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### And If I Fall

by whenwewereoceans

#### Summary

An exploration of a rogue Trevelyan and her relationship with the Commander, in which they discover not all falls are effortless.

Rating is for later chapters.

#### Notes

This is my personal take on a rogue Trevelyan, whose backstory I have adjusted to suit this fic. The plot will follow canon and its events, although I will take liberties in filling in the gaps. I felt we did not get a really fleshed out Inquisitor, and wanted to explore my own, developing the facets of her personality and past. This will not be particularly dark, nor will Cullen be particularly tortured - I'll do my best to do justice to his suffering and withdrawal, but I personally like a lighter Cullen.

This is my first posted fanfic ever, and I apologise for any rambling. I don't do minimalism well, and like to indulge in adjectives. I also apologise for any rough writing or grammar errors as I have no beta. Please enjoy.
Prologue

If it were possible to die from blushing and stammering, Cullen was a dead man.

It had taken approximately eight days, three conversations, two accidental brushes and one smile to know that he was utterly doomed.

He had never considered himself capable of this, this wanting that left his arms so empty yet his heart so full. He had been so married to his servitude, first to the Order and now the fledgling Inquisition that he had barely looked twice at most women. There had been a mage, once, at Kinloch Hold, whom he had thought he loved, or at least could have, given the chance. But that compared to this was like comparing the glow of the moon to the intensity of the sun; a boy’s infatuation against this dark ache in him, joy and pain inexplicably the same.

Sevanna Trevelyan had been spat from the maw of the Fade, the only survivor of the fiery explosion that had sundered the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Cullen had not been there – thank the Maker, for he would be little more than a pile of cinders now – but he had felt it, quaking the ground beneath his feet and bathing the world in a nightmare glow as the Breach tore open the sky.

Scouts had borne the survivor to Haven, battered and unconscious on a makeshift pallet. Cullen had not seen her for himself, though his troops relayed news of the extraordinary: the glowing green tear in her left hand, seething and sparking just like the one in the heavens. He had not been kind when they first met, but it had not been a kind situation. It had been in the warped, shattered ruins of the Temple, pulsating with the sick light emanating from the tumorous red lyrium forcing its way through the rubble. The explosion had blown all but a few dozen bodies to ash, scattering them to the winds, and the ones that remained were little more than charred husks. Cullen had lead a battalion of soldiers – recruits, really – past the Forward Camp and into the mountains, in hopes of destroying the hordes of demons now pouring through the Breach.

It did not go well.

The demons fell upon with them with hell-bent ferocity, their screeches mingling with the dull, wet sounds of blade meeting flesh. Cullen and his troops gained inch by agonising inch, merely stemming the tide of demons rather than turning it. Far too many men were lost as their hope dwindled, their swords moving slower while the demons only moved faster- and then they had come upon the Rift.

It was a bewildering, almost hypnotic sight – like a mutated Dwarven puzzle-box, undulating and collapsing upon itself in a kaleidoscope of green and shadow. Fade mist seeped from it like emerald tears, giving birth to horrors Cullen had never even fathomed, meeting his blade as he dodged their reaching claws. It had seemed utterly hopeless; they had no way of closing the Rift and their numbers were whittled down to desperate. Sweat stung Cullen’s eyes as he slew demon after demon, losing strength with each swing. Without lyrium he was slower, weaker, and tired faster than he ever had; and yet the demons poured forth still, like blood from a wound that could not be staunched. He had been about to order a retreat before all the ground they’d gained was lost, when a ferocious cry rent the air and the Rift hissed and crackled.

Cassandra had leapt into the fray next to him, her blade a deadly arc of silver; bolstered, Cullen redoubled his attacks with new vigor, sending a wrath back to the Fade with an otherworldly shriek. A voice had bellowed “We must close the rift, quickly!” and a flurry of blades whirled by him in a maelstrom of silver and eerie green-
The air compressed in his lungs as he cut down another wraith, a low suctioning sound vibrating the very air as the Rift churned and spat-

There was a muffled explosion and a strange displacement of air; Cullen’s ears popped and his lungs filled again as he swung round to see the Rift.

Gone.

In its place, however, was Cassandra’s ragtag posse: Varric Tethras, who was looking grimly pleased to have a target for his crossbow; the apostate elf, Solas, looking unruffled as ever and speaking to an unfamiliar woman in shapeless, non-descript armor, who was slinging her twin daggers onto her back. He ordered a retreat, watching his soldiers help their injured comrades away from the Temple, before jogging towards the Seeker.

“Lady Cassandra,” Cullen greeted. “You’ve managed to close the Rift; well done.”

Cassandra turned to him, her hazel eyes tumultuous, and sighed. “Do not congratulate me, Commander; this is the prisoner’s doing.”

She’d indicated the rogue stranger, who turned at the designation. “Is it?” he’d said. “I hope they’re right about you; we lost a lot of people getting you here.”

He had heard the accusation in his voice, and felt it was only partially unfair; perhaps that was why she did not look at him. Instead, she had her face tilted up to the Breach, the glow of it casting off the angles of her jaw. “You’re not the only one hoping that,” she’d murmured.

He’d gotten little impression of her at the time; windswept hair tumbling loose from its binding, soot-streaked skin and large, hooded eyes that reflected the green light of the Breach. He had certainly been feeling less than kind towards her; for all they knew, this woman was the cause of the explosion, the reason for the demise of Divine Justinia and countless clerics, Templars and mages. Hundreds of lives wrenched away in a blink, leaving only this stranger in the midst of devastation, bearing the smaller twin of the tear in the sky. It had all seemed very suspicious.

Although…the soldiers who had carried her back to Haven had reported something else of the Rift she had come from; the shining figure of a woman, a silhouette of light behind the survivor as she fell through as if she had been pushed – and now there were whispers among the ranks that the figure had been Andraste.

A saviour sent from the Fade from the Maker’s Bride herself – it was a kinder, more hopeful fate to believe, and Cullen didn’t buy it for a minute.

Little did he know how much he later regret that doubt, when he knew her.

Maker-sent or no, the prisoner had closed the Breach and, according to Cassandra, had nearly killed herself in the process. The rapidity of which Cassandra had changed her opinion of the prisoner certainly made Cullen scratch his head; the Seeker was not one for such dramatic changes of heart, and rarely did he see her form an opinion without punching a hole through it first. She was dependable like that.

The swirling rip in the sky remained however, though it no longer bled an endless flow of demons. The prisoner, now saviour, had once more been carried back to Haven, though now followed by curious stares rather than hostile ones. The whispers of the woman in the Fade behind her had spread, and Cullen had barely dragged his battered forces back to camp when he first heard The Herald of Andraste’ swirl through the frosty air with the snow and ash.
The so-called Herald had been placed in a cottage, attended once more by Solas and the apothecary, Adan. She still had no name, as far as they knew; Cassandra’s interrogation hadn’t extended to pleasantries, apparently. Solas theorized that the Breach, while still present, was now stable; hence the absence of a demon horde. The mark on the woman’s hand, too, had stopped spreading and was no longer a threat but simply a mystery. Cullen hadn’t known it was killing her, which planted a small seed of shame. In his first fit of compassion towards her, he wondered if it had her hurt to close the Rift. She had saved his life, and the lives of his men, and he had not spared any thought to whether it had caused her pain. Void take him, he was a blind fool and he vowed on the spot to not be so short-sighted again. She did not deserve such harsh judgement before he even knew her name.

For three days she slept, fitfully and feverishly. Solas reported mutterings about “the Grey” and “too many eyes”, both of which nobody could make head nor tail of. Adan was heard audibly grumbling about how this beyond his expertise, how he was an alchemist and was well wasted on mashing up elfroot; Cassandra told him to shut up and earn his keep.

The fourth day she opened her eyes, and that was the day Cullen’s lonely path diverged into hers.
The muffled yelling could be heard from the Ambassador’s office, even through the heavy oak door that lead to the War Room.

“Chancellor Roderick sounds most upset,” Josephine murmured, hovering by the door to her office. She didn’t even attempt to pretend she wasn’t eavesdropping.

“The man’s always upset by something,” Cullen said dismissively, plucking objects off her desk at random and carelessly examining them.

She listened hard, eyes narrowed, and gasped, “It sounds as if he’s going to drag the Herald off in chains-”

“You’re already calling her that?”

“Everyone is calling her that, Commander,” she said, turning to him with a slight frown, “and I shall ask you not to fiddle with my things.”

He dropped an elaborate quill back into its inkwell and joined her at the doorway. He could plainly hear Cassandra’s sharp intonation, though her words were muffled. There was a sudden thud, as though something heavy had just been dropped; Cullen half-hoped Cassandra had slammed the Chancellor on the table.

Not a minute later, the door banged open and Roderick stormed out, muttering about heresy and the utter nerve. He spared Cullen and Josephine a single withering glance, before stalking through Chantry and out of sight.

“Goodness,” Josephine remarked mildly.

Low murmurs were coming from the open door now, and a few moments later a woman appeared. Cullen didn’t need Josephine’s elbow in his ribs to know who it was; he recognized the ill-fitting armor and the auburn hair, now in an un-brushed tangle. The newly minted Herald of Andraste followed Roderick’s path out of the Chantry, though she did not seem to notice the Commander and Ambassador hovering avidly in the doorway. She moved with the stiff gait of someone in a great deal of pain and trying not to show it, which Cullen sympathised with; he was intimately familiar with such a walk.

Leliana and Cassandra exited the War Room; the Seeker had a large tome edged in gold under one arm. Cullen knew it as the Divine’s directive; it was the very reason he was here.

“The Inquisition has officially been reformed,” Cassandra announced, “and the Chantry has withdrawn its support.”
“Since when is Roderick the Chantry?” Cullen demanded.

“He is the last of the clerics with any authority,” Leliana said quietly. “Unfortunately for us, his word governs the rest of them.”

“That will affect our dealings with nobles,” Josephine sighed, rubbing her forehead. “The most devout will not acknowledge us without Chantry support.”

Cassandra held up the book, the candlelight glinting off the symbol of the Inquisition embossed on the cover. “Divine Justinia left instructions, a list of who to call on, of those who can be trusted. We must start by reaching out to those who will listen; the rest will follow.”

“And what of the Herald?” Josephine asked.

“She has agreed to help,” said Leliana. “Right now she is our only hope of closing the Breach, or any other Rift in Thedas. She has gone to wash and get new clothing from Harrit.”

“Have you found out who she is?”

“Her name is Sevanna Trevelyan, of Ostwick.”

Cullen didn’t recognize the name, but Josephine made an interested sound of surprise. “How did a Free Marcher noblewoman end up at the Conclave?”

He made a disgruntled noise. “She’s a noble?” This ought to be pleasant, he added privately; he didn’t think Josephine would appreciate his less than stellar opinions of gentry.

“She has not yet disclosed why she was present at the Conclave. What matters is that she has decided to aid us in closing the Breach, but she cannot do it on her own,” Cassandra said grimly. “We will need to contact both mages and Templars and have them cease this ridiculous war. Solas believes more power is needed in order for the Mark to seal the Breach.”

Cullen snorted. “They barely sustained a truce for the Divine – what makes you think they’ll listen to us?”

“That brings us back to the issue of support,” Leliana murmured. “We must first establish favourable connections and gain influence…then we can approach the rebel mages.”

“The mages? What of the Templars? The rebel mages are far too unstable-“

“We will make that decision when it needs to be made,” Cassandra interrupted. “For now we must examine the Divine’s orders, and release a declaration; Haven must know.”

They pored over the list of instructions together, compiling a letter in which to send potential allies; Cullen recognized several names. Leliana left to send off her ravens, while Josephine dashed off an official statement and recruitment missive, which Cullen hung on the door of the Chantry. A curious crowd had gathered, Roderick among them.

The Inquisition was officially reborn.

The Herald of Andraste rejoined them in front of the Chantry, outfitted in more suitable gear; sturdy boots, supple buckskin pants and a tough leather coat that fell to the backs of her knees. She stood with Cassandra, her back facing Cullen; her hair was still damp and pulled into a disheveled knot, gleaming like a polished copper.
Commander, Ambassador and Spymaster retreated to the War Room; it was to be their first official council, and Cassandra had demanded everything to be in order. Josephine was fussing over her stacks of parchment, wondering if she needed more ink and if she should take minutes of the meeting, while Leliana laughed at her fretting.

The door swung open with a resonating bang – Cassandra certainly knew how to enter a room with subtlety – as the Seeker escorted the Herald in. It was the first time, Cullen realized, that he saw her -truly saw her- up close.

And Maker’s breath, she was not what he’d anticipated.

The immediate feature he noticed were her eyes: large and hooded with an almost exotic tilt. They had not simply reflected the green light of the Breach, as he had first thought, but were actually green themselves; a bright, clear green that put into Cullen’s mind of sunlight shining through leaves, the way it did at the lake by his childhood home. An unfamiliar surge went through him – nostalgia, he thought; a longing for a place he called home.

Those green eyes were intelligent and calculating, shifting warily between Cullen and his companions; Sevanna Trevelyan, he thought, looked very much like a fox cornered by wolves.

“May I introduce Lady Trevelyan, of Ostwick,” Cassandra began, taking her place at the War Table. “You have already met Commander Cullen-“

“It was only for a moment on the field; I am pleased that you survived,” he said, inclining his head; he was suddenly feeling much more warmly towards her. Perhaps it was because he finally accepted that she was not the culprit behind the explosion; she seemed much smaller this near, with slender shoulders and fine-boned hands far more likely to hold a delicate fan than an implement of destruction. That must have been it, Cullen thought firmly, his warmed opinion about her; because it certainly had nothing to do with the color of her eyes. Or her hair.

She undoubtedly looked like a noble, with the straight set of her back and carefully folded hands. Her skin was as unblemished as a bowl of cream, and just as fair. Her lips were full but chapped, and pressed into a serious line. Cullen could find no trace of haughtiness or disdain in her finely carved features, though her expression was carefully guarded.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all.” Her voice brought him out of his reverie, and Cullen realized he’d missed all the introductions – not that he needed them. Her voice was whisky-soft and measured, giving the impression that a great amount of deliberation went into each word, knowing the power it could carry.

“I mentioned that your Mark needs more power to close the Breach for good,” Cassandra said, ploughing forward with the council.

“Which means we must approach the rebel mages for help,” said Leliana.

“I still disagree,” Cullen stated, turning to the Spymaster. “The Templars could serve just as well-“

Cassandra cut him off once more, this time with an irritated huff. “We need power, Commander; enough magic poured into that Mark-“

“Might destroy us all,” he finished stoutly. “Templars could suppress the Breach, weaken it, so-“

“Pure speculation,” Leliana interjected coolly.

“I…was a Templar,” he went on, stumbling on the words he was not yet used to saying, forcing
back the ones he’d identified with for so long: *I am a Templar.* “I know what they’re capable of.”

He could feel Lady Trevelyan’s sharp gaze upon him, and knew she’d caught his fumble. But when he looked, her gaze was focused on Josephine.

“Unfortunately, neither group will even speak to us yet,” the Ambassador was saying. “The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition; and you specifically,” she added, gesturing toward the Herald.

One arched brow cocked ever so slightly. “That didn’t take long.”

“Shouldn’t they be busy arguing who should become Divine?” Cullen asked, not bothering to disguise his impatience.

“Some are calling you ‘the Herald of Andraste’,” Josephine continued; judging by the lack of reaction, Cullen guessed Trevelyan had heard the title already, “and that frightens the Chantry. The remaining clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harbouring you.”

Trevelyan’s brow furrowed, as Cassandra drawled, “Chancellor Roderick’s doing, no doubt.”

Cullen felt his lip curl at the name; Maker, what he wouldn’t give to boot the man from Haven. Physically.

“Just how am I the Herald of Andraste?” Lady Trevelyan inquired, with a shrewd sort of dubiousness that made Cullen’s respect for her rise; so this noble wasn’t happily swallowing the glittery new title after all.

“People saw what you did at the Temple, how you stopped the Breach from growing;” Cassandra explained, the conviction evident in her voice. “They have also heard of the woman seen in the Rift when we first found you. They believe that was Andraste.”

“Even if we tried to stop that view from spreading-” Leliana began.

“Which we have not,” said Cassandra significantly.

A tense, silent exchange passed between the two woman; Trevelyan’s eyes darted between them, her expression unfathomable. “The point is,” Leliana continued, after a beat, “everyone is talking about you.”

“It’s quite the title, isn’t it?” Cullen said, in order to gauge her reaction, and definitely not to have her gaze on him once more. “How do you feel about that?”

She hesitated, and her fingers twisted together at her thighs; a single betrayal of her agitation. “I’d never claim to be Holy,” she murmured, “but I honestly don’t know what to believe.”

Cullen let out a humourless laugh. “I’m sure the Chantry will make the decision for you.”

“Could my presence be endangering anyone?” Trevelyan asked. “Would the Chantry attack Haven?”

“With what?” he said, almost dismissively. “They only have words at their disposal.”

“And yet, they may bury us with them,” Josephine predicted darkly.

“There is something you can do,” Leliana ventured. “A Chantry cleric by the name of Mother Giselle has asked to speak to you. She is not far, and knows those involved far better than I. Her
assistance could be invaluable.”

“Has she been informed of my newly declared heresy?” Trevelyon asked dryly.

A small smile played around the Spymaster’s lips. “I understand she is a reasonable sort; perhaps she does not agree with her sisters. You will find Mother Giselle tending to the wounded in the Hinterlands near Redcliffe.”

“Look for other opportunities to expand the Inquisition’s influence while you’re there,” Cullen urged.

“We need agents to extend our reach beyond this valley, and you’re better suited than anyone to recruit them,” said Josephine.

Lady Trevelyon’s eyes clouded but she nodded; Cullen wondered whether she was averse to being handed instructions, or was simply wary of her newfound symbolic status. He suspected the latter, as her fingers were drumming a staccato rhythm on the table, the one crack in her carefully constructed armor.

“In the meantime, let’s think of other options,” Cassandra instructed, already turning towards the door. “I won’t leave this all to the Herald.”

The Seeker led the way out of the War Room, effectively ending the meeting true to her brusque manner. Leliana helped Josephine gather her numerous scrolls, bestowing the smallest of smiles on Cullen, which informed him the meeting had gone well. He supposed it had; nothing had truly been solved, but Cassandra had not hit anything, nor had the noble been so predictably noble.

He rounded the table, his mind already focused on checking in with Rylen on the status of the recruits; he was not paying attention, and nearly ploughed over Lady Trevelyon, who had lingered behind to pass yet more scrolls to the alarming pile in Josephine’s arms.

“Maker’s breath – my apologies,” he said hurriedly, as she bounced off his chest plate. He reached a hand out to steady her; her shoulder was delicately sloped under his palm, but he could feel the strength in it, the finely defined muscles coiled over her slender frame like roots over a flower stalk.

“It’s alright, Commander,” she murmured, absently raising a hand to where his rested on her; the brush of her fingertips sent a lick of heat through him so unexpectedly he jerked his hand back.

She didn’t seem to notice; she’d already rebalanced herself and slipped from the room on a silent tread. He watched her go, his pulse feathering delightedly under his skin as he followed the swing of her hips.

And felt himself go red. The Inquisition may or may not be blasphemous, but staring at a woman’s ass in the Chantry certainly had to be.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the lack of original content in this chapter; much of the conversation in the War Room is directly used from the game, with a few of my own edits that I found more suitable for Sevanna. This chapter was solely meant for Cullen to establish
an opinion of her, even if he doesn't acknowledge it yet. I should be getting into more original stuff in the next chapter, which hopefully comes as easily as this one did. Comments/advice are always appreciated and make me cry in my basement with joy.
Chapter Summary

They don't know how to flirt, but do it anyways. They're terrible at it and don't even realise.

Chapter Notes

This chapter switches to Sevanna Trevelyan's POV. This fic will largely be told from Cullen's POV, though some of Sevanna's will be sprinkled in, in order to get a taste of her character. She came out a little more acerbic than I originally thought, but there you are. A portion of dialogue is used from the game, but I wanted/needed to include it, as it contains the smile that disarms unsuspecting Cullen.

Sevanna balanced at the lip of the ledge that hung over the frozen lake and took a slow, deep breath. The morning had dawned bright and cold, and the crisp frost burned in her lungs as she inhaled. All was quiet, muffled by the snow, save for the cracking of ice as the lake shifted beneath her. She delighted girlishly in the white plume that swirled through the air as she exhaled, feeling foolishly like the dragons she’d read about as a child.

Ferelden was significantly colder than the Free Marches had been; indeed, winters in Ostwick were as chilled and grey as frosted iron, though without a hint of snow. Sevanna had hardly ever even seen snow, and surely not enough to cover the ground as it did here. She could taste it in the air as fat flakes drifted earthward, and after a furtive glance to see if anyone was watching, she tilted her head back to catch them on her tongue. They tasted of cold skies and yet of burning, searing pinpricks of ice on her tongue before they disappeared.

She decided she liked it here, despite the circumstances that brought her to this very spot.

Sevanna had always wanted to see Ferelden. To her, it was a land of intrigue, of wild magic and great, empty spaces. A tiny sliver of her was homesick for Ostwick—she missed the salted breeze and sun-warmed coast—but she had always thirsted for more, to see the world beyond the billowy white buildings of her home city. Ferelden was stark and rough compared to Ostwick, as rugged as the mountains it boasted, but Sevanna found it beautiful. It was wild and harsh and tamed by no man, whispering of the adventure she craved. Although, this was definitely more than she’d hoped for; she would have settled on finding treasure in some forgotten ruin.

She looked down at her left hand; she’d covered it with a glove, in part to hide the Mark from the curious stares that followed it, but also from herself. It sent her stomach into an ill swoop whenever she looked at it, and it always popped and hissed as she did. It was like a livid green eye staring back at her, whispering so only she could hear: I see you.

She especially didn’t like the title she’d earned along with it. The Herald of Andraste. It set a guilty burn within her whenever she heard it, which was almost constantly. She had repeated again and again to not call her that; that Lady Trevelyans was just fine, but her request fell on deaf ears. Even
worse, no one seemed to want to call her Sevanna.

And that’s all she was. Just Sevanna. Not a Herald. Not divinely sent. Just a girl caught in the crossfire.

Or so she assumed. Cassandra and Leliana had asked many times what had happened at the Conclave, first as an interrogation and now as an appeal, but her answer was always the same. She couldn’t remember anything beyond arriving at the Temple of Sacred Ashes – everything after was blank, wiped clean until she’d awoken in Haven’s dungeon. There was no recollection of an attack, or a fight, or even of someone who shouldn’t have been there. Everything was gone, leaving a gaping hole in her memory as if it’d been carved out.

At least she remembered why she’d been at the Conclave; at least she hadn’t been some lost, confused girl wondering how she’d ended up so far from Ostwick. She had chosen not to divulge that information to the Seeker, and she knew they suspected she’d simply been with the clerics; her family was known for their piety, after all. The truth was far more complicated, however, and one that Sevanna was not ready to reveal just yet, if at all. It was her secret to keep, and rapidly becoming the only one she had left.

The toll of a bell resonated through the frosty air, signaling the Morning Chant; she sighed and let her head fall back, knowing her peace would be intruded upon soon. Haven bustled into the day’s business after the Chant, and soon the soldiers would be training, the ravens would be flying overhead and the Seeker would do what she did best, and seek her out. She stayed where she was, though, listening as Haven came to life behind her back.

The clanging from the blacksmith started up, and the smell of smoke wafted towards her; Harrit was officially at work. She liked Harrit; he’d been kind and earnest in finding her comfortable armor, and had been totally oblivious to the Mark. Tears of gratitude had pricked her eyes as he generously offered his services should she need absolutely anything, and had sent her off with a reassuring squeeze on her arm. He made her feel valued, and not just because of the tear in her palm.

Someone barked a string of orders; there was a collective “Yes ser!” and the ringing of metal on metal began. Sevanna turned away from her spot, looking towards the noise; the recruits were sparring, churning up the snow beneath their feet, overseen as usual by the Commander.

Sevanna observed him from a distance. He’d been polite enough at the meeting the other day (despite nearly bowling her over) though she had sensed him scrutinising her carefully. A noble upbringing had instilled the sense of knowing she was being watched, and she had mastered the art of dead expression, giving nothing away. But a shiver had brushed along her spine like silken fingers whenever his eyes were upon her, which had been often. He was handsome, exceptionally so, with an intriguing scar bisecting his lip that merely served to enhance his looks; but that was not what set Sevanna on edge. She’d dealt with enough handsome men to not be intimidated by them. No, it was the way he held himself; his posture suggested all the ease of a lion sprawled in the sun, but his liquid amber eyes were watchful, alert. The subtle lines of tension in his shoulders and the stance of his legs heralded a man who could explode into action with little provocation and far less thought. It did not make her fear him, but there was something there, buried beneath the armor and the fur that suggested tightly leashed instinct.

And she would be lying if she didn’t admit she was very, very curious as to what it might be.

He’d notice her staring, and raised a hand in greeting. She returned it, feeling slightly guilty, like she’d been caught peeking into where she shouldn’t. She knew it would seem rude, or at least strange, if she did not go to speak with him; the very idea sent an odd thrill through her, which
made her instantly cautious.

Sevanna had come from a world full of pretty things, and she had quickly learned they were not to be trusted. It would not do to start now.

She picked her way towards him, once more sealing the shutters behind her eyes. He’d been distracted by a nearby recruit, and was admonishing him. “There’s a shield in your hand, block with it! If this man were your enemy you’d be dead.”

The recruit flushed a blotchy scarlet, muttering “Yes ser!” as he hefted the shield on his arm.

“Lieutenant, don’t hold back,” Cullen instructed the man next to him. “The recruits must prepare for a real fight, not a practice one.”

“Yes, Commander,” he said. His eyes lingered upon Sevanna as she came up next to them, before striding away.

“Nose to the grindstone already, I see,” Sevanna greeted.

“There is much to be done,” Cullen said, crossing his arms. His polished armor gleamed in the morning light. “We’ve received a number of recruits – locals from Haven and some pilgrims.” A lopsided smile whitened the scar at his mouth. “None made quite the entrance you did.”

“Glowing green Fade rips are not my first choice of transportation,” she said dryly, “but at least I made an impression.”

“That you did. I was recruited to the Inquisition in Kirkwall, myself,” he said, just as she was bumped from behind; a recruit had been shoved back by his partner and stumbled into her. He stammered an apology and lurched away; Cullen absentely pressed a hand into the small of her back, guiding her forward out of harm’s way. “I was there during the mage uprising – I saw firsthand the devastation it caused.” He drew his hand back from her, leaving tendrils of warmth snaking up her back. A messenger appeared between them, handing off a report. “Cassandra sought a solution. When she offered me a position, I left the Templars to join her cause. Now it seems we face something far worse.”

Sevanna studied him as he looked over the report. She was close enough to see his eyelashes, blonde and tangled, and smell the polish of his armor. The fur of his cloak dominated his shoulders, but she could make out the lines of his neck, each muscle sculpted under his skin with an artist’s precision. The tension in them was obvious, and she wondered, briefly, if Commander Cullen was a man who ever relaxed.

“The Conclave destroyed, a giant hole in the sky…” she murmured, flicking her eyes to the Breach. “Worse doesn’t quite seem to cover it.”

“Which is why we’re needed.” She could hear the passion in his voice; the man apparently loved to talk about work. “The Chantry lost control of both Templars and mages. Now they argue over a new Divine while the Breach remains. The Inquisition could act when the Chantry cannot. Our followers would be a part of that. There’s so much we can-“

He broke himself off, a patch of color flooding his cheeks. There was a butterfly squirm in her belly; less to do, she thought, with his blush than his fervour. Sevanna was wary of such devotion; she had seen the rifts it caused between people, knew there were some causes that were placed in higher esteem than family. Hers had been a prime example.

“Forgive me,” he apologised, rubbing his neck. It was a surprisingly bashful action, and she
thought of the muscles corded there, wound tight as springs. “I doubt you came here for a lecture.”

His sheepishness wheedled a smile out of her lips, which felt almost strange; lately, it seemed she’d forgotten how. “No, but if you have one prepared, I’d love to hear it.”

He laughed, the first genuine one she heard from him, full and rich and velvety. “Another time, perhaps.”

His eyes snagged on hers, then dropped to her lips, which were still curved in a smile.

The laughter died from his face. “I…uh…” He cleared his throat, and looked the other way; Sevanna felt her smile wither, and pressed her lips together. Perhaps he thought she was making fun of him?

“There’s still a lot of work ahead…” he said vaguely, his honeyed eyes darting everywhere but hers. Her fingers worried at the hem of her sleeve, at a loss for anything to say.

A reprieve came in the form of another messenger. “Commander, Ser Rylen has a report on our supply lines.”

The mask of the Commander slipped back into place. “As I was saying,” he said, gesturing with a slight smirk.

He followed the messenger, leaving Sevanna somehow feeling very stupid, though she was not entirely sure why.

“Herald.” Cassandra’s whip-like voice made her start; she spun around to see the Seeker striding towards her in full armor. “Are you ready to depart for the Hinterlands?”

“Oh – yes.” Her conversation with the Commander had nearly made her forget why she’d been up so early in the first place. Today was the day they left for the Hinterlands; without mounts, it would take at least five days with a small assembly of soldiers. Tucked away in her supplies was a list, written in a careful hand, of what she should try to accomplish while she was there. At the top of it, just under Contact Mother Giselle was Retrieve Inquisition mounts from Horsemaster Dennet. Horses would indeed make travelling faster, and Sevanna understood the importance; but she had noticed Don’t let the Herald die was conspicuously absent.

Perhaps that was why they were sending Cassandra with her. No one need worry of her impending slaughter when the Seeker’s skills and blade were as sharp as her cheekbones.

Sevanna hurried to gather her things, avoiding the Commander’s line of sight. An escape to the Hinterlands was just what she needed; with enough time, he was likely to forget their awkward conversation, and perhaps she would meet sweet amnesia by the hilt of a sword. If there was one thing that conversation had accomplished, was that it guaranteed her return – she couldn’t die letting the handsome Commander think she was an idiot.
The Hinterlands

Chapter Summary

Sevanna and her companions foray into the Hinterlands.

Chapter Notes

I had a lot of difficulty with this chapter, and it is much longer than the previous ones. I didn't feel like splitting it into two, and just wanted to get it over with and move forward with the Cullen scenes; it's why we're here, isn't it? There is a teensy bit of game dialogue in here, as well as some original stuff loosely based on in-game conversations. There is a scene of violence, though I feel it is not too gratuitous. Please enjoy this mammoth-chapter; and thank you for your kudos!

Sevanna had not truly appreciated the conflict between Templars and mages until she was thrown right into the middle of it; nor did she fully comprehend what it meant to be the Herald of Andraste.

They had left Haven behind four days ago, and the journey had been uneventful. The landscape of Ferelden had been rough and wild, and much warmer than the Frostbacks. Sevanna was no longer jealous of every fennec that scampered by in their warm, white fur. The walking, however, she could have done without; every joint creaked in protest, all her bones aching from the suffering that’d been piled on them. First, the fall from the Rift, then the Mark almost killing her, then the trek up the mountain and her battle with demons. She was impressed she was still standing, really. Though that collision with Commander Cullen had rattled her teeth, and she had hurried from the room in order to hide just how much it hurt. Even his gentle touch on her shoulder had been painful, and that had been the softest anyone had been with her since the whole debacle began, and she hadn’t even been able to appreciate it. Instead she’d fled to the quiet, secluded corner just behind the Chantry and unceremoniously thrown up on some elfroot.

Better than on his boots, which she was sure would have made a wonderful first impression.

She’d wanted to see Ferelden in all its glory, however, and she was getting her wish. The trip was almost enjoyable, despite her soreness; she was very glad to escape all the reverently spoken “Your Worship” and “Lady Herald”.

It was also a chance to forget that Commander Cullen seemed very put-off by her smile, which bothered her more than she liked to admit.

Varric filled the long hours regaling his many adventures with the Champion of Kirkwall, though Sevanna suspected she was the only one enjoying them. Cassandra treated the dwarf with ill-disguised contempt, which actually seemed to amuse him, and Solas steadfastly disapproved of the blatant havoc Varric and the Champion caused in Kirkwall.

“Hawke was at the very crux of the mage rebellion; she may have ended all possibility of conflict had she treated the situation more wisely,” Solas said one night, as they ate their meal by the fire.
Varric has just finished telling Sevanna the finer details of what had happened in Kirkwall; she had heard about the Uprising from Ostwick, but the Circle there had taken longer to rebel, and had done so with less mess. Most of Ostwick had regarded the rebellion with a vague, tired interest, the way a parent might regard a child having a ridiculous tantrum. But the Ostwick Circle had a reputation of being one of the most peaceful, and was a very stark contrast to the much larger and turbulent Circle in Kirkwall; thus, Ostwick had not been as harshly affected by the rebellion as other cities had been.

“Shit was stirring long before Hawke got there, Chuckles,” Varric insisted. “This war was a long time coming.”

“But there was still much Hawke could have done,” Cassandra spoke up in a hard voice. “If she had just gone to the Conclave-”

“And gotten herself blown up in the process,” Varric muttered.

“She sided with the rebel mages. They would have listened to her,” Cassandra finished, glowering at him.

“You don’t know that.”

“Where is Hawke?” Sevanna ventured. Varric had painted a picture of a woman who’d been in an alarmingly similar situation to hers; handed a title and a mantle of everyone’s hopes along with it, a lone figure poised against a tide of darkness. Meeting someone who had survived it…well, there might be valuable pointers she could share.

“Gone,” Varric said blithely. “Disappeared after the Uprising.”

“And you still don’t know where she is, Varric?” The accusation in Cassandra’s voice was sharp as a blade.

“I’ve already told you, Seeker,” Varric said indifferently, sopping up stew with his bread. “My answer is still the same.”

Sevanna had retired early to her tent that night; she’d sensed an argument brewing, and was loathe to get caught in the middle of it - Cassandra’s aim wasn’t always accurate.

The entire journey continued in much of the same vein. Whenever she tired of Cassandra and Varric’s bickering, she usually fell back to walk with Solas. He was polite but aloof, which she preferred; she could only ask Varric so many questions before he had some in return. She had briefed him on her childhood in Ostwick, her boredom with the never-changing scenery and her thirst for a life of adventure. But her juiciest stories were of her family and the reasons she’d left them behind, and Varric was getting dangerously close to sweet-talking them out of her. Solas was peculiarly non-forthcoming of his past, or his motives for joining the Inquisition, and thusly didn’t seem to expect her to be. Of this she was endlessly grateful; she wanted to hold her secrets close a little longer, to not give these people every last bit of her, lest she be swallowed up by her newfound symbolism; and maybe she did not want them to think less of her just yet.

Cassandra didn’t push, either, when she dug her heels in and refused to speak of her past, but Sevanna could feel the disapproval radiating from the Seeker, and deduced Cassandra was not a woman who tolerated secrets. Though they did speak politely of their noble upbringings; Sevanna was completely astonished that this tough embattled woman was also a princess of Nevarra. She seemed almost embarrassed of it, and was adamant that her royalty was near negligible and she would not answer her birth-given title. “I am first and foremost a Seeker,” she maintained firmly,
which officially cemented Sevanna’s respect of her, something that had been lacking ever since she first woke up in chains to Cassandra’s brusque interrogation.

Something that came up on the fourth day of travel, incidentally. Sevanna was lagging behind, simply enjoying the fresh, open air, when Cassandra fell back in stride with her. Sevanna gave her a curious side-long glance; the older woman seemed hesitant, even nervous.

“I wanted to…apologise, Herald,” she began, “for the way I treated you back at Haven, when we first took you prisoner.” Sevanna did not say anything; she sensed Cassandra would not appreciate her brushing off an apology, which was obviously something she did not take lightly. Or indulge in often.

“I know I can be harsh, and my actions come more quickly than my words. We were desperate, divided, and I thought I saw in you the answer I was looking for, and in my impatience, misjudged you for it,” she continued. “I do not like to be idle while the world falls down around me.”

“You didn’t really have a choice-” Sevanna began.

“Didn’t I?” she countered, arching one strong brow. “No choice but to drag you off in chains, to mercilessly throw you in a dungeon and accuse you with no evidence other than your survival?”

Sevanna raised her left hand. “Well, a smoking hole in my hand certainly didn’t help matters.”

“I will make no excuses for my behaviour,” Cassandra said firmly. “I can only hope that you accept my apology, and allow me to repent my actions in your service – if you allow it, and in the hopes we may work together as friends in the future.”

Had she not been so adept at schooling her features into a mask of calm, Sevanna’s eyebrows may have shot up into her hairline. Seeker Pentaghast was looking wholly contrite, or at least as much as she could manage, all with a nervous air as if she’d place a sentencing sword in Sevanna’s hands. And despite all her hard words, her curtness and her slapdash temper, Sevanna was beginning to like her. She admired how Cassandra wore her scars more comfortably than any gilded crown and how her noble polishing had merely honed into her into something razor-sharp, with none of the ego and all of its sureness. She was unmistakably a wise addition to have in Sevanna’s corner, and after a lifetime of shallow and false friendships, she was sorely tempted by the one this warrior had to offer.

“I would like that, Cassandra,” she said, smiling. “Though I’ve never really had friends before; I may very well be terrible at it.”

“Nor have I,” admitted Cassandra. Then, after a beat, dryly, “Which I am sure comes as a great shock to you.”

This startled a laugh out of Sevanna, a real one, and a rare smile curled the Seeker’s lips.

Early in the fifth day they crossed into the Hinterlands. They found an Inquisition outpost several miles from the Crossroads, which contained the tiny Scout Harding, though Sevanna knew her size was no account of her deadliness. The arrows in her quiver were liberally flaked with blood, which was perhaps why Varric seemed to rethink his attempt at a clever pick-up line. Her delicacy needed work, however; she had kindly informed Sevanna that she was “the last great hope for Thedas” and that the Hinterlands was headed to the Void in a neat little hand basket if the fighting could not be stopped.
Which only served to make The Last Great Hope For Thedas’ back break out into a cold sweat; she didn’t have to be so nonchalant about the whole affair.

Scout Harding informed them the Crossroads were not far, and was currently thick with fighting. It was also were Mother Giselle was conveniently located; Sevanna had yet to meet the Revered Mother, but was already questioning the woman’s wisdom of where to be and when.

She wasn’t the only one, either. As she, Cassandra, Varric and Solas trekked down the gravelly slopes towards the Crossroads, Varric had spoken up: “Why didn’t Mother Giselle just come to Haven, if she’d wanted to help so badly?”

“A tactical manoeuvre,” Cassandra said from her place behind him. She seemed bent on having the dwarf in her sight at all times. “By asking for the Herald, she also brings the Inquisition to her.”

“I had no idea Revered Mothers could be so sneaky,” Varric muttered.

“Resourceful,” Solas countered. “It was an intelligent move to bring the Inquisition here. She hopes we may stabilize the region. And there are many refugees we can now help.”

There was barely anytime to reflect on Mother Giselle’s apparent shrewdness – they had barely rounded a corner when the sound of fighting erupted from close by; shouts of pain and ringing metal. Whoever had attacked, it sounded like it was a surprise one.

“Quickly!” Cassandra ordered, yanking out her sword. She charged down the path, Solas hot on her heels, robes swirling and staff crackling. Sevanna jogged behind with Varric, slinging the knives from her back. Her heart was racing, and her blood was hot and tight in her veins, but the familiar hilts in her hands felt like the reassuring touch of an old friend.

Breathe, she told herself sternly, as she galloped down a narrow path between two cliffs – and stopped.

It was pandemonium – Sevanna recognized the Templar stamp on the attackers’ armor, thought for one wild second they were here to help, until one of them slew an Inquisition archer a dozen feet from her. The man went down with a bubbling gasp, blood turning his uniform red. Then the Templar’s eyes were upon her, and she was as frozen as a hare caught in the sights of a wolf-

“No Inquisition!” he roared, his eyes and voice seething with anger. He charged at her, his blood-splattered sword drawn back to slice, to kill-

Her body reacted where her mind did not, and she lunged away from him as his sword whistled down. Her returning blow glanced off his armor, making her stumble; he whirled towards her, sword-arm rearing up once more, and she used her momentum to scissor her blades across his neck, just above his armor. Blood sprayed her in the face, hot and wet and horrible; she staggered back as the Templar collapsed, his sword bouncing in the dirt. Her mind and body arrested, her thoughts scrambling wildly for some sort of purchase as she realized what she had just done.

Since she’d been young, Sevanna had been trained for battle like a carefully taught dancer, the steps rehearsed over and over until her muscles memorised it: dodge, slice, duck, slash, spin. This had been her waltz, her ballet, so deeply ingrained in her that even now, long out of practice, the steps were effortless and sinuous.

But she had just killed a man. A man who would not hesitate to kill her, she knew, but somewhere far away he had family who would mourn him. Because of her. Because she had danced to the rhythm of battle despite it being a jarringly different song.

“Herald!” Cassandra’s shout was a bite, a catalyst; Sevanna slammed back into herself just as
another Templar charged at her, his sword a blur of blood and silver. She ducked and rolled to her feet behind him, bringing her blades up into his chest, just under his arms where his metal did not protect him.

Dead. Dead. And dead again. Her blades brought death with every strike, painting her in the blood of the fallen, and it sickened her; though it was not the blood that laced the air with a metallic tang, or the men that tried to kill her with terrifying ferocity that turned her stomach to acid – it was how easy it was, the execution of death no different than practising jabs on a dummy. And for every man she slew, even though it was necessary, she could not help the little death that occurred inside her, too.

It was quick and bloody, the battle; Cassandra slid her scarlet sword into her sheath once more, grimly announcing: “It is done.”

Sevanna nearly tumbled to the ground. She staggered away from her last victim, an archer who had aimed for her heart with cold intent, and doubled over with her hands on her knees. The tip of one blade dripped steadily with blood, and she watched as it watered the stones, unable to look away.

Varric laid a broad hand on her shoulder. “You alright, kid?”

She blew a shaky breath to get the hair out of her eyes and straightened up. “Fine,” she said shortly. She hated showing weakness, exposing the softest parts of her, but she also could not dismiss the guilt of what she’d just done.

Varric’s eyes were sympathetic, and understanding. “It’s shit. Necessary shit, but still shit.”

She sheathed her knives and wiped her hands off on her pants, leaving a smear of crimson. “Yeah,” was all she could manage.

A man wearing Inquisition armor approached her, bringing a fist across his chest. “Lady Herald,” he greeted, “Seeker Pentaghast. I’m Corporal Vale. Thank you for your assistance; the Templars have been trying to gain a foothold of the Crossroads for days now. I think we may have finally driven them out.”

“Why do they want to take the Crossroads?” Cassandra asked.

“Control of the roads, mostly,” said Vale. “But most of the refugees are here, and the Templars are bent on finding mages among them.”

“Are there?” asked Solas.

“We have some mage Healers, but they’re helping, not fighting. They came at the behest of Mother Giselle.”

“The Herald has come to speak with the Revered Mother,” said Cassandra. “Bring us to her.”

“At once, ser.” Corporal Vale turned on his heel and marched away, and they followed.

They came into a tiny village, and it was crushed with refugees; everywhere there were people moaning on the ground, bandaged and wrapped in thin blankets. Chantry Brothers and Sisters flitted among the injured, but there were hardly enough to help everyone, and the Healers were even fewer. The refugees who were unhurt had a starved, raw-boned look to them, and there was sorrow in every face.

But as Sevanna passed, heads turned like hounds catching a scent on the wind, and the whispers
“Is that her?”

“She’s here! She came!”

“The Herald of Andraste!”

She balled up her left hand, the Mark burning in her palm, its light muffled by the glove. She sped up to fall in stride with Cassandra. “How do they know it’s me?” she said in undertone. “The Mark is covered up-”

“They know the Herald of Andraste is a woman,” Cassandra said. She didn’t bother to keep her voice down. “And I wear the crest of the Seekers. They have been waiting for you a long time, Herald. And description of you has spread.”

“You’re gorgeous, sweetheart,” Varric elaborated, sounding amused. “It’ll make people talk.”

“Wonderful,” she muttered. So the glove was entirely fruitless, but as she felt the Mark sizzle in her hand, she decided to keep it on.

A woman suddenly staggered into Sevanna’s path, startling a cry from her as the woman sank to her knees, her hands clasped in something akin to benediction. “Your Worship!” she breathed, her eyes and voice full of tears. “You’ve come at last, here to deliver us from the war! Praise be to you!”

“No,” Sevanna said, feeling herself flush. “No, don’t kneel, don’t-”

But the woman bent forward and pressed her lips to the ground at her feet. And all around her the refugees were sinking onto bended knees, or pressing themselves into the ground, and those awful words rose on the air like birds loosed from cages: “Praise be to the Herald!” “Praise the Herald of Andraste!”

She stumbled backwards, away from the woman’s clutching hands, dimly aware that Varric had seized her elbow to keep her upright. The refugee’s cries and prayers warped and turned to buzzing in her ears. Their eyes were pressing on her, sad and wanting, pinning her like a butterfly under glass and she was suffocating under it, couldn’t bear the weight-

She spun out of Varric’s grip and lurched away, nearly knocking a young man to the ground as she hurried away from the Crossroads, back the way they’d come. Back towards the Inquisition camp and little Scout Harding and her big mouth.

Sevanna’s strides were long and furious, carrying her quickly over the uneven path; she heard Cassandra before the Seeker grabbed her, the squeak and clank of her armor as distinctive as her jawline.

Cassandra yanked her to a stop. “Where are you going?” she demanded.

“I can’t do this.” Her mind was spinning, making her sick with the flashing images; the Templar’s hateful stare, his blood on her face, the woman falling to her knees in worship. “I can’t be what they need.”

“They don’t want hope! They want deliverance!” She wrenched her arm from the other woman’s
grip. “I didn’t ask for this—”

“Neither did they. These people did not ask for a war or to have their homes burned to the ground. No one asked for a hole in the sky. You may not have asked for this, but you are here, delivered in our time of need.”

“No one delivered me!” she said heatedly. The mask of calm had cracked, slipped, but she did not care. She wanted to seize Cassandra and shake her, as if she might knock something loose and give her the idea that the Mark was not a gift. “Everything that you, that all those people think of me is just an accident, and they are asking what I cannot give!”

“Then give what you can!” Cassandra snapped. “We must do our best with the tools we are given, and the one you have may be our only chance, and to deny these people of that hope—”

“The higher you lift me is just farther for me to fall,” Sevanna said bitterly. “I have agreed to help, and to use this thing that has intruded on my body, but I will not pretend to walk a path of divinity. This whole situation is a mistake. I don’t want this, Cassandra!”

The other woman glowered at her silently, and Sevanna knew whatever regard Cassandra had held for her had slipped. “Then I will do my best to help you be rid of it,” she said coolly. “But I will disagree with you about what you are to these people, to all of us. You are no mistake, Herald. The Maker does not give us what we cannot endure.”

There was a gentleness in her words that Sevanna did not anticipate, and it was that gentleness that crumpled her. “But why me?”

“Someday you may ask why not you,” Cassandra said, quieter now. “And all we can do is work towards that day.”

Before she could answer, there was the sound of footsteps behind her. Solas and Varric climbed the path towards them. “Is everything alright?” Solas asked, his clever eyes appraising.

“You looked like you were gonna hurl, sweetheart,” Varric said worriedly.

“The Herald had not anticipated the level of…admiration she would face,” Cassandra said.

“Ah.” Solas looked almost surprised, and Sevanna knew she had impressed him.

But she just wanted to move forward. “It was just overwhelming,” she said quietly, fiddling with the glove on her Marked hand. “I never asked to be worshipped.”

“No,” said Cassandra. “You didn’t.” She brushed by Sevanna, crunching down the path that lead back to the Crossroads. “Let us find Mother Giselle. Then we can start helping the refugees in the way that we can.”

They followed her lead; Varric fell next to Sevanna. “You sure you’re alright?”

“No,” she said shortly, but Varric didn’t push it. The mask had come back, but it felt wrong on her face, and for the first time in a long while she wished she could remove it.

* 

They spent three weeks in the Hinterlands. They had contacted Mother Giselle on that first day, and sent her on her stately way to Haven; they might’ve followed, but the situation in the Hinterlands was so dire they could not bear to leave it that way.
They’d cleared out the rogue Templar and rebel mage camps, and Sevanna got a shiny new burn on her calf when she didn’t dodge out of Immolation spell fast enough. Add that to the collection of scrapes and bruises she’d acquired in a long fall down a particularly bushy hill as she tried to outrun a bear; and Maker’s balls, the Hinterlands were full of those furry bastards. She’d slammed shut Rift after Rift, sending droves of demons back to the Fade. She’d even gone to fetch a lost druffalo that had wandered into a canyon.

Cassandra had made a sound of thinly-veiled impatience at that one, which Sevanna had ignored. Doing these tasks, even the mundane ones, made her feel better. It made her feel like she was actually doing something worthy of praise, far more than falling out of a Rift could ever earn.

The last week was spent working on Horsemaster Dennet’s farm. They’d struck a bargain with the man, who was kind but firm on the price of his help. Sevanna had tracked a pack of possessed wolves and scouted out suitable locations for watchtowers. She’d even raced the track Dennet’s daughter, Seanna, had set up on the farm; although that one had been purely for her own benefit. She’d grown up riding horses and missed galloping through an open field; as she’d gotten older, she had been forced to ride in a lady’s saddle at her mother’s insistence, and she hadn’t been allowed to do more than prance.

Three weeks found the Hinterlands much quieter than when they’d first arrived and in much better spirits. Sevanna particularly cherished the moment she’d delivered ram’s meat and blankets to the refugees at the Crossroads. No one seemed to recall, or care about her less than charismatic arrival, and she’d begun to consider that maybe she was enough for them.

She and her comrades had left one early morning just shy of a month after leaving Haven. This time the journey would be quicker, as they each had lovely new mounts to ride back. Dennet and some of his stable hands would be following in a day’s time with a large herd of thoroughbreds. Their going would be much slower, so Dennet had insisted they go on ahead. Sevanna was almost dreamily looking forward to being back in a place where she had an actual bed and not a roll on the ground, and somewhere she could bathe that wasn’t a frigid river. She had tried very hard to not let a noble life make her soft, but several luxuries had slipped through the cracks – like the luxury of spending a night where the chance of a squirrel running into your bedroll was highly unlikely. At least it had been Cassandra’s and not hers.

There was also a small part of her that was looking forward to seeing a certain Commander with a compelling lip scar; one who may have woven his way into her dreams, and not entirely unbidden. A girl had to keep herself warm at night, after all.

They’d ridden into Haven late in the fourth morning of travel; by that time, Sevanna was atrociously saddle-sore and didn’t wager she’d walk straight for a week. The trip this time had been a little more pleasant; Cassandra didn’t have the energy to bicker with Varric, and he had abandoned his campaign to make Sevanna spill her guts. Much of the fourth morning was spent with him trying to find a nickname for her. Sweetheart, he’d claimed, just didn’t have enough pizazz.

“How about ‘dimples’?” he suggested as they dismounted by Haven’s stables, which would finally be filled.

“It’d have to be just ‘dimple’,” Sevanna said with a mock sigh. “I only have the one.” Indeed, when she smiled, it engraved itself in her right cheek.

“Guess not, then,” he said, resigned. “Shit, kid, you’re the first I’ve ever drawn a blank on.”

“You could call me ‘ungrateful child’,” she suggested composedly. “That was always a favorite of
my mother’s.”

That earned her a belly laugh from Varric and even a light one from Solas. Varric then slapped her on the back, nearly re-summoning all the aches and pains she’d just recovered from. “That’s not bad,” he chortled, “but maybe we’ll leave that one for your mother.”

Cassandra, who had been rolling her eyes all morning, suddenly tensed. “Do you hear that?” she said, and they all went still; there was the far-off sound of many raised voices. “The Chantry,” she said shortly, drawing her sword and striding in that direction. Sevanna hurried after her, any hope that she may wash the dirt from her face and hair fading.

The yard in front of the Chantry was mobbed, the frosty air thick with shouting. Sevanna saw the blaze of the Templar insignia and felt momentarily ill, flashing back to the rogue Templars at the Crossroads. Though she had slain many after that, the first man with such hate in his eyes had featured prominently in her nightmares since.

The Templars here were not her enemy, as she tried to remind herself, but there was no mistaking this man’s anger. He faced off with an equally livid mage, and the very air crackled with energy.

“Your kind killed the Most Holy!” the Templar snarled, advancing on the other man.

“Lies – your kind let her die!”

The Templar’s face turned an ugly purple. “Shut your mouth, mage!” He spat the last word like it was something dirty, something pestilent; his hand whipped for his sword and Sevanna outstripped Cassandra, who was slower in her heavy armor-

“Enough!” Commander Cullen forced himself between the two men and she skidded to a halt at the edge of the crowd.

“Knight-Captain!” the Templar protested.

The Commander’s lip curled, his face hard. “That is not my title,” he growled. He jabbed his finger at the Templar. “We are not Templars any longer. We are all part of the Inquisition.”

His words were strained, and not just with anger. He looked almost ill, every angle of him sharpened and taut, as though he’d been whittled by a woodcarver’s knife in their absence. The shadows under his eyes were as dark as bruises.

“And what does that mean, exactly?” came a loud voice. Sevanna gritted her teeth, knowing its owner before the crowd allowed him to step into view.

“Back already, Chancellor? Haven’t you done enough?” said Cullen, his ire obvious.

“I’m curious, Commander, as to how your Inquisition and its “Herald” will restore order as you’ve promised,” Roderick said. He laid a delicate stress on both his and Sevanna’s titles that made it plain how much he disregarded their weight.

The glare Cullen fixed the Chancellor would have sent a far more intelligent man running in the opposite direction. “Of course you are,” he said, the hint of a sneer on his lips. He jerked his chin towards the crowd. “Back to your duties, all of you!”

The crowd dispersed, apparently eager to be out of the Commander’s warpath; Sevanna, however, approached him, and he was already deeply entrenched in an argument with Roderick over the mages and Templars.
“We require a proper authority to guide them back to order,” Roderick was insisting.

“Who, you?” Cullen scoffed. “Random clerics who weren’t important enough to be at the Conclave?”

Roderick flushed angrily. “The rebel Inquisition and its so-called ‘Herald of Andraste’?” He forced a laugh in Cullen’s face “I think not.”

Cullen’s fingers flexed as if he wished nothing more than to seize Roderick by his throat. “Need I remind you, Chancellor,” he forced between his teeth, “That you are a guest in Haven, and have no authority here-”

“I certainly have more authority than some disgraced ex-Templar!”

Cullen did actually grab him then; he fist both hands in the neck of Roderick’s robes and swung him around. Sevanna’s shout of “Commander!” was echoed by Cassandra, who was striding towards them, sword drawn. Roderick, however, let out a soft, mocking laugh.

“Going to kill me, Knight-Captain?”

Cullen’s mouth twisted in snarl and he let the Chancellor go. “No. There’s no point in turning you into a martyr just because you run at the mouth.”

Roderick’s mouth thinned. He straightened his robes and strode away, shooting a look of pure venom at Sevanna. “Leash your dog, Seeker,” he spat at Cassandra.

“Always a pleasure, Chancellor,” she drawled. “You were unwise to let him antagonise you,” she directed at Cullen, exasperated.

“That man is an utter nightmare,” he muttered jerkily, pushing his thumb and forefinger into his eyes. “My apologies, Herald; I wish you hadn’t witnessed that.”

“I can’t say I blame you. He’s a bigger pain in the arse than my saddle-sores are,” she said serenely.

He might’ve laughed, but it was tense, almost painful-sounding. He looked awfully haggard this close and his eyes were strangely clouded, like milk poured into tea.

“Are you alright, Commander?” Cassandra asked. There was a note of significance in her voice, which Sevanna sensed was not meant for her ears.

“I’m fine, Seeker,” he said forcibly. “How was your expedition to the Hinterlands? You were gone much longer than we’d anticipated.” There was something close to accusation in his tone.

“It is all my report,” she replied coolly. “The Herald ensured we kept busy helping the refugees.”

Sevanna flushed, unable to help feeling like Cassandra had just pushed her under a stampeding horse. Cullen was obviously in a testy mood, especially about their prolonged absence, and now it sounded like it’d been entirely her decision. Well, almost all her decision; rescuing that damned druffalo had certainly eaten up an entire afternoon.

His opaque eyes lingered over her, and she was acutely reminded just how filthy she was. “You certainly accomplished much,” he said, a little gentler now. “Mother Giselle arrived two weeks ago, and has been busy contacting those in Val Royeaux who may be of assistance. We’ve also received word from Master Dennet; he’ll be bringing half his herd to Haven, along with a
significant number of recruits from the Crossroads.” A half-smile curled one corner of his mouth. “You made quite an impression, it seems.”

“She did very well,” Cassandra affirmed. With a curt nod, she turned and marched away.

“That’s very high praise, especially from her,” he said, watching Cassandra’s receding back.

“Indeed,” Sevanna murmured. She could not take her gaze off the unhealthy pallor of his skin, the tightness around his eyes. “Are you sure you’re well, Commander?”

“I’m fine, Lady Herald,” he said, and there was a wintry snap in it. “It’s just a headache.”

“I see,” she said quietly, lowering her eyes. “My apologies.”

She had no right to be offended. He was clearly unwell and she had pushed it; even the friendliest mabari hound snapped at you when they were in pain.

She bid him a quick, murmured farewell; he might’ve said something after her, but her mind was already speeding ahead, making a mental list. When she’d been younger, her mother had suffered the most grievous headaches, and there had been a tea Sevanna’s father brewed her. It was one of the few things he hadn’t let a servant do and he had taught Sevanna how to make it, should he ever be away on business and could not make it himself.

She hesitated. The ingredients were simple enough, and they had taken care to gather as many herbs and plants as they could carry. They had sent bushels ahead of them back to Haven; surely no one would miss a few royal elfroot leaves, or embrium seeds? She wagered not, and decided to raid the stores as soon as she could.

But first, a bath.
The Song It Sings

Chapter Summary

Cullen's having one of his bad days, and reflects on his lyrium withdrawal.

Chapter Notes

The Kirkwall Rebellion occurred in 9:37, but the events of Inquisition do not happen until 9:41. According to the wiki, Cullen remained in Kirkwall to try and stabilise the rebellion, and I assume he was still taking lyrium. I couldn’t find any specific dates or timelines, so for the sake of this fic he was recruited by Cassandra roughly 3 months before the explosion at the Conclave, and decided to stop taking lyrium shortly after his arrival at Haven. This gives him a bit of time to go through the withdrawal and pull himself together in time for the Inquisitor to come along. Going by the conversation they have in Skyhold, Cullen claimed he hadn’t taken lyrium in months, and I would assume the Inquisitor had been around for not quite a year, thusly placing the explosion very shortly after Cullen’s recruitment. I desperately hope this makes sense and I have been agonising over these details; I am very fastidious in my fanfiction. I also fudged up on the mage/Templar argument in the previous chapter, which has been revised. It was also edited for this chapter. I apologise for any inaccuracies in canon or my timeline.

The lyrium song was loud today.

Cullen tiredly rubbed his chin, the rasp of stubble whispering in the dusty quiet as he read over the morning’s reports. He was cloistered away in the War Room, his feet propped somewhere over the Orlesian Empire – Josephine would have a fit if she knew, his boots were filthy – in a last-ditch attempt to find some peace. The scouts and the soldiers, the bellyachers and the moaners had developed a regrettable habit of sniffing Cullen out wherever he tried to hide. The War Room had so far been a clever place to conceal himself; it was strictly off-limits to all but to the Advisors and Seeker Pentaghast; and, more recently, the Herald of Andraste. His insides did a little belly-flop at the thought of her. She had departed to the Hinterlands almost a month ago, and he had kicked himself every day since.

The day she had left, he’d spotted her at the ledge overlooking the lake, silhouetted against the pearly morning sky. When he had managed to tear his gaze away – the sun was glinting beautifully off her hair, gilding it in fire – her image had burned itself into his eyes, forcing him to blink it away. It had made it extremely difficult to concentrate on his group of recruits when the soft lines of her waist and flare of her hips imprinted itself on to each of their faces.

He had ordered them into basic sparring; many of them had never lifted a sword in their lives, never mind wielded one. He approached his command with deep reserves of patience; there had been a time in his life when he had been just a farm boy who knew nothing of service or war, and had begged to be taken up in arms. He had first struggled with a sword and shield, and then less so
everyday under the careful training of the Order. He remembered each lesson he’d learned and whether it’d been taught out of exasperation or patience, and the latter had always achieved better results. A good soldier could be made by being shouted at and ordered about, but an excellent one required a more delicate hand.

When the recruits were busy hacking away at each other, he’d risked another glance at Lady Trevelyan, and felt a jolt go straight to his toes when he saw her looking in his direction. He’d raised a hand in greeting before he considered the consequences of such an act, and damn near regretted it – she’d waved back and made her way towards him, and he had absolutely no idea what to say or if his hair was anywhere in the vicinity of decent. He also just couldn’t stare at her like an idiot, so in an effort to look busy he picked a recruit at random and admonished him on the use of his shield.

Maker, he was utterly hopeless.

Cullen felt a little guilty as the recruit’s face turned scarlet, but she was at his side, looking studious as usual, and her cheeks were tinged with a lovely blush from the cold. He’d barked something at his lieutenant – an order, maybe, he couldn’t quite remember – and she’d quipped in her soft, musical voice, “Nose to the grindstone already, I see.”

So she’d already picked up on his inability to ever take a day off; she was as sharp as Varric, who had wasted no time in calling him “curly” and telling him to get a hobby. *I have hobbies,* he’d thought defensively; he just couldn’t come up with any on the spot.

Damn that dwarf’s stupid, knowing smirk. And damn his chest hair, too.

“There is much to be done,” he’d said in way of explanation. He felt he needed to justify his less-than-subtle passion for work, especially with those green eyes on him, clear and cool and giving nothing away. “We’ve received a number of recruits – locals from Haven and some pilgrims.” He could not suppress a smile. “None made quite the entrance you did.”

“Glowing green Fade rips are not my first choice of transportation, but at least I made an impression.” Her voice was as dry as a witherstalk, though just as warm as the desert it grew in. He’d said something banal in return, instead distracted by the spark of amusement in her eyes, the one chink in her armor. He liked her humour; directed at herself so it was softened, though her tongue suggested all the capabilities of being sharp.

Thinking about her tongue had been a bad, bad idea, and he hurried into the first topic that came to mind: his own recruitment. “I was recruited to the Inquisition in Kirkwall, myself,” he blurted, just as a recruit had been knocked a little too heavily by their partner. They stumbled into the Herald and gone red as a beet when they realized just who they’d crashed into. Without thinking, Cullen had pressed his hand into the hollow of her back, guiding her away from the multiple skirmishes clashing around them.

The contact had been entirely too forward and he snatched his hand back. She hadn’t said anything about it, so he’d hopefully assumed she merely thought him a gentleman.

He told her he’d been present at the mage Uprising, and about Cassandra’s offer when a runner had interrupted him. He’d swept his eyes over the report without really absorbing it; he could feel her gaze on him and was greatly labouring to appear natural.

“The Conclave destroyed, a giant hole in the sky…worse doesn’t quite seem to cover it,” she agreed.
“Which is why we’re needed,” he’d said eagerly. “The Chantry lost control of both Templars and mages. Now they argue over a new Divine while the Breach remains. The Inquisition could act when the Chantry cannot. Our followers would be a part of that. There’s so much we can-”

Her face remained politely interested, but there was that flicker of amusement again; he was rambling. He stopped himself in his tracks, though he could not prevent the heat that had rushed to his cheeks, and he rubbed his neck in embarrassment. “Forgive me,” he’d said sheepishly, hoping against hope she wasn’t laughing at him. “I doubt you came here for a lecture.”

“No,” she’d admitted, her smoky voice amused, “but if you have one prepared I’d love to hear it.”

Oh, but she was kind. He’d laughed at that, and at himself, and said “Another time perhaps.” Then he had looked at her and saw her lips curved in the most beautiful smile, with a dimple in her right cheek - and Cullen knew, without any doubt, that he was a goner.

And then, like the charmer his sister had always said he was, he responded with an eloquent “I, uuhhhh.”

He had difficulty looking at her again, because something was falling in his chest, swooping and soaring like birds against the sun, and all he knew was that he wanted to fall a little longer, a little faster. Her expression had turned serious once more as she watched him; he wondered if she knew how light and free and tumbling he felt inside, and if it were written openly on his face.

Maker preserve him if she saw his free fall, and felt nothing for it.

He’d mumbled some excuse about work, and when another messenger showed up Cullen could have kissed him. He seized the opportunity to escort his warm cheeks to the other side of Haven, which he’d been grateful for at the time; decidedly less so later, when he missed her before she left. She probably thought him an imbecile, but he could live with that, as long as it made her smile.

But three weeks and five days had gone by and that moment still lit a small fire in his chest, keeping the darkness that threatened to engulf him at bay; his last defense against the encroaching front of shadow.

For the lyrium song was bad today, and Cullen’s thoughts ran in distinctly darker circles.

The words on the reports were bleeding together and swimming on the page. He scrubbed at his eyes, trying to rub away the dull red glow behind them. They’d been receiving daily reports from Harding, Vale, and every other officer stationed at the various camps the Herald had established, as well as from a random farmer singing her praises. She found my druffalo, she did, bless her, and bless your Inquisition too. Cullen had been spending far too many hours poring over reports by candlelight; he would’ve preferred being in the sun, the crisp air biting his lungs; but outside was far too exposed and he’d be roped into yet another discussion of tactics and rations and the weather.

Though when he was here, in the peace and the quiet he had actively sought, the song grew a little louder, the pull a little stronger.

It had been nearly five months since he’d stopped taking lyrium, and while the worst of it was behind him, there were still days were the hallucinations took him and the headaches nearly crippled him. One such headache was preparing itself now, rooting itself deep so it could split his head open from the pain of it later. Cullen did not regret his decision to leave the Order or to cease taking lyrium, but he often wondered about his wisdom on the latter. Lyrium had made him a better Templar at the cost of being a better man, but did the Inquisition need a man over a soldier?
Shouldn’t he command at his best and at his fittest, augmented by the blue singing in his blood?

He shoved the reports away, running his hands over his face in frustration. It was the same question that came back to haunt him, the same whispered accusation at the back of his brain: I should be taking it.

But he didn’t want to anymore; sometimes his body did, thought it might die from needing it, but he never wanted it in his veins again. He would not be bound to the Order any longer, or to any service that didn’t leave him free to shape his own path. And he would not undo how far he’d come and suffer through the withdrawal again; he would not bury the man he was once more becoming under the layers of ice he’d crafted after years as a Templar.

No more, he’d said, just like all those nights ago when he had bundled his last philter in its box and delivered it to Cassandra.

It had been just after he’d arrived at Haven and given a new title of Commander, officially rendered an ex-Templar. He had been in his barrack, staring down at the tools and pulsing blue philter nestled in crushed velvet, wrestling with the decision he’d been agonising over since he’d left Kirkwall. He’d begun to resent his dependence on lyrium ever since he’d witnessed the corruption at Kirkwall’s Circle. When Meredith’s madness came to light and he wished, fleetingly, that he’d never become a Templar, had never begged the Chantry in Honnleath to take him on all those years before.

He’d snapped the box shut, his decision made, and beat the path to Cassandra’s door. It was very late and she did not look overtly pleased when she’d answered his knock.

“Commander,” she said. The title had been still unfamiliar, sounding strange in his ears. “What can I do for you?”

She hadn’t invited him in, but he pushed past her anyways; this was not a conversation he wanted to have in a doorway. “The matter we discussed,” he said, turning to face her as she shut the door. “I’ve made my decision.” He’d held out the box to her. “I have decided to stop taking it.”

She did not take it from him right away, and he braced himself for whatever sensible logic she was going to aim at his defenses. “Have you truly thought this through?” she’d said slowly.

“I have. I do not wish to be shackled to that life any longer.”

“This is an enormous risk.”

“I know. But I am willing.” He licked his lips. “I want…I want to be free of it.”

She had not answered him for several beats of his heart, her eyes dark and unreadable. “And what do you ask of me?”

Relief, and also fear, had warred within him. “Watch me, as a Seeker. Make sure that I honor my pledge and stay true to the path I’ve chosen.”

“And if you’re ability to lead is affected?”

He’d recoiled at the implication of her words, but knew they were fair, even just. “I will defer to your judgement.”

She stalked towards him then, and plucked the box from his hands. “That is not a promise I will take lightly, Commander. I hope you truly understand that.” He’d nodded mutely as she examined
the lyrium box. “What shall I do with this?”

“Keep it,” he’d said. “I won’t need it anymore.”

Her eyes had been shrewd on his face, preying on his bravado. “Then why don’t I just…throw it away?”

“No,” he’d said far too quickly, betraying himself.

“I thought so.” She’d tucked the box under her arm, and Cullen felt a flicker of possession; an unjustifiable anger at seeing her hold what was his. “I will keep this here,” she’d added, a dismissal in her voice. “So when you need it most you will come to me, and I will see you through it.”

He’d been touched by that; though undeniably cool and sharp around the edges, Cassandra Pentaghast was a champion of unwavering loyalty. “Thank you,” he’d said and went to leave, but her voice stopped him at the door.

“How much time do you have?”

He understood exactly what she was asking; it was not necessary to take lyrium every day, and it could remain in one’s system for more than month if their powers were used judiciously. His last dose had been several weeks ago already. “Three weeks. Maybe less.”

“I see.” She paused. “Good night, Commander.”

That conversation had set an invisible hour glass above Cullen’s head; he was always aware of it, knew it was trickling down the hours until the withdrawal took him, and his resolve would be put to the ultimate test.

It had been within the week that’d he started to feel the lyrium draining from him; a feverish ache settled deep into his bones, bringing a chill he could never seem to shake. Muscles that had once been strong and steady now burned when he worked them. His sword and shield grew heavier in his hands each time he lifted them. Worst of all were the hazy nightmares that plagued his nights, as the ice he’d built between him and all the horrors he’d witnessed began to thaw. He’d felt off for days, like he was teetering on the verge of illness. It did not help that only Cassandra was aware of his decision, and there was no one else to accompany him on his walk through the burning plain that stretched before him.

Precisely three weeks after his conversation with her, when the fever and aches were at their worst, his lieutenant had spoken to him, and Cullen could have drowned in the lyrium on his breath.

That had been the catalyst. A hot surge of nausea sliced through him with barbed edges, made him double up in agony. A wounded snarl escaped him as the pain cleaved into his head, splitting the world in two; his lieutenant had damn near panicked, shouting for soldiers, healers, whoever was close.

No!” Cullen had forced through gritted teeth. “Return - to your duties. I need – Seeker Pentaghast.”

It’d taken every last bit of waning strength and resolve to stagger to her door. He fell against it rather than knocking with a grunted “Seeker!” It’d flown open and he lurched inside, knocking a table next to the door aside as he tried to catch himself, wooden legs shrieking against the floor. The walls of the cabin swung dizzily around him, driving the nausea to a peak; cold sweat slicked his skin, dampening his shirt.

“Commander!” Cassandra’s cry came from a great distance. She tried to hold him upright, but he
was much larger and heavier in his armor. His knees struck the floor, sending a shockwave of white-hot pain through his bones.

He hadn’t been able to speak; he’d been sick, so blindingly sick that the world went black and it was only him on his knees and fire in his throat. He vomited all over Cassandra’s floor, bringing up everything in his stomach and ropes of bile. Astonishingly, the mess did not elicit a typical disgusted noise. Instead, Cullen thought he heard her sigh amid his retching, and felt her knee next to him, one hand on his back.

When the heaving had subsided, she’d said, “I did not think it would be this bad.”

He’d wiped his mouth on a trembling hand, almost choking on a laugh. “I’m sure it will only get worse.”

It had. Cassandra had peeled him out of his armor and helped him stand; his legs could not support his weight and shook beneath him, so she’d had to dump him rather unceremoniously into her bed. Tremors wracked his body and he shivered so hard his teeth ached. Cassandra had piled every woolen thing she possessed on top his shivering form, then took up vigil at his bedside.

Thus began a day long spiral of withdrawal. His body was wracked by convulsions and spasms as his muscles tried to milk every last drop of lyrium from his blood. Trails of fire laced their way up his bones, causing his headache to crescendo in a wave of agony that robbed him of sight and made him sick with the pain of it, his stomach expelling itself again and again until it was a twisted pit of emptiness. He’d sweated and convulsed and howled, thrashing so violently that Cassandra needed to hold him down. Cullen felt ravaged and torn, every vein flayed open and cracking like riverbeds parched by the sun.

Never once did Cassandra leave his side. She’d sponged his feverish skin with a gentleness he hadn’t known she possessed. She talked to him endlessly, guiding him back from dark places and tried to reinforce his waning faith with hers. She’d grabbed his clawing hands and held them to his chest, and ordered: “The Chant of Light, Cullen! Say it with me!”

The words had bubbled up, reflexive, poisonous, and he choked on them. A howl had wrenched itself from some gnarled place in him instead, drowning out Cassandra’s determined recitation. He could not say the words, would not, for he was so afraid that if he forced the Chant past his dry, aching throat that only Cassandra would hear it - for surely the Maker had abandoned him now.

The Chantry said that lyrium made you better, made you stronger and faster so you could better serve the Maker. They had not said that when it drained from you your blood sizzled as if your veins were beds of hot coal; that the barrier between waking and nightmare would wither and bleed into each other like wine into white linen.

When he’d finally been released into sleep, the nightmares had fallen on him like a starved wolf, assaulting him with every horror he’d ever witnessed. The nightmare had climbed on top of him and held him there until he’d finally forced himself free. In a fit of both energy and weakness, he’d crept from the bed while Cassandra slept in her chair, and haphazardly torn her room apart. She’d awoken to him upending her trunk of belongings and digging through its contents, wild-eyed and dishevelled.

“Where is it!” he’d snarled, as he flipped over her table, sending platters and bottles flying. “Tell me where it is, Seeker!”

“Cullen, NO!” she shouted, as he’d snatched up a canvas sack and the lyrium box fell out, clattering across the floor.
She’d reached it before he did, gripping it in iron fingers; he’d grabbed her and thrown her against
the wall, pressing down on her throat with his arm.

“Give it to me,” he hissed, feeling like every second he didn’t take it was a second closer to dying.

She hadn’t answered; instead her fist came up and smashed into the side of his face, knocking him
aside. He crumpled to the floor, and the impact knocked something loose, or perhaps something
back into place, and horror flooded through him.

Cassandra was panting, the hands that gripped the wooden box shaking. “Remember what you
wanted, Cullen,” she implored, “Remember what you made me promise.”

He’d cried then, and hadn’t cared that she was watching. He wept and wept until every sorrow had
sailed down his cheeks, until he was shrivelled and spent, until all his tears had turned to dust.

She’d helped him back to bed, and he slept; truly slept, though the nightmares still lingered on the
horizon like the threat of an incoming storm. The next day he’d awoken with an ache that gnawed
on his bones. He’d lurched from his bed to wash and dress; Cassandra had left early in the
morning, returning once more to her duties now that the worst had passed. Cullen examined his
face in the mirror, hardly recognising the man who stared back. Every angle of his face had
sharpened like a blade against stone, the shadows stamped under his eyes more darkly than ever
before. He felt he’d aged a year for every hour he spent sweating in the bed; writhing and twisting
in its sheets with all his prayers dead on his lips, afraid no one was there to hear them.

But time marched on, as it always does, and every day got a little better. The tremors diminished,
but never truly subsided, and it would be a long time before his hand could grip a quill without
shaking. His appetite slowly returned; though there were still bouts of sickness that had him
throwing up behind a tree, out of sight, but such episodes were few and farther between. The
headaches lingered, always knotted at the base of his skull like poisonous spores about to erupt.
The pain had dimmed, but still flared up on the bad days. The nightmares remained.

Cullen sighed, breaking the silence in the War Room. The days the song was bad always brought
him back to those dark moments in the early days of the Inquisition. He could think of only one
thing that would make it better, make him feel better, and she was currently dallying through the
Hinterlands rescuing farm animals from ravines.

The muscles in his neck stiffened suddenly, jarring the headache loose. He groaned and pressed
the heels of his palms into his eyes, making little white lights pop behind them. It was useless to
try and read these reports now; perhaps he should check in with Rylen, or Leliana, or with a
hundred other people. Or maybe he should just seek out Mother Giselle, who could provide some
well needed soothing to his troubled mind, a bolster to his shaken faith.

He gathered up the reports he’d strewn over the table, arranging them into a neat stack. There was
no need to bring them with him, as he would undoubtedly need them at the next meeting. He exited
the room, rolling his neck from side to side, deciding whether he should retrieve a poultice – and
stopped. The clamour of many raised voices reached him, coming from just outside the Chantry.
The mantle of Commander fell at once into place as he ran the length of the hall, just making out
the voices beyond the wooden doors.

“Your kind killed the Most Holy!”

“Lies – your kind let her die!”

Cullen burst through the doors just as one of the men – a Templar – reached for his sword, snarling
“Shut your mouth, mage!”

“Enough!” Cullen roared as he forced his way between the two men.

“Knight-Captain!” the Templar exclaimed.

The title stung his ears, recalling every old pain that went with it. “That is not my title,” he growled. “We are not Templars any longer. We are all part of the Inquisition.”

Quite a large crowd had gathered, whispering now, but a loud voice cut through the chatter. “And what does that mean, exactly?”

Roderick strode through the crowd, his face smug, and Cullen felt his lip curl. So, the Chancellor had returned from Val Royeaux; an Age too soon, in Cullen’s opinion. “Back already, Chancellor? Haven’t you done enough?”

“I’m curious, Commander, as to how your Inquisition and its “Herald” will restore order as you’ve promised.”

Cullen detected the sneer Roderick used for his title, and Lady Trevelyan’s; he didn’t care how the man used his, but he would not allow Roderick to be so blatantly disrespectful of hers. “Of course you are,” he said through clenched teeth. He swept his eyes over the murmuring crowd, and jerked his chin. “Back to your duties, all of you!”

The throng dispersed, save one, whom Cullen ignored; he didn’t have a thought to spare for one curious on-looker.

“We require a proper authority to guide them back to order,” Roderick said immediately.

He’d started this argument a thousand times, and Cullen no longer had the patience. Especially not when the throbbing in his temples pulsed with every heartbeat. “Who, you? Random clerics who weren’t important enough to be at the Conclave?”

Cullen felt a sort of savage pleasure as the Chancellor’s face purpled. “The rebel Inquisition and its so-called ‘Herald of Andraste’?” He laughed scornfully in Cullen’s face. “I think not.”

His fingers twitched, and he had to forcibly restrain them from curling into fists. “Need I remind you, Chancellor-” he forced every ill feeling into the word “-that you are a guest in Haven, and have no authority here-”

“I certainly have more authority than some disgraced ex-Templar!”

Something inside Cullen snapped; he seized Roderick’s robes and hauled him around, of half a mind to slam him against the wall of the Chantry – but a twin cry of “Commander!” returned him to his sense like he’d been doused in cold water.

One of those voices belonged to Cassandra; the other he’d never heard in a shout, but he would recognize it anywhere. It had been the one voice calling through his nightmares.

Roderick sneered a laughed. “Going to kill me, Knight-Captain?”

It was definitely tempting, but Cullen released him. “No. There’s no point in turning you into a martyr just because you run at the mouth.”

The ugly scowl on Roderick’s face deepened. He jerked his robes on straight and departed with a
harsh, “Leash your dog, Seeker.”

“Always a pleasure, Chancellor,” came the Nevarran drawl. Cullen turned to see Cassandra and the Herald watching him; the former reprovingly, the latter steadily. “You were unwise to let him antagonise you like that,” Cassandra admonished.

The headache pulsed tightly behind his eyes, and he pushed his thumb and finger against them. “That man is an utter nightmare.” He directed his gaze to Lady Trevelyan, feeling an untimely swooping in his abdomen. He needed his wits about him, and tried not to notice she looked more beautiful than he remembered, wearing the grime of travel as comfortably as fine silks. “My apologies, Herald; I wish you hadn’t witnessed that.”

“I can’t say I blame you,” she replied evenly. “He’s a bigger pain in the arse than my saddle-sores are.”

He choked down a mangled laugh, knowing Cassandra would not approve.

“Are you alright, Commander?” she inquired, looking over him shrewdly.

He identified the question in her voice. *Is it bad today?* “I’m fine, Seeker,” he said shortly. “How was your expedition to the Hinterlands? You were gone much longer than we’d anticipated.”

“Is it all my report. The Herald ensured we kept busy helping the refugees.”

Trevelyan pinked slightly; he could not help staring as she bit her lip, not entirely successful at banishing the thought that he might like to bite it, too. “You certainly accomplished much. Mother Giselle arrived two weeks ago, and has been busy contacting those in Val Royeaux who may be of assistance. We’ve also received word from Master Dennet; he’ll be bringing half his herd to Haven, along with a significant number of recruits from the Crossroads.” He lifted a corner of his mouth, if only to seem at ease. “You made quite an impression, it seems.”

“She did very well,” Cassandra said. Her eyes were sharp upon his face, and Cullen knew he had not fooled her. Her expression was quite plain: *We’ll speak later.*

She turned and marched away, leaving him and Lady Trevelyan alone. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. “That’s very high praise, especially from her,” he said.

“Indeed,” she murmured. He could feel her eyes upon him, as cool and calm as forest pools. “Are you sure you’re well, Commander?”

He could not handle her concern, brittle as his control was. He was terrified he might just buckle in front of her, and she would see him as he truly was – broken.

“I’m fine, Lady Herald,” he said, with more force than he intended. “It’s just a headache.”

“I see.” She blinked, and turned her gaze away, leaving him lower than before. “My apologies.”

She turned and walked away, and he could not blame her; he treated her with the height of rudeness, and all she had done was be worried about him. He wrenched open his jaw, crying “Wait!” to call her back, but she was already gone. Grinding his teeth, Cullen set off towards the training area cursing at himself.

*Blighted idiot.*
Two hours later, the messenger found him. “Commander?”

“Hmm?” He had trouble bringing her into focus; the headache was at its height and was unravelling his vision into two. It was an elf, the same one who had discovered Lady Trevelyan awake after she’d stabilised the Breach. The girl was looking flustered as usual, and was gripping something in her hands.

“The Herald of Andraste made this for you, ser,” she said nervously, holding her hands out to him. “She-she said to drink it straight away.”

He blinked down at her hands; they were wrapped around a steaming mug, filled to the brim with a rich, dark liquid.

“Tea, ser,” she elaborated, looking terribly frightened that he didn’t seem to understand.

“Oh,” was all he could say. The last thing he had expected was a gift. Perhaps he hadn’t fallen from the Herald's graces after all; though she might’ve poisoned it. “Thank you.”

He took the mug carefully from the elf, and she scampered away in obvious relief. The brew smelled heady and slightly sweet. He took a long pull and it tasted as good as it smelled, seeping warmth into his tired bones. It was a few degrees below scalding, but Cullen finished it in several gulps, almost sighing in delirious relief as it softened the tension in his shoulders like the press of warm hands. Her hands.

The headache faded.
This didn't feel like falling.

The tavern was fuller than usual, but then Haven was as well. Cullen sat in the back corner of the crowded room, alone at his table with an untouched stout. He could barely hear the bard over the animated chatter and laughter that filled the air, but it was good to see. Spirits had been much higher lately, and it was all due to the woman laughing across the room.

Cullen watched her as she tilted her head back, clearly amused by something one of the Bull’s Chargers had said – Stitches? Skinner? – the firelight glinting on her hair, burnishing it to copper. She seemed much more at ease lately, laughing more, smiling often, and it was setting a slow, sweet burn in Cullen’s blood. He followed her hands as they danced in front of her, miming out a story she was enthusiastically telling, and he was mesmerized. He was bewitched, ensnared, irrevocably and undeniably captured by her. She had him swooping, reeling, everything in him twisting like ribbons on air.

This wasn’t falling, this exhilarating rush in his chest when he saw her, that breathless plunge in his stomach when her eyes met his. This was flying. And he never wanted to come down.

Cullen had known it had been utterly hopeless, this quick flight into infatuation, when she had given him the tea. It had given him the best sleep he’d had in weeks, even months, having casted a billowy heaviness along his limbs after he drank it. It had even put his mind to rest, muting the usual nightmare so that he slept soundly and deeply, and awoke a new man. He had tried to apologise for his behaviour the following morning, before they had been sucked into a meeting about the situation in Val Royeaux, but she had waved it off.

“You have nothing to apologise for, Commander,” she’d said. “It is difficult to be kind when we are in pain. Did the tea help?”

“It did,” he’d said honestly. “Thank you.”
“I’m glad,” she said, giving him a radiant smile. She’d reached into a pocket, pulled out a small box and handed it to him. He’d opened it to discover a dozen or so teabags, all neatly packed and tied. “It’s a blend my father used to make my mother when she suffered headaches. He taught me how to make it when I was young, so I could brew it if he wasn’t there.”

“Did you have to make it often?”

“Oh yes,” she’d said evenly. “According to my mother, I was the biggest headache of all.”

He laughed. “I find that hard to believe, given how – um, helpful you are.” He’d almost said lovely, but somehow helpful sounded even worse. But she’d given him another dimpled smile that filled him with the same warmth as the tea, and Cullen had to smother a grin through the whole meeting; though it must have turned out as a grimace, as Leliana had inquired if he had a toothache afterwards.

He had been worried when they sent her to Val Royeaux the following day; the Chantry was angry, the people terrified, and someone had to answer for the hole in the sky. At least they had sent Cassandra with her; if the mob wanted the Herald, they would have to get through the Seeker first. She was becoming a sort of informal guard dog, and there was plenty of bite to go along with her bark. The worry had been wasted, however; the Herald had somehow turned a walk to the gallows into an invitation to a salon, and had returned to Haven not as a wanted criminal, but as a leader, a shepherd. And she was beginning to command a most unusual flock.

It had started with Lady Vivienne. She had preluded the Herald’s return to Haven in a flurry of silks and courtiers, wasting no time in assigning herself the finest rooms in the chantry. She brought news that the Herald would be late upon her return; they had lingered in Val Royeaux to investigate some mysterious summons via an arrow. “I informed the Herald she should send someone in her place,” Vivienne had said, “but the dear was so charmingly determined to do it herself.”

Lady Trevelyan had returned the following day with Sera, an elven archer with poor manners and an even poorer haircut. Sera was by far the most inexplicable person Cullen had ever met; the first time he’d run into her, she’d called him “Commander Bossy-Breeches” and shoved a large stack of scribbled lists and doodles into his arms. He could make head nor tail of any of them, so he delegated them to Josephine; though he omitted the list that comprised of evaluations of every woman’s breasts in Haven. Lady Trevelyan had been at the top of the list, followed by “big frigging melons” and a caricature of ample cleavage spilling over a corset. Cullen privately thought that if Sera’s shooting was as accurate as her fruit-to-breasts ratio, then she would indeed be an excellent addition to the Inquisition.

Shortly after her return from Val Royeaux, the Herald had been invited to the Storm Coast by the mercenary company, the Bull’s Chargers. She had returned two weeks later, her leathers salt-stained and armor rusty, in the company of an enormous Qunari, aptly named the Iron Bull. Bull and his Chargers had caused quite a stir in Haven, particularly among the woman; even Josephine, who was the very portrait of decorum, had watched Bull go by with wide eyes, and whispered to Leliana: “Can you imagine-?”

Leliana had only tinkled a laugh, and said fondly, “Oh, Josie.”

Not long after that, the Herald had whisked off again, back to the Hinterlands, this time to follow up on an invitation from Grand Enchanter Fiona. They had returned from Val Royeaux with dark tidings about the new Lord Seeker, and since the Order’s withdrawal from the city, the Templars had been cut off. Therinfal Redoubt had fallen silent, and Cullen began to lose hope that Templar aid would be forthcoming. In the meanwhile, they had decided to send Lady Trevelyan to speak
with the mages. She had returned two days ago with Warden Blackwall, the only Grey Warden who hadn’t disappeared as of late, and Dorian.

Cullen hid a scowl in his stout. Dorian. It had taken Cullen all of ten seconds to decide he didn’t like the Tevinter mage. He was annoyingly flippant, with a swagger that suggested he was walking the deck of a swaying ship, and wore the most convoluted outfits Cullen had ever seen, and Vivienne had been at Haven for weeks. There was also the tiny fact that Dorian eked smiles out of Lady Trevelyan like no one else; something Cullen was simultaneously jealous of and begrudgingly grateful for. Every smile Dorian charmed out of her was one for him to enjoy too, after all.

A massive form appeared at Cullen’s shoulder, sinking into the chair next to him and startling him out his reverie. “Hey Cullen,” Bull greeted. He waved a huge hand at the barmaid, calling “The usual”. Bull hadn’t been around long, but he had already firmly established himself at the tavern and was a large part of the reason it had so full lately; he was very generous with buying rounds.

Cullen had taken to drinking with Bull in the evenings – or rather, Bull had taken to drinking with him; it was apparently unacceptable for someone to enjoy a drink alone. Not that Cullen minded; he liked Bull, despite his lack of shirt, adequate personal hygiene, and that he was Ben-Hassrath. Bull might have been a professional liar, but at least he was an honest one. He had plenty of interesting stories to tell, ones that succeeded in getting Cullen’s mind off his dark nights, and they enjoyed swapping tales of battle and discussing tactics.

The barmaid dropped off Bull’s tankard of ale at their table, with a decidedly flirtatious wink at Cullen. He barely noticed; Dorian had just breezed in, and made a straight, sauntering line towards the Herald.

Bull had noticed her wink. “Flissa likes you.”

“How,” Cullen grunted into his stout, hardly listening; his eyes were on Lady Trevelyan, his stomach contracting as she smiled at Dorian. It seemed no different than the ones she bestowed on him…

“From what I hear she’s rather…liberal in her exploits,” Bull continued, apparently unaware of Cullen’s focus. “Kinky,” he elaborated with a grin, when Cullen glanced at him.

Maker’s breath. He coughed to hide his discomfort. “I’m…uh, not interested.”

“Good,” the Qunari rumbled. “That means she can ride the Bull.”

“By all means,” Cullen said vaguely, though with good humour. Since his arrival, Bull had been cutting a steady swathe through the women at Haven; Cullen only knew which ones by the way they hobbled the next day. He had been vigilantly watching the Herald for such a walk; there hadn’t been one so far, and Cullen thought Bull respected her too much for that.

Though he had worried when Bull first showed up. Cullen worried a lot these days about the men around Haven. He wasn’t the only one who noticed Lady Trevelyan’s beauty, and the soldiers adored her; whenever she walked by, Cullen noticed more than one recruit’s expression perk up and throw themselves into their training with refreshed vigor, a little showboating, and plenty of hopeful glances to see if she was watching. Once, he had to admonish a recruit to “Stop staring at the Lady Herald and use the shield in your hand, no, the other hand” and he had betrayed much more than irritation. He’d actually sounded possessive, jealous. He had been the subject of many whispers and covert side-glances, all with a knowing smirk. He’d kept a scowl on his face that day, trying to prove he was solely worried about their training and little else.
But he was worried; just as he had when Bull first arrived, hitting on Lady Trevelyan as though he was getting paid for it (though, technically, he was). She seemed to find it more amusing than tempting, however, and Cullen breathed a little easier when no evidence of so-called “Bull riding” appeared.

Then he had been worried when Blackwall arrived. He was rugged as a mountain and just as broad, and he was the kind of man stories were written about; loyal, brave, and brooding. But Cullen couldn’t dislike Blackwall. He was honorable and dedicated to the Inquisition, and though he was undoubtedly a skilled swordsman he never overstepped his authority in Cullen’s command. He gladly imparted knowledge when it was asked, but never did he force his way in, which Cullen appreciated; and there was no indication that the relationship between Blackwall and the Herald went beyond professional.

Cullen knew he needn’t worry about Varric or Solas; the dwarf was practically married to his crossbow (Maker’s breath, it even had a name) and Solas seemed uninterested in anything that wasn’t elven or the Fade – Cullen actually rather doubted the apostate would recognize flirtation, even if it humped a nug in front of him.

Then there was Dorian. Dorian. Cullen could fill a book with the things he didn’t like about the man, and nearly all of them orbited around how he made the Herald smile like she did for no one else. Even if the Herald didn’t care for Dorian – and the way she was laughing at whatever he was saying was evidence she liked him very much, despite their brief acquaintance - the fact remained that the Herald was garnering a very attractive following, and she was bound to capture someone else’s interest eventually. And Cullen, thoroughly inexperienced in the matters of courting by his time as a Templar, was at a complete loss on how to capture hers.

Dorian was tugging on one of her stray locks of hair. Cullen watched surreptitiously, feeling another small bloom of jealousy.

“You don’t like him,” said Bull, tilting back in his chair to gulp down his drink.


Bull wiped his mouth with the back of his thick wrist. “The Vint,” he said, waving for another round. “You get agitated when he talks to the boss. You make a fist whenever you look at them.”

“I – that’s –Maker’s breath,” he muttered, attempting to smother his embarrassment in his stout. So Bull hadn’t been unaware to his ruminating and staring as he’d thought. That’s what you get for drinking with a Ben-Hassrath, he thought sourly.

“Can’t say I blame you,” Bull went on, cheerfully indifferent to Cullen’s discomfort. “She has got a great ass.”

“Who’s got a great arse?” Sera materialized at their table, picking her teeth with what appeared to be an arrowhead.

“Boss does,” said Bull.

“Oh yeah. Nice tits too, all in your face about it,” Sera said, climbing into a chair. So far Cullen had never seen her sit properly; she was always crouched, or upside down, or standing on it, and he was beginning to doubt she knew how to use them.

His cheeks were starting to give him away, and Cullen hurriedly gulped down his drink, going a little too fast and choked. He managed to splutter “Good night” to Bull and Sera, the latter wearing
a wicked grin. As he left, he distinctly heard her say “Tight as a cleric’s arsehole, innee?”

He blew out an irritated breath. He hated to admit it, but she was right – he was far too uptight, blushing like a Chantry boy at the mere mention of the Herald’s ass, never mind her tits. *All in your face about it.* He rubbed his neck, his blush deepening at the very thought of them in his face.

He needed a walk to cool him down and exercise all the nervous buzzing in his limbs. It was quite late, and despite the tavern being crowded and noisy, the rest of Haven was sleepy and still. Cullen wandered down the snowy street, only half of his mind on his footsteps, the other on - well, the woman who had been taking up most of his thoughts lately.

It was because of her that Haven had become so full. Word of her ability to close Fade Rifts and her own honourable deeds had bloomed along the gossip vine like colorful flowers; nearly every day brought more travelers, more people eager to join the Inquisition. Among them were plenty of curious nobles, hoping to see the Herald for themselves and find out if her adventures were as wild as rumors claimed; but it was largely the faithful, the shattered and the hard-worn. They flocked to her like fish to a hook, and she didn’t even seem to realize why.

But it was impossible *not* to be drawn in by her, with her carefully weighed words and unfailing kindness and gentle teasing. She was remarkably free of vanity; even Josephine, who was by far one of the most sensible nobles Cullen had ever met, was never seen without her hair neatly coiffed and her clothes crisply pressed. Lady Trevelyan was nowhere near as manicured - her face was scrubbed but unadorned by powders or rouges; her hair soft and shiny but choppy cut and usually scraped into a haphazard knot. Her lips were always chapped in the corner where she gnawed on it (which Cullen covertly watched more often than he dared to admit) and she was constantly brushing stray auburn locks out of her eyes. Honestly, it was what kept her approachable, kept her human; she was rapidly approaching myth-like status, though her retention of her humility made Cullen respect her much more than the Mark on her hand.

He was also impressed that, like Cassandra, she seemed almost bored of her lineage, and never threw its weight around. Cullen suspected the only reason she tolerated being addressed “Lady Trevelyan” was because it was vastly preferable to “Your Worship”; Cullen could see her visibly shudder whenever someone called her that. Not everyone was impressed by her indifference to her title, however; just the other day Vivienne had admonished her after she’d returned from toiling in Harrit’s smithy. Her clothes were blackened with soot and there was a smudge of dirt on one cheek bone.

“As lovely as it is that you help the rabble, Lady Herald,” Vivienne said imperiously, “a woman of your position simply cannot be seen in such a slovenly state. You are the beacon to which these people look, and must appear put-together at all times.”

Lady Trevelyan had watched Madame de Fer drift away, then rubbed the mark on her face until it became a large streak, and worn it like a crown for the rest of the day.

Cullen smiled, lost in thought. His feet had taken him up the road that lead to one of the trebuchets. The night was clear and cold, the moon gleaming fat and white in the sky. The Breach swirled in the west, rumbling like an incoming storm front, but it had not reopened. Within the next few days, the Herald would be setting out once more; back to Redcliffe to meet with the Tevinter Magister, Alexius. Dorian would be going with her, and Cullen’s insides curdled at the thought. There were times he wished he was still in the field, times he wished he could go with her. He had a very terrible feeling about what she would be facing in Redcliffe, and he wanted to go with her and fight at her side.

He blinked. A dark shape had just slipped out of Haven’s gates, and was striding along the road
that led to the mountains – to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Cullen watched the figure go; who on earth would be heading in that direction, this time of night? Then, the moonlight sparkled off the auburn head, and he knew.

He went back the way he came, hurrying through the snow and the quiet. Why on earth was she heading towards the Temple? He didn’t think for a second she was trying to run away, but there was nothing that way but ash and ruin.

She was quick as a deer, and was out of sight by the time Cullen reached Haven’s gates. He followed her path past the stables, where Dennet’s horses whickered softly, and Harrit’s dark house. The light of the Breach lit his way as he climbed the path to the bridge that lead into the mountains, his breath pluming in the air in front of him.

