen bristled with impatience. “I can sew at a basic level. It is one practical task that was a necessity for all templars who, as you are aware, are equipped with identical uniforms. We had to initial each item and do most of the repairs. That’s it. I don’t make ballgowns and I’m not…full of party tricks.”

“Can you cook?”

“Of course,” he answered automatically then seemed to regret it when she gasped in delight. “A little: enough to survive on and mostly by campfire, as was required when we were in the field.”

“You say ‘of course’ like anyone can do it! In Ostwick Circle I never learned anything useful. Well, other than casting…What I mean is, growing up, cooking would have been seen as far too common. The most I can do is butter bread and even then it turns out badly.”

The corners of Cullen’s lips twitched with amusement even as he focused on his sewing. “Too common? Forgive me: my crude manners must be of great offense to you. I should never have admitted to knowing how to stir a pot in your presence.”

“I am severely shaken I can assure you. The horror of it all.”

“I can understand not cooking, but sewing? Didn’t you ever do embroidery? I was of an understanding that was all some noble girls were permitted to do.”

“No, my older sisters did. The more eligible ones. It was considered to be a waste of thread to teach me.”

“I had no idea thread was in such short supply in Ostwick,” he said, glancing at the massive spool beside him.

“The kind of thread they use for embroidery? Spun silk from Orlais and in any colour you could dream of? Yes, that kind was in short supply.”

“What skills did your parents wish to see you furnished with then? What were you trained in?”

“Keeping very quiet and staying out of the way.”

“That failed. Evidently.” Evelyn shot him a glare. “Which is good,” he conceded with a brief, teasing smile. She laughed, then her face clouded over and she sighed. “I mean it,” he assured her, apparently worried by her sudden downcast expression.

“It’s not that.” She swallowed. “I do realise how much you don’t want to talk about what happened earlier. Which is why I am trying really hard to not talk about what happened earlier.”

“You just wanted that on the record, did you?” he said flatly.
She looked at him, chewing her lip with concern and he immediately looked down. “It’s selfish of me to bring it up, but I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Do you think I can?” he dropped the sewing with less care than before and rose abruptly, leaving his desk to stare out the window.

Evelyn knew this was him employing his usual tactic to avoid having to make direct eye contact with her. Feeling a bit queasy, she said nothing of it and instead, like the coward she was, changed the subject of her own volition. “My parents had always held such dim hopes for my future that when I found out I was a mage, even though the fact appalled them, I was determined to be the best mage I could be. It was something none of my siblings could claim to be better at so I thought it may have some merit or earn me some accolades.”

“How did that plan work out for you?”

“Well, I did work hard, and excel. And I was sure to report this with a rather vulgar lack of modesty in my letters home, including details of what spells I had mastered and every passing skerrick of praise I had received, word-for-word.”

“How did your parents react?”

“After about four months they came to visit me, as was permitted for mages from…certain families.” Evelyn pulled a face involuntarily from her discomfort at the distinction. “It transpired that they were on their way somewhere else and just happened to be passing…And while we talked, I prompted them for a reaction on some of the things I had spoken of in my letters. They were confused and certainly not impressed. In fact, it became very clear, very quickly that they hadn’t been reading anything I sent. I guess a servant had been opening the letters, reporting so much as that I was alive, but skipping the four sheets of bragging.”

Cullen made a sympathetic humming noise. “That must have been painful.”

Evelyn swallowed. It occurred to her that she had come to speak to him about him, and all she was doing was talking about herself. How quickly her determination of earlier had faded. “People have suffered much worse.” He turned enough she could see his profile as he raised an eyebrow: it was heavy-handed and he had noticed.

“Are you trying to give me a hint?” Cullen asked, and she immediately dropped her gaze guiltily. “Because I read all of your letters. Usually several times.” He was deflecting and Evelyn had to admit he was bloody good at it.

She rolled her eyes. “Well I know you do. In complete contrast you read all my bragging and then chastise me for being reckless. It is absolutely joyless.”

“My letters are joyless?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Hm,” he said, as if he didn’t believe her.

“Hearing from you keeps me sane out there!” she objected quickly and fervently. “I check at every camp for a letter. You can’t imagine my frustration when I have to hear seven requests for mineral samples before they even mention any post from Skyhold. And then if there is a letter from you, I have to endure an agonising wait until I can read it alone. Suddenly everyone will want my attention urgently and there it is, burning a hole in my pocket, completely consuming my every thought before I even know what it says.”
“Alright, you’re impassioned enough that I am convinced. It would be cruel not to be,” he told her with a brief laugh.

“Hearing your news is the best part of my day. Although, your news is clearly very selective. You leave much out,” she said, with emphasis. There she went, on what felt like attempt four hundred and sixty-seven to steer the conversation back where she had intended for it to be.

“I omit nothing worth reading about.”

Evelyn hesitated, choosing her next words carefully, glad he couldn’t see her hands twisting nervously. “You know I care for you, all of you. Not just the easy bits.”

He let out an exhale of disbelief. “Are there any easy bits?”

“Well, you are very handsome,” she couldn’t resist saying, although it was clearly the wrong time to be making jokes. He ran a hand over the back of his neck and whether it was from embarrassment or exasperation she couldn’t say. “This has been easy, in a lot of ways Cullen. Don’t you think? Even with all the faltering starts and uncertainty it feels like…I don’t know. When we met it felt like we started walking together in step and never stopped. It feels natural to me. Or it does, until you shut me out. I want you to know you don’t have to do that. You can, but you don’t have to.”

“In saying that you don’t know what you are…what you would be taking on.”

“It’s worth it to me, to be with you,” she said with certainty, though her heart was fluttering anxiously.

Evelyn saw the muscles of his back jerk in apparent agitation. His gaze was fixed out of the window, as if there was something to see other than inky darkness. When he spoke, his voice was hard. “Sometimes I dream I am walking through each floor of Kinloch looking for mages and I can feel the lyrium…humming in my blood again. I remember every room, every corridor, every corner perfectly and I check them all: not so much as a store cupboard is overlooked. I’m careful. I’m methodical. I have a job to do. And the mages come towards me. They’re not even trying to hide they’re just begging for help, trying to convince me that they are not abominations, that there are no demons…but I cut them down anyway, even as they plead, even as they surrender.”

“I’ve dreamt that I am being chased by a giant, flying nug that no one seems to be able to see but me. It doesn’t mean anything Cullen.”

Cullen was silent for a long time, then he reached forward, braced himself on the window ledge. “Sometimes you are amongst them. Sometimes you are amongst the mages and I still…” he trailed off.

Evelyn’s breath caught in her throat and it was a moment before she could speak. “It says nothing of who you are or what you…it’s just fear.” She moved towards him and pressed herself against his back, wrapping her arms around his waist. “I trust you.”

She felt his sigh even as he heard it. “When I wake, I feel like I can’t trust myself. I am so revolted and…It takes some time to forget – No, I can’t forget. But even to feel myself again it is…”

Evelyn rested her forehead between his shoulder blades. “I understand why you want to keep this from me. But I just wish I could help,” she murmured.

“You already do. Knowing you has changed…everything.”
“It has for me too.”

He pulled away and she released him, stepping back slightly and saying nothing more, watching him carefully as he slowly turned to face her. When he took up her hand and kissed the palm, Evelyn felt a twinge of sadness: it was the same hand he had pushed away earlier as she had tried to comfort him. But this quickly evaporated as he cradled it carefully in both his own as if it was made of porcelain. He looked at her gently in the first weak light of the dawn. It was the longest he had actually looked at her since he had woken and it felt like a balm to a wound she hadn’t realised she’d received. “You’re shivering,” he told her and she realised that he was right, goose bumps had formed on her skin under the thin fabric of the shirt. “You should go back to bed: there is still time to rest before the day begins.”

“Won’t you come too?” she asked, a little hesitantly, her voice hushed. Evelyn realised with crushing suddenness how desperately she just wanted to be held by him, pressed safely against his chest, even for a little while.

He turned his head slightly towards the window once more and inhaled deeply. “I will,” he said.
Evelyn sighed, sinking deeper into the water and feeling the warmth of it seep into her aching muscles. Mentally, she began to take stock. Her shoulders had been killing her in recent weeks. She must get her new armour adjusted again as something was clearly off. The bruised area below her ribcage was aching whenever she twisted her torso too far. And her legs were still wobbly from all the walking and climbing: damn the recent terrain for being too unstable for a horse.

Not long back at Skyhold, this bath, a proper soak and not just the hasty rinse upon arrival to get the blood and dirt out of her hair, already felt long overdue. She had almost cried with happiness when it had been suggested to her by Nell this evening.

“Maker! I could stay in here forever,” Evelyn said gratefully.

There was a tut in response. “I dare say the Maker has bigger concerns than your bath, but you can if you’d like Ma’am,” her maid told her from the other side of the room where she was sorting and folding Evelyn’s freshly washed clothing.

Evelyn had forgotten how pious Nell was: she must watch her tongue around the poor girl to avoid offending her. “Forever? Really? No one will notice?” she laughed lightly as she dragged a lazy arm back and forth across the froth of bubbles on the surface.

“Well, I dare say you can stay for a bit longer at least, but maybe not forever. Shall I fetch you some more hot water?”