He pushed past the doors on the bridge, and spotted her. She was perched on the wall, her feet dangling over dark, empty space. Her face was upturned to the Breach, and it painted her in a strange contrast – shadows and angles highlighted in eerie green, as though she was no longer solid, but a spirit from the Fade itself.

He approached her, trying to think of a way to announce his presence without her toppling over the edge in fright. “Lady Herald?” he called softly, keeping his voice low, as though coaxing a frightened fox out from under a bush.

She started slightly, whipping her face away from him, one hand hastily swiping at her cheeks. Cullen froze in his tracks, feeling slow and stupid, realizing belatedly that she was crying.

Clearly, she had come up here for privacy, and he had barged in on it like a rampant bronto. He cast his mind over the last few weeks; when had she really, truly been alone? From the moment she’d dropped out of the Fade, the Herald had been poked and prodded like a pig readied for slaughter; constantly called on by greedy ears always hungry for more answers, some she could not always give. He had rarely seen her out of the company of Cassandra, Leliana, or her many new companions. Never mind all the times she checked in with him to inquire about their forces, or hold polite conversation with Josephine and her endless parade of nobility.

No wonder she came here. This wrecked bridge that lead to a decimated ruin hardly got any foot traffic these days.

Cullen cleared his throat. “Forgive my intrusion,” he said quietly, moving to stand next to her; albeit at a respectful distance, ready to turn away if she told him to. “I saw you leave Haven and I was…concerned. You of all people shouldn’t be alone.”

The Herald slowly resettled herself on the wall, turning her face so he could once more see the curve of her cheek, now dry, and cast in green by the Breach.

“Of all people,” she murmured. “Isn’t that just it?”

“My Lady?”

She pulled the glove off her left hand and raised it, holding it against the sky. The tear in her palm was quiet; weeping green light instead of seething with it, twined by its brethren in the heavens. “A question a providence,” she went on, examining her hand against the night, “of exactly why it is me, of all people?”

“Do you not believe it is the will of the Maker?”

She sidled him a side-long glance. “Do you?”
“I…cannot say.” He took a slow, absent-minded step towards her, closing the space between them. “Does it truly matter what I think?”

“It does,” she said. “It matters what you think, what everyone thinks. I don’t know if I…could go on otherwise.”

“What do you mean?”

“I should be dead,” she said simply. She curled her hand into a fist, snuffing the light of the Mark. “I should have died at the Conclave, just like everyone else. Instead, I lived, they didn’t and I’m lifted on the backs of the faithful as Herald of Andraste. But there is nothing divine in being lucky.”

There was an edge of bitterness in her voice Cullen had not heard there before. “Do you wish you had? Died in the explosion?”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier? I wouldn’t have overshadowed the Divine’s death with my survival, and the Inquisition would have a martyr. The remains of the Chantry may have been your allies instead of our loudest adversaries.”

He pondered this, watching her hands fidget against her thighs. “But it is good that you survived,” he said, trying to be positive. “For if you hadn’t, we wouldn’t have the Mark, and no way to close the Breach.”

“Yes,” she murmured. She uncurled her hand once more and the green light bled through, like a jade flame in her palm. “And if it weren’t for this, where would I be now? Rotting in Haven’s dungeon?”

Blessed Andraste’s tits – how insensitive he must have sounded! Implying that the only redeeming quality her presence provided, the only thing between her and a jail cell, was the tear in her hand. The one she believed she acquired by accident.

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, feeling like an enormous jackass. “No – I mean – Maker’s breath, I did not intend to imply that you – that the only reason you’re here is the Mark. It is good to have your company – that is, you are an excellent addition to the Inquisition-”

It was lucky it was dark; he was blushing to the point of his face steaming in the cold. However, she laughed and it was not unkind.

“Thank you, Commander,” she said, mercifully bringing his stammering to an end. “You are very kind.”

It was a simple compliment, but it set a warm glow in his belly, which was becoming pleasantly familiar. It also plastered a stupid grin on his face, which he tried to smother while making a meal of settling himself on his elbows on the wall next to her.

“That is high praise coming from the woman who brings it upon herself to hand-deliver meat and blankets to refugees in a land currently ravaged by war.”

She fluttered a hand at him, as though waving the fact away. “It was nothing.”

“Do give yourself more credit,” he said. “Many of their own people turned them away, abandoned them to shiver at the mercy of the elements. You are…remarkably selfless.”

“You sound surprised.”
“I must confess I am.”

“Is it because I’m nobility?” she asked shrewdly.

He rubbed his neck again, a little ashamed that yes, it was part of it. But she had proved him wrong, many times, about his sentiments of nobles. “Perhaps at one time,” he admitted, knowing she preferred stark truth over kind deception. “But not anymore.”

She smiled at him, stoking that glow a little warmer in his gut. She tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear in a quick, unconscious motion. He followed it with his eyes; her hands were never idle, always tapping her thigh, the War Table, or dancing through the air to illustrate whatever point she was making. It was rapidly becoming one of his favorite things about her. “Cullen,” he blurted.

“Sorry?”

“Cullen,” he repeated lamely. “Um, my name. You should call me Cullen. Considering how closely we’ve been working together, I think an extent of familiarity should be used. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She studied him, tapping her chin. “Cullen,” she said, trying it out. He rather liked the way it sounded in her whisky voice; softened it, turned it to music. The glow got a little hotter.

“I think it will work,” she acquiesced. “It’s certainly easier than Commander.”

“It’ll be nice to hear my name instead of my title now and again,” he said, smiling.

“Do you think you could call me Sevanna?”

“I…” He hesitated. Her name bounded around in his brain in a delighted cacophony. He wanted to use it, to taste it on his tongue, but he felt he had not yet earned that right the way she had earned the right to his.

“I’ll try,” he half-promised. “But I must admit, using your name is more intimidating than ‘The Herald of Andraste’.”

She sighed, and leaned back on her hands. “You and the rest of the Inquisition.”

Her hand was close to him and he studied it furtively. Her knuckles were scraped and chapped, splitting from the cold in angry red cracks. Her thumbnail was ragged where she chewed it during their meetings, though the rest were impeccable, filed neatly into ovals. She had slim, graceful fingers; fingers meant for music, crafted to slide a bow over strings or coax singing from ivory keys. Instead she played the instruments of war, conducting a cyclone of metal and poison in an orchestra of destruction. Her score was the clang of blade on blade, the shrieks of her fallen enemies her soprano. They were fine hands, even beautiful ones; a rogue’s hands, certainly not a noble’s.

Some quiet, idle place in Cullen wondered how they would feel in his; against his chest; in his hair.

He’d been staring too long – she pulled her hands into her lap again, settling them so the right covered the left, obscuring the Mark. She shifted a little on the wall, and Cullen knew she suspected he was staring at the tear, and not at the architecture of her fingers.

“Does it hurt?” he asked quietly, in an attempt to gloss over the unspoken shift between them.
She was silent for a long time, considering the choice of her words; he knew she rarely spoke without careful deliberation of their gravity. “No,” she said finally. “Not like it did before, when it was growing. Now it just feels…odd.”

“How so?”

“Well, have you ever had a metaphysical rip in your hand that served as a key to the Fade?”

He laughed. “I can’t say I have. I suppose it’s impossible to explain, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure Solas would find a way,” she mused. “A very meandering, ambiguous one that wouldn’t really answer anything at all.”

“Indeed,” Cullen said, privately thinking it would not be a conversation he wanted to be present for; Solas always gave him headaches, with the way he always spoke in riddles.

The Herald – Sevanna – twisted and slid off the wall in one fluid motion. “I think I’ll ask him” she said conversationally, arching her hips to stretch her back and reaching her arms over her head. Cullen heard a satisfying pop. “If I ever have trouble falling asleep.”

She shot him a grin, which he would have returned if he were not so distracted by the way she was bowing her body, all sinewy limbs and molten grace. “I….” he cleared his throat, averting his eyes from the juts of her hipbones. “I think that’s a wise idea, Herald.”

“Sevanna,” she admonished him with all the gentle playfulness of a kitten. “Try it. You’ll get used to it.”

That toasted glow was back, inveigling a small smile from his lips. “Is that an order?”

“A request. From a friend.” She tugged her hair back again, and he had a fit of desire to do it for her, to let the cinnamon-colored strand slide through his fingers like silk. “You don’t have to take orders from me, Cullen.”

The way she said his name sent his stomach into a dive. “I think I do, after what you did to that horse.”

She blushed, ducking her head, and he laughed. When Master Dennet had arrived at Haven several weeks ago, he’d brought half his herd with them, one of which was a stallion as grey as thunderhead and just as tempestuous. The stable hands had been struggling to keep a hold on him, as he snorted and tossed his head, hooves ringing on the stones. Dennet had been shouting “Rein him in, boys! Rein him in!” but they couldn’t calm the horse down, and it had reared, trumpeting its displeasure. Then Sevanna appeared and marched right up to it. She yanked its head down by the harness and bit it directly on the ear; the look of pure astonishment that crossed the horse’s face was almost comical, and it immediately went still.

“Well,” Dennet had said, after a somewhat stunned silence. “I guess that one’s yours, Inquisition.”

“I used to bite our horses back home,” she admitted to Cullen now, looking embarrassed. “It made them listen faster.”

“It would certainly work on me,” he said warmly; then promptly blushed when he realized it sounded like an invitation. “Um – may I accompany you back?”

They walked back to Haven in silence; but it was comfortable, easy. Cullen did not feel like he had to fill the space with pleasantries, as he often did with Josephine, for which he was relieved; his
tongue felt oddly knotted up in his mouth. He immensely enjoyed just being quiet with Sevanna, walking through the dark like they were the only two in the world.

He escorted her to the door of the small wooden house she shared with Cassandra – she had been offered more stately accommodations in the chantry, but she had stoutly declined, requesting they instead be used for the sick or visiting dignitaries. Cullen had to admit she did not shy from the less-than-grand lodgings, despite how she was raised, and he greatly admired her for that.

She hesitated outside the door, her fingers twisting in the hem of her coat again. “Thank you, Cullen,” she said softly. “For coming to make sure I was alright. And for…for listening.”

“Whenever you need,” he said sincerely, rubbing his neck. He felt a kinetic need to keep his hands moving, lest he take one of hers or touch her cheek. Neither would be appropriate, though the vulnerability of the moment seemed to call for it.

She outdid him, however – and unraveled him. She lifted herself up on tiptoe and pressed a quick kiss against his cheek, leaving a circle of fire. “Goodnight Cullen,” she murmured, her eyes raking over his face once more. She was close enough that he could smell the soap she used – something soft and flowery, mixed enticingly with the smell of smoke and leather.

She turned away, her hand on the door – and paused.

“Do you want to know why I was at the Conclave?”

He was startled; he certainly hadn’t expected this. “I- you don’t have to say if you’d prefer-”

She turned back to him, fingers twisting together. “You are the only one who has not asked.”

“We are all entitled to our privacy.” He flashed suddenly to the box of lyrium, stashed away somewhere beyond this door; all of his secrets were just behind her.

“I want to tell someone,” she went on, her normally composed voice nervous. “I want – I need to tell it, because I feel like such a fraud.”

“No,” he said immediately. “Don’t call yourself that.”

She shook her head, took a deep breath. “I was engaged,” she blurted. The words were bald, rushed. “Engaged to a man I barely knew, and certainly didn’t care for. My mother married at nineteen, and it is her greatest shame I never achieved the same thing; at twenty-seven, I am ostensibly at the cusp of spinsterhood.”

Well then, at thirty-two, Cullen was doomed to die alone by her mother’s standards; he didn’t say anything, waiting for her to continue.

“The marriage was to favor my family greatly, and it was the only offer they had; I had a bit of a reputation of being difficult,” she went on. “The man they promised me to, Alaric Devereux, saw me only as a challenge, something to conquer. He told me he would break me, and I would be nothing but his broodmare; he – he was not gentle, and would often grab me, leaving bruises that wouldn’t fade for days.”

“What did you do?” Cullen asked quietly, horrified that she had been treated in such a way.

“I put a knife to his throat,” she said in a low voice, “and told him I would not be his prize, and that if he laid his hands on me again, then I would make him my gelding. His family was offended, and retracted the offer. My parents were so humiliated, so angry, that they sent me to the clerics at the
Chantry. They decided to bring me to the Conclave - I was to take my vows there, and become a Sister. I was to be forced into chastity, for if I would not marry Alaric, then I could not marry anyone.

“But I used that as a cover – I had made contact with a man named Fairbanks in the Dales, and he agreed to take me in, let me escape my sentence. I was going to leave my life and my title behind, and make a new one somewhere in peace.” She squarely met Cullen’s gaze, and he saw the depths of shame in them. “That’s why I was at the Conclave. I wasn’t there by divine intervention, or even for the peace negotiations; I was running away. Fleeing from a privileged life because I couldn’t do my duties and marry a man I could not love.” She turned her face away, wrapping her arms around herself. “My parents love each other,” she said quietly. “Or at least, my father loves my mother, and she cares for him in whatever capacity she is capable; marriage has always been a business deal for her, nothing more. But all I ever wanted was what she had – for someone to look at me the way my father looked at her. Is that really so much to ask?”

Cullen stared at her, barely breathing, his eyes roving over her hips, her mouth, her hair. “No,” he said finally, his voice rough. “I don’t think it is.”

She looked at him, too quick for him to hide the naked expression on his face; something passed behind her eyes and her lips parted, almost in surprise.

His heart pounded, and he had a sudden urge to flee, to hide his face from her. “I should...” He cleared his throat, rubbing his neck. “I should let you retire…it-it’s very late-”

“Alright,” she said softly. Her eyes had become closed again. “Thank you, again, for listening; that has been weighing on me for some time. I-I can’t bear people worshipping me, not when I was only unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not when I was trying to run away from a life too few are fortunate to have.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” he said. “The people here follow you because of what you have done, how you have proven yourself. The circumstance of how you got here is just an exciting detail.”

She smiled, and it was a little watery. “Thank you.”

In a fit of courage, he added, “And if I ever meet this Alaric Devereux, I may castrate him myself.”

She opened her door and backed in with a genuine laugh. “You may have to get in line; he’s really a notorious arsehole.” She gave him a final, fleeting smile. “Good night, Cullen.”

“Good night,” he replied softly, her name hanging unspoken on his lips.

The door closed, and he blew out a breath. Indeed, this wasn’t falling; this was crashing, careening, an unpreventable hurtle into the unknown.

If only she could see it.

Cullen didn’t get another chance to speak with her until two days later. They had been caught in a flurry of arriving dignitaries, recruits and reports. He saw her in their meetings of course, but she was always pulled away afterwards by someone else. Their eyes collided often during the meetings, sending a stab of heat through him each time; outwardly, she seemed perfectly composed after their night on the bridge, but there was certain gravity in her gaze when she met his, and there was an undeniable shift in their relationship. She used his name all the time, even in
their meetings. Josephine and Cassandra seemed unaware, or indifferent to the change, but Cullen often felt Leliana’s clever eyes flick between him and Sevanna.

There was still no word from Therinfal Redoubt; Josephine had been tirelessly writing letters to the most prestigious houses in Orlais, hoping for some weight to throw behind the Inquisition. But the fact remained they could not afford to wait any longer; the Templar-mage war needed to be stopped, and they already had an in with the mages. Cullen was not the only one anxious about the Order’s silence; nearly every hour, Sevanna checked in with him or Josephine to see if any word had come. Apparently, she had a brother who had recently joined – or was going to, Cullen wasn’t sure. She had received no word from him, either; but in a conversation he’d overheard between her and Josephine, she had not heard from her family at all since the Conclave. Their disappointment apparently extended past her survival, and Cullen could only guess how painful that was, even if she never betrayed it.

The morning she was to leave for Redcliffe was the first time he was able to speak with her alone. Cullen was usually one of the first to rise in Haven, and he left his tent to hear the dull sound of a blade hitting straw. He discovered Sevanna by the soldier’s barracks, sword and shield in hand, swinging laboriously at the dummy that usually suffered Cassandra’s beatings. She didn’t notice him right away, and he paused a moment to watch her; she was clearly uncomfortable with such a heavy sword, her face flushed with exertion and her hair tumbling loose from its knot. Cullen could make out the wings of her shoulder blades, bunching and gliding under her leather jacket as she laid blows into the dummy.

“Good morning, Lady Herald.” He clearly startled her; her stab went off-centre, glancing off the dummy’s side. She stumbled, the tip of the sword gouging a slash in the snow as she tried to right herself.

She shot him a half-amused, half-exasperated glance. “Are you going to be making a habit of sneaking up on me?”

He chuckled, moving closer. “No. I’m actually surprised you didn’t hear me – Sister Leliana often informs me she can hear me stomping around from the chantry.”

“Sister Leliana exaggerates,” she replied. “We can only hear you from the tavern.” He laughed, and there was the briefest flicker of a smile on her face, as if she were surprised he had at all.

“Why are you using a longsword?” Cullen asked, interested. “I thought you were more comfortable with a dual set of knives.”

Thwack. She hit the dummy’s chest. “I am,” she replied, her breathing heavy. “But Cassandra thinks I should learn to use a shield; she says I leave myself open.” Thwack. Off the arm.

He followed the line of her body, lean and sinuous, as she repositioned her feet. ‘I’m curious as to how a noblewoman trained as a rogue.”

“With a great deal of trouble.” She flexed her shoulders, rolling her neck. “I’m the first female-born Trevelyan in three generations. My father grew up with only uncles and brothers, and had three sons before me. He had no idea what to do with a daughter, so he simply treated me as another son.” She smiled, lost in memory. “I was so desperate to be like my brothers, and tailed them like a puppy. So when they began their training as warriors, I wanted to as well – my father even gave me a play sword and shield, which I carried everywhere. My mother was horrified at that – what would people think! So she took my sword away and enrolled me in dance lessons instead.”
That explained the grace with which she moved. “Clearly, they did not last.”

“They did,” she said gloomily, “for years. Dancing bored me half to death, and I used to sneak into the gardens to watch my brothers’ practice. I was sick with jealousy; I used to practice on my own, too, watching from the shadows. Then, when I was seven, their trainer found me, a man named Ser Galen.”

“Was he angry?”

“No; he was remarkably kind. He recognised my desire to learn, but due to my dance training, thought I had better potential as a rogue.” She squared off with the dummy again, though her eyes were unfocused and faraway. “Ser Galen trained me in secret for nine years, until my mother found out. She dismissed him that same day.”

“He sounds like a good man,” Cullen said softly. “That must have been difficult.”

“It was.” Her voice was hard. She swung the sword once more in a broad slice; the tip snagged on the dummy, and almost twisted the hilt from her grip.

“Here,” Cullen offered, moving behind her without forethought; he placed his hands on her hips. “Plant your feet.” He lightly pressed her down, rebalancing her on the soles of her feet. “Square your center with your enemy. A warrior must stand solid - an unmovable force.” Swallowing past a rather dry throat, he slid one hand down her shield arm, cupping her elbow. “Keep your shield chest height, but tilted down –this will direct projectiles like fire or acid away from your face.” He wrapped his other hand around her sword arm –Maker, but his heart was hammering. “Swing with your body weight, not your shoulder. Keep your knees soft; it will help you keep your balance.” He was pressed fully against her now, her hair tickling his face. He guided her through a slow swing, every nerve thrumming like a plucked cord.

“I’m curious as to how a Templar ended up in a heretical movement,” she said lightly.

“Ex-Templar,” he corrected her. “I no longer serve the Order.”

“I’d wondered.” She let him conduct her arm into a downward slice, learning the balance of the sword. “You don’t wear the armor.”

“No. I lost my right to the armor when I forfeited my Vows.” His breath stirred her hair.

“What are the Templar vows? I don’t know much about them.”

“We swear to protect those with magic, and those without, from the dangers of it.” He reluctantly removed his hands from her arms as she followed the movements he’d guided her into. She had a tendency to put her weight on the balls of her feet, and Cullen used it as an excuse to put his hands on her hips again. “Feet planted,” he reminded her quietly. “We give our lives to the Maker, and seek no wealth or acknowledgement.”

“A life of service and sacrifice…” She paused, sword outstretched before her, and turned her head. His lips were level with her forehead, and she was so close he could have brushed them against her. “Are Templars required to give up…physical temptations?”

Cullen’s heart thudded to a full stop.

Her eyes were clear and serious, watching him steadily. He, however, felt as though the world had bottomed out beneath him, leaving him tumbling through empty air. He flashed back to their conversation two nights ago, when she had confessed the way she wanted a man to look at her.
“No,” he said finally. His voice was rough, a serrated edge. “Some may give up…more, but it—it’s not, um, required.” He knew he should step away, that they had crossed into unprofessional territory, but he so wanted to walk a little further, to go a little deeper.

Her voice was smoke and whisky; soft as a touch of velvet. “Have you?”

“I…” His gaze dropped to her mouth. It looked soft and inviting. “No. I have taken no such vows.”

It would be so easy; no one was around, she was pressed against him, unmoving, her face tilted up and warm breath fanning his face. His pulse galloped, setting his blood aflame, filling him with a sweet, aching heat. All he had to do was lean a little closer, lift a hand to touch her cheek and slant his mouth across hers-

“Lady Herald,” came a voice, “Commander.”

Cullen jerked back from her as if he’d been shocked, head whipping around to see Leliana striding towards them. Her expression was unperturbed, but her eyes were moving between the two of them.

“Dorian wanted to further discuss what you should expect with Alexius,” she said, coming up to them. Her musical lilt was normal. “We’ll be meeting with him in the War Room before you set out for Redcliffe.”

“Of course,” Sevanna said immediately. The Herald of Andraste returned, full force. “Thank you, Cullen, for your expertise.”

She nodded at Leliana before trotting away; Cullen watched her go, a deep well of disappointment yawning open in him, well aware that the Spymaster was scrutinising him closely.

“Is there something you wish to say, Sister?” he asked her.

Her eyes swept over him, her expression unreadable. “Just remember who she is, Commander,” she said finally. “And what we must yet send her to do.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” he said shortly.

“Of course,” she murmured, turning to follow Sevanna. “Simply be careful; we do not even know if she will stay once the Breach is closed.”

The impact of her words hit Cullen like the blow of a warhammer. She left him, dithering in the snow and reelimg from the implication - that Sevanna might leave when her task was done, with nothing left to bind her to Haven. But she would not leave right away…she had made friends here, and seemed so determined to help those who needed it. He thought of Fairbanks, and his offer to whisk her away, and wondered, just maybe, if he could tempt her with a better one.

He will ask her to stay.
In Hushed Whispers...

Chapter Summary

Sevanna leaves to recruit the rebel mages, and face down Alexius.

Chapter Notes

This was originally meant to be one chapter, but I decided to split it into two, ’cause reasons. Comments/feedback are always appreciated, as I’m not sure on my strength with dialogue; but your kindness and support has been stellar so far. Thank you all so much. Please enjoy.

The day they were to leave for Redcliffe dawned cloudy and cold. Sevanna was out by Haven’s stables, perched on the fence of the pen that held the grey stallion. Her grey stallion, whose manners had greatly improved since she’d bitten him on the ear. He’d had no name under Dennet, so she called him Tempest – fitting in both color and temper. Tempest was already saddled for their journey, and currently snuffling her pockets for treats; she had been bringing him apples whenever she could, trying to gain his favour and trust. She didn’t want to bite him again if she didn’t have to; the taste of horse was awfully hard to wash out of one’s mouth.

They had just adjourned another War Meeting, this one about what they were to face with Alexius. He had summoned her back to Redcliffe, though she’d been back in Haven barely a week, requesting she come alone; of course, no such thing would be allowed, and they had organized a contingent of agents to sneak into the castle while Sevanna confronted the Magister. It was a risky plan, fraught with so many chances to go direly wrong. They might have abandoned it altogether and tried the Templars, but that was no longer an option. Josephine couldn’t wrangle enough Orlesian support to march on Therinfal Redoubt, and the fortress had not broken its silence. Sevanna absently scratched Tempest’s chin as she fought back the familiar lump in her throat. Her younger brother had been studying to become a Templar in the last few years, and had been close to undertaking his Vigil before she left…had he joined the Order when she left home? Or had he hesitated, given how the war had broken out anew after the Conclave exploded?

She didn’t know. She’d received no answers to the letters she sent him, and had no idea if he simply couldn’t answer her or if their mother was preventing him. She fist her hands on her thighs, praying it was the latter. Especially since there was no more time left to waste – ironic, considering Alexius’ new trick of magic – it was time to make an alliance, and one with the mages was the best they could get; though she had wanted the Templars, if only to see if her brother was safe.

“Another dismal day,” came a loud, dramatic voice. Sevanna jumped, thrust out of her thoughts, and hurriedly schooled her expression into a serene one - her default mask. The fence creaked as Dorian leaned against it by her side. “Tell me - does the sun ever shine in the south?”
She smiled, relaxing a little. Short though their acquaintance was, Sevanna liked Dorian very much; he was utterly effervescent, and seemed to expect no level of seriousness from her. They had so far established an easy rapport of teasing and flirting, albeit harmlessly. She had sensed right away that she was not his type – nor was any woman, for that matter.

“Certainly not as much as it does in Ostwick,” she said, amused. “And definitely not as brightly as in Tevinter.”

Dorian sighed. “Nothing shines quite as brightly as it does in the Imperium.”

“Poor Dorian, having to slum with the Dog Lords.”

“You’ve no idea the absurdity of it all,” he insisted, tossing a grape into his mouth from the bunch in his hand. “Do you know they expect me to feed myself here?”

“And wipe your own bum?” she asked, horrified.

He waggled a finger at her. “Don’t be cheeky. The one thing I can say for the south is that they grow extraordinarily attractive men. Must be something in the water.”

“No, that’s just the silt.”

He barked a laugh. “Hark the Herald! It seems I’m not the only one who’s slumming it.”

She twisted herself on the fence, dropping down next to him. “It’s worth it, though,” she teased, nudging him with her elbow, “for all the attractive men.”

He smirked, popping another grape into his mouth. “All the attractive men?” he said pointedly. “Or just one exceptionally strapping Templar?”

“Ex-Templar,” she corrected automatically, and blushed.

Dorian pinched her cheek. “Oh, but you’re adorable. Like a blushing virgin at the mere mention of the handsome Commander.”

“You noticed that too, then,” she said, pressing cold fingers to her cheeks to cool them. “The aforementioned strapping-ness.”

“Of course I did,” Dorian said cheerfully. “Have to be dead to not notice.”

She bit her lip against a smile, feeling a lurch in her stomach that was becoming increasingly familiar. She had certainly been intrigued by Commander Cullen when she first met him; but lately that intrigue had dug itself deeper, tighter, became molten and smouldering. She’d noticed it when she started getting a little too eager on the journey back to Haven, and by the flush of happiness that crested within her when he had said, yes, the tea she made had helped his headache. She realized it when she sought him out entirely too often, enquiring about the recruits and training and a hundred other banal topics, just to speak with him. He was incredibly patient with all her questions, and answered all of them save the one about Kirkwall. His eyes had darkened when he told her he’d rather not speak of it, and she had understood his reluctance; Varric had told her all the grim details as only a storyteller could, and she had become suddenly more grateful of her boring life in Ostwick.

But every other conversation with Cullen had been pleasant, easy, and he smiled indulgently at her attempts at humour; and she knew, when she watched the scar on his lip whiten when he did, that her intrigue had turned into a full-blown, girlish infatuation. And Dorian, with the intuitive sense of
a conniving busy-body, had known it right away, and never missed the opportunity to tease her mercilessly about it.

But what Dorian didn’t know was what had happened this morning – or, at least, had almost happened this morning, just a dozen paces from where he stood. The day may have dawned grey and cold, but Sevanna was anything but; it was as though the sun had gone missing from the skies just to settle in her chest, warming her like glass from the inside out.

She had felt it building since two nights ago, this pinnacle, when Cullen had followed her to the bridge. He had been so carrion-smelling, flustered when he caught her crying, when he tried to convince her of her value beyond the Mark and had all the hesitation of a young boy when he told her to use his name. And despite her innate distrust of beauty – for it was the prettiest of things that often caused the greatest pains – she realized she could trust this man, because he did not pry and he did not push, and she thought that maybe all the armor was hiding something much softer than flesh. Which was why she had trusted him with her last secret, cupped it like a moth and passed it to him, because she knew he would not crush it; had told him of her deepest desire to have a man look at her as if he loved her, and the heat she saw in Cullen’s eyes had temporarily robbed her of breath. And then this morning, while she had been labouring with a sword and shield, (no wonder Cassandra was always in a bad mood, having to lug such things around all the time) Cullen had snuck up on her once more. Thank the Maker she had instinctual control over her composure, or she would have wound up stammering face-down in the snow. Flustered as she was at the sight of him, she had made some limp joke, cringing as it barreled out of her mouth; but he had actually laughed, and it almost convinced her he thought her amusing. Or not a total pain in the ass, at the very least. Her pulse stuttered anew as she thought of his arms around her, light on her hips and elbows as he guided her sword. He had handled her as if she were something precious, not fragile or delicate, but something worthy of preservation; he was far more gentle than Alaric Devereux had ever been, with his iron grip that ringed her wrists with bruises like ugly bracelets. Cullen had been close enough that his breath had stirred her hair, and she had wanted to press closer, dive a little deeper into the tension that had pooled between them. It was with the memory of his expression, when he had said in a raw-edged voice “I don’t think it is”, that she dared to ask him of his vows, wondering if he was as aware of her body against his as she was.

The look on his face had resembled that of a man balanced on the edge of an ocean, steeling himself to plunge in and never resurface. She had been so sure that he would close the space between them, and she would feel that captivating scar on her lip, his stubble on her chin - until Leliana had interrupted, and the weight of Andraste’s Herald had returned like the drop of a heavy hand.

“Someone should really tell the Seeker to stop smiling so much,” Dorian said, once more jarring her out of her musings. “Before people think she never takes matters seriously.”

Willing her skipping pulse to slow – Andraste’s blessed arsehole, just the thought of the Commander’s touch had her all warm and stupidly gooey again - she turned to follow his gaze. Cassandra was striding towards the stables, outfitted in gear that had to be uncomfortable to travel in, and wearing her trademark scowl. At least that cooled the fever in Sevanna’s blood. “Don’t tease her, Dorian. Especially not this early in the day; it’s a victory if she doesn’t punch anything before dinner.”

He only winked at her, and sauntered towards Cassandra. He pinched a grape between his finger and thumb, holding it out towards her. “Would you peel this for me?”

For the blistering glare she gave him, Dorian might’ve offered her a snake. “No.”
He made a sound of mock outrage, tossing the grape behind him. “And you said this place was civilized,” he called back to Sevanna, before stalking into the stables.

Cassandra watched his retreat with narrowed eyes. “Remind me why we keep that one around.”


The other woman rolled her eyes. “Funny will not protect you on the battlefield,” she drawled, “but my sword and shield might.”

“And I’m very glad to have them,” she said sincerely. “Are you and Bull ready to head out?”

“Ready to roll, Boss,” Bull rumbled, coming up to them. He was leading the largest stallion Dennet had to offer, an enormous beast that usually hauled carts of crafting material. There was no saddle large enough to fit its back, nor one to fit the rider, so Bull would have to ride bareback the whole way: an easy feat for someone who had wrestled a dragon, if you believed the stories. “Let’s go crack open some Vints’ heads.”

Dorian had just ridden up on his own mount and shivered theatrically. “Excluding present company, I dare hope.”

Bull cast him a one-eyed appraisal. “Only if you manage to keep your mouth shut for half a minute.”

“Shall I simply let you sew my lips together and have done with it? You’ve practised on enough of my countrymen.”

Bull laughed. “I’d at least buy you dinner first.”

“Ugh,” Cassandra said, eyes rolling once more to the heavens.

“Flirt nicely, boys,” Sevanna said mildly. “Or I’ll sew both your mouths shut.”

Dorian bristled haughtily. “I’m always nice.”

Sevanna lead Tempest out of his pen and hauled herself into the saddle. A small knot of nerves was bundling itself in her stomach, but it wasn’t nearly as strong as the anticipation already was for the return journey. Hopefully with enough mages in tow that they could finally close the Breach, and maybe all the shutters between her and the curious stares she’d been suffering under for all these weeks. She was tired of being stared at and whispered about, and she was tired of being constantly interrupted – especially when she was encircled by a strong pair of arms, inches from the lips she’d been shamelessly dreaming about since she first saw them smile.

As always, a small gathering formed at the front of Haven to see the Herald off. A group of Leliana’s agents would be following shortly; it had been agreed upon that it would seem suspicious if the Herald answered Alexius’ summons by riding in with a small army. Therefore Sevanna, Dorian, Bull and Cassandra would head out first, drawing any watchful eyes on them, leaving the agents to slip into Redcliffe, and then into the castle, unnoticed. Hopefully being the key phrase, of course.

Sevanna’s advisors were among those to bid them farewell. Cullen watched her as she rode past, his eyes like sun-warmed honey, his broad hands resting as lightly on his sword as they had on her hips.

“Farewell, Commander,” she said as she passed, hoping he could hear the significance in her voice,
a promise that they would speak when she returned.

“Safe travels, my Lady,” he said quietly, in a timbre of raw silk.

As they spurred their mounts along the road that lead out of Haven, Dorian rode up beside her, wagging his eyebrows. “My dear, I have a well-developed sense for innuendo, however vague—and I’ll have you know those senses are positively tingling.”

She did not deign him with a response, but another blush gave her away; she craned her neck to look behind her once more, to see if Commander Cullen was still watching her. He was, and it cast a shimmering heat over every nerve she possessed.

The return to Haven could not come fast enough.

*

Eight days, and still no word.

She had been gone eight days—should have arrived at Redcliffe four ago—which had passed as slow and dark as molasses, and all communication had been silent. No ravens. No messengers. No whispers or horns announcing their return. Just absolute roaring silence.

The persistent knot at the base of Cullen’s skull replicated itself in his stomach.

Eight days was far too long to be silent; if not the Herald, then Cassandra would have sent word by now, at least to say they had arrived, or whatever varying degrees of success they had. There had been nothing, and Cullen wasn’t the only one feeling the strain. Josephine was fretting much more than usual, wearing holes in her office carpet with her pacing; Leliana was stalwart and taciturn as always, but there was a tightness in her eyes and shoulders that did not usually reside there. It was not only Cullen’s head that frequently turned to check the road for any signs of an incoming party, and a thick blanket of unease fell over Haven, muffling them like snow.

Cullen knew something bad had happened, felt it in his very bones, and late in the eighth day, his worst fears were confirmed.

There were no ravens or horns that signalled the scout’s arrival, just the thunder of hooves as he came tearing in on horseback; Cullen ordered one of the recruits to fetch Leliana, now. In seconds, the scout wrenched his horse to a stop in a desperate skid at Haven’s gates. It was immediately obvious he had been riding hard for hours—perhaps the entire day—and the stallion’s mouth foamed and its bulging eyes rolled with the strain. The scout himself was ghostly pale, sheened with sweat; Cullen recognized him as one of Leliana’s agents that they had sent to Redcliffe with the Herald’s party.

He was covered in blood.

Leliana, Josephine, Adan, and all of the Herald’s companions who had remained came running; but there was no help, no amount of stitches or potions that would bring the scout back from the brink on which he teetered. Cullen knew the look of a dying man; it was a slow wound, but a deep one, and it had sawed through all the agent’s strength. He slumped in the saddle; his dim, flickering eyes met Cullen’s and the breath gurgled in his throat as he opened his mouth to speak.

“The Herald of Andraste is dead.”
...and Abandoned Prayers

Chapter Notes

I retract everything I might have said about this fic not being dark, at least for this update. Please be warned this chapter contains references/descriptions of sexual abuse and torture. This details what may have happened during the year in which the Herald is believed dead, and it is not very pretty. I tried to keep it from being too graphic, instead relying on the art of implication, but there are still some strong descriptions of torture. I also played around a little with layout of Redcliffe castle; in this, Sevanna and Dorian wander around a little more, as I assume a castle wouldn't be so straightforward. I may have also swapped the order in which they find their companions and Fiona in order to suit the progression, as I can't remember what came first. Please try not to hate me too much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sevanna opened her eyes, not quite believing she wasn’t dead.

They had been in Redcliffe Castle, facing Alexius in the throne room as he told them of who he served…there had been a blast…a vortex of sound and pressure, tossing her up in the jaws of darkness – and then nothing.

Except water. She blinked, and her surroundings swam into focus. She was on her hands and knees in a dank, half-flooded subterranean cell. She wasn’t alone; Dorian was next to her, looking around just as bemusedly as she felt.

“Oh,” he said, noticing his formerly pristine robes swirling in the filthy water they were kneeling in. “That’s unfortunate.”

“Blood of the Elder One!”

The sudden shout made Sevanna’s head snap up, launching herself to her feet; a soldier in unfamiliar armor was skidding into the cell, another just behind him.

“Where’d they come from?” The voice was a snarl, and the soldiers raised their swords. Sevanna grasped behind her and found the hilts of her knives, relieved she hadn’t lost them in whatever shadowed place she’d just emerged from.

Dorian whirled his staff, sending a blast of energy that made the soldiers stumble back; Sevanna knew his preferred element was lightning, but he couldn’t use it now, not when they were knee-deep in a perfect conductor. The soldiers righted themselves, but she was already leaping towards them, taking advantage of their stagger. She slashed one across the shoulder, making him drop his sword with a howl, and used her momentum to spin through the air and smash the hilt into his helmet. The impact reverberated up her arm, making it numb; but the soldier crumpled and she stabbed him where his neck met shoulder, cutting his gurgle short. A sudden blast of cold ruffled her hair, and she spun around; the other soldier was directly behind her, sword raised in a killing blow, and frozen solid.
Dorian spun his staff, unruffled, casting his gaze around the room. “Displacement…interesting,” he said. “It’s probably not what Alexius intended, but the rift must have moved us…to what? The closest complements of arcane energy?”

“The last thing I remember is being in the castle hall,” she said, turning in a slow circle to take in their dismal surroundings. The cell was suffused with the sick glow of the red lyrium that had crawled up the walls, pulsating faintly like diseased organs.

“Let’s see…” Dorian leaned in close to a vein of lyrium, regarding it as one would a particularly slimy, poisonous mushroom. “If we’re still in the castle, it…isn’t…ah! Of course!” He turned to face her, practically beaming, which made her briefly question his sanity. “It’s not simply where, it’s when!”

She stared at him, not half as thrilled as he was. “You’re not serious.”

“Deadly. Alexius used the amulet as a focus; it moved us through time!”

“Then did we go forward, or backwards? And how far?”

“Those are all excellent questions,” he said cheerfully, slinging his staff onto his back. “We’ll have to find out, won’t we? Let’s have a look around, and see where the rift took us; then we can figure out how to get back.”

Sevanna’s insides shriveled slightly, horrified at the idea of being lost somewhere in time. “And if we can’t?”

Dorian swept his eyes over the room with a distasteful curl of his mouth. “Then we should seriously consider redecorating; it’s absolutely depressing in here.”

It had been six months since the Herald had died, and the world had gone to shit.

Cullen stood alone on a low knoll that overlooked the Crossroads, one hand curled into a tight fist. This was home to the Inquisition now, or what was left of it, squatting among the rubble left over from the Templar-mage war. A war that was now a distant memory from a lifetime ago, an almost laughable conflict; a mere struggle between ants in face of the newer, greater threat that had loomed over Thedas.

One month since the Breach had destabilised and erupted, demons tearing through the Veil like claws through paper. Two since the skies were obscured with sulfurous cloud and veined in fire; the sun did not shine any longer, the stars forever lost to view.

Three months since Cullen had left Haven burning behind him, leading what was left of his forces out of destruction, reeling from the devastating attack that had captured Leliana and Josephine, and killed countless more.

Four months since the Venatori descended into Ferelden, an iron fist clamped around the leash of the southern mages; toppling mountains and the remnants of the Chantry alike, turning entire cities to ash and the lands to ruin. Five since Empress Celene was assassinated on her gilded throne, bringing the Empire to its knees and proving her blood was no bluer than anyone else’s.

Six months since Sevanna had been vaporized where she stood, taking every good thing and timid hope Cullen had along with her.
With great effort, he uncurled his fist and peered down at it. Cupped in his palm—worn, and in danger of falling apart—was the last teabag Sevanna had made him. Though the headaches and nightmares had been paralyzing as of late, and he had barely slept since the day she’d died, Cullen could not bear to brew it. It was the last piece of her remaining, the only precious thing he owned, and he could not bring himself to drink it away, even for the brief respite it promised. It was the only part of her he had, would ever have, and he carried it in the pocket that kept the coin his brother had given him; though it seemed its luck had finally run out.

He tucked the teabag away, his throat twisting with the familiar pangs of loss; though they were distant now, muted, as if they were coming from across a misted ocean. Perhaps his body knew what was coming, knew that energy did not need to be wasted on heartbreak. It could not grieve when it knew the end was coming, one final pain, before he joined her on a more distant shore.

Soon they would charge on Redcliffe, in a last desperate attempt to just end it, and it was a battle Cullen fully intended not to survive.

* 

The move through the castle bowels was slow; corridors were completely destroyed, the walls torn down and the floors chewed up by the bulbs of red lyrium that forced its way through stone. Everything was slick with oily water, making Sevanna slip every other step, and the place reeked of mold and mildew, among a hundred worse things. She tried not to think about what she was breathing in as she and Dorian waded through another flooded expanse of corridor.

“If displacing us wasn’t what Alexius intended,” she said, “then what do you think his original plan was?”

“At a guess? To remove you from time completely. If you didn’t exist, you wouldn’t have been at the Temple of Sacred Ashes and therefore wouldn’t have mangled his Elder One’s plan.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“Your surprise in the castle hall must have made him reckless. Alexius opened the rift before he was ready, I countered it, and the magic went wild.”

“And here we are,” she murmured. “Whenever this is.”

Dorian caught at her shoulder as they came to the foot of some stairs. His face was very serious, his grip reassuring. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m here. I’ll protect you, and I will get us back.”

She gave him a strained smile and patted his hand. “And when you do, drinks are on me.”

“Jolly good,” he said, ascending the stairs. “Just as long as it’s not that Ferelden piss they try to pass off as beer.”

“What about that Antivan swill they claim is wine?” she jibed, more lightheartedly than she felt, following him up.

He shuddered. “We really must discuss restocking your tavern when we return.”

Her laugh was cut short as they came to the top of the stairs; an acrid wind slapped their faces as they came into an open courtyard capped by an ugly sky. They stared up at it, all levity gone. It was the dark color of a bruise, mottled with sickly red. There was no sun, no moon, just a roiling blanket of smoke and ash.
“What do you think *that* means?” Sevanna murmured.

“Nothing good,” Dorian said gravely. “Nothing good at all.”

The day they marched on Redcliffe was the day the Inquisition finally fell, barely a year out of infancy.

The castle was a fortress, meant to withstand any siege, and it was barbed with a legion of demons, mages, and Venatori. In the gnarled, frigid hollows of his heart Cullen knew it was suicide, knew that he lead his men to slaughter - but if it were not today, then it would only be tomorrow, or the next day, or any day in the finite number they had left. The cogs of time had worn down, had ground to a stop, and it was time to consider the matter of dying. They could wait for the descending guillotine like cowering dogs; or they could chose a blaze of glory in battle, carried away by the last vestiges of their faith.

Cullen knew his choice, and without asking, he also knew the one of his soldiers.

It was underneath a marbled sky that no longer possessed a sun that they made their final stand. It was brief, and it was bloody; their dwindled forces would hardly be a match for well-organized bandits, much less against the full legion of the Elder One. But they fought, with valor in their hearts and their fates placed in Heaven; until, one by one, they began to fall.

Sera’s quiver eventually ran empty. The Bull’s Chargers, without their namesake, lost all momentum. Blackwall’s body succumbed even when his will did not, felled by half a dozen arrows. Vivienne’s head remained high and undaunted, even while it was ripped from her shoulders. Varric wrote the end to his own story with an unflinchingly-shot explosive into the face of a Pride demon. Solas was not there, having slipped away long ago when the winds of fortune had blown the other direction.

Cullen himself cut down demon after demon, laying waste to whatever moved in front of him. He may have come to die, but he was going to bring as many bastards as he could with him. Eventually he was the only one left, a single lion standing against an army of scavengers and shadow. He had dropped his helm long before - he would not need it anymore.

*Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter…*

He slew foe upon foe, ready, *waiting*, for the one who would finally finish it, finish him.

*...Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just...*

Another Pride demon advanced on Cullen, dwarfing the army around it, its cold eyes locked on him. Its whip of electricity and fire left sparking, charred trails along the ground. Cullen smiled grimly; this would be the final fight.

*...Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow...*

Cullen was not afraid of dying; the call across the Void was achingly familiar, the beckon of an old friend. He had already suffered through many deaths, the tender parts of him blackened and lifeless where steel and leather did not cover; the parts Sevanna had been coaxing back to life, before she was ripped away from him.

He had died in Kinloch Hold, imprisoned in a cell with nothing but his own screams and the temptations of demons. He had died in Kirkwall as the tenuous straps of control broke and
everything he knew dissolved to chaos. He had died in Haven, ravaged and flayed as the lyrium abandoned him, all his faith and prayers evaporating like puddles in the scorching sun.

He had died when the agent rode into Haven and delivered the news of the Herald’s demise. That had been the last endurable death, leaving him a brittle shell of hammered steel, devoid of life and warmth and anything that resembled the man he had once been. As he marched towards the demon, already half gone, Cullen did not fear this death; it was no different than the others, save for being a little more permanent and far more merciful.

...In their blood the Maker’s will is written.

He cast aside his shield, hand reaching into the pocket where the teabag laid. He wanted to hold it as he departed, clutching the last shred of anything good; the promise of what was to come on the other side. He remembered her smile, the way she said his name, the precise green of her eyes.

But before he made it a dozen paces towards the Pride demon, something hard slammed into the back of Cullen’s skull, sending him crashing to the ground. The teabag in his hand finally fell apart, his last piece of hope breaking open and scattering through his fingers.

The world went dark around him.

The red lyrium was singing, and it was slowly driving Sevanna mad. It was a constant wordless pitch burrowing into her ears, simultaneously siren and threat, and she was torn between wanting to run from it or examine it a little closer. It had spread here too, in the upper levels of the castle. They still had not come across another soul, the halls eerily empty; but as she and Dorian followed the ravaged corridors, another voice reached her ears.

“Andraste blessed me, Andraste blessed me…My tears are my sins…my sins…my sins…”

She broke into a run, Dorian on her heels, following the voice into a dead-end. Bars were sunk into the floor and ceiling, a narrow cell in this forgotten corner of the castle. Red lyrium had devoured much of the space, but as Sevanna crept closer, she found the shape of a man pressed against the wall.

“Andraste guide me, Andraste guide me…”

She recognized him as the mage that had escorted her to The Gull and Lantern, when she had first gone to meet with Grand Enchanter Fiona and met Alexius instead. The elf didn’t seem to register her presence; his eyes had a strange scarlet glow and they were fixed on some faraway point, seeing something that was not there.

“What did they do to you?” she whispered, reaching out a helpless hand towards the cage. He did not react but simply stared beyond her, his thin singing pouring from a slackened mouth.

“Andraste blessed me, Andraste blessed me….”

Dorian placed a hand on her shoulder. “We must move on,” he said quietly. “There’s nothing we can do for him.”

Deep down, she knew he was right; but as he lead her away, she could not help but feel as though she had abandoned the mage – just like everyone else she had left behind. Her stomach twisted at the thought. Cassandra. Bull. Were they still back in the pocket of time they had left? Or had they been dragged through, tossed into another dark part of the castle? Or might they have been
displaced somewhere else entirely?

“There were others in the hall, back…back then,” she said. “Could they have been drawn through the rift?”

“I doubt it was large enough to bring the whole room through. Alexius wouldn’t risk himself or Felix getting caught in it. They’re all probably still where and when we left them - in some sense, anyway.”

She desperately hoped that was true, but there was still a sense of disquiet. “Do you think we might find them here? Cassandra, Bull, or any other members of the Inquisition?”

“You mean the ones from this time?” Dorian’s brow furrowed. “It depends how long we’ve been gone…I don’t know how long anyone could survive such close proximity to this lyrium, or retain their sanity. That man back there…well, it certainly doesn’t look hopeful.”

“Maybe we weren’t sent very far ahead,” she said, a half-hearted grasp at straws. “Maybe the magic Alexius used just drew all this lyrium up to the surface.”

The look Dorian gave her was very sad, and a little too understanding. “Perhaps,” he said, but she knew he was just humouring her.

The mage’s singing faded behind them, leaving them once more to the whispering cadence of red lyrium.

Cullen woke up slowly, resurfacing from a dark ocean, the ground as hard and cold as an embalming slab beneath him.

*Maker…please…no.*

There was the distant sound of weeping, and someone singing - no, many voices singing, a wordless lilt that rose up and up in an otherworldly pitch that made the tiny hairs on his neck stand on end.

*I wanted to be dead.*

His eyes opened and the shadows scattered slowly, letting his surroundings loom into view. He was in a tiny cell, barely big enough to accommodate him lying down, with a greying pile of rags in one corner. There was a dim, throbbing red light; torchlight, he thought dazedly, until his vision cleared and he saw the webbing of red lyrium across the ceiling, whispering its song down to him.

“No,” he moaned, and the sound was guttural, old and full of anguish. “Please, no.”

He was in the belly of the beast, and he knew he would be digested in a fate far worse than death.

“Cullen?”

The voice was familiar, yet not quite; it was ragged, eroded, a half-remembered song played in a different key. He rolled painfully on to his side, the aching lump on the back of his head sending strokes of fire down his spine and through his bones. He squinted through the gloom to the cell across from him, finding a glint of gold.

Josephine peered out at him from behind its bars, her fingers wrapped around them like dark
ribbons. Her once fine clothes were filthy, tattered and torn to rags, her hair a snarl around her shoulders. Her eyes were huge in her shrunken face, but they were fractured and vacant, little more than broken bits of glass.

“Cullen,” she breathed when he focused on her. There was agony in her voice, agony for him. “I am so sorry you’re here.”

She had dropped the use of his title, which he knew did not matter anymore. Not here, in a dirty little cell veined with red lyrium. He no longer had an army, and was only a commander of ash and corpses; which was to say, commander of nothing at all.

It was just him and Josephine in this little cell block, them and a table laden with cruel-looking instruments. His armor had been stripped and piled carelessly outside his cell, leaving him in his pants and linen shirt, shivering in the chill. The Ambassador’s formerly rich skin had turned ashen in the dark and the damp, spotted with old bruises and badly healed cuts. She did not appear to be hugely mangled, but Cullen knew that torture could go beyond the physical; hadn’t he been here before, kept in a cage while demons shredded his mind to coils of madness? All the evidence was in Josephine’s eyes that what she had suffered here was far worse than a blade against skin.

Josephine told him the tale of her captivity. She’d been alone all this time, only kept company by the sound of Leliana’s screams. The Spymaster had been kept separate from the moment they’d arrived; she was the one with the secrets, and she was the one to break. The Venatori had been working on her for months, with knives and awls and many more cruel objects, as though the knowledge they so desperately wanted were some meaty part of her they could slice out. Josephine and Cullen could hear the daily attempts to sunder her will, the bitten-out questions punctuated by the dull sound of fist on flesh, the clatter of steel and iron as they were cast aside, failing to elicit anything but more pain. Leliana never relented, even when the sounds she made turned animalistic; it didn’t take long for Cullen to wish she would, lest he go mad by the sound.

Josephine did not tell him of the abuse she suffered here; she did not need to, with her clothes torn in revealing places, and by the visits to her cell by countless soldiers. Cullen was forced to witness again and again the punishing use of her body, made helpless by bars and the space between their cells. He could do no more than repeat her name when she lay sullied and discarded afterwards; it was with a terrible pain that Cullen realised that this abuse was old to her. In contrast to Leliana, Josephine remained silent through her torture, far beyond caring, all her wells of resistance run dry.

Weeks went by. Weeks of endless dark and cold, drowning in either Leliana’s screams or the whisper-song of red lyrium; weeks of starvation that melted the flesh from his frame, sustained only by the fetid water and scraps that were sometimes forced down his throat. His captors were seemingly intent on keeping him alive, for what he did not know; until the day the Magister appeared at his cell door.

Cullen had never seen the man, but he knew this was Alexius; dressed in Tevinter finery that was extraordinarily out of place, a jewel among sewage. This was the monster, the mage, who had slain Sevanna. Cullen was so weak at this point, wrecked by hunger and the torture he’d been forced to witness; but he gripped the bars in shaking hands and pulled himself up so he could face the Magister like a man.

“You killed her,” he hissed, his voice scraped raw by the pain of it.

Alexius didn’t react, looking critically over Cullen as though he were a bull for breeding. He addressed the soldiers behind him. “Have you taken samples? He may also be compatible with Felix.”
"No, Lord Alexius."

Cullen was angry that the Magister paid him no attention, as if he were nothing more than a slug who tried to speak. In a surge of hatred, he snatched Alexius by the neck of his robes and hauled him close, roaring into his face. "You murdered her!"

But his grip was brittle and broke easily; the soldiers pulled Alexius back and shoved their swords through the bars. Alexius stood behind them, looking almost wounded as he studied Cullen.

"Collect the necessary samples," he said dispassionately, turning to leave. "And punish him."

Cullen was dragged from his cell, too weak to twist from the iron hands around him; he was placed in manacles and strung up from the ceiling, hanging by his wrists. He could not bite back the mangled grunt of pain as they cut a strip of flesh from his back and collected his blood in vials; then they rained blow after blow against his abdomen and chest until he vomited blood, and was tossed back into his cell.

Josephine stretched her hand out of her cell, reaching fruitlessly towards his, and cried for him.

They did not return for samples again, but Cullen descended into a new phase of torture. Every other day found him hanging in chains and beaten like a slab of meat, though they asked him no questions. This seemed to be entirely for sport, like they were curious to see just how much he could endure.

More weeks of darkness, days of agony; he could no longer tell the difference between waking and sleeping, his brain unable to conjure no worse nightmare than his present.

One hazy day brought another collection of soldiers and an officer to Josephine’s door; not Alexius, but the intricacies of his armor signalled his importance. "The Spymaster has been regretfully unhelpful," the man said. "I think this one will be far more useful in loosening her tongue."

The soldiers went into her cell and dragged Josephine out. Her eyes snagged on Cullen’s, hollowed out like graves, and he pulled himself to the bars again.

"No!" he cried, beseeching, once more ignored as the Venatori left the room. "Take me! Take me instead!"

But his bellow was lost as the doors clanged shut with echoing finality, leaving him utterly alone with a hammering heart. It wasn’t long before Leliana was begging, the first he’d heard from her, before being lost to Josephine’s screams.

They did not last long, however; they were cut brutally short and Cullen heard the admonishing shout that the blade had gone too deep. There was no horror or sorrow, only bleak relief that Josephine’s suffering was over, that she was finally gone from this place. He began to pray that he would be lucky enough to follow her soon.

It was not so. Not long after Josephine had been accidentally killed, (though it was difficult to tell when the days blended together like the bruising on Cullen’s chest) the soldiers were back for another round of torment. This time was different; instead of hanging him from the ceiling, they dragged him down the corridor to a different room – a room designed for pain. A terrifying contraption of cylindrical metal hung above a raised slab, ringed by more tables bearing implements of agony. Cullen was strapped onto the table, thick bands of leather across his chest, hips and legs, manacles clamped around his ankles - pinned like an animal for dissection, trapped
in the place that would become his tomb.

The Venatori were readying the device above him, which seemed to be some sort of vehicle for red lyrium. Cullen could barely prepare himself for the horror of what they might put in his body, when the door to the chamber flew open.

It took him a moment to recognize the Templar crest, like it was a symbol from a half-remembered dream. The Templar approached him with the menacing quality of a wolf stalking some near-dead prey, and he was monstrous; bits of red lyrium pierced through the skin of his cheek and temples, growing like spires from his shoulder, turning his eyes to scarlet. Despite the aberrations on his face, Cullen recognized him; Knight-Captain Denam, who had been one of the many who withdrew into Therinfal Redoubt, and had stood aside as the Elder One descended with his army of demons. He was holding Cullen’s fur pauldrons, letting it drag along the floor like it was the ravaged pelt of some animal.

“Knight-Captain Cullen,” Denam breathed, his expression full of malice. He leaned in close, his eyes flicking back and forth like a lizard’s. He ground his fist into Cullen’s groin, sending a dull flush of pain through him, though he knew it was meant more to humiliate than to hurt. “How far you’ve fallen.”

He forced himself to laugh, an awful choked-out sound that sent stabs of pain through his chest. “Not as far as you.”

Denam’s lips twisted in a smirk. “I haven’t fallen at all. In fact, I have been raised – raised by a new god, more powerful than the Maker! He will rebuild a new world from the ashes of the old, and purge this land of the corrupt!”

The conviction in his voice had a near-hysterical edge, the light in his eyes becoming maniacal. Cullen curled his lips in a snarl, though it was feeble. “You’re insane.”

Denam’s answering smile was terrible; an animal’s sneer pulled over mossy teeth. “And yet, I am not the one strapped down like a dog.”

He leaned away just as one of the Venatori said, “The lyrium is ready to be injected, Knight-Captain. Shall we proceed?”

“No,” Denam said quietly.

“The Commander is of no further use,” the Venatori continued. “Lord Alexius has ordered he be disposed-”

Denam held up a hand, silencing him. “You may dispose of him, in whatever way you wish.” He strolled towards the door, tossing the pauldrons to the ground. “But no lyrium. That is far too… merciful.” He turned back at the door, the red growths on his face and body glowing as nightmarishly as his eyes. “I want him to feel everything.”

“Yes, ser,” said the Venatori, and his voice was cold malevolence.

Denam left, without a single backwards glance, leaving Cullen to the fate he’d been so terrified of.

He still wasn’t far enough from Leliana’s chamber to not hear her screams, and soon his own mixed with hers in an orchestra of methodically inflicted pain. Needles pushed down into bone. Hooks beneath his fingernails. Brands of ice and fire pressed against his skin. It was brutal and it was endless, but it seemed more experimental than sadistic. It was as though they were testing his limits, calculating just how much the human body could suffer. They never pushed it enough to kill
him – there would be no merciful accident like Josephine – and the only respite he got was when
the pain drove him unconscious, burying him in darkness. But never long enough; eventually he
would drift back to wakefulness, and he would hear them discussing their methods and recording
their findings, as if he were nothing more than a carcass being looked over for the finest cuts of
meat. In a cruel twist of irony, it seemed the proximity to red lyrium sustained him, as though it
was designed to prolong the suffering of those near it. Though they kept their word to Denam and
did not administer it to him; so he was left at the disposal of every bodily pain, with no haze of red
lyrium to soften it.

Eventually, he could not hear Leliana’s screams over his own.

*

Sevanna and Dorian had explored many cell blocks and they were all the same; lined with iron bars
on each side, every tiny cell empty. In some places the red lyrium had chewed its way through the
bars, or broken the walls between them. All of them had, thus far, been empty.

Except this one.

Sevanna had just scanned this block, taking in a massive growth of lyrium at one end, and written
the room off as empty. She was about to turn and leave, when a soft voice – a human voice –
stopped her.

“Lady…Herald?”

She squinted; the dim, wavering red light made it difficult to focus. But there, half-enveloped by a
carnivorous chunk of red lyrium, was the shape of a person. A person in familiar mage robes…

“Grand Enchanter Fiona?” she called hesitantly. “Is that you?” She drew a little closer, weary to
get near so much lyrium, and the mage’s features came into light. It was indeed Fiona, looking
terrible and as though she were being eaten alive by red lyrium.

“You’re…alive?” she whispered, her starving eyes on Sevanna’s face. It clearly cost her great
effort to speak. “How? I saw you…d-disappear…into the rift.”

“Is that…?” Sevanna crept closer, unable to believe her eyes. “Is that red lyrium growing from your
body? How?”

“The longer you’re near it…eventually, you become this. Then they mine your corpse…for more.”

Sevanna’s stomach heaved, and she pressed her fingers to her mouth.

“Can you tell us the date?” Dorian asked urgently. “It’s very important.”


“9:42?” he repeated, aghast. “Then we’ve missed an entire year!”

The floor tilted beneath her feet, and Sevanna staggered, catching herself on the bars of Fiona’s
cage. A year – she had been gone an entire year; had abandoned everyone, her friends, the
Inquisition, to this. How many more were buried in the confines of this castle, slowly consumed by
red lyrium, only to be harvested for more? What sort of torture had they gone through when she
had failed to keep them safe, had seemingly fallen by Alexius’ hand so long ago? Her hope that the
time magic had forced lyrium to grow at an elevated rate, that they really hadn’t been gone long,
was laughable. A naïve, childish wish - a flimsy defense against the black, sucking guilt that
threatened to devour her.

*My fault.* The words boiled up like vomit, sour and bitter, clogging her throat. *It’s all my fault.*

Fiona’s beseeching eyes were on her, witness to her guilt. “Please,” she begged. “Stop this from happening. Alexius…serves the Elder One, more powerful…than the Maker. No one challenges him…and lives.”

“Then we can’t fight him,” she whispered miserably.

“Our only hope is to find the amulet Alexius used to send us here,” Dorian said. “If it still exists, I can use it to reopen the rift at the exact spot we left.” He paused. “Maybe.”

“Good…” the Grand Enchanter whispered, eyelids drooping.

“I said *maybe,*” Dorian said darkly. “It might also turn us into paste.”

“You must…try. Your Spymaster, Leliana…she is here. Find her. Quickly! Before the Elder One…learns you’re here!”

Sevanna curled her fingers around the bars, gripping tight to stop their shaking. “I won’t leave you here-”

“There is nothing to be done for me, Herald,” Fiona whispered. “You cannot help. Please…just prevent this from ever happening.” She leaned one arm up on the wall before her, pressing her forehead against it. She looked so awfully tired, so defeated.

“Go.”

Dorian was pulling at her shoulder, trying to get her to move again. With great difficulty, Sevanna unlatched her cold hands from the bars and rebalanced herself on a world that still threatened to disappear beneath her feet. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, unable to bear leaving without saying something, as if she’d had no hand in this, when really, hers were the bloodiest.

They left, leaving Fiona to the predatory embrace of lyrium.

*It had been nearly a year since the Herald died.*

Cullen only knew the date because of the shadows that came into the room; mere, dense shapes prodding his ravaged flesh, pulling back puffy eyelids. Their voices were muffled, coming as though from deep waters; discussing the state of his body, new methods of torture, or recording the effects of every affliction he endured. Each time they called the date out, usually followed by: “Subject appears conscious, but unresponsive.”

*Conscious.* Cullen did not know if the twilight place he inhabited could be truly considered conscious; he floated in and out, a piece of flotsam caught on an indecisive tide, coming briefly back to the world only to drift away again. He was neither dead nor living, but straddled somewhere in between; some lonely place of half-darkness, achingly close to the ones he so wished to join, but kept cruelly separate.

He knew the end was coming, as slowly and inexorably as his blood trickling down the walls. He knew it by the breath that rattled in his chest, the only sound in a room full of silence. He could not be tortured forever, and they had already elicited every sound he was capable of making. The sport was gone, now that there was nothing left in him, nothing remaining to draw out or inflict. They had exhausted everything he was capable of feeling, and there was no more pain; it seemed the
mind and body could only take so much before they splintered, and every agony, every last drop of pain, had pooled around him like tea from broken china.

Nearly a year since Sevanna had died, and he had yet to join her.

She always came back to him when he wasn’t adrift in dusky limbo. She was the last star in his sky gone dark, the only thing that had remained with him throughout his captivity. Though even she was fading, bleeding out of his mind that had been broken open, and he could no longer recall the exact cadence of her voice, or the precise shade of her hair. But her eyes – Maker, her eyes – lingered with him, and that was all he had left. A desert’s memory of rain.

He had never even used her name, and it was his last regret. Never sending her name past his lips, never rolling his tongue over the rise and fall of it, never letting his voice end on the exultant aah like he had been dying to do.

But he was dying now.

He had difficulty working his mouth, discovering to some surprise that he still had a tongue; he could no longer remember what pieces had been robbed from him. The breath sawing in and out of his lungs became gasps, then gurgles, as he tried to work his mouth - an act he seemed to have forgotten - shaping his lips around a word he'd never spoken.

There was always a guard in his room, though it was completely unnecessary; he was stuck, pinned like an insect to a board, his body unspooled like a woolen hem caught on a nail. But a guard was always there, and Cullen was not sure if it was always the same one. It was hard to tell one from the others, indistinguishable by their armor and helmets, only made apart by the growth of red lyrium that burst from their backs, their limbs, their heads. But Cullen recognized this particular shape, and he was sure this guard returned to watch him often, apparently fervently waiting for him to be retrieved by death.

As Cullen struggled for air, for enough breath to exhale her name, the guard crept forward. The little he could see through his swollen eyelids was murky and indistinct; but as the guard came closer, his armor gleaming darkly by the light of the lyrium wreathing his shoulders, Cullen saw the Templar crest. Not that it truly mattered; if this abomination wanted to be witness to his dying breath, so be it. He had only one desire and it did not involve dying privately, away from this monster’s eager, sadistic gaze.

The sound uprooted itself from his chest and he squeezed it past his ravaged throat; and though it came out as a croak, a rusty scrape, it was every bit as sweet as he’d ever imagined. “Sevanna.”

The Red Templar laughed, delighting in his desolation, the sound low and cruel - but Cullen didn’t care.

Cullen couldn’t hear him anymore.

*\

They had found Bull and Cassandra, or at least the shadows of them that wore their skin. Both had been broken and recast in iron, hard and unfeeling. When Sevanna had found their cells, there was no real happiness, only a jagged and hard-edged relief that this timeline may never happen. They didn’t say they blamed her, but Sevanna didn’t need their blame; she placed it all upon herself, drew more from the distant focus of Cassandra’s eyes, the loss of Bull’s shit-eating grin. As far as she was concerned, she had extinguished them, had killed them all or buried them in red lyrium as surely if she’d simply stepped aside and allowed this Elder One victory.
Bull and Cassandra did not speak much as they searched the castle for Leliana. They had been kept alone for months, abandoned to the slow, maddening death of red lyrium, and only seemed bent on erasing this year. Sevanna kept quiet, churning with guilt, left to the painful wonderings of what might have befallen her other comrades.

Varric had been so kind, and had just decided to call her “Fidget” due to her inability to remain still…Sera had recently told her “You’re not so bad, yeah? You’re just like people,” which was clearly meant as a compliment despite its inexplicability…Blackwall had offered such steady support, a silent well of strength…Solas had been so patient with her curiosity about the Fade and his travels through it…Vivienne was - well, a bitch, but a bitch in her corner nonetheless.

A fist squeezed Sevanna’s heart, taking her breath away. Wasn’t this exactly why she had fled to cry on the bridge just days ago – no, a year ago – because she was so afraid of failing them? Because they were wonderful and they were hers and she could not bear to love them, for fear they would discover what she truly was – a pretender; a girl struggling under a weight she didn’t fully understand. But she had failed even that; hard as she tried to keep them at arm’s length and keep her mask in place, refusing them access to such tender parts of her, she had ended up loving them anyways. She had loved them and she had failed them, and that made this cold, long fall so much more unbearable.

And Cullen – her throat constricted at the thought of him, though she had been deliberately not thinking of him, because it threatened to shatter her to pieces. Would she find him here, or was he lost to the world outside, somewhere beneath that awful sky? She did not know what would be worse. The warmth she felt for him had frozen over, plunging her to wintry depths because she could not endure thinking of the fate of the man who had been turning into what she’d been searching for all along - the thing that made running away from a privileged life worth it – and that she may have been dangerously close to loving him.

There were a few skirmishes along the way, a few brief fights with Tevinter soldiers, called Venatori, and demons. With Cassandra and Bull at their side, the fights were a lot quicker; both seemed to relish the opportunity to kill those responsible for their incarceration. But overall, the castle remained disconcertingly empty and quiet, and Sevanna wondered, once again, just how many more of the living remained.

They came to another corridor lined with doors, most of them thrown open. They revealed something like perverted laboratories; hung with chains, manacles fastened to the walls and rows of tables glinting with instruments of torture. She hated to think of what must have happened here – what screams these walls remembered – but she also hated to think of leaving someone behind in this nightmare. She pushed doors open as they passed, ignoring Dorian’s murmured concern that that might not be a good idea – and then she came upon the last one.

Her immediate, foolish thought when the heavy door first swung open was that the entire space was webbed with red lyrium; the floor and walls splattered with shimmering crimson, casting the redness over the knives and spears and barbs that lay upon the tables. There was a table in the middle, some unrecognizable shape strapped to it, and for a moment Sevanna thought it was the husk of some creature, with papery skin peeling from it – until she stepped forward for a closer look, and her foot slipped on something.

She looked down. She had stepped on some fabric, which was horribly familiar, despite the fur being matted and dirty, stamped by countless feet, tattered upon the floor like the discarded pelt of a lion.

The world fractured, inverted, blew utterly apart and sent her careening into darkness – the scream
that clawed its way from the deepest pit within her got stuck inside her throat, choking her, as the realization ate at her with the agony of acid.

The blood splattered upon the walls and silver blades told the horrible tale of torture. The body was entirely destroyed as though it’d been chewed up; the limbs no more than lumps of mangled meat, the little flesh that wasn’t covered in blood grey with bruising, the face puffy and no longer human. What she had thought had been peeling skin was in fact a shirt, stiffened with blood long gone dry, plastered in some places where it wasn’t ripped open. Everything screamed of something that had been broken, pulled apart with no hope of ever being put back together; and underneath it all – underneath the blood and the bone and the devastation – was the glint of blonde hair.

Sevanna whirled away, unable to bear it a second longer and meant to run, to flee from this place of horror, but her legs no longer remembered how to do such a thing. Instead she stumbled and flailed, scrabbling uselessly along the wall for purchase as she collapsed to her hands and knees. She was hyperventilating, her ribs contracting and crushing her heart and lungs in an iron cage; pieces of her falling, spiralling into dark despair. She could hear Dorian cry her name from far away, barely saw him as he kneeled in front of her and seized her shaking shoulders. Her stomach twisted and she heaved; to Dorian’s ever-lasting credit, he did not move away.

“Sevanna,” he said, voice like a whip, and it was her name that reeled her back from the brink of shadow; he never called her by her name, preferring instead things like “darling” or “love” or “biscuit”. But all tongue-in-cheek wit and flippancy was gone. He was pale beneath his rich Tevinter coloring, cupping her jaw in his hand to force her to look at him.

“This will not be real,” he said severely, forcing her to listen. “This does not have to happen. But we must keep going. We must find Alexius.”

“He’s dead,” she whispered agonisingly, her eyes burning with the tears that had not begun to fall. “They tore him apart, and it’s all my fault.”

No,” he said fiercely, giving her a small shake. “This is the Elder One’s fault. I won’t allow you to blame yourself for an accident of circumstance. We will make this right; but we have to keep going!”

She knew it was true, just as she knew the shattered body behind her could not be helped by falling apart. She nodded tightly, forcing the tears back, burying them under the cold, dead weight that had settled where her heart had been. She allowed Dorian to help her up, her legs still trembling beneath her, and she leaned heavily on him.

Cassandra was watching her, her eyes as distant and vague as storm clouds on a horizon. “We have suffered much here, Herald,” she said, the dual tones of her voice impassive. “It is time we ended this.”

“Poor bastard,” Bull grunted dimly, peering into the torture chamber. “Glad it’s over for him.”

Sevanna nodded numbly, knowing it was the only merciful thing this time had to offer. “Let’s finish this,” she said, her voice thin, and allowed Dorian to guide her away from Cullen’s body.

This time she did not look back.

Chapter End Notes
Let's face it, Blackwall deserved a Borormir-esque death. Knight-Captain Denam is the fuckface you meet if you do Champions of the Just; I was originally going to use Samson, but I figured he'd be too busy with being the Vessel and didn't seem quite as sadistic as Denam for this piece, so I swapped them. In reference to Alexius ordering to take samples from Cullen, there is a note in this mission describing just how Leliana ended up looking like Skeletor. I personally didn't find it in my playthrough (or merely skimmed over it) but apparently Alexius takes her skin to try and help Felix's affliction. I imagine he would test Cullen for the same compatibility, and was found not compatible, therefore resulting in being played with like a cat with a mouse.
**Stay With Me**

Chapter Summary

Sevanna returns to Haven, though she seems to have lost something along the way, leaving Cullen discouraged.

Chapter Notes

Note that this chapter uses dialogue from the game; I don't like being a copycat, but the scene begged inclusion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was going to ask her to stay.

Cullen had been awaiting Sevanna’s return from Redcliffe with near breathless anticipation. His nerves had been humming like agitated bees beneath his skin since Sevanna had bid him farewell, the smoke of her voice and smoulder of her eyes weighted with silken promise. Thankfully –finally- Leliana had received word from Cassandra several days ago that they had been successful; Alexius had been overthrown, captured, and Grand Enchanter Fiona had agreed to order a cease-fire among the mages. They had agreed to help Sevanna seal the Breach (given little choice, as they had also been thrown out of Ferelden) and would be arriving at Haven within the week, depending on how long it took the now much larger group to travel.

And Cullen was going to ask her to stay.

He had decided he would the day she left for Redcliffe, right after Leliana had interrupted something that had almost transpired. With Sevanna’s back against his chest and his hands on her hips, Cullen had abandoned everything – pretense, propriety, most likely common sense given the broad daylight they’d been in - except his bravery. He had been certain he was going to kiss her, and was certain she would have let him. But alas, he had not moved quickly enough, and then they had been sucked into another council, and Josephine had demanded he meet with some envoys from Orlais; and then Sevanna was riding out to Redcliffe with all his speeches and declarations unspoken, the non-existent kiss still tingling on his lips.

In retrospect, it was probably a good thing she left before they could speak; he would have mucked it right up. He needed time to plan his words carefully so they did not stumble and falter; the art of wordplay and prose wasn’t something Cullen was particularly proficient at. That was Josephine’s specialty, or even Leliana’s; his was the language of battle strategy and clanging steel. But he could hardly ask the Ambassador to whip up some grand speech declaring his feelings for the Herald of Andraste –though he did not doubt she would be simply delighted to- and Cullen had to resolve himself to his own devices, however bare they may be.

He was not a man of beautiful words that flowed like silk, so it would not be poetic. Best to leave it
uncomplicated anyways; the less words he had to wrap his mouth around, the better, and Sevanna already had the ability to render him nearly incoherent. It had to be simple, to the point; guaranteed his heart would be hammering while he faced her, his tongue tied up in knots with her striking eyes measured on him as he asked her one of the most important questions of his life.

He practised the conversation in his head, feeling like an idiot both for the fact that he needed the pretend conversation and that even in his imagination he was a stammering mess. After many false starts, most of which involved him trying to tell her exactly how he felt, (with many half-formed confessions of how he wanted to see her skin in starlight, or how her fingers always seemed to tap out the exact rhythm of his heart) and would she please stay to explore whatever it was between them. But those speeches were too convoluted, too big a mouthful, too much too soon, and he eventually settled on something far simpler.

When she returned triumphant he would pull her aside, ask her for a private word; before or after she closed the Breach, it did not matter. Whenever her burden was lightest. Just as soon as he could pull her away, retreat somewhere quiet and secluded where they were not the Commander and Herald of Andraste, but simply Cullen and Sevanna.

She would be serene, no doubt, collected as always save for her fidgeting fingers. In contrast, he would probably be sweating and shifting from foot to foot, rubbing at that coil of tension that was always present in his neck. She would ask him what he wanted to speak about, and she would use his name. Cullen swore to himself that would be the catalyst, would spur him into a fleeting moment of courage - a greater courage than he’d ever needed in battle.

“I was curious,” he would say (hesitantly of course, Maker damn him), “as to what your plans were after.”

“After what?” she would reply, with a probable arch of her brow.

“After the Breach was sealed,” he’d continue, perhaps step a little closer. “If you would…move on, now that your purpose here is finished, or…”

“Or?” She would have to prompt him, because even in his imaginings he needed a moment to steel himself.

“I was wondering if you might stay,” he’d blurt, quick and simple and in the open.

In his mind’s eye, he could see her brow knit together, her lips pressing into a puzzled line.

“Stay?”

“With me,” he’d clarify, and maybe he’d be brave enough to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Stay with me.”

At the very least, he hoped that she would smile – at the most, that they might recapture the spark Leliana had inadvertently extinguished and let it ignite the space between them. But he scarcely dared think about that, wouldn’t permit himself that extravagant hope.

Of course, it could go very badly; she might laugh, and inform him that, whatever his impressions were, they were nothing more than the deluded fantasy of a lonely man. She might only want to share her bed with him, uninterested in anything beyond the physical, which Cullen wasn’t sure he could give. She might awkwardly refuse him, but then at least he could move on, retreat behind a wall of stone so he may nurse a battered heart.

Worst of all, she might happily tell him she was staying; with Dorian, and they were going to get
married and have a whole bunch of stupid mustached babies in ridiculous outfits. Cullen cringed at the very thought; Maker preserve him if that were to actually happen.

Armed with the rough idea of how he wanted the conversation to progress, Cullen was able to settle into nervous anticipation for Sevanna’s return. This particular homecoming felt like a turning point, both for him and the Inquisition; they would be that much closer to sealing the Breach, to turn off the nightmare that plagued Thedas for too long, and could finally turn attention to the questions it begged. Who had opened it? How had they accomplished ripping apart the sky, and why? Cullen knew such questions were driving Leliana mad, as these were answers that could not be bought by subterfuge or knives carefully pressed against a man’s back. Josephine was desperate for names to pass along to those who demanded a culprit. Cullen himself wasn’t overly fussed with who did it, only wishing for a target to point his forces at; he was more concerned that the Herald arrived safely, and remained safe even while she stitched the heavens shut.

The man he had been months ago would’ve thought he was getting far too personal, letting his own desires cloud the bigger picture; but that Cullen had been cold and desolate, and the one he was becoming was glad to be rid of him.

Five days had passed since Leliana had received word of the incoming horde, and still no sign of them. Cullen knew full well a group of that magnitude would take much longer than a small mounted party, but he could not help the agitation; the antsy itch of idly waiting as though he had nettle trapped underneath his armor. He was restless, and perhaps a little irritated; he had finished the last of the tea Sevanna had given him, and the headaches were on a slow crescendo again. He had taken to prowling the stone battlements surrounding Haven whenever he could, between training and reports and meetings, if only to give his legs something to do. It was also the best vantage point to see any approaching party, but he pretended to be checking in with the soldiers that patrolled them. Thankfully, the patrol changed often, so Cullen did not suffer too much suspicion as to why he constantly enquired about the situation – which was, as usual, quiet.

In the late afternoon of the fifth day, Cullen once more traipsed up the battlements, taking the route along the eastern side that overlooked the road that lead into Ferelden. He was sweeping his eyes over it, cursing how it twisted out of sight beyond the mountains, when an amused voice broke him from his vigil.

“Don’t worry, Curly. She’ll be back.”

Cullen turned to see Varric –of course, since no one else called him that- strolling towards him with an easy grin on his craggy face, bottle in hand. Feeling rather like a boy who’d been caught with his hands down his pants in the chantry, Cullen racked his brain wildly for some excuse.

“I –um, come up here…to…” The blue fog of withdrawal was not as severe as compared to other instances, but the corners of Cullen’s mind were cobwebbed today, and his mental facilities were regrettably slowed.

“But I’ve come up here eight times a day.” Varric cut him off with a cheerful wave of his hand. “I think you’re exaggerating.

“Don’t sweat it.” Varric cut him off with a cheerful wave of his hand. “I don’t think anyone else has noticed you come up here eight times a day.”

Cullen rubbed his neck. “Is it really that much?”

“It might. But I have been known to exaggerate.”

“Right,” Cullen muttered, knowing by the dwarf’s smirk that he was being made fun of. He decided against putting up any sort of charade; Varric was too experienced with handling bullshit to not smell it in a second, and would probably draw a much more creative conclusion. “I’m just
concerned. It’s a long way to travel with such a large group, but I had thought they’d be back by
now.”

“Fidget probably held everyone up by rescuing a nug from a well,” Varric said, grinning. It took
Cullen a moment to figure out who he was talking about, before remembering that was Sevanna’s
newly christened nickname. He would never say so out loud, but he thought it rather clever; it was
far better than “Curly”, at any rate.

When Cullen didn’t smile, Varric slapped him reassuringly (painfully) on the back. “I’m sure she’s
alright. She’s got the Seeker and Tiny with her. And that sparkler, Dorian.” He paused, his bottle
tipped halfway to his mouth. “Sparkler. That’s not half-bad.”

Cullen said nothing. The mention of Dorian’s name had sent a pulse of irritation through him.
Haven had been undoubtedly more pleasant without him, and Cullen was not alone in those
sentiments; no one was at any ease with a Tevinter in their midst, particularly one that happened to
be the son of a Magister. But Dorian could have crawled up from the bottom of a swamp for all
Cullen cared; he was far more concerned about the cold nights in the Hinterlands, and the fact that
Sevanna’s tent was big enough for two had burrowed into his brain like a worm into a rotting
stump.

Varric scrutinised him over his bottle, correctly interpreting the muscle jumping in Cullen’s jaw.
“Ah, you got nothing to worry about, Curly,” he said sincerely. “I don’t think Fidget has the
right…ah, equipment. For Sparkler. Besides—” he tipped his drink back again, always the one for
suspense “-I know a love story when I see one, even if it hasn’t happened yet.”

Cullen snapped his head towards him. “What do you mean?” he asked far too quickly, giving
himself away.

Varric grinned mysteriously; and perhaps a little smugly, damn him. “Never takes her eyes off you,
does she?”

Cullen’s cheeks turned hot despite the cold breeze, and he rubbed his neck, barely suppressing a
smile. For the love of the Maker, since when had such simple implications reduced him to a
blushing boy?

Varric winked at him, and turned to walk away. “And don’t worry, Curly,” he called over his
shoulder, “Your secret is safe with me.”

Cullen’s stomach flipped over; so the dwarf knew of his infatuation. Great. That meant everyone in
Haven would know; possibly all of Thedas, if he worked it into the plot of his next novel.

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen muttered, very glad no guard had passed during that conversation. He
wondered vaguely as to what Varric had meant by “equipment”; was it because Sevanna was a
dual-wielding rogue, and Dorian a mage? He knew mage offspring were cherished, even preferred,
in Tevinter; perhaps the fact that she was not a mage, that she lacked a magic staff, caused Dorian
to be disinterested in her…Blessed Andraste, why couldn’t that blasted dwarf be clearer about
some things?

His annoyance was short-lived, however; a horn shattered the frosty air, the same one Leliana’s
scouts used in the pass whenever someone was approaching Haven. Voices from the village rose
up in an excited chatter, doors flung open as the people made their way to the gates for the arrival.
Cullen leaned on the battlements, neck craning towards the pass, trying not to look like an
overexcited puppy.
As the horses rounded the bend, he spotted Sevanna first; she was leading the procession astride her grey stallion, her head burnished by the late afternoon light. She was turned to the woman in mage robes riding next to her, clearly in deep conversation. Riding behind them were Cassandra, Dorian, the Iron Bull (looking comical even on the largest horse Dennet had to offer) and behind them snaked an enormous following of mages, on foot.

Cullen recognized them even from the distance; recognized their robes and crests, the tomes that many had slung at their hips. Most had their staffs strapped to their backs, but many more clutched them in their hands and used them like walking sticks. Trepidation raised the hairs on Cullen’s neck, which stirred the beginnings of shame; his wariness of mages ran deep and he was still overcoming it. Seeing so many make their way into Haven…well, sufficed to say he was not comfortable with the matter, but would endure it.

The group approached slowly, but Cullen never took his eyes off Sevanna. She appeared unhurt – there was no obvious bruising or bandaging- but she looked desperately tired and worn down. It wasn’t until now, when she was in his sights once more, that Cullen allowed himself to realize just how much he’d missed her; missed her smile and her laugh, her gentle humour and the steadiness she brought to his life rocked by lyrium. If he had it his way, soon –tonight even, and his heart leapt at the thought- he wouldn’t have to miss her again.

Stay with me. His mind whispered the words, practising for when they finally rolled off his tongue.

Her gaze suddenly clicked from the woman next to her to him. His knees turned to water as their eyes collided, the warmth he’d been lacking these past days blossoming deep in his gut. But she didn’t smile at him like he’d been hoping; she flinched as though she’d been struck, her back stiffening and her posture abruptly rigid. Cullen’s brow creased, the burgeoning heat wilting slightly. She didn’t look unhappy to see him, but rather like she was looking at something she couldn’t quite believe, like a spirit made solid. Her eyes were huge and unfathomable, fixed intently on him as she rode by. She’d gone very pale, and even from his perch he could see the whitening of her knuckles as they tightened on the reins. She even twisted in her saddle as she passed, keeping their eyes locked, drinking him in as though he was water in a desert and she was half-dead from thirst.

And he knew that something bad had happened.

He dashed back along the battlements, pushing past the patrol on the stairs in his haste to meet her. He reached the gates at the same time as Josephine, but Leliana had beaten him to Sevanna; she was speaking intently to the Spymaster, her hands moving agitatedly before her. Cassandra was at her shoulder, nodding gravely at her words. Leliana glanced back at him and Josephine, then nodded tersely at Sevanna. She strode to where Cullen stood as Sevanna turned to help elven mage off her horse.

Without preamble, Cullen demanded, “What’s happened?”

“It seems the Herald has gotten a glimpse of the future,” Leliana said quietly, “and not a good one.”

“The future?” Josephine repeated, astonished.

“Yes. We will discuss it further in the chantry,” Leliana said, with a significant look. Whatever Sevanna had witnessed, it was not to be discussed here. “The Herald has also secured an alliance with the rebel mages. They have come, in peace, with their leader Fiona.”

“At least something good has come of this, then,” Josephine said, and scurried off towards the chantry. Leliana nodded grimly at Cullen and followed her.
He hesitated, eyes once more on Sevanna. She had just relieved her horse to Dennet, and turned in his direction; she froze like a halla in the sights of a hunter and the distance between them grew taut, solidifying like ice. Cullen was certain the shining in her eyes was due to unshed tears. She took several quick, absent steps towards him like she might suddenly rush at him - then seemed to reconsider, teetering on the spot, and turned towards Dorian instead. The Tevinter slid his arm around her as her shoulders curved inwards, murmuring in her ear; Cullen could not pretend it didn’t sting, and his heart splintered like a crack in a glass.

Cassandra was striding past him and he turned to fall into step with her, wanting to get away from the sight of Dorian comforting the Herald. “Do you know what happened, Seeker?”

“Alexius opened a rift, and sent the Herald and Dorian through it,” she said. “They were gone only moments, before falling out again looking as though they’d been in battle.” She paused, her brow a pensive line. “She hugged me.”

Cullen couldn’t quite picture that; Cassandra may be many things, but huggable she was not. “It must have been a terrible future, if she was glad to see you.”

She shot him an annoyed look, informing him his flippancy was unappreciated. “Whatever the Herald witnessed has upset her,” she said starchily. “She has barely spoken since the events at Redcliffe.”

“Have you tried asking her about it?”

She treated him to a magnificent eye-roll; Cullen was beginning to think he was better acquainted with the backs of her eyes than the fronts. “No. I’ve simply been hitting her instead; do you not think that would have worked?”

“At least you know your strengths,” he muttered as they climbed the steps towards the chantry. He was suddenly very tired and cross, the headache unfurling at the base of his skull like creepers from a vine. Unfortunately, the one thing guaranteed to make it even worse was waiting at the chantry doors - Chancellor Roderick, looking mad enough to spit.

“Ugh - what now?” Cassandra snapped as they drew level with him.

“I have qualms over the company you keep, Seeker,” Roderick said, planting his feet to block them from the chantry. “As do the people of Haven. That Tevinter mage-”

“Has proven himself a useful ally,” she cut across him. “It was on Dorian’s information that we investigated Alexius, and were able to prevent the enslavement of the southern mages.”

“That does not change the nature of his birth,” Roderick said through gritted teeth. “The Magisterium is entirely made up of savage, power-hungry blood mages. You would exempt one of their own with nothing but his word and preposterous self-grooming-”

“Insult my homeland all you like,” came an amused voice, “but leave my mustache out of this.” Dorian and Sevanna strode up to them, the former’s grin a contrast to the latter’s downcast eyes.

“It’s sacrilege!” Roderick blustered on, as though Dorian hadn’t spoken. “Your Inquisition claims to be doing holy work, yet you fill this consecrated place with heretics! Tevinter would annihilate us! They would tear down the Chantry and build their thrones from the flesh and bone of Andrastians-”

“Heavens, no,” Dorian said, sounding greatly wounded. “Have you any idea how difficult it is to launder out bloodstains?”
Roderick bristled, his face twisted in a snarl. “I will not entertain that barbarian with my presence,” he snapped. “We will discuss the wisdom of your alliances later, Seeker, and do not doubt I will inform the clerics of this atrocity.” He stormed away, leaving Cullen to privately admit that having Dorian around was at least good for one thing.

Cassandra merely scoffed. “Shall we?”

She led the way into the chantry. Cullen held the door open, ignoring Dorian as he breezed by, focusing instead on Sevanna; she did not look at him as she slipped past, taking great care to not brush against him. His throat tightened as he entered after her, unable to send away the pangs in his chest as though it were suddenly full of sharp edges.

Josephine and Leliana were waiting for them. “Tell us everything that has happened, Herald,” Leliana urged. “What did you see?”

Sevanna carefully folded her hands in front of her; Cullen recognized the trick, knowing her guard had just gone up. She knew her expressive hands betrayed her. “Alexius opened a rift in time using an amulet,” she began. Her voice was dull, flat. “I believe he intended to erase me from existence, in order to prevent me from going to the Conclave. He spoke of serving ‘the Elder One’, and that I had interrupted his plans there. But Dorian countered the magic he used, which resulted in us being pulled through instead. We were sent a year into the future.”

Cullen couldn’t quite wrap his head around the idea of being tossed through time. Instead he grasped at the simpler question. “Who is this ‘Elder One’?”

“No idea,” Dorian said breezily. “Though everyone kept nattering on about ‘more powerful than the Maker’. It got a little dull, actually.”

Sevanna quelled him with a look; she, at least, seemed to realize now was not a time for frivolities. “Alexius said something about the Elder One ‘raising the Imperium from it’s own ashes’. It sounded as though he was Tevinter-”

“Oh, definitely Tevinter,” Dorian acquiesced.

Cassandra made a sound of impatience, while Sevanna ploughed onwards. “After my disappearance, Empress Celene was murdered, and a demon army was raised. And the Breach…it had grown. It was everywhere.”

Cullen couldn’t prevent the fear that slithered up his throat; it was bad enough that the Breach had swallowed most of the western sky, but to get even larger, and yet more unstable…Maker, he didn’t want to think about it.

“How did you return?” Leliana pressed.

“We found Alexius in that time, and Dorian was able to use the amulet to reopen the rift back to the exact moment we left.”

The Spymaster gave her a hard, calculating look. “Alexius just let you take it?”

Sevanna’s knuckles blanched, her fingertips growing purple as she tightened her grip. “We had to fight him –and kill him. And you…you were there, Sister. You sacrificed yourself –you died- in order to buy us enough time.”

Josephine’s hand flew to her mouth, but Leliana remained cool, her gaze unwavering from Sevanna’s. “And I would do so again.”
Cullen knew it was meant in loyalty, but it seemed to have the opposite effect; Sevanna paled once more, her gaze dropping to the ground. He cleared his throat, almost hesitant to address the proverbial dragon in the room. “What of the mages?”

Sevanna did not look at him; it was Cassandra who answered instead. “The Herald has offered them full amnesty, in exchange for their aid.”

All three advisor’s head snapped towards her. “What?” Cullen exclaimed.

“You heard me, Commander,” Cassandra said, a little aggressively. “Mages are now allies to the Inquisition-”

“We cannot offer them a full alliance,” Cullen retorted.

Josephine rounded on him. “Are you suggesting we revoke the Herald’s agreement?”

“It’s not a suggestion. I will not deny we need the mages, but we cannot allow them full liberties. They must be assigned Templars, and certain restrictions-”

“They should, in short, be put into Circles,” Leliana interposed, her musical voice cool.

“Do not place words in my mouth, Sister,” he said hotly. “It’s not a matter for debate. There will be abominations among the mages and we must be prepared.”

“If we rescind the offer of an alliance, it makes the Inquisition appear incompetent at best, and tyrannical at worst,” insisted Josephine.

Cullen turned his eyes on Sevanna, who still would not meet his; the pain in his head and his heart reared like an ugly beast. His control was tenuous, his frustration wearing it thin, and his voice came out with a razor’s edge. “What were you thinking, turning mages loose with no oversight? The Veil is torn open!”

At last, she raised her eyes to meet his, and he finally saw the shadows behind them, like something buried beneath a glacier. “No one deserves to be imprisoned, Commander.”

He couldn’t ignore the sudden reappearance of his title, or that it cut deeper than it should have. “The Circles were created in the best interest-“

“A comfortable cage is still a cage.” Her words had a hardness he hadn’t heard before. “I would know.”

Both Ambassador and Spymaster gave Sevanna curious looks, but Cullen addressed Cassandra. “You were there, Seeker. Why didn’t you intervene?”

She did not look impressed by him, or his tone. She folded her arms over her chest, eyes flashing. “While I may not completely agree with the decision, I support it. The sole point of the mission was to gain the mage’s aid, and that was accomplished.”

Cullen knew the argument was lost; it was four against one, and he would just have to live with it. And he could live with it, a full alliance with mages. He knew his disquiet was no longer warranted, or particularly fair, as he was Templar no longer. But what he could not stand was the way Sevanna refused to look at him except to speak harshly. She had once more retreated behind the armor he’d been so gently peeling back, and he couldn’t help but think he might’ve done something to cause it.
“Ah, the voice of pragmatism speaks,” said Dorian. “And here I was just starting to enjoy the
circular arguments.”

Cassandra fixed him with a dark glare, and Cullen knew that despite how she had defended him to
Roderick, she still did not trust the Tevinter mage. “Closing the Breach is all that matters.”

“We should look into the things you saw in this dark future,” Leliana murmured. “The
assassination of Empress Celene? A demon army? It sounds almost impossible.”

“It sounds like something a Tevinter cult might do,” Dorian corrected her. “Orlais falls, the
Imperium rises. Chaos for everyone.”

Cullen ran a weary hand over his eyes, the anger draining from him. Maker, he was so
tired. “One battle at a time. It’s going to take time to organise our troops and the mage recruits. Let’s take this
to the War Room.” He peered hesitantly at Sevanna, beginning to regret his earlier sharpness.
“Would you join us? None of this means anything without your Mark, after all.” And you, he added
privately, wishing he could tell her.

She nodded, but Dorian chirped, “I’ll skip the war council, if you don’t mind.”

“You weren’t invited,” Leliana said coolly, and Cullen felt a ridiculous rush of affection towards
her, erasing his earlier aggravation.

Dorian laid a dramatic hand over his heart. “You wound me. I would like to see this Breach up
close, however; if a certain Herald would be so kind to accompany me later.”

A small smile curled the corner of Sevanna’s mouth; but it looked hollow, painted on an empty
mask. “Then you’re staying?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention? The south is so charming and rustic; I adore it to little pieces.”

“There’s no one I’d rather be stranded in time with.” Her voice was thin, the light-heartedness
transparent, but the admission made Cullen’s heart sink nonetheless.

“Excellent choice. Though let’s not get stranded again anytime soon, yes?” Dorian replied with a
smirk.

But Maker, Cullen really wanted to punch it from his face.

* *

It took days to organise the march on the summit. A seemingly infinite flood of mages poured into
Haven, having heard of Fiona’s cease-fire and the Inquisition’s pardon. Nerves and tempers chafed
as the Templar’s rumbled with dissent and the mages demanded more and more; more space, more
food, better quarters, better clothes. They wanted all the comforts and safety of the Circles, yet
none of the restrictions, and none of the jailers. More than once Cullen witnessed Cassandra
yelling at people-mages and Templars and clerics alike-breaking up fights and snuffing out
hostilities. Despite all their efforts, patience was beginning to wear thin; Haven was groaning
undeniably beneath the strain, and the Council began discussing the move to more permanent
holdings. Josephine was endlessly campaigning for Val Royeaux, Cassandra suggested Caer
Oswin, and Cullen thought Redcliffe was best. They argued in ceaseless circles, however, and
when it came time to seal the Breach nothing had been accomplished.

Cullen had not seen much of Sevanna in the last few days. After their War Meeting the night she
returned, she’d melted out of sight, and didn’t reappear until much later when he spotted her on the
opposite shores of the lake. She was digging elfroot from the frozen ground, making no sign of heading back to Haven even as the sun sank behind the mountains. Cullen summoned the courage to approach her, longing to speak with her and afraid of what she might say to him as he crunched through the snow to where she was crouched.

She hadn’t reacted when he’d called, “Lady Herald?” She was tugging industriously at an elfroot that had grown between some rocks; when he laid a hand on her shoulder she flinched away, and he realised she hadn’t heard him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and he knew he was apologising for more than startling her; for his impatience, for her pain, for whatever he might have done to send her fleeing back behind the mask he’d only just peeked under. “Perhaps you should return to Haven.”

“Alright,” she’d said automatically, with such an absence that made him wonder if she would have stayed out all night, listlessly collecting elfroot and freezing slowly solid.

He caught at her wrist before she could turn away. “I cannot pretend to understand what you witnessed in Redcliffe,” he said softly, wishing desperately that she would just look at him. “But whatever burdens weigh on you…let me help you carry them.”

Instead of meeting his eyes, she stared at his hand wrapped around her wrist. “Do you need more tea, Cullen?” she’d asked, her voice shaking slightly.

“I…” He’d wanted to push, to wrap himself around her and never let go until everything came spilling out; but he caught the tremble of her lip, the shining in her eyes, and knew that if he did he would crush her. She would never forgive him if he pushed, and he would break whatever it was between them, with no hope of putting it back together again. So he simply said, “Yes. I would… like that.”

“I’ll bring you more tomorrow.” Her voice had been hollow as she slipped her hand from his grip, slipping away like smoke. “Goodnight, Cullen.”

She left him in the snow, silent and drifting like the flakes in the air. She had not reverted back to ‘Commander’, and he took it as a good sign, however small.

He would ask her to stay, but he was no longer sure of her answer. But he would never forgive himself if he didn’t try.

The day of their assault on the Breach arrived. Sevanna, along with Cassandra and Solas, would lead the mages to the Temple, and among its skeleton they would suture the heavens, permanently ending the threat of a demon invasion. Cullen was not accompanying her; he, with the other advisors, and the bulk of his forces would wait at the foot of the mountain, ready to leap into action if the mages failed, and the Breach was torn open anew.

He hated that he had to send her straight into the pulsing heart of danger, and that if it all went wrong she would bear the brunt of it. And he was not certain she would be lucky enough to survive an explosion a second time.

As Sevanna lead her horse from the stables, Cullen seized his chance to assure his intentions. He wordlessly took the reins from her, brushing against her hand as he held her horse steady. She didn’t flinch away, but touched his elbow lightly as she slipped around him to climb into the saddle. The tentative touch stirred the ashes of his hope, giving him the courage he needed. He looped the reins over to her, taking the chance to cover her hands with his.
“A word upon your return, Lady Herald?” he asked quietly, well aware of the countless eyes upon them.

For the first time in many days, she did not look away from him. The shadow still lurked behind her eyes, betraying the absence of whatever she had lost when she’d returned from Redcliffe. “I thought I told you to call me Sevanna.”

He allowed himself a half-smile as he reluctantly released her hand. “Come back,” he said, yearning to add ‘to me’. “And I will.”

She gave him a small smile –genuine, though strained- and led the procession of mages up the path to the Temple.

Cullen watched her go, an empty ache in his chest like she’d taken a portion of his heart along with her. It was a desperate hope, a foolish hope that she may regain all the pieces she'd been robbed of when she finally sealed the Breach. If not…then he could only hope she would allow him to help rebuild her, would let him slip beneath the guard and help make her whole again.

For the first time in a long, long while, Cullen prayed.

*Maker watch over her, and bring her back to me.*

Chapter End Notes

As to Cullen puzzling over whether Sevanna's lack of 'staff' is a deal-breaker for Dorian...unforgivably lame, I know, but I couldn't resist. Oh Cullen, if only you knew. I write Chancellor Roderick as a much bigger prick than he actually was in the game, so I'm sorry if it's OOC. I do not think, however, that he would be above cheap shots; hence the slight on Dorian's mustache.

This chapter and the next was initially intended to be one, but it would have been monstrously long; just note that there is a reoccurring theme (I guess) that would have been more powerful if it were all one chapter, but ah well. Hopefully next update will be up soon. As always, let me know what you think - feedback keeps me going!
In Your Heart Shall Burn

Chapter Summary

The Red Templars attack Haven.

Chapter Notes

Hey there peeps. I have been dealing with a friend's crisis this past week, and have been very distracted. This chapter wasn't written as quickly as I'd hoped, and I apologise if it's not up to the usual standards. This chapter uses game dialogue from this mission, although I have mixed in some of my own edits. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She closed the Breach, and rode back to Haven on a tide of glory.

It had been a sight to behold, even from the base of the mountain. The Breach had churned like an emerald hurricane, echoing thunderclaps bouncing off the summits as tremendous amounts of magic poured into it. A billowing green blaze had arced up towards the sky like fire travelling up ivy, sending a rippling shockwave through the maw of the Fade with the colossal sound of splitting rock – and then its swirling slowed, growing dull until it collapsed in on itself, leaving a shadowy scar behind. It kicked up a vicious wind that sent the amassed forces staggering back, but the cheer went up before they had even righted themselves, drowning out the residual echo of the sky snapping shut.

Cullen did not join in the cheer, though he felt like a great weight had been lifted. He even indulged Josephine in a hug as she threw her arms around him in an apparent fit of unrestraint. The immediate threat was gone. There was no more chance that the Breach would burst like a lanced boil and pour forth an endless host of demons. But he would not breathe easy until Sevanna rode back down from the mountain whole and unhurt, would not let his heart truly leap until he was sure the success had been true.

When she rounded the bend of the mountain, leading the procession of mages back to Haven, she had never looked more beautiful. Her armor was scuffed and crooked from the blast, her fair skin flecked with dirt and ash, and her hair was falling into her face. But she was smiling, more brightly than she had since her return from Redcliff, although it still didn’t quite thaw her eyes – but it was genuine and warm and beautiful, and when her gaze met Cullen’s his heart nearly stopped.

Cullen did not join in the cheer, though he felt like a great weight had been lifted. He even indulged Josephine in a hug as she threw her arms around him in an apparent fit of unrestraint. The immediate threat was gone. There was no more chance that the Breach would burst like a lanced boil and pour forth an endless host of demons. But he would not breathe easy until Sevanna rode back down from the mountain whole and unhurt, would not let his heart truly leap until he was sure the success had been true.

The mass of soldiers who had collected at the base of the mountain parted respectfully for their Herald to pass; they even inclined their heads to the mages, all animosity gone now that they had attributed to the eradication of the Breach. Leliana bowed her head to Sevanna with a rare smile as she passed, and Josephine tried to covertly wipe her tears on her sleeve and stifle a hiccup. All Cullen could do was return Sevanna’s smile with one of his own.
Oh, how he wanted to walk next to her back to Haven, to lift her from her horse and press her to his chest and beg in front of everyone for her to stay. But, as always, Commander came first and Cullen a distant second; he ordered a unit to inspect the Temple and report any findings or suspicious activity to him, and stationed a rotating guard to ensure all remained quiet. The soldiers were eager for a celebration, and Cullen relaxed his standards a little. How could he deny them a night of revelry and good cheer? The threat was eliminated, so how could he force them to stand watch over a desolate ruin? They all deserved a night of ease and celebration.

By the time the patrols were organized and they returned to Haven, the festivities were in full swing. Cullen had barely walked through the gates when the Iron Bull pushed a drink into his hand, slapping him hard on the back with a roar of laughter. Cullen accepted it vaguely, searching instead for Sevanna. The streets of Haven were thick with revelers, people drinking and laughing, looking lighter than they had in months. He saw Lady Vivienne holding court over a knot of Orlesian pilgrims, their precarious swaying suggesting they had long been dipping into the casks of ale; he heard Varric loudly discussing titles for the book he would one day write about the Herald of Andraste, while Cassandra vetoed them with sounds of disgust; he passed Blackwall, who gave him a grim nod and smile, and a quick shake of his hand; he witnessed Sera belly crawl among some nobles, tying their bootlaces together. Finally, he spotted his quarry – Sevanna was with Leliana, being plied with well-wishers and shows of gratitude. She was still smiling, albeit a little tiredly, and was weathering the many bows, curtsies and kisses with good grace. Cullen hung back, waiting for an opening, however small, that he may pull her aside.

“Commander!” Josephine appeared at his shoulder, looking a little flushed but beaming. “Isn’t this simply wonderful?”

“It’s certainly something,” he replied dryly, tipping back his drink.

She gave him a chastising look. “This is a most excellent opportunity to show our guests a lighter side of the Inquisition. Do you have any idea what avenues this may open up into the Orlesian courts-?” And she was off, babbling about noble influence and auspicious contacts, the rumors they could engender and the favours they might accrue; Cullen wasn’t really listening, instead distracted by the fact that Sevanna was so frustratingly close, yet still so distant.

Josephine suddenly stopped speaking, the abrupt silence reminding Cullen that he should have been listening. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her looking from him to Sevanna, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“She is very pretty, no?” she said, a mixture of teasing and insinuation.

“She’s beautiful.” The words slipped out on their own accord, but he didn’t regret them. If he was going to ask Sevanna to stay, if he was going to stake his claim, he wanted his intentions to be clear. Whatever they might become, he would not hide it.

Nor could he obscure it, before it even happened, from a woman who had been trained to read faces beyond whatever mask they might wear. Her elegant eyebrows shot up with indecent haste, the corners of her mouth curling yet some more. “I shall leave you be,” Josephine said, and with a look as pointed as the quill she often used, she disappeared into the crowd.

Barely suppressing a smile, Cullen turned back to Sevanna. Bull and his Chargers had surrounded her, much to the chagrin of the finer company she’d been keeping, and Bull was loudly challenging her to a drinking contest. She was laughing, adamantly shaking her head, but joined in the cheer as Bull downed his enormous tankard in a series of sloppy gulps.

“Enjoying the view, Commander?”
This voice made Cullen’s mood more decidedly foul; he turned to see Dorian, cradling a chalice of wine as though it were a jewelled egg. There was a shadow of a smirk on the Tevinter’s face, his flint-colored eyes flicking between Cullen’s.

Cullen swallowed back the rearing irascibility, endeavouring to keep his voice polite. “Pardon me?”

Dorian moved almost offensively close, curling forward like a lick of flame. “So am I,” he said suggestively, his gaze trailing down to Cullen’s feet and back up again. With a roughish wink, he sauntered away in a swirl of buckles and robes, leaving Cullen more confused than irritated. That had been an undeniable leer, but Dorian had not even once glanced Sevanna’s way. Deciding not to bother fathoming how a Tevinter’s mind worked, Cullen looked back towards the Herald, discovering with a pang of disappointment that she had gone, whisked away by Vivienne to meet with yet more nobles.

The celebration carried on, the revelry getting more and more unabashed. Cullen could only enjoy it by half, as every opportunity to speak with Sevanna was thwarted either by reporting soldiers or those who captured her attention to thank or praise her. The sun fell behind the mountains, bringing the descending blue of evening, and still he had not asked her. *Stay with me.* The words were getting impatient, pacing in his mind like a caged beast desperate to get out. But perhaps there was no reason to rush - she looked like she was enjoying herself. The smile hadn’t faded from her lips, and her eyes were warming by degrees as the evening wore on. Cullen relaxed little by little, as it became obvious she was in no seeming haste to pack her bags or leave. He would get his chance to speak with her, whether it be tonight or tomorrow when things were a little quieter. He even began to enjoy himself, and eventually he saw a sight that made his heart leap – Sevanna standing on the ledge of the chantry courtyard, alone.

Two very unfortunate things happened.

Just as Cullen directed his strides to where she stood, Cassandra appeared at her side, engaging her in conversation; and just behind Cullen came a very strained, “Ser!”

He turned, coming face to face with one of his soldiers. “What is it, recruit?”

“A-an army, ser.” He was very pale. “Coming over the mountain. No banners.”

Cullen stared at him for three very long heartbeats, hardly believing his ears, before snapping into action. “Sound the alarms. Go!”

The soldier nodded a quick salute and dashed away. Within moments the pealing of bells sounded over the noise of the celebration; Cullen dashed in the direction of Haven’s gates, shouting, “Forces approaching! To arms!”

The animated chatter and drunken calls turned into screams and terrified babble, people suddenly scrambling for cover. Cullen hurried down to the gates where Leliana, Josephine and Lieutenant Rylen were waiting, but not before he caught sight of the distant mountain slopes; alive with a seething black mass, dotted with torches and growing ever closer.

He had barely received a brief report from Rylen when Cassandra skidded to a stop next to him, Sevanna at her heels. The Seeker looked wild, in contrast to Sevanna who seemed almost puzzled.

“Cullen?” Cassandra demanded.

“One watchguard reporting,” he said tersely, pointing in the direction they were swarming from.
“It’s a massive force, the bulk over the mountain.”


“None,” he said darkly.

Astonishment widened her eyes and slackened her mouth. “None?” she repeated incredulously. Cullen knew, in her world of nobility and houses, of family crests and colors and propitious alliances, that this was unheard of.

There was a sudden crash and the gates buckled inward, though they held; a flare of light bled on the ground beneath them. There was a sudden, desperate shout, “I can’t come in unless you open!”

Before Cullen could warn her or stop her, Sevanna leapt forward and dragged the doors open. The ground beyond was littered with prone, armored bodies, but one remained; a huge, hulking mass of metal and leather, strolling almost casually towards them, its massive sword glinting evilly.

There was barely a moment to register that it may have been a trap, when the soldier suddenly convulsed with an exclamation of pain; he dropped with a clatter, revealing a waifish young man behind him. He held two long daggers in milky, raw-boned hands and a large, floppy hat obscured most of his face and scraggly white-blond hair.

“I’m Cole. I came to warn you. To help. People are coming to hurt you. You probably already know.” He spoke fast, his voice strained and frightened. Sevanna approached him cautiously, the way one advanced on a terrified animal, all too aware of its teeth. Cullen followed swiftly behind, one hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Who is coming?” she asked gently.

The boy crept forward, raising his head so that one wide, pale eye was visible. It was fixed intently on Sevanna. “The Templars come to kill you.”

A jolt went through Cullen, and he strode forward angrily, making the boy flinch back. “Templars? Is this the Order’s response to our alliance with the mages? Attacking blindly?”


Cullen squinted, struggling to see through the falling night. On an outcropping of rock, overlooking the valley, was a man in Templar armor but it was… wrong. Inverted, somehow. But the recognition crept down Cullen’s spine, and he knew that pallid face, the lank hair and hollowed eyes, even from the distance.

Samson.

Another man marched up alongside him – no, not a man at all, but something worse. The shape was wrong, twisted and humped and demonic, the malevolence radiating from it like the breath of frost off a glacier. Growths of red lyrium from its body glowed dully, its hands long-fingered and claw-like. Its face was turned to Haven, the burn of its gaze potent even from afar.

“I know that man….” said Cullen slowly, “but this Elder One…”

There was no denying how scared he was of this creature.
“He’s very angry that you took his mages,” Cole said, barely audible.

“Cullen.” Her voice came from far away, and it was an effort to pull his gaze from the Elder One and meet Sevanna’s eyes. He could see his own fear reflected in the green depths. “What can we do?”

“Haven is no fortress,” he said bluntly. There was no use sugar-coating the situation; they were at an undeniable disadvantage. “If we are to withstand this monster, we must control the battle. We can use the trebuchets for long distance assault, perhaps cut off their path and reduce their numbers; but we must hold off the nearest ground forces, or we’ll be overrun.”

“I’ll go,” Sevanna said at once. “I’ll keep them off the trebuchets, and out of Haven.”

A different sort of fear surged through Cullen but he forced it back, buried it deep under the necessary cold of command. “Take reinforcements with you.”

“Don’t worry, Curly,” came Varric’s voice. He appeared at Sevanna’s side, Bianca already loaded with a bolt. Bull and Cassandra were right behind him, the Qunari grinning broadly, the Seeker grim. “We’ll watch Fidget’s back.”

Cullen nodded gravely. “Use everything you can.” He drew his sword, turning back to Haven. The rest of the Herald’s companions had amassed there, along with mages and Inquisition soldiers. Rylen was already ordering them into units. “Mages!” Cullen shouted. “You – you have sanction to engage them. That is Samson. He will not make it easy.” He raised his sword in the air, as groups of soldiers rushed past, heading for the trebuchets. “Inquisition! With the Herald! For your lives! For all of us!”

There was an answering roar as more soldiers and mages stampeded past, heading towards the torches that had reached the banks of the frozen lake. Cullen caught at Rylen. “Get the people to the chantry. Round up supplies. Make preparations to evacuate in the event it becomes necessary.”

“Ser!” Rylen saluted and lead another group back into Haven.

“Rousing speech, Commander.” Dorian had snuck up on him again. “Where can my plethora of talents serve best?”

“Take Vivienne and Solas,” he replied shortly. Beyond the walls came the uproar of battle cries and clanging steel – the battle had begun. “Fortify the chantry with wards. Place glyphs around it too, in case our enemies make it over the walls.”

Dorian clucked his tongue. “Dull. But consider it done.”

He sped off, Solas at his heels; Vivienne, who never followed behind anyone, was already far ahead. Cullen turned back to the remaining companions. “Sera, get somewhere high.”

“Easy pickings, yeah?” She nodded eagerly, wearing a wicked grin. “I’ll need more arrows.” She scampered away, yelling something about butts.

“Warden Blackwall-” Cullen began.

“I think I’m best here with you,” the older man said, slinging his shield over his arm. “If you don’t mind the company.”

Cullen felt a wry twist of his lips. “Exactly what I was about to suggest.”
“Good man,” rumbled Blackwall. He drew his sword and led the way into the fray.

Cole had not been wrong; these soldiers, indeed, were Templars. But their armor was not hammered steel but black metal, emblazoned with a red crest, and they were mutated – red lyrium burst from their helmets and chest plates and greaves, adding more protection to the few vulnerabilities in their armor. Cullen and Blackwall held their position at the gates, slaying whatever foe managed to break through the lines of defense. Some small, withered part of Cullen grieved; these were his former brothers and sisters, and he was forced to cut them down. But he was also not fighting Templars – their swiftness and their ferocity was unfamiliar, the brutality of their attacks staggering. He had seen Templars cut down mages in cold blood, but never before had he seen the Order carve such a bloody path through whatever stood in their way. The way they lurched and downed every adversary without hesitation or flicker of anything in their stony faces – no, these were Templars no longer.

There was the groaning of springs and gears, and the nearest trebuchet launched, slinging its great arm up and over. Its ammunition hurtled towards the mountain, the muffled impact trembling the ground. There was no rockslide, or avalanche as Cullen had hoped – but there were two more trebuchets to launch.

One of which should have fired by now, incidentally; he saw Sevanna and her company run up the path towards the south trebuchet, presumably to see why it wasn’t firing. A fleeting stab of relief went through him, but it was extinguished when he heard Blackwall swear. “Maker’s balls!”

Cullen turned to a thing of horror – an enormous, vaguely human-shape, almost entirely grown over with red lyrium. This monstrosity carried no weapon, but its arms served as massive blades and spike; one of which sliced towards Cullen’s head, forcing him to duck and roll away. Blackwall was already hacking at it, but it seemed to be of little use; the lyrium served as its armor, tough and nearly unbreakable. Cullen slashed at its legs, hoping to bring it down, but he barely even sent it off balance.

There was a whistle and a thud as an arrow buried itself in what might have been the creature’s eye; it staggered back with a bellow of pain, which wasn’t loud enough to drown out the shout of “Eat it!”

For the first time, Cullen thanked the Maker for Sera; he pressed his advantage, slicing into the creature’s flank between seams of red lyrium. It screeched again, falling to one knee – Blackwall smashed the edge of his shield into the back of its neck, shattering the red lyrium and driving the metal edge deep. With a hollow gurgle, the creature fell forward, unmoving and Blackwall yanked his now bent shield from its neck.

“Damned blighter,” he growled, examining the splintered wood and twisted metal. He tossed it aside. “That was my best shield.”

A hysterical sort of laugh bubbled up in Cullen’s chest; but before he could choke it down the second trebuchet launched. This time, the impact worked; it loosed an avalanche, a tidal wave of snow and ice racing down the mountain and snuffing out the torches that wound their way towards Haven. Another cheer went up, and Cullen sagged with relief, thinking the battle was nearly won-

Then the roar of a dragon rent the air, and a colossal fireball pummeled the second trebuchet in an explosion of flame and splintered wood.

Ice flooded through Cullen, turning his blood sluggish and thick, his bones suddenly brittle with frost. “Retreat!” he bellowed to his forces. “Back to Haven!”
There was no need to order them twice, especially with a dragon swooping overhead, wheeling back for another attack. They fled back into Haven, faces wild with fear, and Cullen ushered them past, sick with desperation to run to the south trebuchet and see the destruction, terrified of the carnage that surely must lay there, and Sevanna – she was -

She was sprinting towards him with Cassandra, Varric, Bull and Harrit in tow. She was limping and singed, with bits of debris in her hair and a cut under one eye – but she was alive. She pulled Harrit in front of her, making sure he got through the gate first; Cassandra pulled up the rear, with a grim shake of her head at Cullen. “We are the last. No one is left.”

There was grief, but it was buried somewhere deep, under pain and fear and the blank horror of it all. Cullen pulled the gates shut, slamming bolts into place even though he knew it was fruitless – they had not destroyed the entire army, and the dragon that flew overhead in a blur of scales and claws could not be kept out by stone walls and wooden gates. The air was heavy and acrid with smoke, and Cullen did not need the telltale orange glow to know that the streets were burning behind him.

“We need everyone back to the chantry! It’s the only building that might hold against that- that beast!” he ordered, jogging up the steps. “At this point, just make them work for it.” His voice was hollow, and the desolation he felt was mirrored on every face.

There was a fresh outbreak of screams and unearthly screeches; more Red Templars and red lyrium monstrosities were swarming over the battlements like ants over a carcass, and Cullen knew Haven was lost.

“We must save who we can!” Cassandra said in a hard voice, leading the way into battle; Lysette was nearest, losing ground against a knot of Red Templars. They dispatched them with little effort and they resumed their race to the chantry. At the top of the stairs, Cullen heard a weak cry for help; it was coming from a blazing wooden house, and though he hated it he knew it was hopeless - but to his horror, Sevanna raced towards a stack of boxes at its corner and began to climb, intent on reaching whoever was inside.

“Herald, no!” he shouted, seizing her around the waist. He yanked her away just as there was a snapping of wood and the roof crumpled, sending a blaze of fire and embers into the air and silencing the feeble calls for help. Sevanna gave a strangled, wordless cry and tried to fight her way out of Cullen’s grasp; he spun her around and grabbed her by the shoulders. “I had to stop you,” he pleaded. “We cannot save everyone.”

She stared back, the sorrow evident on her face, sending slivers into Cullen’s heart. Then she spun from his grip and dashed towards the tavern, where another horde of former Templars were climbing over the walls.

“Keep her safe!” he spat at Cassandra. “Retreat to the chantry when you can!”

He ran there himself, pausing only to help Threnn fight off more Red Templars. The smoking, mutated remains littered outside the chantry informed him that the immolation glyphs had been successful; he was even inclined to thank Dorian, and perhaps he would, if they all made it out alive.

The chantry was full with whispering, terrified townspeople and injured soldiers propped against pillars. Cullen scanned the white faces, his heart sinking. It had been the best, only idea to bring everyone to the chantry – but now with the threat of a dragon, he felt as though he’d condemned them to a funeral pyre, penned them in like sheep to await an advancing wolf.
He spotted Rylen near the back of the hall, and strode towards him. “Lieutenant. Report.”

“It’s not good, ser,” Rylen said bracingly. “These people are all that’s left. A dozen civilians dead, many more injured. Lysette lost her entire unit, and two more were slaughtered on the lake. Twenty-four dead in all.”

Cullen swore under his breath, though he was amazed it hadn’t been more. “And the mages?”

“They fought. Fifteen reported dead.” Rylen’s eyes flashed. “Ser, the enemy forces—”

“Templars.” Cullen finished for him, his voice hard. “Or at least what used to be Templars. I know.”

“Did you see the red lyrium ones?”

“Warden Blackwall killed one, but it was difficult to defeat. They’re powerful, and the lyrium… well, it only makes them stronger.” He perused the room again, taking in the crates and woven baskets, burlap bags and the scant possessions clutched in their owner’s arms. All that was left of their resources, the last relics of a life they were about to lose. “Have preparations been made to evacuate? Do we have supplies?”

“As much as we could manage. Dennet took some men to save as many horses as they could, but he still lost half his herd. They loaded some carts and rode into the Frostbacks, away from the enemy.” Rylen paused, the muscles of his jaw flexing. “Commander, do you really think evacuation is still possible?”

Cullen met his eyes, resolute and yet defeated; he didn’t see where they could go, which direction they could flee that wouldn’t lead the people to their deaths. “No,” he confessed quietly. “I don’t.”

There was a commotion at the doors of the chantry; a few more survivors stumbled in, coughing from the smoke and ash, Chancellor Roderick yelling feebly about sanctuary. He was ashen, a telltale stain blooming on his white cleric’s robes, and he was supported by the boy with the strange hat, Cole. Cullen saw a copper head enter the chantry last, the doors swinging shut behind her, and caught glimpse of Sevanna’s face as her companions gathered around her. Her expression was unutterably sad, her eyes trailing over the people huddled in the hall, and even from the distance Cullen could read the wondering in her eyes: Is this all who was left?

He swallowed hard, and made his way towards her. “Herald. Our position is not good. That dragon stole back any time you might have earned us.”

“I’ve seen an archdemon,” said Cole, carefully helped Roderick into a chair. “I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”

“I don’t care what it looks like,” Cullen said, barely controlling the snap in his voice. “It’s cut a path for that army. They’ll kill everyone in Haven!”

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village,” Cole said sadly. “He only wants the Herald.”

“Then he can have me,” Sevanna said instantly, squaring her shoulders. The implication of her sacrifice hit Cullen like the blow of a hammer, and Solas made a soft sound of dissent.

“He wants to kill you,” said Cole. “No one else matters, but he’ll crush them, kill them anyway.” He hunched his shoulders, curling in on himself like a cowering pup. “I don’t like him.”

“You don’t like…?” Cullen began incredulously, then shook his head. “Herald, there are no tactics
to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We could turn the
remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide.”

“We’re overrun,” she murmured, and he knew she was speaking largely to herself. “To hit the
enemy, we would bury Haven.”

“We’re dying,” Cullen said baldly. Saying it aloud didn’t make it hurt any less, nor did it smooth
the roughness of his voice. “But we can decide how. Many don’t get that choice.”

Though her expression remained level, something dark passed behind Sevanna’s eyes again; Cole
flinched away from her as though he’d been burned. “It hurts,” he gasped raggedly, pressing
trembling hands over his ears. “It’s loud – her hurt is so loud.”

Cullen had no idea what the boy was on about, but Sevanna’s eyes had flicked away from his own;
Cole suddenly froze, cocking his head towards Roderick. “Yes, that,” he breathed, his voice back
to how it was, lacking that jagged edge. “Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before
he dies.”

The Chancellor took a slow, serrated breath. “There is a path. You wouldn’t know it unless you’d
made the Summer Pilgrimage, as I have.” He sounded very weak, though he struggled to his feet.
“The people can escape. She must have shown me. Andraste must have shown me so I could…tell
you. It was whim that I walked the path. I did not mean to start – it was overgrown. Now, with so
many in the Conclave dead, to be the only one who remembers…I don’t know…”

The confession nearly sent Cullen reeling. “And you’re just telling us about it now?” But he could
only imagine how tantalising that must have been; to be the only remaining cleric who knew of the
path, the last keeper of this old secret.

Roderick shook his head, looking –for the first time- contrite. “I was not purposefully concealing
it. Believe me Commander…I did not mean…” He coughed, wetting his lips with his own blood.
“Herald, if this simple memory can save us, this could be more than mere accident. You could be
more.”

Cullen raised his brow in surprise; it seemed there were no unrepentant men at the gallows.

“Could it work, Cullen?” He recognized the plea in Sevanna’s voice. “Could you get them out?”

He blew out a slow breath, hesitant of making any promises he could not keep; but there was no
time left for such hesitation. “Possibly. If he shows us the path. But what of your escape?”

She turned her face away without answering him; she did not need to, when the hard set of her jaw
and the whitening of her knuckles told Cullen everything he needed to know. He flashed back to
their conversation on the bridge, when she said that it had been accident that she had lived; an
accident, it seemed, she was about to rectify.

This was falling.

Cullen felt as though the sky had dropped away from him at the zenith of his flight, and there was
nothing left to hold him aloft – no wind, no air, no world. Just a spiral into darkness, stealing his
breath and sending his heart into a duplicate plunge. The words he had been longing to say, the
ones that had branded themselves into his brain, crumbled to ash in his mouth as he was forced to
turn over the internal battle – the Templar versus the man. The man had lost, had to surrender his
will and desires and unspoken words – the words he no longer had any right to, when it was the
choice between one life or many.
Stay with me.

He swallowed past the syllables that had turned to sand in his throat; heavy, burning, choking sand. “Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way.” But the words were empty, even to his own ears.

Cassandra strode forward, stoic and determined as always. “I will not let you stand alone, Herald,” she said firmly.

“Wild archdemons couldn’t keep me from your side,” said Dorian, twirling his staff.

Blackwall inclined his dark head. “You have my sword, my Lady.”

Looking stricken for a moment, Sevanna opened her mouth to protest; then snapped it shut, her face growing hard. “If I tell you to run, you will,” she ordered. Her eyes lingered on Cassandra. “Even if it means leaving me behind.”

“Such bossiness,” said Dorian breezily. “One might think you’re in charge.”

Cullen suddenly could not bear to look at her anymore, lest he cup her jaw and crush his lips against hers in front of everyone. Oh, and the man he had gagged and harnessed somewhere deep and dark wanted to…but he couldn’t endure having one small piece of her only to lose it, too. So instead, he wrenched himself away, striding towards those who watched and waited. “Inquisition, follow Chancellor Roderick through the chantry. Move.” He was hesitant to call on soldiers to accompany Sevanna to the trebuchet, knowing it was an order of sacrifice; but three came forward of their own volition, faces pale but set, and saluted him. “Go to the trebuchet,” he said, his voice cracking. “Maker watch over you all.” He turned back as Roderick limped by him, once again aided by Cole. The people parted for them and followed, gathering up the meager supplies that were now everything they owned.

There were no goodbyes, even hasty ones, between Sevanna and her companions. It seemed like if the words remained unspoken, it would sway the tide of inevitability. All but Cassandra, Dorian and Blackwall hurried past Cullen. He met Sevanna’s steady gaze again, pointing after the soldiers. “They’ll load the trebuchets. Keep the Elder One’s attention until we’re above the tree line.”

She nodded, her lips tightly compressed, the rebel strand of hair hanging by her jaw. She turned to follow her companions out of the chantry – out of his sight - and it felt like a thread was unspooling in Cullen’s chest, becoming excruciatingly taut as the distance between them grew.

“Herald,” he called, sounding strangled. She turned at the door, and in this fleeting moment he catalogued the precise green of her eyes – like clear mountain pools. “If we are to have a chance – if you are to have a chance – let that thing hear you.”

She nodded once more, and their gazes broke; she slipped through the doors, letting them thud shut behind her, closing on the now empty, echoing chantry. The thread in Cullen’s chest snapped, slipping between his fingers; and in that old, hollowed out place buried beneath the Templar, the man howled.

\*

It wasn’t easy moving through the passage beneath Haven. It was indeed overgrown, twined with bulging roots, sloping perilously upward and slick with frost. But it was safe, and allowed them to hurry even though they were burdened with supplies. Not everyone was dressed for a hasty escape, however, and Cullen witnessed the Iron Bull heft an indignant Josephine under one arm, as she had been slowed by her insensible shoes. He brought up the rear, straining for the sounds of enemies
barraging their way through the chantry – but all remained eerily silent.

The path led them high into the Frostbacks; in their first turn of luck, they found Dennet and the soldiers with him at the mouth of the tunnel. In their second, it had let them out at a ridge high enough to be out of danger’s path, and they would not have to struggle through the snow to safety. A vicious wind had kicked up, heralding a blizzard, but Cullen didn’t feel its bite as he barreled towards the edge that overlooked Haven, squinting through the smoke and the dark to find the trebuchet.

What he saw nearly made him buckle in the snow.

Even from the distance, he made out the deformed shape of the Elder One; taller than any mortal man, terrifyingly lit by the flames that consumed Haven. He was holding – *Maker*, he was holding Sevanna by the wrist, dangling her off the ground as though she were no more than a rag doll; Cullen knew it was her by the spitting green in her hand. The dragon was curled nearby, it’s sinewy neck stretched forward as if it were curious of their cornered prey. As Cullen struggled to find his voice, the Elder One tossed her away; the cry was torn from him as she hit the trebuchet and crumpled. She staggered to her feet with obvious difficulty, but he knew, eventually, she would fall and not stand back up again.

“The signal!” he ordered, capturing his voice at last. “*Light the signal!***

“*Just use your stupid magic already!*” came Sera’s harassed voice, and there was a sudden crackle of flames behind Cullen –whether from Vivienne or Solas, he did not know- but he heard the signature twang of a fired bow, and he looked up to see the flaming arrow arc high overhead. He looked back towards Sevanna; she had taken up a sword, but from here it looked like a silver toothpick, and for all the good Cullen knew it would do, it may as well have been one.

There was a heart-stopping moment where he wondered desperately if she’d seen the signal – almost hoped she didn’t, because her opportunities to escape were growing ever narrower- but then she leapt to the side, kicking the lever of the trebuchet and it slung its arm over, hurling its ammunition towards the mountain.

The impact shook the very ground beneath him, and Cullen reeled back from the ledge. The mountain’s face had broken, been shattered like a fist against glass, and with a colossal rumble, began to tumble down.

She was running, but how do you outrun the world coming apart around you? The encroaching avalanche swallowed the trebuchet, consumed her, devoured Haven in its white, snapping mouth – but even as the snow billowed through the air, sending up clouds of ash and smoke, Cullen saw the dark shape of a dragon take flight, and knew it had all been for naught.

The ringing in his ears continued even after the world had long fallen silent.

He had killed her; had buried her as surely as if he’d dropped the mountain on top of her himself.

His eyes scanned the white, blank slate where Haven had once stood, continuously and frantically, even though he knew it was hopeless.

“Commander.” The voice called him back from the brink, snapping him back to where he was; knee-deep in the snow with a shepherd-less flock that had no home. He blinked Cassandra into view. Her face was soot-streaked and bloody, her armor dented and singed. Dorian and Blackwall were behind her, looking just as beaten up and defeated. She shook her head at his unasked question, the tightness of her jaw suggesting she was holding back much more than the words she
didn’t want to say; but Cullen knew, that if Cassandra were here, than all hope was truly lost.

“Cullen.” Leliana was beside him now, one hand on his arm. “We must move on.”

He nodded tightly, looking over his shoulder to the people gathered around them. Their faces were blurred and indistinct, and for just a moment they were only ghosts in the blizzard.

He could not leave without some sort of acknowledgement, some testament to Sevanna’s bravery. Without forethought, he jerked his sword from his hip, striding once more to the edge that had looked over Haven. He stabbed it into the snow, driving it deep through the ice, marking the site of the Herald’s final stand, when her miracles had finally run out.

Cassandra appeared next to him, her scarred face resolute; she, too, drove her sword into the snow next to his. Blackwall followed suit, kneeling before the monument as he did so; Sera stomped forward to shove an arrow in as well, scrubbing furiously at her nose; the Iron Bull snapped off one of his leather cuffs and dropped it on the pommel of Cullen’s sword; Varric tenderly laid a bolt against Cassandra’s sword, muttering “Aw shit, Fidget.”

Cullen’s throat was tight, and he couldn’t find any words to say; ‘Thank-you’ or ‘Rest in the Maker’s arms’ did not seem adequate enough-

Before he could say anything, however, a lattice of ice began to creep along their crude version of a headstone, spiralling into beautiful flowers of frost amid icy bramble and thorn, twining between the blades that marked a fallen warrior.

He glanced sideways at Dorian; the Tevinter sculpted an intricate rose with a final flourish before lowering his staff, his eyes impossibly sad. Cullen could still not find the words, though perhaps none were needed – their makeshift shrine was everything they wanted, and hadn’t the chance, to say. Goodbye.

He turned his back on it, striding through the snow. “Inquisition – we move forward!”

They walked, and he led the way; though they had never really had a leader, it felt even more leaderless now, and it was out of blind sense of duty that Cullen took the front. He ordered that fires be built as they go, in order for those who were slower to afford a rest and warm themselves, though he ploughed tirelessly forward. He didn’t pretend that it was also to leave a trail; that if they were blessed with one more miracle, there would be evidence of their survival to follow.

There was ever-changing company beside him: Cassandra, who was burdened with the same silent grief as he; Leliana, whose sharp eyes never wavered from the unknown path ahead; Solas, who had said quietly “Be what the people need you to be.” Even Sera, whom Cullen tried to force a blanket around as she was wearing nothing but her thin leathers. But she shoved him off with a glare, saying “I’m not taking that when people are freezing their bums off, yeah?” And once, the flicker of presence next to Cullen and a voice that was not his echoed his thoughts: “I could have loved her” –but when he looked, no one was there.

They walked. And walked and walked, trudging through the deepening snow until Sera began to complain that her toes were about to fall off, until the snow and ice in Blackwall’s beard had aged him forty years, until Cullen’s legs began to shake with exhaustion. They came across a shallow valley, shielded from the winds by mountains on all sides, and he ordered a stop. Despite the fatigue of his men, tents were set up in little time, latrines dug and fires built –and they were mercifully afforded a respite.

Cullen could not rest. He prowled through the camp, collecting scant reports and making sure
people were warm, that they were fed and had blankets. But soon every task was done, every responsibility winding down and he was left with a clawing black guilt that dug itself in deep, making him want to scream with the pain of it.

He left the camp behind, wanting to get away from the warmth and the light and promise of rest, punishing himself for what he had done. For the sentence he had passed, the condemning of a woman who was beautiful and brave and innocent—a woman he had cared for, but damned her anyway.

The headache he had been ignoring for hours was now granted a full assault. It burrowed itself behind his eyes, cleaving his head in two with a sharpened edge, winding his neck muscles as tight as the trebuchets that had wrought the destruction on Haven. He dug the palms of his hands into his eyes, trying to force more than the pain back, for his eyes had burned with the grief that threatened to turn into tears—and he would not weep for her, not here in the snow and the dark just a dozen feet from everything they had left, which was just evidence of everything they had lost.

“Cullen.” Cassandra’s voice again. She who knew his silent burden, the only witness to the lion he kept caged. Her footsteps crunched behind him and he turned towards her; it was times like this, when he was worn down by the stones he carried, exhausted and spent that the madness crept in, and he had to blink away the folded raven wings on the Seeker’s head. When he once more saw black hair and not feathers, he trusted himself to look into her face; there was sympathy there, an expression that did not cross her carved features often.

“Come back to the warmth,” she said quietly. “You need to rest.”

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “No.”

She didn’t challenge him. “What are you waiting for?”

He sighed, the cloud of his breath so like the ghost he desperately wished he could let go. “I don’t know.”

She didn’t say anything else, but took up a silent vigil with him; staring into the dark, awaiting something they both knew, deep down, was not coming.

There were no prayers he could utter that wouldn’t feel false. His faith had been a waning thing for a long time, bolstered briefly by the one good thing that had been tossed into his life. Prayers would change nothing, would not chase away the shadows that were slowly engulfing him, and Cullen had never felt so alone and abandoned.

Which was why he thought it a cruel trick when he saw the first flicker of green light. Some final joke of the Maker, a cosmic chuckle at his own bad luck; but then there was a second flare of green, pulsing like an emerald heartbeat against the black night, and when Cassandra gasped, Cullen knew it was unbelievably real.

His mouth flapped uselessly as his legs jerked into movement. He stumbled and slipped, but then he was running, racing through the snow as he shouted “There she is!”

“No!” Cassandra cried behind him, but he had already left her behind, his longer legs outstripping her easily in the snow. Raised voices from camp swelled up too, but it was simply noise to Cullen; he was closing in on her, the glowing Mark guiding him like a lighthouse on a lonely rock as she fell to her knees feet from him. He threw himself forward, his knees gouging tracks in the snow as he slid. He caught her against his chest, preventing her falling face-first into the snow.
Her skin was as white and cold as milk, her lips an alarming pale blue. Her eyes were closed, her frozen lashes casting spiky shadows across her pale cheeks and Cullen was terrified that she had found her way to him only to die in his arms.

“Lady Herald?” he said urgently, gripping her shoulders in shaking hands. When she didn’t react, no flicker of movement in her face, he tried again. “Sevanna?”

The sound of her name elicited a tiny, broken sound, and he could have wept with joy from it. Her eyes fluttered open; they were as distant and cold as glaciers out at sea, but recognition flickered in their depths.

“You found me,” she breathed, and they drifted shut again. He let her sag into his chest as he slung off his cloak and furs; Cassandra skidded to a halt next to them as he tightly wrapped Sevanna in them, taking care to surround her face with the fur.

“She’s alive?” she asked breathlessly, wondrously.

“Yes,” Cullen said. He lifted Sevanna in his arms, cradling her like the most precious thing in the world. “Thank the Maker, yes.”

Cassandra never left his side as they trudged down to camp, the going a little more precarious now that he balanced Sevanna in his arms. But he could’ve walked forever, clutching her against him, cold and breathing and alive. He could hear the shouts coming from camp, Leliana ordering preparations for their arrival, and it was a reawakened faith that bore him back to the light. Sevanna’s chest barely rose and fell, and he held her tighter. He pressed his lips against her cold temple, breathing in the scent the mountain had not erased – flowers and sunlight and warm, salted breezes.

“Stay with me, Sevanna,” he whispered raggedly, afraid she would drift away even as he anchored her. “Stay with me.”

The fist that tightened against his chest told him she had heard him, and his heart began to beat anew.

Chapter End Notes

Seggrit died because he’s an asshole, and I hate him.
Haven was not particularly full in the game, but I took the liberty of adding more people than what we saw. It only makes sense for it to be a little fuller than say, like, twenty people.
Heat

Chapter Summary

She is cold, Cullen warms her up.

Chapter Notes

This happened because I am a shameless sucker for body heat scenes. I also find it highly unreasonable that they would plop a half-frozen person on a cot that wasn't even in a proper tent.

Also, I figured you needed a bit of fluff to sustain you until the juicy chapters. Sorrynotsorry.

It seemed the Herald of Andraste wasn’t out of miracles, after all.

She had been tested by fire and tempered by snow. She had refused to bow to the mountains even as they swallowed her, and conquered them instead with an uncrushable will. She was a miracle, and if she hadn’t been cradled in Cullen’s arms he might not have even believed it possible.

He and Cassandra ploughed their way back to camp, each step sending them knee-deep into powder, but the determined fire Sevanna’s reappearance had kindled within them didn’t allow them to falter. Cassandra positioned herself by Sevanna’s head, constantly rearranging and tucking the fur around her pale face like a worried mother hen. Cullen carried her high in his arms so that her face was tucked close to his neck; it was like cradling a sculpture of ice, as still and cold as she was. Underneath all the relief and disbelief that she had returned to them, he wrestled a small flicker of fear – she wasn’t shivering, despite the ice of her skin and blue of her lips and eyelids, and he knew it wasn’t a good sign.

They finally stumbled into camp, where Leliana awaited them. The Spymaster’s clever eyes swept over Sevanna’s still form, and they darkened. “This way,” she said, leading them to a nearby tent. She held the fabric aside so Cullen could duck past it; it was gloriously warm within, the already prepared bedroll thick with blankets and pans of heated water waiting nearby. Josephine was in one corner, anxiously wringing her hands. A tough-looking woman that Cullen recognized as Haven’s surgeon kneeled on one side of the bedroll, turning the blankets down. Solas was here too, his back turned on them as he crushed herbs and stuffed them into a flask with quick, practised hands.

“Place her here, Commander,” the surgeon said briskly. Kneeling, he placed Sevanna down gently, taking care to arrange her head on the pillow. He stood and stepped back as the surgeon and Cassandra began to peel off her armor, sodden in some places but stiff with ice in others.

Leliana placed a hand on his arm, drawing him back. “Why don’t you inform the Herald’s companions of her survival?” she murmured quietly.

He preferred to stay, reluctant to take his eyes off her again, even for a moment; but as he opened his mouth to tell the Spymaster he wasn’t going anywhere, the surgeon began working Sevanna’s
shirt from her body, leaving an expanse of her taut abdomen very bare.

The tent suddenly became much warmer, and Leliana’s expression became much more pointed. Inwardly grateful that his face was still red from the cold mountain wind, Cullen gave a mumbled assent and excused himself from the tent, keen on putting a little distance between him and the thought of Sevanna’s naked skin…which would be slowly revealed, inch by inch...

He scowled at himself. For Andraste’s sake, she was half-dead from the cold, and here he was having to force away indecent thoughts of her body…the body that had fit so perfectly in his arms, nestled against his chest like she’d been sculpted for that very purpose…

Maker’s breath. He was getting a little too warm, despite the frigid air, and set off with long strides to find Sevanna’s companions, distracting himself from –well, himself. The Templar had fulfilled his purpose, and the man had been unchained, had seized control of all his faculties, reminding Cullen that under all the armor he still was one.

He didn’t have far to look for Sevanna’s inner circle; within moments he heard hurried footsteps crunching behind him, and he turned to see Dorian and Varric practically running towards him, Blackwall following at a more dignified pace.

“Is it true, Commander?” Dorian called rather breathlessly. “Is she here?” His usual swagger was gone, replaced instead by a focused stride, the smirk swapped with concern; it was by far the most genuine expression Cullen had seen on him, and the familiar dislike didn’t rear up as strongly as it once had.

“Yes,” he said, as they skidded to a stop. “She’s being examined now.”

“She must’ve had the shit kicked out of her,” Varric said. “How’d she look?”

That flicker of fear grew into a smouldering pit. “Not…not good,” Cullen admitted. “She was nearly frozen when we found her.”

“Well, she didn’t survive Haven just to be taken down by a little chill,” Dorian said, his usual impertinence returning. “And it would be terribly rude if she died before thanking the commander for rescuing her.”

Blackwall snorted. Cullen spluttered a little at the flippancy, but before he could chastise the Tevinter, another voice interrupted him.

“The Boss made it, huh?” They turned to see Bull and his Charger’s marching towards them. “Knew she was tough, but shit – not quite that tough. A fucking mountain came down on top of her.” Behind their leader’s broad back, Cullen saw one of the Charger’s discreetly pass coins to his fellow, who pocketed them with a knowing grin; had there been bloody bets on Sevanna’s survival?

“Harold’s back?” Sera strolled up, a half-eaten peach in hand. Cullen knew her penchant for calling people the wrong name, and didn’t bother to correct her; this wasn’t the first time he’d heard that, and he’d been enduring ‘Cully-Wully’ for weeks now (Maker’s breath, it even made ‘Curly’ seem bearable). “Good. Thought I’d have to kill her for dying all big hero-like on us.”

“What remarkable sensitivity,” Vivienne said imperiously, floating over. “Speaking like that of the woman who saved us all. Have you really no shame, my dear?”

Sera belched in response.
“How charming,” Vivienne drawled, with the flutter of a glittering hand. “You say the Herald has been returned to us, Commander?”

He inclined his head. “She has, Madame de Fer.”

“This is most joyous news. I shall spread word at once - the people will be pleased.”

She swept away once more, and Sera snorted. “Bitch won’t really tell people. Just the stuck-up prissy-pants and bootlickers.”

“Is Fidget taking visitors?” asked Varric.

Cullen shook his head. “Not now. She needs rest and healing potions. She has been through much.”

“Maybe drinking to her recovery is in order,” Bull rumbled.

“You were already drinking, chief,” said Krem, rolling his eyes.

Varric chuckled. “I’ll drink to that too, Tiny. You in, Hero? Sparkler?”

Dorian sighed. “How low I must have fallen, if the only way to forget I’m arse-deep in snow on some forsaken mountain, is to drown myself in the piss you pass off as spirits.”

“How about the same thing as you passing that scrub on your lip as facial hair,” Blackwall retorted, laughing.

The Tevinter sniffed. “At least it has little chance of birds mistaking it for their nests. Have you never heard of combs, Ser Warden?”

The ribbing was the mark of how much lighter the atmosphere had become; Bull, the Chargers, Varric, Blackwall and Dorian drifted away, hooting and exchanging jabs, leaving Cullen alone once more. He just wished Sevanna had been there to hear it – it would have made her smile.

With little hesitation, he made his way back to her tent. He had filled Leliana’s request, and surely by now Sevanna would be bundled in thick quilts, the color returning to her skin as warmth was returned to her.

Which was why Cullen ducked right back into the tent without announcing himself first, or checking to see if it was acceptable to enter; the sight that greeted him sent a hot stab through him, both unfamiliar and unsettling in its intensity.

Sevanna was kneeling in her bedroll, turned slightly from the mouth of the tent, and she was naked from the waist up. Her arms were above her head, her fingers digging into Cassandra’s wrists as the Seeker held them out of the way for the surgeon, who was pressing and squeezing along Sevanna’s ribs. Cullen barely registered the screwed-up expression of pain on her face before his gaze dropped shamefully to her breasts, which hung full and lush and free – Maker, they are perfection, some stupid primal part of his brain whispered, unbidden.

Her bitten-out cry of pain jolted Cullen from his staring, and he averted his eyes as a wordless noise caught and cracked in his throat, giving his presence away. Leliana whipped her head towards the sound and stepped swiftly in front of him; not to block him out, he knew, but to afford Sevanna a modicum of privacy.

“How is she?” he said, attempting to gloss over his rather awkward entrance. He focused very hard on the Spymaster’s nose, taking great pains to count the faint freckles there so he wouldn’t see
Sevanna’s breasts that had lingered teasingly in his mind’s eye. He knew he was a boiling, incriminating shade of scarlet, and hoped Leliana would choose not to comment.

“She has broken several ribs,” Leliana said. The cool cadence of her accent didn’t reveal exactly what she thought of the Commander getting a glimpse of the Herald’s naked breasts. “They must be set before they can mend.”

“No major internal injuries,” the surgeon called from where she kneeled. “Which is a miracle in itself, really. The bruising suggests she fell a long way.”

Cullen hadn’t noticed any bruising, distracted as he was by her naked flesh…by the tight, pink peaks-no, don’t think about that! “Has Se- um, the Herald relayed how she escaped?”

Leliana shook her head. “The pain is keeping her conscious, but she isn’t fully alert.”

“Her body is severely weakened,” said Solas, who had his back to the rest of them, displaying infinite more reserves of tact than Cullen had. “If you hadn’t found her when you did, Commander, her collapse in the snow likely would have led to her death.”

“The Maker has blessed us,” said Cassandra. To her endless credit, her voice remained steady and she didn’t flinch as Sevanna dug her fingers deep into the fleshy parts of her wrists. “We have much to thank Him for.”

“Fuck the Maker – ah!” Sevanna’s thin voice was punctuated by a new gasp of pain as the surgeon twisted her hands, obviously setting a broken rib.

Cassandra wrinkled her nose in disapproval, while the surgeon snorted. “More alert than we thought, apparently. Could you pass me those bindings, Lady Montilyet?”

Leliana surprised Cullen with a musical laugh. “It seems the survival of our Herald comes at the price of a more blasphemous one.”

“You shouldn’t joke about such things, Leliana,” reprimanded Josephine, as she unwrapped the bindings for the surgeon.

“Have you ever had a mountain dropped on you, Josie? I fear that would make anyone sacrilegious.” She moved away, and the shameful thrill that went through Cullen was immediately dowsed when he saw Sevanna was covered by tight bindings. Her head was hanging as she panted in pain, and Cullen aptly thought he deserved to burn for a hundred lifetimes for the shameful want of her uncovered breasts, even as she suffered.

“We will have no Herald, blasphemous or not, unless we can warm her up,” the surgeon said darkly. “As cold as she is, she should be shivering.”

“Perhaps we should move her to the fire?” Josephine suggested hesitantly, but Cassandra swiftly shot her down.

“And bring her out into the wind? No.”

“Perhaps a mage,” said Leliana. “One who could pass flaming hands close to her skin-”

“And risk burning her,” Cassandra interrupted. “We will have to make due with more blankets-”

“The blankets won’t warm her if she isn’t warm,” Cullen said before he could stop himself. The idea had come to him, half-formed, the consequences a little more murky; dare he really suggest it?
“Your point?” Cassandra said aggressively.

His mouth had gone rather dry, his knees a little too watery; in an ironic twist, he wished he could call back the Templar, as the man was a little too eager in his newfound reign. “She needs body heat.”

Andraste’s flaming knickers – what he wouldn’t give to not be in a tent full of intelligent women when those words tumbled out. Four pairs of eyebrows shot up; Josephine looking slightly scandalised, Cassandra unimpressed, the ghost of a smirk crossing Leliana’s face. Maker, Cullen could practically hear Solas’ brow arch; only the surgeon looked like she thought the idea had merit, but then she was rapidly becoming the only conscious person with any sense in this damned tent.

“Are you volunteering, Commander?” The Seeker’s caustic tone rankled him; she made it sound as though his idea was as ridiculous as tossing the Herald into a fire like dry tinder.

“Do you have a better idea, Seeker?” he snapped, his hands already going to buckles of his armor. “Perhaps one that doesn’t involve setting the Herald aflame?”

“Is it necessary to undress?” Josephine said squeakily, one hand already over her eyes – Maker, he hadn’t even removed his furs yet and she was acting as though he had just whipped off his trousers.

“Body heat, Ambassador,” he explained dryly, only slightly amused by her naive embarrassment. “Undressing is the entire point.”

“What do you think of this?” Cassandra demanded of the surgeon.

She nodded approvingly, reaffirming Cullen’s opinion that she was the smartest person present. “I think it’s the best option we’ve got.”

“I agree,” said Solas unexpectedly; he was the last place from whom support seemed likely. The apostate turned to face them all, a flask of healing potion in his hands. “Though it is unorthodox, the Commander’s suggestion puts the Herald at the least risk. There is no denying she needs to be warmed, and quickly.”

Cassandra simply rolled her eyes, which meant Cullen had won. He retreated to one corner of the tent to remove his armor, while Solas kneeled before Sevanna.

“Drink this,” he said softly, gently tipping her chin back with his fingers. He poured the potion into her mouth, and a soft sigh slipped from her as it began to work its magic. Solas steadied her face with one hand, murmuring in elven; he fluttered the other in front of her eyes, tiny blue sparks falling from his fingers, and Sevanna’s eyes drifted shut.

“There,” he said quietly, as he helped Cassandra lay her down onto the bedroll. “She will sleep until the worst of her injuries have healed. Summon me if I am needed.” He slipped from the tent with a nod, though Cullen was feeling slightly less friendly towards him; he was ashamed to admit it, but a small part of him hadn’t wanted Sevanna to sleep while he warmed her up.

“I’ve done all I can,” the surgeon said. She pushed herself up with a stifled groan and headed for the mouth of the tent. “I’ll come check on her later.”

Cullen yanked his shirt over his head, leaving himself bare-chested. A wave of gooseflesh crawled up his arms as the surgeon slipped through the flap, letting in a small gust of frigid air. He refused to meet any of the other women’s eyes as he gingerly settled himself next to Sevanna, arranging himself against her back carefully so he wouldn’t press on her broken ribs, propping himself up on
one elbow.

Josephine cleared her throat, looking everywhere but his exposed chest. “I’ll, ah, just step outside.” She hurried out, and Leliana shook her head fondly as the front flap swung closed.

“In all this, I sometimes forget how innocent she is,” she murmured.

“She will not remain so,” said Cassandra, “if we are headed into war.”

“Don’t you think I know that, Cassandra?” Leliana said mildly.

“Worrying about the preservation of innocence will cause you to forget yourself,” she said. “The Inquisition cannot afford that.”

“Indeed not,” the Spymaster murmured. She moved her gaze to Cullen’s. “We must discuss our options. Now that the Herald has returned to us, we must consider what our next step is. Join us when you have…warmed her up, Commander.” With a final nod, she slipped from the tent, leaving Cullen to the mercy of a very prickly Seeker.

“You can be unnecessarily harsh, Cassandra,” he ventured into the silence.

He expected descending wrath, but instead she sighed, her shoulders sagging. She paced the length of the tent, which was not much. “When I feel helpless,” she said, “I react in anger. I do not like to feel so…so inadequate.”

“You’re not.”

She squared her gaze with his, her mouth thinning. “When the dragon came…when she told us to go, to run…I did. Without a fight. Without even looking back to see if she followed.”

“You can’t blame yourself.”

She crossed her arms and looked away. “I do not. I blame this Elder One; but I will not pretend I had no hand in what could have been the Herald’s death.”

Cullen looked down at Sevanna. The curve of one pale cheek was visible to him, her jaw obscured by her hair, and he swallowed hard. “My hand more so than yours.”

She didn’t respond. After a lengthy silence, she let out a long sigh. “Find Leliana and I when you are finished here.” He looked up but she had already gone, the tent flap rippling from her exit, leaving Cullen quite alone.

He was not truly alone, but Sevanna seemed as distant as the moon to him; she was so cold and so still, no flicker of her eyelids or mouth that betrayed that she simply slept. Only the soft, shallow breath that hissed between her parted lips gave evidence of life. Her back was cool against him and he nestled himself a bit closer, tentatively running his free hand up and down her arm, trying to rub warmth back into her.

It hit him again, that overwhelming grief that had gripped him in the snow before he’d found her. The gravity of what he had almost lost pressed down on him, hitching the breath inside his chest as a fist tightened around his heart with a painful squeeze. It was a gift that she was even here in his arms, though it wasn’t quite the one he wanted. He wanted the freedom of holding her that wasn’t under a guise of warming her up. He wanted to fall asleep and wake up like this, and he wanted her to know.
It would be inappropriate to bury his face in her neck the way he wanted to, and he could not even justify it as an attempt to warm her up. He wanted to press his lips to its soft crook and breathe her in, to taste the skin there and write upon it just how much it would have broken him to lose her. He had almost lost her without even having her in the first place, and even that loss would have been crippling; like losing color in a world already half-obscured by a veil.

But he did not have her and could not press himself fully alongside her like he wanted, did not have license to trace the lines of her body with his hands, no right to bury the threatening tears into her neck; so instead he satisfied himself with brushing the hair behind her ear. “I thought I’d lost you,” he whispered raggedly, because he was sure she couldn’t hear him. The only witness to this raw admission were the canvas walls that separated him from the world where he was only her commander, and not a man who laid beside her, aching from the pain of wanting.

She shivered in his embrace, startling him. It built slowly until she was trembling violently, her teeth chattering so hard he worried they might crack. Burying his own indecent desires – the slide of his skin over hers - he curled himself more fully around her, letting his warm breath blow along her neck as her body slowly regained the ability to warm itself.

Cullen knew it was a good sign, but the shivering jostled her ribs and made her cry out even while she slept. Each whimper tore at him like hooks, and the only balm he had at his disposal was to murmur in her ear and rub her arm, trying to speed up the warming process. She stiffened from the pain and arched her back, pressing the softness of her ass flush against his hips; the groan was ripped from him before he could throttle it, and it occurred to him for the first time just how bad this idea was. Perhaps that explained Leliana’s smirk, and Cassandra’s disapproval.

Mercifully, Sevanna’s shivering waned and she became still once more; her body relaxed, her limbs softened as she sighed and he knew she was taking a turn for the better. He had angled his hips away from her, just in case; but to his mounting thrill and horror, she seemed intent on snuggling closer.

*Andraste preserve me,* he thought weakly as her legs tangled with his; but it felt so *good,* and he had lowered himself off his elbow, and his arm had somehow become pillowed under her head and his fingers had trailed to her waist, and he was sinking down into sweet heat and darkness…

The drift back to consciousness was slow and muddled. Cullen gradually emerged from a soft, gossamer world that had cradled him like a gentle hand. A warm, soft weight was pressed to his side, and he was *deliciously* comfortable, the earlier headache gone…he hadn’t slept so well and without nightmares since he had drank that first cup tea Sevanna had made him…

As her name crossed his mind hazily, Cullen’s eyes snapped opened, returning his senses with a bump. He was looking up at a canvas ceiling, which informed him he was on his back; but it was the warmth moulded around his side and the tickle under his chin that confused him-

*Maker’s breath.*

He had obviously fallen asleep and had rolled onto his back, as was his habit; but at some indeterminable point Sevanna had turned over and he had pulled her with him. Now her cheek was pressed against his shoulder, head tucked under his chin and her arm sprawled across his chest. Sleeping Cullen had caught her hand in his, and their entwined fingers laid atop him, and their legs – oh *Maker,* one of her legs had tangled itself with his, the other thrown over his hips.

Sleeping Cullen, the sinful traitor, had also responded to the wickedly decadent contact, leaving
Awake Cullen with a rather…ah, **insistent** problem.

He was already In Very Big Trouble, and would be even more so if he was caught like this by the surgeon, or -oh *fuck*- the Left and Right Hands of the Divine.

Carefully, reluctantly, he began to detangle himself from Sevanna. Thankfully, she still seemed ensnared by Solas’ sleep enchantment, and she did not wake; she did, however, make it incredibly difficult for Cullen to extricate himself, as the fuzzy sounds she made all but crumbled his resolve to not get caught like this. The color had returned to her skin, her cheeks enticingly flushed; Cullen was more than a little warm himself as he tried to unhook her leg from him without brushing up against the spot that so *desperately* wanted to be brushed. A soft hiss escaped him as he slid himself out from under her arm, and her nails scraped along the sensitive flesh of his abdomen. She arched into his side with a rumpled noise of protest, and her breasts pillowing against him — soft even beneath the rough bindings— once more tested his resolve. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself three deep breaths, both to collect himself and memorise the way her body felt against his; which was, in a word, *heavenly*.

Regrettably freed, he slipped from the bedroll, careful to tuck the blankets back up again to preserve the heat he left with her. He kept his eyes trained on the canvas wall as he redressed himself in his mail, encasing the feel of her body sprawled across his beneath the steel, keeping a tiny bit of heat for himself. He crept to the mouth of the tent, unable to resist stealing one last look, to lock the memory away so he could never doubt it had really happened.

She had curled into the warm hollow he had left, her arms thrown up around her head, one still stretched out like she was reaching to find him. Normal color had returned to her skin, her chest rising and falling fully; that, and the way she now moved without whimpers of pain told Cullen her ribs had mended.

The heat that had pooled low in his belly flooded along his limbs. No lines had been crossed, he had committed no offenses against her, and yet he had gotten his wish after all - to hold her. Even if she would not remember it was still sweet, a little piece to carry with him through the dark times that were sure to come.

With a deep sense of regret, Cullen turned his back on her and left the tent. It was still night, the stars sparkling overhead like the snow under his boots, and it was with relief he realized he likely hadn’t slept that long. Perhaps there was still a chance that the rest of the Council wouldn’t be angry with him for lingering – at least Josephine wouldn’t be. She was probably still too embarrassed to look him in the eye.

With a quiet chuckle he headed towards the center of the camp. He ran into the surgeon, whom he gave a brief report. She nodded her thanks, and before she sped off to check on Sevanna herself, Cullen inquired how long he’d been in there.

“About an hour, ser,” she replied, and he gave silent thanks to the Maker; his hide would remain intact.

Unfortunately his warm, content mood was popped like a soap bubble when he found the Council; tempers had run high while he was gone and Cassandra had apparently worked up a full head of steam arguing with Leliana, which she had yet to take out on him.

Within minutes they were deeply entrenched in an argument; about what, Cullen wasn’t even sure. He defended and argued with Leliana in equal turn, and said some colorful things to the Seeker; he had not been aware his temper had been lurking just beneath the surface of the golden glow he’d been enjoying.
He stewed in silence briefly while Cassandra and Leliana shouted at each other, but it didn’t escape
his notice that Mother Giselle had just helped Sevanna into one of the cots in a nearby three-sided
shelter. He could feel their eyes on him, and knew the Council’s antics were the topic of their
discussion; but his relief that Sevanna was awake and mobile was hastily extinguished as
Cassandra rounded on him. His frustration peaked and he decided to do some shouting back.
Josephine was pleading with all of them, but she was largely ignored; until she said something
about “the infrastructure of the Inquisition” and he snapped at her, and Cassandra started into him
once more, because, apparently she had had enough of him.

Cullen would’ve snorted at the irony, if he were not so certain Cassandra would clobber him in
retaliation.

His temper was getting the best of him, and he stormed away before he did, or said, something he
regretted. Cassandra angrily kicked at a helmet someone had left lying around, while Josephine
and Leliana resigned themselves to the fire.

When he first heard Mother Giselle singing, irritation was his immediate response – until he turned
back to the Revered Mother and found her next to Sevanna, who was watching him with an
unidentifiable glittering in her eyes. His anger, frustration and looming fear drained out of him at
once, as their gazes collided across the distance between them, and the heat of the bed they had
shared returned to him. The way she had been returned to him, and Cullen realized that he had not
truly given thanks for her survival.

His declining faith had been an issue for a long time, a feeble sapling struggling to push through
hard, dark earth. It had cracked and slipped, had been mangled over and over again when he placed
it in the wrong people. He had been prepared to abandon it altogether, to shed like a second skin
and leave it all behind – but now, he realized, he had found someone to place it in again, a soul so
gentle she would not break it, and perhaps it was where it could finally flourish.

The hymn spilled from Cullen’s mouth as he watched her stand fast before a kneeling crowd, her
face no longer saddened by their worship but reinforced by it; she was ready, at long last, to fully
accept the weighty mantle of being their Herald, to bear them along whatever path she blazed. She
would not have fought so hard to return to them if she were not ready, and it was this new strength
in her that pieced together the shards of him that had lain broken at his feet, put back together by
her newfound will and his rediscovered voice – he had not sung for a very long time.

Perhaps faith had not abandoned him quite so easily.
A Lion in the Blizzard

Chapter Summary

In which Sevanna is torn between her guilt and her desire.

Chapter Notes

Lots of dialogue in this one, a little of which is taken from the game. Please bear with me on this one; was pretty late when I wrote it, and dialogue isn't my strong suit. Also, I am absolutely floored by the response and kindness this fic has received. Thank you all, so so much. Y'all are the best.

Whatever fondness for snow Sevanna had, it had all but dissolved since it had nearly killed her. That, and since living in the middle of a frosty stretch of mountains put snow into crevices she never even knew she possessed.

Ugh. Her thoughts had started echoing Cassandra’s often uttered expletive as she discovered the pleasure of snow in her collar, down her back, and in her smalls. It sent snaking rivers of icy water down her skin, which still hadn’t fully regained its warmth since she nearly died in the blizzard.

Sevanna didn’t remember much about that night. Oh, she remembered her encounter with the Elder One; thoroughly doubted she would ever forget it. Corypheus. Her mind whispered what she dared not say aloud, sending another shiver through her that had absolutely nothing to do with the cold. But everything after that – seeing Cullen’s signal, firing the trebuchet, desperately trying to outrun the hungry throat of the mountain as it came down upon her – was mostly shadow. Awakening in a dark and icy place, her Mark – no, the Anchor he had called it – roiling and spitting like the mouth of a geyser. She vaguely remembered demons and that she had been too weak to fight them, but the Anchor had sliced open a Rift on its own accord, snapping them up in its green jaws and collapsed into nothingness once more. And then cold; desperate, biting, blistering cold that numbed her very blood. She had gone forward only to get away from the horror she left behind, too afraid to even glance behind her in fear Corypheus would be there, a lurking shadow intent on undoing what she - however accidentally - had done.

She didn’t know how long she’d stumbled through the snow. It could have been minutes, or hours, or even days, urged by a tiny little voice that sounded at first like Cassandra, then Dorian, and then Cullen: just a little further.

Cullen’s voice stayed with her the longest, whispering for her to take one last step, then another and another until she had taken a hundred last steps and the snow had turned warm and soft, as inviting as the opulent feather bed she had left back in Ostwick…

She didn’t remember falling. But she remembered her name, a caress on the wind; she’d opened iced-over eyes to see ones of warm honey and ochre, and they were the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She had been so grateful to be found, so crushingly relieved she could have cried; might have, even, but the tears would’ve turned to ice on her cheeks, which she had no longer been able
to feel.

She remembered drifting away in a warm embrace, the voice that had urged her forward now whispering *stay with me*... and she clung to it, aching for a little more warmth, aching for the voice to stay.

And then pain.

Voices and agony, heat like needles against the ice of her flesh, commands to *hold her still* and *drink this* and *stay with me*, but they were lost in a whirlwind of heat and pain like knives in her ribs and Cassandra’s voice rose above it all blathering on about the blessings of the Maker, and the pain had whittled her into something sharp and mean and the words barreled past the desert in her throat to fall from a still-numb mouth-

*“Fuck the Maker.”* If her mother could have heard her... nothing so blasphemous had *ever* crossed her lips, but it was the only good thing she felt in a world dominated by ice and fire and pain.

Then blessed darkness had descended again, leaving another hole in Sevanna’s memory; it was full of them as of late. Whenever she tried to conjure up what had happened next, before she had woken up in a warm little tent feeling as though years had passed, all she recalled was a memory of winter; lost somewhere dark and cold, left alone to be devoured by a blizzard until something warm and *golden* had appeared, curling around her and shielding her from the grasp of the mountain. It had been a very sweet dream, better than what she had been enduring since Redcliffe, and she’d been very sorry to awake in the middle of the Frostbacks with terribly sore ribs and a pounding headache.

Much of the residual pain had faded; Sevanna felt remarkably well for a person who’d narrowly escaped an avalanche and subsequently wandered through a blizzard to the point of collapse. Frostbite hadn’t claimed any fingers or toes, though a nasty chill had settled itself in her bones and she hadn’t truly been warm since her dream of golden heat. It’d been made even worse when she and Solas talked late into the night about the Foci and Corypheus – or more accurately, early into the morning. It felt like her joints had iced over and crackled when she moved, and he had to half-carry her to her tent as she shivered so severely she could barely walk.

She had asked him about the Rift she’d opened up somewhere beneath Haven, apparently out of her control; his theory was that the Anchor had used means of self-preservation, had used her body to tear open the Fade and slam it shut once more, thus protecting itself and its vessel from danger. Though Solas had said it was a good thing, a new tool to utilize, it made Sevanna like the Anchor even *less*, if that were possible; it felt parasitic now, something alive that would use whatever means necessary to preserve itself. Including punching holes through the Fade.

A new little shiver worked its way down her spine, and Sevanna tried her best to suppress it; people kept piling blankets on her, but there were hardly enough to go around and she could not stand having them all wrapped around her. She had passed them along to women and children, and then to the Orlesians in their dainty clothing completely unsuitable for the cold.

Solas had also told her of a place, a long forgotten keep lost somewhere in these peaks; to the north, he’d said, and placed a quiet faith in her that she would find it. She would have snorted if she had the energy, or the privacy for such an unladylike sound. If these last few months had proven anything, the only thing she was capable of finding was trouble. But it was their only option, and they were breaking camp in search of a relic, chasing nothing more than memory and legend.

It was their second morning in their hastily-built camp, which was hastily being packed up. Tents were being taken down, rations reorganized and supplies rearranged on wagons in order to make
room for those who could not walk through the snow. Sevanna had been offered such a spot and had immediately refused. She would not be weak; she would punch, bite and kick her way through the mountains if she had to, to lead these people to safety. The people she had finally pledged herself to, though they had long ago pledged themselves to her.

All around her, the camp bustled and dismantled, shouts and orders filling the frosty air. Sevanna had tried to find a spot out of the way, disgruntled that no one allowed her to help; anytime she lifted something, be it a sack or a twig, someone had appeared and relieved her of it, usually with a murmured “Your Worship”. She had retreated just to escape that, but when she spotted an overturned basket of apples she rushed to gather them like she was a beggar and they were rubies spilled in the snow. She hated being useless, standing idle while everyone laboured around her.

She had just knelt down to gather the apples, valiantly ignoring the icy fingers crawling up her leg, when something heavy and warm was gently laid across her shoulders. At first she stiffened, thinking it was another blanket, but then fur tickled her cheek. Her hands automatically reached up to grasp it as a quiet voice said by her ear, “You should be wearing something warmer.”

A different sort of shiver went through her, and though it was far more pleasant it left something bitter behind, like the press of a lemon over an open cut. She stood, turning to find Cullen behind her, cheeks pink with cold and looking very strange without the furs he had just wrapped around her. Sevanna felt a simultaneous lurch of her stomach and twist of her heart; the former just as powerful as it’d been since she left for Redcliffe, the latter with a less bladed edge since she’d returned. The eyes on her face were soft and concerned as he absentmindedly rubbed his neck. Sevanna couldn’t pretend she wasn’t cold, so she pulled the cloak a little tighter around her shoulders. It smelled of him, like camphor and candlewax and incense, and simply Cullen beneath all that.

“Thank you,” she murmured. She felt suddenly shy, fully aware she hadn’t spoken to him, hadn’t been alone with him, since she’d left to close the Breach. When he’d taken her aside, cupped her hands in his and asked in that soft, rich voice to speak with her when she returned. It had hurt to look upon him then, just as it had hurt every time since she’d found him broken and bloody in the future; a future that would now never happen, as Dorian repeatedly assured her – as she tried to assure herself when she awoke gasping and sobbing from nightmares of Cullen’s torture – but it had cut deep, leaving her with an open wound that she didn’t think would ever heal.

She’d wept almost every night since she’d returned to the present. She had almost thrown herself upon Cullen’s neck when she saw him alive at the gates of Haven, but scarcely stopped herself. Though it was foolish, it had been painful then to see him whole and undamaged and beautiful before her while her treacherous mind cast a shadow over him, painting him in blood and gore. She would have buckled as the dam inside her chest burst; she wasn’t ready for Cullen to witness her anguish so she’d turned to Dorian instead, who had leant a constant shoulder for her ceaseless bouts of tears. She’d avoided Cullen after that, though she hated the hurt bewilderment on his face whenever she fled the room he had just entered. Sevanna couldn’t bear the warm, tender things that blossomed in her chest for him because she had seen how they could be taken away, cut cruelly down in penance for falling when she had no right to. She was so afraid to probe the heat between them further, for fear she would gain him then lose him just as quickly, and the tenderness waned and turned sour; like the first blooms of spring struggling through cold, hard ground just to see the devastation of winter and shrink beneath the earth once more.

But Cullen stood before her now and the hurt was lessened; maybe because she had brought the world down and he’d escaped unscathed. Perhaps she wouldn’t be the end of him, after all; but there was still a long, long way to go.

He settled his hands on the pommel of his sword, which looked unfamiliar; upon closer inspection,
Sevanna realized it was a different blade, and wondered why he’d traded. He cleared his throat. “How are you feeling?”

He sounded oddly formal, but then she’d been treating him like an unwanted shadow for days. “Sore,” she said, “but improving.”

“I’m glad.” His voice was rough, like a rasp of velvet, and it brought to Sevanna’s mind a memory of a whisper: I thought I’d lost you. But she had dreamed that…hadn’t she? “But,” he added, shaking her from her muddled thoughts, “are you…truly alright?”

Sevanna knew he was asking beyond her physical state; he was asking about the shadows stamped beneath and behind her eyes, the slope of her shoulders as they accommodated the weight of the world more fully upon them. He was asking the difference between bending and breaking, though she was at a loss herself to know on which side she fell.

“I-” she began, intent on putting on the brave mask and shrug his question off, but she found her voice wouldn’t cooperate. The rusty bravado cracked beneath her feet, and for a moment she was frightened the shakily built wall against her tears would as well. But just her voice, and not her composure, broke and she suddenly didn’t want to seem strong and poised, didn’t want some false mask of courage fastened over her face. And if there was anyone she could answer honestly, to let glimpse of the way she was splintering beneath it all, it was the man before her; because he wouldn’t simply take what she did not want to give.

Sevanna squeezed her eyes shut against the burning. “No. I’m not alright. Not really.” She reopened them to find he hadn’t looked away from her, but there was a new sadness in his gaze. “Haven was close. I-I almost…” She felt embarrassed. She had never been afraid of dying before, hadn’t given it much more than a passing thought; until she had almost tipped from the realm of the living into the next, faced with nothing but the suffocating embrace of empty oblivion. It had terrified her, and that was a word she had refused to recognize – until now.

“The only thing that’s keeping me together, now,” she finally croaked, “is that you – that so many made it out alive.”

His eyes darkened, like clouds over sunlight. Absently, it seemed, his hand came up and grasped her upper arm, his thumb running over the soft swell of her bicep. Her eyelids almost fluttered shut at the sensation; she could barely remember contact that wasn’t a revering clasp of her hands, or reports shoved into her arms, or the chaos of battle surging around her like she was an eddy in a current. This gentle, soft, concerned touch made her want more, but not from just anyone. Dorian’s comfort was wonderful, and appreciated, but never had it been clearer that he was not the man whose comfort Sevanna craved.

“As am I,” Cullen said hoarsely. His eyes flicked between hers, and the intensity of his gaze coupled with his scent enveloping her made Sevanna weak in the knees. “You stayed behind. You could have-” The roughness in his voice crested, broke like a surf upon rocky shores. He hesitated, and when he spoke again it was reinforced with steel. “I will not allow the events of Haven to happen again. You have my word.”

Sevanna didn’t trust herself to speak, so she nodded tightly instead. His hand dropped from her arm, and a small part of her – the part that hadn’t been blackened by what she’d seen in the future, that still dared to want - mourned the loss of his touch.

“I wanted to ask,” he ventured cautiously, rubbing his neck again. “How in the Void did you survive?”
It was answer she did not know herself. She didn’t know why Corypheus, or the Anchor, hadn’t killed her, or had she’d outrun a descending tide of snow. She didn’t know how she stumbled blindly through a blizzard, only coaxed forward by non-existent voices, or how she hadn’t succumbed to the blissful sleep of death. But there were a dozen answers she could give; how she couldn’t abandon the Inquisition, how they needed to be warned of this new threat, or the honest one that she just simply didn’t know.

Instead, the one that soared past her lips was, “You asked to speak with me.”

Cullen blinked; whatever he’d been expecting, it hadn’t been this. “What?”

“After I closed the Breach,” she said lamely, feeling as though this were the stupidest answer she could’ve given. “You asked to speak with me and…well, here I am.”

“Here you are,” he repeated, and if she were not mistaken he sounded a little dazed.

“I came an awful long way,” she said, cringing at the weak attempt at humour. “What did you want to say to me?”

Their eyes were locked, the silence between them lengthening. Sevanna was brought back to the night Mother Giselle had sang the hymn and the people had knelt reverently in the snow before her. Though she had resolved to herself that she would stand with them, and for them, she could hardly bear the veneration; Cullen’s steady gaze over the many heads had anchored her to that spot, the only thing keeping her from fleeing the weight of benediction. She’d watched his mouth shape the words everyone was singing, but she could not hear his voice across the distance – though she had wanted to, curious to know the song in his baritone, and imagined he had been singing to her.

“I wanted to know what your plans were,” he said quietly, eyes never moving from hers. “After you closed the Breach. If you would…stay.”

His last word cracked slightly, and the smile that had been buried along with Haven hovered close to the surface. It felt alien to her. “To be honest, I hadn’t gotten beyond closing the Breach,” she admitted. “But I’d like to stay, if you’ll have me.”

“I would,” he said quickly, then grimaced. The pink in his cheeks deepened. “I-I mean, yes, the Inquisition would have you. Of course.” He rubbed his neck again and that endearing action nearly broke her. She wanted to tell him, wanted to purge the poison in her blood that gnawed at her, rending her apart with the agony of finding his tortured corpse and knowing it had been all her fault. She wanted him to understand her horror and her pain, that her guilt was a live, writhing thing so he would know exactly why she had barely been meeting his eyes since she returned, for fear she wouldn’t see warm brown but bloody, empty sockets-

She took a deep breath. “Cullen, I-”

“Thawed out, have you?” A loud voice interrupted her, and Sera pushed past Cullen. Sevanna hadn’t seen her since before the attack on Haven, and despite the interruption was happy to see her friend. “Mm, looks warm. Shove over.” The elf wriggled into the cloak next to Sevanna, wrapping it tightly around the both of them and wrinkled her nose. “Yuck. Smells like beard and sticky bits.” Sevanna had to assume that meant male; personally, she found it nearly intoxicating.

Cullen had stiffened slightly, looking a little miffed at the disruption. Sevanna gave him a significant, lingering look, and his eyes softened. “We’ll talk later?” she asked hesitantly.
“Of course,” he said quietly. With a nod to both of them, he turned on his heel and marched away. Sevanna felt her chest deflate a little.

“What’s up his arse?” Sera said indifferently. “Other than the usual sticks.”

Sevanna suppressed a sigh, and forced Sera down into the snow with her to resume picking up apples. “Perhaps the fact that we’re stranded in the mountains?”

Sera nudged her shoulder with one of her own; an impressive feat considering how tightly they were wedged together. “It’s not so bad, yeah? Now that you’re back from being dead an’ all.”

“I was never dead, Sera.”

“Well, not all the way. Which is good, innit, ’cause dead things are smelly and weird.” She gave Sevanna’s hair a ridiculous sniff, making her genuinely smile for the first time in what felt like an age. “You smell grand.”

“I’m so relieved.”

Sera forced an arm up out of Cullen’s cloak, sticking her armpit offensively close to Sevanna’s nose. “Now tell me how I smell!”

Sevanna spluttered, as a familiar pair of feet approached through the snow in front of them. “Dear me, have I interrupted some sort of elven seduction tactic?”

“No,” Sera scoffed, scowling up at Dorian. The whiteness of his robes made the snow around him look dull; not for the first time, Sevanna marveled at how clean he managed to keep them. “But you're interruptin’ my snuggle time with Harold. Beat it.”

Sevanna snorted. Dorian merely examined his impeccable nails. “You have such splendid manners, Sera. Wherever did you learn them in that hovel you undoubtedly hail from?”

“Your arse,” she replied automatically.

His mustache quivered. “You know, the amount you mention my arse rather contradicts your womanly predilections.”

“Yeah, well, your haircut is stupid.” As always in a battle of wits, Sera rapidly pulled out the low blows.

“I find that rather rich coming from a woman who looks as though she has a dead cat on her head,” Dorian said delicately.

“Oh, ha ha. Bloody riot, you.” Sera flung Cullen’s cloak from her shoulders and kicked some snow at Dorian, before stomping away.

Sevanna straightened again, giving the mage a one-part amused, three-part exasperated look. “Must you antagonise everyone you speak with, Dorian?”

“A regrettable habit I picked up in my homeland, I’m afraid,” he said loftily. “Although I think she’s starting to like me. She didn’t spit at me once.” The devilish grin faded from his face as he appraised Sevanna carefully. “I’m glad to see you unfrozen, love. You do know when I said blue would be a fetching color on you, I didn’t mean for you to take it so literally.”

“You shouldn’t have been so convincing, then,” she replied tartly.
He chuckled. “If you haven’t yet learned to ‘never trust a Vint’, as that unwashed Qunari keeps saying, then it is high time you did. Speaking of which, someone ought to tell him to put a shirt on before he takes someone’s eye out.”

Sevanna hefted the basket, once again full of apples, in her arms. “I’ll mention it to Cullen.”

A mischievous light sparked in Dorian’s eyes as he followed her to the nearest wagon. “Perhaps when you give back his cloak, yes? Tonight, possibly?”

“Yes…” Sevanna said slowly, frowning slightly. Dorian was certainly teasing about something, but she wasn’t yet sure about what.

He sighed almost longingly. “If I had known freezing half to death would get me into bed with the Commander, I would have strolled into these mountains the day I arrived.”

She stared at him, agape, at a loss for where on earth he had gotten that from. “We’ve never been in bed together.”

Dorian began to laugh, stopping short at the confused look on her face. “Wait – you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“About how Commander Cullen carried you down from the mountain and got into your bed – shirtless - to keep you warm!” he said exasperatedly. “Use your pretty little head, biscuit – how else do you think you didn’t die from the cold?”

It was stupid, but a tangled flush of desire, regret and muted pain rose in Sevanna’s belly; Maker, she really was a mess about the man. She pressed her fingers to her temple. “I don’t know. I can’t remember what happened.”

Dorian shook his head sadly. “Poor thing. I’m sure it must have been magnificent.”

“He was just doing his duty as Commander,” she said, annoyed with the teasing and annoyed with herself for the foolish regret she felt. “I’m sure it didn’t mean anything; nothing more than a means to keep me alive.”

“Oh, possibly,” Dorian said, his voice positively dripping with disbelief. “But Commander Cullen could’ve asked anyone else to do it, like Bull or Blackwall – I’ll have you know I share a tent with that man and he’s an absolute furnace. Or even myself, given the evidence of our close relationship I wouldn’t have minded lending you my body heat. But he didn’t ask anyone else. I have no doubt the Commander was a very willing volunteer.” Dorian gave her a hard look. “Are you positive you don’t remember anything?”

Sevanna screwed up her face in concentration. It was difficult to think past the sweet-yet-sour ache in her chest. “Pain. I remember being in pain.” She probed the blankness further, coaxing flashes out of darkness. “Then…I was dreaming. I was…freezing, back in the blizzard…something golden came, and kept me warm…a lion.”

The shape of the golden warmth finally came to her, slipping past her lips before she even realized what she was saying. She opened her eyes to find Dorian watching her with thinly-veiled amusement. “Don’t smirk at me,” she said grumpily.

“I assure you it’s entirely involuntary,” he said cheerfully. “You dream of a lion, yet you think it impossible the Commander kept you warm. You are too precious.”
“I didn’t remember until now, thanks to all your nagging.”

“You’re welcome.”

She made a sound worthy of Cassandra and marched away. She didn’t know where this sudden flare of temper was borne from; she was not the type to become angry, was much more likely to withdraw into herself instead. She hated the feeling of being cross, like fire-ants prickling beneath her skin. But she was so tired; tired of the cold and the snow and being the bloody Herald of Andraste – tired of being torn between aching for a man and terrified of what she may one day cost him.

She wanted to run away. But how do you run from the heart breaking in your chest, and when the only thing that put it back together was a pair of whisky eyes and a scarred smile?

Dorian caught up to her, stopping her with a grab of her shoulders. “Why are you fighting this? It’s obvious you care for him. Hells, it was obvious back in Redcliffe, when you fell apart at the sight-”

“Yes,” Sevanna hissed, with an abrupt surge of searing vehemence. “I’m well aware of how I reacted when I – found him. You don’t need to remind me.” She forced the words out jerkily. “Yes, I care about him, so much that it’s painful. But don’t you see why?”

“Because you have seen what you stand to lose,” Dorian answered calmly. “If you were to have him.”

She shut her eyes against the threatening tears. “I don’t know if I could bear it, Dorian,” she whispered. “I can hardly even bear the guilt of what will never even happen – of a future that will never be.”

_We’re dying. But we can decide how. Many don’t get that choice._ Cullen’s words in the chantry came back to her, before she had walked into sacrifice with a breaking heart. Though the words had been ugly, it was not the implication of them that had pained her; it was how they recalled his tortured ghost before her eyes and Sevanna knew, that at one point lost to time, he had not picked how he died. His fate had been sealed because she had been beaten by a better foe. And that boy, Cole…it was like he had felt her anguish as if it were sparks from a spitting flame, when she had resolved she would pay the penance of her guilt with her own life; that as Cullen’s body had once been bloodied because of her, she too, would suffer that same fate, but this time it would be she who bore the consequence of her actions.

It had been her own instinctual will to survive – and the strangled, unworthy desire to return to him – that had foiled her own plans.

Dorian tilted her chin up with a finger. “You carry far too much guilt than you should. Everything that happened, that will happen, is beyond your grasp. You cannot control fate.”

She shook her head, heavy with sorrow. “But as the Herald of Andraste, every spill of innocent blood is on my hands. I carry the weight of these people, Dorian. Even if I sometimes cannot bear it.”

“Then I suggest sharing it with someone who will help you shoulder it,” he said pointedly. “Someone who has the shoulders to do so, incidentally.”

Despite herself, a few embers of hope flared to life beneath the choking ashes of despair and guilt. She expressed the insecurity that had plagued her from the start, and her voice came out small.
“But what if he doesn’t even want me?”

“I’m rather capable of discerning a look of longing, having had so many directed at myself,” Dorian said breezily. “And if I had a sovereign for every time our dear Commander bestowed one upon you, love, I’d have enough to buy the spectacles you so desperately need.”

Sevanna actually choked out a laugh. Maker, it felt good. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” he said, admittedly serious at that. “Despite my own preferences being decidedly more masculine, I can honestly say that a beautiful woman such as yourself has nothing to worry about. That man is utterly smitten by you.” He paused to sigh theatrically. “Most unfortunate, really.”

She actually smiled at the word. *Smitten.* Evidently, almost freezing to death had wreaked havoc on her emotions; all her earlier anger had quite evaporated. There was still that knot of fear and guilt, and the weight of being divinely hand-picked for service; but as Dorian had said, perhaps she just needed someone who would help her with those burdens. And if what he said was true, and Cullen was *smitten*…perhaps he would be the one to offer his hand and help guide her from a place of glass-like shards that threatened to cut her to ribbons with the tiniest misstep.

As if she’d summoned him with her thoughts, he suddenly appeared in her line of vision; golden and gleaming and beautiful, helping bundled refugees climb onto the wagons as they prepared to depart. His hair had curled at his ears, and not for the first time Sevanna wanted to run her fingers through it and tease out the natural curl he tamed back. He glanced her way, and did the smallest of double takes when he realized she was watching him. There was a familiar pull in her belly towards him, as if a line tightened between them, wanting to pull them closer.

She wondered what he would do if she marched right up to him and kissed him in the snow in front of everyone. Or if she mentioned that she hadn’t truly been warm since the night he spent with her. She wondered if she would be brave enough, or force back the squeezing pain long enough to hurtle over it.

“Lady Herald,” Cassandra’s voice reached her before its owner did, struggling through the drifts towards her. Sevanna felt a rush of affection for the Seeker, who had kept a vigilant watch over her recovery and expressed in her wordless way just how much her loss had been a blow. “We are ready to move. Solas has asked you take the front with him. Are you ready?”

It was more than just a question of preparedness. It was a question of willingness to lead, to shepherd these people to safety and not falter in the process. Sevanna gave Dorian a side-long look, squeezing his wrist. “Walk with me?” she asked softly.

“I’ll be by your side every step of the way,” he replied.

Sevanna squared her shoulders, brushing off the tired protest of her ribs which had not fully recovered. She addressed her words to the Seeker, though her eyes were on Cullen; dancing over the glint of his hair, the broadness of his back, the memory of his voice whispered against her temple. *Stay with me.* Perhaps it’d been more than a plea for her to not drift away into darkness. “Yes. I’m ready.”
Chapter Summary

Now at Skyhold, relinquishing her demons is not as easy as Sevanna hoped.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Inquisition’s new home was a veritable diamond in the rough; though Sevanna thought she’d never laid eyes on such a beautiful place, despite its current dereliction.

They had trudged upon it on their third day in the Frostbacks. She had wearily crested yet another slope that proved to be the last, and found herself gazing down at a sprawling beast of broken stone and splintered wood, crouched in the palm of the mountains like a yet unpolished jewel. Solas, who had stayed faithfully by her side as she guided them all north under his quiet direction, had leaned upon his staff and uttered its name like a prayer. “Skyhold.”

And it was the answer to their prayers, and so much more; it was their deliverance, their sanctuary, their absolution. Here was the place they could fortify, a place in which to sow fresh seeds of hope – here was the place they would rebuild.

But Sevanna loved it beyond the respite it promised; just like her, Skyhold was something lost and broken and crumbling, a cracked shell haunted by everything that had come before. Yet it endured, awaiting something greater, some new purpose; and perhaps restoring a legend lost to time would help restore the bits of her she’d lost along the way, the detritus of her old life trailing the footprints that took her farther from the girl she used to be.

They fell upon Skyhold like starving dogs on bones – and bones they were indeed, the cold empty halls and weather-gnawed battlements a mere skeleton of Skyhold’s grandeur. But the walls cut the wind from their faces, the hard-packed earth devoid of snow, and the arrival at their destination cut the strings of fortitude that kept them on their feet. Though it was a tight squeeze even with over half their forces deployed in Ferelden, tents were set up in the courtyard amid the wreckage of a collapsed bridge. Sevanna was amazed at the speed of which the Council congregated and organized plans of repair and defences, the animosity of their previous argument gone. Before night had even fallen the camp had been erected, an infirmary set up, a guard rotation established, and a team put together to begin clearing reachable rooms of all debris. Even Sevanna’s closest allies – though that seemed too casual a word for what they were becoming to her – were tireless. Blackwall and the Iron Bull chopped collapsed wooden beams for firewood; Varric and Sera lead a group of archers back into the mountains in search of game; Vivienne and Solas aided the surgeon in healing twice the amount of people in half the time; Cassandra smashed through a blocked door single-handed, discovering an ancient blacksmithing forge, its iron belly cold and empty but intact.

Loathe to stand idle again, Sevanna enlisted Dorian in helping her with Dennet’s horses. A sizable stable was nestled in Skyhold’s battlements like a dusty orifice, piles of surprisingly fresh hay in the corners of most stalls.

“I expect squatters are the only living thing this place has seen in a hundred years,” Dennet remarked as they led exhausted mounts into the stalls. “Explains the hay; gives a desperate man a
“decent enough place to sleep in some blasted mountain’s arsehole.”

“We’re all desperate when ‘mountain’s arsehole’ becomes synonymous with ‘saving grace’,” Dorian muttered from the stall next to Sevanna. He was having difficulty shoving a mare through the gate, and was consequently snippy. “I don’t know why you ever left the Imperium, Dorian.”

Sevanna exited her stall, closing the gate on the warmblood that had begun cropping gratefully at the hay. Her gaze roved over the dark space, only half the stalls filled. “Is that all?”

“It is,” Dennet said heavily, handing her a stack of horse blankets to distribute. “Lost twenty mounts when the enemy hit. Couldn’t get them all out fast enough, and it was either them or supplies.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright, Inquisition. We’ll make due. I can send for more horses from Redcliffe when we get settled here.”

Sevanna nodded silently, wrestling that creeping guilt that constantly pushed at the cracks in her armor. Dorian, and many others, had already informed her that Haven was not her fault, but she privately disagreed; how many lives, human and equine, had been lost because Corypheus had marched on the place unfortunate enough to host her? If she had not sworn to herself that she would stand straight and undaunted by the darkness that threatened the people, she would probably be halfway across the neighbouring mountain; not to flee, but because that was where everyone was safest - with her far away from them.

She suddenly froze in her silent count of the remaining horses – around thirty in all – realizing that a familiar thunderhead grey was missing from all the bays, chestnuts and duns. “Where’s Tempest?” she asked, voice wavering.

Dennet scuffed the ground with his boot, a spasm of regret passing over his face. “Ah. Yes. My sincerest apologies, Inquisition…he went wild at Haven. Broke out of the fence and bolted. One of those Red Templar – things – got him. I’m very sorry.”

It was so incredibly stupid, the pang that went through her, but it was the straw that broke the oxen’s back. Despite that she had not yet cried for those they’d lost at Haven, had not yet fully faced the grief and the guilt of being the cause of such destruction, upon hearing that her stupid, stubborn, asshole horse had died split the dam she’d been holding back and she dissolved into tears right there in the stables.

“Come on, now,” Dennet said gruffly. He crossed over to her in three strides and gathered her against his chest in a fatherly embrace. Her tears soaked his collar, and he seemed to understand they were not just for her lost stallion. “It’s alright, girl. We’ll pull through.”

With stiff, faltering resolve Sevanna pulled herself together. She straightened once more, nodding silently because she couldn’t unhang her jaw for the sob she was holding back. Dennet handed her a handkerchief that smelled of straw and horse, something that reminded her achingly of home.

“I think it’s time you got some rest,” Dorian said gently, curling his arm along her shoulders. Without waiting for assent he guided her from the stables, leaving Dennet to throw blankets over the horses in preparation for a chilly night. Dorian guided her through a world veiled by tears, bringing her to a tent with two prepared bedrolls. With the long-suffering patience appropriate to an older sibling, he helped her tug off her boots and outer armor, pulling back the blankets of one bedroll before settling down on the other.
“It’s hardly dusk,” she protested, but it was feeble as she pulled the blankets up to her chin. The last few days – months, really – had been exhausting, and it would be a lie to deny the tiny part of her that wished to sleep for a long, long time and wake up somewhere far away.

“Yes,” he said simply. “But, as your friend, I decided you should have a more comfortable, and far more private place to fall apart. You’ve barely been holding yourself together since…well, I’m sure you know.”

Sevanna closed her eyes. “I do,” she said thickly.

Dorian stretched out on his own bedroll. “You know there is no shame in crying,” he said finally, correctly interpreting the tension in her arms that she knotted across her chest, as if keeping herself intact.

Had she the energy she might have been embarrassed by her transparency. But she only felt tired and wrung out like a tattered, sodden rag. “Lately, it feels as if that’s all I’ve been doing,” she murmured. “I’m rather sick of it.”

Silence stretched between them until she thought he might’ve fallen asleep in spite of laying fully clothed on top the blankets, when he spoke again. “Have you told him yet?”

She knew precisely what her friend was asking, and it twisted like a knife in her heart. The backs of her eyes burned with the familiar onslaught of tears, but she found she could no longer summon the strength to keep them back. Totally opposite from the confession she had encased in stone, unable to claw through the mortar that sealed it tight despite her valiant effort the night she’d returned a borrowed cloak. She blinked, sending two lines of heat rolling down her temples. “I can’t.”

Dorian sighed, plumping the pillow beneath his head. “You dear, dear fool.”

He did not speak again, and Sevanna had no longer been able to squeeze any word beyond the knot in her throat. She fell into an uneasy sleep as the muted light filtering through the canvas darkened, knowing the places she was inevitably headed were darker still.