Evelyn pondered this tempting option. Her duties were largely complete for the day. And it had been a long day. Not to mention tedious and dispiriting. Evelyn’s brain felt wrung out. There had been visiting nobles to be appeased. Supplies to be checked for her next journey. Calling on badly injured soldiers in the infirmary to increase their morale at the cost of her own. An argument to settle between a group of mages and some of the merchants in Skyhold, who had been accused of selling expired ingredients.

On top of all this, there was a yet unanswered heap of correspondence on her desk that she needed to see to once she emerged from her bath. Evelyn could see it even from her tub, piled so high it was at risk of tipping.

It was only just sundown. It couldn’t hurt to soak a while more, especially if it put her in a better mood to answer the letters. “You know what Nell? Maybe I will. If you could please.”

Looking satisfied, Nell tucked the folded breeches she was holding neatly in the drawer, curtseyed and left.

Evelyn sighed again, feeling the water soothe her frayed nerves and weary body, tracing patterns in the foam with her finger, before finally leaning back and closing her eyes. Nell returned unexpectedly only a minute later, and Evelyn’s eyes snapped open with a start. “That was quick,” she said curiously.

“Forgive me Ma’am. The Commander came to the door and wished to see you. It was a bit of a shock. I told him you were busy, refused him entry but…”
The woman’s face contorted and she gulped rapidly, unable to continue. Evelyn frowned. “Was he short with you?”

Nell looked at the floor and spoke very rapidly: “I protested at his attempt to come in. He – The Commander said I was wilfully obstructing his duties and to allow him entry or he would ‘hold me solely responsible for the consequences of delaying his urgent task’.”

Evelyn’s eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hairline with surprise and she sat up, water sloshing over the rim of the tub. “Well. He certainly sounds in a mood. I’m surprised he didn’t just storm in here with an attitude like that.”

“Begging your pardon Ma’am but I - I was so surprised to see him and so…concerned that he may invade your…find you in a state so…that I…” she trailed off into incomprehensible muttering.

“What was that? What did you do?”

“I slammed the door in his face and locked it,” she said with such horror and shame that she could have been confessing to stabbing him.

Evelyn covered her mouth with a damp hand and tried to choke back a laugh. “Serves him right!”

Nell let out a tiny wail of despair. “He will have me fired Ma’am! I have no doubt of it! I’ll have no coin to feed my little brothers without this work!”

“Oh no, no Nell he wouldn’t dare. And if he tries, I will fire him.” Evelyn hoped her first statement was true and she wouldn’t have to test her second. They heard a distant hammering on the door. “Look, go back there and tell him that I said not to speak you like that and to go shove his ‘urgent tasks’ up his…No get my dressing gown I will…No. No hold that thought. If it is so bloody important, then just send him in.”

Nell looked stunned. “Ma’am. I couldn’t.”

“Go on. Don’t worry about me. Let’s just see how urgent this task is that it couldn’t wait another hour and justifies such incivility towards you. See if he doesn’t change his mind.”

She might as well have suggested Nell challenge Cullen to a joust for how appalled the girl looked. “No. Truly! I just couldn’t!”

“You can because I’m asking you to. Really, it’s okay Nellie. Trust me.”

“If you…If you say so.” Nell, still looking scandalised at the suggestion, but unable to hide an unexpected glimmer of mischief in her eyes, returned to the door. Evelyn lowered herself back into the water. No point shocking him any more than he needed to be.

Cullen blustered in, evidently as irritable as Nell had described him. And more so now having just had a door slammed in his face. “Is there a reason that I was denied –” he stopped dead, mouth hanging open as he registered the situation.

“Hello,” Evelyn said simply.

Shock fell away and he gave her a look that was at once exasperated and amused as he composed himself enough to dryly say: “You’re evidently in the middle of something.”

Evelyn, finding it difficult to not laugh, kept her tone solemn. “Am I to understand you spoke harshly to my maid who was only endeavouring to preserve my honour?”
“I spoke harshly to your maid who squealed like I was a rat in the larder when she saw me then slammed a door in my face. She failed to mention your state of undress.”

He sounded a bit too pleased at the end of that statement and Evelyn decided it was time to get Nell out of the room before they incriminated themselves. “You can go and get that water now Nell.” Nell shot Cullen a suspicious look. “It’s alright. Go,” Evelyn reassured her.

Nell hesitated, then curtseyed and left. Cullen watched her go. “This will be all over Skyhold in about ten minutes,” he groaned as he put a sheaf of papers on the little table near her sofa.

“Not from her: she isn’t like that. Now, what was so urgent?”

“Nothing at all, as it happens.” His amusement apparently fading, Cullen frowned and turned away.

Evelyn began splashing the water a little, unsuccessfully trying to regain his attention. “I’m sorry to put you on the spot. But you must admit you did rather ask for it, speaking to her like that. She’s just a girl, not a soldier.”

Cullen put his hands behind his back, staring out at horizon through her balcony doors. “I was only wondering what was keeping you.”

“Keeping me from what?”

“You said you intended to attend my office this morning. I had told you I had some things I wanted to review,” he said, still looking anywhere but at her.

Evelyn stared blankly at him for a moment then let out a quiet gasp. “Oh, I did, didn’t I? Cullen it completely slipped my mind. Now I feel terrible.”

“It is fine. I’m just glad you’re well.”

Evelyn squirmed extending a leg out of the water and stretching it, wriggling her toes. Cullen glanced towards her before he took a renewed interest in the ceiling beams. “You’re not hurt that I forgot?” she asked guiltily.

“Not at all,” he said, his face maddeningly expressionless.

“Because there are probably a million things I forgot today. And I was thinking of you. Just not of that particular conversation. Obviously.”

“Understandable.”

She flicked some water in his direction but it fell short. “I’ll come over right after I get the soap out of my hair I promise. I won’t rest until we’ve been through everything you need of me. I won’t even yawn when you talk about troop formations.”

Cullen let a noise somewhere between a laugh and sigh. With the tension dropping from his shoulders and he finally turned to look at her. “Honestly it is nothing vital. I was simply disappointed not to see you.”

Evelyn felt the colour rise in her cheeks from combined guilt and the sudden directness of his gaze. The latter of which was, of course, ridiculous given she had orchestrated that he find her in this situation. She hoped he assumed it was from the heat of the bath. “I haven’t stopped running about since I woke up: it has just been distraction after distraction. But I was planning on finding you first
thing tomorrow. The thought of that was the only thing that got me through the day.”

He broke into a smile. “I believe you. Please: there is no need to explain yourself.”

“And you forgive me?” she asked lightly, almost flippantly, but her heart still felt leaden. Evelyn had gotten quite used to letting various people down on a daily basis. But not him.

He came closer, squatted beside the bath and put his hand over hers where it rested on the rim of the tub. “There is nothing to forgive. I meant what I said: I am just glad to see you well,” he said in the soft tone he seemed to reserve solely for her. Evelyn smiled and shuffled closer to the side where he was crouching.

“You had better go before Nell gets back. She’s very protective. She might tip the pitcher of hot water over your head if she thinks you are leering at me.”

“Then I’d deserve it.”

“Hm?”

He glanced deliberately down the length of the bath. “I am leering at you.”

Evelyn moved towards him and tilted her face towards his. Cullen leaned instinctively closer to kiss her but at the last moment she pulled back and swiped foam across his nose instead. He laughed and recoiled, wiping at it with his sleeve, retreating from the room with one final, very intentional look over his shoulder.

Later that night…

The gentlest shift in pressure was enough to wake her: just a blanket being pulled over her shoulders. Evelyn was not startled. Somehow she knew who it was before she even cracked open one bleary eye. Even before she could smell the pine and clean leather. Even before he lightly kissed her temple, the barest of touches.

And it was real. He was there. How often did she stutter back to life from a dream of him and find herself hundreds of miles from Skyhold in a mildewed tent?

She tried to say his name but it came out as an incomprehensible mumble.

“I didn’t want to disturb you but you looked cold,” he told her apologetically, voice hushed as he placed the candle he was carrying on the bedside table.

“Why are you here?” she asked, but while reaching out to show she wasn’t unhappy about it. She felt the mattress dip as he sat beside her and she groped for him, her hand resting on his leg as she enjoyed the solid, comforting presence of him.

“In my bedroom?” he asked with amusement.

“No, in my…” Evelyn trailed off into a groan as she realised he was right. She must have fallen asleep waiting for him. Evidently it had been a mistake to lay down.

The plan had been to make it up to him, atone for her lapse of memory and neglect. More specifically, the plan had been to storm his office, drag him from his work and make her general appreciation of him adamantly and unmistakably clear. Despite his earlier understanding at the side of her bath, Evelyn didn’t want to leave him with even a shred of doubt.
But her dramatic entrance to his office was left grievously unappreciated, the door banging against the stone and her commanding cry of: “Whatever you’re doing can wait,” falling upon on an empty room. The candelabras at the walls were lit, though there was no light at his desk. Still, Evelyn figured he couldn’t be far.

Cullen spoke: “I didn’t know you were here. I was speaking with Vivienne and lost track of time.”

“I was waiting.”

“You sound angry,” he said with a little alarm.

“Only at myself. For not staying awake.”

“You need to rest.”

Evelyn let out a grumble. “But I was going to seduce you.”

Cullen’s efforts to keep his voice low were momentarily disrupted by a snort of laughter. Evelyn glared at him. “I could tell from the volume of your snoring when I approached. Really got me weak at the knees.”

“Very funny. I meant to apologise.”

“You don’t need to apologise.”

“But –”

“It’s alright. You can seduce me some other time. Please do actually.”