* *

Within days, a steady stream of pilgrims began arriving at Skyhold, thanks to both the fertile vines of gossip and Leliana’s ravens. Messages written by both Spymaster and Ambassador flew to all corners of Ferelden and to sympathetic parties in Orlais spreading the news of Haven’s destruction, the Inquisition’s new home, and most importantly, the Herald’s survival. Rooms and barracks were being cleared out as quickly as possible, but it became rapidly clear that the entirety of their force, along with visiting dignitaries and refugees, would never fit. Cullen was already implementing plans to establish a lower camp at the base of the summit on which Skyhold perched as the ranks within the keep swelled. The stone walls would soon hold no more.

The prolonged sleep Sevanna had on that first night proved well-needed; she’d broken the chains of exhaustion that had slowed her steps the last few days and firmly cemented the pieces of her that threatened to break off back into place. She threw herself into the work; clearing the stairs that lead to the main hall of Skyhold, piling shattered stones to be used for reconstruction, and scavenging the edges of the grounds for remedial herbs. Cassandra began bleating she was on the course to re-breaking her ribs by the end of the second day – though it had been the Seeker’s fault that Sevanna had fallen, really, for sneaking up on her while she balanced on Bull’s shoulders to snag the rashvine trailing along Skyhold’s walls.

The work regularly had her colliding paths with Cullen, though there was rarely time for more than
a quick report of how things were progressing, and for him to make sure she was eating, she was keeping warm, or she was getting rest. She seldom got the chance to enquire about him, and he was beginning to look ill again, like the first time she’d returned from the Hinterlands. His pallor grew increasingly waxen and sweat beaded his temples and upper lip despite the cold. He often rolled his neck from side to side as if he’d developed an irritable twitch, and the circles beneath his eyes grew a little more shadowed every day. But whenever their gazes caught – which was frequent – his eyes would clear like a scattering storm front, the intensity of his focus so sharp it felt like needles in Sevanna’s skin. And she wondered, despite the chaos of their situation and the new, looming war and that it was just not the time, if this was the look of longing Dorian had told her about.

If it was, it was different from the ones she had previously endured. It lacked a certain hunger, the dark possessiveness equivalent of an eagle eyeing a mouse. She had seen that look many times; typically from the suitors her mother had hoped to tempt with her daughter’s loveliness, but most of all her pedigree. That was the quality Lady Trevelyan had prized beyond any other, and strived to bring out in her daughter. Consequently, all her life Sevanna felt like something carefully cultivated, something to prune and weed and strip of all flaws like thorn from a rose, until she was desirable and presentable, little more than a prize to put on display. For that was the duty of the beautiful daughter of House Trevelyan, made inconsequential by the order of her birth and the capabilities of her anatomy. To be sold to the highest bidder and made compliant, doomed to a life of fans concealing a blank face and of teacups pressed against a silent mouth as she bore new roots of the noble line. Oh, and how her mother hated Sevanna for rebuking the role she had been created for, hated her for her resistance and disregard of her own beauty as if it had been some treasured heirloom passed reluctantly down to her. The gaps between Sevanna and her mother grew into gaping chasms as she refused to relinquish the unpolished parts of her, the things that made her innately Sevanna; her inability to keep still, dry unfavorable wit, the wild way she rode horses, her thirst of a life with adventure, her desire to dance with swords and not with a court; the way she was bored by a life wholly contained in marbled opulence, totally unfussed with such shallow pursuits of what was considered acceptable for someone as attractive as she.

Sevanna was well aware that she was beautiful, the way a hothouse orchid might know it is beautiful – and much like the orchid, she did not particularly care. She had been bred for beauty like a horse bred for color, with the intent that the commodity of her looks would fetch a high price. But beauty was fleeting and often something paper-thin stretched over what was deep and ugly. And she had long since discovered beauty made you nothing more than an object to be coveted, to be conquered and possessed; or it could be an often utilized tool for cruel agendas.

Like the stable boy she had met when she was seventeen. Fresh from the heartbreak of her beloved tutor’s dismissal, reeling from all the ugly words her mother had hurled at her – undesirable, ungrateful, selfish, unworthy – and Sevanna had felt lower than even the bugs she hated so desperately. She had fled to the stables on the Trevelyan estate, seeking her childhood refuge among sweet-smelling hay and the gentle whickers of horses. There she had met Garrett, who at twenty-two seemed so worldly and experienced, who had wide shoulders and pretty blue eyes. Eyes that consumed her, lit her aflame, and she snuck back to see him every day. He called her gorgeous, and funny and smart and different, so unlike the other beautifully-bred girls who sacrificed being interesting for looks. It had been so easy to fall for the boy with the pretty eyes and even prettier words, and he said them with such conviction that she swallowed them like drops of honey, had believed he had loved her, and had let him lay her down in the hay to do the things people who loved each other did.

When he had taken what she’d been taught was meant for the man she would love, she thought the world became more vibrant. Saturated in color, the air a living, plush thing against her cheek. She suffered the reaping of her womanhood for a few days, the pains of a plucked flower, before...
sneaking out to see her young love again - and had found him in the same bed of hay with a servant girl, whispering in her ear all the words Sevanna had thought belonged to her.

Her heart had broken then, but it was the first lesson that her beauty was not her own, and that the heart is a very fragile thing. It was then she had sealed it behind a case of tempered glass and donned the mask to cover the cracks beneath it. She had hidden those wounded, tender parts of herself like a shipwreck lost beneath the smooth surface of a placid lake. She would not emerge again until she found the man honest in his advances and intentions, who would be able to look beyond the polished mask she wore and still cherish all the rough edges underneath. She would wait until a man looked at her like she was worth diving down to the shipwreck for, and not simply for some vague promise of treasure.

Like the way Cullen was looking at her now, with a curious sort of heat that turned her nerves into threads of fire beneath her skin.

She hated how ashen his skin was, and she hated that he was running himself into the ground despite being so unmistakably ill. She hated the barriers that remained between them, that she could not kiss away the tension around his eyes and mouth, and that all her cares for his well-being had to be compressed into a bag of tea leaves. But most of all, Sevanna hated the memories that dug into her mind like spades into soft earth, assaulting her with every horror she had caused him and could yet cause him; that it was her own cowardice that prevented her from finally slaying the demons that shadowed her so she might claim a man who whispered potential of fulfilling her deepest desires. That if he might turn his passion for duty and work into more tender pursuits, if the fever in his blood might be fuelled by her, she could fall with him into the secret longings of a selfish heart – a passion that fogged her nights and curled her toes, a love that laid bare the most vulnerable fragments of her, without the risk that they might be scraped raw by a calloused hand. Cullen didn’t seem to be the kind of man who would simply take until there was nothing left; wasn’t she watching him, right now, giving away every last drop of his strength?

Oh, how she wanted to be rid of this; the pain and the ghosts from a time that was little more than memory. Less than that, as it only lived on in her head and Dorian’s; perhaps more like the last vestiges of a shared nightmare, one with nasty hooked edges that nestled comfortably in the back of her brain. Ever present, ever watchful, like some mean and embittered relative that smacked her hand back whenever she tried to reach forward.

Cullen had long since vanished, and yet Sevanna continued to stare at the space he’d just occupied, wrestling with the remnants of her fears and the tantalising visions of her desires.

They made her Inquisitor, and Sevanna didn’t know which was more foolish; that she had been the unanimous choice, or that she had accepted the position.

_Inquisitor_ sounded far preferable to _Herald of Andraste_; even more so than _Lady Trevelyan_, a title she was glad to shed as she emerged from the cocoon of a former life, leaving a diaphanous husk behind as she settled into being a woman of action and not just a woman of nobility. It was oddly liberating, and _Inquisitor_ was by far the first title she felt she had earned, eked from sweat and blood and dirt, a much more impressive feat than falling from the ass-end of the sky or being born into status.

She also hoped that the title of _Herald_, so steeped in divinity and providence, would simply fade into history. As a woman who was not quite sure where she stood with faith, she’d felt incredibly guilty bearing the perceived blessing of the Maker’s Bride herself. Considering the vague, half-formed answers she’d given Cassandra in reference to her beliefs, Sevanna was really quite
astounded that the Seeker had been her loudest advocate for her ascent to Inquisitor.

A literal ascent it was too, as they had given her the finest rooms available; an airy space in Skyhold’s crown with arcing windows, vaulted ceilings and two bloody balconies - Dorian had immediately complained he didn’t even have one. Sevanna had initially refused them, insisting the space be used for barracks, or her advisors, or an infirmary. But her first order as Inquisitor had fallen on deaf ears, leaving her stuck with an empty room and nothing to fill it with. She couldn’t even bear to sleep there at first, feeling as lonely and far away from the world like the stars just out of reach, and chosen to bunk with Sera in the cleared-out alcove above what was becoming a tavern.

They had been at Skyhold two weeks, and the place had been nearly transformed in that time. The wreckage in the main hall had been cleared, though scaffolding remained to hold up crumbling sections of the walls or ceilings. A harried Josephine had ordered a crew in from Val Royeaux to restore the original stonework and even design new marble busts for display. She had been hounding Sevanna for an opinion on the shape they should take – a lion, an eagle, Andraste upon her pyre – though apparently, “Whatever you like, Josephine” was not a good enough answer, and Sevanna had been treated to an irritable speech of the importance of appearances and symbols. She grumpily thought that she liked Josephine a lot more back in Haven; at least they had privately agreed that it had been a freezing dump. The Ambassador seemed much less impressed with their new holdings than she was.

Her companions had all claimed a corner of the keep for themselves, and Sevanna could hardly traverse the newly swept grounds and halls without being hailed and drawn into whatever activity (or debauchery, usually concerning Bull or Sera) they were engaged in. Today she had been summoned by Varric to a quiet, out-of-sight corner of the ramparts. There she met the Champion of Kirkwall, who had flatly refused to be addressed as thus or by anything that was not her surname. Sevanna liked Hawke immediately; they spent a couple of easy hours on the battlements, swapping stories and sharing burdens. Hawke seemed much more at ease with hers, a person who lounged beneath the weight instead of splintering like Sevanna did. But there was something in her sharp features that evoked a lethargy much too old for such a young face; she looked as weathered and weary as a cliff that held back the sea, doomed to a slow erosion and inevitable collapse. Sevanna wondered if she had such a look – and the new lines she’d discovered beneath her eyes certainly assured her suspicions that, yes, she did – or if she was as transparent as the glass she felt she was made from, and the spider-web cracks that were growing in her visage were just as obvious to everyone else as it was to her.

Dusk had painted the sky in rosy hues when Hawke and Sevanna finally parted ways; Hawke to enjoy drinks in the tavern with Varric (and Bull, whom she was very curious to meet) and Sevanna to walk the battlements alone. She had not been up here yet, and was enjoying the breeze in her face. The soldiers she passed respectfully bowed their heads and murmured “Your Worship”; that, it seemed, had not abated when her title had changed.

She came to a door that opened into the tower over the bridge that led out of Skyhold. The other rooms she had passed had been in sorry states of disrepair, and she was very surprised to find the condition of this one quite the opposite as she swung the door open. It had been cleared of debris and swept, the bookcases already full in the corner and a desk littered with reports, quills and bottles of varying fullness. Even more of a surprise, and a very warm fluttery one at that, was the Commander leaning over the desk, the candlelight hollowing out the places beneath his eyes and his hair tousled, as though it had been run through by an agitated hand.

Cullen looked up as she entered, a mingled look of surprise and discomfiture crossing his face. “Inquisitor,” he said, flushing. He sounded very strained.
“I’m sorry,” she said, twisting her fingers at her thighs, filled with a sudden kinetic energy like her veins were electrified wires. “I didn’t mean to come barging in.”

“You didn’t,” he said quickly, straightening up. Her eyes fell to the object he’d been poring over; a wooden box, the lid engraved with the likeness of Andraste. “I-I’ve been meaning to speak with you, actually.”

So have I. The words rose behind her tongue, ready to be rolled into existence. But she couldn’t, as it was not a conversation that she had wanted to start with being addressed as “Inquisitor”.

Instead she approached his desk, letting the door swing shut behind her. “About what?”

Cullen closed his eyes and he leaned over the desk again, palms flat on each side of the box. Coming closer, Sevanna could see the dew above his lip, the fine tremor in the hard line of his shoulders and arms - he was shaking. She ached to reach out to him, but the desk indicated every single barrier that was between them, specifically those as Inquisitor and Commander. So she laced her arms tight across her chest to keep them still, in case they developed a mind of their own and reached across the void towards him.

“As leader of the Inquisition, you…” He released a heavy sigh, and opened the box the way one would the casket of a beloved relative. “There’s something I must tell you.”

“You can tell me anything,” she said quietly.

His opaque gaze met hers, and something in it made her shiver; as if he were debating really telling her anything. “Right. Thank you,” he said hoarsely. He straightened again, pulling himself back from the box’s contents with obvious difficulty, like the tides pulling away from the moon.

“Lyrium grants Templars our abilities, but it controls us as well. Those cut off suffer – some go mad, others die.” He paused, lowering his head again. She watched the candlelight dance across his rumpled golden hair. “We have secured a reliable source of lyrium for the Templars here, but I…no longer take it.”

Sevanna had never heard of a Templar depriving himself of lyrium before, as it was supposed to be near impossible and potentially lethal. Her heart contracted. “You…stopped?”

“When I joined the Inquisition. It’s been months now.” He rubbed the back of his neck, bending it to work out that knot of tension. “After what happened in Kirkwall, I couldn’t…” He cleared his throat. “I will not be bound to the Order – or that life - any longer. Whatever the suffering, I accept it. But I would not put the Inquisition at risk. I’ve asked Cassandra to…watch me. If my ability to lead is compromised, I will be relieved from duty.”

He made it sound so clinical. “Are you in pain?” she asked.

“I can endure it.” His voice was like warped steel, something solid that was bending and twisting to support the weight. “The Inquisition’s army must always take priority. Should anything happen… I will defer to Cassandra’s judgement.”

“You shouldn’t have to suffer.” Sevanna was taken aback by the hardness in her voice, a thickening sheet of ice over a raging current. She of all people could understood his desire to break the bonds that held one in place, but the risk to his life… the memory of what he had suffered, what he had endured slammed down upon her again, blowing out her composure like sails in a storm. “Cullen, if this could kill you-”

There was a note of wryness in his voice as he said, “It hasn’t yet.”
“Don’t say it like that,” she snapped, and he looked almost affronted. She rarely spoke with such ferocity. “Don’t you dare say it like that.”

Cullen’s brow furrowed. “Like what?”

“Like it wouldn’t matter if you died!” she said heatedly, voice breaking on the words; breaking like delicate things dropped onto stone, breaking like a man strapped to a table and tested against metal. “Like it wouldn’t matter what it would do-”

Her breath hitched in her chest painfully as she cut herself off. Like it wouldn’t matter what it would do to me if you died. She choked back the words, damming them behind her teeth so they wouldn’t fly out into open air and become irretrievable, like little winged secrets she could not take back.

Sevanna felt so useless, so utterly lost for words, and she wanted to beat her fists against his chest so he might understand the cacophony of pain that rioted within her own. She didn’t know where this fury was coming from; she hadn’t been angry in a long time, not since she had let her anger at her mother burn away, leaving something cool and smooth behind. But now she pitched like a ship on treacherous waters, drowning in the red memories of blood and bone and pain, plunging ever deeper into the suffocating dark with every second she looked upon his haggard face.

A face that looked back at her with worry; a face that, despite the unhealthy pallor and sheen of sweat and shadow, she still found beautiful. “Alright,” Cullen said softly, eyes wary upon her. “I won’t be so…flippant about it in the future, if you wish. But I will not change my mind on this, Inquisitor. This is my decision, and I will see it through.”

She nodded tightly, stemming the tears and the anger that threatened to explode out of her. “Thank you for telling me,” she said stiffly. She turned on her heel and strode through the opposite door from where she came, unheeding and uncaring of her direction, as long as it was far away from the ghosts that were becoming close to entombing her alongside them.

She stormed blindly along an unfamiliar stretch of ramparts, deaf to the murmured greetings from the soldiers. She wanted to run, to flee the man she was breaking herself across even as she longed to be put back together by his hands.

Her flight was cut short by the crumbled stretch of stone that yawned before her, the sheer drop beneath the tip of her boot before she realized she could go no further. Sevanna sank to the ground at its lip as the adrenaline drained from her, leaving her aimless in the tide of her guilt and personal darkness.

“Drifting, yet sinking. A breath that’s caught, trapped like the words in her throat,” came a soft voice. “Will I ever breathe again without feeling like I am crushed?”

Hazily, Sevanna looked next to her. The boy with the odd, floppy hat was crouched by her side. Cole, she remembered, reaching through a cobwebbed place for the elusive memory of his name. She had allowed him to stay with the Inquisition, regardless of Vivienne and Cassandra’s outspoken disapproval. He seemed harmless and eager to help, as gentle and wandering as a wayward curl of smoke. Solas had explained he was a spirit of goodwill, and that he had some sort of ability to assuage people’s inner turmoil, although Sevanna could barely begin to understand what that entailed.

“She thinks she is broken,” Cole went on. “But she doesn’t know reforged blades become the strongest. Her family has damaged her, but he might be what tempers the hurt. He glitters in the darkness around her, but some of it is red. Red like the place she found him, in the nightmare that
roots itself behind her eyes.”

“How do you know all that?” she whispered.

He tilted his head up so that one pale eye was visible. “You’re very loud,” he said simply. “I want to help but it’s…hard. Fingers digging into angry embers. It burns.”

The memory of Redcliffe, the gaping pit of despair that threatened to consume her in a conflagration, burned in her mind like a hole through paper; was that what he was talking about? “Can you…can you see it?” she asked.

“Singing red in a room of pain. Blood, bone and metal. Beneath all that the man, torn apart because of me. *Maker, it’s all my fault.*”

“Yes.” Sevanna swallowed past an aching throat. “That one.”

The pale eye fixed intently on her face blinked. “But it wasn’t your fault. Why don’t you know that?”

Sevanna had no answer. Instead she shifted on the ground, turning to squarely face the wisp of a boy before her. “Can you help me, Cole?” she pleaded. “Can you take it away?”

“No,” he said, and his voice was full of grief for it. “The pains that cut us the deepest are the hardest to take away. I can only help, soothe the hurt like your father’s hand on your brow when you were sick. You miss him.”

“I do. But the memory you see…the one-”

“Of Cullen.” Cole said his name simply. “Yes. That’s the greatest hurt right now. Even greater than your brother gone to the Templars. I can’t erase it, but I can help it. I can make you a little quieter. I can help you love the stars again and not want to join them. Far way, alone, unreachable. A safe distance.”

A tear snaked down her cheek as he spoke her harboured thoughts aloud, plucked from her mind like a butterfly with a bent wing from the air. “Then please. Help me.”

Cole touched his fingers to her face, dry as a brush of wheat against her skin. Sevanna closed her eyes as he bent close, the brim of his hat touching her brow, breathing in the strange smell that surrounded him; like burning and ashes and cold, forgotten places. “Let go,” he murmured, one cold finger touching the tear that rolled down her cheek.

“Oh.” The soft, broken sound escaped as the most curious sensation swept through her, like the cool wipe of a cloth on feverish skin. The stinging, smouldering place in her mind dulled, banked by the boy’s cool touch on her forehead, and the festering edges laced themselves shut, leaving an old scar behind. It was still there, the memory; but it was difficult for Sevanna to summon it now, like she was recalling the long-forgotten pain of an old injury. The reminiscence of a dream someone told her, an ache that was no longer hers.

Staggering relief unfurled in Sevanna’s chest, and a choked sob forced itself past her lips; but it was a grateful one, no longer one of jagged edges and heartbreak. “Thank you, Cole,” she breathed, tears cooling on her cheeks in the light breeze. “Thank you, thank y-”

She stopped short, having opened her eyes to find he had already gone.
Sorry if this one was a little heavy and broody. It refused to come out lighter, but at least this emotional stuff should be out of the way and fluff will be free to abound. I have a lot of difficulty writing Cole, so I apologize if he is OOC or just badly-written. I don't know if his spirit powers would extend to what he does with Sevanna, sort of erasing past hurts and memories, but for the sake of this fic he can.
In Dreams of Blue

Chapter Summary

Cullen struggles with a resurgence of withdrawal.

Chapter Notes

Good LORD I am sorry it took this long to update. I was so stuck on this chapter, started it like five times and it just wouldn't come out. I'm still not 100% sure about it, but I just wanted to get it out. There. Done. *flops forward onto face*

I have made some edits to previous chapters, nothing major that affects the story, just some cleaning up of rougher sentences. The biggest change of consequence is that I dialed back Cullen's age; I had originally put him at 35 but upon reflection felt that was a little too old. He has been scaled back to 32; not that his age is important for this chapter or future ones, but just so I don't contradict myself later on. Please enjoy this chapter while I go lie down forever.

She came to him at night.

It was always too dark for Cullen to see her fully, and he wanted light as badly as he wanted her; more light - any light - to illuminate the expanses of skin lost to him in darkness, to shine off her loose copper hair, to reflect in her eyes like the sun glancing off still waters. The night turned her spectral, a wraith of charcoal and silver on soundless feet as she approached him, stoking the fire in his blood a little higher with each step. But she was beautiful like this, too; made ethereal by the loom of moon and shadow, a thing of beauty crafted out of starlight before Cullen’s very eyes. A creature descended from Heaven itself.

The moonlight would briefly expose her breasts as she came to the foot of his bed, just enough to send a stab of heat through Cullen but never enough to stare, memorise, or worship. Then, just like tonight, and the other nights she had come to him, she knelt upon his bed with a soft creak and he saw her face instead.

Open, hot, ardent desire was written upon it, framed by a soft halo of hair that was bled of all color in the dark, her irises swallowed by black as they latched hungrily to his. She crawled up his body in a fluid, serpentine line, carving scorching patterns against his skin as she dragged her breasts up his belly and chest. He reached out his hands to trace her, to learn the planes and dips of her body – skin pulled like satin over ribs, taut belly, long thighs – but never long enough, leaving him breathless for more.

“Sevanna,” he breathed, both plea and benediction as she straddled him, allowing him to grip the soft flesh of her hips.

She answered with a smile and braced her hands against his chest. The sound he released as she
impaled herself upon him in one slow, velvet push was both reverent inhale and yet airless; like a man fallen over the edge of a cliff, lungs filling with a rush of air that simultaneously robbed him of breath in the exhilarating plunge. Her fingernails were crescents of pleasure-pain in his skin as Sevanna undulated over him, throwing her magnificent head back in rapture and exulting the rise and fall of his name in a breathy moan. Cullen would die a hundred deaths just to remain here beneath her, even if he were only witness and not participant to the pleasure she gleaned from him. His mouth shaped the words he wanted to whisper along her throat and trail them up to the plushness of her lips where he could spell them with his tongue. Coils of fire were unravelling deep in his belly and he wanted her faster, harder, deeper, to chase the brink of ecstasy and tumble down the other side with her –

He dug his fingers into her hips to do so, and was met with a sharp crack. He peered into the space hidden from the moon between them and saw, with an arctic douse of horror, ice spreading from each indent of his fingers; a carapace of frost that began to swallow Sevanna’s creamy skin.

“No-” he choked, struggling to yank his hands from her body. But she only moved faster atop him, ice crackling as it spread along her thighs.

“You did this to me,” she whispered, her voice raw and breathless with pleasure. He tried to twist out from under her, or break the wintry shell that was devouring her. Her breasts had turned into cracked, shimmering ice, which crawled inexorably towards her throat. “You did this to me, Cullen.”

“No!” he cried, but he was too late. The ice sealed over her face like a diamond casting, her breath a puff of frost on the last syllable of his name; she shattered into a thousand shards, cascading over him, his hands wrapped around empty air and each finger tipped in frost –

Cullen jerked awake, rearing up from his rumpled, damp bed with a shout. He tore the hand that was fisted around his aching length away, grunting as his impending release faltered and became made of barbed edges as he forced it back. The grey light of dawn was filtering through the roof as his heart rate slowed and the discomfort of halted climax receded. He rubbed his eyes with a shaking hand, sinking beneath the wave of guilt that was just as fresh as the day.

The worst part of this new breed of nightmare was the way they began, misleading Cullen with their sweetness; this had been the third night in a row it had twined itself in with the usual host of bad dreams. It’d started the night he told Sevanna of his decision to quit lyrium, and they had argued – sort of. She had been undoubtedly angry, but it was unclear to Cullen whether it was towards him. Had she gone on about the risks it posed to the Inquisition he would have understood, and would not have blamed her; she would be wholly justified in that anger. Yet she had not mentioned the Inquisition at all, her ire instead seemingly raised by his offhandness of his own mortality. Cullen didn’t want to flatter himself in believing she meant him and not the Commander, but her words kept echoing back to him. Don’t say it like that. Like it wouldn’t matter if you died. Like it wouldn’t matter what it would - what? What had she stopped herself from saying?

In all honesty, Cullen felt she should be angry with him. For it was his decision that had buried Haven, it was on his order that she march to her own slaughter. The weight of command was a leaden thing, and one must craft themselves of iron to bear it, especially if they were hollow beneath the hardness. It was part of why Cullen had given up lyrium; what was the point of being invulnerable, if there was nothing underneath to protect? The life of a Templar was stone upon stone, cold and unfeeling, and he’d once decided he’d rather suffer the thousand follies of a man than live a half-life in shackles, unable to recognize his own emptiness. But now Cullen thought he may be unable to bear it, if there was nothing to bolster the smothering guilt. He had functioned so long with a cushion of lyrium between consequence and conscience, and without its familiarity he
was beginning to crumble under the choices he had made.

It was an unfortunate task to order an innocent woman to sacrifice, however necessary; but it had been monstrous to let her do so alone. What made it worse was that no one blamed him. It was the burden of authority to enact such decisions, to weigh the balance of one life against many. Those were the bonds of duty, and those were the bonds that bound Cullen’s hands and legs as he sank into the dark and the deep. The man he was becoming flailed as he drowned in blue waters, though all he had to do to ease the guilt, to put the incessant singing in his blood to rest, was take a breath.

But he wouldn’t.

His stiff and aching erection had faded, and he could focus on how stiff and aching the rest of his body was. At least that he was used to, and had earned; unlike the right to dream of Sevanna’s naked skin, which had been teasing him since he’d glimpsed her breasts in the mountains. Maker, lately they were all Cullen could think about, even as he tried to focus on Skyhold’s restoration, or the organizing of their troops. He barely managed to push them into the corner of his mind during the daylight hours, but at night, alone and exhausted in a cold bed, they returned to him, making him throb with desire…soft and full and heavy, tipped with mouth-watering peaks of rose -

Cullen muttered an oath as he hauled himself out of bed, resigning to yet another early rise; just like he had for the last two weeks they’d been at Skyhold, as the withdrawal escalated once more. He’d been sleeping little and eating less, the evidence scrawled harshly across his face. Cassandra had been haranguing at him to take a break and that he was pushing himself too far; but Cullen felt his limits had been tested well enough for him to know where they ended. But he avoided looking at the reflection of the shadows beneath his eyes and the hollows of his cheeks as he tamed his hair with an oiled comb. He did not need to be reminded that he looked almost as bad as he felt. He washed briefly from the basins he put out to collect rainwater, gooseflesh erupting in the chill morning air. He dressed in his usual armor, burying the simmering tension of arousal underneath steel and leather. He kicked the floor hatch open and descended into his office, figuring he may as well get a head start on the endless mountain of daily reports; though he was technically supposed to take the day off, as was everyone else.

Today was the memorial for those who’d died at Haven. It wasn’t until the late morning, so Cullen settled himself at his desk to start going over reports. He plucked the first one off the stack, finding it to be from the Blades of Hessarian, the militia whose allegiance Sevanna had won in her trip to the Storm Coast. He read it over twice, having not fully absorbed the first time. His mind was decidedly somewhere else, (though firmly kept away from a place of moonlight and naked skin) like in the small drawer on the right-hand side of his desk.

Absently, furtively, Cullen laid the report down and placed his hand on the drawer’s handle. He told himself he was just checking it was still there, just a stolen glimpse and he would shut it away again; he had himself almost convinced as he pulled it open, his body singing a sorrowful song.

His lyrium kit was nestled in the drawer, answering the call in his blood with a sweet litany of its own, a melody of contentment, of recovered strength, a soothed mind and of hands that did not tremble -

Cullen slammed the door shut, pulse racing. Lately, it seemed he was torn between the want of many colors; cream and roses, clear green, pulsating blue. His body ached with need, and he wasn’t sure what was strongest. Lips on a bottle, his mouth on a breast; a plunger pressed into a vein, the softness of her body moulded to his.

A swell of resentment crested through him; towards himself and his fallibility, towards the Chantry and its chains of blue; towards Cassandra, who had barged into his office three mornings ago and
returned his box of lyrium, ordering him to inform Sevanna of his...situation. Of all the things the Seeker had rescued from Haven, of course it’d had to be this – the last scale of an old skin he had yet to shed, the strongest hammer on the anvil of his resolve. She had returned it, she explained, because she trusted him. He had not sought it out for months now; but that was because he could put it out of mind when it was in Cassandra’s care, and he was almost able to ignore his wrestle with addiction. Now it was here in his possession again, and though Cassandra meant it as the last hurdle he needed to face before he truly conquered it, Cullen himself felt hopeless; as doomed as a prisoner aboard a sinking ship, his own ball and chain placed in his hands and being told to swim.

He wiled the morning away in a blur of reports, snatches of song and snippets of naked flesh. The light from the window turned pink and gold as the sun crested the mountains. There was no sound of the blacksmith, no uniform stamp of soldier’s feet or shouted orders. Not today, when sorrow blanketed Skyhold on the morning they grieved the dead.

The door opposite from Cullen’s desk banged open, letting Cassandra and a crisp accompanying breeze into his office, sending his stack of reports fluttering to the floor. He bent to retrieve them with a somewhat irritable, “Good morning, Seeker.”

“Commander.” Her eyes swept over his face with hawk-like precision. “How are you feeling today?”

“I’m fine,” he said shortly.

“You look terrible,” she retorted, “and you have not been taking meals.”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing a hand over his eyes. It was much too early for an interrogation. “I’ve been better. I’ve not been sleeping well.”

“Is it the usual nightmare?” Cassandra was well-acquainted with his demons, having witnessed them firsthand when he’d bellowed at them during the initial withdrawal in Haven.

“Among others,” he muttered, pushing away a resurgence of bared breasts and moans of his name.

She watched him for a beat, obviously hovering on something else to say, but then she nodded and turned on her heel. Perhaps his tone conveyed that he was not in the mood for this discussion. “We are preparing to leave for the memorial,” she said over her shoulder. “I’ll see you there, Cullen.”

He grunted in response just before she slammed the door behind her. He was granted a reprieve for now, but the Seeker was likely to badger him about his sleeping habits later. Cullen could think of two things that would help him sleep, one of which was the tea Sevanna made him. But he had lost his supply along with Haven, and he didn’t want to ask her for more; it was hardly the Inquisitor’s duty to whip up tea on his request. And the other...ignoring the reports he had restacked haphazardly on his desk, Cullen once more opened the drawer to stare at his lyrium kit.

Yes, Cassandra had trusted him enough to give it back; but the problem was that Cullen didn’t trust himself. He didn’t know how long he could tread these choppy waters before his head slipped under again.

*

Out of the fifty that had died the night Coypheus attacked, only seven bodies had been recovered by Leliana’s agents. The rest had been buried in the snow, or chewed up by the mountain’s teeth until it’d been impossible to tell what parts belonged together. Cullen knew seven was far more than they could have hoped for, but there was still sorrow for those who were lost to the mountain,
and their families who would never achieve true peace while their loved ones slumbered beneath the snow, forever irretrievable and unable to come home.

Fifty lives lost, and they had built eight funeral pyres. Seven for those recovered, who now lay on wooden crowns, swathed in white silk and awaiting a warrior’s burial through fire. The last pyre stood empty of a body, piled instead with woven braids of flowers, to be burned for all those who remained in a frozen grave.

Every single person at Skyhold was in attendance; every weathered soldier, every green recruit, every visiting dignitary had climbed the neighbouring slope where the pyres had been built. Many of them had more flowers clutched in their hands; embrium, prophet’s laurel, bulbs of dawn lotus. Tokens to toss in with the flames in a symbolic act of letting go, letting the blooms curl up into the smoke that perfumed the air.

Mother Giselle led the memorial, her voice carrying on the wind with the ash as she recited the Canticle of Trials. “Though all before me is shadow, yet shall the Maker be my guide…”

Many voices whispered the Chant with her, though they were lost in the crackling of flames. The smoke stung Cullen’s eyes as he, too, breathed the words, though he found no comfort in them; they were only for the living, as the dead could no longer hear.

“I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond, for there is no darkness in the Maker’s light…”

Sevanna was standing across the last pyre from him, her hair tumbling loose in the wind. Cullen could see where the soot stuck to the trails her tears had left. They hadn’t spoken since that night in his office, but in the days since he’d often felt eyes upon him and he would turn to see her watching from a distance. It lacked the distinct sadness that had been present for the last few weeks, and hope had flickered though him even though she hadn’t sought him out.

Mother Giselle finished the Chant and began to read the names of those they mourned. Cullen kept his eyes on Sevanna, watched as she continued to mouth a prayer after each name was read. He wondered which verse it might be, or if it was a simple blessing to help bring her comfort; until, with a jolt, he realized she was repeating just two words over and over.

“My fault.

The names went on and on, and after each one Sevanna mouthed a silent declaration of guilt. Cullen stared, each name weighing more heavily on his heart; tiny cracks fissuring across it, breaking it a little further as she whispered her culpability to the dead. My fault. My fault. My fault. She piled the blame higher on her shoulders, each utterance of those words like another shovelful of dirt in the grave she had abandoned, when she should have been buried alongside them. Cullen knew that’s how she felt, because long ago he had left the tower that had become the tomb of his friends, and known he should have joined them.

The end of the list was reached, and the dead had been put to rest in the best way they could manage. The flowers had been burned up and the smoke became acrid; those in attendance began to drift away, almost like they were made of smoke themselves, blown back to the world of the living by the wind. The smoke of those who couldn’t return curled towards the sky, which was the same clear blue as lyrium. Cullen’s stomach clutched painfully on emptiness at the thought, and he was reminded just how long it’d been since he’d eaten.

He didn’t move from his spot in the snow as the crowd dispersed around him. Leliana squeezed his arm as she trudged by with Josephine, but he barely felt it. He was focused intently on Sevanna, in
part to ignore the gnawing withdrawal. The tears had dried on her face, but the way her arms were knotted tightly over her chest belied her grief. He wanted to go to her, put his arms around her so he might comfort them both, but the memory of their argument held him back. What could he say to her to take away her pain, and what if his were the last words she wanted to hear?

“She’s like the sun,” came a voice. Cullen blinked the stinging ash out of his eyes as he broke his gaze away from her. The last of the crowd had gone, leaving churned up snow in their wake; the only ones left were Sevanna, Cullen and the waifish young man who had appeared at his side. He blinked up at Cullen in earnest, one eye peering through pale strands of hair like the moon through wintry boughs.

Cullen struggled to remember the boy’s name; he seemed familiar, like the memory of a face from a dream. “Cole,” he finally managed.

“Yes.” The boy nodded vigorously, the brim of his hat flopping as he did. “You remember.”

Cullen looked back towards Sevanna. She had turned away from the pyre but hadn’t yet moved away, her head bowed. “What did you mean by ‘she’s like the sun’?”

“Everything spins around her,” Cole said. “She burns the darkness away, holds back the shadows you’re afraid to see behind you. But it’s hard to look at her when she hurts. You want to lift it from her, but the chains are too short. Too heavy.”

She’s like the sun. Cullen had rarely heard anything so accurate. Ever since he’d broken his orbit around the Chantry, there’d been nothing to prevent his drift into darkness. Until the Inquisition; until an explosion had dropped Sevanna into his path, giving him something new to revolve around. For all of them, for that matter; hadn’t the Inquisition been struggling until she’d fallen right into the middle of it? She had balanced their entire cause, had affixed their center of gravity.

“He’s still when he looks at her,” Cole said quietly. “His heart sings a different song. Choice, not chains, keeps him here.”

Cullen shifted uncomfortably. He had been warned of Cole’s ability to pluck thoughts and emotions from a mind as easily as an apple from a tree, but it didn’t make it any less unsettling.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Cole flapped his hands. “Solas tells me I shouldn’t listen. But I can’t help it. You and she are so--so loud about each other.”

“Loud?” Cullen repeated, nonplussed.

“Yes. Or…not loud, but strong. Like tides swirling together, pushing, pulling towards each other.”

Cole cocked his head like he was listening for a whisper. “How do I miss what I’ve never had? How do I stay afloat when Anchors only sink?”

The first comment echoed one of Cullen’s own errant thoughts. His gaze found Sevanna again, watching her hair stir in the wind. He did miss what had never been his, and though only feet separated them it felt like an ocean. And though he often felt like he was sinking in it, Cole’s second comment was unfamiliar. Was it possible he was listening to Sevanna?

“Go to her,” came Cole’s soft voice. “She wants you to.”

Startled, Cullen turned to Cole again, but the boy had gone; there weren’t even prints in the snow to prove he’d ever been there.

Taking a deep breath, Cullen crunched his way towards Sevanna. The pyres had burned down, the
flames sputtering as they ran out of fuel. His boots were clogged with ash and snow as he came up behind her and touched her arm. “Sevanna?”

In one motion, she turned on the spot and pressed her forehead against his shoulder, arms still crossed between them. Rather unprepared for such a maneuver, his hands flew up to catch at her shoulders. “What-?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, muffled against him. “I just – I need a moment. Will you stay with me?”

His heart thudded loudly at the request. Tentatively, Cullen ran his hands along her upper arms in an attempt to rub warmth back into them, and tilted his mouth towards her ear. “Of course,” he murmured into her hair, and closed his eyes as she relaxed into him.

He didn’t know how long they lingered there, lending and accepting comfort in equal measure. His hands eventually found her back, one pressed between her shoulder blades, the other in the curve of her waist. She let him hold her, and he guessed she needed it as much as he did, and wondered if she knew that; that he had craved this kind of touch for so long, and holding her unconscious in a tent hadn’t been enough to assuage that.

Far too soon Sevanna pulled her head back to look at him, though she kept their bodies aligned. Cullen tingled wherever there was contact, as though her touch was jeweled pins brushing his skin. She wet her lips, parted them to say something but faltered and Cullen’s pulse grew swift – for a moment, it was like they were back before she’d left for Redcliffe, before the withdrawal had crept up on him again, and now they were pressed close once more, too close, with her face tilted up to his. He could kiss her, press closer with one small movement; he could kiss her until there was no breath left between them and he could forget the lyrium talons that dug into him every waking moment –

He inhaled a sharp breath between his teeth and carefully angled himself away. No matter how badly he wanted to lose himself in her, now was not the time; not when they had just put the lost to rest and wore the scent of their pyres on their skin; not when Cullen would kiss her mainly to bury the blue fever beneath the feel of her mouth on his. He wouldn’t use her for such a selfish purpose.

Sevanna let him pull away, watching him closely, and he saw for the first time that the darkness in her eyes had faded. The color was no longer fractured, like cracked ice over a spill of ink. It made him want to pull her close again, as if he might physically feel the barriers melting away between them. It made him want to take her face in his hands and tell her it wasn’t her fault, repeat it until he saw the acceptance in her eyes. But that would come across as patronizing, and forcing her to believe she wasn’t at fault would be as bad as forcing a kiss; it would be for his own benefit, and not hers, that he did so.

“May I walk you back?” he asked quietly. She nodded, and allowed him to draw her away from the burning mounds behind them. She even allowed his hand to remain pressed into the small of her back the entire way to Skyhold; Cullen decided, for now, he could rejoice in the small things, the little points of brightness in an otherwise darkened place. The withdrawal wouldn’t last forever, and when he once again came out the other side perhaps she would let him light up the world in a different way. Perhaps she would agree to be his sun, and burn away the darkness for good.

* 

Two days was certainly not forever, but clutched in the jaws of withdrawal made it feel as such. Cullen had suffered two more nights in which Sevanna featured in his dreams, turned to ice once again the first night, the second dead by his hands that had latched upon her throat. He had erupted from that dream with a tortured bellow, the allegorical end of his rope tight across his neck like his
hands around hers – Cullen had stormed into his office without dressing, had the lyrium kit on his desk and pilfered in his shaking hand before he truly came to his senses. He collapsed in his chair, slick with cold sweat and every muscle quivering with fatigue. His headache was like a hot, living parasite behind his eyes, feeding from him until he could not stand it. He was done, he was finished, as frayed as a wire under stone. His weakness had won. The lyrium had won. He was reduced to a wretched, trembling wreck, the laughter of his demons ringing in his ears.

It took a long time to force himself up the ladder; his hands could barely grip the rungs, never mind haul his dead weight to the top. Getting dressed had been an even more enormous challenge, and he left a majority of snaps and clasps undone, his clumsy fingers unable to summon the dexterity to fasten them. The day’s activities had already begun by the time Cullen stumbled from his office, using every ounce of waning strength to keep himself upright and walking straight; the last thing he needed was the entire keep to witness him staggering like a drunk.

Cassandra was in her usual spot, preparing to slaughter the training dummies as usual; Cullen caught her by the arm and dragged her to the nearest door, which lead to the blacksmithing forge, ignoring her snarl of protest. He hauled her into the blessedly empty space, slamming the door shut as she ripped her arm away.

“What is the meaning of this?” she demanded.

The headache made it seem like there were two Cassandra’s staring daggers at him. “Find me a replacement.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” he growled. “I need a replacement.”

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she scoffed, and stalked past him. “No.”

“No?” he repeated incredulously, at her heels. “No? Look at me, Cassandra! I can’t sleep, I can barely-“

“I will not replace you until all other options have been exhausted,” she snapped, whirling on him. “None of which you have tried. Do not deny it,” she warned, as his mouth opened in protest. “I am not a fool. You refuse to seek aid, you never take breaks – your weariness is your own doing, Cullen. You have come too far to turn back now because of a bad day.”

“You think this is the result of a day? It’s been weeks! Do you really believe I can push through this, when no one else has?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “I do. Just like I did when you first came to Haven. We both knew the risks, yet you made me promise to see you through it.”

“And you promised me to find a replacement in the event I was unfit for command,” he forced through gritted teeth. “I would daresay this qualifies-”

“I disagree.” She gave him a hard look. “Have you taken it?”

“I almost did.” He paced in front of the forge, running his hands through his hair. “This morning. I wanted to. I still want to. Can’t you see that I’m unable to do this?”

“And yet you did not. Certainly that counts for something.”

Cullen actually snarled. “Seeker-”
“No,” she said sharply. “You asked for my opinion, and I’ve given it. Why would you expect it to change?”

“I expect you to keep your word!” he shot back. “It’s relentless. I can’t-”

“You give yourself too little credit!”

“If I’m unable to fulfill what vows I kept, then nothing good has come of this. Would you rather save face than admit-?”

The door swung open, stopping him dead in his sentence. A voice cried, “I heard-”

They both turned towards the voice. Sevanna hovered on the threshold, looking unsure as her eyes flicked between him and Cassandra. “…raised voices,” she finished inaudibly.

The fight drained out of Cullen. There was no point in arguing, if his mind was made up – his limits had been tested, and now they were broken in his grasp.

He turned his back on Cassandra and marched away, lowering his gaze from Sevanna’s face. “Forgive me,” he murmured, unable to bear her tentative touch on his arm as he slipped past her.

Cassandra said something after him – something scathing, most likely – and the door swung shut. Cullen returned blindly to his office, guided by the pull in his blood. He jerked the drawer of his desk open, tenderly lifted the box out and placed it on his desk. He stared down at it, hands squeezing into fists and releasing with every knock of his heart against his ribcage. Was he doing this? Would he do this? Abandon all the progress he’d made just to snuff out what he was too weak to endure?

He flipped the lid open. The philter winked at him, nestled like a fallen star in velvet. He could drink it right now in his impatience, stain his lips and teeth with blue as he poured it down his throat. Or he could find comfort in an old routine; lyrium carefully poured into a syringe, an arm tied off so the veins bulged out, thirsty for the taste and for the power. Was there enough time? Should he down it now, make it irretrievable in one gulp; or should he draw out the process, savor it one last time? He frowned. Was it the last time? Or was it the beginning of a fresh addiction, a willing return to the leash that bound him like a well-trained dog heeling for its master -

No!

With a roar, Cullen seized the kit and flung it away from him. Hurled it across the room with all his might like it was a venomous snake poised to strike, just as the door opened. Sevanna flinched as the kit exploded by her head, the utensils and philter bouncing to the floor at her feet.

Cullen sucked in a horrified breath, as he took an icy plunge back into reality. “Maker’s breath! I didn’t hear you enter! I -” The excuse died on his lips and his shoulders sagged. He’d never felt so low; how had he allowed this struggle to turn him so violent? “Forgive me,” he whispered, though he knew he didn’t deserve it, even if he got down and begged.

Sevanna said nothing, her eyes upon the debris at her feet. Cullen stared at her with arrested breath and pulse, waiting for her to shout and berate him, to look at him with anger and disgust. He wanted her to, so he could justify his burning self-hatred and shame; but what she did instead broke his desire for punishment. Slowly, she knelt to the floor and picked up the pieces of his kit, turning them over in her hands to ensure they were not broken.

“You don’t have to-” Cullen began, hating that she took it on herself to tidy the mess he’d made. Literally and figuratively, as she would not be here if she thought he was beyond saving. But
another paroxysm of pain wracked him, forcing him to lean heavily on his desk. He waited for it to pass, watching helplessly as Sevanna re-arranged his lyrium kit and closed its lid. He swallowed dryly. “I never meant for this to interfere.”

“I know,” she said quietly. She approached his desk without meeting his eyes and placed the kit down. “I just wish I had known it was this bad.”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” he whispered. “This is my burden, and mine alone.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” she said, raising her eyes to his. There was no anger in her eyes, and though at first he’d wanted it, Cullen was relieved. He didn’t know if he could bear it if she turned her back on him. “Let me help you carry it.”

She echoed the words he’d said to her long ago on the shore of a frozen lake, after she’d left his side full of fire and promise and returned but a shell. It felt so long ago, a lifetime apart as they now stood in opposite roles; he of cracked resolve and she the blacksmith. Cullen did not know if he could accept someone by his side to share the weight. It was easiest to walk a dark path alone, for trust was too fragile when placed in another’s hands. But in yet another life, a young man he no longer knew had been locked in a tower and laid to waste by demons, had subsequently curled in on himself because it was easier to hate than forgive; a man who shut all others out to continue walking in shadow because the ascent to the light was too frightening.

“I don’t know if I can,” he croaked. “What I have seen – what I have endured…”

“In Ferelden’s Circle Tower?” Sevanna asked quietly.

He gripped the edge of his desk. “How do you-”

“Cassandra told me you had been stationed there.” She sounded almost apologetic. “She said it was – bad.”

Cullen could have laughed, but he knew she didn’t understand. Couldn’t understand, unless he told her – if he could find the words to describe the worst time of his life, dredge them up like a carcass that had been swallowed by quicksand.

He decided to try, but he didn’t know if he could face her as he did. He drifted to the window and gripped its ledge instead. “It was taken over by abominations. The Templars – my friends – were slaughtered.” His voice broke, but didn’t wane. Now that he had started, it was a dam pouring forth from a reserve it’d tried to break; like drawing poison from an abscess that festered within him for a decade. “I was - tortured. They tried to break my mind, and I – how can you be the same person after that? Still, I wanted to serve. They sent me to Kirkwall.” He sneered the word. “I trusted my Knight-Commander, and for what? Her fear of mages ended in madness. Kirkwall’s Circle fell. Innocent people died in the streets.” He faced her, and finally allowed her to see just how shattered of a man he was. “Can’t you see why I want nothing to do with that life?”

“Of course I do,” she said immediately. “And if this is what you want, then you should have it-”

“Don’t!” he pleaded, shutting his eyes against the surging tide of images; of breasts and bottles, naked skin and frost, dreams of blue every night, whether it was ice or lyrium. He could not be trusted to decide what he wanted, for those were the very things that haunted him.

“You should be questioning what I’ve done,” he continued in a hollow voice. She rounded the desk towards him, but he couldn’t have her touch him, not now when his control was slipping. He paced away, then back, caught between what he couldn’t have and couldn’t give up. “I thought this would
be better – that I would regain some control over my life. But these thoughts won’t leave me!” He pressed his palms against his temples, feeling Sevanna’s gaze upon him as he paced like a caged beast.

“How many lives depend on our success?” he said, mostly to himself. “I swore myself to this cause! I will not give less to the Inquisition than I did the Chantry! I should be taking it!” His control snapped like the threadbare thing it was; he slammed his fist into the bookcase, sending books crashing to the floor as they were jarred from their shelves. He let out a slow, resigned breath and repeated the words he had refused to say aloud until now. “I should be taking it.”

They were swallowed up by silence, heard only by the pounding of his heart. Cullen kept his fist braced against the bookshelf, eyes squeezed shut out of fear that if he opened them he would find himself alone.

Instead, soft fingers slid under his jaw, pressing softly to encourage the turn of his head. “Don’t make this about the Inquisition,” Sevanna murmured. He opened bleary eyes to find her before him, her gaze resolute. “Is that what you want? To take lyrium again?”

He lowered his hand slowly, and sighed. It stirred the hair hanging over her ear. “No,” he said hoarsely. “But…these memories have always haunted me – if they become worse, if I cannot endure this…”

Sevanna laid her hand on his chest, directly over where his heart hammered beneath the steel. She was close enough that he could see the small scar under her left eye, relic of the night Corypheus attacked. She was close enough to kiss. “You can,” she whispered. “You don’t have to do this alone, Cullen. I’ll help in whatever way I’m able.”

He swallowed, trying not to think of the possibilities of such a statement. Would she fulfill his other, more carnal desires if he asked? But he couldn’t. Instead, he said, “Alright.”

She backed away, her hand lifting off his chest. He regretted wearing his armor, wishing instead it had been only linen between her skin and his.

“Would you like to take a walk?” she asked.

“I…” Cullen hesitated. He wanted a few more stolen moments with her. But he wanted them as badly as the lyrium on his desk, and he no longer wanted to confuse the two. He didn’t want to allow his thirst for lyrium taint his want of her any more. He needed time to separate them, to put one to rest and the other aside, for now. If he didn’t want to hurt her in the end.

“Perhaps another time?” he said tentatively. “I-I need to clear my head, and I think I need some time…alone.”

“Take all the time you need,” she said sincerely. He was endlessly grateful for her words, and that she didn’t feel rebuffed by him. “We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“I would like that,” he said softly. She smiled, backing towards the door so their gazes didn’t break. Then she was gone, taking a little bit of his heaviness with her.

Cullen decided it was time to finally heed the Seeker’s advice and take a break. He didn’t want to remain in his office with so many echoes of his past horrors, and opted instead for a walk on the battlements. His feet absently carried him to a quiet corner where he leaned against the ramparts, eyes unfocused as he relished, for the first time in many days, a quiet mind.

He didn’t know how much later he returned; his office was empty save for a new stack of reports
on his desk, which he had no care to look at. But on top of them, probably leaving a ring on the
topmost paper, was a mug of tea. It had cooled; it’d obviously been sitting there for some time. He
gulped it down and left the empty cup on his desk; he climbed the ladder to his loft as the tea
washed over him, thinking he might just be able to take a nap.

When Cullen woke again, it was with relief; the headache had vanished and there had been no
dreams. The pearly light told him it was just after dawn; so he had slept most of yesterday and the
entire night, but Maker did he feel better. He dressed in the usual armor, feeling far more optimistic
than he had the last couple weeks, even though his status on reports had likely reached ‘alarming’.
But the first thing on his agenda was to find Sevanna and apologise, thank her for the tea and ask
her if she might want to take that walk with him – in that order.

He left his office, taking an indirect route to the main hall as Solas was still likely to be asleep. He
ran into Cassandra at the stairs that lead into the keep. She scowled at his greeting, informing
Cullen she was still frustrated with him.

“Commander,” she drawled. “Are you feeling better today?”

“I am,” he replied, rubbing his neck. “I’m sorry for my behaviour yesterday. I…was not in a good
place.”

“It is forgotten,” she said, though her tone made it abundantly clear it was not. Cullen smothered
an eye roll as he followed her up the stairs, knowing she wasn’t likely to forgive him for a long
time and would hold it over him in the meanwhile.

“Have you seen the Inquisitor?” he asked.

“She’s not here.”

He froze in his tracks; she, however, marched on. “She – what?”

Cassandra swivelled around impatiently, as though he were endeavouring to be dense. “She is not
here, Commander.”

“Well, then, where is she?”

“Crestwood, with Blackwall, Bull and that snake, Varric,” she snapped, turning on her heel.
Perhaps her animosity wasn’t entirely reserved for Cullen, then. “They left yesterday to meet with
Hawke’s Grey Warden. They’ll be gone for several weeks.” She left him gaping in the doors to the
keep as she stomped away.

Cullen felt every last drop of optimism drain out of him. Sevanna was gone – Sevanna had left
yesterday.

And she hadn’t even said goodbye.
An Unexpected Tea Party

Chapter Summary

Cullen attends a rather awkward tea.

Chapter Notes

I reaaaally wanted this and the upcoming chapter to be one, but I'm not quite done the second part and it was coming up on 10 000 words. Like what. Felt that was much too dense. Both will be heavy in dialogue, and there is some from the game used here. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cullen,

I'm so sorry I had to leave so abruptly. We received word yesterday evening from Hawke’s friend in the Grey Wardens, and set out immediately. Apparently Crestwood is crawling with Wardens with a warrant for his arrest, and there was no time to waste if we wish to reach him first.

I had stopped by your office to say goodbye, but found you asleep upstairs. You looked so

I couldn’t bear to wake you. You needed the rest. I hope the tea helped.

Please, persevere while I am gone. I have faith in you.

Sevanna

(By the way, did you know there’s a hole in your roof?)

Sevanna’s letter, which had arrived with one of Leliana’s birds the afternoon following her departure, was now kept in Cullen’s pocket alongside his brother’s coin. It was still tied with a knot of leather, though having been unrolled and read a hundred times left it much flatter than when it first arrived. Cullen carried it for that purpose; to peruse in idle moments, tracing her looping handwriting with eyes that never tired of looking until every letter was memorised, branded into his brain so when he stowed it away they wouldn’t fade, and he could summon them up when the box in his desk whispered to him. Persevere. I have faith in you. Her written words reinvigorated his determination, became an unquenchable spark in the onslaught of withdrawal; and so he carried her letter everywhere, a talisman of hope jostling next to the one he carried for luck.

The arrival of Sevanna’s letter had quashed Cullen’s initial petulance at her sudden departure. Of course she wouldn’t have left without saying goodbye – not for lack of trying, at any rate. A pleasant little shiver had gone through him at the thought of Sevanna in his loft, until it dawned on
him that he might have been snoring. Or drooling. Or, Maker, maybe both. He might’ve looked absolutely appalling; that would have explained the scribed out sentence in her letter.

Despite that particular ambiguity, it also erased Cullen’s subsequent fears that he might’ve been a contributing factor to her hasty parting. He’d been afraid he had done or said something to offend her; throwing a heavy object at her head certainly qualified. He also worried she had come to her senses and realized just how fractured he was, as bent and beaten as a nail after a lifetime under hammers, and had gone out of her way to avoid him. But the letter in his pocket disproved all that and laid those fears to rest; blossoms of hope were beginning to grow in its stead, filling a space with color where all had once been dark.

But there remained the niggling issue that it was not appropriate. She was Inquisitor, and he the Commander of her forces; he was a mere extension of her hand, reaching where she could not, crushing what ought to be crushed when she needed a fist. Surely there was some archaic rule bound between the pages of Cassandra’s book that forbade such fraternization, one that kept the Inquisitor as a person and as a figure indistinguishable, and cleanly divided from their subordinates. Cullen tried to keep that particular disquiet suppressed to the corner of his mind; he was nothing if not a rule-follower, and perhaps ignoring such one would render it non-existent.

There also remained the fact that he could be misinterpreting this. The looks, the touches, the offer of support; all might be the platonic gestures of a worried friend, or the professional concern of a leader. Sevanna’s demeanor toward him had changed so abruptly after Redcliffe, all but smashing his timid hopes to pieces. It had just been in the days before she’d left for Crestwood that they were slowly returning to that point, when their eyes could meet without such pain buried in hers. And perhaps, even then, he had been mistaken; had read signs that were not there, conjured by his loneliness. Cullen couldn’t bear to set himself up for such disappointment again and believe Sevanna desired more from him; for what did he have to offer her, really? He had no land, no titles, and no rank of importance outside the Inquisition. _But she didn’t want all that_, one small hopeful voice reminded him in times of doubt. _She meant to run away, and leave her title behind_. But even if all that truly did not matter to her it did not change that he was a broken man of damaged faith, who did not know what he feared most: night, when the dreams and demons plagued him, or day, when he was inexorably drawn to the little box inside his desk like surf to the shore.

_Persevere._ He called back the words when his own resolve waned. _I have faith in you._

The episode of withdrawal passed in the wake of Sevanna’s departure, as slow as a shadow’s creep across a sundial. But it was not gone; it sank beneath muddied waters once more, like some scaly beast lurking below the surface in hibernation, ready to reawaken when he spread himself too thin again. But for now it slumbered; his appetite crept back, the pain in his bones faded, and the pull in his blood lessened. Cullen had walked yet another stretch of shadowed path, but for the first time he realized it may not be a trek he had to undertake alone, even if the footprints next to his were that of a friend’s, and nothing more.

Sevanna’s trip to Crestwood lengthened, stretched to a week, then two, and into three. New reports arrived by the day; the Grey Wardens were combing the area for their vanished comrade who had a price on his head; the lake had a Rift boiling at its center, sending the dead crawling out of the waters; wyverns had taken up residence and were feasting on livestock; bandits had taken over a crumbling Keep and prowled the roads. The whole area was a blighted mess, and Sevanna had walked right into the middle of it. Cullen’s stomach clenched whenever her reports were delivered to him, expecting to discover terrible news in its contents only to breathe with relief each time. They captured the Keep, creating a new outpost for the Inquisition; they slew the wyverns and sent
back the skins to be turned into armor; they beat back the legions of dead that rose from their watery graves, strangely intent on reaching the village. The most recent message, delivered several days ago, relayed news that they had made contact with the Warden, and would successively be taking care of the Rift in the lake. That would be the end of their obligations in Crestwood, and they would be back in Skyhold soon.

Due to time’s irritating habit of slowing down for someone who was eager for it to pass, the days of Sevanna’s absence drew themselves out maddeningly long. Busy though he was, Cullen felt he might go insane cooped up in his office, passing the hours with the endless monotony of paperwork, and he began to take up every request that came his way. He sparred with Cassandra, who retreated into a better mood once she got in a few hits with a practice sword. He worked with recruits in the ring as well, working out his nerves through sweat and bruising. He delivered newly-forged weapons to those down in the lower camps. He patiently listened to the many arguments that were brought to him, as tensions between mages and Templars mounted again. Time went by a little quicker when Cullen kept himself busy, so he continued to say yes to those who asked for his presence.

Which was why, nearly four weeks after Sevanna had left, he found himself in Josephine’s stuffy office in store for a tea party.

Scowling down at the delicate teacup that looked laughably childish in his large hands, he tried to work out just how he’d gotten roped into this. The invitation had come this morning – no, not an invitation, because that would have implied he could decline; it was a demand in the guise of polite request that he come to the Ambassador’s office after dinner so they could “discuss the state of the Inquisition” – which Cullen now knew was code for “gossip”.

Leliana was present too, but her apparent ease made it clear she’d attended such an event before, and made Cullen suspect that she was behind the deception that landed him there. Josephine had been nagging after him to attend just one of her cozy gatherings, all of which he’d invented some excuse to avoid attending. But today, in his endeavour to remain busy and keep his mind firmly off the Sevanna-shaped absence in Skyhold, he had foolishly accepted the offer without seeing the strings attached. He’d been outplayed by the wiles of Spymaster and Ambassador, and not for the first time, Cullen privately wished his fellow Advisors were men. That at least would have led to ales in the tavern and not tea in a frilly, crowded room, making him feel rather like a bull who’d mistakenly found itself in a china shop.

Cullen had been directed to an overstuffed divan which sat him a bit lower than the others, making Leliana smirk and his ears burn. There was a spindly table in the center of the sitting area, laid with an elaborate teapot, a matching sugar bowl, and platters of tiny sandwiches and cakes. Gloomily thinking he was at least getting a snack out of this, Cullen reached forward for a sandwich and promptly had his hand smacked away by Josephine.

“Not until the other guests arrive, Commander,” she chastised. “It’s rude to start without them.”

“There are more?” he said, unable to keep the note of incredulity suppressed and making Josephine glare. Leliana hid her tinkling laugh in her teacup.

“I suppose you think this amusing, Sister,” he said stiffly. “But I have a lot of work to do -”

“We all have a lot of work to do,” she said. “Just relax, Cullen. Varric was right about the stick up your -”

“Ah, ah,” Josephine cut in, waggling a finger. “That is not a discussion fit for soirees, Leliana.”
“Of course, Josie,” she affirmed, though it was full of mirth.

The door opened and Vivienne breezed through. “I’m terribly sorry I’m late, darling,” she announced, arranging herself impeccably on a settee.

“Not at all, Lady Vivienne,” said Josephine warmly.

“How kind of you to take time from your undoubtedly busy schedule,” Leliana said, a frigid note in her musical lilt.

Josephine glared at her as she poured a fresh cup, but Vivienne merely laughed. “I always have time for tea and pleasant company. And it’s so nice to see you out of your tower, Cullen dear.”

“Oh,” he said awkwardly. “Right.”

Josephine glowered at him, motioning for him to sit straighter and mouthing make an effort; or perhaps she was just threatening him. “How are you finding Skyhold, Lady Vivienne?” he continued politely.

“I’m adjusting, my dear,” she replied, dropping a tiny sugar cube into her cup. “As Imperial Enchanter, I am used to the many great comforts of the Circle. But I shall endure without them; our Inquisitor leads a just and worthy cause, and I am glad to serve.”

“It is too bad the Inquisitor is not a man, Madame de Fer,” said Leliana. “For if she were, I’m sure you could have…charmed your way into better accommodations.”

“Leliana!” Josephine reprimanded in hushed tones.

Vivienne stirred her tea and tapped the spoon against its rim with supreme unconcern. “A pity my tastes aren’t as diverse as yours, Sister Nightingale, for then it would not matter to me that the Inquisitor is of the fairer sex.”

“Perhaps. Though it remains the Inquisition does not run on the same politics as the Circles.”

“Clearly not,” replied Vivienne. She raised the cup to her lips, eyes glittering at Leliana over the rim. “Where else could a bard become a Spymaster so swiftly? I’m sure, my dear, you must appreciate that a rise to influence takes a certain amount of creativity and all the tools at one’s disposal.”

Leliana’s responding smile was as sweet as arsenic. “The speed was result of gaining my own influence, rather than basking in the excess of more powerful friends.”

“Powerful friends indeed, seeing as they are King and Queen.” Vivienne took a tiny sip of tea. “Speaking of which, where is the Hero of Ferelden these days? Unless you don’t know,” she added as though in afterthought, “as I understand the two of your aren’t as close, since her marriage to King Alistair.”

Leliana’s smile became fixed, her eyes flashing dangerously, and Vivienne’s smirk was quickly hidden by the napkin she dabbed against her lips. Whatever the Spymaster’s retort might’ve been was interrupted by the door banging open; Cassandra strode through and froze at its threshold, her eyes traveling over the scene before her and lingering on Cullen with a perplexed frown. He knew he must look incredibly stupid in full armor, surrounded by dainty furniture, well-dressed ladies and doilies; rather like a large bullfrog squatting amid a patch of lilies.

“What is this?” she demanded of Josephine. “You summoned me on the pretense of holding a
“This is a council, Cassandra,” said Josephine, springing to her feet. She was beginning to look most harried, and Cullen would have felt sorry for her if he weren’t still rankled over her deception and choice of china. “There is no harm in a little informality -”

Cassandra scoffed. “I have no time for tea and gossip. You may cluck like hens on your own time if you wish, but I won’t be joining you.”

She turned to leave, but Josephine apparently had had enough. She fisted her hands on her hips and her expression became positively thunderous. “Lady Pentaghast!”

Cassandra whirled around, her brow drawn in an angry line; no one ever dared call her “Lady”, and Cullen had a feeling she was about to exhibit why.

But the Ambassador was having none of it. She marched forward, snatched Cassandra by the sleeve and towed her to an empty chair. “I have courteously extended multiple invitations, all of which you have ignored,” she snapped. “Forgive me for going to such devious lengths to have you join us for one afternoon of pleasant conversation. We shall all grow old discussing diplomacy and plans and strategy otherwise.” She shoved a teacup into Cassandra’s hands with a glower. “Now sit down and enjoy your tea.”

Perhaps it was because Josephine had never looked so dangerous that Cassandra sat, her teacup rattling on its saucer.

Cullen smirked at her, feeling much better knowing he wasn’t the only who’d been duped into this. “How nice of you to join us, Seeker.”

She punched his arm, hard, and Josephine clapped her hands sharply.

“Enough! This is a civilized event!” She reseated herself huffily, lifting her tea to take a somewhat loud and aggressive sip. “I honestly don’t know why I bother.”

From there it dissolved into a spectacularly awkward affair; Leliana and Vivienne traded polite insults while Josephine tried to steer the conversation into more civil waters, though her demeanor grew progressively tempestuous. Cassandra snorted and huffed so much like an angry dragon throughout that Cullen was genuinely astonished smoke wasn’t pouring from her nostrils.

Meanwhile, he had never felt quite so ridiculous in his life, balanced on an overwrought chair holding a floral-patterned teacup and nibbling on tiny sandwiches unlikely to satiate a rabbit, while he watched the politest yet most scathing banter he’d ever seen.

He was half-heartedly wishing that Corypheus would launch an attack on Skyhold and put him out of his misery, when he examined the stack of books on the table next to him in order to give his eyes something to do besides stare like a dumb ox. The topmost volume was thick and bound in red leather, A Genealogy and Aristocracy of Ostwick stamped upon the cover in gold lettering.

Deciding to rescue their Ambassador from deteriorating into a frazzled mess, (though a part of him, incidentally located where his back ached from sitting on that ridiculous chair, was shamefully gleeful the whole thing was crumbling beneath her feet) Cullen spoke up, interrupting yet another round of verbal sparring between Leliana and Vivienne. “Why do you have a genealogy of Ostwick, Josephine?”

The women’s heads all swivelled toward him, then to Josephine who was turning an incriminating shade of pink.
“Well,” she began, fussing with her sleeves and not meeting his eye. “If you *must* know, the Inquisitor has been particularly…*secretive* of her family, and did not seem willing to contact them for support, so I…”

“You nosed,” Leliana offered fondly.

“It wasn’t nosing!” Josephine squeaked. “I just thought – it might be a good thing to be more informed of the Trevelyan family, and perhaps find out why she, um, the Inquisitor was so – so *unwilling*.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes with a sound of disapproval. “So you pried into her family history instead?”

“I think it’s a tactical decision,” interposed Vivienne. “It is wise to exploit every connection available to the Inquisition.”

Josephine frowned at the word “exploit”, but Leliana extended her teacup with a saccharine smile. “It seems we agree about one thing after all, Madame de Fer.”

“What a pleasant surprise,” replied Vivienne in amusement. She tapped her cup against Leliana’s with a musical *clink*, leaving Cullen to inwardly marvel at the many complexities of women.

“It’s nothing *informative,*” explained Josephine, wringing her hands. “Many cities release these kinds of books every decade or so in order to commemorate highborn families. It’s also a way to keep track of titles, status and heirs.”

Cullen traced the lettering with a finger, very curious as to what he might hold in his hands; he knew very little of Sevanna’s family, excluding that she had several brothers. His interest got the best of him and he flipped it open, running a finger along the index to find *Trevelyan.* Regardless of her earlier displeasure, Cassandra leaned to look over his elbow as he leafed through most of the book, finally opening it on the section devoted to Sevanna’s family.

The family crest, flanked by two rearing horses was embossed on the vellum, its axiom printed beneath it in flowing script: *Modest in Temper, Bold in Deed.* Cullen smiled, thinking Sevanna was the perfect embodiment. Below the crest the page was filled with cramped writing, most likely a brief history of the family and its ancestral line. Disregarding it, Cullen flipped past it and the opposite page bearing a family tree, past several painted portraits of significant figures in the family’s cultivation, before finding what he was looking for: the most recent renditions of the current Bann and his family.

Cullen looked down at the portrait of Sevanna’s parents, her father standing behind the elaborate chair his wife was seated on. Bann Trevelyan was an austere-looking man with broad shoulders and unmistakable height. His black hair was threaded with grey, his nose aquiline beneath a heavy brow; but laugh lines were carved deeply around his eyes, and he had clearly passed them on to his daughter – they were the same vivid shade of green.

But that was where Sevanna and her father’s similarities began and ended; she had obviously taken after her mother. Lady Trevelyan was exquisitely beautiful; ivory skin, oval face, full mouth and copper tresses identical to her daughter’s, though her narrower eyes were dark blue. In spite of their remarkable likeness, Sevanna was undoubtedly the lovelier of the two; her mother’s face was harder, her mouth pressed into a haughty line, the sharpness of her cheekbones and jaw giving her the likeness of a freshly cut diamond. Cullen didn’t know much about Lady Trevelyan beyond that Sevanna’s relationship with her appeared strained, and he had to wonder if it was partly born out of jealousy because her daughter was more beautiful by far.
The following page contained a man seated on a chaise with a woman who was clearly his wife; this had to be the eldest Trevelyan and heir, though Cullen didn’t bother looking at his name. He felt an instant prickle of dislike as he looked down at Sevanna’s brother, who inherited his father’s impressive bulk and dark, severe features but his mother’s eyes. There was a palpable air of arrogance surrounding him, implied by the way he lounged on the chaise as though it were a throne, and in the near-undetectable smirk playing around his mouth. His wife was quite lovely, blonde and rosy-cheeked, but there was a vacant conceit in her face that made her nearly as dislikeable as her husband.

The page opposite displayed the rest of Sevanna’s brothers, who were evidently unmarried. She was not among them, but there was one who was so startlingly similar in appearance Cullen thought they could be twins. He appeared infinitely more pleasant than his brother, his green eyes full of mirth and a devilish curl to his lip. He was standing next to a third brother, who was alike the eldest in coloring but with more delicate features, and they had their hands on the shoulder of the youngest, a boy of about thirteen with dark rumpled hair and bright green eyes.

Cullen turned the page with an inkling of what was next, though it did nothing to prevent the leap of his pulse and dive of his stomach; attractive though her family was, Sevanna was undeniably the crown jewel. She peered up at Cullen from the page, her large eyes as serene as the surface of a lake, looking hardly more than nineteen. Her face hadn’t yet lost the softness of youth, and her hair was much longer, falling over one white shoulder in a cascade of copper. She was wearing silks of pale blue that left her shoulders bare, the slits in her sleeves giving glimpse to white skin, the contrast like a lily cast upon a stream.

Suddenly breathless and warm, Cullen shoved the book towards Cassandra, who flipped back a page. Josephine was watching him with sparkling eyes, fingers pressed against her smiling lips; he coughed to clear his throat and tried to find something nonchalant to say.

“By the Maker,” Cassandra grumbled before he could open his mouth. She was examining Sevanna’s brothers again, scowling. “How can one family be so – so attractive?”

“Which family?” came a voice. They all whipped their heads around to see Sevanna standing in the doorway, dressed in dusty travel gear and her hair loose around her flushed cheeks.

Cullen stood up so fast his knees banged into the tea table, almost knocking it over. “Inquisitor!”

Cassandra slammed the book shut at once and stuffed it into the cushion next to her; Josephine did a nervous little hop, stuttering, “L-Lady Trevelyan - Inquisitor! We weren’t expecting you back until tomorrow!”

“It’s unbelievable how quickly horses travel when you point them towards home,” she said, sounding deeply amused. “I’m sorry to catch you all off guard – what were you looking at?”

“Nothing!” squeaked Josephine, and Sevanna raised her eyebrows at Cassandra.

The Seeker released a heavy sigh and tugged the book from the cushions. “We were looking at this.”

Sevanna came forward, moving a little stiffly – from her long journey, Cullen assumed, watching apprehensively as she took the tome from Cassandra’s hands. She stared down at it for several long moments, before looking up at them with a bemused expression. “Curious about Ostwick?”

“No!” Josephine said immediately. “It was, um – ordered by mistake .-”
“Josie was curious about your family,” interrupted Leliana, who was looking enormously entertained.

To their surprise, Sevanna laughed. “You could have asked, Josephine.”

The other woman’s mouth popped open in shock. “But when I did, when I asked about approaching your family for support, you made it clear you did not wish to contact them -”

“I’m not interested in speaking to them until they become so with me,” she replied, slightly cooler than before. “But that doesn’t mean I have a great many tales to spread about them out of earshot.”

“You still haven’t heard from your family?” Cullen asked, thunderstruck. “Even after all that’s happened?”

She met his eyes and a shiver went through him, thankfully hidden beneath his armor. “I have not,” she affirmed softly, “and at this point their silence speaks far louder than words ever could.”

Josephine made a sad little sound as Sevanna paged through the book, coming upon the pictures of her family. She looked down at them, worrying her lip between her teeth, then deliberately tore them from their bindings. She handed the book to Vivienne and brandished the pages at Josephine with a straight face. “May I keep these?”

“Of – of course, Inquisitor,” she said, looking utterly bewildered.

Vivienne examined the book before she rose to her feet and tossed it aside as she walked a circle around Sevanna. “You had such lovely hair before, my dear. Whatever did you do to it?” She rubbed the ragged end of a strand hanging by Sevanna’s ear between two manicured fingers and tutted. “It looks as though you cut it yourself.”

“That’s because I did,” she said, “when I was at the Conclave, preparing to run away. I didn’t need it anymore.”

Both Cassandra and Leliana stiffened, and Josephine looked stunned. “You were running away?” the Ambassador gasped. “Whatever for?”

“I didn’t want to be a Trevelyan anymore,” she said simply.

Cassandra rounded on Cullen. “Did you know about this?” she demanded, having realized his lack of reaction.

Cullen looked at Sevanna; she was smiling at him, and his heart beat a little faster. “I did.”

“Why didn’t you speak of this before?”

Sevanna gave him a small, conspiratorially wink and he had to smother a ridiculous grin lest the Seeker punched it from his face. “It wasn’t my secret to tell.”

“Don’t blame Commander Cullen,” Sevanna said firmly, silencing Cassandra who had opened her mouth in anger. “I told him in the strictest confidence, and I will tell you all as well – but not now. I’m exhausted and in desperate need of a bath. May we convene the council first thing tomorrow morning?”

This she addressed to Leliana, who dipped her head in agreement, and who alone seemed amused by the current proceedings. “Of course, Inquisitor.”
“Thank you. I’ll be in my rooms if you have need of me.”

“I’ll escort you,” Cullen said hurriedly. He gulped down his cold tea and carelessly dropped it back upon the table. “Thank you for having me, Josephine.”

She spluttered indignantly at his back, but he didn’t care; he followed Sevanna out of the office, letting the door swing shut behind them. She smiled up at him, tucking the hair behind her ear. It was a little longer now than when she’d first joined the Inquisition, hanging just past her shoulders; Cullen liked it, despite what Vivienne said.

“I think I can remember where my quarters are, Commander,” Sevanna teased.

He chuckled. “I know. I just needed an excuse to escape. How was Crestwood?”

“Dismal,” she sighed, leading the way back into the main hall. “It didn’t stop raining until the day we left. I haven’t been properly dry in weeks; I must smell like a boot left out in the rain.”

“You always smell good,” Cullen blurted and instantly went red. Sevanna pressed her lips together in obvious suppressed mirth as he tried to backpedal. “Maker’s breath – that is, I mean - you’re limping,” he said suddenly, forgetting his embarrassment. He’d just now noticed; she was heavily favoring her right leg and he reached out an arm to support her.

“It’s nothing,” she said, though she allowed his arm to slip around her and cup her elbow.

“It doesn’t appear to be nothing. Have you seen a healer?”

“It’s not serious - just a cut. I didn’t dodge out of a Terror’s way fast enough and it scratched me. I’ve been putting a salve on it for the last few days. It’ll heal up eventually.”

He frowned. “I still think you should see -”

“I’m alright, Cullen,” she assured him. “But I’ll go the healer tomorrow if it makes you feel better.”

“It would.”

She leaned on him a little more as he helped her up the steps at the end of the hall. “I didn’t want to worry Josephine before, so I didn’t say anything.”

“So you dropped that particular piece of information instead,” he said significantly, though he smiled. He pressed her a little nearer, enjoying the weight of her body against his, warmth radiating from her like the sun. She did smell a little musty, but Cullen didn’t mind; he was feeling a little ripe himself after sweating in Josephine’s stuffy office, and sent up a hasty prayer that it wasn’t obvious.

“That was unfair of me, wasn’t it?” Sevanna said thoughtfully. “I’ll apologise to them in the morning – especially Cassandra. She looked like she was about to breathe fire.”

“I think Josephine’s tea party was more the cause of that,” he said dryly. “The both of us were led to believe we were invited to a council, and not a session of gossip.”

She laughed and patted his hand, leaving searing heat behind. “You poor thing.”

The door to her quarters arrived too quickly, and there was still so much Cullen wanted to say. As Sevanna limped forward to push the door open, he asked quickly, “May I have a…private word?”
Her eyes flicked to his, and her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. Cullen followed it hotly, wishing he could chase it with his own. “Of course.”

He followed her through, finding himself on a re-constructed landing, the door leading up to her actual rooms ajar at the other end. He closed the one behind him for want of privacy, but he did not dare go any farther. Beyond was her personal space and he hadn’t yet breached that sort of closeness, and so remained where he was. It was darker in here, the half-light illuminating Sevanna in gold.

“I wanted to thank you,” he ventured. This was a conversation he’d rehearsed many times while she’d been away; an apology she deserved, and not in the form of a letter. “When you came to see me – if there’s anything -” He heaved a frustrated sigh, his hand going to the back of his neck. “This sounded much better in my head.”

“Is this about the day before I left?” she asked, and when he nodded, continued, “I shouldn’t have gone without saying goodbye. I’d promised to be here for you, but Stroud’s message arrived so suddenly, and I had to go.”

“The Inquisition must come first,” Cullen agreed. “You’re at no fault, Sevanna.”

The corner of her lips jumped at her name. “I should have left a note. I’m sure I looked like a dreadful snob.”

“You didn’t,” he said immediately. “Even before I got your letter.”

She smiled more fully as she scrutinised him, bright eyes traveling over his face. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes. Thank you again for the tea; you’ve no idea the wonders it does for me.”

Her fingers played with a lock of her hair. “Is it always that bad?”

“The pain comes and goes,” he admitted. “Sometimes I feel as if I’m back there. I should not have pushed myself so far that day. I never…I never told anyone what truly happened to me at Ferelden’s Circle. I was…not myself after that. I was angry. For years that anger blinded me.” He looked away as a stab of shame went through him. “I’m not proud of the man that made me.”

She touched his shoulder, as fleeting as a bird unsure of where to roost. “I can’t think of anyone who could suffer what you did and not become angry,” she said softly. “What matters is that you forgive yourself for it.”

He smiled humourlessly. “That needs working on. But now I can at least put some distance between myself and everything that happened.” He shrugged self-deprecatingly. “It’s a start.”

“For whatever its worth,” she said, her voice soft and hesitant. “I like who you are now.”

Cullen met her wide eyes, pulse throbbing when he saw the sincerity in them; there was no trace of that previous darkness now. “Even after…?” he trailed off nervously, rubbing his neck again.

Sevanna stepped closer, once more laying her hand on his chest, directly over his heart. He could feel the heat radiating from her, the earthy scent of her sweat and musty armor as appealing as any wildflower. Her lips were bitten and rosy, and Cullen could not help but imagine this what she must look like in the throes of passion, all flushed dewy skin and bright eyes. The burgeoning heat in his blood intensified, and for a moment they both burned like sparks from a lightning strike, his skin tingling from the charged air between them.
“I…I care about you, Cullen,” she murmured. “You’ve done nothing to change that.”

It was if all his unspoken uncertainties were written upon his face for her to read, to acknowledge, and put to rest. He couldn’t think of what to say; it was as if someone had pulled the drain from under his mind and his thoughts were sucked away, every half-formed confession swirling out of his grasp as he realized, once more, just how close they were standing. The hand upon his chest still clutched the papers she tore from the book; he raised his own to brush along her knuckles, the contact blazing even through his gloves.

“May I ask why you took these?” His lips and tongue betrayed him, forming a question instead of a declaration, the words jammed up somewhere in his chest: I care about you too. “Poor Josie looked nearly scandalized when you ripped them out.”

Sevanna smiled a little sadly. “It’s all I have left of my family now.”

She pulled away from him and he leaned forward as she did, as if they were magnetized. Maker, each time she came that close made it much harder to let her pull away.

“I’m very tired,” she murmured. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning?”

“Yes,” he said, equally quiet. “That is – if you promise not to leave without saying goodbye again.”

She laughed; it was tired and worn, like velvet made threadbare by years of abrasion. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't recall much interaction between Leliana and Vivienne in the game, but to me it seems there would be some animosity between them; their opinions of the Circle and Chantry are so radically different I would imagine there’d be some chafing. I apologise if their cattiness was rather weak; I had issues channeling my inner bitch. And in my own little headcanon, the HoF was a Cousland (though there was an Amell at the Circle Tower - more on that later) who ended up with Alistair, but given Leliana’s bisexuality I like to think she was quietly in love with her too. Sorry if the ending is rather abrupt - this was the best place I felt I could split these chapters without being terribly disjointed. If you're wondering why I apologise so much, I'm Canadian. The stereotypes are true. *drinks maple syrup*
She Who Hangs the Stars

Chapter Summary

A poisoned wound brings forth some interesting conversations.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I am the worst. This stupid chapter has taken on a life of its own and snowballed into something monstrous; I'm splitting it yet AGAIN because its getting so fricken huge. I'm not completely sure with it so I may do more editing in the future. To quote Cassandra: ugh. Thanks for bearing with me on this one, and thank you all so much for those awesome and hilarious comments last chapter. I wish I could send each and every one of you a fruit-basket as thanks :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The problem with sin was that it often felt so good.

Cullen dreamed of Sevanna in his bed again, but for the first time he didn’t kill her, nor was the cause of her death. Instead he’d watched her writhe over him like a moonlit goddess until he awoke, hips grinding into the mattress and her name caught like his lip between his teeth. It was a sin, this torturous need of a body that didn't belong to him; sin to let such a filthy rendition of her name pass in the same breath as the Maker’s. But such was his relief to wake from a good dream, and so wound up from work and withdrawal and want that Cullen let himself go - thrusting into his own hand until he came, hot and sticky, onto his sheets. It was something he did not do often, when his control was not so easily relinquished, and nor was he eager for the embarrassment that followed in its wake. Not shame of the action, but guilt of the content - and therein laid his greatest sin. His scorching desire for her that made his hands wander to forbidden places, thinking of Sevanna in a way he had no right to. But when the painful edge of arousal diminished and his headache disappeared before it’d truly started, Cullen was inclined to ignore it; he was but a man with basic needs, and he did have a right to secrets of his own.

Perhaps he should begin every day like this – a thought he entertained for all of one second, as he very well couldn’t pleasure himself to thoughts of the Inquisitor and then look her in the eye over the war table.

With a mix of lingering satisfaction and guilt, Cullen washed and dressed, and headed to the War Room. His morning indulgence had made him a little late, and he found Leliana and Josephine already there; the latter appeared to be scolding the former about her behaviour the previous day, and the frosty glare she bestowed upon Cullen as he entered informed him he was not yet forgiven either. “Good morning,” he greeted. He scanned the large room and was disappointed to find it empty. “Has the Inquisitor not arrived yet?”

“She has not,” Leliana said swiftly, apparently grateful for the opportunity to divert Josephine’s sermon.
He frowned. “It’s not like her to be late.”

“Perhaps she’s overslept. She looked most exhausted yesterday.”

“Should we go wake her?” asked Josephine.

“Maybe she would prefer to hold this meeting abed,” said Leliana, shooting Cullen an amused glance as the Ambassador started describing aloud the breakfast tray they could order Sevanna.

“If the Inquisitor doesn’t object, we could move this meeting to her quarters,” he said, trying to sound casual though his heart picked up in anticipation of seeing her. Maker, she had him acting like a teenaged boy again, with sweaty palms and plummeting stomach.

“Let’s go rouse her then, shall we?” Leliana lead the way out of the War Room, while Josephine hastily scrambled up an armful of necessary scrolls. The main hall had remained as quiet and empty as when Cullen had come through. One guard was stationed by the door to Sevanna’s quarters, a rotation that’d been arranged when she finally deigned to sleep in those rooms and not Sera’s eclectic hovel over the tavern. Leliana dismissed him with a nod and pushed the door open. They were greeted with sleepy silence, punctuated by the rustling of ravens that were perched on the exposed beams.

Cullen followed the two women all the way to the door leading to Sevanna’s quarters proper, until a hand hit him in the chest, making him stumble back a step. “Wha-?”

“I’m afraid it’s ‘ladies only’ beyond here, Commander,” explained Leliana sweetly. “Who knows what the Inquisitor looks like first thing in the morning?”

“It’s not for men’s eyes,” agreed Josephine, looking highly amused. “It wouldn’t be decent.”

“We’ll let you know when she’s…presentable.” Leliana gave him a smirk before slipping through the door, Josephine following at her heels with a small giggle and leaving it open.

Nettled, Cullen waited, feeling like a misbehaving Mabari told to heel. It was entirely inappropriate, the disappointed twinge that went through him; he wanted to know what Sevanna was like first thing in the morning. He wanted to know her eyes still soft with sleep, her hair made a tousled cloud by her pillow. He leaned on the wall, the back of his head hitting with a thud, as he imagined her rumpled by a night in his bed…tangled in his sheets alongside him, warm skin pressed to his against the morning chill, her voice hoarse from a night of calling his name. He cleared his throat and tried to banish such wonderings, as his trousers were becoming a little too tight.

“Commander!” Leliana’s shout shattered any lingering fantasy; Cullen crashed through the door, taking the stairs two at a time as he drew his sword, certain an intruder was the cause of such a distressed yell.

But what he found instead made his blood run cold – Sevanna was propped up in Leliana’s arms, head lolling against the Spymaster’s shoulder and closed eyes like bruises against her ashen skin. She was trembling and mumbling inaudibly, wearing little more than a silk shift; but Cullen barely registered her exposed arms, her long bare thighs. His eyes were drawn to her right calf like flies to putrid meat, where a deep, ugly gash oozed, its edges a ghastly green and a lattice of dark veins spreading out from it.

“Maker have mercy,” he breathed.

Leliana’s voice was like steel. “Blood poisoning.”
“What do we do?” Josephine said shrilly, with a little flap of her hands. “Should we summon a healer?”

“There’s no time!” Cullen snapped. He lunged forward and lifted Sevanna from the bed. “We’ll have to bring her, now -”

“Solas will know what to do,” said Leliana promptly.

For the second time in his life, Cullen clutched Sevanna in his arms as he raced to save her. But this time was radically different; she shivered and moaned, her skin as hot and dry as sun-baked sand. Before he had carried a sculpture of ice and now she was made of writhing heat, murmuring deliriously as her blood turned to poison.

He was such a fool. He’d been totally oblivious to the signs of her fever yesterday, its symptoms manifested in her bright eyes, flushed cheeks and parched lips. He’d been so entangled in his pining that he had ignored the warnings, foolishly thinking they were for him as if they were physical evidence of her joy at seeing him. He ground his teeth as he cradled Sevanna in his arms, her dead-weight sinking those buoys of hope he’d stupidly left afloat.

It was a small mercy the keep was quiet this early in the day; there were no crowds to shove through, no curious pilgrims to catch glimpse of the feverish, half-naked Inquisitor clutched desperately in her Commander’s arms. Leliana hurtled through Solas’ door first, Cullen following with a clatter. To his vast relief, they discovered the apostate was awake; he turned at the commotion, a paintbrush in his raised hand and his eyebrows traveling up his forehead.

“The Inquisitor is wounded, Solas,” said Leliana tersely, as she cleared the table for Cullen to lay Sevanna on. “On her leg – it looks like it might be poisoned.”

Solas swiftly set down his paints and approached Sevanna’s injured leg. Cullen moved to stand at Sevanna’s head, holding her shoulders to keep her still and trying not to notice the tight little buds straining through the thin fabric as she trembled with cold. She yelped and bucked as Solas prodded the laceration, eliciting gaseous wisps and a dribble of blackened blood.

“You are correct, Leliana,” he confirmed, seemingly unperturbed. “Though not just any poison – this is of the Fade.”

“To hell where it’s from,” Cullen growled, as Sevanna squirmed under his grasp and whimpered with pain. Right now he wanted to break the elf’s smooth expression with his fists, rip away the scholarly interest as though Sevanna were a strange breed of sickly plant. “Can you heal her?”

“Fortunately I am familiar with this variety,” Solas replied calmly. He retrieved a small case from a nearby stool. “A friend of mine – a spirit – once whispered to me the antidote of the deadliest Fade toxins, brought into this world by particularly vengeful demons.” He opened its lid, revealing an assortment of herbs. “I can heal her, but it will take time and a fair amount of magic – perhaps Lady Vivienne could be of assistance?”

Leliana nodded wordlessly to Josephine, who dashed from the room with a pale face. Sevanna was shivering violently, her skin pimpled with gooseflesh; Cullen snagged a blanket from the sofa and tucked it around her, leaving her leg bare for Solas.

A sudden, agonized cry rent the air, making Cullen jump and spin round once more. Cole was crouched on the sofa cushions, hands clutching desperately at his face and hat as he rocked on his heels. “I can’t hear her! I can’t hear her! Where is she? Where did she go?”
“She’s right here, Cole!” Cullen said loudly, but the boy was whipping his head from side to side, his breathing ragged.

“No, no, everything is gone!” He yanked at his hair, pale eyes gleaming like coins in the shadow of his hat. “Dark where the light used to be – painful to look at, like birds against the sun – gone, blotted away. Everything is dark and empty and it hurts, it burns, the fire in her blood.”

“Kindly remove Cole from the room, Commander,” Solas instructed sharply. “He is becoming far too upset.”

Cullen moved towards Cole, but then he blinked and the boy had moved, crouched farther away, mumbling under his breath. It was like chasing smoke; whenever Cullen moved closer Cole drifted a little further, so instead of forcing him from the room Cullen herded him away from Sevanna, wafting him like a wayward curl of mist. He reached past Cole to open the door that led to the bridge, stepping out into the watery morning light and closing the door firmly behind him.

Cole was staring at him, transfixed like a desert upon a raincloud. “Maker, let her live. My fault, my folly, should have asked her, made her, but I can’t push what I fear to break…”

“That’s enough, Cole.” Cullen’s voice came out like a razor, honed wicked-sharp by all the thoughts Cole was plucking from his mind. He took a deep, serrated breath and pushed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, as if he might push back all the hideous thoughts of what would happen if Solas failed. What he would have wrought because he was an infatuated fool who allowed his heart too much reign.

“We need to leave Solas alone to work,” he said with far more patience. “I’ll find you when it’s alright to see her again, understand?”

Cole tilted his head in childlike curiosity. “But will you?” he said, and vanished from one blink to the next.

Cullen sagged against the door, the guilt churning in his chest like the Breach had the sky. He tried the door, wanting to remain sentinel as Solas healed Sevanna, but found it wouldn’t budge. Either it locked behind him, or Solas had sealed the room to create a secure space to work his magic; either way, Cullen took it as a dismissal.

He returned to his office, but there was no point in even pretending he could focus on his work. Instead he paced like a lion shut away, his mind trapped in the room he was locked out of and his heart somewhere in the vicinity of his knees. He wanted to hope, but it was like trying to catch ashes scattered by the wind, remnants of burning that crumbled in his hands and left a sting behind. The minutes ticked by with agonizing slowness, and as they drew themselves out Cullen began to doubt that it was even possible to tow Sevanna back from the brink she’d been hoven to by a demon’s claw.

After an excruciating quarter of an hour, a messenger burst in. “Ser! Sister Nightingale sent me…”

Cullen did not wait for him to finish. He shoved past without apology, tearing across the bridge that lead back to Solas’ room. This time the door was unlocked and he nearly ripped from its hinges in his haste to enter, to see, to know if he’d need pick the pieces of his heart off the floor and toss them away to save himself from their sharp edges in the future.

An incomprehensible sound escaped him, a tangle of disbelief and reprieve as he crept closer to the sight before him. Solas was bandaging Sevanna’s leg, bloodied rags littering his feet; Vivienne was bowing over her head, wrapped in an ornate silk robe and her elegant hands fanned over
Sevanna’s cheeks. She was whispering something, the melody of it invoking that of a spell, each finger shimmering with a purple haze. The air had the astringent scent of healing magic – something like peppermint, but older and bitterer, the arcane smell of the Veil pried open and manipulated into something medicinal.

Sevanna’s fever had broken; she wasn’t shivering anymore, her face was flushed and damp, sweat darkening the hair at her temples. Her eyes no longer fluttered beneath their lids, her lips slack and unmoving – no longer delirious, but vacant, like a sizzling coal banked by sand. She laid utterly still as Solas wrapped her leg in thick gauze, all previous protests of pain gone. Leliana and Josephine stood opposite him as he worked, positioned back slightly to allow the mages room. Cullen claimed a spot next to them, unable to tear his gaze away from Sevanna’s face.

“IT was close,” Leliana told him in undertone, and he balled his hands into fists, judging them culpable as the ones that’d let Sevanna slip too far.

Vivienne’s murmured incantation ended and she straightened, eyes sleepy. “She will mend,” she announced quietly, the aura fading from her hands as she removed them from Sevanna. “Do not wake her – the poison took her deep into the Fade, and she must find her own way back. She needs rest, and peace. She will return when she is ready.”

With a stately incline of her head, Vivienne departed, leaving ringing silence behind. Cullen watched Solas pin the bandages in place on Sevanna’s calf, his long fingers practised and nimble, and cleared his throat. “What did it do to her?” he asked hoarsely.

“It’s a poison made to separate,” Solas explained, gently settling her leg down. “Intended to cleave one’s soul from the body and render it lost in the Fade - that was why Cole couldn’t hear her. It is a demon’s fitting retribution, to yank a live essence from our world to theirs.”

“But she -” Cullen swallowed thickly. “She’s still got her…”

“Yes, Commander.” The elf’s previous coolness was gone, but his clever eyes were appraising. “The Inquisitor’s soul remains intact, though it may be some time before it resettles. She is no longer in danger, but she’ll be weakened when she regains consciousness.”

“Thank the Maker,” breathed Josephine somewhere to Cullen’s right.

“How long will it take, in your estimate?” asked Leliana.

Solas repacked his kit, his expression thoughtful. “It is likely she’ll sleep a full day. The soul is a fragile thing, and does not wander well. Its migration should be quick – her physical recovery, however, may take several days.”

Leliana sighed in relief. “Thank you, Solas. You have our utmost gratitude. Is it safe to move the Inquisitor back to her quarters?”

“I see no reason not to,” he said with a slight shake of his head.

“Will you carry her again, Cullen?” she asked, but he was already moving forward, slipping his arms under her knees and back to lift her once more. The former heat radiating from her had diminished; it was no longer like cradling the sun, but she remained just as distant.

“I would prefer not to let our guests see the Inquisitor like this,” Leliana murmured. “Can you check to see if it’s clear, Josie?”

She darted forward, opening the door to the main hall to peek around it. “There is Lord DuPont and
his wife…I’ll lead them away.” She slipped out, voice raised in genteel greeting; Cullen and Leliana waited for the drone of Orlesian accents to dwindle before following her, Leliana promising Solas to send someone to clean up the gory rags.

They managed to return to Sevanna’s quarters without being seen by anyone else besides a handful of guards. The Spymaster quelled their questions with a significant look, earning a grim salute back that promised silence. Cullen said nothing, nor did he look at anyone. He kept his gaze firmly ahead and his jaw flexed as he passed Leliana into Sevanna’s quarters; he was making a silent, furious, and unworthy promise that the next time he held her, she would be conscious and willing. He couldn’t bear to hold her limp form like this again.

Once upstairs, he deposited Sevanna back into bed, disentangling her from Solas’ blanket still wrapped around her. He tossed it behind him and pulled her own sheets up around her, leaving the heavier coverlet at her feet - she wouldn’t need the extra warmth. Leliana was pouring water from the pitcher into a bowl and wetting a cloth, presumably to lay on Sevanna’s forehead. Cullen stripped off his vambraces and gloves, taking the bowl from her hands as soon as she set the pitcher aside.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

Her eyebrows went up a fraction. “Surely you have work to attend to.”

“Nothing more important than this.” He wrung the cloth out and laid it on Sevanna’s flushed brow.

“It’s no trouble for me to stay, if you wish someone to watch over her -”

“It should be me,” he bit out, voice cracking slightly. “It’s my fault it got this far. I should have noticed, I should have known that she was more ill than she let on -”

“Cullen.” Leliana laid a hand on his arm that held the bowl. It was shaking, sending the water sloshing over the edge slightly. “This is no one’s fault. The Inquisitor should have known better than to ignore such an injury, but at least we were able to save her. And I wouldn’t worry about her now – when she wakes up, I’m sure Cassandra will have much to say on the matter.”

“Then allow me to see to it that she lives to suffer such an encounter.”

She smiled faintly. “If that’s what you wish. I can send an agent to retrieve your work from your office, and divert any messages here for the day.”