Evelyn yawned. “Fine.”

“I could see how tired you were earlier. I assumed you would retire immediately.”

“Letters,” was all she said.

“Ah,” he said with obvious distaste. “You have my sympathies.”

She squeezed his leg, suddenly suspicious at how he remained sitting there instead of coming to bed. “Are you staying?”

“I have work to do.”

“It can wait.”

He brushed some hair back from her face and said softly. “It can’t. Not with your party leaving Skyhold at the end of the week.”

“Remind me, who is in charge here?”

Cullen unable to hide a smile admitted defeat with a quiet: “As you command then.” He pulled off his boots and lay beside her on top of the covers. She let out contented sigh and moved beside him, resting her head on his shoulder, curling at his side with one arm thrown across him as if it was enough to keep him there. She felt his chest rising and falling rhythmically with his breathing as sleep threatened to overcome her once more. “Are you going to leave as soon as I fall asleep?” she asked without opening her eyes.
“Yes,” he said honestly, pulling the blanket over her again. Sensing a losing battle, Evelyn let out a dissatisfied ‘tsk’ but didn’t speak again. A moment later, Cullen apparently couldn’t help himself and added: “See? I know you’re exhausted if that is all the argument I’m getting out of you.” Evelyn lightly jammed her elbow into his stomach and he grunted out an ‘oof’ then laughed. Evelyn laughed too and fell asleep like that, with a faint smile on her face.

It was a pleasant surprise and a victory when she woke at dawn, to find him unmoved, relaxed and deeply asleep beside her. Evelyn enjoyed a moment of smugness that she fully intended to (mostly) conceal by the time he awoke.

Chapter End Notes

Did someone at this table order some um... *check notes* "actual fluff"?
Emprise du Lion had been a disaster, to put things lightly. Progress was slow, and aside from the challenging weather conditions and Red Templar hold on the area, demons yet running rampant were further adding to the chaos. Temporarily defeated, unable to continue up the mountain until their soldiers cleared a path, Evelyn had returned to Skyhold, exhausted and demoralised in a way Cullen had not seen before. Even after some time to recover, she had been distracted and untalkative, at once anxious to return to Sahnia and dreading it.

The latest war table meeting had not gone well and she had left in a huff, one that was unmistakably directed at solely at him. For once, Josephine and Leliana had no smart comments to make and seemed suddenly very busy with their own work.

Cullen was torn between leaving Evelyn to blow off steam on her own terms, and following her. He opted for the latter, striding out of the war room after her. Instinctively he knew that giving her a chance to calm down was probably the best option. However, he was conscious of the fact that she was riding out early the following morning. The risk of her leaving with this tension between them unresolved made him uneasy. At least, he figured, he couldn’t make it any worse. Probably.

He caught her in the enclosed stairwell that lead into the garden. It was private at least. She must have heard him behind her but only stopped when he called her name. Pausing on the steps, she turned back and shot him a resentful glare, her features thrown into harsh relief by the flickering torch on the wall. Yes, he definitely should have left her alone but it was a bit late now to pretend he just happened to be walking in the same direction. “Evelyn. Wait.”

“Wait for what?” she asked sharply. “Are you here to tell me I’m walking down the stairs wrong? Breathing wrong? Haven’t we covered enough of your issues with me today?”

He tried to keep his voice calm. “Is that what this is about? I wasn’t saying you were wrong, merely suggesting an alternative.”

“Suggesting an alternative when it just happens to be too late to implement it? That feels more like a criticism.”

“It was simply an option. I hadn’t explored the logistics fully but with some adjustments it could still be…” Cullen realised he had fallen into a trap in discussing precisely what he had been hoping to avoid. “I didn’t come here to try and persuade you on this matter. The decision has been made.”

“Then what do you want?” she snapped. Unnerved by her coldness, Cullen floundered.

“To make sure you’re okay.”

She made an incredulous huffing sound. “Obviously I’m just peachy.”

“I don’t understand what happened in that meeting that is different from the hundreds of others we have had.”

“Do you really want to have this conversation right now?” Not in the slightest, Cullen thought, but instead he gestured with a broad shrug. “Fine. I didn’t appreciate the lack of support.”

“Lack of support? I agreed with the consensus when it was reached.”
“Reluctantly.”

“If the three of you agree then I accept it as the best option. As always.”

“And what about if it isn’t the three of us? What about just me?”

“You have the final say on these matters.”

She folded her arms. “As Inquisitor?”

“Yes. As was established some time ago,” he told her dryly.

“Which you find yourself regretting, no doubt.”

Cullen let out an exasperated laugh. “Evelyn, are you serious? That is ridiculous.”

“Is it? Do you think it hasn’t occurred to me that this situation, the entire Inquisition, would be completely different if you had been in charge? I mean fundamentally different in every possible way.”

“And? I don’t believe it would have been better, if that is what you’re accusing me of thinking. Quite the opposite.”

“Really? Because you’re so thrilled with our new friends the rebel mages, right?”

“Evelyn, that was months ago and we have discussed it to death. Why in Thedas is it coming up again now?” Evelyn did not answer. Instead she folded her arms, looked at the walls, the ceiling, her boots: anywhere but at him. He pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to compose himself. This was going…terribly. “There is a rarely a perfect solution to anything. Just because your decisions are not always the choices I would have made, it doesn’t mean I don’t respect them.” She let out a scoff of disbelief but Cullen forged ahead. “You’ve resolved conflict after conflict, achieved outcomes that seemed impossible. You consider your options and act with determination and grace that would be beyond me in your role. I don’t know what else to say to assure you of this.”

Evelyn chewed her lip as Cullen desperately tried to gauge whether this had made an impact on her mood. “Well, it doesn’t feel like it,” she finally said, voice flat and emotionless.

Cullen felt a surge of irritation. “Am I supposed to stop having opinions of my own now that we are—” he cut himself off and she raised an eyebrow at the words he left unsaid.

“What are we exactly?”

Sensing treacherous waters ahead, Cullen avoided the question. “If you would prefer for me to just parrot whatever you say then I might as well not bother attending these meetings in future.”

“Obviously I don’t expect my advisors to act as an echo chamber. That would defeat the purpose of having advisors.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” he asked curtly. “I make suggestions and you brush them aside as a matter of course. It has never been an issue before.”

“Maybe if you made better suggestions, I wouldn’t have to discount them so often,” she hissed and then immediately her face crumpled in regret and she put a hand over her mouth.

Cullen’s eyebrows shot up in surprise at the venom in the comment. He might have been offended,
if she hadn’t been acting so unlike herself all week. Instead he only felt more concerned. “Evelyn,” he said gently, but this only seemed to prompt her to steel herself, expression hardening once more.

“You’re the one who wanted to discuss it,” she told him dismissively and started down the stairs again.

“What are you going?” he asked in a last-ditch attempt to salvage the situation.

“To check on my plants. Do something I’m good at for a change.” She gave him a final, withering glare and stomped down the stairs making it very clear he was not welcome to join her.

Cullen waited until he heard the ground floor door slam and then leaned against the wall with a groan. He ran a hand over his face. She was taking some stress out on him which left him with no option but to let her, wait and hope that this wasn’t a permanent shift in their relationship. He shook his head: no, this wasn’t her. He knew it. Evelyn deserved more loyalty and faith than him giving up on her after one spat. But any chance of a reconciliation before she left at dawn seemed unlikely now, and the thought of seeing her off into the thick of the Red Templar conflict on these terms made his stomach feel leaden.

It was early, the sun had not risen, but Cullen was awake making final preparations and writing orders to be sent out with the group leaving that morning.

There was an unexpected creak and Cullen looked from his paperwork. Evelyn must have seen candlelight from the window and pushed the door open tentatively. He swallowed nervously, staring at her wide-eyed and genuinely surprised to find her there. Evelyn glanced around and seeing that his office was empty, she hastily crossed the room, sweeping around his desk. Then, planting herself heavily in his lap, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him several times on the ear, each cheek and forehead before he could so much as speak.

“What’s this for?” he asked when he could, pleased but cautious.

“You know what,” she said with a slightly impatient tut. “I’m sorry: I’ve been horrendous to deal with.”

She pulled back a little, giving him a worried look as she waited for his response. Cullen finally had a chance to put down the ledger and quill he had been holding when she had rushed him and ran his hands soothingly up her back. “That isn’t how I would describe it.”

She gave him a cynical look. “That was me in a good mood was it? Scowling at you and biting your head off?”

“Oh, you meant that,” he said as if he had not lain awake tossing and turning, plagued by whether she hated him half the night.

Evelyn looked embarrassed and dropped her gaze. “I don’t know what happened. I didn’t expect to be leaving again so soon and it caught me unprepared, put me in a mood.”

“No one expected the conditions to be so bad in Emprise du Lion.”

She glanced up at him. “And somehow being forced to leave again translated as me being horrible to you. I think pushing you away made me feel like I had control over the situation when…I don’t. I wish I had a better excuse.”

“You’re stressed and exhausted: you don’t need an excuse Evelyn. It is the most complex,
unpredictable and dangerous scenario we have engaged with yet.”

“Worse than the Winter Palace?”

“Second most,” Cullen quickly corrected himself and Evelyn looked amused for the briefest of moments. “My point is that you’re under an immense amount of pressure. I know that.”

“And that entitles me to be unjustly taciturn and mean towards you?”

“If it helps.” But preferably not, he added mentally.

Evelyn narrowed her eyes at him distrustfully. “Are you really going to be so forgiving, so quickly?”

“I was only worried about you. And us.”

Her face dropped guiltily. “I hope you know how much I depend on you. On your expertise at the war table. And just…generally.”

“You were provoked yesterday: I shouldn’t have followed you.”

“I appreciate that you were trying to help. Now I appreciate it anyway. I was just lashing out; it didn’t mean anything.”

“I’m never going to agree with every one of your decisions. That doesn’t mean I don’t respect them. Truly.”

“I know. I know,” she told him emphatically.

“Good, because I have so much адмira–” She let out a frustrated growl and kissed him abruptly, hands at the back of his head, burying her fingers in his hair.

She pulled away, just barely, face still close, her breath tickling his lips. “You’re making this too easy: I had expected I would have to convince you.”

Cullen tried to look serious. “If you had a plan then by all means proceed with it.”

Evelyn laughed, and that, more than anything else, made his heart soar with relief. She kissed him lightly on the forehead. “Well, it started like that.”

A grin tugged at the corner of his lips. “Good start.”

“And then I was going to look at you like this.” She pulled an expression of exaggerated remorse, pouting theatrically as she clutched at his collar with faux-desperation. Cullen snickered.

“Also good.”

“And then I was going to…” she leaned forward, kissed him once, barely making contact then nudged his nose with hers and whispered: “Sorry.”

“Very convincing,” he said in a low voice and pulled her in to kiss her properly, hands splayed on her back.

“Cullen?” she asked, voice slightly muffled as he tried to keep kissing her.

“Hm?”
She leaned out of his reach, arms still wrapped loosely around his neck and looked seriously at him. “I am sorry, really sorry, even if you’re pretending I don’t have anything to apologise for, just because I’m going to go off to maybe get killed in a few hours.”

Cullen made an uneasy grumbling noise and tightened his embrace of her. “Don’t say things like that.”

“I’m trying to tell you that I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Absolutely not, that is unacceptable,” he said firmly.

She looked shocked and leaned further back. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “I mean, I don’t mind you occasionally brutalising my ego if this is the apology I get. Honestly I’d rather not forgo it.”

She snorted and shoved him lightly before falling against him in an embrace, burying her face in his neck and whispering: “I love you.”

Cullen felt her relax against him with a sigh and he closed his eyes, concentrating on the warmth of her, the feeling of her hair against his cheek and the smell of her skin and above all, tried to forget that in a matter of hours she would be away again.
They were hardly alone, by the definition of the word, but if they kept their voices low enough they could avoid attracting the attention of the Inquisition soldiers, focused as they were on their own troubles. Cullen held aside some branches so that Evelyn could step through and she shot him a grateful smile. This was all they had had for weeks since the majority of their forces had left Skyhold for the Arbor Wilds. Now here they were, finally at the gates of the elvish temple. Their last chance to speak before she must press on into the uncharted with only the enigmatic Morrigan for guidance. They barely had this time to waste.

He glanced ahead at her. No: it wasn’t a waste. Seeing her was never a waste and here she was, making a path in the underbrush like she knew where she was going. Her hair was fastened up and walking behind her he could see where strands had escaped and curled in the humidity at the nape of her neck. And when he was close, despite the grime of travel and filth of battle he could still smell what was unmistakably her: vanilla and something floral that he couldn’t place but always reminded him of spring.

They were soon out of earshot, although not quite out of sight. As much as he wanted her to himself it would be dangerous to venture much further. Cullen reached out and lightly placed a hand in the curve at the small of Evelyn’s back to halt her progress. She turned to face him, his hand slid to her hip and he couldn’t help but apply a little pressure, just to feel her flesh dip slightly in response and to know for a moment that she really was there with him. Her eyes snapped up to meet his proving she had felt it. He could see the pulse thrumming at the base of her throat and barely resisted the urge to place his lips there. Suddenly, she glanced over his shoulder, spotting some movement in the camp behind them and the moment was gone. He withdrew his hand. “I’ve missed you,” he told her, as if she didn’t already know.

“Me too. It’s good to see you,” she replied with a generous smile that made her eyes crinkle charmingly at the corners. Up close he could see she was a little sunburned and spot the new freckles across her nose and cheeks that came with it, like a spattering from a paintbrush.

“That was a timely intervention. As always.” Evelyn and her party had barrelled into the clearing at the temple entrance with such suddenness and fury that Cullen could not decide if their own Inquisition soldiers or the enemy were more startled by the arrival.

Evelyn shrugged. “Happy to help. Though I’m sure you had it all well in hand.” Cullen detected no trace of sarcasm though he reflexively searched for it.

“I was a bit nervous about the amount of lightning you were conjuring.”

“It seemed the best choice for crowd control.”

“Perhaps, but it was alarming when I was already knee deep in water.”

“It doesn’t work like real lightning. Not unless I want it too.”

“I know. I was just hoping you’d actually realised I was in there before you started electrocuting everything in sight.”

She grinned at him. “The lone man holding off a group of five red templars? You were hard to miss.”

Cullen did not return the smile. “Samson was sighted earlier. I trust you’ve been notified by the
scouts. Presumably he is in the temple now. And as if he were not enough of a threat alone…”

“Corypheus is likely skulking about: I know.” She waved a dismissive hand as if she didn’t want to discuss it. Cullen tensed at her apparent flippancy, narrowing his eyes but she looked away, staring up into the canopies instead. “It’s beautiful here,” she sighed.

“Beautiful?” he said brusquely and with undisguised scepticism. He didn’t consider this jungle to be anything but a quarrelsome combination of difficult terrain, unpleasant humidity and effective camouflage for enemies.

Undeterred, Evelyn nodded. “Did you see the gates to the temple? The engravings? Just spectacular.”

“Have you forgotten what our purpose is?” He knew he was barking at her like she was an errant recruit but he couldn’t seem to help it.

But Evelyn did not seem bothered. Showing no offense at his tone, she only gave him her usual look of bemusement. “Why are we here? Is it to celebrate you Name Day?” she asked brightly. He responded with a frustrated silence, folding his arms. “ Forgotten? Hardly Cullen,” she said evenly. “I just wish I had more time to take it in. Oh! Did you see that bird? Blue and red! I hope none of the Orlesians see it. They’ll want to wear it. Or eat it.” She continued to stare after the animal with thoughtful concern. “Or both.”

“A bird? This is what troubles you? Of all things?”

Tearing her gaze from the canopies she suddenly looked at him with alarming directness, lips drawn into a thin line. “No. You looking like you haven’t slept in three days troubles me,” she said with an accusing prod at his chest. “The bird was just very pretty.”

“How do you always manage to take delight in such things even with…”

“Very wet socks and demons lurking behind every tree trunk? I don’t know Cullen. I suppose despite everything difficult and terrible that has happened, there are always good things too. If I didn’t recognise that I’m not sure I’d see the point in trying anymore.”

He gestured in the direction of the temple. “I am struggling to understand how you are not more worried. You must take this seriously, Samson seriously. I don’t know how else to impress this upon you.”

Evelyn’s eyebrows shot up with surprise. “I am worried. I’m terrified. And I’m trying very hard to hide it,” she told him matter of factly, though her voice trembled slightly on the final words. “I’ve been informed that me quivering and bawling in front of the troops is apparently bad for morale so I’m not sure what you want me to do.”

Cullen felt a rush of shame. What did he want her to do? Validate his own fears when he himself was working frantically to supress them every minute of the day? “Nothing.” He exhaled and shook his head. “Forgive me. I should know you better by now.”

“Don’t apologise: I learned from the master.” She gave him a pointed look.

“Me?”

“Who else? When we first met I didn’t think you were afraid of anything. Now I know when you’re worried.”
“Oh? And what’s my tell?”

“You’re short with me,” she told him dryly.

“Am I just an open book to you…?” Cullen breathed out slowly again, feeling his exasperation fading as her presence relaxed him. Just as it always did. “You’re right, I shouldn’t have spoken so –”

She shushed him. “Cullen. Your mind is still on the battle. And it should remain there: I have to move on soon and you’ll have no shortage of enemies to face in my absence.”

“And that is where your mind is? Your next battle? Not the exotic fauna?” He gestured towards the branch where the bird had briefly alighted.

She smiled and he recognised the mischief in it even before she spoke. “I confess: no. Actually, I was thinking it would be nice if we came back here to see this place when the end of the world isn’t looming over us.”

“You mean for a holiday.”

Evelyn pretended to be shocked and began dictating to an imaginary audience. “I can’t believe he has even heard of the word, let alone suggesting it! Never did I think I would live to see the day! Commander Rutherford, insisting, nay demanding a holiday…”

“You were suggesting it not I and…And you’re mocking me.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. Evelyn undoubtedly always had the upper hand, but fatigue was making him more susceptible to her teasing than usual.

“Can you imagine it though? Us taking in tourist destinations in Orlais? Reading plaques and observing the architecture of note? Mingling with the locals, visiting salons, shopping all day, going to plays at night…” Evelyn snickered.

“No,” Cullen said flatly. “Is that your idea of a holiday as a noble?”

“I just thought you might be attracted to all the fine furnishings and creature comforts. My mistake,” she told him teasingly. “You look like you could use a little pampering is all. Quite desperately.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I think you know.”

He must look a wreck: he well knew it. But he would not gratify her by admitting it. “I assure you I do not.”