“Thank you.” Cullen set the bowl on the bedside table and dragged a small sofa next to the balustrade closer to the bed. “Can you also inform Rylen of my whereabouts? He’ll need to oversee training for today.”

“Of course.” Leliana inclined her head and strode towards the stairs. He had settled himself on the sofa and lifted the bowl of water again when she called back. “And Cullen?”

He swivelled; she was halfway down the stairs, her head and shoulders still visible. “Try not to blame yourself,” she said, surprisingly gentle. “She wouldn’t want you to.”

She disappeared before he could formulate a reply, the creak of the door below indicating she was gone. Cullen turned back to Sevanna with a small sigh, leaning forward to retrieve the cloth and freshen it. “Forgive me,” he whispered, as he pressed it along her hairline, wiping away the feverish dew that had turned the edges dark. Her face remained still as he dabbed her temples, the sweep of her cheeks, the underside of her jaw; there was no flutter of her eyelids during his ministrations, indicating some vital piece was still lost to a netherworld. Close as he was, Cullen
could see the fan of her lashes along her cheekbones; they were a red-gold, like filaments of fire, smudges of sunset against the shadows that collected in the hollows of her eyes.

He found he couldn’t stop touching her – nothing inappropriate, of course, but the tiniest brushes of his fingers on her brow, her cheeks, her chin. It was like skin discovering silk for the first time, intoxicated by the slide of it, wondering how water had been captured in fabric. Cullen wetted the cloth again and again, unable to just lay it on her forehead and leave it idle, couldn’t remain static during the decline of her temperature. So he used the task of cooling her skin as an excuse to trace the lines of her face and learn its subtle curves, the cloth in his hand used as a barrier between tending and caressing, a small representation of the lengths between them that he did know if he dared traverse.

It was several minutes into his chaste exploration when Cullen realized he’d forgotten to alert Cole. The boy was probably somewhere out of sight, straining for a voice he might not yet be able to hear, yanking at his hair like it was the roots of a weed he meant to rip from the ground. Just as Cullen was wondering if he could bid someone to find the boy, his hand stilling on Sevanna’s face as he pondered how to find someone who so easy to misplace and forget, there was a wooden creak – Cole had appeared from thin air on top of Sevanna’s desk as if he’d been summoned by Cullen’s thoughts.

“Maker!” Cullen’s cry was a near yelp and he dropped the cloth over Sevanna’s eyes.

Cole blinked at him from his perch on the desk, looking a bit like a dishevelled owl. He had something small and square in his hands. “I frightened you,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You startled me,” Cullen corrected him, picking up the cloth again. “I’m not afraid of you, Cole.”

Something akin to a smile passed over Cole’s face, but it wasn’t quite right; like a smile on a clay sculpture made by someone who didn’t know what such a thing looked like. Cullen knew the boy was thoroughly inexperienced with such mortal expression, and understood it to be a childish imitation of something he knew was linked to happy.

“You are kind, Cullen,” Cole said. It sounded more like a factual statement than a compliment. “Even though the voices that whisper to you aren’t.”

Cullen looked away, dunking the cloth in the bowl again. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to find you when I found out Sevanna was alright. You – ah, it slipped my mind.”

Cole cocked his head. “But you did. I heard you. ‘Blessed is the Maker, undoing what my greediness has wrought’. I felt the weight leave you like a lifted stone, but you still carry more – little bits of guilt in your pocket.”

“I have much to be guilty for,” he muttered.

Cole shook his head slightly. “No. You just think you do. But it won’t leave until you let it.” He slipped off the desk, flitting towards Sevanna. His wide hat hid his face from view as he leaned over her, gently easing one hand up beside her face and placing his little bundle in her palm. To Cullen’s astonishment, her fingers curled around it, bringing it imperceptibly closer to her nose and inhaling deeply.

“It reminds her of home,” Cole murmured as he crept back. “It makes her think of gold and light, the sun glinting off of metal – it’ll be easier to find her way back.”

Cullen leaned forward for a closer look. It looked like a handkerchief wrapped around a handful of
hay; he could see it poking out at the corners. He lifted his head to ask Cole what else he’d put in there, only to find – once again – that the boy was gone. Shaking off that disorientation of Cole’s abrupt departure (and wondering if he’d ever get used to such an event) Cullen raised Sevanna’s hand to his face so he too could smell the little bundle, careful to not disturb it from her grasp. It smelled sweetly of hay and horse, with a hint of something flowery that made Cullen suspect there were some sort of petals tucked inside, and a waxy, heady scent that he would know anywhere; incensed candles, like the ones in the chantry that left smoke clinging to him after his prayers. He’d never seen Sevanna in the chantry, but perhaps she, like him, preferred to go alone in quiet contemplation. He tenderly laid her hand down on the pillow, tucking it close to her face so she could smell it while she slept.

The eventful morning stretched into a long day; Leliana’s agent arrived within the hour bearing an enormous stack of Cullen’s reports and a message from Rylen about the drills he would run while Cullen was absent. He finally surrendered the constant duty of dabbing Sevanna’s face, instead leaving the cloth over her forehead and occasionally checking to see if it remained cool. As the morning crept by, she steadily improved; she shifted every now and then, throwing her arms up around her head and murmuring contentedly in a way that made Cullen’s heart simultaneously mend and ache. He found himself enjoying a captured moment of peace and quiet with her, except she was once again unaware. He tried to focus on his work to ignore that twist of longing and the soft curve of the side of her breast, revealed to him by the gaping of her shift.

It helped his errant thoughts but hindered his work that Cullen’s concentration was repeatedly punctuated by a steady stream of visitors. Josie and Vivienne dropped by briefly with the pretense of checking on Sevanna, though Cullen suspected the latter was far more interested in seeing the Inquisitor’s rooms for herself; a suspicion confirmed when she rubbed the curtains between her fingers and tutted “Dull” on their way out. They were accosted in the hall below by the Bull’s Chargers, and if Josephine’s loud rebuke was any indication, Bull was trying to bring the head of a wyvern up the stairs. Cullen had to laugh, especially when the mercenaries came into view looking abnormally sombre, with the air of children freshly scolded. He spent a very enjoyable hour with Bull and his boys as the Qunari recounted the tale when he and Sevanna had tackled the wyverns in Crestwood, and she had taken one down all by herself and took its head as a trophy.

Not long after the Chargers decided to move their raucousness to the tavern, Blackwall showed up. He’d brought a handsome little woodcarving of a griffon that he’d whittled himself. “Told me she likes them,” he explained, as he placed it on her mantle. “Said she wants to ride one of the damned things herself one day.” Blackwall remained half as long as the Chargers, giving Cullen a brief account of what they’d accomplished in Crestwood. Cullen was very interested in the Grey Warden they’d met, Stroud, who’d agreed to come to Skyhold but was taking a circuitous route back with Hawke; they’d be looking for more evidence of where the Wardens might have gone, or if they could find any remaining despite the reoccurrence of the Calling.

After Blackwall left, Cullen got one hour of peace in order to tackle some work – and then Sera showed up. He was sitting at the desk when she slouched into the room, a plate in each hand, giving Cullen a rather surly once-over. “Still here, yeah? I reckoned.” She shoved one plate towards him; it contained a tempting slice of fluffy cake with creamy frosting. “Thought you might be hungry.”

Cullen examined it warily, wondering if she’d somehow ingeniously hidden a jar of bees in the icing. “Er – you did?”

“Shite, yeah. Always looking hungry, you. All -” she sucked in her cheeks, making a ridiculous exaggeration of his recent gauntness. “- like. So eat up.” When he didn’t move, she snorted. “It’s good, yeah? Go on. Stuff your face.”
Hesitantly, and to seem polite more than anything, Cullen picked up his cake. He was fairly ravenous, having missed breakfast, and he hadn’t yet recovered from the recent bout of withdrawal that had robbed his appetite. His face still hadn’t filled out from the regular meals yet, and the cake looked particularly mouth-watering. Given his bulk, most people assumed Cullen was a meat and potatoes kind of man, but he was actually the owner of a rather voracious sweet-tooth with a weakness for cake – so he relented. Sera had kindly brought him a fork, though not for herself. She was crouched on the bed next to Sevanna, eating her cake with her fingers. Upon noticing Cullen’s rather baleful glare, she grinned wickedly. “Oi, don’t get your knob in a twist about me getting into bed with Inqy,” she said thickly, forcing the words around a mouthful of cake. “Any gobshite with a brain knows she’s yours.”

He choked a little on his first bite, but Sera had already turned away. She was mumbling something to Sevanna as she ate, giving Cullen the impression he wasn’t meant to hear, though he caught “scarin’ people like that” and “kick your arse” and “arrows in your face” amid her chewing.

Sera remained surprisingly subdued throughout her visit and didn’t mention Sevanna being “his” again, allowing Cullen to make decent headway with his work; though he did look up now and again to ensure Sera wasn’t drawing on Sevanna’s face. He’d seen enough recruits with faint mustaches they’d failed to scrub off to know the elf couldn’t be trusted around ink. She did finally scurry once Varric turned up, large book under one arm and bottle in the other. He gave Cullen the cursory “Curly” and “Buttercup” to Sera. He settled onto the sofa Cullen had abandoned and started reading aloud, albeit at a respectful volume. He was repeatedly interrupted by Sera who kept pretending to doze off and snort herself awake; she bounded off the bed with a resounding “Boring” and saw herself out, blowing a loud raspberry with each stair.

Varric shot Cullen a grin that did not bode well, before pointedly flipping through the book to somewhere in the middle – and Cullen realized he’d brought *Tale of the Champion*.

He suffered three-quarters of an hour with Varric reciting specific passages aloud, all of which centered on the uptight Knight-Captain of Kirkwall. Accordingly, Cullen was a bright shade of red by the time Cassandra arrived, which effectively ended Varric’s deliberate narration.

“Go cause trouble elsewhere,” she snapped, towering over him.

Varric simply smirked, giving her and Cullen a mock salute. “As you wish, Seeker. I just thought our Inquisitorialness would enjoy some of the more exciting parts of *Tale of the Champion* – Curly was liking it.”

Cullen sputtered and Cassandra growled, so Varric took the hint. He winked at Cullen before he left, his chuckles echoing up the staircase.

Cullen threw himself back into his chair, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “*Maker*, I thought that’d never end.”

Cassandra snorted. “You owe me.” She gave him one of her rare smiles as she settled into Varric’s vacated spot. She had also brought a book, but when Cullen tried to get a clearer look she coincidentally shifted her hand, covering the title. “Leliana explained what happened this morning. Have you been here all day?”

“I have,” he confirmed warily, bracing himself for a lecture about neglecting his duties.

Instead, she surprised him. “Good. I think it’s best if Sevanna wakes up to your face.”

Cullen couldn’t quite believe his ears; perhaps a spirit of compassion inhabited the Seeker’s body.
“What makes you say that?”

She rolled her eyes, though it lacked its usual impatience. “Because Sera is unpleasant to look at even at the best of times.”

He blinked – he did not think he’d ever heard Cassandra make a joke before.

She fidgeted slightly, apparently taken aback by her own humour as much as he. “What I mean – ugh.” She shook her head and gestured towards Sevanna’s prone form. “Does she know how you feel?”

“No, I haven’t – wait.” Cassandra’s sudden change of tactic took Cullen unawares, and he gaped at her. “How do you know?”

“Because you look at her like she hung the stars,” she said, and there was a wistfulness in her voice that reminded him there was more to Cassandra Pentaghast than scowls and a sharp sword. There was a vulnerability beneath all her armor, soft and secret spots protected by carefully tended gardens of thorn; concealing a woman who’d cried when she learned of the Divine’s death, who had held Cullen’s clawing hands to his chest when he tried to rip apart the ghosts that weighed on him, a woman who had stood with him on a dark mountain in silent faith that their deliverer would return.

“I, ah –” He rubbed his neck. “I didn’t think it was that obvious.”

“It was not,” she said, shaking her head, “until I knew to look. Varric once asked me if I had noticed – that when you and the Inquisitor talk, it’s as if the birds sing a little sweeter.”

“Maker’s breath, did he really say that?”

“He did. And then I saw – that when you and Sevanna spoke, it was as if you were so – so contained, like the eye in the storm that circles us all.”

Cullen had never heard the Seeker speak poetically, and was sort of impressed. He idly played with his quill. “Do you disapprove?” he asked, in a would-be casual voice.

“At first,” she drawled, making his heart drop like a tossed stone. “But then I realized it was making you better. And both of you have proved your obligations to the Inquisition come before – whatever this is.”

“I – thank you, Cassandra.”

“You deserve to be happy, Cullen,” she said firmly, opening the book in her lap. “Just don’t turn into a slavering idiot because of it. I will not abide if you do.”

She ignored him after that, apparently finished all she needed to say. Cullen returned to his reports but without his previous concentration, instead wondering about all the things Cassandra had just said – and if she might be dangerously ill.

Someone burst through the door below, climbing the stairs with a racket. Both Cullen and Cassandra half rose from their chairs as one of Leliana’s agents came bursting through; Ritts, the woman Sevanna had conscripted when she’d been in the Hinterlands. Ritts was flushed and out of breath, eyes flicking nervously over to Sevanna, who remained still and peaceful in bed.

“There’s a situation, Commander,” she said in a rush. “There are Templars at the gates – not red!” she added in alarm when they both stiffened. “One says his name is Ser Barris, and they’ve come
from Therinfal Redoubt. He asked to speak to you – urgently.”

Cullen glanced over Sevanna; the high color in her cheeks had receded greatly, and he’d stopped cooling her with a cloth long ago. She looked more asleep than unconscious, but he was still reluctant to leave despite the arrival of seemingly unscathed Templars.

Cassandra recognized his hesitation. “Go, Cullen,” she said, resettling herself on the sofa. “I’ll stay with the Inquisitor until you return.”

He gave her a brief nod of gratitude and followed Ritts down the stairs, hoping against hope that Sevanna wouldn’t awake while he was gone and have Cassandra inform her that he looked at her like she hung the stars.

And he would not put it past the Seeker, given how unsympathetic he’d been at Josephine’s tea party.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand I'm sooo sorry about the whole "poisoned brush with death" thing so quickly after Sevanna nearly froze. I wanted a chapter that interacted with all the companions and to set up the reconciliation of Cullen and Sevanna's guilt, and this is how it wanted to happen. The tropiest of all tropes.
Cullen receives advice from an unanticipated source.

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ser Barris had come to Skyhold to tell them the Order was no more.

He and his singed and beaten crew – ten in all, and possibly the last remaining uncorrupted Templars outside the Inquisition – had the feral looks of an animal pursued, trapped in a wild flight from a vastly superior hunter. They had fled Therinfal Redoubt, leaving the fortress burning behind them when the duplicity of the Lord-Seeker came to light and Corypheus had come to claim the Templars. Those who had abstained from the red lyrium were slaughtered by the Magister’s new puppet, Samson, and his monstrous new army; the few who stood before Cullen now had barely escaped, made renegade by the order they’d refused to take and now hunted for execution. Their journey to Skyhold had been fraught and many weeks long; Corypheus was bent on amassing every Templar within his reach and had sent his red horrors in search of the last of those unpolluted, forcing them to flee like vermin under the shadow of a determined boot. Along the way, they had investigated the whispers of where Templar camps lay hidden, remnants of the war that had razed Ferelden and left the path clear for the Red Templars to march on Haven.

There were no more camps – the last fragments of the Templar Order were either lost to parts unknown; tethered to Corypheus by red bindings; or now stood before Cullen as shadows, in shells of the armor and insignia that had been perverted.

Still, they now had ten more Templars in their ranks, and Cullen was in a position to be thankful for every boon they received, no matter the dark tidings it may bring. The arrival of Ser Barris was an undeniable gift – especially since he brought news of Samson. It seemed Corypheus’ newest general had a mine somewhere in the Dales, and that was their primary source of red lyrium. It was a colossal step forward in the movement against the darkspawn Magister’s expanding forces; a step, Cullen hated to admit, he hadn’t known in which direction to take.

After questioning Barris – who had apparently met Sevanna in Val Royeaux, and seemed deeply regretful he had not joined her then - Cullen sent the men off to rest, telling them to take as long as they needed to recover from their harrowing journey. His interrogation had taken nearly an hour, and the poor sods looked nearly dead on their feet. Anxious to return to the post he’d left to Cassandra, Cullen made his way back through the main hall and was promptly hailed by Varric.

“Fidget wake up yet?” he called, feet propped up on the table he sat at as Cullen strode by.

“No, not yet. I can inform you when she does.”

“Maybe you should try kissing her, Curly!” Varric yelled at his retreating back, cheerfully unconcerned about being overheard. “That always works in the books!”

Cullen managed to keep his face impressively neutral as those in the hall looked his way in
curiosity, but his ears burned; that dwarf was an insufferable loudmouth.

He was grateful to re-enter the landing to the Inquisitor’s quarters, in half a mind to gripe about Varric to Cassandra, who’d undoubtedly be a willing party. Working up a sizable tirade about the dwarf’s chest hair and plunging neckline, Cullen climbed the stairs to Sevanna’s room only to have it die on his lips as he found not Cassandra, but Dorian. The Tevinter was running a finger along dusty, leather-bound spines in Sevanna’s bookcase, and raised an eyebrow when Cullen halted at the top of the stairs.

“Oh – sorry,” he said, shuffling his feet and suddenly unsure if he should stay. “I can return later -”

“I’m sure there’s room enough for all of us,” Dorian said, grinning. “Do come in, Commander, you’re letting in a draught.”

“I – all right.” Cullen retrieved some reports from the desk and settled himself on the sofa at Sevanna’s bedside. There hadn’t been much change in his absence; she lay on her back with her arms up around her head, white as bone against the spilled embers of her hair. He watched the rise and fall of her chest for a few moments, reassuring himself she still breathed before bending his head over his work once more.

Cassandra had clearly left and taken her book with her; a pity, as Cullen was very curious as to what the Seeker might be reading that she was so keen to hide from him. She’d never struck him as a reader, but then he usually remained out of striking distance in case the fancy took her; there were still many things Cullen did not know about Cassandra Pentaghast, but that she was a hard-hitter was one of which he was sure. He assumed her disappearance was in no small part due to the man humming at the bookshelves; the Seeker disliked Dorian, and she disliked unnecessary noise even less.

Something the Tevinter seemed entirely bent on making, or he simply lacked any aptitude to remain quiet. Muttered words in Tevene interrupted his tuneless humming as he pulled books off the shelf, rifled through them and clapped them shut once more. He also vocally expressed his distaste for certain tomes and tossed rejected titles over his shoulder. Cullen raised his head, frowning, but Dorian seemed more absorbed in the slow deconstruction of Sevanna’s bookcase.

Cullen wasn’t sure how he felt toward Dorian anymore – beyond the present irritation for all the noise – but the antagonism had certainly faded since Haven. He wasn’t quite certain what had exactly brought it on; it was a mixture of gratitude for his aid during Haven’s destruction, the sadness in his eyes when he’d sculpted a tribute of ice when they’d thought Sevanna had fallen, or the vast relief in his voice when he’d discovered she had survived. All of these instances indicated there was much to Dorian than the preening and flippancy, coaxing small shoots of regret in Cullen’s opinion of him. The Tevinter had turned his back on his mentor, had left his family behind in the country he wasn’t afraid to admit he loved, and done no less than anyone else during Skyhold’s initial restoration. The theory that he was a Venatori agent simply biding his time became more ridiculous with each passing day; if his true intent was to sell them out to Corypheus, why hadn’t the Magister already arrived with his forces in the near two months the Inquisition had been at Skyhold?

But perhaps the reason for his fading animosity – the real one, the secret one – was the lack of any romantic affection between Dorian and Sevanna. That was the very cornerstone in Cullen’s resentment – and lately, it seemed to be crumbling away.

Always adept at broaching conversation, Cullen blurted, “I need to stop calling you ‘the Tevinter’.”
“By all means, please continue,” Dorian replied without turning, sounding deeply amused. “As long as it’s ‘the handsome Tevinter’.”

He grimaced. “Not likely, Pavus.”

Dorian turned to shoot him a smirk. “From my homeland to my surname,” he said, laying a hand over his heart. “How quickly our relationship has progressed, Commander. I might blush from the familiarity.”

Cullen snorted. “You don’t have to call me that. Cullen is fine.”

“Oh, but I like Commander,” Dorian said salaciously. “It invokes a certain power.” He pushed a book back into its place and sauntered over to the opposite side of Sevanna’s bed. He pointed at Cullen with an elegant rotation of his wrist. “Why in Thedas are you wearing all that? You must be dreadfully uncomfortable.”

“My armor?” Cullen looked down at himself. “I always wear it.”

“Exactly! Don’t you have, oh I don’t know, normal clothes?”

“I wouldn’t know what you’d consider normal, seeing as you never wear proper sleeves.”

Dorian threw his head back with a laugh. “Ah, but Commander, what is the point of having rippling biceps if one cannot show them off?” He dropped himself into a chair at the bedside, slinging one ankle over the opposite knee with a certain grace Cullen could never achieve. “Now, on a more serious note, there is something I’d like to discuss - what is going on between the two of you?”

“Who?” Cullen asked, bewildered.

Dorian looked incredulous, and gestured vigorously at Sevanna. “You! Her! The Inquisitor and her Commander! Do catch up, my good man, or are you really so oblivious?”

“For Andraste’s sake - is this all you people talk about?”

“It’s all anyone can talk about! The clandestine glances, the mutual blushing, the pining from afar…” Dorian actually fanned himself. “It’s terribly romantic, yes? And though I do love a good will-they-won’t-they, I assume there comes a time that a man must carry off a woman and make her forget her name -”

“Maker’s breath!” Cullen exclaimed, going red; was he really so obvious that all of Skyhold was aware of his feelings? “I – nothing is going on, and certainly nothing like that.”

“I will assume by your adorable blush, however,” said Dorian, mustache twitching, “that you do want something to happen.”

“I… I won’t pretend I haven’t thought about it,” he muttered. Maker, how had he gotten into this conversation – with Dorian bloody Pavus, of all people? “But to be honest, I always thought you and Sevanna were…um…”

He gestured vaguely between her still form and Dorian, the latter going rather wide-eyed before barking out a laugh. “Andraste’s frilly bloomers, no. She is my dearest friend, but there is nothing of that nature between us. Although…” a rather wicked grin unfurled on the mage’s face. “We do have remarkably similar tastes.”
Confused, Cullen asked, “In what way?”

Dorian smirked. “Handsome, blonde ex-Templars.”

For about three seconds, Cullen was lost; then the pieces clunked into place, making sudden sense of Dorian’s lecherous grin. “Oh.”

The abrupt strike of clarity was almost comical. The Tevinter’s smug looks across Haven suddenly didn’t seem so smug, but flirtatious. Varric’s words on the village’s battlements came back to Cullen: *I don’t think Fidget’s got the right, ah…equipment.* And then, after Sevanna had closed the Breach, the way Dorian had leaned way too close, his eyes tracing over him slowly as if he were committing Cullen to memory. *Enjoying the view? So am I.*

Well. Cullen definitely hadn’t seen *that* coming. He’d wasted a lot of time begrudging Dorian for nothing more than a platonic friendship. But now there was an entirely different issue to address.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “You do know I’m not - um…”

“Interested?” Dorian asked cheerfully. “All part of the fun, I assure you. I knew from the beginning you were as straight as an arrow – excluding any of Sera’s, of course. And I would’ve had to be blind to miss the way you look at our dear Inquisitor.”

Cullen leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on the angle of Sevanna’s jaw and the pulse fluttering beneath it. The day had certainly taken an interesting turn, and on an impulse of daring he decided not to let it slip away; what better opportunity than now, to discuss his feelings for a woman with the person who seemed to be her closest friend?

“There was a moment,” he said finally, “that I thought…that we might want the same things. But she seems so different from…from before.”

“Before her apparent quest for martyrdom, you mean,” Dorian said dryly.

“The day she left for Redcliffe,” Cullen murmured, his mind reaching back for that day. Sevanna in his arms, the sun in his chest, their lips so close they remained but a breath apart. “I almost kissed her. I *should* have kissed her. And I think…I think she would have let me.”

The other man affected a look of mock offense. “She never mentioned *that.* Rude.”

“But when she came back,” Cullen went on, “she seemed…heavier. Like her burdens had doubled. For days she barely looked at me - I thought I had done something to upset her.”

Dorian gave him a hard look. “Did she never tell you about the future we saw in Redcliffe?”

“I read her reports; about the red lyrium and Leliana’s incarceration. But she…we never discussed it.”

“*Fasta vass,*” Dorian sighed, looking fondly at Sevanna. “That dear fool. She found you there, you know;” he added bluntly. “Or, rather, she found what was left of you. It was quite horrible, actually. It was obvious the torture you went through was…extensive.”

“Oh,” was all Cullen could think to say. It was very strange to hear of something that had happened to him, and yet had *not* happened to him. There was a disconnected sense of horror, like hearing of a tragedy that had happened to a person he’d never met.

“It broke something inside of her,” Dorian said sadly. “She was quite torn up about it after – cried
the entire journey back to Haven. Didn’t really stop when we returned, I think, but she made sure to hide it.”

“I never knew,” Cullen said in a hollow voice.

“Then she didn’t want you to. One misconception of those born into privilege is that we don’t feel as acutely,” said Dorian. There was a note of regret in his voice. “Which is entirely untrue. We just learn to conceal it better than everyone else.”

Cullen gazed again at Sevanna, remembering the shadows behind her eyes after Redcliffe, a clot of darkness submerged beneath clouded waters. He knew she’d been struggling silently, had sensed something more than what she relayed had happened in that dark twist of time – but never had he imagined he’d be at the core of it.

“It’s obvious you care for her,” Dorian said softly, “and she you. And I would like very much to see the both of you quit moping around, so I ask: why haven’t you done anything about it yet, and put both of your miseries to end?”

There was an interesting sort of drumroll occurring inside Cullen’s chest, but he retained an appropriate sense of trepidation. “Honestly?” he said with a small, strangled laugh and running his hands through his hair. “I have no idea how to begin.”

“Ah,” Dorian said shrewdly. “Yes. I suppose matters of courtship wouldn’t be in the Templar mandate, would they?”

“I know the nuances – flowers, letters, poetry…” Cullen trailed off with a thrill of horror; he didn’t know any poetry and especially nothing of a romantic nature. Would he have to go and buy a book of sonnets? Or – and Maker have mercy – would he be expected to write some of his own?

He was working up a good case of nervous sweats and heart palpitations when Dorian gave a decisive shake of his head. “Absolutely not. Sevanna is far too practical for that sort of nonsense; and if she really wanted all that, she would’ve stayed in Ostwick.”

The crisis swiftly abated, and it was with profound relief that Cullen eagerly asked, “So what should I do?”

“My advice? Spend time with her. Get to know the woman beneath the titles, and let her know you see her as such.”

“As her titles?” Cullen asked stupidly.

Dorian rolled his eyes skyward, as if praying for tolerance. “As a woman.”

“Oh – right.” He rubbed his neck again, feeling incredibly out of depth. “And how do I do that?”

“Must I think of everything?” the mage said scathingly, though it was insincere; Cullen suspected he was rather enjoying himself. “Just ask her to do – well, whatever you do for fun.”

Cullen frowned. “Fun?”

“Yes, Commander,” Dorian said, with an air of extravagant patience. “Fun. As in diversions, merriment, pursuits of whimsy – surely there must be something you do to let out those tight curls.”

Why was everyone so damned interested in what he did during his spare time? Wrestling to keep
his annoyance in check, Cullen ran through the short list of things he liked: training, sparring, reading, horses. Hells, he even enjoyed polishing his armor, which appeared to amuse Varric to no end. But Cullen honestly loved such chores. He found comfort in old routines, knowing it was safe and practised and simple, took authentic joy in working his body into sweat and soreness. He preferred when his days were as comfortable as a pair of broken-in boots, a luxury he was still getting used to; but he also knew these humble pleasures he truly enjoyed would be classified by most people under work.

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“I like chess,” he said finally.

Dorian rested his chin on his hand with a huff. “That’s it?”

“I enjoy other things,” he retorted, “though apparently not to anyone’s satisfaction.”

The mage raised his hands in mock conciliation. “Fine, fine. It’s just that chess is so – so typical. Of course you would enjoy something so steeped in strategy.”

Cullen raised an eyebrow. “Only those who are inadequate are so dismissive of it.”

“Oh ho.”

Dorian grinned, leaning forward as if to actually catch the bait Cullen dangled. “Is that a challenge, Commander?”

“Only if you’re fool enough.”

Dorian barked a laugh. “Now where is all this confidence when Sevanna’s awake?” Ignoring Cullen’s blush, he settled back in his chair with a smirk. “I’ll have you know my skills at chess are in the same realm as my looks – which is to say, staggering.”

Cullen sat back too with his own broad grin; the world seemed a much brighter place all of a sudden. “Then I should be fine, considering I was never staggered by your looks in the first place.”

The conversation became easy after that – so easy that Cullen was genuinely surprised. Now that his antipathy toward the man had evaporated, he found himself enjoying the company. Dorian was a lot more self-deprecating in private, his humour more sincere and not to simply be a pest. There was a certain humility beneath the preening and the faux superciliousness, an honesty that Cullen could identify with and suspect that they may have been kindred spirits all along; just two men dealing with a personal darkness to the best of their abilities.

It wasn’t until the sun was low over the mountains that Dorian departed, with many threats of a chess game unlike which you’ve ever seen and total annihilation. Feeling more light-hearted than he had all day, Cullen rolled his neck and shoulders, trying to work out the stiffness that had settled from sitting on the sofa for so long. Sevanna was still sleeping soundly, the faintest smile on her lips; Cullen leaned forward, elbows on the edge of the bed and rested his chin on his hand. It was nice, just to sit with her, the now quiet room filled with golden dusk that turned the dust motes to gilt; he found his eyes falling shut, fatigued from a day of watching and waiting and praying, and thought he might like to drift for a while. The conversation with Dorian came back to him, ebbing in and out of his tired mind like the tides…how odd, the way it turned out, getting advice from the man he’d considered to be his biggest rival…

Cullen coasted back to wakefulness to a pleasant, unfamiliar sensation - soft fingers brushing the hair from his temple and tracing the shell of his ear. He enjoyed a few precious seconds of such tender contact before his disciplined mind kicked in; he groggily pried his eyelids apart to see
Sevanna watching him, her hand feathering over his brow. The soft golden light still present indicated he hadn’t slept long; his bleariness was lost in the jolt of seeing her eyes open, albeit still a little hazy.

He raised his head off her mattress, his neck protesting creakily as he pushed himself upright. “My apologies,” he said, voice clotted with disuse. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s alright,” she said huskily, settling her hand back on the mattress. “You looked like you needed it.”

He cleared his throat. “How long – ah, have you been awake?”

There was a small, amused spark in her heavy-lidded eyes. “Not long.” She shifted, and pain flickered over her face. “What happened?”

“The wound on your leg,” he explained, pulling aside the cover so she could see the bandaging. “It was poisoned. We found you early this morning, nearly – nearly dead.” His voice cracked and he blinked away the sting behind his eyes. “Solas was able to purge the wound in time, before…”

His unfinished sentence strung itself between them like a delicate web, weaving all its implications in the hanging silence. Her fingers reached down to pick at the edge of her bandaging wrapped up past her knee, her brow crumpled. “I guess it was worse than I’d thought. I’m sorry.”

“What matters is you’re fine now.” He pulled the covers back over her leg, careful not to brush her bare skin. He still wasn’t wearing gloves and felt strangely exposed. “Can I get you anything? More blankets?”

She licked her cracked lips. “Some water?”

“Maker – of course.” He quickly poured out some water, and eased one arm behind her back to help her sit up. The hand that had been tracing his face came up to grasp at his shoulder, the other resting over his on the cup he lifted to her lips. He let her take her time, allowing her small, controlled sips so she wouldn’t choke, enjoying the soft weight of her along his arm. When she finished he lowered her once more and resettled himself in his seat.

“Is there anything else I can do?” he asked.

Sevanna pressed her lips together, looking beautifully shy. Her hand slid back along the sheets to grasp his fingers, and his breath caught in his throat like it was made of hooks. “Sit with me a while longer?”

“As long as you need,” he said, rubbing his thumb along her knuckles.

Her eyes fluttered shut at the contact, long lashes brushing the curve of her cheek. “Have you been here all day?”

“Most of it.”

She wrinkled her nose sympathetically. “That must’ve been terribly boring.”

“Not at all. I was kept plenty entertained by all the company you missed.”

“Like who?” she asked, smiling faintly

Cullen looked down at her hand, the slim fingers nestled in his like they belonged there. He
counted the tiny freckles on her knuckles, naming one for each visitor she’d had. “Josie and Vivienne, though she may have just been gathering an opinion on your decor. Then all the Chargers – Bull tried to bring up the head of the wyvern you killed in Crestwood, but Josephine forbid it.” Sevanna hummed a soft laugh, eyes crinkling. “Blackwall brought you a carving – a griffon. It’s really quite impressive. And Varric, who read you excerpts from *The Champion of Kirkwall*."

He left out that they’d all revolved around him, but he wondered if Sevanna had heard them from the realm of fog she’d inhabited. He cleared his throat. “Cassandra chased him out eventually. She sat with you while I attended some other matters; she had a book as well, though she didn’t let me see the title.”

“I know which one,” Sevanna said mischievously, but didn’t enlighten him further.

“Sera also came by.” He frowned slightly. “She brought me cake.”

Sevanna’s fingers twitched in his. “Oh?”

“She said I looked hungry.”

“Did you…” Although she sounded tired, she seemed deeply amused. “Did you eat it?”

Cullen looked up in alarm; she was watching him again, lips pressed together in mirth. “Do you think I shouldn’t have?”

She giggled a little at his distress. “I’m sure it was perfectly safe. Sera isn’t subtle; you would have noticed right away if she was pranking you.”

“I certainly hope so,” he muttered. Sevanna’s hand squeezed his, urging him back to his recount of her well-wishers. “Dorian was here too, and was kind enough to rearrange the contents of your bookshelf all over the floor.”

She gave a tiny snort. “I hope he wasn’t too much of a nuisance.”

Cullen traced the branch of a vein at the soft skin of her wrist, steeling himself for the next topic. “Actually…quite the opposite. We had a rather…illuminating conversation, about – about what happened in Redcliffe.”

Sevanna’s hand flinched; he squeezed it and looked into her face again. The erstwhile amusement was gone; her eyes were wide and shining, an old anguish buried deep within them. “What did he tell you?” she whispered.

“About what you saw. About what happened…to me, specifically.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. She turned her face away and said with limp self-deprecation, “You must think me such a ninny.”

In a moment of bravery, Cullen reached out and cupped her cheek, turning her back to him. Her skin had cooled, all previous flush of fever gone. “No,” he said firmly. “I don’t. What you witnessed there…Maker, if I had seen you there, torn apart like Dorian said, I wouldn’t -”

The crowding emotion in his throat choked him, cleaving his admission neatly in half. He wouldn’t have survived, he knew, been made completely undone by her ruin; he would’ve wasted away there, even if he’d escaped, a part of him forever trapped with her ghost in its tomb.
Like she had these last weeks with his.

A single tear snaked down her cheek and Cullen swiped it away with his thumb. “You don’t have burden yourself with that guilt any longer,” he told her. “Because it will never happen. I will never let it happen – you have my word.”

It was the promise he made to her on the mountain; the same promise he’d uttered after he nearly let her die the first time. Now he reiterated it once more, on the outlying cusp of her second brush with death, but this time Cullen meant to keep it. Even if he had to break himself first and relinquish his hold on life for the inevitable fall; he wouldn’t fail her again like he had at Haven.

“I’ll unburden myself,” Sevanna said softly, “only if you do as well.”

His hand left her cheek as he sat back, knowing she’d seen the turmoil on his face. He’d never been good at concealing his innermost thoughts. “I…don’t know what you mean,” he said, in what he hoped was an offhand way.

“Don’t lie, Cullen.” She tangled her fingers more securely in his, ensuring he couldn’t pull away. “Guilt is an old friend of mine – I know the look of it, even on another’s face.”

Cullen swallowed thickly, focusing again on their entwined fingers, feeling as if her grip was his only anchor to this earth. “What happened at Haven…the night you fought Corypheus -”

“You saved my life.”

He was shaking his head adamantly before she was even done speaking; he couldn’t let her think that of him, couldn’t bear her gratitude when he deserved her abhorrence. “I left you to die in Haven,” he whispered, the grief of it pressed like a knife against his throat.

“That was no more your choice than my own. It was necessary – we both know that.” Sevanna squeezed his hand weakly until he met her eyes again. They were beseeching and devoid of any blame. “But that’s not what I meant. You saved my life after Haven. I was lost in the blizzard, and thought I would die there; but I heard you, encouraging me through the storm - and then you found me.”

She echoed the words she whispered when he’d caught her from falling in the snow, returned to him cold and blue from a realm of fire and ice; the first miracle he’d ever witnessed, the most desperate of his prayers answered.

But still, she had done most of the work. “No,” he corrected, “it was you who found me.”

She smiled, and it was perhaps the loveliest he’d ever seen. “And then you kept me warm in the tent.”

Cullen flushed spectacularly, and Sevanna laughed; it was a beautiful yet fragile sound, like the tinkling of glass chimes. He rubbed his neck with his free hand. “Er – who told you that?”

“Dorian.” Her eyes sparkled with mirth. “He’s a bit of a blabbermouth, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Cullen agreed with a lop-sided smile. Then, unable to resist, added with a snort, “Though apparently a very handsome blabbermouth.”

Sevanna laughed with him, the sound of it like music in a once silent world. “According to him, at least.”
Their laughter faded slowly, turning from chuckles and snorts to shy glances and blushes. Cullen was very reluctant to let go of her hand; but her expression suddenly scrunched as she yawned, turning her head as if she could hide it.

“You’re tired,” he said gently. He sat back, preparing himself to untangle their fingers. “I should let you rest -”

She, however, tightened her hold, her cheeks still prettily aflame. “Stay with me,” she said. Her blush deepened. “Until I fall asleep – if you don’t have to go.”

Cullen smiled slowly, relishing the words he’d long since stored in the back of his mind as they rolled off her tongue. It was a tiny promise, but that made it much easier to keep. “I have nowhere more important to be.”

Sevanna’s eyes drifted shut as she made an inaudible retort – something self-deprecating, no doubt. Cullen waited until her breathing deepened and her fingers became slack, quietly marveling how her hand was dwarfed in his, her skin like satin against his calloused palm. Once again he admired the elegant craftsmanship of her hands – the slender wrists, the tapered fingertips and delicate bones. The contact made him bold and when he was certain she had fallen asleep, he bent his head to brush his lips across her knuckles.

Had he been looking, he would have seen her smile.

Chapter End Notes

YAY they talked about their problems!! That concludes this arc; I can't believe I thought I could make it all one chapter. Such tomfoolery. I apologize if there are any glaring errors or awkward sentences. I'm posting this pretty late, and my eyes are tired. I suppose I could do it in the morning, but I do so enjoy waking up to kudos and comments - so please, leave one if you enjoyed! Or send me balloons whichever you prefer.
In Three

Chapter Summary

Cullen is triumphant, in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

A small just so you know: there is in-game dialogue in here, but these are scenes that have been rendered so many times in this fandom that I've altered it a bit. I wanted to stay true to the events, but felt the conversation could use some tweaking to highlight the differences of my Inquisitor, and just so you guys aren't just reading another rehashing of the game. Hopefully you don't mind the edits I've made :) Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following morning, Leliana called a council in the Inquisitor’s quarters. She had relieved Cullen from his vigil the night before, and he’d left very late – late enough to start rumors, had he been seen leaving – but he was more than happy to be back so soon. When he arrived in Sevanna’s rooms (to a generous spread of tea, hot rolls and jams – Maker bless Josephine Montilyet) he found she had improved tenfold overnight; her pallor and temperature were normal, all residual symptoms of fever vanished. She was out of bed, still limping heavily on her right leg, and was wrapped in a silk robe of pale green. It made her eyes glacial, but when they traveled over Cullen as he climbed the last few stairs they were full of heat, sending his blood into a sweet, languid boil.

His fellow advisors and Cassandra were also present. They were in the middle of questioning Sevanna about her status; apparently Solas had been up earlier to change the dressing, and had said the wound was progressing nicely. Once they’d satisfied themselves with her recovery, they ploughed forward. It was a densely-packed meeting; Sevanna was finally able to make her reports on Crestwood and Warden Stroud, and combed each of them for what had transpired in her absence. It was late into the morning that they finally finished the council they were supposed to have the previous day, and turned with a general weariness to more current matters.

“We have a situation in the Fallow Mire, Inquisitor,” said Leliana, withdrawing a rough scroll from her pocket. “While you were gone to Crestwood, I sent a unit of soldiers to the Mire to secure it for our forces. Unfortunately they have been captured – by a group of Avvar, led by one who calls himself Hand of Korth.”

“What are the Avvar doing in the Mire?” Sevanna asked, reaching out to take the message. She was leaning against the fireplace, one hip thrust out as she kept the weight of her bad leg. Cullen was trying not to notice the way her robe clung the shape of her ass and thighs, and was failing stupendously. “I thought they kept to the mountains.”

“It seems they were in the area on the look-out for Tevinter agents,” Leliana explained as Sevanna read over the scroll.

“And caught ours instead,” Cullen finished darkly.
The Spymaster nodded. “Hand of Korth has offered a challenge directly to you, Inquisitor. He will not release our men unless you go to the Fallow Mire and face him in combat.”

“Absolutely not!” Cullen began, but Sevanna held up a hand to silence him.

“Is there any way to get our men out that doesn’t involve having my head caved in?” she asked calmly.

“I have already tried our only other option - by sending in two of my agents to get them out by stealth.” Leliana shifted slightly, her eyes flashing. “That was eight days ago. I’ve had no word since.”

“So either they’re dead, or captured as well.” Sevanna sighed and rubbed her forehead. “How long has Hand of Korth held our men?”

“Ten days.”

“And it’s another six days to the Mire…” Sevanna trailed off, face drawn in concentration. “If I leave within the hour…”

Josephine made a sound of protest and Cullen rose to his feet from the sofa, exclaiming “Maker’s breath! You can’t be serious about going!”

“We can’t just leave them there!” she insisted, tilting her chin stubbornly.

“No, we can’t,” he agreed, and she blinked. “But that doesn’t mean you need to go haring off to fight this barbarian – for Andraste’s sake, you were nearly dead just yesterday!”

“We don’t have much else choice,” she retorted. “I won’t leave our people to rot in some forsaken swamp while I lay around in bed. It’ll take six days to reach them, plenty of time for me to heal adequately. I’ll bring Solas; he can continue to tend to my leg on the road.”

Cullen rounded on Cassandra, who had her arms folded over her chest and eyebrows pulled together in one severe line. “What do you think of this?”

“I think the Inquisitor is right,” she said in a hard voice, “and it is our only option. I’ll accompany her myself to help fight this stupid Hand of Korth.”

“And keep watch on me,” Sevanna muttered.

Cassandra eyed her balefully. “If that’s what it takes to make sure you don’t act so foolishly again.”

“So, you have Seeker Pentaghast and Solas,” Josephine piped up, scribbling a quick note. “Who else will you bring on this endeavour?”

Sevanna chewed her lip, evidently weighing each of her inner circle in her mind. “Dorian,” she said finally.

Leliana raised a brow. “Two mages; do you have a certain strategy in mind, Inquisitor?”

“Not really,” she said impishly. “I just want to see Dorian in a bog.”

Josephine coughed politely. “No doubt he will be – ah – enthused.”

Cassandra snorted and rolled her eyes.
“How much time will you need?” Leliana asked, tipping her head towards Sevanna’s leg.

Her fingers idly played with her hair as her gaze met Cullen’s. He gave a small shake of his head, letting her know of his disapproval that she left while still so unwell, and her eyes softened.

“One more day of rest,” she conceded. “We’ll leave for the Mire tomorrow.”

Cullen let a small smile tug at his lips. “At your word, Inquisitor.”

Josephine began to gather up her usual armful of papers, signalling the meeting was over. Cullen shifted his feet, pretending to be absorbed in straightening his belt in order to linger behind; he was hoping for another moment of seclusion with Sevanna. Dorian’s instructions of *spend time with her* were bouncing around in his skull, and though he wasn’t quite sure just *how* to do that, he wagered a good start would be having a private word about how she was feeling.

His plans, however, were ultimately foiled when Cassandra fixed him with a glare. “If you would please excuse us, Commander,” she said in a clipped cadence. “I would like to have *words* with the Inquisitor.”

Leliana gave him a significant look of warning; he got the hint and decided to get out of the line of fire. With one regretful glance at Sevanna over his shoulder (who was looking slightly alarmed as Cassandra planted herself squarely in front of her) Cullen descended the steps and let the door swing shut behind him. Josephine was waiting for him, and it was only moments before they could hear muffled voices raised in an obvious diatribe.

Josephine smiled. “I do not much envy the Inquisitor right now.”

“No I,” he said, holding the door that led back to the main hall open for her. “Though she may not make it to the Mire after all, if Cassandra ends up killing her.”

Josephine laughed and headed back towards her office. Cullen made his own way to the front doors, idly wondering what daily matter he should turn his attention to first. However, he was waylaid once more as he passed Varric’s usual table; Dorian was sitting there too, and jumped up at the sight of him. “Ah, good day, Commander! Care for a game?”

He indicated the chess board next to him and shook a velvet bag with a clatter, evidently containing the pieces. But before Cullen could answer, Varric cut across him.

“I wouldn’t bother, Sparkler,” he said, grinning. “I’m sure Curly has some *very* important shield polishing to attend to.”

Cullen bristled in indignation. “Actually I *don’t*, dwarf. I do have time for a game.” He paused, hoping he wasn’t overselling it, and added “*Several* games, in fact.”

Varric chuckled, waving a hand at him. “Alright, Curly, you’ve made your point.”

Grinning winsomely, Dorian scooped up the board and sauntered past him. “Shall we?”

Cullen followed him out into the garden; the day had warmed nicely, and the sun was sitting directly over the courtyard that also served as a meager garden. The seeds Sevanna brought back from her travels were being tenderly nurtured into small green shoots, promising a bounty of medicinal herbs for which the surgeon was keenly awaiting. Several clerics were milling about, most of them gathered around Mother Giselle, who watched with an unreadable gaze as Dorian and Cullen settled themselves in the small veranda.
“Is this your board?” Cullen inquired, plucking up his king to examine it as Dorian laid out the pieces. It was a very handsome set, and exquisitely carved.

“Actually, no. This one was directly imported from Sera’s Tavern Emporium.”

“I take it here ’imported’ translates to ‘stolen’,” Cullen said dryly.

“I prefer the term ‘borrowed’,” Dorian said breezily. “But no matter, I doubt she’ll miss it – don’t think she’d know what to do with it anyways, the simple creature.”

It quickly became clear that Dorian played chess much as he did everything else – with great risk and dramatic flair. He also hadn’t been lying; he was indeed skilled, but his strategy of bold and admittedly cheap moves was weak against Cullen’s own dogged approach. He had learned most things could be won with a patient mind and careful hand, and he applied much of that philosophy to everyday life – tactical, measured, and steady. And unlike Dorian, he could see the outcome of such strategies; he would have the mage in seven moves, or four if Dorian did the obvious and took out his rook for the simple sake of theatrics.

And lo, he did exactly that, with a fair amount of swagger as he did so. “Tell me, can you already taste your bitter defeat?”

“Gloat all you like,” Cullen said with a smirk and made his next move. “I have this one.”

Dorian’s eyes popped open in faux shock. “Are you sassing me, Commander? I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Cullen’s muttered rebuttal was cut delightedly short; there was a light tap of footsteps on the stones and he looked over to see Sevanna walking up to them, moving stiffly as to hide her limp. His heart immediately went from a steady pace to that of a galloping horse, taking all the air in his lungs with it.

“Inquisitor!” he said a little breathlessly, half-rising out of his chair and sending his remaining knight rolling across the board.

“Leaving, are you?” came Dorian’s voice, sounding highly entertained. “Does this mean I win?”

Cullen reseated himself with a bump, cheeks warming under Dorian’s smirk. Sevanna examined the board briefly, before shooting the mage an amused glance. “Getting the pants beaten off you, Dorian?”

“If only,” he said, waggling his eyebrows and fluttering an elegant hand. “But our dear Commander must come to terms with my inevitable victory. He’ll feel so much better.”

“Really,” Cullen said lightly, taking his next move. “Because I just won. And I feel fine.”

Dorian’s posing froze midway, his eyes sweeping over the board to see, in fact, that he’d been beaten. Sevanna hid a smile behind her hand as Cullen leaned back in his chair, as self-satisfied as the lion that’d caught the gazelle.

Dorian sniffed. “Don’t get smug. There’ll be no living with you after this.”

He departed in a haughty swirl of pristine robes. Sevanna laughed, watching him go. “I always knew he’d be a sore loser.”

“He’ll survive,” Cullen said, feeling not a whit guilty; he liked winning. His eyes traced over her,
long and slow. She had changed out of her robe, wearing a long moss-green dress that hid her bandages, cinched at the waist with a simple gold cord; she looked exquisitely beautiful, and softer somehow. Like she’d shed the tempered veneer of the Inquisitor, leaving only the woman behind. “I take it the Left and Right Hands are finished with you? That didn’t take as long as I thought it would.”

“Cassandra yelled at me for twenty minutes,” she replied tartly, “with about half a dozen slights against my intelligence.”

“She went easy on you, then,” he said, grinning broadly.

She snorted. “Hardly. I now have to submit extensive reports on every injury I sustain – every last bump, scrape and bruise.”

“That sounds tedious.”

“Maker forbid I so much as stub my toe in the future.”

He laughed, but when that faded he realized he had nothing else to say. Her smile was completely disarming, and his first instinct (Void take him) was to flee with his dignity remaining intact.

“I should be returning to my duties -” he began, just as he spotted Dorian some twenty feet behind Sevanna; apparently he hadn’t left after all. He was waving his arms around his head and pointing enthusiastically at the board, mouthing something Cullen couldn’t quite make out. He got the gist, however. “That is, unless you would care for a game?”

He gestured toward the board. In the distance, Dorian threw his hands up in celebration and Sevanna, unaware of the interaction going on behind her, smiled warmly.

“Prepare the board, Commander.” She settled herself in Dorian’s abandoned chair as Cullen reset the pieces. She followed his hands with her eyes, lips pursed musingly. “I haven’t played in years, and never against anyone who wasn’t one of my brothers.”

“As a child, I played this with my sister,” Cullen said, taking extra care to not knock over the pieces as he set them, hyperaware that she was watching. He smiled as he remembered his games with Mia, ones that usually ended in humiliating defeat. “She would get this stuck-up grin whenever she won – which was all the time.”

“I never won either,” Sevanna said morosely. “My brothers took great pleasure in beating me at every endeavour.”

He grinned. “Mia had to be the best at everything too. When I finally grew sick of it, my brother and I practised together for weeks. The look on her face the day I finally won…”

He indicated that Sevanna play first; she propped her chin in her hand, contemplating her first move. “That must’ve been a sweet victory,” she said, finally deciding on a knight – bold in deed, he remembered, and smiled.

“It was,” he agreed, moving forward one of his pawns. “Sometimes I wonder if she still plays.”

“You don’t know?”

He shook his head. “Between serving the Templars and the Inquisition, I haven’t seen her – or my other siblings - in years.”
Most people reacted in shock when they discovered just how long he’d been separated from his family, especially by his own choice. His parents were dead; two more casualties in the many the Blight had caused, and he couldn’t go back to where their ghosts still roamed. Ghosts he would see in the color of Mia’s hair, the shape of his brother’s nose – phantoms he saw in the mirror every day. He also didn’t want his siblings to see all the demons that still breathed down his neck; they were better left in the dark about certain aspects of his life.

Sevanna, however, didn’t even blink at his admission. She understood the necessity of distance, even as the void between her and her family widened every day; her ghosts remained among the living. “Tell me about them.”

How to start? Did he really even know them after all these years? Mia, who’d been sixteen when he’d left, hard-faced and angry because he traded them for the Chantry; Branson, hardly more than a year younger than him, earnest and trustful with the coin he’d passed along for luck; or Rosalie, who had only been eight when he left, and hadn’t liked much more beyond kittens and hair ribbons. They were still children in his mind, and the people who had gone on without him, who had grown and grieved and cultivated their own lives, would be but strangers to him now.

He decided to start with the basics, the hard facts the tows of time couldn’t change. “I have two sisters and a brother. We grew up in Honnleath, but they moved to South Reach after the Blight.” He made an absentminded move, too busy focusing on not remembering where he had been at that time, and the magnitude of what he’d lost then; innocence, faith, parents…

“I do not write them as often as I should,” he added baldly, the confession no less ugly than it was in the privacy of his mind. “And sometimes I fear it may be too late to start.”

Sevanna shook her head. “As someone who would give anything to hear from her siblings,” she said sadly, “believe me when I say it’s never too late.”

She made her next move, brushing her hair behind her ear as she did so. She rarely spoke of her brothers and Cullen wondered if those might be dangerous waters to delve into. He remembered how she ripped out their portraits from Josephine’s book – the last bits of them she had left – and thought she might miss them far more than she let on; Dorian had established she was remarkably adept at hiding her suffering.

He cleared his throat and decided to ease into the topic, ready to back off at the slightest hint he’d gone too far. “Besides knowing they bested you at everything,” he said carefully, moving another of his pieces forward, “what else should I know about your brothers?”

She smiled wistfully, her eyes becoming distant. “Only that they are utterly impossible, and very dear to me.” She let out a short laugh. “Well, except maybe Caradoc – but then we never got along.”

Cullen had a sudden flash of one of her brother’s faces; the eldest, who sat like a king upon his throne, arrogance in every line of his face. “Which one is Caradoc?”

“She’s always been a right ass, with an enormous sense of entitlement that came along with his status as heir.”

So you are, what, third-born?”

Fourth,” she corrected. “Arman is spare, then Gideon, and Dominic’s the baby.”

“Who’s the one that looks like he could be your twin?” Cullen asked, making his next move.
Though they hadn’t been playing long, it was clear she played unlike Dorian; she countered his moves as opposed to challenging them, her tongue poking out in concentration as she sized up the board.

“Arman,” she said, smiling. “We were always the closest, even though he’s five years older. Caradoc couldn’t be fussed with us and Gideon preferred his books. But Arman and I…oh, we used to get into the worst sorts of trouble. We drove our mother up the wall.”

Cullen laughed, thinking fondly of his own brother, and the way they used to gang up on Mia. “I never would have put you down as a troublemaker.”

“It was mostly due to Arman’s influence,” she mused. “He is irreverence incarnate and I just got mixed up in his mischief by association – and poor Dom, who followed us everywhere as soon as he could walk.”

There was a current of melancholy beneath those last words, a certain finality in them that told Cullen she might not want to speak of them anymore. To be left with nothing of your family except your memories – well, sufficed to say there was a reason he didn’t speak much of his own either, and let the subject drop.

They played a while in silence, the game ebbing and flowing in each of their favor. Sevanna had already proven she had a fine, tactical mind by her months with the Inquisition, but it had never been put up against Cullen’s and he was enjoying the challenge of an adept player. Especially one who played fair, though Dorian had been dismally obvious in his attempts to cheat.

“You know,” he said lightly, breaking the comfortable concentration between them, “this may be the longest we’ve gone without discussing the Inquisition – or related matters.”

Sevanna’s smile returned. “I suppose it is.”

“To be honest, I appreciate the distraction. I’ve been told I work too much.”

Her hand lingered over one of her pieces, before moving it hesitantly forward. “We should spend more time together.”

He looked up so fast he cricked his neck. She was looking shyly up at him through her lashes, and it was as if a swarm of butterflies had suddenly burst from cocoons in his chest. “I would like that,” he said tentatively.

“Me, too,” she said, eyes darting back to the board.

A slow smile curled his mouth, warming him as leisurely as dawn did the day. “You said that.”

She blushed as she realized the redundancy of her words, and Cullen had the ridiculous thought that the Maker must’ve mixed the colors for her cheeks from the same reds he used on the most beautiful rose.

A far more quiet and forbidden thought wondered if the blush spread to her breasts.

Feeling himself flush as well, he cleared his throat clumsily. “We should – um, finish our game.”

“Right,” she said softly, her eyes dancing like sunlight off of glass. “Your move, Commander.”

He had her in three, narrowly taking her king due to a miscalculation on her part; a rather inept maneuver given her otherwise cunning approach. They traded several good-natured jibes, teasing
easily about the game, their respective strategies, and her getting chewed out by Cassandra. But it was not winning the game that had Cullen feeling so triumphant; it was the way she tossed back her head when he made her laugh, the column of her white throat and smile dazzling him as if he were looking directly into the sun. Never before had he felt so ignited, so aglow with light and warmth and fire he thought he might actually be ablaze, gone up in divine smoke like dry tinder at the sound of her laughter.

If happiness was made of gold, then this shining moment where they were the only two in the world and with Sevanna smiling at him made Cullen feel richer than any king.

The following day had Sevanna and her companions setting out for the Fallow Mire, but that did nothing to take the new spring from Cullen’s step. This trip was due to be much shorter; should everything go to plan, they would be gone roughly two weeks. He’d gone to see her off at the main gates, managing to only fumble half of his sentences as she bade him a sweet farewell. She was astride a new horse, an Imperial Warmblood the color of butter. This mare had a much gentler disposition than that grey stallion she’d favored, and Cullen was relieved to see her on a more reliable mount – he’d seen Tempest’s ears go flat too many times for his liking.

The days went by predictably slow again, and Cullen managed to keep himself busy without getting corralled into another tea party. In fact, the little tasselled invitations Josephine usually sent him twice a week had stopped altogether, and he realised with a mixed sense of guilt and relief that she’d either given up on them, or he was now unwelcome. But he didn’t need that hassle; there were recruits arriving by the day, amid knots of curious pilgrims, and even a handful of Orlesian chevaliers, who had tired of the Civil War and sought out the Inquisition instead. The lower camps grew steadily larger, and for the first time it began to truly feel that he was the commander of an army, not just a herd of farm boys playing soldier – they had all come a long, long way.

Eight days after Sevanna had left, they’d received word of her success; Hand of Korth was dead, the Inquisition soldiers were freed and they were on the return journey home. It was halfway through the fifteenth day that the bell finally sounded, signalling that the Inquisitor was approaching Skyhold. Cullen was up in the rookery with Leliana, going over the supplies and forces they would be sending to Caer Bronach to further stabilise Crestwood. His head had snapped towards the window when he heard the bell, although he tried to pass it off as a weird sort of stretch that didn’t fool Leliana for a second.

“Go on, Commander,” she said playfully, tugging the reports from his hands. “Say hello to the Inquisitor for me, will you?”

He rubbed his neck, unable to repress a sheepish grin. “I – alright. Thank you, Sister.”

She made a shooing gesture at him as she turned to her birds and he practically skipped down the steps to the library, a place that seemed a little gloomier without Dorian promenading amidst the shelves. Cullen wondered just how much the mage had hated the Mire, and was actually surprised he hadn’t returned sooner; he had suspected Dorian would’ve turned on his heel as soon as he set eyes on the swamp.

He reached the front steps leading from the main hall just as Sevanna’s party rode through the gates. His pulse raced as he saw the burnished glint of her hair, and he wanted to run with it; to dash down the stairs and chase that verge of delirium the sight of her stirred within him. Instead, he affected the precise gait of a man in control of himself, a man who commanded a growing legion, and not a man who was reduced to near giddiness at the sight of his infatuation.
Dennet and some stable hands had already arrived to relieve the returning party of their mounts as Cullen reached them. The pale-faced soldiers they’d rescued from the Avvar were being bustled off by healers and mages, but none seemed terribly harmed. Sevanna had dismounted and was shaking her hair from its limp knot, fingers catching in snarls at the ends.

“Welcome back, Inquisitor,” Cullen called in greeting. She turned to him with a brilliant smile, and his pulse skipped like a stone across a pond. She was distinctly grimy; her clothes were mossy and smelled musty, her blades had a hint of rust at the handle, and her boots made an awful squelching sound as she moved. But oh, she looked beautiful.

His tongue suddenly felt a little too big for his mouth. “How was the Fallow Mire?”

Sevanna shuddered violently and made a face. “Horrible. There’s nothing left from the Plague except the rotting remains of a village and the dead rising from the waters.” She looked truly agonised as she wrung her hands. “I fell, Cullen. In the swamp. It’s in my boots. It’s in my hair.”

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat to smother his amusement; she looked so fetchingly distraught. “At least you got our soldiers out alive. That’s not a feat to ignore, Inquisitor.”

“I suppose,” she said peevishly, “although I wish I didn’t have to gargle corpse water to do it.”

He laughed, feeling the tension of the last two weeks dissolve. The threat from the Avvar seemed laughable and inconsequential, now that she’d emerged victorious from the encounter – and reeking of the underside of a bog.

“I must excuse myself,” she said, as if she’d read his mind. “I desperately need a bath.”

“Possibly two,” he teased.

She snorted. “Oh, you likely won’t see me for a week. Unless you want to come help wash my back – I don’t think I’ll reach all the swamp scum on my own.”

Needles of heat prickled all over his skin at her words; Cullen tried not to think of it as an invitation, although that did nothing to quell the pinking of his cheeks. “I –er, ah, shouldn’t,” he stammered, tongue tying itself in a knot at her teasing smile. “That is, I’m sure Dorian could help you with that.”

“I’m afraid not,” came a loud, dramatic voice. Dorian swaggered over, looking most annoyed and his moustache drooping sadly. “I think I may just light myself on fire; that would be far easier than trying to scrub this muck off.”

Sevanna laughed. “That idea certainly has merit.”

“Although, if the Commander is volunteering his services at back-washes, I’m sure I could hold off my self-induced pyre until he gives it a crack,” Dorian added with a wink.

She laughed again and Cullen blushed further, unable to articulate a response. The heat was only intensifying; unbidden images of Sevanna wet and naked were flooding his brain, sending all his blood south. He needed a retreat, now.

“Enjoy your bonfire, then,” he managed, and marched away, trying not to think that the gale of laughter that followed him was at the expense of his discomfort. It seemed unlikely; Dorian was not so cruel, and Sevanna typically directed her humour at herself. Cassandra gave Cullen a terse nod as he passed, covered in a thin film of slime like the others, though it did nothing to detract from the regal sort of authority she carried herself with.
As Cullen headed towards the stairs that would lead him up to his office, he realized he’d left a report he needed in the rookery, and he had no real desire to retrace his steps back all that way. So he caught an agent by the elbow as he passed, one of Leliana’s agents named Jim, and requested he retrieve it for him ‘without delay’.

“Ser!” was Jim’s eager response and took off at once, leaving Cullen to climb the rest of the way to his office. Rylen was there waiting for him, thankfully with a full report on troop formations to discuss; Cullen needed some work to take his mind off how Sevanna was likely stepping into the bath now, her armor scattered around her feet...

If Rylen noticed his Commander’s eyes become a little unfocused for a moment here or there during their conversation, he didn’t mention it. Cullen managed to hold up his end of the discussion as a superior officer should, while keeping up a small internal dialogue chastising himself for his unprofessionalism. Now was the time for work – later would be time to fantasize. He shifted as his whole body tensed at the thought. Perhaps he should just get into the ring with Bull at the end of the day. A good sparring match would allow him to work off this head of steam that threatened to blow out his composure like an agitated geyser.

It was sometime later that Rylen left, leaving Cullen to start shuffling the new stack of reports into some semblance of order; the messengers had the deplorable habit of dropping things pell-mell onto his desk. His door opened and he raised his head, expecting to see Jim – who was taking rather long – but instead received Sevanna. His stomach leapt as she smiled at him, made temporarily breathless by the unexpected sight of her. She must’ve gotten out of the bath not twenty minutes ago, her damp hair pulled over one shoulder and face freshly scrubbed. She was wearing a soft tunic the color of cream and dark brown leggings, different from the more authoritative gear she usually wore around Skyhold; the distant part of his brain that was still functioning wondered as to what the occasion might be that she dressed so casually.

The rest of his brain had gotten stuck on her in the bath.

“Hello, again,” she said, leaning back against the door to close it.

Cullen scrambled to find something to say – charming or witty or flattering or just something and what came out was: “You smell better.”

His cringe was instantaneous, but she laughed long and loud, her fingers over her mouth as if she could cup its sound in her palm. “I feel better,” she affirmed, approaching his desk. “Though they did have to change my bathwater twice, I was so disgusting.”

The thought of her rising naked and steaming from a burnished tub rose gleefully to the forefront of his mind, and he nearly ripped the report in his hands in half as they flinched. “I, er – yes, you were quite, um…”

“Filthy,” she supplied cheerfully. She stopped at the opposite side of his desk, with hardly two feet left between them; Maker, he could smell her, clean and soft and feminine, dizzying him as he sucked in a breath.

“Was there something you needed?” he asked, feeling his voice was as uneven as mislaid keys on a piano. He didn’t know if he could stand there and hold polite conversation, not when Sevanna’s scent was drowning him and his traitorous mind was happily imagining her wearing nothing but suds.

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug, twirling the ends of her hair around a finger. “I wondered if you might like to go for a walk.”
A cold breeze slapping him in the face might rouse him from his depravity. “We could go check on the progress of the new recruits -”

“I thought we could talk,” she interrupted a little loudly, and blushed. He cut himself off and stared at her, bemused. She rarely rose her voice, but this time it seemed like she’d had to steel herself to speak…and overcompensated with volume.

“Talk?” he echoed, as if it were some foreign word that warranted garbled pronunciation.

“Alone,” she added, the color in her cheeks darkening. 

She knows, was Cullen’s first intelligible thought; that she was aware of his infatuation, was made uncomfortable by it, and found it inappropriate. She was going to confront him and make him admit every last secret, sordid thought and feeling that ever flitted through him, and she was going to kindly accompany him on a walk while she did so that he may throw himself off the battlements afterward.

His second thought was to chastise himself for thinking such a thing; she had said she cared about him, hadn’t she? She had held his hand, asked him to stay while she was recovering, had sought him out after her bath…

“Of – of course,” he stammered, his own blush rising in his face. He followed Sevanna out the side door of his office, the wind ruffling the fur of his mantle and stirring her hair. They walked in semi-awkward silence, Cullen frantically searching for something to say and horribly aware of how much his arms moved while he walked and that his expression couldn’t be organised into something that wasn’t remotely panic-stricken.

They’d passed through the room above the tavern when his desperation to fill the silence peaked. “It’s a…nice day,” he said lamely, hand going to the back of his neck in discomfiture.

“It is,” she agreed, seemingly unperturbed by his painful inelegance. She traced one hand along the stone ramparts, coming to a halt as she looked out over the valley. Thankfully, the curt wind cooled the sweat from his forehead, though his skin was slick with it beneath his armor. Cullen leaned on the wall next to her, careful to keep a proper distance between them – and promptly discovered he was upwind of her.

“I like coming up here when it’s warm,” she continued, scraping the hair that’d blown free back behind her ear. “It helps to clear my head.”

That was all well and good for her; Cullen’s mind, however, was anything but clear. It felt as though he wholly contained a desert storm, hot and gritty and disorienting, blasting away his ability to form coherent thought and turning his words to sand on his tongue. He felt stupid and slow, hampered by his own inexperience and insecurity - not to mention appalling lack of charisma.

Sevanna seemed in no hurry to speak as she leaned her weight on her elbows, hands clasped on the parapet and one calf hooked over the other. He tried to arrange himself into a posture that vaguely resembled casual, but the much shifting of his feet and shoulders had his armor clinking like chimes in a high wind. Sweet Maker, when he did he forget how to hold his elbows in a way that didn’t look like a marionette with tangled strings?

Verging on desperation to have the conversation she’d invited him here for so that he may escape somewhere dark and private, Cullen cleared his throat. It sounded as if he’d swallowed gravel. “There was something you wished to discuss?”
He heard her sharp intake of breath as if she might blurt something out, but then her shoulders sagged and her chin dropped to her chest with a rueful laugh. “There is,” she said sheepishly. “I’m just trying to figure out how to put it.”

“Is something wrong?” he asked, discomfort suddenly forgotten.

“No. Nothing’s wrong – at least, not yet.” She turned her head to him, pillowing one cheek on her interlocked hands. Her expression awoke a tiny shiver at the base of his spine, climbing it like vine on a trellis; she looked pensive, worried even, as if she were debating to step forward onto a frozen lake and was unsure if the ice would crack beneath her.

“Cullen, if I asked you a question,” she said suddenly, “would you answer it honestly?”

Taken aback, he said, “I’ll try my best.”

Straightening, Sevanna turned to face him fully, eyes carefully trained on his. “What am I to you?”

Her words were like a stone falling on eagle’s back and sending it plummeting from the sky – abrupt, unexpected, unthinkable. A rush of words unspooled in his mind, things like Inquisitor and desired and Maker sent snagging in the region closest to his tongue. He wanted to be honest, but he also didn’t want to set himself up to be crushed.

“A friend,” he offered cautiously.

She stepped closer, tilting her face up to his as she did. “But do you think you could ever see me as something…more?”

Maker’s breath – he must be dreaming.

“I could,” he said hoarsely, resisting the urge to pinch himself; he could not bear to wake from something so sweet. “I mean, I do, but I…I never thought…”

She was playing with her hair again, the endearing and girlish agitation cracking her composure. “You never thought what?”

“That this -” Cullen drew in a craggy breath, willing his pounding heart to slow. Honesty. He needed to address the barriers between them, remind himself that his needs and desires were not above those of the many. “You’re the Inquisitor. We’re at war. We shouldn’t…it wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Sevanna came closer still, and it was as if the very air sizzled between them. “What if I don’t care?” she whispered.

Cullen forgot how to draw breath; oh, how he wanted to cross the scant distance between them. It was if he was balanced on the precipice of something insurmountable, knew he stood at the edge of a cliff that was about to shift, and that his bedrock would give way to the sky.

“Say something,” she implored softly, touching his hand.

One last confession, harder than any he’d uttered before on bended knee. “You…I did not think it was possible,” he croaked, “that you would ever want a broken man like me.”

Her eyes were shining, but like he’d never seen before; not with tears nor with fever, but an untold happiness that rivaled the stars in all their nocturnal glory. “And yet I’m still here.”
“So you are,” he breathed, and it was he who inched forward now, his hands finding their own way to the indents of her waist. “It seems too much to ask…”

His gaze dropped to her lips as she wetted them with a quick dart of her tongue, as if inviting him to take a taste. A familiar heat rolled through him, turning any last reservation to smoke as he leaned in, lips an aching inch from hers, and his voice came out as a groan. “But I want to…”

He felt her sharp inhale as much as he heard it, her ribs expanding under the spread of his hands, sucking in the last breath that remained between them -

“Commander.”

Jim’s voice was like a douse of icy water – and it was in that moment Cullen thought he might be capable of murder.

He swivelled on Jim much the same way a tornado swivels toward an unsuspecting farmhouse, fixing him with a blistering glare. Jim hadn’t yet noticed his Commander’s impending wrath, just as he hadn’t noticed the moment he’d inadvertently stumbled into, intent as he was on the report in his hand.

“You wanted a copy of Sister Leliana’s report,” he continued, coming within smiting distance.

Cullen’s voice was a near snarl. “What?”

Jim blinked up at him, apparently a little bewildered at the reception of what he’d been asked to do. “Sister Leliana’s report?” he repeated hesitantly. “You wanted it delivered ‘without delay’.”

Cullen loomed over him, trying to convey without words just what he had interrupted, and how he was about to be obliterated for it.

The dawning comprehension on Jim’s face might’ve been almost comical if Cullen were not inches from throttling him. Red-faced, he backed away as if from a lion showing its teeth, stammering, “Or…to your office…right.”

He turned tail and fled. Cullen let his shoulders sag as he shut his eyes and clenched his fists, grateful his patience hadn’t snapped like a brittle twig.

However, the awkwardness had solidified once more; he could hear Sevanna shifting behind him with a gentle clearing of her throat. ”If you need to -”

Before she could finish her sentence, and before he lost his nerve, Cullen kissed her.

He had her in three strides, hands coming up to cup her face and bring it to his. It wasn’t quite the first kiss he had planned; he’d intended to make it reverent, a soft slant of his mouth on hers and a slow courtship of tongue. But this one was hard and swiftly claimed, a mash of lips against teeth and noses pressed together. He felt her eyes widen in surprise by the brush of her lashes on his cheeks; then they fluttered shut and her mouth softened under his, her pulse fluttering under his thumbs like the wings of a captured bird.

It was exhilarating, and the kiss drew on, suspended in a moment that could’ve lasted seconds or hours or days – time had been turned on its head like the flip of an hourglass, and Cullen felt as if he was rising from the depths of an ocean, speeding towards a surface that’d been turned jewel-bright by the sun.

He broke from her, taking what felt like his first free breath after a lifetime of drowning. “I’m
“Sorry,” he gasped. “That was – um, really nice.”

Of course the first words from his mouth would be an apology; he could almost hear Dorian hitting himself in the forehead if the mage had heard what he said. That was nice – Maker, there were a thousand words Cullen could use to describe what that was, and nice had no place among them.

Sevanna, however, seemed wholly unconcerned by his lack of eloquence. She looked a little dazed, as if he dizzied her with his kiss, her lips delectably crushed and wet. Her hands slid up his chest to tangle in his furs. “Tell me how long you’ve wanted to do that,” she breathed.

His heart leapt at the words and their airless quality. A collection of images pin wheeled in his mind - all the times she’d stood a little too close; lying flushed and tangled with him in a warm tent; standing in the circle of his arms the morning she’d left for Redcliffe; the first time he’d seen her smile…

The day she stood across from him at the War Table, when he’d first discovered the color of her eyes.

He chuckled softly at his own hopelessness. “Longer than I should admit.”

“That’s not wait another second,” she whispered.

This time she rose on tiptoe as she pulled his face down, creating a perfect arc that had their lips meeting at its zenith. The sigh she made undid him, and it was with a stifled groan that Cullen wound his arms around her, pushing her back down to the soles of her feet and backing her against the rampart.

The second kiss – he deliriously thought he would count every one he would ever have from her – was soft and slow, almost shy in its exploration. He was deliberate in his unhurried pace, pressing and coaxing like she was a tender root dug up from hard earth. But when he traced her lower lip with the tip of his tongue she parted for him, tasting him with a breath. With a tilt of his head, he took what she offered and deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue along hers for a taste, finding her more potent and sweeter than any wine.

It was like the sun breaking through storm clouds in his chest, filling him with light and heat as Sevanna allowed him to plunder the hot cavern of her mouth, the tiny mewls in the back of her throat spurring him like a siren’s call across the sea. When he finally, regrettably, needed air, he drew back and her lips followed like they were reluctant to part. He touched his forehead to hers, capturing that errant strand of hair by her ear and sliding it between his fingers - next time he would not wear his gloves.

“That was…” he began, trailing into silence when he couldn’t find an expression powerful enough.

She smiled, touching his lips with her fingertips. “I know.”

They remained like that for some time, simply breathing each other in and enjoying how their bodies fit together. It was almost funny, Cullen’s previous awkwardness, when this suddenly seemed like the easiest thing in the world. And for the first time in a long, long while, he felt utterly content.

With a sigh, Sevanna pulled back from him slightly so she could look up at him. “I hate to say, but I need to go,” she murmured regretfully. “I promised Josephine I’d help her write letters, to make up for how I ruined her tea the other week.”
Cullen laughed. “That was already a wreck before you got there.”

I won’t tell her you said that,” she said, smiling. She pulled away, her hands lingering in his grasp. “Find me later?”

He kissed her hands, eyes following the way she caught her bottom lip on her teeth. “Of course.”

He let her fingers slip from his and she gave him one last, lingering smile, backing away so not to break her gaze from him. When she finally turned and vanished beyond the door into the crumbling tower over the tavern, Cullen slumped back against the stone with a reverential exhalation and grinning like an idiot.

Perhaps he could throw himself off the battlements after all – he rather felt as if he’d suddenly developed wings.

Chapter End Notes

ABOUT TIME.
To all those who have been patiently waiting for this moment, I dedicate this chapter to you! Thank you to every single person who has left kudos, comments, or has even just clicked on this fic and given it a chance; it means more to me than words can say, so thank you. And I'm sorry this kiss took so long - when I said slow burn, apparently I really meant it.
The following week was one of the best of Cullen’s life.

He found Sevanna much, much later after their interlude on Skyhold’s battlements as she’d asked, though to his disappointment she didn’t take her supper in the main hall as she usually did. However, he was hailed by Dorian, Bull and Varric to join their table; he spent a very enjoyable meal with them, besides developing a kink in his neck from constantly looking over his shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of auburn. His restlessness did not go unnoticed; Bull was kindly hiding his smirk in his tankard, Dorian winked at Cullen whenever their eyes met and Varric started loudly advising him to see if he could find whoever he was looking for on the ramparts. Thus, he was a delicate shade of pink by the time the door to Josephine’s office opened, revealing a very giggly Ambassador and Inquisitor. With little pretense and a hasty farewell, Cullen swung himself off the bench, leaving the men behind him to guffaw at his expense. Ears burning, he approached Josephine and Sevanna, the former of which elbowed the latter and hurried away with a melodic laugh.

“Good evening, Commander,” Sevanna greeted, looking up at him through her lashes.

It was an angle of her that never failed to get his heart stammering, though he managed to keep his mouth from following suit. “Inquisitor,” he replied in a low voice, relishing the way her lips parted to suck in a breath. “Dare I ask as to what has you and our Ambassador so amused?”

She grinned mischievously, and jutted her chin in the direction he’d just come from. “Perhaps the same thing that has such esteemed members of my inner circle reduced to snorting buffoons?”

He rubbed his neck sheepishly, all bravado gone and tangled up instead in the fluttery knots twisting in the region of his navel. “It, ah, seems our…meeting on the battlements didn’t escape anyone’s notice, as I had hoped.”

Sevanna’s eyes sparkled. “Is nothing sacred anymore?”

“Not where Dorian’s concerned,” Cullen muttered, ignoring the exaggerated kissing sounds the
mage was making loudly enough for them to overhear. “Er – would you care to go somewhere more…private?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, and went pink. “Actually, there was something I’d wanted to show you. If you don’t mind.”

His stomach flipped over; her bashfulness was surprising, but it made him feel a little less silly about his own. Smiling, he offered her his arm. “Of course.”

She looped her arm around his elbow, tugging him into the small space leading to Josephine’s office and down the stairs. “Down here. I found it the other day – I don’t think anyone’s been there in ages, and I thought I’d make a little project of it.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll see,” she said playfully, as they reached the bottom of the steps. They were in Skyhold’s basement, where Cullen knew the kitchens were located; he’d been there a few times already, fetching late meals on days he missed them in the hall. It was dim and cool down here, with many barrels of mead and ale stacked at one end of the large space, and a long stretch of darkened corridor leading to the barracks. The kitchens and larders were at the opposite end of the broad corridor, filling the air with the rich scent of simmering food, but that was not where Sevanna headed. She towed him toward a dark space between the stone arches and pushed open a door Cullen wouldn’t have discerned from the shadows. She let go of his arm at its threshold, shuffling quietly in the gloom before she struck a flint and lit a small torch.

“Come see,” she said, closing one small hand over his and pulling him in further. He swallowed past an arid throat, although its dryness had nothing to do with the dusty, close air and everything to do with the hand in his. Sevanna set the torch in a bracket on the wall, casting its flickering glow over the space; they were crammed in a tiny passage lined with tall, cobwebbed bookshelves, their contents grey with dust. The narrow space opened into a small round room with a desk on which ancient tomes were piled, surrounded by yet more shelves. It was clear it had not been touched in many years; the wax of candles long cold and dead dripped like icing down the shelves, the cobwebs thick and numerous, every surface densely coated in dust from years of neglect. Cullen’s nose tickled in the stale and dusty air, the motes settling on his eyelashes. Whatever potential Sevanna saw here, he did not.

“What was this place?” he asked, secretly thrilled her hand hadn’t left his. “Another library?”

“My guess is some sort of arcane study.” Sevanna traced a finger down the spine of the nearest book and pulled it back dark with grime. “Whatever titles aren’t in Tevene are runes of some sort; I’ve never seen the likes of them before. Dorian would be ecstatic – except I won’t show him until he stops with all the teasing.”

Cullen snorted and immediately regretted it, due to the large amount of dust that invaded his nostrils. He valiantly held back a sneeze, his eyes watering. “I-I think that’s fair.”

She squeezed his hand and ducked her head shyly. “I hope it doesn’t bother you.”

“What?” he asked, startled.

“The teasing,” she elaborated, sounding soft and hesitant, “and that people will…talk.”

“They’ll talk regardless,” he said, thinking of how Dorian indicated that everyone knew about the way he looked at Sevanna. About how she looked at him. His heart suddenly swelled. “Of course,
I’d rather my – our – private affairs remain so, but this…” He lifted a hand to push her hair behind her ear, thumb running over her cheekbone. “I don’t care what anyone else has to say about it.”

She smiled, turning her cheek into his hand. “Good,” she said shyly, “because neither do I.”

Three long heartbeats passed as they stared at each other, that familiar tension swelling between them. Cullen drew in a strangled breath, and let it escape him again in a shaky laugh. “I, uh – I really want to kiss you.”

She blinked, her lips parting. “Then kiss me.”

He hastily obliged – though with admittedly more restraint than on the battlements that afternoon, tilting his head to press his mouth softly against hers. She hummed almost inaudibly in response, her free hand curling around the back of his neck. He lingered, nibbling gently on her lips as his heart became a hammer and his ribs its anvil.

When he finally pulled away, they were both as breathless as if they’d been running. Sevanna was smiling widely, her eyes bright as she leaned in to press a chaste peck to the corner of his mouth, right at his scar.

Cullen felt as befuddled as if he’d taken a blow to the head. “Thank you,” he said lamely.

She laughed and pushed at his chest. “You don’t have to thank me, silly. I wanted you to kiss me too.”

“Oh,” he said, and smiled.

She turned away from him, fingers still tangled loosely with his. “This room,” she began, tipping her head back to examine the dark, topmost corners. “I was thinking of restoring it for the mages. There’s not enough room for casting, but to have a library of their own – for their books and scrolls and whatnot – I thought it might be useful. We have such little else to offer for a space of their own.” She swivelled back to him, chewing at her lip. “Do you think that would be alright?”

“I don’t see why not. We set aside space for the soldiers and the Templars – why not the mages?”

“I’m glad you think so.” She twisted her hair around her fingers. “I was thinking of doing the restoration myself.”

“Why not have someone else do it?” he asked curiously.

“Because everyone always insist on doing everything for me,” she said sourly. “And I know it isn’t meant this way, but it makes me feel like an incapable little girl who’s too foolish to take care of herself.”

“I didn’t know that’s how you felt,” Cullen said honestly. Then, to tease, added, “If you like, you can start taking turns at cleaning out the latrines -”

She laughed, covering her eyes with a hand. “Oh, fine, so maybe I don’t want to go that far -”

“I know.” He chuckled and kissed her forehead in a fleeting moment of bravery. “And I understand wanting to do this yourself, but would you like help? From, ah…me?”

Sevanna bit her lip, smothering a rueful smile. “I couldn’t ask you to do that. You must have hundreds of more important things to – ah!”
She let out a shrill gasp at something behind him and flinched into his chest. His arms curled automatically around her as he whipped his head around. “What? What is it?”

She let out a tiny squeak, pointing, and he saw it – a large, hairy spider the size of a coin had just flitted across the nearest bookshelf, stopping in its tracks as if to examine them.

Cullen raised his eyebrows at Sevanna; she was positively trembling in his embrace, her eyes wide and stricken as they fixed intently on the spider like it was a snarling wolf about to pounce. He felt a jumbled rush of affection and amusement at her endearing display of girlish fear, though the latter won out and colored his voice. “It’s just a spider.”

“It’s huge,” she breathed in terror, fists tightening in his furs. “Oh, Cullen, would you please kill it?”

Gently relinquishing her (she immediately cowered behind him), Cullen lifted up the nearest book and slammed it over the offending creature; its crushed body fell to the floor and he kicked it away with the tip of his boot. He turned back to Sevanna, unable to keep the smirk off his face. “The foul beast has been slayed, my Lady.”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “My hero.”

Cullen couldn’t help but pry. “But really – spiders? I thought you came across massive ones in caves all the time.”

“We do,” she said, looking distraught. “But I, um, hang back a little and someone else usually kills them first. I hate them, they’re so…so ugh.” She shuddered, and then hesitated, looking furtively into the corners of the room. “Um – it’s not too late to take you up on your offer to help, is it?”

“I think that’s a wise choice,” he said sagely, making her roll her eyes again. Now he understood why Varric teased him so much; this was fun. “There might be more.”

Sevanna took a swift step closer, effectively trapping Cullen between her body and the bookcase. “And,” she said huskily, walking her fingers up his chest plate, “we’d be here alone.”

The room became suddenly airless, leaving Cullen rather lightheaded as Sevanna traced his lower lip with one finger. His tongue laid limp and dead in his mouth as she leaned dangerously close, and he struggled to regain use of it. “Urk,” he finally managed with colossal effort, and she drew back with a laugh; it seemed she was far better at teasing than he was, though he much preferred her method.

“Meet me down here tomorrow night, when you’ve finished your duties” she said, stepping back, gaze locked hotly on his. Then she spun on her heel and walked away, her hips swaying provocatively as she left him sagging against the shelves. “See you then, Commander.”

He was a doomed man – but damn it all if he wasn’t looking forward to going up in a glorious blaze.

* *

Cullen spent much of the following day in a state of high anticipation. His nerves felt like living lightning beneath his skin, setting a charge to his blood and a hum in his bones. To his luck, it was a fairly eventful day that kept him busy; Marian Hawke and Warden Stroud arrived, looking severely weather-beaten and travel-weary, bringing the curious news that a strange man was hurling live goats at Skyhold’s walls. Cullen sent out a unit of soldiers to retrieve him; they returned with a hulking mountain of a man wearing a helm of ram’s horns and looking like he was
thoroughly enjoying himself despite being in chains. This allowed Sevanna to hold her first judgement as Inquisitor, which was held before a large and interested crowd. Cullen watched with Cassandra from the back of the hall as the prisoner – Movran the Under, the father of the Avvar Sevanna had defeated – explained the tradition of staining his son’s killer’s holdings with goat’s blood. Appearing entirely unperturbed, Sevanna exiled him and his remaining tribe to Tevinter with as many weapons as they could carry. Movran the Under seemed only too happy to oblige, and was led away in unnervingly good spirits.

Beside Cullen, Cassandra let out a tremendous snort. “What a waste of time.”

He begged to differ, however; Movran’s sentencing consumed an hour of the afternoon, bringing him ever closer to the end of the day. Nobles, recruits, and agents alike were excitedly discussing the judgement, and Cullen took advantage of the disturbed flow of the usual interruptions and made decent headway on his reports. But as the sun crept steadily across the heavens, he found his mind wandering further and further until it was cloistered in that dark little room with Sevanna, alone and shut away from curious eyes and fervent gossipmongers; a dusty and contained little world where they would no longer be the Inquisitor and Commander. His palms grew clammy beneath his gloves.

He agonised over what to wear; he was hardly ever out of full dress, except if he was sparring or preparing for bed. Although he would never admit it to Dorian, he didn’t own much for casual clothes, save the simple trousers and linen shirts he wore beneath his armor. He had an inkling Sevanna would think him rather foolish for showing up in his full Commander regalia, and that was something he wanted to leave behind tonight; never mind that they would hardly fit in that room with the added bulk of his chest plate and spaulders. In the end, he decided to leave his armor; naked though he felt without it, he was eager for contact with Sevanna that was not separated by the trappings of metal and leather.

Cullen bolted a quick dinner in his office in order to plough through his remaining work. Ser Barris had sent him detailed maps and reports regarding the possible locations of Samson’s mine, and he was trying to organise a scouting party to search the listed areas. He’d been sending messages back and forth with Leliana all day, which grew increasingly irritable; the Spymaster was being fussy about which agents she would send with his soldiers, and seemed more interested in slipping bits of coded text alluding to his kiss with the Inquisitor on the ramparts. That was when he let his last proverbial nerve snap and pushed himself away from his desk; if Leliana had abandoned their work in favor of teasing him, why should he persevere? The butterflies in his chest had long ago become agitated, flurrying within him as if they yearned to burst forth and take to the sky in a frantic cloud.

He retained some scant patience to arrange his desk into order before dashing to his loft to strip off his armor and change his shirt; there was no time to bathe, but at least he hadn’t been working with the recruits today and gotten sweaty. He was checking his hair in the mirror before he realised what he was doing and made a furious face at his reflection – pull it together, Rutherford! With an odd sense that the world was gently swaying beneath him like a ship on an untroubled sea, Cullen left his office. Night had fallen hours ago, the spangled sky like diamonds scattered on a canvas of ink. He took the stairs to the grounds so he could go through the kitchens; no doubt the staff would find it strange that their Commander was moseying through without his armor this time at night, but they could also be counted on to be more discreet than the nobles who dallied in the main hall.

He found the door, shrouded in shadow, and took a moment to steady himself before knocking. It swung open and he entered, finding the space much more brightly lit than the previous day. Sevanna was in the circular space with a broom in hand, her hair tied up and a streak of dirt already on her cheek. She gave him a brilliant smile that made his pulse leap as he shut the door behind him.
“Hello, Cullen,” she said shyly, as he approached her.

“Sevanna,” he murmured, taking her hand to press a kiss to the back of it – and promptly spluttered, tasting dust.

“Sorry!” She tore her hand back with a breathy laugh, wiping it fruitlessly on her dress. She was wearing blue tonight, though it was already turning grey from the grime; he decided not to tell her about the cobweb in her hair.

Cullen wiped his mouth with a sheepish grin - so much for appearing suave. “I take it you’ve been here a while already.”

“About half an hour. I’m afraid I haven’t gotten very far – I’ve been too nervous to pick up anything, in case a spider crawls out from under it.”

He laughed and tugged the broom from her hands. “Why don’t I get rid of the webs first? Then we can ensure they won’t be back.”

“As long as they don’t move to my room.” She shuddered and leaned forward to peck his cheek, leaving a searing imprint behind. She dragged a low stool across the room and clambered on top of it, reaching up to start scraping the waxen icicles left over by the ghostly candles.

“Are you sure you should be climbing up and down like that?” he asked, frowning. “What about your leg?”

“It’s all better.” She lifted the hem of her skirt, showing him the faint pink scar that ran the length of her creamy calf. The heat rose from his neck as his eyes followed the bend of her knee to the swell of her thigh, which disappeared back under the blue fabric; it wasn’t until he tasted dust that Cullen realized he had licked his lips, and wrenched his eyes away.

“Solas says the scar should fade eventually,” she continued, unaware of his hastily averted gaze. “But the pain has been gone for a while now, so don’t worry about me.” The grate of metal against wood began again, telling him she was covered once more. “How was your day?”

“Long, but productive.” He began recounting to her Barris’ information on Samson and his mines of red lyrium, while he reached the end of the broom into the shadows that clung to the ceiling, snagging the gossamer cables around the handle. A spider fell from above, and he crushed it discreetly beneath his foot.

Sevanna contemplated this new information as she worked. “So if we find this mine, what’s our next move?”

“We destroy it, and deal Samson a blow he won’t soon forget.”

Cullen could feel her eyes on the back of his head, appraising him. “And if we find Samson there?”

“We capture him,” he replied evenly, “and bring him to Skyhold for judgement. Like you did with Movran the Under today.”

“You were there?”

“I was.” He lowered the broom, the end of it swathed in cobwebs, their stray ends fluttering, and began attacking the ones in the corners. “You handled it very well.”
She huffed. “At least my first one wasn’t something terribly serious. It was like having a bit of practice. They’re sending Alexius from Redcliff, and I’ll have to judge him at the end of the week.”

“How are you feeling about that?” he asked gently.

She drummed her fingers on the bookshelf. “Nervous. If it were up to me, I’d never lay eyes on that man again. There are too many -” Her breath hitched. “- too many bad memories.”

Cullen reached out and grasped her upper arm, rubbing his thumb in comforting circles. “He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“I know. But he was the cause of something so awful, of so many nightmares. I can’t forgive him for that, even though he was trying to save his son.” She bit her lip, her eyes faraway. “But I also feel like I have to take Dorian’s feelings into account… Alexius was his mentor, his patron. He was closer to him than his own father. How can I sentence someone of that value to my friend to death?”

“Dorian’s a grown man,” said Cullen. “He understands and appreciates the magnitude of Alexius’ crimes. Remember that he wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t thought what Alexius was doing was wrong, regardless of the relationship they had.”

Sevanna sighed, rubbing her forehead. It left another dusty smear. “I know. I just wish someone else could do this part – I don’t like passing down sentences like some sort of god.”

Setting the broom aside, Cullen gently encircled his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. She relaxed into his hold, her hands coming to rest over his. “That’s exactly why it should be you,” he said, “because you understand the weight of that sort of power, and don’t care to wield it.”

She pondered his words, and let out a slow breath. “Thank you, Cullen. For always…” She paused, and turned in his arms, laying her hands flat over his chest. His lungs and heart contracted beneath her palms as he felt their warmth through his shirt. “You’ve always believed in me,” she said matter-of-factly, “even when I don’t believe in myself.”

“Well,” he began slowly, sliding a lock of her hair through his fingers, finding it as soft as it looked. How quickly it became easy to touch her, to hold her close and feel like he was getting pieced back together, and not falling apart. “I suppose…I’ve always seen you in a way you don’t see yourself.”

Surprise flitted over her face, and her eyes dropped briefly to his mouth, before darting back up again. “And how is that?” she asked, a faint curiosity in her voice.

A cyclone of words to describe her gusted through his mind. A thousand words of praise to bestow upon her, yet he found none of them suitable to truly encapsulate what he thought of her, the depth of his admiration unable to be harnessed in mortal prose. A clumsy word for every star in the sky, and he wanted to pick the right one, the brightest one.

“A force,” he said finally, hoping he could make his point clear. “You are to be reckoned with and not underestimated; for even the mountains challenged you, and you could not be beaten.”

Her mouth opened and shut twice, at a loss for anything to say. Then it curled into a crooked smile, her eyes turned jewel-bright by the threat of tears. “I don’t…” She made a self-effacing sound, shaking her head. “Most men would have just called me beautiful.”
“You are,” he said, with every ounce of sincerity he possessed, “but there is so much more to you than that.”

She quickly dashed at her eyes before the tears fell, and Cullen was suddenly staggered by the enormity of what he held in his arms: a woman beyond beauty, though she did not know the true sum of her worth. A woman who had fallen from the Fade and subsequently walked through nightmare, shadow, and snow, had marched into sacrifice and returned a deliverer; a woman who was small and delicate in his embrace, with all the strength and none of the fragility of what had been bent and tested, yet remained unbroken.

What had he done to ever be worthy of her?

“May I kiss you again?” he asked hoarsely.

Sevanna let loose a fluttering little laugh, curling in close so that he could feel the softness of her breasts against his chest - oh Maker, he could just imagine them pushed into his palms. He tried to bring her back into focus as she wrapped her fingers around the nape of his neck, the other hand splayed directly over his pounding heart.

“You don’t have to ask, Cullen,” she breathed, pulling his mouth down. “Just do it.”

Their lips collided, both of them inhaling sharply through their noses. Though they were pressed from hip to chest, she wasn’t close enough, he couldn’t feel enough of her; Cullen wound one hand into her hair, anchoring her to him, its fellow tracing the soft line of her throat. Their last kiss, long lost to yesterday, had been chaste and unhurried, one intended to be savoured – but this, the fourth kiss, was dangerous and volatile, as incendiary as oil next to an open flame.

And they ignited.

They pressed and nibbled like it was the last they ever would, her fingers threading into his hair to pull him closer, harder, sucking his lower lip between hers. Cullen swept his tongue along them and she yielded, pushing his lips apart to joust him wetly with her own. He felt the scrape of her teeth and he groaned somewhere deep and low in his throat, sucking her tongue into his mouth to tangle with his. He was aflame by her touch, by the gasps and fingers tightening against his scalp and the teeth on his lip. He could taste the wine she’d had with supper – woody, with a slight bitterness that was not unpleasant – and underneath that was the essence he was discovering to be uniquely hers, something like mint and tealeaves and oranges, a taste he sampled, devoured, craved – a taste he never knew he’d hungered for, until now.

Sevanna was whimpering into his mouth, a wordless plea for more, the last gasp of a survivor on a shipwreck gone under. He sought her pulse point with this thumb, suddenly desperate to know if hers was flying as fast as his, if she were affected by this conflagration as much as he. When Cullen found the soft, throbbing point beneath the angle of her jaw, he couldn’t resist - consumed by an instinctual need to mark that vulnerable spot, he wrenched his lips from hers to mouth along her jawbone, finding her pulse with his teeth; he tugged her head back to expose the soft skin and nipped it. She inhaled sharply, nails digging into his neck, and he soothed the bite with his tongue, tracing a hot pattern at the crook of her throat.

“Cullen,” she breathed, his name caught in a place between a moan and a prayer. It spurred him on, blazing a trail of open-mouthed kisses to the spot beneath her ear, which he sampled with another swipe of his tongue. She pushed her breasts more firmly against him with a tiny gasp, making him stagger slightly. It was what righted a world gone crooked, returning him to a semblance of sense; and that was where he stopped, face hidden in her neck with his nose buried in her sweet-smelling hair, his blood thundering through him like the rapids beneath a waterfall.
“I’m sorry,” he murmured, when he finally trusted his voice not to crack like a young boy’s. “That was too much, I shouldn’t have -”

Her fingers were still tangled in his hair, and she pulled so that he was forced to surrender the safety of her neck and look at her directly. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips swollen, a look offset by the ferocity of her expression. “Do not apologise,” she said, her voice like silk over steel. “You did nothing I didn’t encourage.” A slow smile curled her mouth, and she added, “Although I can see why you felt the need to ask permission – that was nearly devastating.”