“Have you been combing your hair with a stick?”

There was something about the stupidity and frivolity of the jibe that made him smile, as if they were miles away in the Skyhold tavern, not here in the dead centre of chaos and uncertainty. “And there I was looking forward to this moment of seeing you not knowing you were going to use it to bully me.”

She objected with a gasp. “I’m not a bully! Did you know the soldiers say you fight for days without resting?” It was a question, but an accusatory one.
“And? The soldiers say you’re invincible and can breathe fire like a dragon.”

“Hm, touché. You’re just looking a bit bedraggled is all.” Evelyn frowned. “One side of your face is bruised – what happened to your helmet?”

“We were ambushed. In the moment I thought it better to risk doing without it than to certainly be cut down while grooping around for stray pieces of my armour.”

“What about this?” She took his hand in hers and brushed her thumb over the knuckles where ropey new scar tissue had formed.

“Are you keeping a catalogue?”

“Yes. Don’t avoid the question.”

“My sword was knocked from my grasp. I had to resort to using my fists.”

“Against what?”

“A Horror.”

Evelyn let out a hiss of concern but she quickly composed herself with a shake of her head. “And then there is this?” she said as she gently ran a single finger over his stubbled cheek, along his jaw then briefly tipped his chin up to see better. It was so long since they had been together in any meaningful way that the simple touch made him shiver. This did not escape Evelyn’s notice and eyes twinkling, she responded with a smug, cat-like grin.

Cullen swallowed rapidly. “Is that a criticism?”

“No. Just that I quite like it.” She tilted her head and looked at him thoughtfully and he rolled his shoulders. “Don’t be so slovenly.”

“Slovenly!?” he replied as she laughed, obviously pleased with the reaction she had gotten from him. He quickly moderated his voice. “We are in the middle of a jungle, fighting off Red Templars and demons Evelyn.”

“Not to mention the local wildlife – and you expect me to stop and shave?” he said incredulously, slapping at an insect on his neck.

“Oh Maker that one drew blood,” Evelyn said in a quiet, worried voice and put her hand gently against his throat where it had bitten.

“Save your mana,” he told her but couldn’t bring himself to pull away from her touch.

“It might have been poisonous,” she said, disregarding his protest and moments later he felt the irritated spot cool, the itch that had been threatening to come on completely soothed. “There,” she added quietly when she was done, looking up at him tenderly in a way that he found impossible to resist.

Moving swiftly, he kissed her firmly, then left his hands cradling her surprised face for a moment as he whispered: “Thank you.”

“We’re not alone,” Evelyn told him, but she looked pleased.
Cullen glanced belatedly towards the camp. “No one is watching.”

Still smiling she raised an eyebrow. “You’ve become very cavalier all of a sudden.”

Adamant had not been far from his mind in recent weeks. Voice low he told her: “I missed my opportunity to do that once before and swore I never would again.”

“Cullen, I’m coming back –” Evelyn began but they were interrupted by the sounds of crashing undergrowth on the opposite side of the clearing. They both turned towards it on instinct, knowing Red templars approached.

“Get your party and go. You must leave before they engage us,” he told her, and without another look pushed through the trees towards the oncoming enemy. “On your feet! Get on your feet!” Cullen began yelling as he strode through the soldiers, some of whom had been taking the break in the fighting as an opportunity to sit or even lay down. Why were they so slow to react?

Drawing his sword, he headed straight towards the noise, and was halfway towards the tree line when the enemy began to spill out from it. Cullen took stock, glancing around him to see what numbers of his soldiers had readied themselves. As long as the templars didn’t have a wave of reinforcements coming they should match them.

Cullen felt a rush of wind that seemed to come from below and saw a glimmering blue light briefly encompass him. Someone had cast a protective glyph and he did not need to wonder at who. But why was she still here? They needed to go while they had the chance, not engage in this new distraction that would put Evelyn at risk and cost them precious time and energy.

The enemy was closing in and Cullen slowed his approach and braced himself, yelling for his soldiers to do the same. Glancing up the line of troops he could see Cassandra nearby. Under any other circumstance he would be glad to have her fighting at his side but this was exactly his concern: that Ev – The Inquisitor’s party would become entangled in this fight and slow the progress of the mission. “You need to move out! Convince her to go!” he yelled to Cassandra. But it was too late for her to do so, or even to respond. The Red Templars were upon them.

Evelyn and her party instinctively held the middle ground, while Cullen moved amongst his soldiers, assisting wherever their line of defence looked at risk of being breached. He kept directing men back to the fringes of the clearing to thwart the Red Templar attempts to get behind them.

As for the templars themselves, he found engaging with them straightforward and predictable, despite their unnatural strength. It seemed that apart from polluting their bodies with red lyrium, the group had done very little to adapt or develop their combat techniques since his own time with them. Cullen would have expected more from Samson, but obviously they assumed the red lyrium would provide sufficient advantage alone. It was a mistake that Cullen was grateful to take advantage of: his soldiers knew what weaknesses to look for, what to undermine.

He only hoped Samson would make as many mistakes when Evelyn was forced to face him.

Whenever there was even a brief opportunity, Cullen was unable to resist checking on her. But it was unnecessary. She needed no aid. It was impossible not to marvel at how far she had come. Never lacking in courage or determination from the beginning, her skill was now also undeniable. He knew how strong she had become: he had seen it in the wiry muscles of her arms, her unflinching courage and in the continued success of her party on their missions.

But to witness it in person was different. Cullen had so few opportunities to see her in the field, but
even since Adamant her experience had rendered her more fluid, more powerful. It was in direct contrast to the overwhelmed figure he had first seen approaching the Breach, fresh from the Circle and barely grown used to the glare of day let alone battle. Now she was confident and natural as she fought. He had spent his fair share of time studying mage combat and she still managed to surprise him. It came from absorbing so much from those around her. He felt a glow of pride. There she held herself in a stance he had taught her, before casting a spell Cullen had seen Dorian use and then, as an enemy fixed on her, feinted in one direction setting them off balance in a way that could only have come from Sera. It was hard to drag his eyes away and stop watching: she was incredible.

Perhaps the timing was strange, there in the midst of battle, but it hit him full in the chest: he loved her.

He loved her and it had never been a choice.

He loved her and if he didn’t start paying attention he was going to be cut down.

They finally had the advantage, but more would inevitably be on the way now that the first wave had cut a path through the scrub. Cullen grabbed the arm of a man who seemed alert and unharmed. “Run back and get reinforcements. Quickly,” he told him, then gave him a push in the right direction. The soldier saluted, but understanding the urgency, immediately began to sprint towards the return path. Others were looking to him for instructions. Most he told to keep their line of defence and wait, a few he instructed to start pulling their wounded to safety. Mercifully there were few injured and dead. They weren’t in trouble yet, but they couldn’t afford to be pushed back any further. It was crucial they hold this position near the entrance of the Temple to provide support for... Where was Evelyn? He spun around to look for her and she wasn’t difficult to spot, conspicuous in armour twice as bright as any common soldier.

“More will be coming,” she told him as he approached, looking worriedly past him into the trees.

“You have to go. You should have already left,” he told her firmly.

“But –”

“I’ve sent for reinforcements. You must leave.”

She looked around anxiously at the remaining soldiers and Cullen guessed she was counting those still standing. “We can wait for their arrival.”

“No. Your tarrying will endanger the mission. Go now,” he told her, voice made hard by the urgency.

She squared herself with a look of surprise at his tone. “You don’t give me orders. No. Not until the reinforcements arrive.”

“Evelyn.” He said in desperation now, not caring if any of the soldiers heard him using her name. “You have more important battles than this. Let me do my job. Go!”

Evelyn gave him a furious look and let out an low growl of irritation. He was expecting a sharp reprimand to follow, even for her to begin shouting. Instead, her shoulders dropped and she exhaled as if all the fight had been knocked out of her. When she spoke her voice was flat: “You should be wearing a helmet,” she told him then looked about for her party. “Cassandra! Tell the others we’re moving out” Evelyn called, signalling for the woman to head towards the temple entrance.

“Thank you,” he told her quietly. It was a stupid thing to say, but he could think of nothing else.
Evelyn did not speak but he saw her mouth twist anxiously before she composed herself and turned on her heel to leave.

This time he did watch her go.

And this time she did glance back.
Evelyn had her back to him as he entered her quarters, already in her armour and apparently fixated on the view of the Breach from her window. She glanced over her shoulder when she heard him approaching, face hard, but her posture relaxed a little when she realised who it was. “Cullen,” his name came out like a breath of relief. “Thank the Maker it’s you. I don’t think I could have tolerated anyone else right now.”

“I know how you feel.” He stood beside her, put an arm around her waist, followed her gaze towards the swirling Breach, an angry bruise in the sky.

“Isn’t it infuriating that after chasing around in his footsteps for all this time, searching for him endlessly, picking up the pieces and groping about in total darkness, he suddenly gets to pick where and when we meet. I know we’ve provoked him into confronting us but…Once again it feels like he has control over the situation and we can only react.”

She was obviously anxious to set off, but her voice was largely impassive. If anything, she sounded a little angry. No one had ever had cause to accuse her of cowardice, least of all him, but it still impressed Cullen that she could stare down a confrontation of this magnitude with such resolve.

“Our enemies have had the upper hand for a long time,” he said, his voice calm to match her composure.

“And now?”

“They have underestimated us. They have underestimated you.” Evelyn looked thoughtful then seemed to hesitate before replying, stopping herself and biting her lip. “What is it?” he prompted.

“I was going to ask if you trust Morrigan but I know you don’t.”

“I believe her goals align with ours at this time and that is sufficient.”

“She is intelligent. And she knows what she is doing.”

“I agree on the former, perhaps not the latter. But we can only assume. And pray.”

“If she is willing to do so much as even try to distract that awful dragon from me then I am more than grateful.”

“And here I thought you liked dragons? Not such a fan now all of a sudden?”

Evelyn looked up at him. “Commander Rutherford are you teasing me? At a time like this?” she asked, a little shocked but her eyes were sparkling with amusement.

“It must be your influence,” he said with a shrug, fighting back a smile.

“Well, it was all worth it if that ends up being the only thing I’ve accomplished in this life,” she laughed before they both fell into a subdued silence. Evelyn quickly turned away.

“I love you,” was all he could say and he pulled her closer to him to kiss her temple. She allowed herself to be drawn in, his arm tight around her waist, but did not react for some time.
“I’m sorry. I know you would prefer I wait for the return of our forces before I go in there.”

Cullen let out a scathing noise from the back of his throat. “What I would prefer is that Corypheus tripped and broke his neck and you never had to face him at all.”

“If only. But you know I have to meet him now, don’t you? Else he will move on Skyhold. He must realise our defences are weakened. And Maker only knows how many demons that breach is spewing out each hour that passes. These walls house more than soldiers: there are so many in our care.”

Cullen bit back what he wanted to say. Choked down the urge to argue his War Table points again. The decision had been made and all he could do was support her: in the field as Commander of her forces and here as...So instead he told her, his voice neutral: “I understand your urgency.”

“I’m glad because despite the words that keep coming out of my mouth, I’m still convincing myself. I know what I need to do but somehow it doesn’t feel like any of this is actually happening.” Flexing her fingers, Evelyn glanced down at the anchor that was still crackling with flashes of green light. He wondered if it hurt and knew better than to ask. She made a white-knuckled fist around it and returned her gaze towards the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Towards Corypheus. “It feels as if I just turned my back on the Breach it might disappear on its own and everything would be alright,” she said, her voice breaking a little on the final word.

“Then for a moment, let it be so,” he said, gently taking her by the wrists and steering her away from the window to face him instead. And face him she did, brow creasing as she looked into his eyes, unable to conceal the panic in her own. “You’re worried.” It was the obvious thing to say, unhelpful and a little callous. But it made Cullen so sick to see it that the words slipped out.

“I’m worried about you.”

“Me? I’ll be dealing with the dregs of his army and garden variety demons. Nothing compared to you.”

“That’s not what I mean. If something happens to me –”

His stomach sank. “Evelyn, I’m sorry but I don’t want to discuss this. I can’t discuss it.”

But she was determined. She shook her hands loose of his and grasped at his shirt in two desperate fistfuls. “It’s not...I don’t want to hurt you but I’m afraid that were I gone; you would convince yourself that this...what we have wasn’t real. That I never really cared for you. That you would forget. I need you to know how much I love you. I need you to always believe it Cullen, if I’m not here to remind you.”

He had not been expecting this and stood stock still for a moment as he tried to process her words. Coming to his senses, Cullen cupped her face with his hands, tilting her face ever so slightly up. She looked at him searchingly. “I have never been more certain of anything in my life,” he told her slowly, calmly, holding her gaze so she could have no doubt. Her eyes fluttered closed with relief and when he kissed her it was gentle and unhurried, despite the anchor sparking frantically between them. Her hands slowly relaxed against his chest, unfurling from their grip on his shirt. She pulled away from his lips, only to wrap her arms around him and bury her face against in his shoulder. He returned the embrace, hands splayed across her back, holding her tighter and not minding the way the buckles from her armour dug into him. It crossed Cullen’s mind that if that were their last kiss, it would be the precise opposite of their first. He quashed the thought.

Evelyn raised her head and let out a sigh that he felt as a hot puff of air against his neck. “Okay. I
don’t doubt you. And I love you. And I’m not sure I would have spent last night doing paperwork if I had known this was coming today,” she joked and it reassured him to see the barest of smiles as she peered up, even if she was forcing it.

“I assure you: had I known I would not have allowed it to be so.”

“When I’m back,” she told him, her voice even again, “We’ll make up for it.” She dropped her hands to her sides with an air of finality.

“When you return,” he told her seriously, “I intend to spend the rest of my life making up for it.”

Evelyn smiled broadly, then exhaled slowly, returning her thoughts to the Breach and steeling herself once more for her task. Even her body seemed to stiffen with resolve in his arms and he let her go. He was always letting her go.

“What are you planning?” Cullen knew she meant in terms of the Inquisition military, not how he was planning on making up for them missing spending last night in each other’s company.

Now was not the time.

“What soldiers we can spare from Skyhold’s defences will march ahead. No doubt Corypheus intends to send out his minions to slow your journey. We will clear a path where we can and draw their attention.”

“You’ll be with them?”

“Yes, staying as close as I can. Leliana will be seeking alternative routes for you in the interest of speed, and sending decoy parties to confuse the enemy about your actual location as you travel. The fewer interruptions you encounter, the better.”

“It will still be a day and a half of hard riding. At least. And the Breach has grown, even as I have tarried here watching it.” She turned and scanned the room with agitation, as if she was wondering if she had forgotten something. “The other must surely be ready by now.”

Cullen nodded. “Then it is time.”

“Yes, back to where it all started. Maker. It feels like a different lifetime. Before all this.” She glanced at her hand again, then back at him. “Cullen,” she said in a way that made his heart stutter.

“Yes?” he asked, his chest tight.

Evelyn’s lips parted to speak but she hesitated, then scrunched up her face with a shake of her head. When she opened her eyes again, she smiled at him confidently, in a way that seemed surreal. Like it was a normal day and nothing was wrong. “Never mind, I’ll tell you when I’m back,” she said before walking from the room.

Cullen watched her leave, then, as if compelled, resumed her position at the window, staring at the distant Breach and nauseatingly conscious of the silent, empty room behind him.

Chapter End Notes

What!? The penultimate chapter? How did this happen? I will be sad to finish this fic
but I am also so, sooo looking forward to posting the final chapter which is a longer one and 99.9% pure, sickening fluff aka the chapter you all deserve and have more than earned for coming this far. Thank you for reading! So much!
Evelyn had left the front door of the cottage slightly ajar. Pushing it open with her foot, she hefted the basket of firewood she was carrying into the kitchen. Cullen was still seated at the pine table, deeply engrossed with his elbows planted on either side of his book and his brow furrowed in concentration. Evelyn shook her head in bemusement, knowing he was relaxed though he may not look it. Even now, so long since the defeat of Corypheus, and even here, so far from their old responsibilities at Skyhold, he still applied himself to every task with the focus of a Commander.

For instance, the day she had wondered aloud if the chickens might benefit from a new coop, he had set about the project with such energetic enthusiasm that she barely had a chance to finish her sentence. Cullen had marched towards the birds with such determination and equipped with so many tools that the hens had fled from him, surely expecting they were to be slaughtered rather than built a new shelter.

Smiling at the memory, Evelyn passed by him without speaking, not wishing to disrupt his focus. Plonking her basket down in close proximity to the stove, she checked on the progress of the bubbling pot, using a rag to remove the lid and recoiling from the steam that erupted upwards. It was simmering nicely, though still had a way to go before it would be ready to eat.

Evelyn still had to admit that aside from Cullen’s enduring work ethic, he had changed since their move to the cottage. With his skin tanned from their long days in the garden and aimless country rambles, no sword at his belt, easy grin and shirtsleeves rolled up his forearms he might have lived here among the villagers his entire life.

And beyond that, his demeanour was lighter and the worried shadows under his eyes had waned to mere smudges. He slept fine most nights, sometimes even well. The nightmares and headaches may still come but they could be faced with the resolve of a veteran: without surprise or fear. And Evelyn had learned when to comfort him, and when to let him be: always quick to do the former and never resenting the latter.

Casting a stealthy glance in Cullen’s direction, she felt a rush of affection so fierce a lump formed in her throat. She watched him trace a finger down the page, mouthing a few of words as he contemplated something that was evidently puzzling him. Seeming to come to a conclusion, he stretched his legs out underneath the table, leaned back and ran a hand through his already tousled hair, his eyes never leaving the book.

Evelyn turned away to the window, smiling to herself as she drank in the rolling pastures trimmed with lush woods, all painted in warm, golden tones by the setting sun. Sometimes she had to pinch herself that they were both here. Alive…and mostly in one piece she thought with a brief, rueful look at the space where her left forearm had been. To distract herself from lingering on that, she picked up the spoon and began to stir the pot, scraping at the bottom to make sure nothing was sticking.

There was no point dwelling on what she had lost when she had gained so much. There hadn’t been another time in her life when she had felt so free. Her parents had dominated her childhood with the understanding she was clay to be moulded until she was made a shape that could be useful to them. The Circle had been a chance to grow and develop her magical talent, but she still was penned in: completely limited in what she was permitted to achieve and what she could aspire to, let alone...
where she could go. As for being Inquisitor: she may have had broad decision making power and incredible resources at her disposal, but she was shackled by a hundred competing obligations and the weight of her responsibilities was ever suffocating.