Cullen blushed. “You, um – really thought so?”

“No man should have that sort of power,” she teased, drawing him down for another kiss. The fifth they ever shared was short and chaste, though with its own sort of spark left over from their previous inferno. She cradled his face in her hands, looking very seriously into his eyes. “I don’t think you have any idea,” she said quietly, “the effect you have on me.”

“You could show me,” he said hopefully.

She laughed and pulled out of his embrace. “Maybe tomorrow, Commander. We need something to look forward to, after all.”

The second night she did show him, in a simmering display of feathery brushes over his mouth, scar and cheeks. This sixth kiss took him by surprise; they’d been in that subterranean study an hour, chatting about their respective days, the unspoken tension nearly humming in the air between them. In the middle of Cullen’s sentence – some tale about the chevaliers who had come to Skyhold – Sevanna’s hand had cupped the side of his face and turned it to hers, quickly driving the rest of the story from his mind.

“Sorry,” she’d breathed, when she finally pulled away and took all his air with her. “I couldn’t resist any longer.”

“Good,” he’d whispered back, and claimed the seventh in the midst of the piles of dust she’d been sweeping, any guise of continuing their work swiftly abandoned.

The third night they’d laughed until their sides ached, swapping stories from their childhoods. He told her of when he’d been eight years old, and announced to his siblings that was he was going to become a Templar; Branson had mockingly addressed him as “Ser Cullen” and then tackled him into the lake. Sevanna told him of when she’d been nine, and her brother had dared her to climb the tallest tree he could find. She had scurried, chipmunk-like, to the top, only to fall from the highest bough rather like a sack of potatoes; she pushed up her sleeve to show him the puckered scar on her left wrist, where the bone had broken and punched through skin. Kisses eight through twelve were taken freely, albeit shyly, as they tested the limits of their comfort with something so new and precious.

The fourth night they had suffered ten minutes of polite conversation and charged tension, before their restraint split like wood under an axe and they tossed their brooms aside. He had her pushed against the bookcase and was ruthlessly kissing her before they’d even clattered to the floor, Sevanna’s fists bunching his shirt and gasping into him like he was her last breath of life, all work forgotten.

The fifth night they spoke of their parents; she of her father, who had taught her to brew the tea of his own invention, and who had always loved his plants. How he had become Bann because his
older brother had passed young, taken by a sickness in his bones, leaving the spare to step up and take responsibility breeding the famed family horses; though his true passions lay within the gardens he had become far too important to tend. Cullen told her of his parents, how his father toiled in the fields from dawn till dusk and the way his mother cried the day he left to become a Templar. He told her how they died, his father bravely remaining behind to fend off darkspawn from fleeing villagers, his mother turning back to join him when her children were a safe distance; he told her of the letter he’d received, written in Mia’s shaken hand to tell him they were orphans. When they held each other after, heavy-hearted with the sorrow they shared, the grief over the living and the dead like a two-sided coin, their kisses tasted of the salt from Sevanna’s tears. Cullen made sure to take away each one with his lips, tasting them in lieu of tasting his own.

The days between passed long and syrup-slow, golden hours spent in giddy recollection of the dusty time spent in that tiny room. Sevanna was remarkably easy to talk to, their conversation flowing as easily as uncorked champagne, and he began to truly know her. Her favorite breed of horse was the Anderfel Courser, though she’d always wanted to ride a dracolisk; she hated anything with more than four legs; she thought she was a terrible singer (though she refused to prove it to him); she had a secret penchant for goat’s cheese; she wasn’t fond of birds, and the overabundance of Leliana’s ravens made her nervous; she had once dreamed of becoming a pirate and leaving Ostwick behind on its ivory coast. Her tongue was quick to tease and eager to curl against his; she was shy in her glances and touches but bold in the wordless language of brushing lips. After that first night, when his control had all but run away from him, Cullen had let her set the pace of each kiss. He reined in his hunger, leashed and muzzled it like the beast it was, and gave himself over to her; tasting when she offered and pressing when she pulled, but went no further. If leisure was needed to ensure he didn’t fracture the growing passion between them, so be it. He was happy to follow her lead in discovering each other, the chaste quest of hands learning foreign bodies; she squeezed his biceps as he traced the wings of her shoulder blades, she mapped the hard lines of his chest as he found the bump of her collarbone. It was a slow, sweet ebb and flow of daring, a catch and release of playing tongues, burning touches and silken caresses like strikes of a flint above dry grass, waiting for just one wayward spark, thirsting to burn.

And as Cullen learned her, slowly uncovering snippets of her essence like brushing off bones buried by sand, he realized a little more each time that he was utterly hers.

The sixth night he tried to bring her flowers – well, flower. He had snagged it from one of the bushes by the stairs to the kitchens, but he’d gripped it too tightly in a nervous fist; by the time he presented it to her it had wilted rather sadly.

“I’m sorry, it’s -” Cullen exhaled loudly, awkwardly rubbing his neck. “I’m no good at this.”

“It’s fine, Cullen,” Sevanna admonished playfully, giving the flower a delicate sniff. She tucked it behind her ear with a flourish. “I think it’s perfectly lovely.”

But when he leaned in to kiss her, she tilted her face to the side so he bumped his nose against her cheek. He pulled back, puzzled, as she peeked up at him through her lashes.

“If you start that,” she said softly, “we won’t get any work done.”

A smirk unfurled slowly on his face as he rested his hands on her waist and pushed her back toward the table; they had cleaned it off the night before, after a particularly heated break, the stray books back in their spaces on the shelves. When her lower back bumped into its edge, he hooked his hands under her thighs and lifted her onto it, eliciting a sharp exhale.

“I think we work too hard,” he said in a low voice, fingers seeking the rut of her spine. She was in a gauzy green dress tonight, the fabric clinging to every curve she possessed, its thinness a meagre
barrier between his skin and hers.

She smiled crookedly as her hands came up to his shoulders. “Who are you, and what have you
done with my commander?”

“He’s off-duty tonight,” he whispered, and slanted his mouth over hers.

Despite her earlier protests, Sevanna accepted his kiss eagerly, and a muffled sigh escaped her. It
was a routine they had established, but not one so old that the thrill had diminished; she explored
him slowly, almost lazily, tugging his lips between hers and flicking her tongue where his scar
puckered. Cullen trailed where she’d touched like a shadow, tasting the remnants she left, sating
him until she opened, and let him take, savor, drink from her until he could bear no more. Until his
skin crawled with fire and his bones charred to ash, when he need angle his hips carefully away
from hers so he wouldn’t frighten her with the portents of his desire.

When she granted him access, it was with a sound of bliss and a hand that slipped beneath his shirt
to feel the clench of his abdomen, and he crumbled.

They submerged in each other again and again, coming up for breath only to plunge in anew, each
time diving a little deeper, a little farther. Cullen kept his hands politely away from the fullness of
her breasts, instead counting the spaces between her ribs and finding the dimples at the base of her
spine. They burned long and slow, curling together like smoke in a lengthy blaze that did not
reduce them to embers, but fortified them - turned them diamond-hard like molten glass in a kiln.
He felt stronger with her, better, like the chains that’d held him down for a decade were melting in
the flames she awakened within him.

When she allowed his lips to find the column of her throat, Cullen realized he had lost count of
how many kisses they’d shared, how many times his lips had met hers in celebration of finding
each other. But as he dragged his teeth along the seam where her neck met her shoulder, and felt
her shiver in his arms, he found he did not really care.

As long as she kissed him back.

Chapter End Notes

Too much kissing? Not enough kissing? Too much description? Needs more cowbell?
Let me know, I'd love to improve anyway I can!!
What Might Never Be Told

Chapter Summary

Sevanna meets with a Templar, a Magister, and a Champion.

Chapter Notes

This update may seem a little boring compared to the recent fluff I have indulged in. I'm still not sure about this whole chapter, but it was necessary so future developments make sense, and for exposition and all that. Please forgive me if this is not up to usual standards - I hit a bit of a slump recently, and eventually I just get tired of staring at my work and just post it to move on. Also, you can spot another ship if you squint.

Sevanna couldn’t sleep.

She pitched from side to side, sheets twisting maddeningly around her legs as she tried, fruitlessly, to get comfortable. It was very late; the fat moon was gleaming like a coin through her window, washing the room in silver. The night was peaceful, the wind a silken rustle, but these damned sheets – they were torturous against her skin, almost coarse as if they were gritty with sand. But then, all week she’d been as taut as a cord wound too tight; her nerves as sensitive as a blister, raw and chafed and aching.

And it was all Cullen’s fault – him and his beautiful, wicked mouth.

Sevanna groaned and rolled onto her back. She kicked the sheets down to the bottom of her bed, which was new, ordered in by Josephine from Orlais; a magnificent edifice of polished mahogany bed posts and white Rivaini silks as insubstantial as a gust of breath on a winter night. They fluttered in the slight breeze, tempted in by windows thrown open in hopes it would also cool her fever of desire. Sweet Andraste, even her bedclothes felt constricting and abrasive on her too-tight skin, the slippery material catching a little too well on the tips of her breasts. Grumbling, Sevanna shimmied out of the offending garment, balled it up to toss across the room and flopped back onto her pillows.

The breeze chose that precise moment to freshen itself, stirring against her naked flesh like the brush of a hand.

The frustrated growl that began deep in her chest somehow turned into a low moan as her nipples pebbled in the cooler air, stiff and wanting, for a mouth, a pinch, a caress - anything. Though even that dimmed in comparison to the situation between her legs; thighs slick with her own arousal, a dull throb of emptiness in the most intimate part of her. Sevanna dragged a hand over her face, her cheeks warm with carnal need and embarrassment. Her thigh muscles were rigid from constantly squeezing together in an attempt to find relief; but she needed purchase, she needed friction –
Maker, she needed something inside her to clamp down on and rut.

She certainly desired Cullen – had, now, for quite some time – but at this instant, with her skin raw and flayed for the want of a lover’s caress and her veins turned to hot beds of cinder, desire seemed too tame a word. She needed him, hungered for him; coveted his touch the way a dragon covets gold.

A week of heated kisses and polite exploration had her hanging by silken threads, strung along a web of tautness and anticipation. It had been a very long while since she’d lain with a man and too few a time to be considered as anything “experienced”; but never before had one conjured such a fever within her as Cullen had, and Sevanna knew she wanted this - him. It was his hands she wanted to roam her body, his mouth claiming flesh no other had before, his voice sighing her name. But a week felt too soon, a barely negligible time in which to know each other as they began this unhurried voyage into a hazy unknown, a whispered promise of something more…

Which was why she was positively mortified for her current state of blatant arousal.

As her slick thighs pressed together and her inner muscles clamped down on emptiness, Sevanna tried to think of less inflammatory things, though her thoughts never wandered far from him. His laughter rumbling in his chest beneath her palm; the half-smile he reserved just for her; the way his eyes no longer darted quickly away if she turned and caught him looking. A hundred sweet and chaste ways he showed her how he felt, leaving silent the words he so often stumbled over. But that was just another endearing quality about him; that a man so at ease in the role of commander, who had a legion at his feet and a host of demons snapping at his heels, would become so boyish in her presence, with only a soft-spoken word or shy smile to render him so.

Memories like these made her heart ache as sweetly as less…innocent places.

Lately, Sevanna thought that one of the greatest happenings of her life would likely be the one never told. History would remember the symbol that wore a woman’s face, would recall the fist with which she ruled and the legacy she left in her wake like the ocean receding from the shore. Her life would pass to legend, and likely one embellished, becoming the stuff of extravagant tales; but what would fade to forgetfulness was rapidly turning into what she prized like no other. The nights in the library with Cullen would be hers to keep, hers to preserve as if they could be mounted in glass cases so that they might be safe from tragedy. No songs would be sung about the dusty space in which they hid themselves, or how they wove together away from prying eyes – but oh, it did not matter. Not when they composed a private symphony of drumming pulses, shared breath and stroking tongues, creating a music all their own.

But now the song was different, where all before was fluting sighs and soft noises drawn from glancing touches like a bow over strings. But this, as Sevanna laid like a sizzling coal in twisted sheets, was a clash of heart against ribs, a mad strum of nerve and twang of tendon. Her whole body seized, painfully aware of how empty and desolate it was, her arms vacant of a man that had so filled her heart.

Perhaps just this once…Sevanna’s breath caught and her fingers twitched, tempted by a siren sin. Administering her own release was not something she did often; it was a decadence she indulged with the wax and wane of her cycle, which was accompanied by that peak of tension like a sea-creature about to break the surface, the water forming like a second skin before it ruptured and let it free. But the blaze Cullen had stoked within her was like none she had felt before; and even from his simplest touch this firestorm surely might implode and set her aflame.

Guiltily, she moved one hand down to slip between her sodden folds. The simple touch was electric, the charge arcing across every nerve in her body, and her hips bucked at the sensation. It
was easy to find a rhythm, caught as she was in a wordless keen of desire; a single unbroken note of ethereal pitch, wrung from her by Cullen’s voice and lips and tongue. Oh, and she thought of it now; a sinful fantasy of Cullen’s mouth pressed against her sex, an intimate touch she had never known. But she wanted to, and she wanted it to be him. The thought of his golden head between her thighs, drinking from her as if from a chalice, his whisky eyes glittering at her over the plane of her stomach –

Her breath hissed between her teeth and she moved quicker, rolling her hips against her own insistent fingers and fantasizing they were Cullen’s tongue. Her other hand grabbed roughly at her breast, pinching and thumbing the hard peak the way she wished he would with his own sword-calloused fingers. He was so sweet with her, allowing her to set and push the boundaries at her own pace, his hands politely avoiding any spot that might be considered too forward. It filled her to the brim to be handled so delicately, so reverently, like she was something precious – but she was shy and inexperienced in assuming control in passion. Her own timid advances were never enough to encourage Cullen to go further, to take the reins and introduce – she hated to say it – petting.

So now she was here, writhing in bed like a whore in a brothel, her own hand strumming her clit and its fellow groping her chest. Wound up from a week of just kissing Cullen, all the countless times he pressed his scarred mouth over hers and stole the breath straight from her lungs. Simply kissing, and Sevanna was reduced to an over-sensitized and wanton mess. She was ashamed, she was burning; she was pathetic, she was soaring; she was woefully inexperienced and nervous, she was hopeless -

She was coming.

It hit her as swift and sharp as a lightning strike, her thighs squeezing together and her hips rising off the bed, head thrown back on the pillow. Her body bowed in ecstasy; it was like glass shattering, sunlight bouncing off the shards in medley of light and color. She rode out her release, the week’s tension leaving her body along with a strangled cry.

“Cullen!”

She was embers on a draught, fragments of what had burned spiralling back to earth, cooling and fading as the heat left her. She was still alone in bed, one that now had a large wet spot at its center, and the fingers coated in her pleasure were her own. But the sheets were no longer burlap against her skin, the seething heat banked by the velvet weight her climax cast along her limbs.

She slept, naked beneath the eye of the moon, the glittering heavens the only witness to the contented smile on her face.

* 

Sevanna awoke well-rested, feeling as fresh as the morning dew. She had just wrapped herself in her green robe when the door below creaked open, and Flissa’s cheerful voice floated up in greeting. She ascended the stairs bearing a laden breakfast tray, something she had been bringing to Sevanna’s quarters since she’d finally decided to sleep there. Flissa no longer ran the tavern, and had taken up the unofficial post of being the Inquisitor’s maid, of sorts. Sevanna was glad for it, despite having initially told her it wasn’t necessary. Flissa wouldn’t take no for an answer, insisting she had to earn her keep some way, and repay the Inquisition for saving her life at Haven. Sevanna was quite certain the pretty barmaid had propositioned her the first time they met, but when she had shown no interest, Flissa had retreated into the role of the friendly gossip. They chatted easily over the course of Sevanna’s breakfast while Flissa straightened the bed and relayed every rumour that bounced around Skyhold, from the innocent to the sordid, and the wild to the mundane.
When she had finished, and the other woman had lifted the tray from her desk, Sevanna asked, “Flissa, do you mind sending for Ser Barris to meet with me here? As soon as possible, if you please.”

“Oh, of course, Your Worship,” she said, forgetting (again) not to address Sevanna as thus. Then she lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Shall I make sure Commander Cullen doesn’t here about this?”

Sevanna laughed. “There’s no need. I only have…an Inquisition matter to discuss with Barris.”

“Alright then,” Flissa said, adding a dubious wink.

She disappeared down the stairs with a giggle, leaving Sevanna to shake her head in amusement. Flissa was terribly incorrigible, but fun to talk to. She was an eager ear for gushing, and there were many things Sevanna just wanted to enthuse about with someone who would be equally excited; all of which revolved around Cullen. Despite Cassandra’s secret romantic heart, she was not the sort to gush and Sevanna wasn’t sure if she would tolerate such girlish behaviour. Sera, of course, would rather swallow a jar of bees than endure a detailed recount of every kiss with a man. She had already babbled incessantly to Dorian, who was such an insufferable tease she decided to abstain until he’d learned to behave.

Like the day Cullen had finally kissed her for all of Skyhold to see; she had stumbled in a near daze in the direction of Josephine’s office, and met Dorian somewhere along the way. He had mockingly informed her she appeared to be “swooning”, and she’d blurted, “Cullen kissed me!”

“Is that what he was doing?” Dorian said in faux surprise. “I thought you’d lost something in the region of your tonsils, and the Commander was helping you retrieve it.”

That had certainly taken the stars out of her eyes, but she’d laughed anyway. She had suddenly felt like she was bursting with it, expanding with such giddiness that she would surely float right up off the ground.

A week later, and the lightness still hadn’t gone away.

Humming to herself, Sevanna slid out of her robe and went to rummage through her armoire for the buckskin “Inquisitor” outfit. She caught sight of herself in the floor-length mirror and paused, running her hands over her naked breasts and down her stomach. Her body had changed much over the previous months; she’d grown more muscled than she’d ever been from the amount of walking, fighting and horseback riding she’d been doing. She had always been on the slender side – trim waist, long limbs – but the roundness she’d had from her former life had all but vanished. The soft swell of her belly had gone flat, and she was significantly less full in both hip and thigh. Muscles bunched sleekly under skin as she twisted to examine herself from the back, and let out a small huff.

She’d always been comfortable in her own skin, having valued a honed mind better than a body. It also didn’t hurt that she’d been graced with her mother’s beauty, though the complexion she inherited was no longer like the flawless marble it once resembled; she was littered with a new constellation of scars, evidence of living rough and countless battles. Her mother would think them ugly, mortifying – but Sevanna liked them. Scars were stories told by those who truly lived.

As she traced each of them, recalling their origin, she wondered if Cullen would notice them, or if he would find them unpleasant. She didn’t think so – he often touched the one below her eye like it was something wondrous, a marvel to look upon in awe, and would press his lips to it in near reverence. She had never been handled so delicately, as gently as one would a flower they were
afraid to crush; though she often wondered if it was due to her slender frame. Fereldan men seemed
to prefer their woman sturdier, of larger builds or softer flesh; Dennet, Harriet and Adan often
advised her to eat bigger meals, lest she be blown away by the slightest breeze. But she had none of
Cassandra’s raw power and feline litheness, nor did she possess the womanly curves Josephine
subtly boasted beneath her ruffles of silk. Sevanna could easily count the ribs in her reflection and
spot the hard sculpt of her thighs, her hipbones flanked by hollows inflicted by weeks on the road.

She wondered what Cullen might think, if he saw the flesh he only knew under a barrier of cloth,
and discovered the true shape he often traced with gentle hands.

An explosive knocking jarred her from her musings; she dove for her clothing as a voice called,
“Inquisitor? Ser Barris is here to see you!”

“Just a moment!” she called out in a high pitch, shoving her feet into her trousers. There was no
time for smalls, but no one need know. She yanked on her breast band and pulled on her jacket with
impressive haste, dragging her fingers through her hair to tame it. “Send him up!”

Just as she heard Barris’ footsteps on the stairs, her eyes fell on a puddle of silk – her nightgown,
the one she’d stripped off last night when she’d become too hot, before she had…

Cheeks flaming, Sevanna managed to kick it under her bed before Barris’ head came into view.
She hurriedly arranged her features into a resemblance of calm, all too aware of her blush. “Good
morning, Ser Barris.”

“Your Worship,” he responded, falling to one knee and crossing his fist over his chest in a salute.

“Please,” she said immediately, “don’t call me that. Sevanna is fine. Or Inquisitor, if you must.”
Barris straightened, looking faintly embarrassed. “Of course, Inquisitor.” He further entered the
room on her wordless beckon, arranging himself straight and tall before her fireplace. “You asked
to see me?”

“Yes. Thank you for coming.” Her hands twisted together, all previous levity gone as she focused
on exactly why she’d summoned Barris here; what had been weighing on her mind since the
beginning, increasing a hundredfold when she learned he had arrived with the last of the Templar
Order and the news of its demise. It was difficult to remember her own newfound happiness when
this wandering knight stood before her, heavy with an old grief akin to the last tree that stood
where there had once been a forest, his brethren cut down by steel and leaving all barren behind
them.

As she swallowed hard to wet her throat, he spoke up quickly. “Inquisitor, I must apologise for
what happened in Val Royeaux -”

“With the Lord-Seeker?” she asked, brow furrowing. “You have no blame for that affair.”

“Still,” he pressed. “The Lord-Seeker was not himself and I suspected something was not right. But
still I returned with him to Therinfal, when I should have joined you right then.”

Sevanna shook her head. “What matters is you disobeyed the order to take red lyrium, and escaped.
You’ve already provided valuable insight on our enemies. Do not discount that.”

“Yes, Inquisitor. Thank you.”

Her fingers worried at the hem of her shirt, her heart pounding inside her throat. “I wanted to ask
you,” she began softly, “about your last day in Therinfal Redoubt.”
She saw the shadow that passed behind his eyes, the private recalling of the bloodshed he’d witnessed. “The day Samson attacked.”

“Yes. I wanted… I needed to know –” she set her shoulders back, forcing her spine straight to reinforce herself against the blow she might be about to suffer, “- of a boy who might have been there.”

Barris’ expression became one of sorrowful comprehension. “What’s his name?”

“Dom -” Her brother’s name caught in her throat, and she had to shake it loose and begin again. “Dominic Trevely an.”

There were several beats of awful silence, before Barris gave a mournful shake of his head. “I-I’m sorry, Inquisitor. That doesn’t sound familiar.”

The breath left her lungs under a painful squeeze. She did not know what was worse - the answer she had dreaded, a quick and clean end to all her private fears so it could give way to grief; or this, a fate unknown and left with no answer at all.

“Your brother?” Barris asked sadly, and she nodded mutely. “How long ago did he take his Vows?”

“I don’t know,” she said thickly, swiping at her eyes before they betrayed her. “He hadn’t yet taken them when I left Ostwick.”

Barris looked pained. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor, but you should know – before the Lord-Seeker handed the Templars to Corypheus, he put out an order. He summoned all Templars to the fortress, includ– including those who had yet to make their oaths, so he could preside over them himself.”

The floor cracked beneath her feet, crumbled away to darkness, and there was nothing left to hold her. “So, you mean…”

“If your brother was about to undergo his vigil when you left,” Barris said gently, “then it’s likely he was among the first to receive the tainted lyrium.”

Sevanna sat down heavily on her sofa, dropping her head into her hands. Barris made a small sound of surprise, his hand brushing briefly over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so sorry.” Then, after a strained pause, he added, “It is possible he escaped. Or was never at Therinfal in the first place. Some of the Order was not there, when…”

“Perhaps.” Her broken voice was muffled by her hands, though they did nothing to obscure the false note. Sevanna knew it was a weak attempt to humour herself, but this last clutch at straws was all she had left. She raised her face to find Barris in a blur of tears and gave him a thin smile. “Thank you, Ser Barris. I just…I needed to know.” She drew a deep breath. “Please,” she added, “don’t repeat what we discussed here. I would rather no one knows that my brother… might be a Red Templar. There are far more troubling issues to focus on.”

He looked greatly conflicted. “I’m sorry I could not be more help – or comfort. Forgive me, Inquisitor.”

Barris left quietly, leaving ringing silence behind. Sevanna stared vacantly at the dead ashes in her hearth for a very long time and allowed her tears to fall. One stolen moment of grief, before she tucked it away like a sharpened blade wrapped in cloth, pushed it deep where it wouldn’t be seen, and tried to forget.
The blistering nights with Cullen and the long days between became suddenly finite, as the date she would leave for the Western Approach loomed ever nearer. With Hawke and Stroud back in Skyhold, the Warden was anxious to continue on and begin the journey to the desert. Though they would leave before Sevanna and her company did, along with a small band of scouts to secure camps along the way, Sevanna knew the day he left would be trailed closely by her own. The knowledge that it needed to be done and that this was necessary did nothing to settle the wild sway between what she needed to do and what she wanted, her sense of duty unbalanced by the counterweight of her selfish heart. Though there was nothing fragile about the way she felt about Cullen, there was a tiny seed of fear that separating for a lengthy period of time would wilt the burgeoning passion between them. It had taken so long for them to reach this point, due to her becoming skittish after Redcliffe, his withdrawal and both of their hesitant natures; if she returned to him eager, only to start at the beginning again, she wasn’t sure she would be equipped to deal with it after so many steps forward.

But until the nebulous date of her departure, there were many duties to oversee at Skyhold. Of the most important was Alexius’ arrival, meaning the time for judgement had come at last, and Sevanna was required to take up the weight of Inquisitor like a familiar but reluctantly-accepted gavel.

Facing Alexius was not easy, despite that his weeks in captivity had clearly not been kind to him. His skin hung loosely off his frame, his once-fine clothing dirtied and torn, and his eyes hollow. He looked, in a twist of irony, much like her companions he’d left to wither in that dark future. Gone was the arrogance, the manipulation and unctuous manner; gone was the Magister that had flaunted his shackles on the mages and had wielded terrible magic for a master who’d forsaken him. Only the man was left, broken and darkened, facing the gallows as a shadow of what he’d been and bereft of the son he’d only wanted to save.

Sevanna did not want to pity Alexius. She wanted to look upon him in cold fury and squeeze every last injustice from him, before inflicting every drop of pain he had done to her in retribution, as if she’d been the one strapped to a table and he had held the knife above her heart.

The hall was packed with those who wished to witness Alexius’ sentence, but for all that she paid attention, it might as well have been just her and the Magister. Some of her inner circle were present and they shone like beacons in the sea of indistinct faces. Blackwall, dark and brooding on the fringe of the crowd; Solas, who flitted in and out of sight, ever watchful and appraising as if her every move was that of one in a game of chess; Cassandra, as unbroken and silently supportive as a stone pillar; and Vivienne, who watched imperiously from above, the sunlight slanting through the arced windows illuminating her like a deity descended from on high in a blaze of heavenly wrath.

Cullen, of course, was present too. He watched from the back, his gaze steady, sturdy as the lone rock amidst a raging sea. When she found she could not bear to look at Alexius, Sevanna stared at Cullen instead, reassuring herself that he was whole and well, forever untouched by that horrible fate if she ended Alexius now.

But in her heart of hearts, she knew she could not.

Dorian was made conspicuous by his absence, retreated somewhere far away so he would not witness what they all knew needed to be done, still not completely devoid of those last shreds of affection for his former patron. But it was not just for her friend that she could not do it. She had none of Vivienne’s cool indifference; none of Cassandra’s blind faith in which to enact justice; nor did she have Solas’ ability to see the black and white, and all the shades of grey that lay between.
She was Sevanna, who could kill in defence but not in cold vengeance, and who possessed streak of pity that now reared within her, like a snake that had been lying dormant from a long winter.

She conscripted Alexius on the condition he could see his son if he served the Inquisition, and she did not know who seemed more conflicted – the judge or the tried. The crowd was certainly taken aback, and even angered, as the Magister was led away in chains to begin a new servitude in research.

Sevanna fled as soon as she signed Josephine’s documents, slipping through the door that led to her quarters and pressing her back against it when it shut. She felt dizzy, shaken by the encounter with the man who had given her too many ghosts, and surprised by her own decision. Would this make the Inquisition seem weak? Or would their enemies think her soft, easily crushed and conquered simply because she did not have the ruthlessness to smite those in her way?

Someone knocked softly on the door behind her, and Sevanna didn’t even think twice of who it would be. Cullen edged himself in carefully, as if to keep something more from entering behind him, and took her in his arms without preamble. He didn’t need to ask how she was coping, when he recognized it in the strained set of her shoulders and too-bright eyes; he kept one hand pressed into her low back, the other stroking her hair as he murmured words of reassurance in her ear. He held her until her frenzied pulse slowed and the trembling subsided – but it was still not long enough. The real world and all its responsibilities was pressed too close on the opposite side of the door, threatening to cave in this stolen moment. She managed to wring three kisses out of him before he left (not that it took much convincing), with a murmured promise to meet in their spot later that night.

But even that oasis was drying up, as the dust and cobwebs slowly vanished under their attentions, and she wondered just how long they had left before they were devoid of a place to just be Cullen and Sevanna.

She waited in the shadowed space just a little longer, hoping the hall would clear and eliminate the possibility of being questioned about her decision. She finally peeked to see if it was relatively safe to leave, and discovered Josephine must have put on her Bossy Boots and ordered everyone to return to business. Grateful, Sevanna slipped into the open again, and was just closing the door when someone called to her.

“Well, that was interesting.”

She turned to see Hawke approaching her with a bottle in each hand, the crystalline sloshing indicating both were full. She was wearing a lopsided grin, tossing back the bangs that’d fallen into her eyes with a quick flick of her head.

Hawke tossed over one of her bottles. “Want to slip away?”

“I’d love to,” Sevanna said, smiling as she caught it.

Hawke marched away, jutting her chin to show Sevanna should follow, and she did. She was startled as she realized, again, that Hawke was several inches shorter than her. Rumours and legend, it seemed, added a significant amount to one’s height, and the staff usually strapped to her back made her seem much taller. Or perhaps it was the way she held herself; the confident set of her shoulders, the proud tilt to her chin, the tension of her posture like a bird of prey about to fold its wings for a dive. She did not move the way most mages did, especially those from the Circles, with their eyes usually averted and shoulders rounded, used to a life flitting between bookshelves and torchlight, avoiding the unreadable Templar gazes. But the loping gait with which Hawke moved recalled the prowl of a predator. Sevanna didn’t need a display of Hawke’s powers to know
this was not a woman she would ever wish to mess with - and it was precisely why she had earned the title of Champion.

Hawke lead the way into the gardens, over to where a thick tangle of ivy crawled up the stones. Tucking her bottle under her chin, she began to climb; Sevanna hesitated only a second before following her, holding her own bottle against her neck as she did.

They climbed until they reached one of the higher roofs; not as high as Sevanna’s balconies, but more so than Vivienne’s. Hawke perched herself at its edge, feet dangling in open air. Sevanna settled next to her, feeling a slight thrill as she leaned forward to gauge the distance to the garden below – which was far. Hopefully their identities would be indistinct from such height; it would not do for the Inquisitor to be seen shimmying up buildings like a squirrel.

Hawke yanked the cork from her bottle with her teeth, eliciting a hollow pop. She spat it out, and Sevanna watched it fall to the ground, praying it wouldn’t hit anyone important.

“Nice view,” Hawke said conversationally, as if they’d stumbled upon it and not climbed a hundred feet into the air via ivy.

“It is,” Sevanna agreed, popping the cork from her own bottle and wafting it under her nose. Thankfully it was not one of the more foul spirits the tavern provided; it was heady and rich, with notes of wood that suggested a spiced wine. She swigged it back, careful not to choke when it flooded her tongue; she did not often imbibe, and was always inadequately prepared for the burn of alcohol.

Hawke took the deep draught of a seasoned veteran and wiped her mouth with the back of a hand. They sat in companionable silence for a while, the Champion and Inquisitor, far removed from the gravity of their responsibilities.

Hawke spoke up first. “So – the Magister. It’s not what I would’ve done.”

“I don’t think it’s what most people would’ve done,” Sevanna admitted.

“I would’ve popped him one in his balls,” said Hawke wistfully, “and thrown him in some dungeon to rot. Trying to bind mages to the Imperium…peh. Bastard. The Chantry’s bad enough.”

“It was certainly tempting.” Sevanna took a tiny sip, preferring the acidity of the drink on her tongue than the current subject. “Will you and Stroud be leaving for the Western Approach soon?”

Hawke didn’t look fooled by her feigned interest in the new topic, but left it alone. “Tomorrow. Or the day after.” She lifted her drink in a mock toast. “Depends how much I drink of this tonight.”

Sevanna was all too aware of Hawke’s habit of drinking until a near stupor, and was unnerved by the helplessness of it, so she simply smiled politely instead.

Hawke shook her hair back again; it shone like polished ebony in the descending dusk. “How’re you feeling about your inevitable trip to the Approach?”

“Anxious. I admit I’m dreading what we’ll find there.”

“One day you will’ve seen enough crazy shit,” Hawke said darkly, “and nothing will surprise you anymore.” She took another swig. “Worried about leaving Commander Uptight behind?”

Sevanna smiled in spite of the jab; she knew it was meant in affection. “It’ll be difficult. This will be the first time we’re apart after…well, everything.”
“He pork your beans yet?” Hawke asked insolently.

Sevanna spat out her next sip, and the mage dissolved into raucous peals of laughter.

“I—I – no,” she stammered, cheeks turning as dark as the wine. “And I would prefer *that* stays on this roof.”

The other woman waved a nonchalant hand. “No sweat. He doesn’t seem like the type to rush things, anyway. Bet you anything he’ll be praying the entire time when he finally gets around to it.”

“I’d lose money on that bet, I’m afraid.”

Hawke laughed long and loud, in a series of sharp barks; the whittled-down laughter of a woman who’d had too little of it for too long a time. “It has been an *age,*” she announced, punctuating the grandness of her statement with several long swallows of her liquor, “since I’ve had my beans properly porked.”

Sevanna sputtered, nearly bringing up another mouthful of wine. “Dare I ask how long?”

Hawke winked roguishly. “Long enough for cobwebs to appear.”

Sevanna found that rather hard to believe. “What about your company that Varric’s always going on about, like the pirate captain? He always makes them sound fabulously attractive and promiscuous.”

“Isabela? She was *far* too terrifying,” Hawke said with an affected shudder.

“Then what about the healer?” Sevanna pressed, suddenly curious. “Or the former slave? What does Varric call them…Blondie and Broody?”

But Hawke shook her head. “Anders was complicated,” she said, “and Fenris was a sulk.”

Sevanna gave her a hard look, as if she might pierce the defensive glibness. She knew Hawke to be a lonely sort, preferring to stand on her own in a fight than drag others into danger with her; but for the first time she saw the hardened facade Hawke wore like a second skin. It was as thin as an eggshell, crumbling and cracking, giving a glimpse to the vulnerable woman beneath it.

“Is there no one in your life, Marian?” she asked softly.

Hawke didn’t even react to her first name. She stared out towards the summits, fixed on some invisible point like her gaze was tethered by an invisible cable. “Not in the way I might wish.”

She took another pull from her drink, her eyes very far away. Varric had waxed many a poetic verse about the color of the Champion’s eyes; blue as lyrium, as cutting to the core as a carefully aimed dagger. But Sevanna thought they were like lightning; the briefest flash of blue before it split the sky, her gaze as remote as a storm assembling silently on the horizon.

She picked at the hem of her sleeve, unable to think of anything to fill the heavy silence, when Hawke glanced sideways at her fidgeting.

“Fidget,” she stated, sounding faintly amused. “*Now* I get why Varric calls you that.” She took another swallow - her drink was nearly empty. “Would you tell me something?”

“Of course.”
Hawke fiddled with the faded label on her bottle. “Does he have a name for me when I’m not around?"

“No,” Sevanna said honestly. “I’ve only ever heard him call you Hawke.”

She huffed, pushing her hair out of her eyes again. “He never did figure one out for me. I guess I stumped him.”

“I don’t think so,” Sevanna said thoughtfully. “I heard someone ask him, once, why he only ever called you Hawke and not come clever nickname.”

Hawke didn’t look at her. She was staring into the distance again, her hands curled into fists in her lap. “And?”

“He said you didn’t need one,” she continued slowly, “because Hawke was already accurate. He… he said you always flew too high, and never came within reach.”

A quivering silence stretched between them like the plucked string of a spider’s web; then Hawke blinked rapidly, her mouth twisted into a pained imitation of a smile.

“Trust Varric,” she muttered, “to make assumptions.”

Before Sevanna could reply, Hawke set her empty bottle aside and scooted toward the edge of the roof.

“Thanks for the break, Inquisitor,” she said, slinging herself back onto the wall of vines. “But I should get ready to leave for the Approach. Give my best to Commander Curls, yeah?”

“Alright, Hawke,” Sevanna replied, but the mage’s dark head had already disappeared from view, slipping down the ivy as easily as one might hop a fence. Sevanna examined her half-empty bottle for a moment, before setting it carefully aside. The world was making a slow revolution around her, and she thought she would sit a while before attempting her own way down.

The conversation with Hawke had taken an uncharacteristically somber turn, and she thought of how lonely it must be; to hold everyone at arm’s length, afraid to let them close in case she detonate and ruin them, too. She thought of Hawke and Varric, the best of friends with leagues of words yet unspoken, both too stubborn to see what lay clear between them, forever thinking the other unattainable. She thought that the greatest of love stories might never happen - never to be told because one was too busy writing them for everyone else, and the other was resigned to an isolation as absolute as the moon’s.

Yes, there might be a great many things Sevanna admired about Marian Hawke – but she had no doubt that she did not wish to end up like her.
A Gift of Starlight

Chapter Summary

Cullen gets Sevanna a present.

Chapter Notes

I'm terribly sorry it took so long to update. I lost all motivation and confidence for no reason, and have been tied up in a lot of personal crap. Really had to push through this chapter, but hopefully you guys enjoy it! As always, leave a comment letting me know what you think - makes my day! :)

After so many nights spent with Sevanna in the dusty little library beneath Skyhold, Cullen was beginning to think they shouldn’t give it to the mages to use; he was certain the Veil must be stretched thin as Desire demons pressed against it, their panting breath fogging it as if it were made of glass, summoned by the blistering hours he and Sevanna had spent there. Surely any mage who entered after them would be at risk of possession- but for now, it remained theirs.

Sevanna had judged Alexius that afternoon, and Cullen hadn’t seen her since he’d briefly comforted her after she’d given her sentence. There had been far too much work to be done to linger, though he had wanted to, if only to dry the tears she’d seemed to be holding back. They’d agreed to meet in the secret library later that evening. The hours he spent in his office before he went to meet her trickled by with excruciating slowness, wholly not helped by the Seeker delivering a tirade about the Inquisitor and Champion “irresponsibly climbing rooftops”, as if there were no greater offence. Her mood wasn’t improved by Cullen’s indifference; he knew Marian Hawke to some degree, respected her, and knew her unorthodox methods of cheering someone up usually involved dragging them along somewhere – in this case, a roof.

He had to admit to a certain amount of curiosity of what she might tell Sevanna, however; they had crossed paths often, as Knight-Captain and Champion, and not always amicably. Hawke had always bent the rules far past his liking, but these days she seemed much less insolent; she had aged in a way not measured by years but by hardship, an oldness that was evident in the set of her jaw and the tightness around her eyes. And while he wished Hawke’s burden on no one, in a way he was grateful for it; it was by her actions that unveiled Meredith’s madness, the catalyst for Cullen to finally open his eyes and truly see what the life of a Templar was, and that he wanted no more part in it. It was the detonation that had sent him veering off his trajectory, a path of obedience, blindness and blue, spinning him away into the unknown and into path of the Inquisition.

Which had led him to Sevanna.

He didn’t bother knocking on the door to the library anymore. There was no sign that others had discovered it, so their little world remained undisturbed; though he usually locked the door behind them, taking extra precaution they wouldn’t be interrupted.
As always, Sevanna had already arrived. She was not so addicted to work as he, even though at times the reports on her desk were stacked higher than his. She was wearing green tonight, which was becoming his favorite color on her, with her hair pulled into a haphazard knot. She turned when he shut the door behind him, her mouth curving in a beautiful smile, looking slightly flushed and her eyes shining a little too brightly.

Cullen was just wondering if she’d been crying before he got here when she launched herself at him; she collided with his chest, sending them both staggering backwards as she pulled his mouth down for a kiss that made his head spin. When her tongue swept along his lower lip he could taste a heady, spiced wine, and things clicked into place. She had the glazed eyes and rosy cheeks of someone who’d imbibed and was none too experienced with it, and judging by the way she was tracing her hands over the hard lines of his chest, it had lowered her inhibitions somewhat.

The rational part of Cullen’s brain wasn’t sure a tipsy Sevanna was a good thing, but the rest of him was certainly eager to respond. He pressed her tightly to his chest, twisting one hand in her hair so he could angule her head and take control of the kiss. He cut short a breathy moan as he slipped his tongue into her mouth and explored its roof. The taste of the wine was just as dizzying as hers, and it was a great need for air that forced him to part from her.

“You’ve been drinking,” he murmured, when he finally had the breath to speak.

She grinned crookedly and pressed a little closer. Her breasts were pillowed against his chest, and the hand gripping her hip bit deeper. “Not much,” she said coyly, with the hint of a pout.

He spied the bottle sitting on the desk over her shoulder; it was three-quarters empty. “Hawke,” he growled playfully, “is a bad influence.”

“Oh, no,” Sevanna purred – Maker, but she was a lightweight. She fisted her hands in Cullen’s shirt and pushed him up against a bookcase, curling close to hover her lips over his. “This is all by your influence, Commander.”

She kissed him, hard – this time it was Cullen’s groan who was swallowed as she ruthlessly plundered his mouth. He splayed his hands on her back, one between her shoulder blades to keep her close, the other just resting above the curve of her ass. He had never been quite so forward with his touch, afraid that she might balk; but as she eagerly pressed closer, her breasts flattening against him as she did, the movement jostled his hand and it slipped lower, inadvertently cupping one firm cheek.

She made a pleased sort of sound in the back of her throat, and Cullen’s heart soared. As politely as he could manage, he slid his other hand down to grip the other cheek, finding they fit perfectly in his palms. He gave her a hesitant squeeze, and was rewarded with a yes that was gasped out between stabs of tongue. Encouraged, he lifted her higher, forcing her to stand on tiptoe as he massaged and clutched at her ass.

They were both breathing hard as they devoured one another, teeth catching on lips and tongues wrestling hotly. His obvious arousal was trapped between them, pressed into the softness of her belly, but she didn’t seem to mind. On the contrary, she gave the smallest of rolls with her hips, which would’ve made his eyes roll back into his head if they’d been open. One of her hands was tangled in his hair, mussing his curls, the other sliding dangerously low to push up his shirt, seeking the hard planes of his abdomen underneath.

It was incredible, dangerous, desperate – and it was the dark undercurrent of desperation that alerted him, and gave Cullen the willpower to seize Sevanna and yank her away, holding her at a safe distance.
She made a surprised little noise at the abrupt end of their kiss; a noise that almost undid him, along with the bewilderment in her eyes that bordered on hurt, and the glistening of her swollen mouth.

“W-what?” she asked breathlessly.

Cullen shut his eyes, taking a slow breath. It felt serrated, catching on the rough edges of his throat. “We need to stop,” he said firmly, though the words were admittedly forced.

She blinked at him. Licked her lips. The hand in his hair trailed down the side of his face and neck, coming to rest directly over his thundering heart. “Maybe I don’t want to.”

A lesser man’s resolve would have gone up in smoke at that point, and Cullen couldn’t deny the temptation of giving in and chase euphoria with her. They could forget everything for a few moments, lose themselves in pleasure to forget what loomed just beyond that locked door – and that was precisely why Cullen did not relent. Because they would be doing this to forget, and not to become concrete; they would squander their first time by simply pursuing bliss in order to outrun darkness like birds that fled an encroaching storm. Because she had said maybe, and he wouldn’t take what couldn’t be given back when the only thing she was sure of was that she was in pain.

He also knew that he teetered at the very edge of his control, and if they pushed further he wouldn’t be able to stop, and everything he’d barely dared hope for would happen right here against the bookcase.

“We can’t,” he said hoarsely. “Not here. Not – not like this.”

She didn’t look away from him, but her expression became that of studious blankness, and Cullen knew she was trying to hide something from him.

“This,” he enunciated, making it clear he was referring to their inferno, “is you trying to forget. This is about today – about Alexius.”

She flinched ever so slightly. “I don’t – no.”

“Sevanna,” he said, cupping her cheek in one palm. “Don’t shut me out. Please.”

She rolled her pursed lips together, as if she were chewing on the words she was debating on saying out loud. “Did I do the right thing?” she finally blurted, the pain in them evident. “Because I’m so afraid that I didn’t.”

Cullen considered his answer carefully. He was not alone in thinking the second chance she’d given the Magister was one too many, but he knew it was not in her nature to be ruthless. That was one of the qualities he prized in her; that a soul so gentle had managed not to be maimed by the cruel, double-edged blade of sovereignty she’d been elected to wield.

“I think you did the best thing, given the situation,” he said. “There was no easy decision.”

She closed her eyes. “I wanted to kill him,” she said in a hollow voice. “A part of me still wants to. Should I have…?”

“No,” Cullen said swiftly. “No. And I’m glad you didn’t. I wouldn’t want to see you become - that sort of person.”

Like Vivienne, who brandished good grace as easily as a thunderbolt called down to level whoever stood in her way. Or like Leliana, who often decided blood trails were the best way of covering her
own tracks. Or like him, who had harboured such hatred for those who, by accident of birth, possessed what he so feared, and had cut them down for it whenever he could.

He did not ever want to see her become as despicable as him.

“Seeing him,” she said slowly, her eyes distant, “it was like being back…there. I just wanted him gone. I wanted him faraway so he c-couldn’t hurt you again, and I…” her voice cracked, and she shook her head. “But I couldn’t do it. And then Hawke came with the liquor and I…I just wanted to forget.”

Her voice had become small and plaintive, begging him to understand – and he did, he really did, because there had once been a time he found solace at the bottom of a bottle. Although alcohol had never really been his oblivion of choice; lyrium had always cast a haziness between memory and reality, swathed it like a wound in gauze, and been the barrier against a tormenting madness.

“I know,” he told her, and drew her close again. She hid her face in his neck, and he rubbed slow circles on her back. “I know.”

They stood like that for some time. All of Cullen’s previous arousal had dissipated; he was content to just hold and soothe her, and ensure he didn’t extinguish what had been breathed to life between them. Like a catching spark that lingered, birthed from a heat they hadn’t yet experienced; the first glow on the horizon that promised a blazing sun.

Sevanna’s lips moved against his neck. “It’s not…you didn’t stop because you don’t want…?”

“Maker,” he said weakly, almost tempted to laugh. She peeked up at him with trepidation, and he shook his head at her. “Don’t think it’s because I don’t – don’t want to,” he said huskily. “I do. But it’s been a long – I’ve never felt this way before, and if I did anything to ruin it I would never forgive myself -”

Sevanna silenced him with fingertips pressed against his lips. Her eyes were wet, but she smiled tremulously. “Okay,” she whispered, reaching to peck him chastely on the side of his mouth. “As long as it’s not because you are…uncertain.”

He shook his head. “Not of this. Not of you. But if I do ever seem…unsure, it’s because it’s been a long time since I’ve wanted anyone in my life.”

Her head tilted slightly, expression suddenly curious. “How long?”

He cleared his throat, feeling faintly embarrassed. This hadn’t been a turn he’d been expecting. “Does it really matter?”

“Cullen,” she said gently. “You don’t have to worry about sparing my feelings. We’ve both lived a fair amount of life before we met – it would be naïve of me to think there has been no one else.”

“There hasn’t,” he said truthfully. “Not like this.”

She gave him an indulgent smile, but was clearly waiting for him to continue. He let out a slow breath, and dropped his head back against the bookcase. This was something that would’ve come up eventually – for he had to admit his own curiosity about her former suitors, how many she’d had and if she’d ever loved them – but it didn’t make it any simpler to speak of.

“Ten years ago,” he said finally. “At Kinloch Hold. Her name was Solona Amell.”

Understanding dawned over Sevanna’s face. “She was a mage.”
“Yes,” he admitted; but, curiously, it no longer came with the familiar hot stab of guilt.

“Were you together?” she asked, without a trace of jealousy.

“Maker, no. Those sorts of relationships were forbidden with the mages.” He rubbed his neck, still experiencing that little squirm of embarrassment when he remembered just how painfully awkward he’d been, even after all these years. “Besides, it was totally one-sided. I could hardly string together a coherent sentence around her. It was utterly humiliating.”

To his endless gratitude, Sevanna didn’t laugh. Instead, she looked rather thoughtful. “My brother had a friend who I desperately fancied when I was eleven. He was five years older and thought me nothing more than a little girl, but once he complimented me on my eyes. I was so overwhelmed I tripped on a rug and fell flat on my face. I was so embarrassed, I was sure I would die of it.”

Cullen’s heart swelled so rapidly he thought he might float upwards. Of course she would know just what to say in the face of his own embarrassment, that she would share her own story of being mortified in front of a long-lost infatuation. That she understood, that she knew, and made herself equal to the blushing boy in Templar armor who didn’t know what to do with a pining heart, made Cullen’s chest flood with warmth. He kissed her, soft and slow.

“Your eyes are extraordinary,” he said when he drew back.

“If you’re trying to fluster me,” she said airily, “it won’t work. I have learned to control all my adolescent dithering, so you won’t be seeing me trip over something anytime soon.” She traced his jaw with her fingertips, her amusement subsiding. “Where is Solona now?”

He swallowed a little dryly. “Dead. She was one of many killed when Uldred seized the Tower.”

Sevanna’s face fell. “Oh Cullen, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean -”

“It’s alright,” he said, and meant it. It seemed less painful to speak of it in the circle of her arms, standing in the dusty place where they’d shared so much. It felt as if all their pains, no matter how old or enormous, could be spoken here without the sting of a whip at their tails; and this pain was so very old already, and he wanted to be free of it.

“Whatever I felt for Solona before,” he continued slowly, touching Sevanna’s cheek, “I have not felt for a very long time. When I was in the Tower, the demons –” he swallowed hard, ”- when they tortured me, they wore her face.”

Sevanna made a sad little noise, heartbreak given voice, but for some reason it was like a balm to the jagged wounds in Cullen’s soul.

“To have my feelings used against me…” he went on. “It soured them, made me bitter. I was angry at Solona for a long time afterward, even though it was misdirected, and I…well, I didn’t think I was capable of feeling that way ever again.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Hawke.”

Something passed over Sevanna’s face, as fleeting as a dragonfly over water. “So you and Hawke, you were…?”

All too late Cullen realized how it’d sounded, and he recognized the would-be casual note in Sevanna’s voice. “Maker’s breath - no!” he said fervently. “No, nothing like that at all. That is –
what I meant, seeing Hawke in Kirkwall, and how fiercely she protected the ones she loved even while she held them at arm’s length… it made me realize I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to hold the world at a distance for fear of getting hurt. I didn’t want to be angry anymore. Seeing how she cut herself off from those who could have been more, I realized…I didn’t want to be alone.”

It was like ripping a throttling weed from its roots; never before had he admitted out loud how angry he’d been at Solona, how he had made himself cold and desolate before anyone else could render him so – at least he could be in control of his own misery, or could keep himself immune to it by the blindness of servitude and obedience. Though Cassandra had offered the hand that’d pulled him from a web of chains and darkness, it was Hawke who had given him the keys to unlock them in the first place; because as much as he respected Marian Hawke, he did not want to end up like her.

Sevanna was smiling, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears again. “Well then,” she whispered, “maybe I need to send her a fruit basket as thanks.”

Cullen actually groaned. “Please don’t. I’d never live it down if she knew she – she’d gotten to me.”

She laughed, low and husky, tracing his scar with one finger. “It’s a high price to ensure my silence, Commander.”

The corner of his mouth curled in a smirk. Keeping his grip on her, he spun them around so that she was trapped between the bookcase and his body; he skimmed his hands along her arms to her wrists and lifted them above her head, pinning them with a gentle grip. He watched her carefully, vigilant for any sign of unease or discomfort; but her eyes were smouldering, pupils blown wide, and her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

“Accept this as my first payment, my Lady,” he rumbled, and bent his head to kiss her. He kept it soft; brief slants of his mouth on hers, tugging at her lips without breaching them. She tried to coax him deeper with silent supplication, but he abandoned her mouth to brush his lips over her cheeks, eyes, and jaw. He necklaced her throat with wet, open-mouthed kisses, careful, as always, not to mark the tender flesh and announce to everyone exactly what they’d been up to.

“Oh,” she sighed, and he placed one final kiss to her pulse point, savouring its frantic flutter beneath his lips.

He released her wrists and touched his forehead to hers. Her hands came down to loop around his neck, and she rubbed their noses together.

“There’s still time to get some work done,” she murmured. “Perhaps we can even finish tonight.”

Cullen’s insides shrivelled slightly at the thought. He didn’t want to give up this room just yet. They had learned how to leave their titles at the door, a feat he wasn’t sure would be so seamless elsewhere. “Or,” he suggested idly, “We could leave that for another time.”

“But we’re so close.”

“Exactly.”

She pulled back to look at him fully, and he wasn’t quick enough to smooth his expression.

“Cullen,” she said, with a hint of exasperation. “We don’t stop here.”

His mouth twisted in a half-smile. “I know. But it…it’s so easy here, and it’s ours. When we’re
here, it’s like nothing beyond that door matters. And I…I don’t want to give that up. Not yet.”

Sevanna was staring at him, her face unreadable; then it split into a wide smile. She reached one hand above her head, blindly groping along the shelf until she, deliberately, knocked a book to the floor. It landed with a thud, and she smiled serenely.

“Oops.”

She was reaching for another one when he realized what she was doing. Grinning, he reached overhead too, pulling down books at random so they fell to the floor with a muffled commotion. Sevanna was laughing, as they rapidly deconstructed the book shelf until its contents were spread across the floor in a dusty heap, loose papers twirling in the disrupted air. They knocked over unlit candles and disturbed neatly arranged dust piles until they were doubled over, breathless with laughter, ankle-deep in books with dust settling into their hair.

As they leaned up against the empty shelves still howling with laughter, limbs tangled in a mutual effort to remain upright, Cullen realized something, the profundity of which taking away what little breath he had left. It may have been in the War Room where he had grown to respect Sevanna, and in Haven where he admired her, and in the mountain that he knew he valued her – but it was here, in a dusty relic of a room buried deep within Skyhold, that he had fallen in love with her.

As luck would have it, Sevanna’s trip to the Approach was delayed. The next morning had messages of a high Grey Warden presence still in Orlais, combing the land for Stroud. Thusly, his and Hawke’s departure was put off until the following week, much to their agitation. Stroud was clearly keen to move on and investigate, and Hawke was much too fiery to remain static for so long.

Cullen didn't get another week to enjoy Sevanna's company, however; that very afternoon, she and Dorian had taken off to Redcliffe where, rumor had it, he'd been summoned. She had used her best Inquisitor voice when Cassandra had opposed them going, telling the Seeker that in no uncertain terms that it was a matter they could ignore. That only spurred Cassandra into insisting she go along as well to ensure they did not dawdle; and curiously, Bull went along with them. Cullen had never seen the qunari and Tevinter trade more than barbed remarks, any indication of a friendly relationship near negligible; but he felt better for Bull going, seeing as Sevanna had refused an official Inquisition escort. Cassandra was nearly enough to scare anything off in a quarter-mile radius - but Bull guaranteed at least three.

Given that Sevanna would be absent for the next several days, Cullen decided to take advantage and leave Skyhold as well. Sera had been after the Council - him especially, since she knew he hadn't the patience for being bothered - to march the Inquisition through Verchiel. A land squabble between nobles was beginning to affect the more common population and Sera, in her never ending crusade for "the little people", had been bugging them all to throw some weight around. Cullen had finally agreed just to be left alone, but figured now would be the best time to organise a march through the city with him leading the front, and get Sera off his back once and for all.

He selected forty of his best trained soldiers, and set out to Verchiel. It would be about a six day trip, provided there was little to hold them up in the Orlesian city, and Cullen was hoping for some time to spare in order to peruse some of the shops.

There was no denying he and Sevanna were the Inquisition's worst kept secret (kissing her atop the battlements had not been a strategic location for keeping their relationship under wraps), but Cullen hadn't cared that they were the newest gossip fodder until certain elements of their courtship came
under scrutiny - or more accurately, lack thereof. Whispers beneath masks followed him through Skyhold, sounding completely flabbergasted that there had been no formal announcement, nor some public declaration of love; the fact that he had made no grand statement of his affection by filling the keep with flowers or shouting love ballads from the parapets had many a noble wondering aloud of his true intentions, or if he was really as uncultured as they'd always believed of Fereldans.

All of that would have been bad enough if Josephine hadn't noticed as well, and the Ambassador was perhaps the most vocal of all. Cullen was constantly receiving little notes suggesting books of poetry, examples of calligraphy he could use in love letters to Sevanna, or the names of florists he could order from in Val Royeaux. She had also taken to loudly discussing the Inquisitor's favorite flowers with any party she could get to stand still long enough for such a conversation, or giving Cullen withering yet meaningful looks whenever she saw him and Sevanna together. Amusing as it was, he largely ignored her; if Josephine thought he would recite poetry, whether in private or before an audience, then she was sorely mistaken.

It was not that he didn't want to properly court Sevanna, but he wanted to do it his way. He preferred to show her with earnest kisses rather than showering her in gifts. She was much too practical for all that drivel, and would consider presentations of flowers or poems about as useful as a rainbow. Cullen wanted to get her something, but not because tradition dictated so. When he had been up in her quarters while she recovered from her fever, he had noticed they'd been rather...bare. While full of books, rich rugs and handsome furniture, there was a certain impersonal coldness to it, no flair that spoke of the woman who inhabited it. Cullen had realized she must not have brought much from Ostwick, as one could hardly bring an entire life along when they meant to flee it, and whatever little she had carried with her might have been lost in the Temple's explosion or in Haven's burial. He wanted to get her something she could keep and call her own, something that belonged solely to her and hadn't just received because she was the Inquisitor.

To his fair surprise, Verchiel was not a total waste of time. The people had looked distinctly downtrodden, with a general air of weariness that faded into curiosity when Cullen and his troops marched through. They established an outpost that drew in recruits, noble envoys and the simply inquisitive by early afternoon, leaving Cullen time to slip away and wander through the market district.

After an hour, he had no more ideas than when he'd first dreamed up this endeavour. Merchants that usually catered to gentry didn't have the practical wares he was used to seeing at Skyhold. No, here there were stalls upon stalls heaped with rich fabrics, vials of exotic perfumes and pots of cosmetics, creating a riot of color and smells that was giving him a headache. Lining the narrow street were dimly-lit shops, their windows boasting beautifully crafted displays of books, antiques, jewels, dresses and shoes. He caught snippets of invitations to enter or approach the stalls, calls of monsieur and promised low pricing, the jingle of coins and haggling customers. But he didn't know Sevanna's shoe size, if she preferred gold or silverite, what books she liked, nor her measurements for clothing. And Josephine had loudly reiterated many times that one never bought a woman's clothing when unsure of their size, for fear of offence. So, when nothing caught his interest among the stalls, Cullen decided to give the shops a try. He flitted in and out of so many he lost count, including one that sold armor made of solid gold; another so full of large and decorative weapons Cullen rather thought the shopkeeper was compensating for something; and another that contained many suggestive scraps of lace and silk, which had him leaving red-faced and stammering within seconds of entering.

He was just tiredly coming to the conclusion that there was nothing suitable to be found, and he might just have to go with flowers after all, when he came upon the shop at the end of the street. It was small and unassuming, with a sign written in a florid hand that he couldn't decipher; but the
window exhibited a glittering array of knives resting on pillows, and Cullen decided to try one last shop.

He had difficulty manoeuvring in the cramped space, but it seemed promising. There was a rich display of jeweled arrowheads, ornate bows and countless daggers ranging from plain to the exquisite. A shop for a rogue - perfect. Cullen began carefully examining the walls and shelves, waiting for the perfect dagger to catch his eye. There were many fantastic ones, but some were so elaborate they bordered on impractical. Like the twin blades with gorgeously crafted handles that would imitate unfolding wings when strapped to one's back; or the dangerously curved knife that resembled a dragon, complete with emeralds for the eyes. Cullen had nearly settled on a handsome yet undecorated set of serrated daggers, when his eyes fell on the glass case in the middle of the room.

There, laid on a pillow of deepest blue so that it looked like a falling star against twilight, was a slender blade roughly the length of Cullen's forearm. It was so highly polished it resembled a mirror, tapering to dangerous point as thin as an awl and reflecting back the candlelight that illuminated the shop. Its guard evoked the outstretched wings of a bird, gracefully swooped and inlaid with tiny diamonds so that it glittered. The handle was wrapped in snow-white leather, the pommel shaped like a rose freshly bloomed.

It was a blade meant to be concealed, kept hidden until an enemy was close enough to be put through the ribs. But given its sophistication, Cullen knew this particular creation would not be stowed in some secret scabbard; and here in Verchiel, it was unlikely to ever be more than an overwrought letter opener.

It was equal parts beauty and deadliness - just like Sevanna, and without so much as checking the tag, Cullen bought it.

The shopkeeper positively fawned over his purchase, but given that he seemed to know exactly who Cullen was without asking gave the impression he would've been as equally enthusiastic if Cullen had bought a coat rack. As it was, he left the shop feeling rather pleased with himself, the knife now carefully nestled in a wooden, silk-lined box and tied with a ribbon.

The journey back to Skyhold was uneventful, but Cullen's nerves grew with every passing mile. The box, which was really quite light, seemed to become much heavier as the old doubts crept in. Would Sevanna like it? Would she appreciate the act of gift-giving itself, or would she simply find it strange? Their relationship was in its infancy after all, and by official standards could hardly be considered a courtship; perhaps he should have started small, with flowers and notes, perhaps they should not have spent all those hours wrapped up together before...before what? Discussing the intents of such a relationship? Expectations, consequence? He'd never even paused to consider what might happen if things between them went badly. How could he serve as her commander when he'd come to know her beyond that, and how could he remain steadfast and separate when he was sure, with every beat of his repaired heart, that he loved her?

Mounting dread made the hours slip past like fish darting in a stream, sliding through his fingers as he tried, with no avail, to calm the sense of panic that was unfolding within him. He was eager to see Sevanna, that was true, but was also beginning to regret buying anything at all, as it was wholly possible it would prompt a dozen conversations he didn't want to have. He'd just wanted to show his appreciation for her, compress his admiration into the form of a beautifully crafted gift; but what if, that old voice of uncertainty whispered to him, she was used to far more opulent offerings, as she had once been the sought-after daughter in an illustrious family?

Skyhold didn't bring the rush of excitement and relief as he thought it would when he'd originally
left; instead, there was a hot surge of nausea and apprehension in his throat. It was late in the afternoon by the time he was handing his horse off to Dennet, who mentioned the Inquisitor had already returned in an offhand sort of way. That kicked his pulse into a violent upswing, and he was seized by the ferocious desire to find her and kiss her until all his misgivings melted away; yet he dawdled in the courtyard, contemplating taking a bath. Days of travel had him smelling strongly of horse, dust and sweat, but bathing would put off the very thing he was dreading - never mind that he wanted to see Sevanna without smelling like he'd just rolled around in a stable.

But before he could escape to a session of cowardly bathing, the crunch of an apple came from directly behind him. Startling slightly, he turned to find Dorian and Bull, both wearing a smirk and the mage cradling a half-eaten apple.

"Beat you," Bull said smugly, as if they'd been in a race back to Skyhold.

"Right," Cullen said vaguely, barely sparing a curious thought as to why Bull and Dorian suddenly seemed much chummier than before.

Dorian rolled his eyes. "How nice to see you, Dorian! How was your trip? So glad to see you haven't been carted off back to Tevinter." He waved the hand holding the apple in the direction of Sevanna's lofty quarters. "She's up there, in case you were wondering - doing reports as per the Seeker's punishment for skipping off to Redcliffe with dastardly old me."

Abandoning all ideas of avoidance, and deciding to face this like facing the task of ripping a barbed thorn from one's flesh, Cullen decided to just get it over with. With a mumble that could have been interpreted as thanks or farewell, he set off towards the main keep with a determined stride, ignoring Dorian calling after him: "Marvelous chat, Commander! Let's do it again sometime!"

He tried to keep his pace business-like and purposeful, but in his nervousness Cullen rather feared he was storming through the keep instead; that explained the many jumping and scrambling of alarmed people from his path. It helped, though; at least no one bothered him when he walked like a man intent on murder, made slightly ridiculous with a beribboned package in his hands. That agent, Jim, practically dove off the stairs when Cullen stalked past him.

Altogether too soon he was pushing into the lower part of Sevanna's quarters. The door at the far end was slightly ajar; he knocked and upon hearing the distant "Come in", steeled himself and entered. He could just make out the scratching of a quill as he ascended the stairs; the large room was illuminated by the late afternoon light, the piping of birdsong filtering through the open windows. The fire blazing in the grate kept the room from becoming too chill, and in the far corner - his heart stuttered and swelled at the sight - Sevanna was seated at her desk, poring over a stack of vellum and chewing her lip. She didn't look up right away and he paused at the top of the stairs, staring at how the light picked out the gold in her hair, his eyes traveling hotly over the line of her neck to the expanse of white skin the neckline of her dress showed.

Then she looked up, her whole face brightening when she saw him. "Cullen!"

She leapt from her desk and met him halfway across the room, deft hands sliding up into his hair to yank him down for a kiss. He responded eagerly, clutching her tightly and already missing the softness of her against him - he was used to holding her without his armor on.

She hugged him tight, breaking the kiss to bury her face in his neck and took a shuddering breath. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," he said roughly, hoping she wasn't breathing too deeply. "I'm sorry, I probably
smell terrible -"

She laughed, her hair tickling his nose as she shook her head. "You smell like you. It's wonderful."

"Oh - good." That was one fear laid to rest, then. He tilted her chin up so he could kiss her again, sweeping his tongue along her lower lip to sample the taste he'd been foolishly afraid he might forget. She sighed softly with a delicate parting of her lips, and he pressed deeper, showing her with teeth and tongue just how much he'd missed her - and to ignore the sudden, devilish thought that there was an empty bed right there.

Her glazed eyes and drunken smile when they parted gave him a fresh burst of courage, and he withdrew his arm from around her to present the package. "I brought you something."

She made a surprised little noise, her eyes bright with interest as she traced the edges with her fingers. "What is it?"

He chuckled. "It's a gift - you have to open it to find out."

Her hands stilled and suddenly withdrew, her face becoming anxious. "But I didn't get you anything."

Much of his remaining trepidation evaporated at the distress in her voice. He took her by the hand, and (with a great will of effort, mind you) pulled her towards the couch before the fireplace, and away from the very tempting bed.

"I didn't get you this just to receive something in return," he said as they settled themselves down. He sat slightly angled toward her, so that their knees were pressed together. He placed the gift gently in her lap. "I bought it for you because I'm supposed - well, not because I had to, but because I wanted to - and I should get you, I mean, court you properly with - Maker's breath," he muttered, rubbing his neck. "I'm terrible at this."

But Sevanna's face was shining as she traced the ribbons with a finger. "I've never gotten a present before."

That caught him off guard. "You haven't? But what about your suitors?"

She rolled her eyes. "Courting among nobles is a very different affair. Most of my suitor's gifts were meant for my parents - bolts of silk, hunting dogs, ladies-in-waiting, that sort of nonsense. I suppose my gift was the promise of such an illustrious marriage." Her tone was thoroughly unimpressed, making Cullen once again thankful he had fallen for the noble who was disenchanted with that life. "But never once have I received a gift intended for me, and I..." She bit her lip, looking shy. "Thank you, Cullen."

He placed his hand on her knee, drawing a slow breath. "Don't thank me till you've opened it."

She smiled, and positively wiggled with excitement as she ran her fingers over the box again. To his delight, he realized she was savoring it - before she yanked on the ribbon, her enthusiasm getting the best of her as she hurriedly pushed the lid open.

And there it was, looking like a slash of starlight on dark blue silk. Sevanna gasped when she saw it, one hand flying to her mouth. She stared down at it in stunned silence for so long that Cullen began to fidget.

"Er - do you like it?" he prodded hopefully.
"Cullen, it's beautiful," she breathed, lowering her hand to speak. Before the relief had completely exploded within him she was leaning forward and pulling him down for a blistering kiss that felt as though it would peel the very flesh from his bones. He smiled dazedly when she released him, keeping one hand on his cheek as she lifted the knife from its silken bed. It sent prisms of light dancing over the walls and floor; he watched one waver upon her awed face, a hunger beginning to gnaw within him.

"Oh, Cullen." She repeated his name with the same breathless reverence, and he knew, as the last of his doubt drained away, that he had picked the perfect gift. "It's exquisite - wherever did you find it?"

"In Verchiel," he explained, capturing the hand on his cheek to drag over his lips. "I saw it, and I thought of you. Beauty belongs with beauty."

She lowered the dagger once more, her eyes suddenly watery. "You beautiful man," she whispered. She shifted the box from her lap, scooting closer so she could lean into him; he curled his arm around her waist, hoisting her up so she was half-sprawled over his chest. He tucked the hair behind her ear just before she kissed him hungrily, forcing his lips apart so she could slip her tongue alongside his.

It was a kiss to be dreamt about - a kiss that would launch a thousand ships, a kiss that could lure a man across a raging battlefield. It possessed an intensity they had not yet breached, a feat Cullen had thought was impossible since that last night in the library. But here they were, Sevanna sliding up his body to straddle his lap, her hands burrowing and tugging at his furs as if she meant to rip them off. Unable to help himself, he had gripped her ass again, bringing her flush against him as he drowned in her mouth, making the desperate sounds of a man who had just been set aflame.

It was a kiss that made him want to beg - for her love, her taste, her body. It was a kiss that made him want to lay himself bare, place those vulnerable pieces of himself in her hands and beg her to do what she willed - for she owned his heart, utterly and without doubt, as surely as if she cracked open his chest and scooped it out herself.

"Come away with me," he gasped out.

Though they were not the words he truly wished to say - I love you, make love to me - they had her pausing all the same; she drew back from him, her brows drawing together even as she tried to catch her breath. "What?"

He couldn't help the blush that rose into his neck and face. "Come away with me."

"But I - where?"

"We have dealings in Ferelden that need attending." The words spilled forth without forethought, and it was not until now Cullen realized he had been planning this in the back of his mind, in the idle hopes he could steal her away for himself. "It isn't necessary for me to go, but it's close to where I grew up - and I thought - you might like to get away for a while, before you leave -"

It was a blatant plea, and a selfish one; he fully expected her to refuse, and chastise him for even entertaining the thought when she was due to leave and save the world any day.

But she didn't - instead, she bit her lip and looked at a loss, her fingers still curled tightly against his scalp. "I want to," she murmured, inflating his hopes again. "I really do - but I have to leave soon. Stroud and Hawke left yesterday, and I - oh, sod it!"
He raised his eyebrows as she reared back, though she remained in his lap, looking thoughtful. "We're supposed to give them a week's head start anyways - could there really be any harm in running away for a few days?"

His heart swelled until it felt too big for his chest. "So you - want to?"

She rolled her eyes at him playfully. "Yes. I really do, Cullen. But we can't just go running off without permission - we'll need to clear it with the rest of the council."

It made it seem like they were two teenagers who didn't want to be caught sneaking around. "We have to ask Cassandra, you mean."

She nodded grimly, and Cullen rather thought he'd prefer facing down a dragon, armed with only a toothpick.

"I'll make you a deal," Sevanna said a low voice. Cullen tried not to think it as seductive, but Maker, the way she was arching her body against him and trailing her fingertip along his jaw gave all evidence to the contrary. She leaned in to hover her lips by his ear, sending warm breath fanning over his neck. "If you get permission from Cassandra, I'll go wherever you want me to."

His thoughts immediately jumped to the bed standing mere feet away; he could probably toss her from here if he was so inclined.

But he decided to rein those devious thoughts back, eager to play out this game of tension they had between them, content to wait until she was absolutely clear. Instead, he tugged aside the hem of her dress to run his teeth along her shoulder, intent on marking her where no one could see.

"Deal," he whispered back.
Unsurprisingly, getting Cassandra’s approval to leave Skyhold was about as difficult as pulling teeth from a fire-breathing dragon. Cullen found her in the War Room with Leliana, discussing outpost establishments across Orlais. He went alone; Sevanna chose to remain behind and slog on with her reports, in the meager hopes Cassandra would be softened by her diligence in serving her punishment. Yet, her staunch refusal had come before Cullen even finished his sentence, her eyes flashing dangerously as her arms folded across her chest; which, predictably, raised his ire.

It was an argument for the ages. It spiralled out of control very quickly, until their bickering had reached such a volume that Josephine poked her head in to investigate the source of commotion. Cassandra accused him of ‘gallivanting off on a lover’s retreat’, which he vehemently denied, but was contradicted by his darkened cheeks. He defended that the trip was not a waste of time and launched into a formal-sounding speech about responsibilities to the Inquisition and those who asked for its aid, which was cut short by Cassandra’s even louder rebuttal that he was acting like a spoiled child.

It was Leliana who finally intervened. “Just let them go, Cassandra,” she said, throwing up her hands in impatience. “The longer you argue with him is just more time wasted.”

Josephine was the only other party who seemed pleased by this development, serving to make Cullen’s smugness rather short-lived when she worked up an excitement about the excellent opportunities for the rural public to see the Inquisitor walk in their midst.

“The people will be able to see first-hand her dedication to their welfare,” she said enthusiastically, scribbling on her writing board, which Cullen did not doubt was a list of places they could make an appearance in along the way. It seemed that stealing Sevanna away for himself for a few days under the pretense of work was rapidly being foiled. “The timing is good as well, as the new
carriages from Orlais have finally arrived. You will travel in style and comfort, Commander, and perhaps we should consider an updated uniform as well....” She began to circle him like a shark around chum, lifting a hank of his furs with the end of her quill. “These are beginning to look...worn.”

“That’s because I wear them,” he said testily, pushing her hand away, but Cassandra fought that battle for him.

“There is no time for new uniforms,” she said sourly. “The Commander will make do with what he owns. He and the Inquisitor will leave tomorrow, at dawn.”

“So soon?” Josephine asked, her eyes going round.

“We’ll be back in a week,” said Cullen. “That’ll give us plenty of time to -”

But Cassandra was shaking her head. “Five days,” she said firmly. “We can spare no longer than that. The situation in the Approach is growing more unstable, and it will take at least two weeks to travel there.”

Cullen decided not to push it. “Fine. Five days. As you wish.”

With a haughty roll of her eyes, Cassandra departed, which meant he was victorious. He felt it, too, despite Josephine muttering ominously under her breath about banners and envoys. Leliana just looked mildly amused.

“You seem to have a death wish, Commander,” she said lightly, before following in Cassandra’s wake.

That was fine. Cassandra could kill him when he came back – but he would get his five days first.

He stopped by Sevanna’s quarters to tell her they were leaving on the morrow, and for several more stolen kisses (all the more sweeter on the tail of triumph), before returning to his own office. He had a lot to do before leaving in the morning, and was hoping to leave the Seeker behind in a far better mood; he didn’t particularly want to send Sevanna on a two-week trip afterwards when she was so aggravated with them.

It took working late into the night, but Cullen reached the bottom of his reports. He managed to cobble an itinerary and a contingent of soldiers that could escort them on such short notice, before climbing to his loft to collapse into bed. Far too soon, and yet not soon enough, the sky beyond his ragged roof turned pale and the birds heralded the dawn. The freezing rainwater with which he washed himself served to be an efficient way to wake up, though his flesh reheated itself eagerly as he anticipated the days to come, and how they might just be spent.

They were going on official business, of course, but Cullen couldn’t keep his mind away from the forbidden; thoughts of firelight on canvas, of bodies pressed together to ward off the night’s chill. He thought of how he and Sevanna would finally be far away from curious eyes, shielded by distance, leaving what lay vulnerable between them free to flourish and bloom.

There were matters of a more...intimate nature that they hadn’t yet addressed, not since the night in the library when he halted her inebriated advances. He didn’t regret it, because it was something to be cherished, and not expended in a place of dust and spiders; but it had cracked open the inevitable, leaving a lingering awkwardness as their bodies danced around that which they hadn’t spoken of aloud.

Cullen wanted her – of that there was no doubt. He wanted Sevanna as badly as a desert did rain,
his aching need a parched and burning thing, rendering him a little more desolate every day he did not know her touch, her taste, her body. He wanted to know her pleasure song, wanted to hear his name in her voice made hoarse by carnal ecstasy. Oh, and to think of it, her pleasure…of unwinding her to quivering pieces with his fingers – or Blessed Maker, his mouth – made his cock twitch at the thought, his tongue thirsting for a taste it did not yet know. Such fantasies had been nestling in the back of his mind, peeking from beyond the gauzy veil of his control, patiently waiting to be acknowledged. They infused his dreams with his secret longings, filling his nights with hot, hazy visions and beginning his mornings with damp sheets.

Desire had whispered in his ear before, in a voice of ash and ruin, but this was different. This was no dark promise, no lustful carnage that threatened to consume him and burn his very heart out. This was resurrection; the reconstruction of a man who’d spent far too many years of his life struggling to hold himself together for fear that the shadows were always waiting, biding their time until he slipped, faltered, failed, and they could break him from the inside out.

The vague promise of what the following days might hold set Cullen’s blood to boil. He reined in his eagerness as best he could – abated only slightly since he had taken himself by hand the night before – because he didn’t want to create some sort of expectation that had been previously absent, and exert a pressure on Sevanna that she might not be ready to address.

He packed his travel things into a small chest and pulled on his armor, though he did use a little less care with his hair than usual, as he hoped the half-formed thoughts of Sevanna’s fingers raking through it would make such a task unnecessary. He descended to his office, dashing off a list of instructions to Rylen that he left in an envelope on his desk, and made his way to the courtyard. A slumbering silence laid over Skyhold in the lavender dawn, broken only by the sound of Dennet hitching his horses to the carriages that waited. They were not as horrible as Cullen feared; knowing Josephine, he had expected some sumptuous contraptions that resembled lacquered, decorative pumpkins. These however, were quite elegant, with flared corners like a ship’s prow and squatting on golden wheels. They were entirely black, save for the scalloped edges of gilt. The door was embossed with the symbol of the Inquisition and hung open, revealing a handsome dark red interior. The assembly of soldiers was already present; as was Cassandra, who was closely examining the wheels as if looking for some tiny flaw. As Cullen approached her, she straightened up and crossed her arms with a scowl.

“They are…adequate,” she said, which told him she rather liked them.

Faint voices reached his ears, and he turned to see Sevanna descending the stairs with Josephine. Cullen’s heart leapt into his throat as they drew near, and he stared with abandon. Sevanna’s hair was neatly braided over one shoulder and she was wearing a new outfit, the likes of which Cullen had never seen on her before: tight, charcoal pants tucked into knee-high boots with a dazzling array of golden buckles; a sash the color of fresh blood wrapped around her waist, the mark of the Inquisition slung low on her hips by heavy gold links; a long jacket as black as night, hemmed with golden thread and ending in dangerous-looking gauntlets. The cut was severe, each angle sharp and demanding, drawing the eye like a deadly arrow nocked straight at your heart. The effect was intimidating, but that was not what had spiked Cullen’s pulse.

It was because it was very, very tight.

“No, Josie,” Sevanna was saying, snapping Cullen’s attention from the sway of her hips to her face. She was pushing something that glinted back towards the Ambassador, who promptly offered it again with the barely concealed air of an impatient older sister.

“It completes the ensemble, Inquisitor,” she said superiorly. “It makes you easy to identify -”
“It makes me look like a snob.”

“It is sophisticated,” Josephine countered, beginning to sound a little hurt. “And will look so lovely with your hair.”

Cassandra, who apparently didn’t want to hear more frivolous, girlish reasoning, said menacingly, “You will wear what Lady Montilyet tells you to, Inquisitor, or you will not be accompanying the Commander on his trip.”

Giving the older woman a sour look akin to one an aggrieved daughter bestows on her mother, Sevanna plucked the item from Josephine’s hands and crammed it on her head. It was a crown – an elaborate circlet crafted of heavy gold and ornately shaped, once again, as the symbol of the Inquisition.

Josephine looked delighted, while Cassandra’s expression became much more understanding. Sevanna gave Cullen a swift look of warning, as if she’d sensed the snort that had built up in his throat.

He coughed instead. “That’s, ah – very nice, Josephine.”

She made a sound of approval. “Isn’t it?” She reached forward to adjust it on Sevanna’s head, as it was sitting rather askew. “I had this outfit custom made in Orlais, to be worn on your more official business journeys.”

Sevanna made what was clearly a pained attempt at a smile. “You shouldn’t have.”

Cullen smothered this snort with another cough, catching the spark of amusement in Sevanna’s eyes as she kissed Josephine on the cheek in farewell. The Ambassador handed her a small covered basket, before catching Cullen in a fleeting hug, which made him suspect she was, in a way, just as eager for this trip as he. Cassandra gave them both grim nods and held the door to the carriage open for them as the soldiers piled into the two behind. Cullen helped Sevanna in, covertly sweeping his gaze over the curve of her ass as she ducked inside, before following her and settling on the seat opposite. Cassandra stuck her head in to give them both a baleful glare.

“Do not delay,” she said sternly, then withdrew, closing the door with a snap.

Cullen blew out a breath, and smiled at Sevanna. “Good morning.”

Her eyes were blue with tiredness, but her returning smile was radiant. “Good morning.”

She leaned forward to brush her lips over his for one brief, scorching moment, before scooting closer to the little window set in the door and wiggling her fingers against it. Cullen just glimpsed Josephine waving back as the carriage jolted forward, bumping over the uneven courtyard and onto the bridge. He studied Sevanna as she watched the world slip past beyond the window; down the slope towards the lower camps, and through the forest of tents that were lightly dusted with snow. Her eyes never left the bit of Skyhold that was still in sight, growing ever smaller on the horizon; he wondered if she always watched it disappear like this when she left, her face turned towards home before it vanished from view, cupped in the mountains like a gemstone in a palm. Then Skyhold was gone, between one blink and the next.

Quick as a whip, she snatched the circlet off her head and opened the door, tossing it into the thick brambles that lined the mountain road. She latched the door shut again, turning primly towards Cullen, who was watching with his eyebrows raised.

“If Josephine asks, it fell into a Rift,” she said serenely, and his laughter carried them to the base of
Skyhold’s mountain.

The covered basket turned out to contain flasks of hot tea and hearty biscuits with nuts and raisins. Sevanna had twitched the curtains over the window shut (much to the swooping in Cullen’s abdomen) and slid onto the seat next to him, so they were pressed hip to hip as they ate their breakfast. She kept stealing his raisins from his share when he wasn’t looking, and when he caught her popping one into her mouth he pursued it with his own, sliding his tongue along hers to steal the morsel back. Which, as he had hoped, lead to their breakfast becoming quite forgotten.

When they finally parted to catch their breath the window had fogged over. She tucked her feet up next to her and leaned into him, her head pillowed on the fur of his mantle. He pressed another kiss to her crown, breathing in the fragrance of her soap as she tried to stifle a yawn.

“Sleep,” he murmured into her hair, sliding his arm around her waist to steady her from the carriage’s jostling. “We won’t be stopping for another few hours.”

“I’m not very good company, am I?” she said regretfully, but she was already nestling closer, one hand coming up to absentmindedly wind its fingers into his furs.

He laid his own hand over hers and squeezed. “I would have no other,” he said quietly, and she hummed contentedly in response.

Much of the morning was spent like that, with Sevanna tucked against his side, asleep. He was content to tip his head back and relax, never fully drifting off but allowing himself to fall into daydream, a feat easily accomplished with the warm weight of the woman who inhabited them pressed into his side. Easy, to fantasize of their entwined bodies when he was enveloped in her scent; easy, when his fingers played over the curve of her waist and hip, knowing the flesh beneath her tough gear would be soft in his grip, indenting her flesh with each digit as he tested its tenderness; easy to wonder if he would leave bruises behind, like marks in the white flesh of an apple.

He spent the next hour reading the reports he’d brought along with him, in the attempt to stifle the state of arousal he was working himself into.

It was early afternoon that they had their first stop, at an Inquisition camp at the foot of the Frostbacks. Here they watered their horses and stepped from the carriages to stretch their legs; Cullen watched with a heated gaze as Sevanna lifted her arms above her head and arched her back, and burned to know the feel of her flesh tautening when she moved like that. Then they were back in the carriages, heading south as the land shifted from a coarse plain to farmlands.

He and Sevanna talked idly as the day wore on, their conversation never ceasing like the playing of her fingers in his hair. They traded gossip like giggling children; she telling him of the game of flirtation between Dorian and Bull, who’d been circling each other like hungry birds of prey in the last few days, and he of the flowers that had suddenly appeared on Josephine’s desk, serving to make her go pink when he’d asked her about them. Sevanna also confided in him the reason for her sudden trip to Redcliffe, recalling how Dorian’s father had been waiting for them with the demand his son return home, and the bitterness of their friend when he revealed his father had once tried to change his preference for men with blood magic. It was then that Cullen truly understood what Alexius had meant to Dorian – a father who would rather burn down the world to save his son, as opposed to one who would try to alter him, like grinding down a sword with a faulty edge.

They reached the second camp in the late evening, where they were to bunk down for the night. It was a fairly large encampment, with roughly forty soldiers who helped guard the roads between the many small villages. They seemed delighted to have the Inquisitor in their midst, and they all
spent an entertaining evening listening with rapt attention as Sevanna shared tale after tale of her adventures, getting them all laughing with the antics of Bull and Sera, of Cassandra and Varric’s bickering. Cullen knew she was enjoying herself, as he followed her dancing hands as she mimed out her tales, her eyes meeting his frequently over the fire with a smile, that he knew, was just for him.

Unfortunately, any plans of getting a tent for just the two of them was thwarted; Sevanna was eagerly offered a space in a tent with some female officers (who had been shooting glances between her and Cullen all evening, and giggling behind their hands), leaving him to take the lodgings offered by the commanding officer. He lay awake a long while, wondering if she was as disappointed as he, and if she was lying awake, missing him too.

They were up early the following dawn to continue their journey. Sevanna spent much of the morning dozing in the carriage once more, with her legs laying over Cullen’s lap so that she curled against his side, her head in the crook of his neck. This made it incredibly difficult for him to concentrate on his work, as every tiny bounce of the carriage had the outside of her thigh bumping against his groin, sending ripples of heat through him like pebbles tossed into a pond. He was of a half-mind to kiss and nuzzle her neck until she woke, so he could pull her astride his lap and –

Well, he hadn’t gotten that far when the carriage jolted to a halt, jostling Sevanna awake. Cullen could hear the soldiers in the following carriages clamber out of them, their shouts blurring together so they were indistinct; Sevanna had just swung her legs from his lap and reached for the door when it swung open, revealing an anxious-faced soldier.

“Inquisitor, Commander – sorry to disturb you both, but there’s a Rift just up the road -”

They were already scrambling from the carriage before he could finish, Cullen rounding to the back to retrieve his sword and shield from the storage space, and Sevanna pulling two long daggers from compartments in her boots. They could hear the crackling of the Rift ahead, the metallic tang of the tattered Veil sharp in the air, and the chorus of demons as soldiers fell upon them.

There wasn’t a moment to tell Sevanna to be careful, to stay with him – but it quickly became clear that it didn’t need to be said. She lead the way into the battle, slicing off a Terror’s clawed hand so fast her knives were a silver blur; then she was gone, darting to where a soldier had been backed against a boulder by two Despair demons. Cullen tried to keep up and cover her back, but it was like chasing a storm, the thunder trying to catch up the lightning. She whirled and parried and leapt and twisted, nearly driving Cullen to distraction by the fluidity of her movements, the grace she brought to battle as if she was dancing a waltz.

It was neither the time nor the place for Cullen to find such a thing erotic – but oh, he did.

They slew the last of the demons and Sevanna brandished her left hand at the Rift, the Anchor popping and hissing violently so near to its larger brethren. Then she clamped her fist tight like she was squeezing a heart and the Rift collapsed, leaving nothing more than green ashes that were blown away by the wind.

It had been an easy defeat; no one was injured, though they were all covered in liberal amounts of dark ichor. Sevanna examined her splattered blades before stripping off her gauntlets to wipe them on the sash around her waist (somewhere, Josephine must have come over faint) before bending forward to tuck them back into her boots, her hair falling from her neck and the jacket from her hips, so that her ass in those tight leathers stuck straight up in the air…

Cullen didn’t realize he was staring, jaw agape and his shield hanging loosely by his side, until a soldier by the name of Rhodes (who was much too sensible to spread tales, bless her) cleared her
throat nearby. He turned what had to be a brilliant shade of scarlet, snapping his mouth shut and hurriedly cleaning his sword of blood.

He realized he had never truly seen Sevanna fight before. They’d only fought side by side once, what felt like a lifetime ago in the crater of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. But he hadn’t paid attention then, remembered little more than a whirlwind of daggers and ill-fitting armor; had barely registered the woman who would so captivate his heart. If he had known then, if he’d had an inkling of the magnitude of her worth the first time he laid eyes on her...Maker, he might’ve loved her then, and fallen from the most dazzling heights at the very beginning of the end of the world.

“Cullen?” Sevanna laid a hand on his chest, recalling him from his dazed musings. She looked worried. “Are you alright? You have a strange look on your face.”

“I’m fine,” he managed, but he wasn’t fine – he was glorious, filled to the brim with light and wind like he was spring made solid, the sun his heartbeat and its blaze his very blood. But she didn’t look convinced, so he elaborated clumsily, “You fight good.”

Her worry dissolved into a smile, and she played with the ends of her hair in a characteristic sign of shyness. He followed her back to the carriage, his eyes like a metronome as they followed the swing of her hips, suddenly ravenous with an appetite of a sinful nature. When they were safely and privately enclosed once more, and the carriages were bouncing along the road, Cullen crushed his lips to hers, and devoured like a lion starved. She responded just as hungrily, her nails digging into his scalp as she yanked him closer, seemingly intent on besting him just like she did those demons. He growled into her mouth, and wrenched himself away to nip at her lips, her throat, her ear.

“It’s nice,” he forced out.

She threw her head back in a husky laugh, her skin pulling like satin over her throat as she did. Cullen groaned, longing to feel the vibration of her mirth beneath his mouth; he wound one hand into her hair to tug her head back, relishing her small gasp as he reared forward and explored the
white slope with barely-leashed control.

Within one blazing moment, where they were was forgotten – all that mattered was the strokes of his tongue that elicited the most beautiful of noises, the scrabble of her nails down his neck, and his heart that fluttered wildly like a bird kept in a cage of bone. He mouthed down to her collarbone, leaving a damp trail in his wake, and suckled a bruise into bloom just below its swell. Sevanna moaned long and deep, forcing his head up roughly so that their noses flattened against each other, and kissed him like she was poisoned and the antidote was at the back of his throat. Her hands were framing his face, her thumbs on his pulse, and his hands cupped her ass. He kneaded it with his palms and pressed her closer, his throbbing erection begging for purchase against her pelvis, the layers of clothing almost painful in the way they made them separate, divided, apart.

What he longed to tell her - the three little words that were of such insignificance on their own, but when strung together had an impact of earth-shattering consequence – burned in his mouth like they’d been put there by a brand. But it still seemed too soon, to pour out his devotion in a form they could not be mistaken, nor be taken back. He wasn’t yet sure of the depth of her feelings for him, and he desperately wanted to be before he took that leap. A bird didn’t dive into the abyss on infant wings; it waited and tested their strength, until it knew they could sweep it aloft, and be carried into sunlight.

Sevanna rocked into his aching length again, and he groaned, every muscle growing rigid as his control thawed like a frozen waterfall by spring. They were heading into territory they would soon be unable to turn out of, and despite everything he wanted, everything he was dying for, he would not have it clumsily in a moving carriage.

His respite came at the very brink of his limit; the carriage bounced hard over something in the road, causing Sevanna to lurch forward and bang her forehead into his. The kiss ended abruptly and in laughter, with her rubbing her head wearing a grimace. It was inelegant and sweetly awkward as she blushed and shifted back in his lap; he moved his hands to her hips, tracing the smallest of patterns upon them, letters that he tried not to give a second thought to.

Something shifted behind her eyes, like deer behind dense brush. “Cullen,” she began, but fell silent as her teeth caught her lip.

“What is it?” he asked softly, and for once, he didn’t fear the answer.

Her blush deepened; she slid from his lap, leaving an echo of her warmth and weight, and tucked herself into his side again.

“You fight good, too,” she said finally, as if in answer to the other three little words he’d said before.

* *

They rode into a small farming settlement late in the night, building their camp with the haste of the weary desperate to sleep. Not large enough to be considered a village, the hamlet was made up of several families and their combined land, who worked together for a more profitable harvest. Given their remoteness, they had been having trouble with travelling bands of bandits, who struck under cover of night and raided their stores. They had written the Inquisition in a request for aid, offering to provide their growing forces with crops in exchange for protection. Cullen had organized some troops from the Hinterlands to meet up with them here, bringing loads of lumber in which to build watchtowers around the farms. Another Inquisition camp would be established here as well, a rather strategic place given its position between the Hinterlands and the Frostbacks.
Word had spread of their presence, and the following day was full of curious pilgrims from nearby villages to see the fabled Inquisition in person. Cullen didn’t doubt there were ones from Honnleath, and he carefully kept himself at a distance, in hopes he wouldn’t be recognized; the place he’d half-grown up was a short ride away, but he had no wish to return. At least not now. There was a lurking fear of what haunted the streets, of who, and he wasn’t sure if he was more afraid to see how much had changed, or if anything had at all.

Sevanna was kept very busy, however. Josephine had gotten her wish, and the authoritative outfit made Sevanna stand out like a raven among wrens. Cullen caught mere glimpses of her all day, clasping hands with the stooped elderly, crouching to speak with children who hid shyly behind the skirts of their mothers, or laughing among women her own age with a chubby toddler on her hip. Despite her severe uniform there was a naturalness to her, a domesticity he hadn’t yet seen, which birthed a bittersweet fantasy of a normal life; of he and Sevanna living somewhere quiet and uninterrupted, the Inquisition some mythical entity far, far away – a life free of duty and danger. A life that Corypheus cast no shadow over.

It was late afternoon when Cullen concluded his duties were fulfilled for the day; influenced, of course, by how he hadn’t seen Sevanna for a couple of hours. Most of the inquisitive had returned home, leaving only the soldiers and farmers behind to keep working on the watchtowers. Cullen made his way back to the camp, where Inquisition banners fluttered loftily in the breeze. They had set up along the edge of some sparse woods, which rang with birdsong and a gurgling creek.

Cullen caught the elbow of the nearest soldier, and asked about Sevanna’s whereabouts.

"Believe she just went up a ways, ser," he said, nodding towards the trees. "Said she wanted to collect some herbs."

Cullen thanked him and headed in the direction he indicated. The woods smelled earthy and green, flush with growing things, the sunlight dappling the ground in dancing prisms of light. He’d walked not thirty feet, when he heard off-key humming. Changing his trajectory, he came upon Sevanna on her knees and waist-deep in a mouldering log laying on the ground, recognizable by her ass. She had changed out of her Inquisitor’s garb; she was wearing a blue dress, with mud already caked around the hem. She was obviously foraging for something, if the wiggling of her rear was any indication. He watched it for several scorching moments, tempted to plant himself behind her and pull her against his hips. Dismissing the thought with a regretful squirm in his belly, he crept to the other end of the log, hoping she hadn’t heard him.

Balancing himself, he ducked his head down to grin into the log. "What’re you doing?"

He took her by surprise; Sevanna yelped and jumped, bumping her head on the top of the rotting wood. She had fistfuls of some kind of mushroom, which served as an amusing contrast to the indignant look she gave him. He laughed and straightened up as she shuffled backwards and sat back on her knees, shaking dirt out of her hair.

"Pest," she said, throwing a mushroom at him.

He caught it and examined it. "What’s this?"

"Dankspore," she replied, stuffing the ones she held into the satchel slung over her hip. "They don’t grow well at Skyhold, and they’re good for skin ointments."

She dusted herself off and stood up, coming to pluck the one from Cullen’s hands. She pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth and brushed by him, heading to a clump of flowers growing in a
patch of sunlight. He followed, watching as she began to work the flowers, along with the roots, from the ground and decided to relax. He stretched out next to her, crossing his ankles and folding his arms behind his head.

She looked at him suspiciously. “What are you doing?”

“She looked at him suspiciously. “What are you doing?”

“You never lay down.” She leaned forward to place her hand over his forehead. “Are you feeling alright?”

He smirked and pulled her down next to him, earning a surprised giggle as she toppled over him. He laughed with her as she wriggled over him, rolling to lay alongside him so they were pressed from shoulder to wrist, their fingers entwined loosely between their hips. Pieces of the sky were visible between the trees, bits of clear blue that didn’t remind him of lyrium, but of the color of Sevanna’s dress. She sighed deeply next to him, though he didn’t look at her, not yet – it was simple to pretend they were not the Inquisitor and Commander while his eyes were on the heavens.

It was a taste of peace, this stolen moment; he wanted to safeguard it, preserve it like a flower pressed between the pages of a book, and lock it somewhere it couldn’t be damaged. A place he could return when his reality grew dark, when the ugliness of his past reared its head again; a world in which he was simply a man and not a broken soldier who learned to live on severed strings. It was tease and taunt, laying here with the sun on his face and the warmth of the woman he loved at his side, an indistinct whisper of what could have been; the glimpses of another life.

What if he had never become a Templar, if the Chant had never robbed him of breath and invaded his dreams? It was difficult to imagine another Cullen, one who grew up in the sun-baked fields and not the candlelit dustiness of the chantry; he had been on this path for as long as he could remember, had set his feet upon it when he’d been young and naïve, with no idea such a road could be so fraught with hardship. Destitution had tempered him, and he had come out the other side of nearly two decades as something much harder than he’d ever anticipated. He felt so separate from the boy he used to be, divided by so much more than years, but by the collection of a hundred scars, the thousand fragments of nightmare in between. Would the boy even recognize the man? Or worse – would he regret that which he would become?

Sevanna’s slim fingers gently squeezed his. “What are you thinking about?”

He knew she already suspected the answer; it was always the same when the silence grew heavy, when he laboured under the memory of countless pains driven like ghostly knives between his ribs. But he didn’t want to dwell on them here, on this patch of grass beneath lazily waving boughs and sunlight, which he had drawn the conclusion was the best place in the world.

"I was thinking," he said, “of just how long it's been since I laid in the grass.”

“Mm,” she murmured, and he could hear the smile in it. “Me too.”

There was another beat of silence. “It hurts my back,” he said finally.

“It’s itchy,” she replied evenly.

“It's probably full of bugs.”

“And worms.”

“Ticks.”
“Snakes.”

He skittered a hand up her thigh. “Spiders.”

She twisted away from him with a shudder. “Ugh.”

He laughed and rolled after her, ignoring the creaking protest of his back. He propped himself up on his elbow, the other arm looped around her waist so she couldn't wriggle away, and slid one knee between hers. Her eyes danced between his, sparkling with mirth, and the tip of her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

A responding heat coiled in his belly, and a groan rumbled deep in his chest. "Don't do that."

She bit her lip, tongue poking out again. “Don't do what?”

“That,” he breathed, and bent his head to kiss her. She yielded to him eagerly, though he kept it brief, and it blistered. “Vixen.”

She laughed. “You love it.”

His pulse hitched, and his mouth popped open, the eager words already balanced on the tip of his tongue - but he didn't let them take flight.

She caught his hesitation, and her brow crinkled. “What's wrong?”

“I...” He swallowed hard. She was blinding to him, sprawled in the grass and the dirt, half-trapped beneath him and her hair like a spill of copper around her head. The forest was undoubtedly jealous of the color of her eyes, and the white wild flowers must surely covet the fairness of her skin. Maker, she had never looked so beautiful, and he was in awe of it - of her.

“You're so beautiful,” he said roughly, suppressing for now the other three words he wanted to say. He touched the sweep of one cheekbone with his hand, where the minute scar lay; even that tiny flaw was beautiful, a testament of her bravery carved into her skin. “Sometimes I still can't believe...that I...that you would ever...”

That cursed fumbling returned, mixing up the words that flowed so smoothly in his brain. But oh, she was always so good at reading him; the amusement in her eyes softened, became tender, and it was she who pulled his mouth down this time.

She kissed him deeply, sweetly; he let her set the pace and stoke the brimming fire, groaning against her tongue as she slipped it into his mouth, tasting the sweet nectar that was uniquely and wonderfully hers.

His hand skidded down the column of her neck, traced the bump of her collarbone and quested lower, demurely brushing the side of her breast and down to the indent of her waist. She sighed into him, nipping at his lower lip as his fingers clenched into her side; then she pushed at his shoulders, slinging her leg over his hips as she forced him into his back, rolling on top of him.

Kissing her in the grass had been heavenly, but this - Cullen decided this was so much better.

She broke the kiss in one airless motion, leaving him deflated. The amused glint had returned to her eyes. “I bet you say that to all the Inquisitors,” she teased.

He rumbled a laugh, brushing the hair behind her ear. “Only the ones that also happen to be the Herald of Andraste.” He thumbed her lower lip, sliding his hand to cup her cheek. Her eyes fell
shut, and she turned into his palm and pressed a searing kiss to its center.

Yes, it’d been a difficult road – but Maker bless that broken path, for it had led him straight to her.

He pushed himself up on one elbow. “Come with me – I want to show you something.”

Smiling, she rolled off him and helped him stand. She stood on tiptoe to pick the grass from his hair. “What is it?”

He took her hand, pulling her back towards the camp. “You’ll see.”

He took her to the lake, the one he’d so often visited as a child, the last refuge of peace he’d thought he’d had. Of course, that had all been before Sevanna; before he knew one person could be serenity incarnate, and restored him to the man he had always wanted to be but had lost somewhere along the way. It was less than an hour’s ride away, so they only took one horse; he at the front and Sevanna pressed into his back, her arms wound around him as she coaxed stories of his boyhood from him.

The lake was perhaps smaller than he remembered, though no less placid. It resembled a mirror in the falling night, its polished surface reflecting back the fireflies that hovered above it so that it looked like an inverted replica of the sky.

Sevanna toed off her shoes and perched herself at the end of the dock, patting the spot beside her with a smile as she dipped her feet in the water. Cullen followed suit, rolling up his pants and submerging his tired feet into the lake, the water swirling around his calves like familiar silk.

“IT’s beautiful,” Sevanna murmured, resting her head against his shoulder, a position he’d become used to in a matter of days, and cherished. “Did you come here often?”

“Yes. I loved my siblings, but they were very loud. I would come here to clear my head.” He chuckled lightly. “Of course, they always found me eventually.”

She sighed contentedly. “You were happy here.”

“I was.” He laid his cheek against the top of her head. “I still am.”

They sat in silence for some time, watching the lake’s surface darken beneath the sky and enjoying the cool lap of water – all while Cullen was steeling himself for what he wanted to say next, his fingers toying with his lucky coin in his pocket.

“I have something for you.”

She looked up at him. “But you’ve already given me so many gifts.”

“Just the one,” he countered. “But this – well, it’s not valuable, but if you were to keep it…that is, if you want…” He drew the coin from his pocket, and Sevanna leaned forward slightly to see it. “The last time I was here was the day I left for Templar training. My brother gave me this. It just happened to be in his pocket, but he said it was for luck. Templars aren’t supposed to carry such things – our faith should see us through.”

Sevanna touched the coin gently, tracing its edge with a finger. “And has it worked?”

“It brought me to you,” he said quietly, and she turned her face to his so that their lips were scant
inches apart. He placed the coin in her palm, curling her fingers over it with his own. “I want you
to take it.”

Her eyes never left his. “Me?”

“We don’t know what you’ll face before the end,” he whispered, giving voice to the greatest of
fears that slumbered within him. “This can’t hurt.”

“But what about you?” she asked, very seriously.

He moved closer, brushing his mouth over her lips, her cheeks, and her eyes when they fluttered
closed. “As long as I have you by my side,” he breathed raggedly, “I have all the luck I need.”

They lingered by the lake a little longer, wrapped in each other’s arms and comfortable silence.
Too soon it was dark, and Cullen knew it was best to return so they did not fall prey to whatever
might roam the roads. He went to untie the horse from the tree so he could climb up first and help
Sevanna up after him, but when he turned around she was already in the saddle, her gaze dark and
heady upon him.

“Is this alright?” she asked in a low voice, and he knew she meant for him to sit behind her.

He swallowed past a suddenly dry throat. “It’s…perfect.”

He settled behind her, pulling her securely against his chest and wrapping his arms around her
waist. Her ass was soft against his thighs, rocking slightly into him as he spurred the horse towards
camp. She let her head drop back on his shoulder, her fingers tapping a heartbeat rhythm on his
wrists, when she broke the charged quiet.

“Will you sing for me, Cullen?”

Surprised, he cast his mind down the short list of songs he knew, most of which were better suited
for the chantry. “What would you like to hear?”

Her voice was as soft as wind through wheat. “The one that you sang in the mountains.”

Instantly, he knew the one she meant – the one he sang of coming dawn, his eyes locked with hers
over a snowy distance, still warm from the bed they had shared.

His skin grew hot beneath his armour, as if recalling the heat of her near-naked body against his.
He cleared his throat, and sang it softly, keeping his voice low and in her ear, so she knew it was
just for her. She tilted her head ever so slightly to the side, giving him access to the tender skin of
her neck. Here he inscribed the words, writing them into her flesh with the heat of his breath so that
she shivered, her chest hitching at the vibration of the song at her throat, the hand that still clutched
the coin pressed over her heart as if she were afraid of losing it.

The song ended just as they came to camp. It was still busy with activity, having finished the work
since the day had gone to rest. Cullen swung himself off the horse first, tying it up with its fellows
before reaching up to help Sevanna dismount. She didn’t need it, he knew; having grown up with
horses she could probably backflip off one now. But it was an excuse to have his hands of her
waist again, a chance to let her body slide down his, gazes locked when she came to her feet and
did not move away so they remained pressed together, hands lingering on each other longer than
was proper.

A soldier came forward to take care of the horse, while another approached Cullen with several
scrolls; he could not escape work, even for several stolen hours.
Sevanna stepped away from him, the sudden handful of inches between them seeming like miles, and squeezed his hand. “Goodnight, Commander,” she said, in a tone that might have promised more, if he was not to be forced away from her.

So it was with a rather testy demeanour that Cullen reviewed the day’s work with the soldier, his impatience as obvious as the tension Sevanna left in her wake. The soldier scurried from his sight in tangible relief when they had finished, and Cullen was halfway to his tent in a much glummer mood when he paused.

He wanted a proper goodnight.

He wheeled around on his heel and marched towards the Inquisitor’s tent – evident by its size and the Inquisition symbol inked into its canvas. A guard was already posted at its entrance, the ghost of a knowing smirk crossing his face as Cullen strode past him with a terse nod. Nerves thrumming, he slipped between the flaps – and found it dark. His barely adjusted eyes could make out the huddle that lay quite still on the bedroll, and it was with great disappointment that he crept out again, bidding the guard goodnight.

He found his own smaller, and much emptier tent, resigning himself to another night lying awake in thought. He ducked through the flap, his heart a heavy thing in his chest – until he looked up and saw Sevanna, wheeling to face him and nervously playing with the ends of her hair.

The sound that came out of his mouth cracked embarrassingly like a boy’s; clearing his throat and keeping his voice low, he asked, “H-how’d you get in here without being seen?”

She smiled mysteriously, though her eyes stayed reserved. “A rogue’s secret, Commander.”

His brain had quite jammed; he stared at her, his mouth working to find a word, any word, as she grew progressively more fidgety.

“What…” he said lamely, just as she spoke.

“I didn’t want -” The words spilled forth and she bit her lip as if to dam them. “I wanted to spend some more time with you. If that’s alright,” she added hastily.

It was, but he couldn’t seem to work his mouth to tell her so. Instead, he made some fractured sound of assent, rubbing the back of his neck as he swept his eyes over the tent for something to keep them occupied. Something other than what he’d been holding himself back from whenever they were alone.

“O-of course,” he finally managed, all hopes of sounding casual dashed as his voice cracked with nerves. “I, ah, didn’t think to bring the chess set -”

“Cullen.” Her voice was like smoke, soft and smouldering, and he met her gaze once more. She hadn’t moved from her spot. “I didn’t come to play chess.”

The air in the tent thickened, became close and quiet as the world beyond the canvas faded. Cullen felt his fists clench in time with his stomach, his blood turned to thunder in his ears.

There was a heat in Sevanna’s eyes, as if there were embers buried beneath the green. “May I stay?”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, of course.”

He moved towards her, feeling as weightless as if he were treading water. Her hands came up to his
shoulders, hesitating there briefly, before pulling the fur down along his arms and finding the clasps of his pauldrons.

There was a certain intimacy to it as she helped him undress. It wasn’t an act of desperation, a wild tearing of clothes to get to the skin beneath, but a tenderness that left him feeling more naked in his simple shirt and pants than if he’d stripped bare.

Sevanna was still wearing her blue dress from earlier, the soft curves of her body obvious beneath the fabric; Cullen averted his eyes with a sudden shortness of breath, turning away when he so desperately wanted to move closer. “I’ll let you change -” he began.

“I didn’t bring any bedclothes,” she murmured.

Oh, but this was torture of the most exquisite kind; his throat bobbed sharply as he swallowed. “Do – do you want to borrow a shirt?”

She stepped in front of him, sinuous as silk, lining their bodies up as one hand slid to the back of his neck, the other resting over his hammering heart. “No.”

It was very hard to think straight when there was no blood in his brain. “Then what – do you -”

“Kiss me,” she breathed, rescuing him from his stumbling – and he had always been good at following orders.

There was no telling where he began and ended, as he wound himself so tightly around Sevanna that he felt her heartbeat against his. They were both flying fast and hard, pummeling each other through ribs as if they longed to unite like their tongues. He never tired of the sound she made when he tasted her, would never grow weary of the way she arched into him, or the welcome give of her flesh when he gripped her waist. But Maker – how quickly it became not enough.

Somewhere amid the clash of teeth and tongue and roving hands they sank down to his bedroll, with Cullen poised on its edge with Sevanna straddling his lap. One hand had pulled her hair loose from its binding, running his fingers through its soft length, whilst its twin traced the narrow channel of her spine. Her hands were everywhere; dancing over his shoulders and back, stroking the coarseness of his stubble, tugging at the laces of his shirt.

“Cullen,” she whispered into his mouth, the sound of it like a prayer. Her palms had skimmed over his broad chest, questing lower so that they gripped the hem of his shirt. “I want – can I -?”

His jagged exhale was his sanction, a wordless whine that implied a thousand whispers of yes, and her warm, trembling hands were sliding beneath the fabric, pushing it up from his body. He broke from her to allow her to tug the shirt over his head, raising his arms and shivering when she trailed her fingers over the muscles that were sculpted against his ribs with feather-light pressure. He couldn’t decide which burned more, his flesh or her touch – flame upon flame, agony in pleasure.

Sevanna leaned back the smallest of fractions so that she could examine him, her gaze as hot as her hands as they swept over the ridges of his abdomen and the hard lines of his chest. It didn’t make Cullen uncomfortable, but there was a certain vague self-consciousness as she studied him like a sculptress does a block of marble, and hoped she found him suitable.

She brushed the scars that littered his skin, the silvery marks relics of a dark past; mere tips of the blades that dug much deeper. His hands upon her flinched as she traced the puckered one that went from his sternum to shoulder, and he sucked in a breath.

“I know they’re not – they are ugly,” he murmured, wishing for a brief moment he did not have to
wear his flaws and burdens so openly.

“No,” she said softly, finding the ones on his back with seeking fingers. “They’re not. They’re stories – each one speaks of who you are, and how you came to be.”

She kissed him again, soft and sweet, her hands never idle in their exploration. And it was heaven, her touch on places that had forgotten such gentleness.

_Not enough._

The hand on her neck slid hesitantly lower, tracing the lines of her throat with fingers of char, until he found the first button on her dress. “May I…?”

She nodded into their kiss, her serrated breath catching even more as he pulled that first button open. He wanted to see, he wanted to watch as he revealed her skin, inch by inch of ivory bared to his gaze – so he wrenched his mouth away, and she tongued the shell of his ear with a moan that sounded like his name.

He fumbled with the second, then the third, his shaking fingers pulling them apart with reverence. When he had reached the last one, just below the swell of her breasts, he skimmed his hands up her arms to pull the dress from her shoulders, letting it bunch around her waist. The groan rumbled in his chest like thunder as his gazed hungrily upon the soft mounds of flesh supported by her breast band, the plunging, narrow valley between them just visible above the cloth.

She mewled in his ear as he cupped them, feeling their weight in his palms. They filled his hands with glorious perfection, the softness a delicious contrast to his hardness – his hands, his chest, between his thighs –

Cullen placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss at the hollow of her throat, venturing lower over velvet slopes, lifting and squeezing her breasts up against his mouth, his thumbs sweeping over where the fabric pebbled. They rose and fell in his hands as Sevanna panted, her head falling back as he dipped his tongue below the edge of her bindings, drawing a scorching line over hill and dale.

“Oh,” she breathed, her voice like the sound of a flute, a pure note of music more beautiful than Cullen had ever heard.

He nudged his mouth lower, hot breath fanning over the hard nub beneath the band. Her fingers tightened against his scalp with a gasp, and he relinquished the hold on her breasts, so that his trembling fingers could follow the band’s path to her back, and find the laces that kept them bound and barred from his gaze and mouth –

A sudden commotion outside the tent burst the heated bubble they’d inhabited, as a sharp voice barked at the entrance. “Commander!”

Cullen buried his face in Sevanna’s neck with a hiss, his fingers biting into her flesh. _Not now._

“What?” he snapped.

“Bandits, ser. About two dozen, flanking the farms from east and west -”

He cursed, rolling Sevanna from his lap so he could clamber to his feet. “I’ll be right there!”

He started tugging on his armor again, his movements frenzied and jerky. Sevanna ran her fingers through her hair, looking flustered, the skin of her face and chest prettily flushed.
“I’ll come with you -” she began, but Cullen knelt swiftly at her side.

“No,” he implored. “Please, stay safe for once.”

She touched his lips, her eyes moving worriedly between his. “Alright.”

He pressed a kiss to her fingertips. “Wait for me.”

He fastened his armor into place and ducked from the tent; the camp was swarming with soldiers scrambling for swords and shields, and someone was shouting orders to get into groups. Cullen caught the elbow of Rhodes, who was passing in the opposite direction, halting her.

“Remain here. Guard my tent,” he ordered.

Her eyebrows raised a fraction. “But the Inquisitor’s -”

“My tent,” he repeated, and understanding passed over Rhodes’ face, mixed with a flash of amusement, which he ignored. He strode away, grinding his teeth, and thinking he would escort each and every bandit to hell for the interruption.

* 

When he returned it was hours later; so many that the fires had burned low, and the night possessed a stillness only present at its peak. Luckily, the bandits were poorly organized and even more poorly armed. Some had been captured to face sentencing, and most had fled. Cullen doubted they would return; being faced with the Inquisition certainly had them turning on their tails within moments.

Rhodes was still at her post outside his tent. She watched his approach with thinly-veiled sympathy, returning his bid goodnight as she retired.

The braziers within had dimmed, too. They threw his shadow long over the canvas as he crept in and removed his armor as quietly as he could. To his immense relief, Sevanna was still here; she was beneath the blankets of his bedroll, facing away and clearly in deep slumber. He placed his armor back on its stand, swapping his dirtied pants for a clean pair and crawled in next to her.

It was like she was made of moonlight, nothing more than an illusion that would vanish the instant he touched her. He settled next to her as if she were something delicate that might crumble with the slightest movement, hardly daring to breathe as he laid his head on the pillow behind hers, praying this wasn’t a dream.

But then she moved, pressing back into the warmth of his body and sighing as she softened against his chest. His heart beating into her spine, he slid his arm over her waist, his hand bunching in a fabric that was not the dress she’d been wearing – but his shirt.

He inhaled deeply, drinking in the scent of her, and for the first time in a long while, slept with no nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

10000 points if you spotted the Mulan reference.
Where He Cannot Follow

Chapter Summary

In which they march on Adamant.

Chapter Notes

I'm not thrilled with this chapter, as its a rather awkward in-betweener for much more exciting events. I didn't want it too drawn out, considering not much happens, but it was still necessary. My brain has been uncooperative as of late, so I apologise if this is not up to usual standards or if there are loads of errors. I wanted to post this before I left for the weekend. Happy Friday!

It was the sweetest of dreams from which he didn’t want to wake – made sweeter still when Cullen realized he was not asleep at all. It was as if sleep and consciousness had reversed, and the long dark stretch had been his waking world and he had, now, fallen into dream.

They were tangled in sheet and skin, bare legs braided together and Sevanna’s spine pressed from his navel to sternum. His nose was in her hair, his arm nestled in the crook of her waist, and she was soft, moulded against every inch of him like she’d been sculpted for that purpose. He could feel the gentle press of her ribs as she breathed, and it was a moment he wanted to last an eternity, forever experiencing the shift of her body against his as she slept; or if it were possible, to preserve this tiny blink of time like a butterfly in amber so he could cup it in his hands.

Sevanna stirred slightly, as if she could feel his scrutiny. “Cullen?” she murmured, her voice rumpled and scratchy, but no less beautiful.

He brushed the hair from her neck and laid a kiss at its nape. “Good morning.”

She twisted in his embrace, rolling over so she faced him. “I didn’t hear you come back,” she said softly, touching her fingertips to his chin. “I’m sorry I fell asleep.”

“Don’t be,” he said, and scooted closer to kiss her. Her fists curled on his chest and one leg hooked itself over his, pulling his morning stiffness flush against her. He groaned into her mouth but kept their kiss unhurried, drawing it out as softly and slowly as the dawn.

When he pulled back to catch his breath, Sevanna traced the scar on his lip with one finger, and whispered, “We have to get up, don’t we?”

The fingers on her waist tightened, as if they were preparing to grip her and sling her over his hips – but he did not. It was tempting, so excruciatingly, tortuously tempting, when she was soft and warm and in his bed, pressed against all the right places; he could have her here and now, give in to temptation and soar with her before he had to release her to the west. But despite all that – that they
were here and nearly naked, that they were on the cusp of an undoubtedly lengthy separation – Cullen knew that having her would be like a man condemned to the desert getting just one taste of water before having his lips sewn shut. If he lanced this simmering tension so that all their desires spilled forth, and he discovered exactly what sounds she made when he pushed himself into her depths, then how could he let her leave his side? He could not, no more than he could turn his back after catching a glimpse of heaven.

“We do,” he murmured, with no small amount of regret – regret that was mirrored in her eyes, as she made no attempts to move.

“Surely we have a few minutes,” she breathed, tilting her face up.

She swallowed his chuckle, turned it into a moan, nearly made his determination into smoke; the way her tongue curled around his was nothing short of sin, the breathless oh Maker she lured from his lips made blasphemous. She was both siren and sacred, temptation in flesh yet divine in soul. Something to treasure and cherish; worthy of every mortal pleasure he could bestow upon her, deserving to be in the most beautiful of places when he did. Not in a tent at the edge of a wild wood, with dozens of listening ears and the inevitability of their separation hanging over their heads.

When she’d finished with him, made him dizzy and flushed with her kisses, she disentangled herself and sat up, stretching. Cullen swallowed hard as he watched the sway of her breasts beneath his shirt, saw her hair made tangled by his bed, and had never loved anything or anyone as much as he did her right then.

“We’ll have to explain ourselves,” he began, meaning all the people beyond the flap that were going to see them leave together; people who thought their Commander and Inquisitor spending the night together far more interesting than a bandit raid or a Rift on a road.

“Oh?” was all Sevanna said, as she nimbly stepped over him. She bent to scoop his dirty pants from the ground, revealing a mouth-watering stretch of white thigh and a round bottom that peeked around her smalls; then she was shimmying into them, looking faintly ridiculous and not at all subtle in his too-large clothes. Before Cullen could stop her, she threw him a smile and ducked out of the tent; he could hear her chipper greeting and an answering splutter from outside.

He flung himself back onto his roll. So much for indiscretion.

Thankfully, no one was stupid enough to say anything when he finally left his tent, full mantle of Commander in place; though he did get a few winks as he called for reports, which he decided to ignore. Sevanna appeared at his side twenty minutes later, once more dressed in her daunting Inquisitor gear, acting serenely unaware of all the furtive glances and smirks sent their way.

As they pored over the reports together, Cullen bent his head close to her ear. “Was that really necessary?”

“No,” she said, sounding amused as she signed off on one of the papers. “But it was fun.”

There was little to pack up, as most of the tents and soldiers would be remaining in order to finish the towers, so it was mid-morning when Cullen and Sevanna climbed back into their carriage and headed back to Skyhold. Where there had been a sense of freedom just two days ago, there now hung a weight that only grew heavier with each mile they passed, as if sand in an hourglass trickled over them. Their conversations were more earnest, and skirted over the looming gap that was about to come between them. They spoke instead of things they would do when Sevanna returned; have a private dinner, escape to go horseback-riding, have a round in the sparring ring – a list of just the
two of them, enjoying each other’s company, circling ever nearer to what might have transpired the previous night if there had been no raid.

Neither of them mentioned it; not out of awkwardness, but of the sense that they cradled something explosive between them, which they alone could decide to detonate. It was a matter of when, and not if, as they were tugged along that path as if the destination were magnetized. Speaking of it aloud would only serve to diminish it, to bring this air-born thing to earth where it might be harmed – and so they let it float free and nebulous, ready to call upon it when they both knew it was time.

Cullen hadn’t known that torture could be so magnificent, his nerves like threads spun from gossamer, thrumming with the anticipation of what would come, even if he didn’t know when. It was conflicting and yet absolute, the sour and the sweet blending together to create the most delicious of sensations. He might wait to tell her too, the words on his tongue poised like birds about to take flight; he might wait for her homecoming, when she returned bronzed by the sun, so that he could steal her away to an oasis of his creation, and pour his heart out there.

But like all the plans Cullen made with good intentions – such as becoming a Templar, and then unmaking one – it would not go how he intended.

* *

They arrived at Skyhold in the late afternoon of the fifth day with Cullen still aglow from the night before. They’d arrived at the in-between camp late, and with fewer soldiers there was more room to spare; he had walked Sevanna to her tent to say goodnight, and she had pulled him in with her. He didn’t care who saw, not when her fingers were on the straps of his armor and her mouth over his before he could speak. The second night was a dangerous game of who could press closer, who could bear more before the barriers set in place crumbled. It was a little of hell and a lot more heaven with Sevanna’s ass pressed deliberately against his hips, though he’d retaliated by chastely cupping her breast. It was like tinder dancing with an open flame, daring and close, ready to catch and burn.

He pulled her in for a kiss like a drowning man for air before the carriage rolled to a stop in Skyhold’s courtyard, wringing one last, shining moment before they were forced to accept their trip had come to an end. Cullen knew Cassandra would be ready to leave that same day, but he did not expect to find her waiting with four prepared mounts as if she were expecting Sevanna to come home only to instantly turn around again.

They broke apart just as the carriage stopped and the door flew open, greeted by Cassandra’s stern gaze.

“Welcome back,” she said, standing aside so they could climb out. “There is little time to spare, Inquisitor, but if you wish to wash there is a bath awaiting you in your quarters.”

“Thank you,” Sevanna said, smiling, “and yes, we had a lovely time.”

She squeezed Cullen’s hand and hurried away, Cassandra rolling her eyes after her. Cullen watched her go, eyes fastened on her swinging hips, until the Seeker cleared her throat.

“What?” he asked a little defensively, breaking his gaze.

Cassandra merely looked him up and down. “You look happy,” she said finally, which lacked her usual bite, and strode away to her horse.

I am, he thought privately, knowing the Seeker would only reply in disgust if he told her. With a
slight shake of his head, Cullen followed Sevanna’s path up the main keep, figuring he might wait for her there so he could see her off. He passed Blackwall, who was waiting next to his own horse and tenderly examining something silky in his hand. It was a handkerchief, made of rich blue fabric trimmed in gold, with an ornate J embroidered in golden thread, which the Warden traced with one broad finger.

“‘A token?’ Cullen asked curiously.

“A gift,” Blackwall rumbled, eyes twinkling beneath his heavy brow, “from a very special woman.”

He tucked it carefully into the sleeve of his armor, his expression faraway. Cullen left him to his reminiscence, smiling, thinking he was quite sure where the flowers on Josephine’s desk had come from – and if he might tease her mercilessly about it.

He ascended into the main hall and saw, with a familiar jolt in his stomach, Sevanna at Varric’s table, her back to the doors. She and the dwarf were bending over something, and he could tell by the way she bounced on the balls of her feet that she was excited. As he approached them, Cullen could hear her saying, “Hurry Varric, Cassandra is already cross with the both of us -”

“And whose fault is that, Fidget?” he chuckled, working on something small with his hands.

“What’re you two doing?” Cullen asked, touching the small of Sevanna’s back.

She smiled at him, twisting her hair around her fingers. “You’ll see.”

“And why is Cassandra cross with you?” he prodded.

She and Varric shared an amused look. “I’m afraid that’s a secret we’re taking to our graves, Curly,” he said, twisting the object in his hands with a flourish. “There you go, Fidget.”

He handed it to Sevanna, and Cullen leaned forward to see as she held it up. It was his coin; ingeniously encircled with a thin wire that had been looped over a fine silver chain, and turned into a necklace.

“It’s perfect! Thank you.” Sevanna beamed, handing the necklace to Cullen and turning her back to him. “Will you help me, Cullen?”

She pulled her hair aside, so he could loop the chain over her head and close the clasp at her neck. He pulled off his gloves to do so, his fingers lingering on the soft skin at her nape, brushing over the slope where neck met shoulder and felt her shiver.

She faced him again, her hand going to touch where the coin now lay beneath the hollow of her throat. “For luck,” she whispered, standing in tiptoe to claim his mouth in a soft kiss. He barely had time to savor it before she was pulling away, eyes sparkling. “Don’t let me leave without a proper goodbye.”

She turned and hurried down the hall, leaving Cullen rather breathless and dazed next to the smirking dwarf. But for once, he did not really care.

“Varrie?” he said, voice slightly strangled.

“Yeah?” said Varric, sounding amused.

Cullen watched Sevanna disappear into her quarters and knew that if there had been more time, he
would be following her right now. “I think I might be the luckiest man in all of Thedas.”

Varric laughed, thumping Cullen in the back. “Curly,” he said, heading to the courtyard himself, “I think you might be right.”

He knew they were in for a long separation; perhaps a month or so, with the time it took to travel and a few days in between so they could investigate the Approach. A month he could handle, Cullen thought optimistically, thirty or so days in which he could distract himself with memories of Sevanna’s body wound around his, nights he could fill with recollections of the sounds she made at his touch. Yes, a month was possible; difficult but doable, a barren patch in an otherwise lush journey.

But what he did not anticipate was a second month.

Two months Sevanna was gone – and even then, she did not return to Skyhold. The situation in the Approach was much worse than any of them had dared consider, with the reality of corrupted Grey Wardens and the threat of a demon army like a slap in the face during an already troubled sleep. Peril was brewing at Adamant, and it quickly became clear it was necessary to lay siege to the ancient fortress; thus, it did not make sense for Sevanna to return when most of the Inquisition would be needed in the west.

They wrote letters of course, a correspondence that began within the first week of her travels. They began chaste, a simple summary of the days that passed as the distance between them grew greater. Sevanna wrote to him of the ransacked and smouldering Exalted Plains, how Cassandra had pushed Varric over in a fit of temper, and how Blackwall was teaching her how to carve at nights by the fireside. She even rolled up one of her carvings with a letter, with a note saying it was supposed to be an owl but came out more like a chicken and that he should probably burn it. Cullen kept it anyway, stowing it in the same drawer as his lyrium kit which slowly became buried beneath all her letters. He, in turn, wrote about the mundane happenings at Skyhold; and the not so mundane, such as walking in on Bull and Dorian in a position Cullen could only bear to call “canoodling”.

But somewhere along the way, in a shift as natural as the phases of the moon, their letters focused less on what transpired around them. They hinted at what they would do upon their reunion, teasing one another with promised kisses and touches, pledges of private places in which to reacquaint themselves with each other. And then, seven weeks into Sevanna’s absence, when Cullen began to feel he could no longer endure the agony of waiting and had half-convinced himself to take a horse after her, he received a single scrap of parchment bearing one simple line.

I miss you so much it feels as if I am drowning.

The sheer force of much he missed her hit him like a gauntleted fist, sending him sitting heavily into the chair at his desk. That a line so simple could conjure a dozen images, assaulting him in their melancholy – Sevanna lying awake and alone, moonlight turning her tears to silver; or tipping her face up to the sun to catch the wind, hoping for the one breath that would lift the crushing weight that he, too, felt upon his chest – it was a physical pain worse than knives or fire. It was the pain of a splintering heart and vacant arms, the dull ache within him borne of the absence of her. Cullen felt hollow, a face painted on empty skin, his spirit faraway with her instead.

He wrote back right away, after agonising just how to convey the magnitude of loneliness: Know that if there was a choice between seeing you and taking my last breath, then you would be in my arms at this moment.
Before he had time to doubt himself, he sent it, and hoped she wouldn’t show it to Varric.

But the end was in sight; they had captured Griffon Wing Keep in the Approach, creating a sizable outpost for the Inquisition. They had confronted the Venatori Magister tugging on the strings of the Grey Warden’s, Livius Erimond, and sent him running to Adamant. While there was a much larger Warden force there, the fortress was old and crumbling, and Josephine had secured a propitious alliance with someone in Orlais who would lend trebuchets for the siege. Now it was a matter of organizing their forces for the long journey, a feat made easier when, after months of training, the soldiers were eager to see battle.

Leliana left Skyhold first, taking her archers and agents with their slender daggers. Two days after saw Rylen and Barris taking the Templars and mages who agreed to fight; then three days after that, Cullen departed with the bulk of their forces, the rest of Sevanna’s companions and the Chargers. Josephine and Vivienne remained behind, where both were far more valuable in dealing with the visiting nobles and Orlesian courts, where the whispers of a ball had begun. Cullen had written Sevanna the night before he left, the shortest message he’d sent yet.

_Fifteen days._

It was four days into his journey when the returning raven found him.

_I’ll be waiting._

All things considered, the trip went rather smoothly. Cullen might’ve even gone as far to say it was pleasant, if they were not marching on war. The revelry of Bull’s Charger kept spirits high, the soldiers were in top form, and Cullen even found himself in a better mood since he was actually _doing_ something and not just sitting behind a desk, waiting for Sevanna to return. Despite Dorian taking every opportunity to make Cullen squirm by referring to the tryst he’d accidently barged in on, he actually enjoyed himself during the two-weeks it took to the Approach. But it didn’t change that he was keen for bed every night, ticking off another day that had stretched between him and Sevanna.

The desert, predictably, was awful; but in his thinning patience Cullen found it to be one of the most beautiful places he’d laid eyes on. Griffon Wing Keep was a weathered edifice built into natural desert rock, the new Inquisition banners fluttering above it in the hot breeze. Its confines were crowded, chocked with soldiers hurrying to and fro, the air thick with smoke from the forges. Cullen craned his neck to look over the shifting mass, searching through the throng of steel and leather for a flash of auburn, straining for the familiar voice like picking out birdsong in a thunderstorm –

And then she was there, materialising from the smoke and heading straight for him like a figure from a dream. The world might have gone silent, or erupted into chaos, Cullen did not know; he couldn’t hear over the surf in his ears, the roar of blood that rent through him as his heart writhed and fought as if it were chained in his chest. He was moving toward her, but it was effortless and surreal, as if they were not moving at all but the earth was folding in on itself beneath his feet, closing the distance between him and her like two cliffs falling into the chasm towards each other. Their gazes were locked, hot and bright and _electric_, as though they walked into a tempest that churned between them. Just before they collided, they simultaneously turned and fell into step with one another, one inch of sizzling space apart.

“Welcome to the Approach, Commander,” Sevanna said, her tone clipped and formal. “I hope you like the heat.”
“Inquisitor,” he replied, eyes forward. “Where are the supplies for our assault on Adamant? I wish to look over them myself to ensure they are in order.”

“Follow me,” she said promptly, wending their way through the crowd with purposeful gaits. She led him up several crumbling staircases, nodding to the soldiers and agents who hailed her in passing. They came upon a heavy wooden door, which Sevanna opened for him. “Through here, Commander.”

He slipped past her and it was like skirting a lightning strike, the way the near-contact burned; and then she was closing the door behind them, the heavy bolt falling into place with a beautiful thud.

Cullen saw enough to know they were in a storage room of some sort, but it didn’t matter; Sevanna had just hardly turned to face him when he was upon her, pushing her up against the door, one hand cupping the back of her head so it didn’t bounce off the wood, the other on her waist as he sought her mouth with his.

Kissing her was like the sun’s first touch in long-shadowed places – everything that had been dark and cold was suddenly alive with heat and light, things long dead revived by the blaze. Sevanna moaned into him and pulled him closer, her arms snaking around his neck and fingers burrowing into his hair. This was no polite kiss in greeting, no reacquainting themselves with a touch they hadn’t known for two long months – this was flood and fire, sweeping away all reason and burning whatever pains may have remained.

She gasped his name over and over, a breathless chant that made his very blood sing, and he rocked his hips into hers to its rhythm, his pulse the drum and her breath the flute. She sank her teeth into his lip, eliciting a growl from the deepest parts of him; his hands followed the sinuous trail to her ass, cupping it in his palms to lift her, aligning themselves so sinfully they would surely be engulfed in hellfire.

Sevanna wrapped her legs around his hips, pressing her very core flush against him; Cullen hissed at the contact, wrenching their lips apart so he could nip and suckle the soft skin of her neck, inhaling the scent he’d been starved of for much too long. Her lips were on his temple, his forehead, the shell of his ear, tasting whatever bit of him she could reach. The flicks of her tongue against such sensitive spots had Cullen groaning as if in pain, and he captured her mouth again, drawing out the muffled gasps and sighs that had haunted his lonely nights. He surged closer still, though such a feat seemed impossible, with both mouth and hips, aching with the thought that surely the place pressed so delectably and torturously against his rigid cock would be just as hot and slick as her mouth.

The kiss suddenly slowed but became no less deep; a pace and intensity that matched their courtship, hurtling towards some brink of ecstasy and just stopping shy, prolonging the sweet sting of anticipation. Sevanna seemed intent on not letting him escape for air, a fate Cullen was totally accepting of. He could live like this forever, sustained by her heat and breath and taste like a plant basking in the sun.

When they finally needed to break away, they remained tightly knotted together like two trees who shared one root. Cullen could both feel and hear the fluttering of her pulse as he buried his face in her neck, reluctant to separate, unwilling to relinquish her weight against him.

“Do the supplies seem to be in order?” Sevanna asked, still breathless from their ardor.

He mouthed along her jaw to nip below her chin. “It appears so, Inquisitor.”

She shivered at the rumble of his voice on her skin. “Then I suppose we must move on to other
matters.”

There was regret in her tone, but Cullen knew she was right; they couldn’t remain in some cramped room, pawing at each other and ignoring their duties. This would be enough to hold him over, for now; a fix for an addiction of a different kind, a taste to tide him over until all this was finished. He let her body slither down his, his hands never leaving her in order to keep her as close for as long as possible.

“I missed you,” she breathed, nudging her face up for brief, soft kisses like a butterfly’s wing on his lips.

“I missed you, too,” he whispered, running his thumb along her lower lip. He pressed one last kiss to her forehead. “Now - to work.”

Cullen had thought it impossible to dwarf the pain he’d experienced at Sevanna’s absence – but he had not yet sent her to war.

They marched on Adamant the following day, reaching the fortress in the cooling fall of night. The Wardens were waiting for them, with a legion of demons already summoned across the Veil, their screeches mixing with the horns of battle. As they had anticipated, Adamant was not built for an attack with modern equipment; towers and battlements shattered under the pummelling trebuchets, disrupting the Warden archers who rained flaming arrows upon Inquisition soldiers who heaved the siege engine to the iron gates.

Cullen watched it from a distance, ordering for volley after volley, directing their ammunition to where it was needed most; where their ladders could not gain foothold, or where their ranks grew thin from the attacks coming from above. His only comfort at that moment was knowing Sevanna had not yet joined the fray – she was being kept behind lines of spears and shields, protected until the gates were breached and they could clear her way to the Warden-Commander.

It was perhaps an hour into battle that they claimed their first victory; with a tremendous crash, the gates to Adamant caved inwards, allowing soldiers to flood the lower bailey. Cullen moved the Inquisitor’s unit forward, taking advantage of the Warden’s withdrawal into the deeper parts of the fortress, attempting to regroup their forces. There was fighting just beyond the gates, which the Inquisitor’s personal party quickly joined – Cassandra, Bull and Dorian – but Cullen caught Sevanna before she was out of reach.

“Clear the battlements!” he shouted over the clash of steel and battle cries. “We’ll cover your advance!”

Sevanna nodded, her eyes wide and bright beneath her helm. There was no spare moment to be had here, amid the surge of battle like two seas clashing in a storm, but her hand found his and squeezed, a fleeting pressure that he returned with a desperate grip of his own –

And then she was sprinting away, in a whirlwind of daggers and mail, and took the world from underneath him.

His heart beat like the strokes of a clock, counting ever second that the battle waged. Cullen lost count as they mounted into the hundreds, unable to focus on his silent fear when he had an army to command. Again and again he called to fire; again and again Adamant broke beneath their barrage, but never did the rubble seem to outnumber the bodies that lay unmoving amid the carnage, unseeing eyes looking towards the sky.
His heart had beat a thousand times when Cullen heard the dragon’s roar – somewhere distant, there was an eruption of light like an exploding star, accompanied by the colossal sound of breaking rock. Perhaps the beast had finally been felled, an undoubtedly significant blow to Corypheus and his army –

But no. Where yesterday been a dream, when he had had Sevanna in his arms, today had dissolved to nightmare. A soldier appeared at his side, white-faced with shock, the news on his lips like drops of poison.

“Ser – the Inquisitor, she fell - !”

Surely he did not hear correctly; surely the soldier was speaking a language he did not understand, but Cullen was already striding towards the fortress with furious intent, fear blooming so intensely along his spine his lungs and throat felt choked by thorny weeds.

“Where? Take me to her!” he demanded, refusing to believe she’d fallen until he saw it with his own eyes.

“No,” said the soldier, seizing Cullen’s arm. “She’s not – she fell into a Rift, Commander.”

The ticking of his heart stopped, leaving echoing silence in Cullen’s chest. “A…a Rift?”

The man nodded gravely, the light from where the fortress burned thrown jaggedly across his face. “She’s gone.”
For the third time in her life, Sevanna opened her eyes to find herself in a different place from whence she closed them last.

She remembered the fall – the bridge crumbling beneath her boots, running on air as she tried, yet again, to escape the world falling apart around her. She remembered the split second of weightlessness, before the ground’s pull had beckoned her, and she hurtled unpreventably towards it –

Then a familiar pain. The Anchor coming alive like fire in her palm, ripping a hole through dimension as easily as a blade through fabric – and she was swallowed by the Fade.

Now she was falling, but it was so unlike falling it was as if earth and heaven had simply reversed; she felt like a cork speeding upwards in an ocean, the roof of the world coming down upon her and empty sky at her feet. There was barely a moment to throw her arms up to protect her head, but just as she did her descent, or ascent, suddenly slowed and she hovered a mere foot away from the earth that had risen to meet her. She reached to touch it, to see if it was actually real, or if it were no more tangible than the sky she had left behind –

And promptly toppled into the dirt. So much for being graceful.

She heard the heavy thuds of other bodies hitting the ground as she rolled, wincing, onto her back; discovering, to some surprise, that Hawke was hanging over her, looking as bemused as Sevanna felt to be standing parallel to the ground, seemingly defying gravity.

Hawke’s lightning eyes darted around and she snorted. “If this is the afterlife, the Chantry owes everyone an apology. This looks nothing like the Maker’s bosom.”

“What is this place?” came a male voice - Orlesian, and Sevanna knew Stroud had fallen through as well. Her stomach clenched painfully; how many had she taken with her through the Veil?
Her question was answered quickly. Cassandra loomed above her, holding out a hand to help her up. The Seeker’s face was ghostly in the eerie light of the Fade, her armor dented and dusty from falling in the dirt, but the set of her jaw was no less resolute. Sevanna gripped her hand and was hauled to her feet, her hip aching from where it had struck the ground. As she ran her hand over the throbbing spot, she felt a hard lump in a secret compartment of her gear, and remembered. It was the hilt of the knife Cullen had given her, the one with the blade of starlight; the one she hadn’t been able to bear leaving behind and so had taken it along, in order to keep some small part of him close. Despite the raw disbelief and burgeoning terror as she took in her surroundings, Sevanna was relieved to have the blade now; it was like she was safeguarded twice over, protected by Cullen’s luck that she had strung around her neck and his fortitude strapped to her hip.

“I think…” she said in answer to Stroud’s question, her voice as cracked and parched as the desert they’d come from. “I think we’re in the Fade.”

“What a fantastic development,” came a nearby grumble. Sevanna spun around to see Dorian clambering to his feet, his neat hair ruffled and pristine robes dirtied. But the usual good-humour from his voice was absent; he looked stricken, fearful eyes scanning the mist and shadow that hovered over them. For a half second, Sevanna wondered what he was looking for – until she realized who, because there was one more in her party, someone who was difficult to miss and was yet not here –

There came a muffled cursing as a large shape rose in the haze; Bull was getting to his feet, his bulk and horns as recognizable as his rumbling voice. There was the briefest flicker of relief on Dorian’s face, a hummingbird dart of expression that was gone as quickly as it’d come, before being smoothly arranged into nonchalance once more.

“Did anyone else come through?” said Cassandra, whose sharp eyes couldn’t cut through the mist no more than a sword through smoke.

“Don’t think so,” grunted Bull, lumbering towards them. “There wasn’t anyone else on that bridge when it collapsed.”

Sevanna’s throat closed on a lump like a fist over a stone. “I’m so sorry,” she said, wringing her hands. “I didn’t mean to open a Rift – I didn’t mean for any of you -”

“Don’t sweat it, Fidget,” said Hawke, sounding so much like Varric that Sevanna could practically hear it in his voice. The Champion managed to backflip from her odd perch, landing in a feline crouch with one hand already on her staff. “Besides, you know I’d hate to miss out on all the fun.”

“I would hardly call this fun,” Cassandra snapped, making Hawke roll her eyes.

Sevanna rubbed her arms, catching a shiver that had little to do with the dank chill that hung like the Fade mist. “I wish Solas was here.”

“I doubt he’d be much help,” Dorian said dryly. “He’d be absolutely catatonic with joy.”

“When you were here last time, Inquisitor, how did you get out?” asked Cassandra.

Sevanna pressed her fingers to her temple. “I don’t know. I can’t remember.”

“In our world, the Rift the demons came through was nearby,” murmured Stroud, drifting forward, pointing to the churning hole in the alien sky. “In the main hall. Can we escape the same way?”

Sevanna focused her gaze on the Rift as well; it seemed hopelessly far, as probable to reach as the sun. “It’s possible.”
“Meaning we get to drag ourselves through the ass-end of demon town,” Bull grumbled. “Fucking great.”

“Well, if it’s the best chance we’ve got,” said Hawke, striding forward, eyes fixed on the sky, “then I say we take the fight into town.”

They fell into step behind her, as pale and silent as ghosts in the mist. The ground beneath their feet turned from rock to spongy earth to swamp, sucking at their boots and sending oily ripples ahead into the murk. But slowly, ever so slowly, the haze began to lift; they could see the feet of unfathomably tall cliffs, lone spires of rock that plunged towards the sky, bubbling pools of marsh that smelled of sulfur. Finally, Sevanna thought the fog had lifted well above their heads – until, craning her head back, she realized the sky was the same suffocating green, swirling with flotsam and jetsam of a broken up realm, and rippling with the ashes of otherworldly fire. It was like walking the bed of an ocean that had drained into the heavens; revealing what storm and undertow had dragged to its depths, leaving the spectral remains shattered and strewn across a shipwrecked world.

There was a sudden blaze before them; a pillar of fire that appeared on the banks of yet another stretch of swamp that had Hawke stumbling back with a shout of surprise. Weapons were drawn on all sides, Cassandra leaping forward to ensure, as always, that Sevanna, was behind her shield – and then the fire burned away, leaving a woman in white cloth behind.

The weathered face stirred the briefest flicker of recognition in Sevanna’s mind, but it was the robes that gave the woman away, the golden sun embossed on the fabric gleaming brightly despite the gloom. She did not need Hawke’s second shout to know who this was, just as she did not need Stroud’s and Dorian’s twin murmurs of shock; nor did she need Cassandra’s cry of grief that was so raw it sounded as if she’d been broken open, as she lurched drunkenly forward and staggered to her knees.

Sevanna swallowed past an arid throat and croaked, “Divine Justinia.”

Walk into the heart of darkness, Justinia had said, and do not let yourself falter. Walk willingly to Nightmare, but do not let it see you flinch.

They traversed the Fade under the guide of the departed Most Holy – or by whatever entity wore her face. Stroud warned that it was likely a demon, which Bull enthusiastically supported, but Sevanna was unsure. Justinia, or whatever she might be, felt benign, a friendly figure from a half-remembered dream. She really wanted to ask Cassandra what she thought, but by the way the Seeker’s jaw was flexed and her too-bright eyes locked on a far-away point, Sevanna knew it was better not to ask.

Justinia also told them their presence had not gone unnoticed; the monstrous demon that dwelled in this part of the Fade awaited them at the Rift, knowing they would use it to escape. It was ready to feed, she warned them, to grow fat upon their fear like a beast feasting on carrion. But first, it was sending hordes of fearlings - pieces of nightmare itself – to slow them down, giving the army on the other side time enough to draw it through.

Sevanna and her party splashed through mires, clambered up steep and treacherous paths, battling wraiths that detached from the mist and an endless wave of crawling black smoke that coalesced into terrible spiders, their multiple eyes glowing and mandibles dripping with venom. She gripped the hilts of her knives until her fingers turned purple in order to stop their shaking; but she felt she could only swallow so much fear, and it grew like an abominable plant, threatening to rip her from
And yet she crushed them all, tearing down whatever horror stood before her because, like many things in the Fade, they were not simply as they appeared. The Divine had said they were, in fact, her memories; fragments of recollection stolen from her at the Conclave, plucked from her mind as easily as a bush stripped of berries and encased in husks of the creatures she hated most. Pieces of herself that Nightmare had claimed – and now relinquish, because she was here to take them back.

She slaughtered more, and more, turning them into what was less than dust and shadow, until her vision went dark and she sagged against Bull. Sevanna could hear Cassandra and Hawke still leading the fight around her, but they sounded distant; hollowed out voices coming from another world, drowned by the whirlwind of color and noise in her mind. Her memories returned in a typhoon, thrashing the insides of her skull until it ached, staggering her in their confusion and vibrancy.

“Inquisitor?” Cassandra’s voice came from across an ocean, almost lost in the hiss of receding tide; the demons were defeated, then. “What do you remember?”

Her tongue felt thick and heavy in her mouth; she was dimly aware of Bull’s massive arm around her waist and Dorian’s hands propping up her head. Cassandra came slowly to view, covered in muck and blood and dirt, her shield dented from countless attacks.

“The Grey Wardens,” Sevanna whispered, wincing as if it’d been a shout. “They helped Corypheus. He killed the Divine. And I – his Orb -”

Her palm throbbed in time with her heart, remembering the moment it had touched Corypheus’ tool, remembered the pain of the world coming apart in her grasp, as if the Anchor could recall just how it had come to be.

Cassandra’s face was grim. “You interrupted his plans.”

Dorian clapped Sevanna on the shoulder. “Well done.”

But her eyes never left the Seeker’s. “But the Divine – I’m so sorry, Cassandra -”

The other woman’s expression curdled, and she looked away. “The Divine was already dead,” she said in a flat voice. “There was nothing you could have done.”

But Sevanna couldn’t agree. The return of her memories only proved what she thought all along – that she was no hero, but instead the product of accident. Foiled an Archdemon’s plan with her own clumsiness, survived by luck, and saved by a far better woman. She wanted to shout the truth, to shake the churning heavens with the voice that had been locked inside her for many months, silent screaming that she was a liar, a pretender – a fraud.

But a different voice spoke first.

“Ah, we have a visitor.”

It was if the very earth itself had spoken; a resonance that came from miles deep and dark, lifting the hair from her face as the air stirred, as if it spoke right into her ear.

“Inquisitor.”

Every hair on Sevanna’s neck stood up and her knees turned to water; it was lucky Bull was still supporting her, because she would’ve toppled right into the dirt. It was voice that recalled every
unspoken and nameless fear - lost and wandering in a blizzard; the burn of the Anchor when it was growing; being surrounded by fire and the scales of a dragon. It was a voice she hadn’t heard outside of her dreams in an age, a slithering whisper that had her waking up cold and shaking nearly every night; a voice she’d only heard once, the night she learned what she truly stood up against.

“You should have left your fear where it lay, forgotten. You think the pain will make you stronger? The only one who grows stronger from your fear is me.”

“Corypheus,” Sevanna said faintly.

“No,” Cassandra said in a hard voice. She was craning her neck, looking for its source. “It is only his voice, Inquisitor. The demon must be using it.”

“So you’ve brought the Seeker,” Nightmare rumbled, sounding almost amused. “Have you come to reunite her with her beloved Divine?”

“Do not listen to it,” Stroud instructed. “It knows your every fear, every weakness, and will try to exploit them.”

“Do you suggest we stuff our fingers in our ears and hum?” Dorian asked dryly.

Corypheus’ laugh shook the ground beneath their feet. “Ah, Dorian – it is Dorian, isn’t it? For a moment I mistook you for your father.”

Dorian merely examined his nails. “Rather uncalled for.”

“A voice can’t hurt us,” said Hawke, marching forward once more. “No point in standing around like -”

“Champion.” The voice seemed hardly above a whisper, yet it reverberated; echoing a hundred times with growing force until it sounded as cruel as a curse. Hawke’s shoulders stiffened, yet she kept going, the knuckles on her staff growing white.

“Champion of a ravaged city,” Nightmare sneered, his voice like thunder. “Champion of ruin. Champion of death and destruction. You will fail, foolish girl, as you always have.”

“Fuck off,” spat Hawke, and earned a sonorous laugh in return.

They all fell behind her once more, Sevanna feeling shaken and sick, as the demon hissed their names and vicious taunts. You could not fight sound, nor stab a blade through words – and yet these dug far deeper than any spider’s bite, slicing into tender flesh with the accuracy of a carefully aimed arrow.

“Oh, you’ll enjoy this,” Nightmare rumbled, once again amused. “Have you considered the consequences of your idiocy, Inquisitor? Do you know you bring a legion to its doom? Perhaps you don’t yet know where it is you’ll lead them.”

They came upon a sepulchral lagoon; a lonely waterlogged expanse ringed by looming cliffs so it gave the impression of a sunken place, of something forgotten. Spirits lingered here as well; mere wisps that faded when Sevanna came too close with an old, tired sound – the memory of a last breath.

They waded through the murky waters, nervous eyes cast over the horizon again and again as if waiting for some new horror to descend. But the only sound was the whisper of water underfoot,
the creak of leather and swish of robe. Sevanna’s eyes fell on a patch of dry, raised earth laying in
the shadow of a cliff, littered with stones like broken teeth. She splashed towards it, the sound
breaking the watery silence that muffled them like fog.

“What…” Cassandra began to ask as they clambered up the knoll, but the words seemed to die on
her lips, along with a little piece of Sevanna’s heart.

They had come across a graveyard with ten headstones; one for each of her companions, and one
all her own.

A sound of anguish lodged itself in Sevanna’s throat, choking her. Here, at her feet, lay Dorian’s
headstone, bearing a single word - *Temptation*. Next to his was a marker much larger and far more
worn: The Iron Bull – *Madness*.

Bull himself stared down at his own grave, his one eye furrowed in confusion. “What the fuck?”
he murmured.

Sevanna wanted to answer, but the knot of grief trapped the words, stuck like the pit of a bitter
fruit. *Dead*, she wanted to say. *You’re all dead*.

A cemetery for her friends – a graveyard she may as well have dug with her own hands.

*Irrelevance*. The names of those she held dearest, remembered by nothing more than broken bits of
stone and ugly inscriptions, forever trapped beneath their own personal nightmare. But there was
one headstone – the largest, the one *meant* for her to see – that lured Sevanna to it, burning to know
the word it bore and yet terrified of it; like pulling flesh back from a deep cut, morbidly curious if
she might see the bone beneath.

On the weathered marble, below the engraved stallions, was a single name: *Cullen*.

Sevanna stared at it, heart throbbing painfully. A fear realised, a nightmare come true; Cullen’s
grave, a place she always dreaded she’d end up, forever separated by fate and penance and six feet
of earth. Yet his headstone was missing a crucial piece, a testament to the greatest fear of the
bravest man she had ever known. But as she searched for it, wondering what it might be, she
recognized the Trevelyan horses and it hit her.

This wasn’t Cullen’s grave.

It was *hers*.

She stumbled back, hand going to stifle a scream – but it came out silent, an agony that could not
be captured in voice. Her greatest fear, the bleakest of horrors – Cullen dead and buried, lying cold
in a grave because of her.

*My fault*.

Her legs buckled beneath her, *again*, but a vice-like grip hauled her up, keeping her from falling.
She turned to see Cassandra, her scars livid against her white, angry face.

“No, just give it satisfaction,” she said in a low voice. Just beyond her shoulder, Sevanna could see
another bluntly hewn headstone. Cassandra – *Helplessness*. She met her friend’s steely eyes again,
and nodded. And when Cassandra let go, she did not let her knees shake.

“Let’s go,” Sevanna murmured. “Let’s just move on, we must – Hawke?” She had just stepped
back into the marsh, ready to leave this particular heartache behind when she spotted Hawke outlined against the eerie sky, transfixed by what lay beyond the rise of earth.

“Hawke,” she repeated, going to touch the other woman’s elbow. She stood immobile as a statue, blank eyes staring ahead; Sevanna stepped around her and saw that her face was snow-white, warped into a mask of horror.

Below them, like a spray of blood from a head wound, stretched a city of headstones. Countless graves at their feet, ringed endlessly around the largest tombstone that had been engraved with a bird; Marian Hawke- Failure.

The stones closest to hers bore Varric’s name, and Sevanna recognized the names on the ones nearest from his stories. All of Hawke’s friends, the motley crew that would have followed her to the ends of the earth and back; the ones who would’ve died for her, had she ever let herself fail in protecting them.

The sorrow of her cemetery was nothing compared to Hawke’s; Sevanna reached for her friend’s shoulder, her fingers a hair’s breadth away. “Marian -”

Hawke’s eyes flashed like the reflection of lightning in a lake – she swung her staff high over her head, bringing it down hard enough to stab through the softened earth and sending a bolt of magic down into her headstone. It exploded into dust, destroying everything around it in a ten-foot radius and charring a hole into the ground. Hawke’s shoulders rose and fell, her teeth bared in a snarl akin to a wounded predator; then she yanked her staff from the ground and turned on her heel, striding away from the plain of Kirkwall’s tombs. One by one they drifted after her, as silent as the dead they left behind, yet carried with them.

Justinia waited for them once more at the mouth of a flooded cave, dissolving into a glowing golden form when they drew near. “The Nightmare is close,” she warned, floating over the water like airborne embers. “Your journey is almost at its end.”

Sevanna waded after her. “Are you really the Divine? Or her spirit, maybe?”

“Oh a demon,” said Cassandra, soft and dangerous behind her.

The form of Justinia drifted ever forward. “Whatever brings you the most peace is what I am.”

Sevanna did not whether to be comforted or troubled by this answer, but there was no time to ponder it. They came to the opposite end of the cavern, dry ground once more spreading beyond them. Perhaps fifty feet away was the Rift, seething like the surface of an agitated lake. She almost breathed a sigh of relief, thinking the way ahead was clear –

But no. Lumbering through the mist, towering countless feet above them, was a monstrous spider the color of ancient bone. Its many eyes shone like dim moons, its colossal mandibles shuddering and clicking as if in laughter. At its feet was a creature no less horrifying: part insect and part wraith, with an arachnid’s legs thrusting from its back in a nightmarish imitation of wings. Its screech upon spotting them was steel against stone, driven like spikes into Sevanna’s ears. All around her, her companions were taking up arms; Dorian, Hawke and Stroud whirling their sparkling staffs, Cassandra and Bull hefting their heavy weapons. Sevanna touched the coin at her throat before lifting her daggers as well, ready to pay the toll of passage with her blood, if need be.

The iridescent shape of Justinia glided past them, rising to meet the Nightmare face-to-face. “If you
would, please tell Leliana,” she called, her voice like the last notes of a fading hymn. “I am sorry I failed you too.”

She brightened, became dazzling like a star in supernova – then exploded in a sunburst, driving divine light into the Nightmare’s eyes and sending it staggering back.

“Now!” Stroud roared, launching himself forward. They leapt after him, voices raised in challenge, sprinting towards the Rift as the aspect of Nightmare rushed to meet them.

Bull reached it first; he managed to slice the tip of a leg in a single slice, eliciting a horrible scream. The creature sent him flying, its legs crooked like predatory claws and swept over him, only to be pushed back by Cassandra’s shield and a swing of her sword.

It was like fighting smoke, like weapons made of pure darkness; the aspect moved with unfathomable speed, becoming insubstantial as mist and darting over the battlefield like the flick of a whip. It called wave after wave of fearlings; spiders so small they moved like an avalanche, climbing up Sevanna’s legs as she leapt and ducked and parried; and ones the size of mabari, leaping from unseen heights on silken threads, knocking their arms from the air and their legs from beneath them.

The fear had become too much, wiping Sevanna’s mind blank but for a narrow sense of purpose: survive. She didn’t dare open her mouth to scream lest the tiny spiders crawl down her throat, didn’t dare cry out in pain as she pushed herself up again and again, or rolled out from under a stab of the aspect’s legs. She was getting slower, her limbs heavy and leaden with exhaustion; a tiredness only spurred by the memory of the graveyard, of Cullen’s name in stone, of Hawke’s buried legacy. She was drowning in fear, floundering in hopelessness, numbly thinking her lucky coin had run dry.

The aspect’s appendages whipped out, lashing her across the face. It felt like a lick of fire, sending her bouncing over the rocky ground and jarring one of her knives from her hand. Like a wolf on a lamb, the aspect was upon her before Sevanna could move, wrapping a skeletal hand around her throat and lifting her so that she dangled helplessly in its grip. A spidery limb ripped her other blade from her grasp, leaving her defenceless as she scrabbled uselessly at its wrist, feeling the life being squeezed from her.

It smelled of places cold and damp, the shadowed crannies where spiders dwelled. Its laugh was a reptilian hiss, the sound of snakeskin over cold stone as it put its face close to hers. “I know what you fear,” it rasped, its breath frigid on her skin. “I know the shadows that haunt your nights, the creeping horror that withers you. A man condemned by your hand – a love laid to waste without ever being spoken.”

A thin gasped escaped her, and its grip tightened.

“How delicious would it be,” it hissed, “to keep you here while I inflict the greatest of horrors upon him? To drink your screams and split open your mind as I break him -”

Sevanna’s vision dissolved into a scene of savagery – of Cullen screaming and writhing in agony as crimson shards burst from his shoulders and face, his skin splitting as the lyrium consumed him –

A scream bubbled up in her pinched throat, coming out as a choked whine and the image imploded in her mind’s eye. The creature laughed and loosened its grip, as if it wanted to hear the cries it provoked from her. One of Sevanna’s hands had left its wrist, clawing at her hip as the aspect lifted her higher still.
“Foolish girl,” it breathed, drowning her in breath that smelled like an open grave. “Mortal love cannot save you here.”

Her hand closed upon the hard shape in its hidden compartment, sending a burst of strength through her. “Actually,” she gasped, “it can.”

She whipped her silver knife from her gear; it flashed like an arc of starlight as she sank it in the soft space in the creature’s carapace. It gave a great shudder and dropped her with an unearthly shriek; she fell to the ground, hard, feeling the knife snap in her grip as it broke off in the aspect’s gut, left with nothing more than a hilt and a mirror-like shard.

She must have hit something vital; it was screaming like a boiling kettle, tearing at the place her blade was buried and collapsing in on itself like a wooden structure with failing beams. It buckled, falling to the ground with a dull sound, its spider legs curling upwards towards the sky.

Sevanna barely had time to fill her lungs with her first free breath; Hawke was dragging her to her feet so they could run towards the Rift. Somewhere above them, the Nightmare was bellowing in anger, its legs plunging through the gloom like giant sabers.

“Go, go now!” someone was screaming, and the Rift flared as her companions leapt through it, until only she, Hawke and Stroud remained.

Hawke shoved her towards the Rift. “Go!” she shouted, slicing at one of the Nightmare’s leg. “I’ll hold it off -!”

“No!” Stroud was there, sending fireballs up to the belly of the beast like fireworks. “The Grey Warden’s did this, so a Grey Warden will end this!”

“The Wardens need you!” Hawke rolled out of the way as a leg stabbed into the ground. “They need someone to guide them, to rebuild the order -”

“You must go, Inquisitor!” Stroud shouted over her, looking desperately to Sevanna. And though she hated it, she saw the determination on his face, the shadow of death that loomed over him.

She grabbed Hawke, hauling her towards the Rift with a harsh cry. They both stumbled and nearly fell; Hawke tried to launch herself back to where Stroud was fighting, silver flashes in the mist like an earthbound thunderstorm, but Sevanna blocked her.

“Please, Hawke!” she begged, struggling to keep the mage from getting past her. “Please, don’t do this to Varric!”

For a moment, Hawke looked stricken; the flash of Stroud’s casting reflected in her eyes, turning them into flat silver discs. Then she sagged into Sevanna, who didn’t spare another thought. She hove her weight into Hawke, sending them falling back into the Rift; the last they heard before the maelstrom swallowed them was the piercing screams of the Nightmare, and Stroud’s cry: “For the Wardens!”

Then they were hitting stone, rolling like marbles spat from the Fade. Ignoring every ache that lanced through her, Sevanna pushed herself to her knees to brandish her hand at the Rift. With the enormous sound like a riverbed being sucked dry, it collapsed and imploded into nothingness, turning every remaining demon into dust.

There were many exclamations of shock, or swords clattering upon stone, and they crashed over Sevanna’s pounding head like a relentless surf, weighing her down. Hawke was next to her, beating her fists on the ground and making a sound caught between a sob and a scream; no one moved
towards them, stunned as they were by their sudden reappearance.

Sevanna’s vision split into two and her body buckled beneath her, falling painfully onto her shoulder and hip and rolling onto her back, the hilt of her broken gift still clutched in her hand. Her vision was ebbing, the sky swallowing her whole – her sky, the star-studded heavens winking like familiar jewels – and wondered if it would be the last she would ever see.
What He Would Never Know

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the battle at Adamant.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait! I had hoped to get this update out much sooner, but the holidays steamrolled me. Hopefully now that things will settle down I'll get back to regular updates. Thank you for your patience! I don't feel like this is my best work, as I just wanted to post the stupid thing already, but I hope you enjoy anyway <3

Gone.

The place his heart had once occupied was now empty, vanished from his chest to pound beneath the earth instead, the very ground threatening to become alive and swallow him whole.

She’s gone.

It could not be true.

Cullen could only gape at the soldier, a seeping horror solidifying him like ice. He worked to open a mouth that was suddenly made of rusted hinges, reeling from the two words that echoed in a world gone silent.

She’s gone.

“Where?” he croaked, in a voice of dust and hollows.

The soldier looked strained. “In the main courtyard. Right where the Wardens were doing their summoning.”

Maker have mercy – what mouth of danger had Sevanna fallen into, given what the Wardens were trying to bring through the Veil?

“Tell Rylen to take over my post,” he snapped, the familiar guise of command taking over where a man had turned to stone. “Direct launched assaults along the battlements and lower bailey – clear me a path.”

For half a second, the soldier looked like he might protest – their commander, abandoning his position when his army needed him most? – but set his jaw and saluted instead. “Ser!”

Cullen spun on his heel, feeling it sink into the soft sand beneath his feet as he rushed towards the smashed-open gates of Adamant. The shadowed courtyard just beyond was empty, save for the
piles of ash that had once been demons and the dark, still shapes of fallen Wardens. Cullen drew his sword as he went, slinging the shield from his back as he stalked into the fortress, ready to move hell and earth to bring Sevanna back.

The ever-present sound of battle was distant, difficult to discern how far away it raged when it echoed off the stone walls. It was like running a maze; corridors turning in on themselves or leading to barred doors, multiple sets of staircases that had his back slicked with sweat. The air was thick with smoke, the dark sky above bathed in the orange glow of countless fires, the ash and embers drifting down like snow and stinging where it landed on his nose, his cheeks, his neck. Twice, there was a colossal *whoosh*, and a projectile would arc overhead, crashing into some distant part of the fortress with a muffled explosion. He was breathing hard, his lungs aching from the acrid air, crushing his already aching heart in iron bands.

How many more times would he be allowed to beg for a miracle? How much more could he tap the wells of his faith before they ran dry, leaving him with nothing but desolation? Many times he had prayed for Sevanna – to bring her safely down from a mountaintop, to resurrect her from devastation and blizzard, to call her back from a distant shore – and Cullen was not sure they could be answered much longer. He already owed the Maker too many debts - contracts signed in blood - but he did not care. The foundation of his faith had been tested and shaken, and he had proven his devotion to be absolute. He had given more than half his life and an innocent mind to the Maker. If that was not enough to bring her back again, then what would - his bones to build an altar, his blood to spill at its feet?

Abruptly, he left the calm behind and plunged into chaos. Cullen hurtled around a corner only to collide with a demon; he staggered into the wall as the creature raised a clawed hand with a shriek, ready to slice his flesh to ribbons. But he raised his shield overhead to block the blow and stabbed his sword up into the demon’s chest, splattering the ground with its ichor and felt it disintegrate around his blade.

The thunder of battle was just beyond – he raced down the final corridor and found a knot of Inquisition soldiers fighting demons in the cramped space of a stairwell. A heavy bolt thudded through the skull of the nearest demon, and Cullen caught a fleeting glance of Varric overhead, squinting down the sights of his crossbow to ensure each arrow was deadly.

Cullen elbowed his way through the throng, using his shield to force the demons up the stairs. The soldiers fell into formation behind him, pushing their way to the top of the battlements. Here, it was utter bedlam; demons of every kind spawned endlessly from seething green fissures, spilling from the Fade like mice through cracks. The smell of magic was sharp here where the Veil wore thin, and though he no longer had lyrium to sense it as strongly as he once had, Cullen could feel it, the sheer amount brushing his skin like electrified fingers. Though this was not where the Fade had been torn open, he knew he was not far; these tears in the fabric of dimension and realm were mere pockets of instability, like runs in a stocking where it’d been caught on a nail. The actual Rift would be much larger – large enough, Cullen knew with a clench in his gut – to summon an entire army of demons that would make this battle look like a tavern brawl.

He leapt forward into the fray, but had difficulty finding the place to strike first; there were more Wardens than Inquisition men here, their blue and silver mail like ripples of lightning in the dark, but they were not fighting Cullen’s soldiers. Instead, their weapons were turned on the very creatures they had summoned, staining their armor with blackish blood and turning their foes to ash.

Yet still the demons poured forth, and no matter how many turned to dust by sword, staff or arrow, it was not enough.
There was a whirl of steel, and Cullen raised his sword just in time to meet the one of a Warden. He could just make out dark eyes and darker skin beneath the visor when a woman’s voice ordered, “Down!”

His body obeyed the order before his mind caught up; he ducked down as the Warden slashed her sword where his neck had been, beheading a Fear demon that had reared up from behind. Cullen looked over his shoulder to see it turn to ashes, before turning back to the Warden to find she had already disappeared back into the battle, indistinguishable from her brethren.

So this was no longer between the Grey Wardens and Inquisition, but instead between man and beast. Cullen knew then, to some degree, that Sevanna must’ve been successful before falling. His chest contracted at the thought, as in his mind’s eye, unbidden, he saw her plummet through the air – he forced it back, refusing to give in to his personal horror when he was in the middle of a war.

He ploughed onwards, dodging blades and talons alike. The clang of metal and otherworldly screeching was deafening, like a thunderstorm that had been bound to earth; a maelstrom of teeth and mail and blood. Cullen could feel himself being swept by the storm, a familiar panic crawling up from the base of his spine and along his limbs like thorny vines. Battle never changed, no matter where it was; in the decimated ruins of a temple, or the city streets of Kirkwall, or in the dusty shadows of a Circle Tower. Each breath tasted of blood and iron, the sounds of the dying indiscernible between Templar and mage.

No. Cullen squeezed his eyes shut for a half a moment, knowing it could mean death – but he had been shaken at the thought. These were not Templars and mages; he was not at the Circle, locked in a glowing prism as he watched men turn to monsters and tear open the throats of his friends. He was not a Templar forced to witness the slaughter of his brothers and endure the temptation of a demon that wore a human woman’s face.

The screaming and howling and wet, dull sounds of shredding flesh were the same – but he was not. He had survived death itself and the subsequent walk through hell, only to find himself on the threshold of heaven. Though it had slipped from its grasp it was not yet lost – and he was here to take back the sky.

All the lesser Fade gashes suddenly flared, making Cullen’s ears pop; in the distance, an emerald glow stained the sky, signalling that a Rift – a big one – had been disturbed. It cast shivering lights across the sky like sun-dazzled waters, turning every head and causing the demon’s cries to raise in discordance, victorious at the appearance of their summoned general –

But then, like the hot breath from an enormous mouth, a wind swept through their ranks. The jubilant howls turned to shrieks that were cut short as withered bodies crumbled away, each demon turned to nothingness like wet sand crushed in a fist. There were outcries of shock, clatters of ringing steel as weapons were dropped in incredulity, the whirlpool of battle turned suddenly still.

Reality or nightmare? Cullen did not know; they were indistinguishable now, trapped as he was in a surreal fog of disbelief. Fires turned to blurred halos, each face featureless and insignificant as he pushed himself through the masses with a frustrating slowness. Like moving through waist-deep marshes, each limb heavy and waterlogged, his ears muffled by thick silence, he inched to where the green light had flared, terrified at what he might find yet burning to know.

A sound like a wounded animal pierced through Cullen’s muted world – and everything returned at full volume, like the crash of the ocean on a once quiet shore. Hawke was on all fours, fists beating the ground with a ferocity that made her knuckles bloody, voice pitched in a scream of anger. A short distance away, Cassandra was also on her knees, but her face was tipped towards the sky, teeth bared in a bitten-back howl as tears carved silver lines down her cheeks.
But they were phantoms to Cullen as he pushed himself to the front, desperate to see, desperate to know – and found his answer.

Sevanna was on her back, sprawled in the dirt like something broken and discarded. Her hair was plastered to her snow-white face, her eyelids dark and unmoving, bloodied mouth open in a final sigh. Her arm was thrown out from her body, her hand clutching a shard of starlight; a broken blade that Cullen recognized as the one he’d given her.

It felt as if the world was sinking away from under him, but as Dorian appeared from the shadows on the edges of his vision, Cullen knew he had only begun to fall. “She’s not dead,” Dorian said urgently into his ear, and the words were like lanterns loosed into a starless night sky— not dead, not dead.

Not moving, hardly breathing—but not dead.

The whispers turned to wind and storm, whistling in Cullen’s ears as he tried to regain his bearings – just as he tried to remove his weight from Dorian’s shoulder, or how Varric tried to stop Hawke’s howling with a gentle hand on her back. All around, the Wardens were lowering their weapons, some even dropping them to the ground, but the Inquisition soldiers’ remained half-raised, unsure if the fight would begin again. Bull was lifting Sevanna in his arms with a tenderness surprising for one so large, and she was as white and still as a cradled moon – then she was being carried away, as Hawke’s cries turned to silence, though her fist never ceased striking the ground – and Cassandra was in front of Cullen, swimming into focus like a reflection in a silver river, like the ones that had left gleaming tracks on her face.

“Cullen,” she said, calling him back from drifting tides and distant moons. “Tell us what we need to do.”

It was the bizarre notion that the Seeker needed him – she who needed no one but a sword at her side and a shield in her hand – that roused Cullen from the depths of his shock. He was rattled, yes, but they all were; no one, least of all him, could afford to fall to pieces now. He had been trained for this, to operate on instinct and logic when his private mind was in turmoil, when his emotions left him vulnerable.

“Inquisition,” he called, his hoarse voice foreign to his own ears. “Lower your weapons.”

The answering murmurs were like sand swept by a breeze, but weapons on all sides were stowed in sheaths or slung across backs. One Warden stepped forward, fisting a hand across his chest; his comrades behind him each sank onto one knee and copied the gesture.

“The Grey Wardens surrender,” he stated, his voice carrying for all to hear. “And we stand ready to make up for Clarel’s tragic mistake.”

Cullen answered with a tight nod; he did not think the word mistake was near accurate enough. “The Magister, Livius Erimond,” he said, “is he alive?”

“Yes, but unconscious,” answered the Warden. “He was taken into custody when the archdemon took off.”

“Have him delivered to the Inquisition camp,” Cullen ordered, “and bring your forces as well. I’m sure the Inquisitor -” he choked slightly on the word “- would like to deal with you upon her awakening.”

The Wardens inclined their heads and silently fell into lines between ranks of Inquisition soldiers,
and allowed themselves to be escorted from the courtyard. Slowly the space emptied, becoming
darker as the fires could no longer reflect off of chest plates, the air less dense with smoke as they
burned down to embers. Members of Sevanna’s inner circle drifted by like ghosts – Blackwall,
Sera, Varric. Dorian had gone from Cullen’s side, but Hawke had appeared instead, looking wane
and pale.

“I’m leaving,” she said without preamble, “to Weisshaupt.”

“Now?” Cassandra demanded. “Is that necessary?”

“The rest of the Wardens need to know what happened here,” Hawke replied. Her tone was flat and
faraway. “I did my part. You don’t need me anymore.”

She was already marching away when Cullen found his voice. “Hawke -”

“Say goodbye to Varric for me, would you?” she called over her shoulder; if he was not mistaken,
Cullen could hear the quivering in her voice. And that was it – she flitted out of sight without an
answer, the Champion of Kirkwall sucked away by shadows.

“Do we go after her?” Cassandra asked, but she had neither moved nor drawn her sword to take
action.

Cullen sighed and pinched his nose. There was pressure behind his eyes, like the headache that was
growing behind them threw itself against them like a beast kept in a cage. “Is there any point?”

Cassandra merely grunted; he turned away from where Hawke had gone, the blood her split
knuckles had left upon the stones the only evidence she’d ever been there. They left without
another word between them, striding away from the place that was now eerily calm and silent, like
the placid surface of an ocean that had just felled a fleet of ships.

But outside the fortress was a thrashing tide; soldiers hurried in and out of firelight, turning from
bones to shadow and back again. Many more were on the ground, moaning upon makeshift pallets
or lying silent in wreaths of blood. Cullen could hardly tell between the living and the dead in the
dark; he walked through a graveyard regardless of how many headstones they left behind.

Just beyond the leagues of the wounded, dying or dead was the Inquisition base; not nearly enough
tents set up to protect eyes from the grit of blowing sand or nearly enough hands to carry the bodies
of their fallen brethren back home. Leliana was waiting for Cullen here; Cassandra had already
gone from his side, rounding up the most capable healers to attend those grievously injured. The
Spymaster still clutched her bow in one hand, her near-empty quiver rattling with a handful of
blood-streaked arrows.

“This way,” she said, turning swiftly on her heel to answer his unasked question. He followed her
through the labyrinth, dodging healers and soldiers before coming to a stop before a small tent.
“The Inquisitor is in here. She is being tended to by Solas and the surgeon.”

Cullen nodded wordlessly in thanks; he could not speak for the trembling in his jaw and the
studious clench of his fists. But Leliana, of course, could read the tension around his mouth and
eyes; she laid a hand on his shoulder in a silent gesture of support, before slipping away to tend to
duties they all knew he could not oversee, at least for now.

A distant part of him hated how useless he was being – but it was buried somewhere deep beneath
the fear he had been wrestling for months.

He had gouged a trench in the sand when the canvas was pushed aside, spilling golden light at
Cullen’s feet. Solas ducked out, his usually composed expression becoming almost amused as he saw Cullen frozen there, mouth half-open in question.

“She is resilient as always, Commander,” he said in answer, wearing a faint smile. He slipped away, leaving Cullen to collect himself at the mouth of the tent, afraid to discover if Solas’ definition of “resilient” was different from his.

With a deep breath he pushed his way inside, the heavy canvas muffling the external noise behind him. It was warm and softly-lit within, cramped with several empty cots and sacks of medical supplies. The surgeon stood on the end opposite, her back to him and head bowed so that he could just see the halo of copper hair and edges of her armor –

A wordless noise broke in his throat, alerting them to his presence. The surgeon peered behind her, and Sevanna raised her head to meet his gaze over the other woman’s shoulder – their eyes met like a strike of steel on flint, igniting something so powerful within Cullen that he almost sank to his knees. Yet he was held in place by a creeping frost; hoar cast across his joints like a frozen-over lake as the terrible possibility dawned like a winter sun.

What if – like it had once been before – what if the woman who was before him was not really a woman at all?

He remained motionless at the fore of the tent, his heart twisting painfully beneath his ribs as he counted the flutter of her lashes, the rise and fall of her chest with each breath. She winced as the surgeon finished splinting her wrist, pulling the bindings tight with a sharp jerk.

“You’re lucky it’s not broken,” she said, with a click of her tongue. “Avoid using it as much as you can for the next few days. The bruising should fade by then. And watch the lump on your head – that’ll be tender to the touch for at least a week.”

“Yes,” Sevanna murmured in response, though her gaze never left Cullen’s. The frost had reached his lungs, and he was sure she would see it on his next breath.

The surgeon stuffed her materials back into her bag, patting Sevanna on the knee. “Rest up, my Lady. And don’t you be trying anything,” she added to Cullen as she brushed past, tossing him a lop-sided smile. Then she was gone, the whisper of fabric over sand indicating that he and Sevanna were, finally, alone.

The seconds stretched long and taut between them, every beat of his heart like the ticking of a timepiece. She was still sitting on the cot the surgeon had tended to her, her feet dangling slightly above the ground. She was fidgeting; squirming slightly in her seat, her hands turning to fists and back again on her knees, her spine rigidly straight.

“Cullen?” she ventured, when he still did not speak. And it was what broke him – to hear such hesitation in the voice he knew so well and loved so dearly, unable to tell if it was genuine, or deception by a clever-tongued monster.

“No,” he blurted, remaining exactly where he was; he couldn’t bear to move closer until he was certain this was no demon’s trick.

She blinked, her mouth opening once in silence. “I – what do you mean?”

“Are you real?” he blurted, remaining exactly where he was; he couldn’t bear to move closer until he was certain this was no demon’s trick.

She blinked, her mouth opening once in silence. “I – what do you mean?”

“Are you real?” he repeated. Though he kept his voice soft she flinched anyway, comprehension emerging in her eyes. “You were….you fell. How can you be real?”

Her lips parted in a sharp intake of air; an achingly familiar habit, yet one too easily mimicked or
imagined. A mind could play the cruelest of tricks when in denial.

She stretched a hand out towards him, reaching across the void between them. It was trembling. “Touch me, Cullen,” she pleaded in a whisper. “Please. Feel that I am real.”

Oh, but those words and that voice were hers – yet Cullen was not convinced until he saw the shining of her eyes; the shimmer over the green he could never forget, and witnessed the tears bead along the red-gold lashes –

Demons couldn’t cry.

He moved forward so quick he startled her, but he was swallowing her sound of surprise before she could even finish it. He crashed his mouth to hers with bruising force, tasting the blood that had painted her lips. Her exhalation was muffled against his nose, but she was already yanking him closer, winding trembling fingers into his furs so he couldn’t part from her if he tried.

He felt her tears on his cheeks and tasted them on his tongue. A broken whisper of “Oh, Maker” spilled repeatedly from his lips, punctuated by their mutual assault. Her entire body was trembling against his and he held her gently, terrified if he held her tighter she would dissipate into the dream he feared she was made from, and he would wake up in a world where she had not come back. A sound of despair wrenched itself from some deep place buried within him, spilled from his throat like the song of a lovebird that discovered its mate had died.

Sevanna gently pulled away so she could look into his face, her fingertips soft along his lips. “Oh, Cullen,” she whispered, tears turning the words thick. “I am so sorry.”

“Don’t. . .” he could not bear her apology, when he was the one who had failed. Failed to keep her safe, had failed to keep her within this world. He kissed her again to taste the salt on her lips, to smell the smoke and iron of her skin, to sample the velvet heat of her mouth. She arched into him, fingers trailing over his cheek to trace the shell of his ear.

“Don’t apologize,” he said huskily when he resurfaced. “You have nothing – Maker, I should have been there –”

She silenced him the same way he had her. “But you were,” she breathed. He felt her hand slide into the space between them, touching the coin at her throat. “I have your luck on my side, remember?”

He choked on what was half laugh and half sob. Her eyes were shining, yet they were not quite met by the smile that curled her mouth. He, too, touched the coin strung at her neck.

“Still,” he murmured, “when you next decide to take a stroll through the Fade – or a jaunt through time – let me know, would you? I’d like to pack a bag.”

She made a sound similar to his, another tear slipping down her cheek. “I’ll have a sign made: ‘If lost, return to Commander Cullen’.”

But his sudden levity evaporated at the word, and he cupped the back of her head to bring her close. “On my word,” he vowed against her lips so that she might taste his oath, “I will not lose you again.”

He surged forward once more, and found her equal in passion; the world fell away and there was only Sevanna, warm and thrumming with life in his arms, pouring a wordless cry of pleasure-pain down his throat –
There was an abrupt racket of throat-clearing behind Cullen, shattering the hot and desperate state they had slipped into. He did not need to turn to see who it was; only Cassandra could condense unknown fathoms of disapproval into one wordless sound.

He didn’t care that the Seeker was standing right behind them, witness to their private moment; she was interrupting them as far as he was concerned, and blight it all if she had to wait. Cullen threaded one hand into Sevanna’s hair, anchoring her to him, and twisted slightly to hold up his index finger behind him.

One minute.

Cassandra made a token noise of disgust. He ignored her. Though they mutually preferred no audience to their affections, Sevanna did not pull away; instead, she pointedly hooked one calf over the back of his knee and didn’t smother a soft groan. Cullen could practically hear Cassandra’s eyes grind around in their sockets.

He finally broke away in one airless motion; her mouth tried to follow, seeking his once more. Her lips were crushed and glistening from their kiss, her eyes glazed like frost over leaves. He was tempted to relent in submerge in her again and risk the Seeker’s wrath, but he knew it was time to secede.

He withdrew slowly from her, remaining by her side as he turned to face the Seeker – and was surprised, yet not embarrassed, to discover that they had more of an audience than he expected. Cassandra’s brows were drawn in one thunderous line, arms folded over her breastplate. Leliana was just behind her, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. Accompanying them was a tall, bronze-skinned woman in a Warden’s plate; she had a broad nose and a spill of small black braids, her dark eyes familiar.

“This is Warden Fell,” Leliana said, indicating the woman next to her, who inclined her head. “She is here to inquire of the whereabouts of Warden Stroud.”

Cullen heard Sevanna draw a deep breath next to him. “Dead,” she said quietly. “He elected to remain behind and distract the Nightmare so we could escape.”

“The Nightmare?” Leliana repeated.

“A monstrous demon,” said Cassandra, exchanging dark looks with Sevanna, “and the general of Corypheus’ demon host.”

“You fought the Nightmare demon?” Fell asked, and Cullen recognized her voice as the warrior who had helped him avoid the Fear demon on the ramparts.

“Not directly,” said Sevanna. “It was more like an - an aspect of it. Its puppet. It must have been focusing on getting through the Rift.” She pulled down the neck of her tunic, revealing an expanse of skin. “We were lucky it was distracted. I don’t think I would’ve survived being lifted by it.”

Leliana murmured quietly in shock, but Cullen’s sound of outrage was much louder; there were bruises along Sevanna’s throat and jaw, wreathing her neck like dark, ugly blooms. It looked like she had been lifted by her neck and squeezed, with the intent of choking the very life out of her –

She laid a hand over his, which had turned into a fist and gave him a significant look. Slowly, he let his breath out and relaxed his hands, though he did not let hers leave his.

“But it did not succeed in its plans,” Fell pressed, “and now we must consider the next question: what will become of the Wardens?”
Leliana remained impassive, but Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. Cullen himself was at a loss to decide; he had reaped the benefits of second chance more than anyone, yet the Wardens had been proven vulnerable. They already had one dark voice whispering in their ears, and had succumbed to a second; could the Inquisition really accept a force that was so susceptible to what could not be fought?

Sevanna was looking evenly at Fell, her fingers still twined with Cullen’s. “If you were to retreat to Weisshaupt,” she began, “what would become of you?”

“There are no more Wardens of significant rank,” Fell said bluntly. “To try and rebuild would be chaos; without order, we would crumble where we stand.”

Sevanna exchanged glances with Cassandra, who was already giving a minute shake of her head. Sevanna’s eyes flicked back to Fell. “But if the Inquisition were to offer a treaty – a way to rebuild the Grey Wardens and regain your honor – would you help us?”

Cassandra grunted, and Fell glanced over at the sound. “Is the Inquisition making such an offer, or just you?”


Fell’s eyes glinted. “And for our crimes?”

“We all make mistakes,” said Sevanna, her left hand curling into a fist around the Anchor. “No one, not even a Warden, is infallible.”

There was a beat of silence, before Fell bowed her head. “Thank you, my Lady. Shall I inform the rest of the Wardens?”

“I’d like to, if you don’t mind,” said Sevanna, fingers tightening against Cullen’s. “I think it would be best if they hear of Stroud from someone who was there.”

“I…appreciate that.” Fell shifted from foot to foot. “I would like to offer my sorrows, Inquisitor. That must not have been an easy decision.”

“No,” Sevanna agreed heavily, allowing Cullen to help her to her feet. She did not let go of his hand. “It never is.”

They filed out of the tent with Leliana in the lead; she shepherded them through the darkened camp to larger space where the Wardens had gathered. Some Inquisition soldiers hovered at the edges, still watching their former adversaries with wary eyes. The Inquisitor’s companions were present as well: Dorian and Bull, both as filthy and careworn as Sevanna, with Sera scuffing her feet in the sand beside them; Solas near the back, ever watchful and appraising; and Blackwall in the no-man’s-land between the two forces, caught between the promises to one and bound by oath to the other.

Cullen finally relinquished her hand so that she may take her place at the head of the crowd, staring down a divided legion with the bruises on her throat and blood in her hair. Though there was no order to, the Wardens knelt again, many bending their necks as if awaiting the proverbial sentencing sword she carried.

But – yet again – she delivered mercy instead. “Warden Stroud is dead,” she said, her voice sharp and clear in the silence. “He gave his life to strike a blow against a servant of the Blight. We will honor his sacrifice, and remember how he exemplified the ideals of the Grey Wardens; even as
Corypheus tried to destroy you all from within. The Inquisition offers full pardon for the atrocities you were manipulated to commit, in the hopes you will aid us in our fight to save Thedas.” She held their full attention, every eye on her, every breath waiting on her next words. “In war, victory – and we are still at war. Honor your fallen comrade. Help us. Fight for the Inquisition.”

Her words were met with a loud cry, a medley of grief for Stroud and answer to her plea. Blackwall closed his eyes in obvious relief, while Cassandra crossed her arms and tilted her chin in disapproval next to Cullen. He, however, found himself relieved; he didn’t like to think what might happen if they chose to banish the Wardens and leave the lands defenceless against a Blight. Vulnerable though the Wardens might be, they were a massive force with centuries of favours owed by many countries and would undoubtedly have information on Corypheus’ plans.

Cassandra, Leliana and several healers had converged on Sevanna, rapidly discussing rotations, placement of the injured and where to house their new allies. “As many to a tent as possible,” Sevanna was saying, impatiently brushing the hair from her eyes. “Make sure the wounded get priority – shelter, beds, food – have those unable to stand on duty but can still move around get the fires going for meals.”

“We won’t have enough tents, Inquisitor,” a healer pressed, “What can we do for shelter?”

“We could scour Adamant, see if there are quarters to spare for the night. Set up what is only necessary for the council in my tent, and use the Commander’s for the injured.”

“As you wish, Inquisitor,” Cullen spoke up, frowning slightly. “But may I ask where I’ll be staying?”

Her eyes caught his, and something heavy and warm dropped into his stomach. “I suppose you’ll have to share with me, Commander,” Sevanna said evenly. “If that’s acceptable.”

She didn’t give him the opportunity to answer; she strode away, leaving him gaping in the sand next to goggle-eyed healers. The Fade, it seemed, had spat out a much bolder Sevanna, and he would be a liar to say he didn’t like it.

The fires they built for their dead would burn for days.

Cullen spent most of the night sweating beneath the moon, carrying the countless bodies to where they would be burned, piled like wood for a pyre. There was no discrimination; Inquisition was laid next to Warden, leaving only the ashes of vanquished demons to be scattered by the wind. There were too many to carry back home, too many to properly bury – and so they gave them to the sky, sending them up to the stars until they were obscured by the very smoke they were offered.

When he finally returned to camp, it was to discover Sevanna still running at full steam; she brought bundles of herbs and bandages to the toiling healers, clasped hands with those who laid in agony on pallets, or packed poultices with her bare hands and distributed them among the wounded. Cullen retrieved two bowls of stew – scraped from the bottom of the pots, indicating that most had been fed – and tracked her down, cornering her among a stack of supplies.

“You need to eat,” he said gently, pressing the bowl into her hands. “You must be exhausted.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him with a thin smile. But he caught the tremble of her hands as she raised the stew to her lips. “Have the bodies been recovered?”

“Yes,” he said heavily. “They’re being burned right now.”
Her hand found his and squeezed; they gulped down their stew in silence, sharing the wordless grief of so many lost lives. When she had finished her share, wiping her chin with the back of a hand, Cullen took the bowl back. “Time to rest,” he told her. “You’ve been through hell.”

“I must look like it, too,” she said wearily, allowing him to lead her throw the maze of tents. Hers was easy to find; crammed with a table piled with maps and scrolls and chests of supplies. Sevanna ducked inside ahead of him and he took a moment to fiddle with the ties at the door, letting the canvas drop and block out the night. He opened his mouth to speak as he turned, to comment that she looked beautiful as always, but the words died on his lips.

She stood in the middle of the tent, her back to him, head down and shoulders hunched, her arms wrapped so tightly around herself that her fingers were turning purple against her sides.

“Sevanna -?” he began urgently, hurrying to her side to see what hurt – and found her face screwed up in a silent scream, her teeth clenched against a sob.

“Oh,” was all he could say, sounding weak in his own ears. “Oh, Maker, Sevanna -”

Her sob was like the shatter of glass; her knees buckled and he caught her before she hit the ground, kneeling with her as he took all her weight upon him.

“S-Stroud,” she wept, fists curling in his furs. “I-it’s my f-fault -”

Cullen pressed her face into his neck, stroking his hands over her shuddering back, saying nothing because any rejection of guilt would only sound like a lie to her.

“It w-was so t-errible,” she gasped against him, tears soaking his collar. “Oh, C-Cullen, there were sp-spiders everywhere, and s-so many demons – a-and the Divine -”

She quaked in his arms and he held her tighter, feeling as helpless as a sword with no edge.

“But the worst,” she whispered brokenly. “The w-worst of it – the Fade, the Nightmare, everything – was that I might d-die –and you didn’t, you w-wouldn’t know…” She took a deep throbbing breath, her fingers winding tightly into his hair.

“I wouldn’t know what?” he prompted gently, brushing her ear with his lips. “Tell me.”

She became rigid in his arms; a brief transformation to ice before she softened, melting into him the way she hadn’t let herself before, releasing the softest of breaths like a butterfly brushing against his throat.

“I love you.”

So unexpected were the words that he hardly dared believe he heard correctly; he didn’t realize he was crushing her in his embrace and as unmoving as stone until she was struggling to see him, trapped against his body.

“Cullen?” she whispered, her voice suddenly hesitant. “I -”

At that moment, his biggest fear was that she would apologize - that she would be sorry for loving him and telling him so, and regret the most beautiful words he had ever heard. He was so afraid such an expression would be like an exotic bird released into grey skies, never to behold again or bound to earth – a piece of extraordinary beauty that would be gone forever, the last bit of color in a washed-out world.
He silenced her with a kiss, putting every sentiment into it that he might trip over in speech. He could feel her confusion in the slackness of her lips, the uncertainty in the fists against his chest.

“Maker,” he breathed against her mouth. “How I have longed to hear you say that – I love you, more than anything.”

She uttered a soft cry and threw her weight against him; he welcomed it, coveted it, crushing her against his chest and lifting her higher so could feel her, feel all of her, and inscribe her skin with the words he’d been holding back for so long.

I love you. I love you. They whispered it back and forth in an endless chant, divulged to eyes, ears and lips that hungered for every inch of the other, reveling in this newfound freedom. I love you. She said it just as urgently as he did, making his heart ache with an unfamiliar joy as she repeated it over and over, guaranteeing there was no room for him to doubt it. They spelled it with insistent fingers, with palms over soft curves and sculpted edges, mapping each other with a touch that did not heed their armor.

Yes, he had written a thousand contracts in his blood, but Cullen would sign a thousand others to ensure he would hear those words from her mouth forevermore, and he would outlive every last day to make sure he said them back.
Feverpitch

Chapter Summary

Concerning love, lust, and timing.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while *hides face* sorry! Real life takes up too much time. I suffered with a lot of block with this chapter, as we are finally getting into some really saucy bits and, well, I suppose I was really nervous to share. I'd hate to hype it all up with UST and then write it like *fart noise*. So hopefully you enjoy, leave a comment if you fancy, and I swear to god there are no April Fool's shenanigans here. This is no dream sequence.