But now how she felt each day mattered. What she wanted mattered. It was still a difficult concept to grasp and at first had been downright overwhelming. Though she had begun to acclimatise to it, Evelyn hoped she would never take it for granted. Never take any of this for granted. Though that was hard to imagine, as obscenely happy as they were.

Still stirring, Evelyn eyed some bones on the counter that she had kept back from the soup for Cullen’s dog. She wondered where the animal had gotten to, already looking forward to seeing his lopsided, toothy grin of canine gratitude.

His book abandoned on the table before him, Cullen watched Evelyn stir the soup, marvelling at the impossible peacefulness of the entire scene. Out of armour and far away from the scrutiny of Orlesian high society she wore a plain dress over a long sleeve shirt, all of which was presently concealed under a generously-stained apron. Hair carelessly piled on top her head and loosely fastened by a comb (the easiest style for her to manage with one hand), there was nothing in her appearance to give away that she had recently led armies, conquered great evil and inspired hordes of devoted followers.

Leaning against the counter and humming tunelessly to herself, he watched her swirl the wooden spoon in an aimless fashion as she stared out the window at the sun setting over the rolling hills. It had been months and he could still hardly comprehend that this was their life now. Their home.

Apparently breaking free of her reverie, Evelyn banged the spoon on the side of the pot a few times, before putting it down and letting out a sharp whistle. When there was no immediate response she whistled again and turned to Cullen. “Where is –” she cut herself off, breaking into a smile and tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear self-consciously. “You’re staring at me again.”

“Am I?” he asked, continuing to gaze at her.

“I’m not sure what it is you find so fascinating. It is the same me as always. Just scruffier.” She scrunched up her face. “And slightly fatter.”

The glow of the sunset was making her hair shine with burnished streaks of gold. Her cheeks and forehead were pink and dewy from the heat of the stove and above all, she had a radiant peacefulness about her. Something content and relaxed in her eyes, her smile and her entire frame. “I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you look more beautiful,” he told her.

She scoffed, but the spreading blush was unmistakable. “I think the country air has addled your brain, honestly.”

“If you say so.”

“Speaking of country air, or the lack thereof, I was wondering if you could be convinced to visit Orlais with me in the next couple of weeks?” Cullen could tell she was trying to sound nonchalant and it immediately put him on his guard.

“Why?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.
“So suspicious!”

“Am I wrong to be?”

“Not in the slightest. You’ll hate it,” she told him gleefully.

“If this is to do with furniture again, I told you: just pick whatever you like.”

“No no, it’s much more upsetting than that. For you, anyway.”

“Evelyn,” he said warningly.

She dropped her gaze and made a show of tugging at the collar of her shirt as if she needed air. “I love it when you say my name like that. All forebodingly. Like you wish you could just whip me into shape like a recruit but you know you can’t. Takes me right back to when we first met.”

Cullen couldn’t maintain his scowl at that and grinned, even as he scoffed. “I never wanted to make you anything that you weren’t.”

Now it was Evelyn’s turn to be sceptical. “That can’t be true. I must have frustrated you endlessly.”

“It is. You were everything we needed: strong willed, competent, resolute and yes, occasionally frustrating,” he conceded.

“Psh. Charming.” Evelyn said with heavy sarcasm as she rolled her eyes. “Competent and resolute indeed! Such poetry. I can tell it was love at first sight.”

“Ha! That might as well be love: it sounds a lot like it.”

“And you? You thought I was a monster when you first met me.”

“No,” she corrected him quickly, “I thought you might be a monster. There’s a difference.”

“Small though it may be. When did that change?”

“Oh. Well…” Evelyn looked suddenly embarrassed, shifting and turning about looking for a task, which gratified him. She constantly caught him off guard and had him at a disadvantage but it was rare for him to do the same. Finding nothing to occupy herself with, she chewed her lip and looked back to him. “I realised… I suppose at some point I realised that I trusted you. Whatever our differences of opinion, somehow I had come to trust you more than anyone else I knew.” Neither of them spoke for a moment and Cullen felt his heart swell. Then Evelyn let out a short, sharp exhale. “I was trying to ruin your evening and now you’ve gone and made me all sentimental.”

“Ruin my evening? You’re doing a poor job of it so far.”

“Yes. With Orlais. Will you come with me?”

“Why the sudden desire to visit? Last time we were there you called it a nest of spiteful, self-serving vipers.”

Evelyn smiled broadly and then the words seemed to burst out of her: “There is a play about us.”

“About the Inquisition? I’m not entirely surprised.”
“No. About us. You. And me. And our relationship. Together.” Cullen blinked at her. “Well, kind of. It is about two very different people, ‘Eloise’ and ‘Connor’, who are thrown together when an organisation is formed to combat a great evil that threatens chaos upon all the world. Subtle, isn’t it?” Cullen tried to speak but only made a quiet gagging noise so Evelyn continued, beaming: “Tickets have been selling like nugcakes apparently. They’ve already extended the season.” When Cullen continued to sit frozen in silent horror Evelyn landed her killing blow: “And you’re being played by Gaël Lucien Deschamps. The critics are saying he is wonderful, possibly a better you than you are in their eyes. Do you remember him? Gaël?”

Cullen finally found his voice. “Sadly yes! It is indecent! Our personal affairs are…This cannot be allowed to proceed, there must be some law against…It is a defamation…” he groped desperately about for a more convincing protest.

“There is no law, Cullen. But apparently there are some very beautiful musical interludes.”

“I feel sick,” he said, only half joking.

“Our friends do not object so vigorously as you do. Dorian intends to make a trip especially for it. Cassandra has seen it twice and said it was very good. Varric wrote to say he wish he’d written it first.”

Cullen swiped a hand down the length of his face before balling it into a fist on the table. “How could they revel in this…insult?”

“Oh, don’t be like that! We should go see it! We would probably get tickets for free.”

“I’d rather go furniture shopping again.”

“Please? How often do we get the opportunity to see a play about our romance?”

“Once too often, at least,” he told her flinging his arms out in an exasperated gesture before folding them defensively across his chest.

“I’m begging you. Please,” she put her hand over her heart, “I’ll give you anything you want in exchange.”

“I already have everything I want,” he told her. And he really meant it, but the significance behind the statement was lost on Evelyn who was only growing increasingly desperate to find a way to convince him.

She looked about her and grabbed some skin from the potatoes he had peeled earlier. “I’ll give you this?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Vegetable scraps? Somehow I’m not tempted. I don’t know why you’re bothering to ask when you know full well that I would never consent to go.”

She smirked and half-heartedly tossed the potato peel across the table where it stopped just short of him. “Yes, you’re right. I was only bringing it up to see that charmingly perturbed frown on your face.”

“Then I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

“More than,” Evelyn told him smugly.

Desperate to move away from the humiliating topic of the play Cullen changed the subject. “What
“Were you going to ask?”

“Hm? Was I asking something?”

“Before I distracted you. You wanted to know where something was?”

“Oh.” Evelyn laughed lightly. “I was wondering where that dog of yours had gotten to. Usually I’m tripping over him when I have food in reach.”

“He spotted a nug before I came in and was in hot pursuit.”

Evelyn looked aghast. “Oh no! I wish he wouldn’t chase them. They’re so sweet.”

“You won’t be saying that when they start getting into the vegetable patch.”

Evelyn whistled again, as loudly as she could as she tipped the peas into the pot and resumed stirring. “Well he is going to miss out on those offcuts if he doesn’t hurry: I’ll give them to the neighbours pigs. Hope he enjoys his nug.”

“He’ll never catch one. He is an appalling hunter,” Cullen reassured her. He rose and crossed the room to embrace her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder to examine how dinner was progressing. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“No. Its nearly there.” She put the spoon down again so she could put her hand over where his arms folded around her torso, leaning back against his chest and letting out a little sigh. She was fast becoming a competent cook, now that she had the time and had taken a liking to the process. She was already far better than him, though the food she made was simple, and largely influenced by what produce was available. All of which was more than agreeable after some of the ridiculously complex and elaborate meals they had eaten during their time in the Inquisition.

The baking on the other hand, had been disastrous for both of them on multiple attempts.

“Perhaps with enough jam?” he had tried to convince her recently, as he sawed off the blackened bottom of a depressingly unrisen loaf.

“We don’t have enough jam in the house to make that edible,” she had scoffed and silently he agreed, abandoning his efforts and pitching the failure straight into the scrap bucket.

Mia had promised to visit one day and show them the basics. He hoped it would be soon.

Not all was as it seemed in their simple routines and long, careless days. Their current objective was to appear as retired as possible for the benefit of the inevitable spies Solas would have watching them. This was to continue for as long as possible, Leliana’s own network getting notes to them hidden in parcels from the local greengrocer and via messengers disguised as passing vagabonds who Evelyn would unfailingly invite in for a hot meal in a completely characteristic and unsuspicious gesture. Leliana herself had even arrived once this way, much to their delight.

So a ruse it may be, and only a temporary one at that, but that reality didn’t stop him from enjoying it. Though it remained unspoken, it was clear they both found their roles very easy to adopt, and their new life agreeable. He didn’t like to think about a point in the future when this may need to change.

“Cullen?”

“Hmm?”
“You might have nothing to do but I need to move now,” she patted his arm gently.

He tightened his hold of her for a second longer then released her with a peck on her cheek. “I should go and find that dog actually, before he gets all of us into trouble again.”

Evelyn huffed. “The butcher shouldn’t display meat in a way that is so easy to reach if he doesn’t want it stolen. It isn’t the dog’s fault he wasn’t trained properly as a pup: he’s still learning.”

Cullen was at the door pulling on his boots and chuckled at her indignation. “It was an entire string of sausages. The poor man chased him for nearly two miles. I’m not sure he’s had that much exercise in years. I was genuinely concerned his heart might give out.”

“So what? We paid him, didn’t we? And it was months ago but he still makes sure we get the smallest cuts every time.”

“We did pay him, true. But I think the apologetic gesture was compromised by how hard we were laughing.”

Evelyn adopted a mock, snooty voice. “No gratitude from these peasants! All this over some sausages! Did he not hear about how we stopped the end of days and saved Thedas? Honestly.”

Cullen grabbed his coat and swung it on. “I don’t think saving Thedas compares to the injury of dented pride in a small village like this. And I hate to be the one to disillusion you, Lady Evelyn, but no one cares who you are here.” They both shared a knowing smile: that of course, was exactly why they both liked the village. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“You had better be: this is nearly done.” She glanced in his direction once more and frowned. Putting her spoon to the side, she crossed the room. Reaching beside him, she took a scarf from the coat rack and wrapped it around his neck as he stood still to oblige her.

“Satisfied?” he asked her, after she had carefully looped it twice.

Still grasping the scarf, she used it to slowly pull him down for a kiss, gently nipping at his bottom lip with her teeth before pulling ever so slightly away. “Very,” she told him in a flirtatious hum as she looked at him through her lashes, her breath tickling his lips.

Two could play at that game. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her firmly against him. She let out a delighted yelp of surprise that was cut short by their mouths crashing together. The kiss was sloppy at first, and he could feel her laughing against him. But he soon took advantage of her parted lips and as their tongues met, she tilted her head so he could deepen the kiss with a moan. Cullen was feeling a lot warmer, and it had less to do with the scarf than the way Evelyn was pressing her hips against his. He struggled with the knot at the back of her apron, cursing the extra layer between them and conveniently forgetting he had been the one to tie it for her. But just as he was beginning to wonder with mounting eagerness if the kitchen table was as sturdy as his desk in Skyhold, she turned her face away. Undeterred he kept kissing her, sweeping his lips across her cheek then focusing on tracing the line of her jaw.

“Soup’ll burn,” she finally managed to get out the half sentence in a pant, using her hand to push back from his chest even as he kept her encircled in his arms and trapped against him.

“Suddenly I’m not hungry,” he said with a shrug.

Still trying to catch her breath she raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Weren’t you going somewhere?”
“Was I? Can’t have been important.”

“Go find your dog,” she said with unconvincing sternness as she pulled away to return to the stove, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand where he had left a wet trail. “And don’t be impatient: I’m here all night you know.”

Grinning, he unlatched the door and Evelyn blew him a final distracted kiss before returning to her task. The afternoons were getting shorter and the evenings had a bitter chill. Cullen found himself immediately grateful for Evelyn’s intervention and pulled the scarf higher. She was right, as usual. He stepped out into the bracing Autumn air, striding down the path to the edge of their property, noting that the front gate was swinging open: the dog could be anywhere. With no other clues, Cullen made for the woods, a favourite haunt of the animal.

And of his, come to think of it.

There was no cure for lyrium addiction. He expected no end to the nightmares, the headaches and the pangs of need that came mercifully infrequently now, though always unexpectedly. Sometimes he could nearly ignore them. Sometimes Evelyn could distract him, cool fingers running lines of pressure against his scalp, her lips against his temple, murmuring comfortingly until the pain ebbed away. Sometimes nothing helped. But if there was no cure, these woods were the next best thing. At the worst of times, when he felt most suffocated, he would rise in the middle of the night, dress hastily and leave the cottage. If he woke Evelyn she did not intervene beyond squeezing his hand briefly, or passing him his shirt without speaking. And he would come to the woods and lose himself among the trees that were distractingly vaster and more enduring than his problems. It was grounding to be there, transporting him away from the pain and the phantoms of his memories. Instead he could focus on the wet earth smell, the night creatures snuffling in the undergrowth and the rough bark against his fingertips when he reached out to brace himself.

Or he might instead take the mountain path if there was enough moonlight. Where he lost his footing in the loose pebbles and the wind seemed to protest his attempt to climb by pushing back against him and forcing air into his lungs. And he would only stop when he found a vantage point where he could watch the sun rise over the village. Then, the dawn fresh and his mind clear he would return, pulling up wildflowers on the way into a scraggly bouquet, and Evelyn would see him at the threshold of the cottage and smile just to see him smiling.

Now as he walked, calling for the dog intermittently, the wind stirred up flurries of leaves at his feet in every shade of brown and orange and Cullen felt contentment beyond what he had ever thought possible.

Varric’s final words to them before they had parted ways at the Winter Palace came back to Cullen in that moment. “Be selfish for a change, both of you.”

And they had been, for as long as possible. The domestic performance of being disengaged from any resistance to Solas’ plans suited them perfectly.

Soon Rosalie was travelling to stay with them, and would assist Evelyn with keeping the house. There was too much garden for one person to tend, and Evelyn was still having to find ways to adjust tasks to be manageable since the loss of her arm. Rosalie was a far better alternative than hiring help who they could never fully trust weren’t working as a spy. Evelyn would enjoy the company, and he suspected her influence would do the energetic and flighty Rosalie a lot of good. When they had visited his family, Evelyn had charmed them all but Rosalie in particular had followed her around like a lost duckling, asking questions about how many times a day Orlesian’s change their clothes and how tall is a Pride Demon and had she ever swum in the ocean and how many trees are in the Emerald Graves and what is fondant…?
And once his sister was settled and he could bear to, he would be leaving. Even thinking about it took the edge of his good mood sharply.

A centre for templars recovering from lyrium addiction was being established, and he had been overseeing the plans. Now that construction was nearly complete, it was time for him supervise the opening: instructing staff and implementing the routines and structures that would best assist the residents based on his own experiences.

Evelyn understood. He could not leave them to overcome their addictions alone, not when he knew how difficult it would be. How difficult it still was, on the worst of days. Cassandra must have had endless faith in him, to always believe he would see it through, even having witnessed him at some of his worst moments. And Evelyn: her love and her forgiveness was his strength. He was lucky to have them. But those templars would have no one.

They would have him.

Then he would return. A few months, he had told Evelyn, at most. They both knew it risked being more. Nevertheless, he must see it out.

“I don’t want you to leave,” she had told him, with undisguisable sadness, “But how could you not?” Evelyn’s face crumpling, the waiver in her voice had nearly been enough to make him change his mind. But her confidence that he could help them, that he could make a difference to even some of those suffering as he had, also galvanised his resolve. Evelyn would have come with him, but they both knew the presence of a mage at those early stages of recovery may be distressing for some, or may put her in danger. Hallucinations and blind fury were possible, if not likely. They would be desperate. They would try anything. He must go alone.

Even beyond this separation, Cullen felt sure Evelyn would be forced to face Solas in some capacity one day. It was, he secretly feared, inevitable. And while he intended to be at her side when she did, who knew what the future held? In private he had begged Leliana and Josephine to not make Evelyn a figurehead once more, not to burden her with that responsibility again. “We never made her anything,” Josephine had rightly pointed out, “Evelyn became the Inquisitor herself. It was always going to be her.”

Cullen took a deep breath, felt the cold air burn his throat. But right now, he didn’t want to think about any of that. Right now, it was just them. Only them.

Her sleepy smile in the morning, every morning, silky hair spread like a halo around her face on the pillow. Faces close in the glow of dawn, fingers entwined, gentle kisses and soft conversations about chopping firewood or checking if the carrots were ready to be pulled.

The sound of her laughter when the chickens got loose and he could not catch them. And when the dog bounded happily for a crumpled ball of paper she threw. Or when she started pocketing his chess pieces and he dragged her all the way to the stream and threatened to dunk her. Until finally she admitted it, seconds before he overbalanced and they both fell in anyway, laughing so hard they struggled to get out again.

Finding songs they both knew most of the lyrics of between them: his voice clear and steady while she sang with embellishments and theatrical gestures to try and put him off.

Long comfortable silences, as they watched the sun dip below the tree line from chairs in the orchard. The dog at their feet, cups of spiced wine warming their hands.

Sitting by the fire inside, rain pattering against the windows. The dog snoring, as Cullen read aloud from the book in his hands and Evelyn drifted off, head drooping until he intervened and carried
her to bed.

Silver moonlight through their bedroom window, with her hot breath on his neck and sweat slicked skin against his. A moan that she tried to stifle even though they no longer needed to. Then silence but for her steady breathing. His arms around her waist, now keeping her close after having to let her go so many times.

The last mumbled I-love-yous of the night.

What they had here, their happiness, was all so tenuous. But it was more than he could ever have hoped for. It was more than he felt he deserved.

It was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I actually feel sadder than I thought I would to be here at the end! I had been looking forward to finishing, just to have a bit of a break, but now the reality is setting in and I am remembering how much I have enjoyed writing this, editing and daydreaming up new plot points over the many months this fic has been running. Thank you for all the incredible support in every format: readers, kudos givers and commenters alike. I really do consider myself so lucky to have had so much support and company on a project that has been so much fun to create. Especially some of you who have been here since the beginning or nearly! I'm flabbergasted by that!

Thank you again and farewell for now. :)

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