Sleep that night was difficult – as fleeting as fireflies over the reflective surface of a lake, kept shallow by restless dreams. Cullen himself hardly dared to truly rest; he remained vigilant over Sevanna as she slept fitfully by his side, his brief fits of dozing interrupted by his determination to see her through the nightmares. She did not thrash and cry out as he often did, coming to with muscles tensed to strike and teeth bared against invisible assailants. No, Sevanna slept like hunted prey, burrowing fruitlessly into darkened crannies to escape an ever-looming danger, sleeping on a knife’s edge. She whimpered and flinched and turned rigid, knuckles clenched so tightly around the bed sheets they turned purple. It was not easy to pull her from these haunted places, deaf as she was to the world beyond her nightmare; yet with gentle words and his hands stroking down her spine, Cullen managed to call her back whenever she was submerged in a fresh undertow of dream. She would lay, trembling, in his arms afterwards, the glassy reflection of her eyes upturned to his face, watching as if to make sure he would not disappear before them.

They didn’t speak beyond his murmured comforts; reassurances that he was right there, that she was safe, that she was loved. He knew her throat was raw from swallowing a constant knot of despair, the one she had let rupture in the privacy of their shared tent. Her tears had run dry before her sorrows, given the many she laboured under, and she as limp and mute as a wrung-out rag when Cullen helped her to her feet to prepare for bed. Yet he didn’t mind her silence; her last words before falling into fitful slumber were a whispered confession of love, and they carried him through the tumultuous night, like luminous moths that guided him through the dark.

Somewhere before the edge of dawn they both fell asleep; she exhausted by the relentless onslaught, he from standing sentinel over her. She seemed better pressed tightly to his chest, tucked beneath his chin so she could feel the drum of his heart beneath her cheek. Cullen himself was lulled by her breathing, finally turned slow and deep, and dozed with her before the camp began to wake around them. The hours ahead would involve the arduous trek back to Griffon’s Wing Keep, the restocking of supplies, and directing their forces back towards Skyhold. It would be a long, limping journey back, as their numbers were nearly doubled by the Grey Wardens, and with more
injured than they had horses to carry them. They would once more be splitting up the Inquisition for the trip: the Inquisitor, her advisors, her inner circle and those hand-picked by Leliana for extra protection; followed by Rylen and Barris leading the bulk of the soldiers, Templars and Wardens; and finally those who needed a few day’s rest to heal. Cullen didn’t particularly like dividing his forces this way, as it would be leaving both Skyhold and the travelling parties vulnerable. But he had little else choice, unless they remained at the Keep until everyone was well enough to travel, which Josephine’s increasingly harried letters informed them was not an option. And he had to admit, he’d had enough of the desert.

The day’s activities came with the sun; Cullen awoke to the sound of shouted orders and the much stamping of feet. Sevanna’s warmth was still pressed along his side, and when he cracked open his eyes to look down at her it was to find her already watching him, the shadows behind her eyes just as dark as they’d been the night before. Her lips parted when his gaze met hers, dewy with the tongue that darted over them as their eyes locked, swollen and red from sinking in teeth to hold back a night’s worth of cries.

He sucked in a breath to say something – but hesitated, unsure of exactly what. Good morning seemed false, and how are you was redundant; his answer lay in the hollows beneath her eyes, the pallor of her skin from an ill night’s sleep. So instead he lifted a hand to brush his knuckles along her cheek, and when her eyes fluttered shut his heart matched the rhythm, and the ache within it softened.

She pushed herself up on one arm, catching his hand with hers so that it never left her skin, and slid upwards so that her lips were over his. A reverent exhalation escaped him as she settled her weight against his chest; soft breasts pushed into hard planes, a slender thigh sliding between his own. She kissed him softly, like a brush of rose petals against his lips, and opened like a bloom to the sun. The hand resting on her cheek tangled itself in her hair, while the other slid to the curve of her waist – and he was lost. The desert was forgotten, the long journey ahead evaporating like mist; all he knew was the salt of her tears gone dry on her lips, the shirt that was bunching up beneath his exploring hand, and the soft shift of her weight as she threw a leg over his hips –

He inhaled sharply as she pressed down on him, settling herself directly atop his swollen length. She silenced the following moan with a kiss that felt like fire, and Cullen knew what she wanted – knew what he needed – and released his grip on the world like palms torn open by rope.

They had been such fools – fools to think they did not live on borrowed time, calling on a debt that could only be paid in blood. They were fools to believe their days together were endless, like something intangible as love could keep them safe from a burning down world; delusional to think, for one moment, that they could afford the hesitation between them to dissolve as slowly as a river erodes its banks.

But no more; no more skirting around what lay obvious in their path, no more blushing like two virgins at the explicit. They had been denying themselves for so unbearably long, allowing interruption and self-doubt to rob them of what they both wanted most.

Cullen dug his fingers into Sevanna’s hips, heard her whimper into his mouth as he bruised the tender flesh there. His other hand tugged her head back, breaking their kiss but baring that long expanse of elegant neck. He wiggled down, guiding her body up along his so he could drag his teeth along her throat, feeling her soft cry as much as hearing it. The fullness of her breast bumped his chin and he groaned, his hips bucking instinctively. Sevanna gasped as he rocked her with his thrust, which turned swiftly into a sharp cry that she muffled with a hand clapped over her mouth when his lips found the tip of a breast through her shirt.
The long, low sound she made as he suckled the stiff bud, wetting the fabric with his tongue and breath, was something to die for. The last thing he could ever hear and he would be left satisfied, deaf to everything else but this bit of music born of longing, of love, of *lust*. He gave her a broad lap of his tongue so he could discover what other melodies he might elicit from her, and was rewarded with a mewling chord, a leap in her pounding heart.

Despite his greediness, his eagerness to nip and suck until he knew the orchestra of her pleasure, Sevanna had managed to work one her hands between their bodies, sliding it along the heaving lines of his abdomen. He did not, *could* not, anticipate the next sensation, lost as he was in the teasing of hidden flesh – and when her hand pressed against his cock it was *rapture*, a pleasure so intense it blinded him in its glory.

He could not help it; he had always been a vocal lover, and Sevanna drew him to heights he had never known. But at the sensation of her hand wrapping around the base of his throbbing cock he cried out so sharply that it returned them to earth with a startling bump.

He was suddenly aware of how quiet it had gotten outside the tent, and they both froze – his lips fastened over a breast and his erection in her palm. A dozen frenzied heartbeats had passed when there was a high-pitched giggle just beyond the canvas, and an outbreak of hushed voices. Cullen screwed his eyes shut, the familiar fusion of frustration and embarrassment flooding through him. *Why, why* did their tent have be in the middle of the entire damned camp?

Yet even worse was what came next; a dulcet clearing of throat that Cullen knew all too well. “Inquisitor,” came Leliana’s voice. “It is best we break camp before the day gets too hot.”

“Thank you, Leliana,” Sevanna answered curtly, a little too quickly to *not* sound suspicious, and Cullen could have sworn he heard the Spymaster give a quiet laugh.

“Cullen,” Sevanna murmured in his ear. She still had not removed her hand from him, though he had admittedly wilted from the interruption. It was with great regret he abandoned her breast, tilting his head up so he could see her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright, and for but a moment he was reminded of her poison fever, when she had laid dying in his arms, and he was reminded of how cruel time could be. But her lips on his brow chased away the darkness, reminded him that the fever in her skin *now* was born of passion, and one that he could summon again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered hoarsely against her breast. “I want – Maker, I *need*.”

“I know,” she murmured, “me too.”

He exhaled harshly. “Andraste preserve me, but…I don’t want the entire Inquisition to know that – um, what we’re up to.”

Her hand hadn’t moved, but the pressure was barely more than a caress. “Do you want to…wait?”

“No,” he groaned, half frustration and half raw need. “Maker, no, but I – I know I won’t be able to…to remain quiet.” He felt her sharp intake of breath and craned his neck back to look at her. Her eyes were glassy and full of longing, teeth worrying at her lip and *Maker*, Cullen could almost feel those teeth on his skin.

“You have no idea,” he said softly, touching the sweep of her cheekbone, “how deeply you affect me.”

“Then show me,” she whispered, a near-naked plea in her voice. “I don’t care who hears.”

Cullen squeezed his eyes shut again; though he was loathe to admit it, *he* did. The Chantry’s shame
still ran deep in him, and some things were meant to be kept private, when done at all. But beneath the boyish embarrassment, there lurked a much darker concern - the manner of his self-restraint and the frayed thing it was, sawed at by a blunt knife until it would inexorably snap like a violin’s string. He could barely control himself in such innocent endeavours as kissing Sevanna; how would he keep himself together with her writhing and willing beneath him? What if this was the chip in the arch stone and all his discipline left him, crumbling into dust while he went blind in his own pleasure? What if he hurt her?

Even in his waking hours, the nightmares returned to haunt him.

“I want to,” he whispered roughly. “I will. At Skyhold, where I…” He hesitated. Where what? Where he might keep her safe from himself? Where had these fears been every other time they came so excruciatingly close to being together, and why did they need to return now?

“Alright,” Sevanna murmured, brushing her lips over his temple. “We’ll wait until we’re home.”

Though there was nothing but understanding in her words, Cullen could not help the stab of guilt. He did not want to disappoint her, and he did not want to go another day without loving her in every manner he was capable; the selfish part buried within him could not bear it.

He drew a shaky breath, his lungs feeling as though they were full of ice; aching, freezing, turning his breath to frost. He had never really known that facing intimacy would take a completely different sort of bravery.

“There are ways,” he said, voice breaking on the words. “We can… I can… I want -”

Articulacy had abandoned him, but his body was already betraying him; one hand had slid between them and pressed against where she rested on his hips. She gasped at the sensation, a shiver going through her like a ripple across a lake. Encouraged, Cullen rubbed a knuckle gently against her, a tiny circle in the spot many a Templar had regaled him about when he was a blushing teenage virgin; a spot he had been delighted to discover on his first lover, the spot he trained himself to find like a tailor for a pin.

Sevanna moaned low and velvety, arching into him as her body softened. Cullen kept his leisurely pace, pressing her against his chest so that he could experience every shudder, feel every whimper on his skin as he touched her. He could feel her dampness through her smalls, was nearly scalded by the heat of her arousal. He buried his head into her neck, pushing the heel of his palm against her as his fingers stretched for the edge of the soaked smalls, breathing hard and fast as he ground himself along her thigh –

“Oh, Cullen – stop!” she begged, with such desperation that he froze, terrified he had harmed her.

“Maker, I’m sorry -”

“No,” she said emphatically, pushing herself up to look at him. He could not help but avert his eyes in shame; but her fingertips beneath his jaw coaxed him to meet her gaze. She looked very solemn despite the flush in her cheeks and tremble to her lips. “I want this, Cullen,” she said, a careful stress to each word so there was no room for misinterpretation. “I want this – all of it, but I don’t want it while you go without.” She touched her forehead to his; it felt just as feverish as his. “I want to touch you so badly – I want to know every inch of you with my lips, and I want to love you in a way words cannot express.”

“As do I -” he began, but she shushed him with a gentle finger.
“I want us to do it all together,” she whispered, and he shivered at the erotic implication. “So we’ll wait, together.”

“You are…” He trailed off, releasing a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “I have never felt this way.”

“Nor have I,” she replied softly, “and I’m certain it will be the death of me.”

He huffed a small laugh and nudged his face against her until he found her lips, kissing her soundlessly until he was sure the earth had righted itself beneath him, for he could have sworn he was tumbling through the sky.

But ready or not, the responsibilities beyond had grown impatient; there was a vehement “AHEM” just outside their tent that made it clear Cassandra was not in the mood for waiting. They reluctantly untangled themselves and hurried to dress, Sevanna raking Cullen’s errant curls back into submission.

Before they left the tent, the plate of Inquisitor and Commander once more in place, he pulled back on her wrist. “Thank you,” he said quietly, “for understanding- and for your patience.” He brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “I don’t deserve a woman like you.”

“Let me decide what you do or don’t deserve,” she said gently. “You are worth the wait, Cullen. Although I don’t think it will make a difference, she added, pulling herself from his grip, “whether we’re in Skyhold or not, when I’m screaming your name for everyone to hear.”

She slipped out at the tent, leaving Cullen to jerk back at her statement and having to deal with consequential flood of throbbing heat to his groin. When he had composed himself, he followed after her; thankfully, she had not gotten far, and he caught her up as she wound her way through the camp.

“So you promise, then,” he husked, leaning close to speak into her ear.

“Promise what?” she said playfully.

His voice dropped to a low rumble. “That you’ll scream.”

She did not reply, but his answer was in the sharp breath she took and the colour darkening her cheeks. He couldn’t help but smile, but it was almost painful on skin that felt stretched too tight, imprisoned in a body simmering with such arousal he was certain it rose off him in clouds of steam.

It was going to be a very long journey back.

* * *

The return march to Griffon Wing Keep was uneventful, though the smoke rising heavenward behind them was a grim reminder of all those they left behind. It wasn’t until they had turned in the direction of Skyhold that the sobering cloud over them all lifted; though the cost had been great, the victory was greater by far. Corypheus no longer had a legion of demons waiting beyond the Veil like a frenzy of sharks circling the shallows, and his hold over the Wardens had been broken. Their addition to the Inquisition’s ranks more than made up for the soldiers they lost at Adamant, but Cullen couldn’t help but feel as though they’d gotten the losing bet; these men and women were not those he’d carefully trained from day one, nor were they soldiers who served because they wanted to, but because their reins had been put in the hands of a different master. He had no ill will towards them, but he felt a certain unease surrounded by those whose minds’ were bent so easily to the enemy, whose mail of silver and blue recalled a dark tower and the young man
who’d been ruined within it.

But he ordered himself not to dwell on it; and it was almost easy, with his feet turned towards home and Sevanna at his side. They would be returning to Skyhold quickest, as their party of thirty was mounted on horses or piled in wagons. Leliana had wanted to thin the ranks even further to travel more swiftly, but Cullen rebuked. Sevanna was still injured, and though she valiantly tried to disguise it, she was still drained by her time in the Fade. Those who’d been with her hardly fared better: Cassandra was forgoing her usual chest plate due to the bindings around her healing ribs; Bull had deep wounds gouged into his back that seemed intent on reopening at the slightest provocation; Dorian claimed he sprained his wrist, and had pretended to come over faint when Cullen accidentally bumped it.

Even those who’d been on the mortal side of the Veil were worn down. Solas had been sapped by the quantity of healing he’d done, although he declined a mount when it was offered, choosing instead to walk alongside them, using his staff as a walking stick. Blackwall looked older, his eyes more lined; and Sera was more irritable than usual, and refused to discard the pieces of her favourite, and now broken, bow. Varric was already spinning gaudy tales of how he’d been backed against the ramparts with two demons bearing down upon him; though Cullen suspected the talking was to fill the silent space Hawke had in her wake.

But spirits began to lift as they left the Western Approach behind; it was as if life returned to them along with the world, barren sands fading to scrubby plains, gradually becoming more green and lush. It took three days to leave the desert, and it was though they’d left the recent hardships alongside their footprints in the sand. Or they did, at least, for now – but it was certain to return when this shining blip between battles past and those in the future was gone, and they were back in the walls that would not witness the return of far too many soldiers.

It had been four days since he and Sevanna had agreed to put aside their intimacy, and Cullen had discovered riding a horse while burning up from a lascivious fever was about the worst thing to do. He grew more bow-legged by the day, and was always having to hobble around with a persistent half-hard cock. Dorian began to cheekily remark how “tense” and “stiff” Cullen was, and he was reaching the point of cornering the mage somewhere private so he could throttle him.

Sevanna was clearly faring no better, though she handled it with infinite more grace than he. She, at least, could hold up her end of the conversation in company; whereas he was constantly distracted by her lips, the slope of her neck, the beads of sweat collecting along her collarbones. They still shared a tent at night, though now with a few inches of scorching space between them, knowing their skin was as thirsty as tinder and would set ablaze by the slightest touch.

He was quite certain his recent surliness and Sevanna’s fluster was not lost on their companions – at least, most of their companions. Though she was like a wolf in the heat of battle, Cassandra proved that a downy lamb lay dormant beneath the teeth and ferocity. On the fifth day of travel, when they stopped for a meal and to rest the horses, the Seeker watched Sevanna gingerly dismount her horse and enquired in what seemed to be her loudest volume: “Are you sore from riding, Inquisitor?”

Sevanna straightened slowly, before turning on her heel to stare Cassandra dead in the eyes with a perfectly composed expression, and replied, “I wish.”

Cullen just about died in his saddle; Dorian had slumped over in his, howling with laughter as Cassandra turned the shade of a beetroot and stammered an apology. Bull was shaking his head as though deeply disappointed in Cullen, and for a single lust-driven moment Cullen wished he possessed Bull’s nonchalance about sex; he and Dorian certainly didn’t seem to mind a bit of noise.
Indeed, he was nearing the end of his tolerance. Each day was like another coin in a fraying purse, and Cullen was certain he was going to explode. Either he would have to swap tents and bunk with Blackwall just to resist the lovely and equally aroused temptation that slept next to him, or he was going to snap. He had half-formed, feverish fantasies of pulling Sevanna from her saddle and over his lap, gallop fast and faraway until they came across the far-flung corner of a field, where he could claim her with no audience but the wind and the sky.

Unexpectedly, however, he was not the one to give in first.

They were eight days into travelling, and they had come across a fast-moving river. They set up camp for the night on its banks, and water was drawn for some much-needed bathing. Basins had been brought to the Inquisitor’s tent, warmed with mage-fire, which Cullen had been grateful to discover when he entered, alone and weary. He stripped himself of his dusty armour, discovering there was still sand in the crevices, and with a tired sigh stepped naked into the largest basin. There was soap, scented with dawn lotus – and he groaned. It was the same soap Sevanna used, and he could perfectly recollect the scent of it on her skin; a memory perhaps too vivid, as it recalled the heat to his blood. He poured water over his head, groaning as it softened the stiffness in his muscles and sluiced down other, differently stiff places.

Trying to ignore the ache between his thighs, he set about scrubbing himself clean. The water around his calves became darker as he washed the sweat, dirt and frustration away, careful to skirt the places he knew would be raw to the touch, instead focusing doggedly in less inflammatory regions.

He had almost begun to relax, keeping his mind firmly away from his cock and exactly what he wanted to do with it when the tent flap was thrown aside, startlingly him. It was Sevanna; she was halfway in when she spotted him in the corner of the tent, where he could be unseen from the outside. She froze, staring; he had no towel within reach and was naked beneath her scrutiny. Her eyes travelled slowly from his golden, damp curls to the broadness of his chest, down the taper of his hips and to the very spot that was so desperate for her attention. Cullen felt light-headed, dizzy from the surprise and the fact that Sevanna’s expression became hungry, with a lick of her lips that had him groaning at the sight.

Suddenly coming to, she grabbed a scroll from atop the nearest chest and disappeared beyond the tent again. Cullen stumbled from the basin as though drunk, groping for a towel; absolutely terrified that she would come back, and yet more terrified that she wouldn’t.

She was issuing orders to someone, though he couldn’t quite hear what over the roaring in his ears. He had just wrapped a towel over his hips with shaking hands when she slipped back inside, and did not see her tie the bindings that would keep the flap shut.

“My – my apologies, I didn’t mean for -” His stammering began to render him incoherent. He felt like a boy caught misbehaving, though he knew he’d done nothing wrong. He felt as if she had caught him more naked than just bare skin; never had he stood before someone so vulnerable, with his body in a state the Chantry had once told him he must disregard.

But Sevanna didn’t answer; she was stalking toward him with a blaze in her eyes so bright he retreated, his back bumping into the table strewn with their reports. She pinned him between it and her body, sinking down to her knees and yanking the towel from his waist before he could react.

His erection sprang free, heavy and aching, and it seemed to stun her as much as he. She studied it with a rapt expression, unconsciously wetting her lips and as she braced her palms against his thighs Cullen knew what she intended, and Maker, he was powerless to stop it –
“Wait,” he rasped, fisting a hand in her hair to halt her. “I can’t – I won’t be able to -”

She stood up so swiftly that he grieved, convinced they had started what would not be finished for two more agonizing weeks – but she reached around him to snatch one of his gloves that he had left upon the table, and stuffed it in his mouth.

It tasted of sweat and leather and dust, but he did not care. He inhaled sharply through his nose, vision nearly splitting in his exhilaration. His head fell back as soft hands skimmed over his heaving chest, the ridges of his abdomen, and the ruts of his hips. Yet he caught at her wrists, afraid, as he always was, that she was testing him, and would find him lacking.

She brought his hands to her lips. “Let me,” she whispered, and there was such pleading in her voice that he did.

He couldn’t watch her sink slowly to her knees, consumed as he was by the fire she was tracing over his skin, knowing his control would take leave at the sight of her reverence. Her fingers were braced against the firmness of his hips and he could hear her breathing just as raggedly as he knew it by the hot, serrated puff of breath over his cock.

The leather in his mouth muffled the drawn out moan; he reflexively bucked forward, desperately seeking her, the weeping head nearly raw with desire. He didn’t think he could bear any teasing, and his mouth was moving around the glove to utter a silent prayer that Sevanna would be merciful –

The first tentative touch of her lips around his head was euphoric, and the glove deadened the mangled cry of her name and the Maker’s. Slim, trembling fingers wrapped themselves at his base, fitting so flawlessly in her hand that he was certain nothing else had been so divinely planned, that they had been crafted to fit together before the stars were even placed in the heavens.

Cullen could not endure his blindness anymore; he forced his eyes open and let his chin fall to his chest so he could watch her, to drink in the sight of her kneeling before him, burnished hair glinting in the brazier’s light. No royal mural or collection of precious jewels compared to this beautiful vision before him, nor had his dreams been as magnificent as she swallowed him with agonizing slowness. And when she tipped her head back so her heated gaze met his, Cullen knew, for the first time in so long, that the fever in his blood was not born of blue, but green.

He could sense her inexperience and uncertainty in the timid stroke of her hand, but finesse was the farthest thing from his scattered mind. Not when his heart was like thunder beneath his ribs and every alive with lightning. He steadied himself on the table at his back, grateful for its sturdiness as his legs no longer took his weight. Sevanna sucked at him with increasing sureness, swirling her tongue over the head and hollowing her cheeks to take him deeper. He grunted a slurred litany of praise, prayers and expletives, guiding her lips and tongue with throbbing moans. Oh, he was much too close and it had been much too short, and he wanted to prolong this, to live and die in this space of time like a phoenix rising from the very ashes it had become.

But then Sevanna tried to take him too deep while he thrusted, seeking nirvana –it was simultaneous ecstasy and exquisite torture, the feel of her velvet throat swallowing his cock – and she gagged, choking around him as her body resisted. And every muscle in Cullen’s body clamped down with such sudden ferocity he convulsed, bludgeoned with the horror of too much too soon and phantom whispers of you did this to me.

He anchored his hand in her hair, stilling her, drawing her back though it was near agony. She allowed him to guide her away, but she did not move from her spot before him and brushed kisses along his thighs like raindrops on angry embers. It was times like these, so governed by his fears
and old demons that Cullen forgot how well she knew him; that she read him like he was damaged book before her, and she alone could decipher the language of his torment.

“It’s alright, Cullen,” she whispered between kisses. Her hand began a slow upstroke, as gentle as lips on bruised skin. He hissed between his teeth, torn between what his body longed to do and fearful of sending his mind into freefall. “Let go for me.”

He was a soldier to the end, trained to follow orders - her plea was sweet sanction, acquiesce that he could fall apart and she would remain to rebuild him; her throaty appeal like the touch of a heel on a stallion who was desperate to run.

The dam of his pleasure burst within him, crested in a muffled shout and singing in his ears. She wrapped her lips around him just as he came, catching the hot spurts on her tongue, huming her pleasure at his release. He spiralled down from on high, panting as if he’d outrun death itself and feeling, for the moment, just as invincible.

Sevanna sucked him clean, retreating when he protested weakly at the newfound sensitivity. Somewhere within his cloudy thoughts he knew he should find her a towel for her to spit – but before he could get his limbs to move she had tilted her head back, and in one smooth motion, swallowed his seed. She coughed, eyes still wet from when she choked on him, and Cullen had never been more in love, or felt more unworthy.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, rising unsteadily to pull the glove from his mouth. “That was, um, rather unplanned -”

“It was perfect,” he said hoarsely, and kissed her so he could discover the taste of his bitterness mixed with her sweetness.

She smiled shyly. “Thank goodness. I felt dreadfully clumsy.”

He made a feeble noise of objection as he pressed kisses to her jaw. Overcome though he was sudden exhaustion, he was determined to get her just as naked as he, so he knew the slide of her skin on his, and could kneel before her like she had done for him –

Inept fingers had wrestled the first clasp open when she stopped him, her hands coming to rest over his. “I can’t stay,” she murmured, sounding deeply regretful. “Leliana is expecting me.”

“Alright,” he said, unable to help the tiny death inside of him at the loss of her touch. “And when you come back…?”

His heart was too weak to bear the magnificent thought, but her smile was made of promise. She kissed him once more, the taste of his pleasure lingering on her lips and hair dishevelled where his fingers had burrowed. Emblems of satiated lust, her trophies of bringing a man to divine immolation, rendering him stronger when he was afraid he’d be led to ruin.

She left, unspoken promises ringing in the silence, leaving Cullen feeling much less naked than he truly was, elated from a fever that had finally been broken.
He dreamed of the lake of his childhood, and that he stood with her on its pebbly shore.

She was laughing, the sun dancing off the gold in her hair and sending sheets of dazzling brightness off the calm waters. Cullen was nearly blinded by it – the sun in his eyes, shimmering over the diamond surface of the lake, glancing off her skin. She was naked and just beyond reach, wading into the lake ahead of him, his name ringing with her laughter over the water.

He heard her splashing, saw the flash of a dimpled lower back and the wings of her shoulder blades, the elegant neck with her copper hair pushed to the side. A slender hand skimming over the light-dappled surface, before breaking in to create the music of disturbed water. She was swimming to the middle of the lake and yet he could not seem to leave the shore, made unhurried by the hot sun and murmuring waves and his own heavy limbs -

He resurfaced from the dream slowly, registering the warm blankets beneath him and the delectable, sated weight of his body. There was no sun dazzling his eyes, but shadows from the brazier throwing dancing shadows over the canvas walls of his tent. The splashing from his reverie had not yet faded and he drifted in that sleepy space before truly waking, enjoying the last vestiges of a pleasant dream.

Until a louder, sudden splash had his eyes flying open and everything – *everything* - came flooding back.

Sevanna, on her knees before him, the heat of her breath and wetness of her mouth on him; Sevanna giving him the kind of pleasure he had nearly forgotten, the kind of pleasure he’d been burning to bestow upon *her*. Sevanna, who had left him propped, white-knuckled, against the table, waiting an age for his racing heart to slow, for her to push aside the tent flap once more and return to him. And though she had not, it was no less magnificent – an age that had passed in the sun, never knowing cold nor shadow.

Cullen had meant to wait for her, but when he stumbled to the bedroll like a drunken man, his eyelids had weighed heavy and he inadvertently drifted into serene twilight. But no longer, as desire rekindled within him. He pushed himself up on his elbows, his naked body still aglow from
his earlier release; a memory that made his cock throb and his breath catch. He could see her shadow on the tent just beyond the screen that kept their bedroll private, knew by the fluid way the phantom hands traced their own silhouette and the rhythmic splashing that now she was bathing.

He rose to his feet as silently as a plume of smoke, though he feared his hammering heart would betray him. He hesitated, distracted by the state he was about to find Sevanna in and just what to say in response without stuttering like a virgin boy when two large, final splashes broke him from his daze; a change in the shadow on the wall told him Sevanna had stepped out of her bath, and was wrapping herself up to dry. His feet moved on their own accord, jerky and clumsy as usual, but Cullen could have sworn he was gliding on air.

She was facing away from him, her damp skin reflecting the low light of the braziers. Her hair was tied up at the top of her head, but those stubborn few strands clung to the wetness of her neck, shining like veins of rose-gold in white marble. He caught glimpse of the shallow divots at the base of her spine – just like he’d dreamed – before she adjusted the towel she’d wrapped around her hips, pulling it firmly around her body so each mouth-watering curve was tragically obscured from view.

He couldn’t stop the hoarse sound that escaped him; her head tilted up at the sound and her shoulders tightened a fraction, and Cullen knew she had drawn a single, shuddering breath.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” She spoke softly, with every bit of shyness she had after she’d swallowed his pleasure. Her face turned ever so slightly so he could see the shape of her jaw, the fullness of her lips. Cullen knew it was this natural reserve, and not fear or contempt that kept her from meeting his gaze.

As she had extended a hand to guide him through stretches of darkness, he knew he would have to do the same; though this was no bitter journey, littered with the shards of oneself. This was ascension, a leap into inexperience where the only familiar certainty was that he would keep her hand safely in his.

“I wish you had,” he said huskily, his eyes following the journey of a single droplet that rolled from her nape down her spine. How he ached to mimic its trail with his tongue. “Before…”

He trailed into silence, letting his every intent hanging in the air, strung amid the unspoken need and tension between them. Another shift of her slender shoulders to indicate serrated inhalation, and she turned to face him, her fingers curled over the edge of the towel that sat tantalisingly low over her breasts. Her eyes were bright but steady, like the luster of the most brilliant star, and her lips were parted as if around the beginning of a name – his name.

They had done their waiting, their coyness and their dance; too long had they delayed this most beautiful occurrence, this baring of skin and heart and soul. There was nothing left to say, no flimsy excuse of time or duty; no simple fear that had been left unexamined, all except for the thrill of the plunge.

“Show me,” was all Cullen could manage; a rough and naked plea for mercy, to look upon her so he might put his tortured mind and lonely soul to rest.

There was but the barest moment where they both did not breathe; it was as if the space between them became airless, as though the very world was drawing breath for them when they could not. And then her fingers were uncurling, her arms drawing away from her chest so the towel could fall to her feet - and the firelight illuminated every inch of her, each curve edged in ember and gold, shadows collected in every hollow.
The world still had not returned Cullen’s breath to him; his heart contracted painfully beneath his ribs, the twisting on such fullness an exquisite sort of pain. And yet it eked the last of the air from him, drawing it out in a sound like rustled sheets, the rough sound of skin upon skin. She was utterly naked before him; collarbones gilded in firelight, full breasts sitting heavily above a slender waist, a mouth-watering expanse of soft skin stretched between her hipbones, the thatch of dark auburn hair at the apex of her thighs. Her hands remained demurely at her sides, and she stood still as stone, nearly fooling Cullen into believing she was an edifice of worship, a hewn idol, but the subtle sway of her breasts and planting of her feet reminded him that she was not.

“Maker,” he whispered, his voice trembling in awe; were he struck blind here and now, he would live the remainder of his days content, knowing his final sight had been set upon her full beauty.

Sevanna said nothing, but nervously licked her lips as if awaiting some sort of approval, all of which jutted heavy and hard from between his legs. Nor did she move as he drifted nearer, drawn to the flame upon her skin and hair, reflected in the diamond droplets clinging to every curve of flesh. She was fire and marble and molten copper – such was the flush of heat in her skin that Cullen was reluctant to touch, worried they’d both be burned by this new contact.

“May I…?” he husked, lifting a hand to hover between them, letting its hesitation to finish asking for him.

She nodded minutely, eyes never leaving his; then she made a soft, rumpled sound as he cupped her jaw in his palm, thumbing the sweep of her cheekbone. He felt the quickening of her pulse as he traced his fingertips down the slope of her neck, and wound a damp curl that clung there around his finger. Her eyes fluttered shut and she bit the corner of her lower lip as he grazed his knuckles along the cord of muscle between her neck and shoulder, and over the bump of her clavicle – then, with a hard swallow and surge of his blood, Cullen brushed the back of his hand alongside the fullness of her breast.

Sevanna made a hushed sound, somewhere between a sigh and a moan; emboldened, Cullen skimmed the tips of his fingers over its slope, following the delicate curve of soft tissue to the valley between so he could rest his hand over where her heart beat, feeling its fluttery rhythm along with the pulsating of his own. She opened her eyes, looking faintly surprised as he let his hand rest in this place.

“Maker - you are so beautiful,” he whispered to her, the sentiment doubly enforced with the tremor in his voice and the other hand that brushed up along her waist towards her breasts. He gently cupped each one, letting them weigh heavily in his palms, filling his grasp with their lushness. There came a feeble noise from Sevanna’s throat, and Cullen so wanted to know each and every variation – and so he grazed a thumb over one pebbled peak. This earned him the smallest of gasps, which pushed her further into his palms. He groaned, and did it again. She grasped his wrists, and for a desperate moment he worried she’d push him away – but then she was pulling him closer, anchoring her breasts to the gentle cradle of his hands.

No longer could he mistake her warm flesh for the absolute cold of stone; yet he was dizzy with awe and such exquisite bliss that the lines between faith and lust became blurred, dazzled by her beauty – this divinity in flesh.

And he’d been taught only one way to worship.

He sank to his knees before her, kissing his way down the vale between her breasts, nearly deaf to her surprised utterance at his descent. His hands found their way to the small of her back and fullness of one buttock, as his mouth found the lip of lower ribs and felt the shiver of her abdomen at the light graze of his teeth. He was mumbling into her skin, half-delusional with her scent and
her touch, an absent mouth inscribing the holy words into the softness of her belly.

“O Maker, hear my cry; guide me through the blackest nights...Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked...Make me to rest in the warmest places...”

He felt the bite of her nails as she clenched her hands upon his shoulders, though the sting was distant, lost to his senses like the moon behind cloud cover.

“O Creator, see me kneel; for I walk only where You would bid me...Stand only in places You have blessed...Sing only the words You place in my throat.”

His name came from a world away, and he would have recited the entire Chant into her skin were it not for the insistent fingers in his hair, pulling him away from his fervent reverie. He peered up at Sevanna with glazed eyes, his heart leaping in his throat. She had the most beautiful flush in her cheeks, her eyes bright and wanting, and the fingers that brushed the hair back from his temple were trembling.

“Are you...praying?” she asked, the breathiness of her voice caught between amusement and puzzlement.

Cullen could feel his own blush rise. “I don’t know any poetry,” he confessed quietly. “The Canticle of Transfigurations are the only beautiful words I do know.”

She smiled softly. “Isn’t it blasphemous?”

“Blasphemous, that I love you more than I do the Maker?” He rose to his feet once more, his hands never leaving her body as he brought them up to frame her face. She stared up at him, those green eyes flicking back and forth between his, a yearning within them for his answer. “Andraste take me,” he whispered against her lips, “I do.”

She yanked him down to crush his mouth to hers, wrapping her arms tightly around her neck. The softness of her breasts became crushed against the hard planes of his chest, and it was like fire, the way her flesh burned upon his. He inhaled sharply, stealing her breath as he pressed her lips apart, curling his tongue against hers to stifle the moan that resonated from them both. He stooped – awkwardly, as to not break their deepening kiss – to scoop her up in his arms, cradling her against his chest with arms that no longer shook.

“Are you praying?” he recited breathlessly, carrying her away from the forgotten tub to their bed. “Take from me a life of sorrow. Lift me from a world of pain.” He lowered her to the bedroll, which laid rumpled from where he had thrown the covers back earlier. He arranged her legs so that he knelt between them, positioned his weight on his elbows so he could finish the chant hovering just above her. “Judge me worthy of Your endless pride.”

He kissed her again, deeply and urgently; she whimpered into his mouth, raking her fingernails along the hard sculpt of his back and onto his scalp. Though he was careful not to rest his weight fully upon her, he could not help the press of his erection into her belly. She mewled at the contact, and he felt the responding curl of her hips underneath him. He groaned, wresting his teeth and tongue from hers so he could nip along her jaw and throat.

“I want to taste you,” he whispered raggedly, and he dipped his head down to scorch a path of burning kisses along her body –

But Sevanna stiffened slightly beneath him, shaking him from his glorious intent. He drunkenly raised his head, the teeth worrying at her swollen lip swimming in his focus. “Unless,” he rasped,
“you don’t want-”

“No,” she said swiftly, stilling his speech with her fingertips. “I-I do. It’s just – I haven’t – no one has ever…”

The quick aversion of her gaze told Cullen all he needed to know; that no one had ever made love to her like this, had never put their mouth against her most intimate place. There was a peculiar blend of sorrow and joy at her admission; regret for her inexperience that led to unnecessary shame, and yet elation that he would be the first to show her what it was like – that he would be the only man to know the taste of her pleasure.

He moved back up to press a soft kiss to her lips. “Tell me to stop,” he reassured her quietly, “and I will,”

He started with her ear; gentle tugs at her lobe with his teeth, the trace of his tongue along the outer shell. She exhaled softly, relaxing beneath him. He cupped the opposite side of her face in his palm, not to control her movement but to guide her, letting her melt into his grasp as he was granted slow access to her body.

Then he tasted the soft underside of her jaw, sampled the feathering pulse with the barest touch of his tongue, and she made the most exultant aahh. He waited for its vibration to die against his lips, before brushing his way down the crook of her neck. The hard nubs of her nipples grazed his chest as he moved down, testing the absolute limits of his control, and she shivered at the hot puff of his jagged groan. He would not, could not, torture himself by putting off what was so tantalisingly near; he scooted back so his face was level with her breasts, his breath warming the trembling peak of one rosy nipple. He glanced up at her then, to ensure his pace did not daunt her; her lips were slack and dewy, her half-lidded eyes smouldering, and his doubt was erased.

His lips were upon her, suckling her gently and she was panting, her chest heaving beneath him as he laved her with his tongue. Her bitten-back cries were like bits of a broken melody, snippets of song and his name – Cullen, Cullen, oh, Cullen – gasped over and over like a prayer. The molten heat of her core, pressed just below his sternum, had him groaning around the stiff little bud, rumbling his aching pleasure against her. Her palms were pressing on the tops of shoulders, and he knew that she wanted more, needed more, but such was his resolve to take his time - to sample her with every bit of excruciating slowness and reverence she inspired - that he did not go lower, but simply moved to her other breast.

She moaned anew, low and sweet; he teased her wetly, relishing the tiny pop as he released the suction on her breast, enraptured by the way it swayed and resettled on her chest. Oh, but Sevanna was growing impatient; wiggling her hips beneath him, angling herself slightly away with a delicious arch of her back. Cullen seized the opportunity to explore this new flesh, to taste the satin-soft place where breast met rib.

“Cullen,” she protested breathlessly, and he chuckled against her. He had never disobeyed her orders, and this was no place to begin now; he brushed hot, open-mouthed kisses along the bow of her waist, finding the swell of a hipbone with his teeth. He nibbled its hollow flank, a spot that had been tormenting him in all his fantasies of this, of her naked and writhing beneath him, his lips and tongue on an inexorable journey to her below. He kissed a line to its fellow, pausing only to nip just below her navel, delighting in her slight jump. Then, before she had fully resettled herself, he pushed her legs up and his body down, so that her thighs were thrown over his shoulders with his head between.

He heard the air between her teeth; he looked up again, his fingers tracing the lightest of patterns on her hips. She was watching him with dark eyes, her bottom lip folded under the top. There was
tension in her legs, in the subtle clench of her abdomen, and he brushed his lips over the soft join of her hip and thigh.

Sevanna let out a breath. “Please,” she whispered, and that was all the sanction he needed.

The smell of her was overwhelming – the soft musk that was uniquely hers, blended enticingly with the tang of arousal. Cullen could nearly taste it on the air; his tongue darted along his lower lip as if it were pollen from a fragrant flower that had settled there, teasing him the barest hint of her essence. He could see how slick she was, the glisten of her anticipation darkening the auburn curls. She quivered as his breath fanned over this sensitive spot, and it was this tiny movement, this birdlike shiver just from the proximity of him that nearly has his resolve breaking –

He pressed his lips chastely against her, feeling her heat upon this innocent kiss. She gasped somewhere above him, but Cullen could not bear to draw himself back, even to see her face twisting in pleasure – he needed this, had been flayed with the torment of not knowing her like this, with his lips and tongue and down his throat –

He nuzzled closer, lips pressing ever further into her slick, feeling her legs tense against the sides of his head and the flex of her body as it bowed off the bedroll. She was moaning, pleading for him, but it was not until he found the small little bundle of nerves that he acquiesced to her whimpers, and finally tasted her with a broad lap of his tongue.

She cried out – quieter than he could ever be – and seized a fistful of his hair. He grunted at the sting, but oh it was magnificent, this pleasure-pain on his scalp and in the hardness trapped between his body and the bedroll. But his aching cock did not matter right now; it was testament to Sevanna’s vocal pleasure, as inconsequential as smoke rising from where there was fire – and he needed to stoke it higher.

He began a steady rhythm of swirling his tongue over the small jewel, guiding himself by her gasps and cries to the spots that made her hips buck against his mouth. But the low, throbbing sound she made when he speared his tongue inside of her that made him thrust into the bedroll, dying on the sound only to be resurrected when she made it again.

The tension in her thighs had turned to trembling, and he knew by the way she rode his mouth that she was ready; he carefully slipped a finger into her heat, muffling his groan with her body as he felt her hot, tight, wet clench. She hissed his name, turned it into something garbled as he crooked his finger, curling it against that exquisite spot within her. He worked her like this, with a gentle finger and insistent tongue, exulting in the little mewls from her throat and spiralling cries. He knew she was close, by the thrust of her hips and breathy pants of his name – and he would not be far behind, driven to delirium by the soft thighs gripping him, her arousal on his tongue and the smell of her pleasure drowning him. He heaved closer, suffocating in her heat and slickness, slipping a second finger within her so that she bucked and crowed. The little broken pieces of his name were becoming faster, more desperate, and Cullen moaned against her so that she could feel the caliber of his ecstasy on the throb of his breath and lips –

Sevanna gasped - the sound of shattering, of what was rent to pieces – Cullen felt her contract around his fingers, gripping him in soaked velvet heat, and he gazed up along the quivering plane of her belly to see her head tossed back against their pillows, her beautiful mouth open in an arrested howl. He watched, transfixed, as her expression became that of utter rapture – flushed skin and screwed shut eyes, lips curling back on the sharp aahh as she came. He felt the blankets twist underneath his chest as she bunched them between her fingers, her spine lifting from the bedroll as her release rolled its way down her body like a thunderhead across the sky. Her hips and thighs jerked against him, and Cullen felt the rush of her juices, cresting against his tongue and rolling
down his chin. He moaned into her, lapping at the taste of her pleasure and feeling the final
shudders of her silken walls around his fingers.

Sevanna was panting, her thighs becoming slack around him, and Cullen pressed a lingering kiss
against her. She groaned as he slipped his fingers out, her half-lidded eyes smouldering with a sated
hunger, watching as he licked them clean. She reached for him as he gently rearranged her legs at
his side to crawl back up along her body, kissing the spots once taut with tension made soft by
climax.

“I love you,” he breathed against her mouth when he reached it, and claimed it with the same
aching tenderness as below. She murmured the words back, tasting herself on his lips with flicks of
her tongue. One small hand rested on the back of his neck, its fellow skimming down the lines of
his abdomen.

“You don’t have to -” he began, only to finish in a grunt as Sevanna took his length in her palm,
fingertips pressing softly along the swollen head. He groaned low and ragged, thrusting jerkily into
her hand; she wrapped her fingers around him, stroking him until he was gritting his teeth against
her neck, muffling his cries with her skin and hair. She soothed him down from his blistering peak,
her mouth and hushed words of love brushed along his feverish skin, hissing like drops of water on
blacksmith iron. When his thundering heart had slowed, he rolled them over - away from the wet
spot – so he was on his back and she was half-sprawled over him. His lips found her damp temple,
where the hair stuck in red-gold filaments; her fingers curled against his chest and she hummed a
contented sigh, which turned into quiet laughter.

“What?” Cullen murmured, curious in the joke.

“It seems I owe Hawke some money,” Sevanna replied huskily, the mirth evident in her voice.
He groaned, his head falling back against the pillow with a soft thwump. “Do I want to know?”
She laughed again, snuggling closer. “Probably not.” There was a beat of silence. “She said you
might pray.”

“Maker’s breath!” Cullen slapped a hand over his eyes as Sevanna giggled. “What in Thedas did
you discuss with that woman?”

“Oh, hardly much,” she said coyly, slinging her leg over his hips to slide on top of him. “Just all
the naughty things I’d like to do to you.”

Cullen peeked at her as she began laying soft kisses along his chest. “You didn’t.”

She sat up with a laugh, her beautiful breasts swinging above him. Maker, he loved the sight. “Of
course I didn’t, silly. I couldn’t even put them into words.” She smiled down at him, radiant as the
sun at its zenith. “We act quite the pair of blushing virgins, don’t we?”

He huffed a soft laugh, tracing the outline of her waist and hip with a hand; he could still taste her
on his lips. “Absolutely.”
The Baring of Souls

Chapter Summary

GUESS WHAT TIME IT IS

Chapter Notes

I might come back and re-do some of this - trying to write smut while your roommate watches Futurama and yells at her 3DS doesn't make for a sexy environment.

It hardly seemed appropriate to slip so quickly into dream when they had just left a nightmare behind – the horrors and dead they’d left in the desert had barely faded whenever he shut his eyes – but Cullen could not help the transition no more than he could help the stars that fell out of the sky.

Sevanna was curled against his chest, having fallen asleep mere moments ago, once more exhausted by his tireless onslaught. They were tangled up in sheet and skin, bodies sticky with sweat and more – the taste of salt and pleasure lingering on his lips, on Sevanna’s tongue, on fingers licked clean. Since that first glorious encounter – him biting down on a dirty glove with her on her knees before him; her body arched like a ribbon of silk with his face buried between her thighs – every night had been spent like this, falling asleep naked and entwined after exhausting themselves in pleasurable exploration. Though it never took long, given the long days of travelling in between; days scarcely made bearable by the feverish memories of the night before, and the ache of anticipation of what was to come the next.

He had not yet lain inside her; had not yet traversed that final stretch of their physical courtship, their bodies meeting in the most sacred way they were capable. But that desire, the raw need of that Cullen had was curbed for now, sated by the slow discovery of Sevanna’s body. There were so many ways that he knew her, in mind and soul, but this was an entire different realm; an undiscovered world of hidden flesh, of tastes and sounds and shivers, a new unearthing for each of Cullen’s senses.

Like learning the slender shape of her feet, the play of tendons against his fingers as she wiggled her toes; he’d learnt of Sevanna’s secret love for foot rubs the night he’d entered their tent to find her bootless, digging her knuckles into her sole. At first she’d tried to brush away his offer to take over, but was helpless to stop him when he did so anyways; she had positively melted at the first firm press of his thumbs, begging that he never stop, and quickly became comfortable with the request, often making him chuckle by wriggling her feet into his lap by way of asking.

This was the way he discovered the soft skin on her ankle, the slim contour of the tendon at her heel, the slightly crooked little toe that she’d once broken when a horse stepped on it. That night he had explored her calves with his lips until he found the bend of her knee, listening to her squeaks and still the undulation of her hips as she tried to hide her eagerness that he might go further – that he might mouth his way up the cord of muscle on the inside of her thigh and mark the skin just
below the curve of her bottom with his teeth, before kissing her in the most decadent way…

He, of course, did exactly that.

And that was how he learned the way only he could make her sing; the pitch of her breath when he tasted her, the flute of her cries with each reverent touch and the low bass of humming in her throat. Sevanna was nearly as quiet and composed in her pleasure as she was in everyday life, but Cullen loved it all the same. Let the battlefield keep her bellows, her enemies the clash of her steel and cries of war; these small, secret gasps and drawn out breaths belonged only to him, this private symphony of moans and whimpers to which he was the solitary audience.

She was his opposite in pleasure – soft and quiet where he was vocal, shy where he was more sure, her hands on his body less hesitant and nowhere near as careful; but he relished it, the wanton drag of her nails along his back, the teeth that brought angry crescents into bloom. He let her be rough in the way he would not allow himself, always mindful of his grip on her hips, the suction of his mouth against her breast. But Sevanna was always gentle in turn, when it was Cullen who was on his back and at the mercy of her exploration. Though her touch had grown bolder over this short time, the kisses down his body no longer shy, the stroke of her tongue less uncertain. Cullen let her explore her limits to the best of his absolute control, as she repeatedly tested how deep she could take him in the hot cavern of her mouth; he had to stifle his grunts and groans into a pillow as Sevanna grew more confident, discovering clever twists of her tongue that brought him to the brink of his endurance, and the firm pumps at the base of his cock that had him spilling into her throat.

No, he had not yet discovered that final pleasure – being seated fully inside her, knowing the tight, wet clutch of her, every inch of her soft and pliant body pressed against his – but Cullen was glad for this slow voyage towards it, this suspension of ultimate desire prolonging the sweet sting of anticipation. And he was grateful for the opportunity to explore one another, this gentle passing of flame between them ensuring they wouldn’t be caught up in the wild inferno and burn out just as quickly; the careful juggle of fire and tinder that was true to the nature of their relationship, striking the balance between discipline and the glorious conflagration.

Sevanna stirred against him, jarring Cullen from his musings. He gazed down at her as stretched in her sleep, resettling with a fluid twist to her upper body so that she rolled slightly away from him. He adjusted himself gently, careful to not disentangle his legs from hers, until he lay on his side and could slide his arm across her waist. Sevanna hummed sleepily at the contact, her eyelashes fluttering slightly as if in pleasant dream; Cullen smiled, tucking her head beneath his chin, and closed his eyes to follow her there.

The miles between them and Skyhold were whittling down; the Frostbacks loomed slowly into view, first as a jagged shadow that chewed up the horizon and now as snow-capped giants slumbering below the sky. They had come into the Dales a few days before, the enormous trees creating an emerald canopy high above them. The remaining tension lingering over their party had lifted; it felt as though they had finally eluded the darkness at their heels, chased away by the dappled sunlight and smell of warm grass. Here life abounded, in the many small streams gurgling between pebbly banks and wildlife that darted across their path. They came across a Dalish clan, who were polite but aloof, and enquired if they had seen a golden halla in their travels. Both Sevanna and Solas were especially interested in this, halting the group in order to sit and speak with the Keeper about the revered beast, and how they might assist in locating it. Doing so made the clan much friendlier; they presented the Inquisitor with a basket of dried fruits, salted meats and fresh roots, a welcome change from the bland rations that were steadily growing scarce as their journey wound down. The Keeper also confided them of some warm mountain springs at the base
of the Frostbacks, a secluded grove deep in the woods where they might find some well-deserved
peace and rest. It was with little discussion that it was decided they’d spend one of their final nights
of travel there, allowing themselves the tiniest bit of luxury before trekking the slopes that lead
back to Skyhold.

They reached the springs well before nightfall, finding them as beautiful as the Keeper claimed;
small rocky pools staggered along the gentle incline of the mountains, creating many natural
waterfalls that fell from the higher pools in silvery sheets, the melodic gurgle of water coursing its
way between stone and foliage, steam rising into the dusk. They set up camp a several minute’s
walk from the springs and enjoyed a delicious meal put together from the Dalish’s gift. Cullen, as
usual, was squeezed next to Sevanna by one of the fires, finding himself more at home with the
Inquisition than he’d ever been. True, he was no longer used to such extended journeys - familiar
instead with long hours behind a desk – but the stiffness in his joints and muscles did nothing to
mar the kinship he’d found with these people. Bonds that only grew deeper with each evening they
laughed and traded stories by firelight; tales of people’s fragile hope from Blackwall’s lonely
travels, or the exciting recounts of Bull’s Chargers run in with dragons. There were many facets to
each of Sevanna’s companions that Cullen had not yet known – like Sera’s profound sense of right
and wrong, even if she was ham-handed in her ways of enacting justice; or that Solas had found a
more comfortable place among spirits than his own ilk, and wove unimaginable tales of ancient
ruins lost to dream, and knew stories so old even the trees had forgotten them. Once, Leliana even
graciously agreed to sing one of the old songs from her days of being a bard; Cullen did not think
he had ever heard the Spymaster sing anything besides the Chant, and nor did he think he’d ever
seen a smile cross her lips like the one that did when she finished.

But tonight, with the air warm from the nearby hot springs and heavy with the smell of night-
blooming flowers, they listened to Varric’s many stories of his misadventures in Kirkwall. Cullen,
of course, was familiar with several of them, either from hearing them second-hand from those
who’d read the dwarf’s books or from having to clean up the resulting messes himself. Though
sitting around a fire with good friends and food gave these near-legends a certain fresh verve;
Cullen had never heard the stories from Varric himself, and while he found the author a touch too
flowery in prose, he could not deny Varric’s mastery of storytelling now. But he more enjoyed
Sevanna’s reactions by far – the way she tipped her head back against his shoulder to laugh at
Varric’s anecdotes, the press of her thigh against his as she leaned forward to hang on the dwarf’s
every word, as if physically drawn in by his tale. And though Cullen already knew Sevanna so
well, from her endearing quirks to the sensitive spots on her body, he could not help love
relearning just how much she cherished her friends.

Before night truly fell, and before they could all become too sleepy from full bellies, their small
party broke apart; Sevanna with Solas, Blackwall and Cole to search for the golden halla, and the
rest drifting off to the hot springs for a well-needed soak. Cullen decided to wait until a bath would
not be so crowded – a near lifetime of communal bathhouses in the Templars had taught him the
value of a private place to wash – and so retreated to Leliana’s tent with Cassandra to pore over
maps of the Dales in order to decide where to establish requisition camps. His hot and unhurried
nights with Sevanna had proven to mitigate his temper; he found himself unprovoked by
Cassandra’s attempts to argue, and who was obviously much crankier by the length of the return
journey than he. Leliana, too, seemed on edge, but Cullen suspected she was worried about
Josephine and how long she’d been at Skyhold largely by herself. He hadn’t gotten any letters from
the Ambassador, so he assumed nothing had been attacked or burnt to the ground, though he did
not doubt Josephine would have plenty to speak with him about once he was back within earshot;
she must have assumed (correctly, of course) that he usually did not bother trying to read her
elaborate handwriting.

Sevanna had not yet come back by the time Cullen retired to their tent, something he tried not to
mourn when he’d had so many successive nights of her to himself. He also tried to ignore the ever-present disquiet in the shadowy corners of his mind – that she would tire of him eventually, and that he should love her as much as he could for as long as she would allow him, so that he might tuck the memories neatly away so he could smooth them out later when the drought inevitably set in. It was difficult to turn thoughts of this nature away when he climbed into a cold bedroll, which whispered of a thousand desolate nights that had come before. Cullen, with a sinking sense of dread, did his best to banish them; he knew this idling was indicative of a much darker reality, and that the bleakness of withdrawal was creeping up again. He did not know how many times he would need to ride out the waves so intent on drowning him, but it grew a little easier each time knowing it might soon be the last, and that he was no longer alone in the merciless riptide.

Somewhere before Sevanna returned, he fell asleep; though he heard her return, the soft rustlings of her undressing and crawling in next to him rousing him halfway from slumber. His hands slid up her back as she settled herself against him, pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder.

“Did you…the halla…?” he mumbled groggily, struggling to wake up more fully.

He felt the breath of her soft laughter against his neck. “Yes,” she whispered, tracing light patterns over his broad chest. “We returned it to the Keeper.”

Cullen shifted sleepily, trying to turn himself over to face her, so he could kiss her and slowly rekindle the passions of all the previous nights, but Sevanna pressed him back down into the bedroll.

“Sleep, Cullen,” she murmured in his ear. “We have plenty of time.”

As always, she correctly interpreted his intent as if she could read the thoughts scrawled behind them – that she could see his secret fear that would one day be devoid of her, left with nothing but the regret that he hadn’t loved her as much as he could have.

“Sleep,” she whispered again, as his arms tightened around her. “I’ll be here tomorrow.”

And after an age of uncertain tomorrows - the only constant a new bottle of blue and that nothing in life was dependable - thought Cullen hazily as he slipped back into twilight, what a magnificent luxury that was.

The birdsong beyond the canvas was just as soft as the dawn that filtered in when Cullen found himself awakening. The light was the watery blue that came just before the sunrise, the colour of crisp morning air and fresh dew. The tip of his nose was cool, indicating the end of a chilly night; though he hadn’t noticed, with Sevanna’s warmth tucked against his side. She was facing away from him, her head resting on the crook of his outstretched arm. He stretched, groaning quietly as his spine popped– sleeping on a bedroll for such a prolonged period of time hadn’t done his back much good – and pushed himself up on one elbow to lean over Sevanna. A lock of hair fanned across her cheek, stirring where it fell over her nose, one hand curled next to her chin. He swept the hair back from her face, watching her lashes twitch at his soft caress; there was no mistaking that she was deeply asleep and was in serious need of it. The long travel had taken its toll on them both, but coupled with their frequent late nights…well, Cullen was slightly disappointed to take a bath alone, but not so disappointed to wake her from some much needed slumber.

He brushed a kiss against her temple and quietly slipped from the bed, taking care to tuck the blankets back up around her neck. He dressed in the simple shirt and pants he wore beneath his armour, grabbing a towel and his nub of soap as he pulled apart the lacings at the door of the tent.
The air beyond was just as blue and chilly as he expected; the collection of tents looked ghostly in the morning mist, their sides wet with dew. The thick cushion of pine needles and grass underfoot muffled Cullen’s footsteps as he made his way to the hot springs; the camp was quiet and empty, save for the birds and their songs in the trees, the night’s watch obviously patrolling the wider radius of their camp.

He heard the play of water before he saw the springs, the air warming slightly as he grew closer. The flowers were an explosion of colour - embrium, prophet’s laurel, arbor blessing – the soft smell of their perfume tickling his nose. He came to the first spring, fed by a gurgling stream that poured forth from the side of the hill, ridged by large rocks and dotted with dawn lotus; this flowed into a slightly larger pool sitting a little lower on the incline. Cullen carefully picked his way down the gentle slope, the humid air dampening the hair at his nape; he finally settled on one of the lower springs, tucked slightly out of sight behind some large moss-covered boulders. It was broad and seemed shallow, its surface ruffled by the two miniature waterfalls that cascaded from the pools above.

Cullen toed off his boots, tugging his shirt off his shirt and pants to fold and lay neatly along with his towel on the pebbly bank. He disturbed the steam laying low over the spring’s surface as he waded in, sighing at the water’s warm touch. The temperate was pleasant enough to ward off the morning chill, though he felt a ripple of gooseflesh as a slight breeze cooled him. The woods were alive with the sound of a world coming to life, something he had sorely missed in the Western Approach; in the desert, there had been nothing but the sound of hot wind scraping over hotter sands, or howling in desolate gorges between sun-baked cliffs. He had missed the green, just as he often did in Skyhold, surrounded by the slate and snow of the mountains, and yearned for the green and gold of the hills and fields in Ferelden.

Cullen came to one of the waterfalls, bracing his palms on the smooth rock wall on the other side and bent his head so the water could sluice over the soreness in his neck and shoulders. The water swirled around his hips, not quite high enough to soak the stiff muscles of his lower back; the pampered part of him was really looking forward to being back in a proper bed.

And oh, the possibilities that came with being back in a proper bed.

He cleared his throat, a regrettable nervous tick he still carried from his years as the virginal Templar. How often he still caught himself doing it around Sevanna, yet despite all his experiences he felt that this was brand new - the depths of his emotions, the caliber of his desire. He had never wanted a woman like he did Sevanna, nor did he think he ever would again. He had never deluded himself into thinking he would experience a love so great – for the mandate of a Templar was that he love the Maker above all – and he had locked away that secret regret the day he took his vows, that he would never love nor be loved in the way poets wrote ballads about. For he had once believed that his desire to serve was greater than any desire at all, before he had even experienced it for himself – but service did not make the soul content.

“Would you like some company?”

Her voice nearly made him leap out of his skin; torn from his reverie, Cullen whirled on the spot, already exclaiming, “Maker’s -!”

Sevanna was standing utterly naked behind him, her hair hanging loose and tousled around her shoulders. The water lapping at her waist and her breasts reflected in the surface of the spring, the rosy peaks pebbled from the cool air.

“–breasts,” he finished stupidly, staring.
Sevanna smiled and glided closer. “You didn’t wake me.”

His eyes closed as her fingers, wet and warm from the spring, slid along his jaw. “I didn’t want to disturb you. I know you’ve been tired.”

“Never too tired for you and a hot spring,” she murmured, bringing him down for a soft kiss. He groaned as her hand slid to the back of his neck, tangling in the curls the humidity had brought out in his hair. He pulled her in close, felt the silken slide of her belly against his and found the shape of a buttock with his hand. The heat of the spring and her body and the utter softness of her skin had his cock stiffening, brushing along her thigh.

Sevanna was rubbing something slippery on his chest; confused, he broke apart from her to look down. She had the soap he brought in hand, dragging it over her chest and up one shoulder. She smiled as he raised an eyebrow at her, and chirped, “Want me to wash your back?”

“Hand that over,” he said, grinning as he tugged it from her grasp. “Turn around.”

Flashing him an impish smirk, Sevanna turned, pulling her hair over one shoulder. Cullen trailed his fingers down the groove of her spine, eliciting a tiny shiver as he dipped the soap into the spring. He brought it to the slope of her neck, brushing aside the few stubborn strands aside and dragged it along her shoulder.

“Mmmm.” Sevanna hummed contentedly as he bathed her, pressing the heel of his palm into the stiff spots in her back, the hand holding the soap leisurely tracing the lines of her curves. He snaked one arm around her waist, pressing her against his chest and resting his chin on her shoulder so he could drag the soap over her belly. She was molten in his embrace, head tilted back into him, her bottom flush against his hips. The cleft of her ass glided silkily along his growing erection, having him groan low and ragged into her ear.

They had crossed many great lengths of intimacy – but this innocent caress that bordered on sin was unfamiliar and erotic, a new dimension to their comfortable closeness. It was not carnal exploration but the chaste reintroduction of flesh upon which he had so thoroughly lavished his attentions. But now it had turned to satin beneath his fingertips, made pale by the blue of burgeoning dawn. He soaped up her breasts, kneading them gently with hands that never tired of their softness and nibbling along the column of her throat. She groaned, long and low, the subtle arch of her back pushing her rear more firmly against his hips. He stilled, the hand with the soap lingering at her waist and its fellow cupping a breast, the pad of his thumb resting against the stiff bud of her nipple.

He exhaled a serrated breath, suddenly faced with the crossroads of what he had not fully intended – he could demurely remove his hands for but a moment to regain his composure and resume the innocent task of washing themselves. Or, or, he could go with this shift in the tide of their desire, continue the wicked descent to her core and have her cries echoing with the birdsong; bend her over on the shore so the pebbles left indentations in her hands and knees as he drove himself home –

She was gently plucking the soap from his hand, turning in his arrested embrace so he could see the tender expression on her face, the soap on her breasts he hadn’t washed away. Gently, as though he was carved of brittle ice, she began washing circles on Cullen’s chest. He closed his eyes at her touch, a mingled sense of relief and regret that she’d taken over when he had faltered. He was loathe to admit that for all their familiarity, the library of knowledge he now possessed of her body and that he was welcome to it, that the issue of his control was still an obstacle; the final monster in a maze he’d finally solved, a crouching beast he still wasn’t sure he could face.
For what if he betrayed this gentle touch? A loving caress the likes of which he’d never known, bestowed by a woman whose nature was more silk than steel, whose toughness was eked by the constant choice to be good; to be merciful, forgiving and kind. A touch Cullen could not bear forsake, for the flesh more easily forgot such tender contact than the cruelty of whip and metal and fire. A man forged with such brutal tools could never be trusted with what was so fragile – of slender limbs that could be bruised and snapped by careless hands.

Sevanna kissed the jagged scar at his pec, bringing Cullen once more from a trance. Her lips were petal-soft, dewy with the curious tongue that always wetted them before being touched to his skin, so she could taste them again after as if to sample the difference. It seemed that every gentleness he was afraid he wasn’t capable of gave him tenfold; such raw consideration of every pain he’d ever known, branded into his flesh over a lifetime. She touched him not as if he was frail for his hardships, liable to break at the slightest pressure against his defenses; but as though she knew every harsh touch of a blade or hand he had endured, and did not think him weak because of it, but deserving of such delicate treatment. That he was worthy of this, the devotion of what was feather-soft and benevolent, despite the cruelties he himself had helped bring into the world – that despite it all, he was capable of being loved, and could be shown in a thousand ways beyond words.

She moved behind him in a fluid line, the tips of her breasts dragging along his skin. Cullen groaned, fists curling in the water as he tried not to allow the withdrawal-whispered thoughts detract from this – being naked and warm with Sevanna in this beautiful place, riding home from victory; coming home a different man from when he’d left.

She was washing his back, her nails scraping pleasantly down his spine. He could feel the damp slide of her breasts on his skin, their lushness molded against the firmness of his back. His teeth found his lower lip, his breath hissing between them; the water was doing little to conceal how hard he was, and Sevanna’s hands were lingering along the ridge of muscle alongside his hipbones, her hands drifting ever lower.

"Cullen," she murmured huskily, her lips brushing the skin between his shoulder blades as she spoke. “Please...we’re all alone...”

Of course she knew of his tenuous control, must have felt the tension in every inch of his body, the straining of a trained lion desperate to leap but unsure if it had permission; ever waiting for the sting of a whip to send it back, and once more contain it behind metal bars.

But there was pleasure instead of pain - the tentative touch of her hand on his cock beneath the water, the slide of it unfamiliar and good. Cullen moaned, the sound of it longing and raw; he lurched around to gather Sevanna in his arms, pulling her close and wet and slippery against his skin, claiming her mouth in a hard and greedy kiss. She did not hesitate nor shy away from his ardency, but returned it in equal measure – teeth clicking against his, a hard suck demanding his tongue along hers, fervent lips pressing him apart, cracking him open to expose the vulnerable place beneath the discipline and coaxing it into the light.

“Tell me,” he gasped into her mouth, hands frantic upon her body, unable to touch enough of her at once. “Tell me if I hurt you -”

“I’m not as delicate as you think,” she said, the tremble in her voice doing nothing to dissuade from her statement – to think that he made her so, that he unravelled her measured voice and careful words, and rend her apart with his touch –

It was his ultimate undoing. Cullen scooped her out of the spring, water streaming from her body down his as he carried her to the back wall of their secluded pool. Here it was shallower, clustered with large rocks spongy with moss. He set Sevanna down on the flattest, rearranging her legs to
hook around his waist; she did not make it easy, tugging his face down for urgent kisses that tasted of salt and copper, blood from a bitten-open lip – his or hers, he did not know or care – her fingers twisting in his hair and digging into his chest. He gripped her hips and heaved her closer, so her bottom rested on the edge of the rock and pressed against his legs. He made a sound akin to a growl as he yanked her legs around him, pressing himself into the cradle of her thighs. She gasped as his cock bumped bluntly against her, the involuntary arch of her back wrenching her mouth from his; he positioned her clumsily, one hand on her knee to keep it hooked over his hip, the other spreading along the small of her back to support her. She leaned back on one hand, the other curling over the nape of his neck; her eyes were nearly black with desire, her trembling lips parted around her jagged pants.

Cullen no longer had the wherewithal, nor the breath, to speak – he made himself halt, to suspend themselves in this single quivering moment, so he could look into her eyes and give a questioning nod of his head.

The hand at his neck came to brush over his brow; he could see her heaving breasts in his peripherals, felt the tremble of her legs around him. The light upon her skin had changed – turned pink and gold by the rising sun as the birds raised their voices in greeting, filling the silence between them. Sevanna licked her lips once – something no less erotic even in the face of what they were about to do – and nodded back, her answering yes in her shining eyes and the teeth on her lip.

Slowly, reverently, Cullen positioned himself against her, and pushed – softness yielded to hardness, and the first hot, tight clench of her around his head had him crying out, the echo answering back with a dozen voices raised in ecstasy. Sevanna flinched at the intrusion, her whole body becoming taut as she accommodated him – he forced himself to still so she could adjust, panting into her face as if he’d been running half his life.

She softened around him, her eyes fluttering as she arched her back with a high-pitched sigh. He groaned and pressed deeper into her slick, sinking inch by agonising inch until he could go no further; and like all things made to go together – locks and keys, hands and hilts – fit perfectly within her.

He waited once more for her to get used to him, trembling fingers biting into the soft flesh at her back - Sevanna choked on a sound like his name, and Cullen answered in a shallow thrust. She whimpered, eyes falling shut, and he did it again and again, keeping the pace as slow as he could bear. But it was good, so good that all his previous fears had dissolved to sand, and all his prayers and intonations would be her name, his only alter at the meeting of her thighs.

He kissed her, roughly and deeply, his tongue mimicking his hips. She cried out loudly as his next thrust went deeper, and he groaned long and low at the sound; he pulled back so he could stare down at the joining of their bodies, to watch his glistening cock plunge into her, grunting with the pleasure-pain as he pulled back from the welcome clutch of her body.

Oh, he was much too close and it was not enough – would never be enough, the addict in him whispered in that black velvet voice – and he had never felt anything more magnificent than the wetness dripping from his shaft and the scorch of her quim – Sevanna was gasping with each hard thrust, her pitch growing higher and needier – he pressed his thumb to the spot above their joining, so that her voice crested and broke on the pleasure – he was losing his rhythm, the sweat on his brow mixing with the humidity of the hot springs and he was so close –

Cullen muffled his shout against her neck, burying himself deep with his final thrusts; he came, hot and hard inside her, felt the clench of her muscles milking him as she reached her own peak by his
clumsy fingers.

They remained like that for a long while; pressed together from hip to shoulder, hearts hammering against each other behind the confines of their ribs and thighs sticky with sex. The steam evaporated as the sun found their little pool, dancing off the surface in prisms of white light. Cullen eventually pulled back to rest his damp forehead against hers. Sevanna was smiling; a drunken, happy smile that laid to rest any remaining worry that he had hurt her – that his desire made a monster of a man that paid no heed to the destruction he might cause.

He helped her off the rock and stood with her beneath one of the small waterfalls to wash the remains of their climax from their bodies. They didn’t stop touching each other, though now the contact was affectionate and tender as opposed to incendiary. They waded back to shore, hands loosely intertwined between them, and redressed, stealing more touches and glances as they pulled on their clothes. Cullen boyishly presented her with some dawn lotus he had plucked from the shallows; she smiled radiantly and tucked it behind her ear, her hair tied back to dry.

Not a single word had passed between them in the aftermath of their love-making; it was as if they both knew there were no words to complete it, a transcendence that could not be put into mortal prose. Words would only serve to make it clumsy and cluttered, tongues that had been so confident in an unspoken language becoming tied over what couldn’t be described. There would be plenty of time for declarations of love – but they did not wish to speak them here, and break the beautiful silence of the place that had just listened to their ultimate act of love, the place that witnessed the baring of souls.

They walked back to camp together, hand-in-hand; Cullen didn’t care that it was obvious in their faces where they’d just come from. All that mattered was Sevanna’s hand in his and the flower in her hair, and that he had faced his fears and found them frail. A demon had been beaten today – and Cullen was free.
A Shifting Eclipse

Chapter Summary

Back at Skyhold and threatened with a ball, Cullen faces old hardships again.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while! Here's 9500 words, half of which is smut! <3

The return to Skyhold was not quite what Cullen expected – he’d been hopeful for at least two days of rest, in which they could regain their balance from being on the road so long. Instead, however, they returned to find it’d been transformed into the opulent shop of an Orlesian tailor in their absence; there were numerous unfamiliar carriages in the courtyard and haphazard stacks of wooden boxes, which were being carried into the hall by people wearing Orlesian masks. There was no less pandemonium inside; racks upon racks of fabric in all colours and textures, stacks of ribbed shoe boxes, and glittering displays of jewellery were being moved to and fro in a flurry of colour, directed by Josephine and Vivienne at its centre.

The invitation wrapped in velvet had arrived six days earlier, requesting the Inquisition’s presence at the Winter Palace in Halamshiral in ornate cursive. According to an extremely harried Ambassador, the invitation had come at the behest of Duke Gaspard de Chalons, who seemed deeply interested in the Inquisition and had even secured them a meeting with the Empress. They now had a mere two weeks for measurements and fittings for formalwear – a fact Josephine impressed upon them significantly with a strangled sort of fury in her eyes, so Cullen privately decided it was wisest to follow her instructions without resistance.

Thusly, any hope for even a day of rest was lost; Cullen had barely unpacked his things when he was summoned to Josephine’s office for his first fitting, so it was with a rather painful force of will that he left the security of his tower for what was sure to be an eternity of impeccable posture, pins, and bossiness.

However, he was relieved to discover Cassandra was also suffering the same fate; he entered Josie’s office and was welcomed by the Seeker’s glare over the top of a short and white-haired man, who was carefully pinning something blue to her waist. This was overseen by Vivienne, Josephine, and Leliana, who was lounging on a divan with a slim glass of champagne in hand.

“Ah, Cullen dear,” Vivienne greeted, gliding over to guide him forward by the arm. “Just up here, if you please.” She stationed him on the raised platform to Cassandra’s right, who grimaced at him as Vivienne stepped aside to allow a small female elf to help him out of his armour.

“I – uh,” he stammered in weak protest, as she slipped off his furs with quick hands, and began to work on his chest plate.
“Proper measurements, darling,” Vivienne explained with faint amusement, standing back to look over him as critically as an elegant mare would a donkey. “You won’t be wearing any armour over those broad shoulders at the Winter Palace.”

“You expect us to go unprotected?” Cassandra directed at her, her belligerence diluted somewhat as she stood with her arms held wide as the tailor measured her bust.

“I expect the court to find our Commander far too… delicious to make him a target,” Vivienne said delicately. “A problem I suspect you won’t be dealing with, Lady Pentaghast, if you continue to roll your eyes and snort like a wyvern in Halamshiral.”

“Thank the Maker,” Cassandra said under her breath.

But Cullen made a sound of dissent, feeling suddenly quite vulnerable without the familiar layer of steel over him. “I don’t want to be simply dangled as bait for the court.”

“I know, my dear,” said Vivienne, her expression sympathetic. “Which is why I suggested to the Inquisitor that we have Dorian keep an eye on you throughout the ball – undoubtedly he will beat any interested party off of you if need be.”

“Only because I won’t be able to,” piped up another voice; Sevanna was just closing the door behind her, smiling at Cullen as their eyes met. “Leliana and Josephine are keeping me very busy for the whole thing. It’s rather unfair.”

“We need you to be looking for Corypheus’ agent sent to assassinate the Empress, Inquisitor,” Josephine insisted.

“I know, Josie,” Sevanna said warmly, stepping onto the tasseled platform next to Cullen’s. A second elf began taking her measurements. “I’m only teasing. But I won’t leave Cullen alone at the mercy of the Game.”

“Thank you,” he said to her, earning a beautiful smile in return.

“It would seem suspicious anyways, if you were to take all of your companions with you to search for the agents,” Leliana spoke up from her divan. “Have you given any thought to who will accompany you in your search of the palace, Inquisitor?”

Sevanna hesitated, chewing on her lip as she thought, seemingly oblivious to the Seeker’s burning stare, until she said, “I’m sorry Cassandra, but Nevarran royalty, however minor, will catch the court’s attention. Someone is likely to notice if both us are gone.”

Cassandra cursed, but her lack of argument suggested she agreed.

“Varric should stay as well,” Sevanna continued, as Josephine began to scribble everything down. “He’ll be a popular distraction. And Bull too – he’s too big to be inconspicuous.

“Of course,” said Josephine, pausing to cough politely. “Ah – and what of Sera, Inquisitor?”

The corners of Sevanna’s mouth twitched, and Cullen could see the dimple in her cheek. “Use her as your secret weapon, Josie – she’ll give us a commotion if we need it.”

“Andraste preserve us all, should it come to that,” Josephine muttered down to her writing board; Cullen knew she did not like to think of Sera set loose in the middle of the noblest Orlesians, and managed to disguise his snort as a cough
“I’ll bring Cole with me. He’ll be useful in making sure we stay out of sight,” Sevanna went on. “Blackwall as well – I don’t expect a Grey Warden will command much interest – and Solas. I think the court would regard an elven apostate with a…curiosity I’m certain he’d rather avoid.”

A strange look ran over the elf’s face who was measuring Sevanna; a ripple of curious appraisal that was gone as quickly as it came, almost leading Cullen to believe it hadn’t happened at all.

“Very good, Inquisitor,” said Josephine, as Vivienne and Leliana made noises of approval; the elf’s expression had gone unnoticed except by him. “Now we can begin focusing on more important matters – such as colours.”

“Colours?” Cassandra repeated in disbelief, flinching away as the Ambassador tried holding up swatches of blues and purples against the Seeker’s cheek.

“Colours are to the Great Game what a sword is to a warrior,” Leliana interposed, “do not dismiss their power, Cassandra.”

“And why don’t you have to suffer through this?” she demanded, earning a rude look from the tailor, which she ignored. “I have been stuck here for nearly an hour.”

“Alphonse knows my measurements by heart,” said Leliana, directing this to the little white-haired tailor who was now measuring Cullen’s shoulders. “Don’t you, Alphonse?”

“They are among my greatest treasures, my dear Lady Nightingale,” he replied with a deep bow, making her laugh and Cassandra roll her eyes with a scoff.

“You can imagine my surprise when I discovered how close the two of you are, Leliana” said Vivienne, pouring the Spymaster more champagne. “The Monsieur has been my most preferred tailor for many years.”

“I suppose one cannot spend time in Val Royeaux without immaculate taste.” Leliana raised her glass to Vivienne’s, who tapped her rim to hers with an identical smirk.

“Do all women bond over clothing?” Cullen said in undertone to Sevanna, noticing the distinct lack of hostility from the last time he’d seen the two woman in the same room.

“Yes,” answered Vivienne, Josephine, and Leliana, none of whom even glanced at him. Cassandra simply shook her head and Sevanna suppressed a giggle.

“You are finished, Lady Pentaghast,” chirruped the elf before her, who had finished scribbling the fabric measurements on her small scroll.

“Thank the Maker.” Cassandra yanked off the skirt pinned to her waist, and tossed it aside with ill-grace. “Do not make it pink,” she snapped towards an offended looking Josephine as she stomped past her; the door slammed behind them as the Ambassador spluttered and Vivienne tsked.

“Someone will have to give the Seeker some lessons on simple etiquette,” she announced, as she resumed her pacing around Cullen.

“Perhaps you could instruct her personally, Madam Vivienne,” he suggested wryly.

“Don’t flatter me, darling,” she said, patting his cheek. “You know perfectly well I haven’t the patience for that.”

He laughed, flinching suddenly when it earned him a hard poke in the ribs from Alphonse.
“Remain still, Commander, unless you wish I pierce your naval.”

“I hear that’s quite the scandalous fashion in Antiva,” Sevanna said pleasantly, as Cullen sputtered.

“Perhaps you could show yours off at the ball, Josie,” suggested Leliana, with an impish smile.

“Leliana!” Josephine exclaimed, dropping the length of silk she’d held up next to Cullen’s face in shock.

“So could I,” said Sevanna wickedly, making Alphonse murmur an Orlesian oath of disapproval somewhere around Cullen’s waist.

“But you don’t have your -” he began, before he remembered that two-thirds of remaining War Council, Vivienne, a tailor and two assistants were present. Sevanna smiled and winked at him; he immediately shut his mouth, turned red, and resumed staring straight ahead of him. The other women let out tinkling laughs at his blush.

“Maker’s breath,” he muttered. “Is this what the Winter Palace will be like?”

“No, darling,” Vivienne said gently, flicking through the nearest rack of fabric. “It is guaranteed to be much worse.”

Cullen groaned, as the tailor raised his arms to measure him from wrist to wrist. Sevanna, smiling sympathetically, reached out to grasp his fingers with her own. “Can you tell me what my Commander will be wearing, Monsieur?” she asked.

“He will be in the finest Orlesian silks, your Worship,” said Alphonse, examining Cullen closely with light, watery eyes. “Blue, to stay abreast with the current gentleman’s trend – and silver! Oh yes, lots of silver, and perhaps diamond studded buttons down the front -”

“No,” said Vivienne, interrupting Alphonse’s wistful description and Cullen’s mounting horror; not only was he doomed to be a point of key interest among the court, but they intended to drape him in sparkling jewels to ensure he evaded no predatory gaze.

Vivienne laid a swathe of deep crimson against his shoulder, stepping back to study him with a silver ringed and perfectly manicured finger tapping against her lips. “Put him in Ferelden colours,” she said finally, as Alphonse looked slightly crestfallen. “Perhaps they’ll stay off him if he looks a little more…unpolished.”

“As you wish, Madame de Fer,” Alphonse said in a tone of defeat, turning back to finish Cullen’s measurements. He caught her eye over the tailor’s head, giving her a grateful nod, and received a warm smile in return.

“That is all I need from you today, Commander,” Alphonse said, moving away from him to scribble on a writing board. “I will send for you again when we need more detailed fitting.”

“Right,” said Cullen, as the tailor’s assistant moved forward to redress him in his armour – and hastened to add, after Josephine gave him a look, “I-uh, I look forward to it.”

She nodded approvingly, and turned back to watch as Alphonse began to expect Sevanna more closely. Cullen stepped off his platform, assuming he was dismissed but decided to linger, thinking Sevanna would be finished shortly after; but Alphonse was taking his luxurious and undoubtedly expensive time looking her over, moving her arms and shoulders through ranges of motion.

Cullen waited through five minutes of this, shifting back and forth as Monsiuer Alphonse studied
the angle of Sevanna’s underarm and torso, when Leliana spoke up, “You can go, Cullen.”

“I’ll stay,” he said quickly, rubbing his neck. “If it’s not much longer -”

“The Inquisitor’s outfit will be the most complicated,” Alphonse interrupted loudly, his eyes never moving from Sevanna’s armpit. “I will have to begin constructing it on her tonight if we are to be finished in time.”

Sevanna’s eyebrows jumped up in surprise, and Cullen rounded on Leliana. “That’s outrageous! She’s been gone for nearly four months, she needs rest -”

“If you wish to keep the Inquisitor as safe as possible, Commander,” she interjected, the cool tone of her voice suggesting he would be unwise to argue, “then we need the time to ensure we can keep her so, without alerting our enemies we are expecting an attack by noticeably arming her.”

Cullen ground his teeth together, hating so much that she was right – that he was relinquishing Sevanna into one of the most dangerous places she could be; adrift in a sea of masks that hid few friends and far more foe, where she drew nearly as many dagger points as stares with the grasp of a much greater enemy already tight across her throat.

Sensing his disquiet, Sevanna smiled brightly at him. “I’ll be fine, Cullen – my mother has made dresses far more contrived for me. I’ll find you when I’m finished.”

He nodded, his neck moving stiffly; he turned to the door with barely a glance to the others and strode through, allowing it to swing shut heavily behind him. He knew he was being unreasonable, but it was distant, unable to pierce this sudden surge of irritability within him. Though he knew it was the withdrawal, a fresh wave testing him once more; but it had been a long four months, and Cullen was tired. Traveling had tired him, missing Sevanna had tired him – he was exhausted from it, the ache from the hollow she had left, and from the duties he commanded that chained him to a desk. The two months Skyhold had gone silent without her only made the lyrium louder; the drawer he kept it in beginning to squeak from how often he pulled it open. He had kept his most private letters from her right next to his kit; letters of how much she missed his lips, that her nights had turned cold without days with him to warm them. Once tightly rolled, they had gone quite flat since he’d taken to reach for them instead of the lyrium, reminding himself that the man Sevanna wrote these letters to was not the man he was after whenever he had stained his teeth blue.

Someone had lit the torches in his office, and there was a fresh stack of reports on his desk. He sighed deeply, knowing there would only be more in the morning – paperwork had the odd ability to reproduce on his desk overnight. Yet he couldn’t quite bring himself to sit down; that damned drawer would be right there, and he would barely have to stretch his arm to grasp its handle. And he knew, without a shred of doubt, that he would, knew it was inevitable like the darkening of the moon; knew that he would be unable to resist pulling it open and pushing aside Sevanna’s letters, to see that the kit was still there, an omen of a dream turning into nightmare.

He turned towards the bookshelf instead; inhaled the smell of leather and dust that was never unfamiliar, not when he so often anchored himself to this shelf, arranging and rearranging his books by title, subject, or colour of the bindings. It proved a methodical and distracting task, one that kept him from toying the handle on that drawer in his desk; the brass of it tarnished from the oils on his gloves, and now the a slight wiggle from how frequently he bent his fingers around it, ready to yank it open.

Absently, instinctively, his two fingers curled just so against the bookcase; Cullen released a harsh breath he didn’t know he was holding, realizing with a hot rush of blood to his face and other places that it was the precise motion he used to press the delicate spot inside Sevanna, the one that
made her breasts arch up from the bedroll –

Flushed and half-hard, Cullen spun on his heel to march towards the far door; now would be an excellent time to check with the soldiers who’d remained to guard Skyhold. He took a moment to readjust himself before stepping out into cool twilight, stiff length pressed between his belt and belly; even now, so long out of them, there were times he missed his heavy linen Templar robes.

The ramparts were quiet that night, patrolled by less guards than usual. They had not yet begun regular rotations, as Cullen wanted his soldiers to have at least one morning lie-in - something the ache in his joints was telling him he needed, yet could not afford. He’d left no lieutenant in his stead at Skyhold, and the steady influx of fresh recruits had not ceased in his long absence. There were men to train, forges to relight, duties to re-attend – and yet he had brought more in return than whence he’d left, counting and re-counting the rolls of parchment he would need in his mind, for when he wrote the letters to the families of those who hadn’t made it home.

He roamed the battlements for quite some time, until the courtyards were pocketed with shadows and the sun became a weak haze that gilded the edges of the westward mountains. The guards that passed nodded and murmured in greeting, but did not stop to speak; Dorian flitted by in a blur of light remarks of finding Bull, and a kindly tone that indicated the mage sensed Cullen was in no state to be badgered. He lingered by the stairs outside the door to Bull’s haphazard quarters, long after Dorian had disappeared within with the distinct click of a lock; Sevanna would have known to find him here if he wasn’t in his office, this spot next to a partly crumbled parapet where they often met at for a private kiss amid their midday duties – the spot he had first kissed her for all the world to see.

No, if she had not found him here by now, that meant she was likely still in the tailor’s clutches. To stay awake and wait for her would mean to let his headache grow and thrive; if he wanted to see straight in the morning, he would have to turn in for the night soon. The temperature was becoming quite chill, regardless, and months away in the lower, warmer regions of Orlais had Cullen rather unused to the mountains’ frosty bite.

The torches in his office had dimmed, but someone had been by again to light the scattering of nubby candles in his room above and place warming pans beneath his bedcovers; a luxury he’d been getting used to since the beginning of his and Sevanna’s courtship. He’d never mentioned how cold the nights could get in his tower, though she had made the correct assumption herself – she knew about the hole in his roof, any which way. She’d also sent him a thick quilt, which he usually kicked off during the night since the withdrawal made him run hot, especially in his sleep. But Cullen liked getting into a warm bed when the room was cold, and tonight it helped him miss her less.

He’d gotten so used to sleeping next to her, twined together as naturally as the roots of two trees that it was as if he’d forgotten how to sleep alone; he pitched from side to side, limbs restless without a soft and warm body to hold, the night much too quiet without her sleepy hums and soft sighs. The stars peeking through his rafters were indifferent to his plight, cold and diamond hard against the black sky, and offered him no refuge from the whispers that came from the drawer in his desk.

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Three days passed, slow and gray, in which Cullen saw Sevanna only twice. First thing the next morning, despite the pain that had speared in his temples and down his neck when Cullen sat up in bed, he had gone to Sevanna’s quarters to see if they could have a private, albeit quick, breakfast. Instead, he found out that Alphonse had turned the space into his personal workshop, and that
Josephine and Vivienne were already there. Sevanna was on the platform once more, looking wane and pale with her arms above her head as the tailor pinned what looked like scales to her corset. Josie was feeding her bits of a scone and sips of tea as Alphonse circled around her, as task they allowed Cullen to take over for fifteen minutes before shooing him out as to not “distract the Inquisitor from her fitting”. Cassandra displayed her rare compassion by allowing him to rant about it later that afternoon, though she had her own steam to vent; apparently Alphonse had gotten her buttock with a needle after she’d made a remark about how she was wasting her time, and she was convinced it hadn’t been accidental as the diminutive tailor had seemed rather smug in his apology.

It was on the fourth day, late in the evening when the candles were lit to combat night, that the tailor relinquished Sevanna. Cullen did not yet know it; Rylen and Barris had returned to Skyhold the previous day with the enormous force they’d left behind at Griffon’s Wing Keep. They’d made good time with the Warden’s cooperation, and now the camps at the base of the mountain had expanded, a ribbon of silver and blue tents cutting through the ones of plain linen. It was good to have his forces behind him once more; Cullen felt as though work could once more proceed, and they could return to the important task he’d been force to abandon on his march to the Western Approach.

He was in his office with a scouting party, poring over a map of Emprise du Lion, where Leliana’s spies had at last tracked the locations of Samson’s lyrium mines. He knew Sevanna would want to investigate them herself – they knew it was mined from corpses, so there were bound to be prisoners – but himself, Leliana, and Cassandra, had unanimously agreed that it was much too dangerous a place for the Inquisitor to set foot. It would be undoubtedly dense with Red Templars and whatever other red lyrium monstrosities they’d managed to mutate since they had last seen them in battle.

There was also the matter that they did not know where Samson lay in hiding. If they did not find him somewhere deep in these mines, Cullen would not know where to look next. A trail gone cold scared him, the kind of deep, wintry fear one feels in their bones – how could he protect Sevanna if he could not anticipate from where Samson would leap?

The answer lay in the mines, whether it was Samson himself or yet another clue – Cullen was certain of it. “When you find the Templar’s mines,” he said, tracing his fingers over the mountains that were inked around Emprise du Lion, “remain out of sight. Rylen’s men will monitor the situation from a closer vantage point when the enemies’ rotation pattern is established. You must act with caution; we need to gather as much information as we can before we strike.”

His soldiers nodded solemnly; dangerous as this mission was, and exhausted as they all were from their latest journey, Cullen had made it strictly volunteer. He would not order anyone into the heart of the Corypheus’ operation; Rylen, of course, had put in his name first, then Rhodes, Ritts, Harding, and Barris. A handful of other good men and Leliana’s agents came forward as well, and Cullen was confident their operation would be a success. They would leave on the morrow, and he was nearly envious – at least they would escape the Val Royeaux tailor shop that had spread through Skyhold like a colorful and haughty fungus. Why, just the other day, one of Alphonse’s assistants had walked into his office, arranged a large vase of dried, fragrant, and purely ornamental flowers on his desk, and then left without even acknowledging him or his spluttered demands.

Although, it had been enormously satisfying to chuck the stupid thing off the battlements, and worth the odd looks he’d gotten from the soldiers who were obviously mystified why their Commander had marched past with an overlarge vase of flowers.

The corner of his mouth twitched at the memory, and Cullen straightened up from the map on his
desk. “That will be all. Get lots of rest, if you can.”

There were murmurs in answer, and they dispersed; some out of the left door to go to the tavern, some out the center, most likely headed for the barracks. Cullen was bent over the desk again, gathering together papers to shuffle into order, and did not notice that Barris had stayed behind until the knight cleared his throat.

“Commander,” he began, as Cullen blinked up at him; if he was not mistaken, the other man looked quite nervous. “I was wondering if I could ask you about a – erm, personal matter.”

Cullen felt his brow raise. “Of course, Ser Barris. Is it regarding the mission-?”

“No,” he said quickly, a look of guilt crossing his face when he realized he’d interrupted his commanding officer. “It’s about…rules. Of fraternisation.”

There was a beat of silence. “Fraternisation?” Cullen repeated, at a temporary loss.

“Yes,” Barris said, the colour high in his cheeks not unlike Cullen’s when he was flustered. “I figured it was best to ask you, given your command and your – um, relationship with the Inquisitor…”

Ah. It finally fell into place, what Barris was asking – and Cullen cleared his throat. “Oh, um, yes. Well, the Inquisition is not the Order. You are free to pursue whoever – um, a relationship with whomever you wish.”

“Right,” said the knight. He was shifting back and forth, his gaze not quite meeting Cullen’s. “And the nature of that relationship…?”

Cullen was sympathetic of Barris’ uncertainty; he remembered the confusion well, relearning that he was allowed to speak with whomever he pleased, and that he was not limited by the Order and his oaths, no longer a silent sentinel that could only watch, command, and punish.

“That is whatever you wish,” he said. “We are not like the Chantry here.”

Barris smiled, relief darting across his face before he inclined his head respectfully. “Thank you, Commander. I – I’m very grateful.”

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck. He knew the sensation that was surely stirring in Barris’ chest – like a great unfolding of giant wings, wind and weightlessness contained within him as he realized that everything the Chantry discouraged, but could not outright ban, lay within reach, and was up to him to decide what he grabbed a hold of. “It’s not up to me to lay out your path, Ser Barris.”

The knight smiled again, wistful in a way that Cullen knew had nothing to do with him. He bowed once more, turning on his heel to leave the office – but as he opened the door he stepped back in surprise. “Oh -! Inquisitor, my apologies -”

“There’s no need, Ser Barris,” came the achingly familiar voice that had Cullen’s heart leaping against his ribs. “Is the Commander busy?”

“I was just leaving.” The Templar shuffled awkwardly on the spot, letting Sevanna slip past him in the doorway. “Excuse me, I-”

And he was gone, leaving the door ajar and Sevanna looking curiously out after him. “Is he alright? He looked awfully flushed.”
“We were discussing matters of, ah, personal relationships,” Cullen explained; he was distracted by the wide neckline of her dove-gray dress, which was embroidered with lace and sitting low on her shoulders. He moved to close the door, passing her so closely he could smell her soft perfume, leaning on it to ensure it was firmly latched, and turned the lock.

Sevanna bounced excitedly on her toes. “Did he really? Then there must be truth to the rumour Josie heard that he’s sweet on Lace Harding.” She sighed, drifting past Cullen into the pools of shivering candlelight with a soft brush of her hand against his. “I suppose nothing breeds romance like the end of the world.”

“Yes, well -,” he began, but cutting short as he spotted the roll of parchment in her hand, neatly tied with a ribbon and obviously sent by Josephine. He groaned. “There’s always something more, isn’t there?”

She stretched over the desk to place it gently on top of his morning reports, her braided hair falling over one bare shoulder. “The schedule of your remaining tailor appointments. I’m delivering it for Josie, on the condition that they would leave me alone for a night so I may spend it with my Commander.”

She turned back to him, leaning back on her palms on the edge of his desk and a sparkle in her eyes. It took about three seconds for Cullen to properly process the implication, and actually be a gentleman about it. “Oh – um, would you like to stay tonight?”

She laughed, hoisting herself up to perch at the desk’s edge. “Cullen, do you have to ask?”

“I suppose not,” he said, a half-smile curling his lips. It seemed foolish that not that long ago, this three-day stretch of not seeing her would have sent him into a spiral of self-doubt; but now it felt like coming home after a long day, that gnarled ridge of withdrawal still left within him the only ripple of disquiet, the final remaining whispers that told him his current luck would one day run out.

Sevanna sensed it, this state of mind that had Cullen running the ruts he had beat a thousand times before. She held out her hand, drawing him forward to stand close. “It must be difficult,” she murmured, lacing her fingers through his, “to be back here again, with the lyrium so close.”

He appreciated that she did not dance around the word, as if it was dirty or that he might be too sensitive to hear it. Nor did she refer to it as his, for which he was eternally grateful; it helped him separate them, the lyrium and his sense of self, helped him slowly realize that the Templar and the man did not have to be so different.

“It has not been easy,” he admitted, eyes closing when her other hand came up to feather over his brow, and let out a harsh exhale.

“Bad memories?” she asked gently.

“More than I would care to admit,” he said, the pain of them threadbare in his voice; dark memories of need and want and anger, fits of temper in the isolation of his office when the withdrawal became agonising. Nights spent nursing blinding headaches and trying to steady his shaking hand as he wrote reports. Weeks, no, months of waiting in this office, waiting for the endless days to shift like the dunes of a desert; an age of erosion and brittleness, counting an unknown number of sunsets to the one that bore her home.

He moved suddenly, sweeping the contents from the top of his desk to the floor. The resulting clatter and shush of flying papers was punctuated by Sevanna’s sound of surprise – cut short as he
nudged his hips between her knees so they were flush against each other, the steel of his chest plate pressed against breasts he knew were not restrained by bindings. He towered over her in his armour and furs, the tremble of his fingers winding into her hair betraying the vulnerability that only she could expose.

“Give me a better one,” he said, hushed against her lips. “Help me make a good memory here.”

She locked her ankles around his waist, hauled his weight against her, let him pivot her under him so he could climb onto the desk and lay over her. She was flushed-cheeked and tempting beneath him, candlelight reflected in the blacks that swallowed the green of her eyes as she watched him pull a glove off with his teeth. He cupped her breast with a gentle swipe with his thumb – she arched into his palm, the nibble of her lip as mouth-watering as bitten-open berries, and he surged forward to taste her. It had been a few long and tedious days since that morning in a warm mountain spring, and it showed in the hot, heavy press of his cock between their bodies. Sevanna was tugging at fistfuls of his furs, murmuring something amidst his assault on her mouth –

She dragged his mouth away, pulled him down to breathe unevenly in his ear, “Armour, Cullen – off.”

He obeyed; he reared back, fingers clumsy as he rushed to shed his trappings so that he could cover her without crushing her beneath his weight. Sevanna watched with smoky eyes and wetted lips, waiting for his hands to be free of his vambraces before sitting up to help him from his pauldrons. They could work on the opposite laces without getting in each other’s way, and if he hadn’t been so distracted Cullen would have been proud of how quickly she had learned to free him from his armour.

He was in his undershirt in moments, the fabric stuck to the places where he grew warm from his layers of leather and steel. Sevanna’s hands roamed the hard expanse of his abdomen, her slender fingers creeping under the hem to touch bare skin – he clench beneath her questing fingertips, shuffling backwards off the desk and to the floor. He gripped her waist and hauled her toward him, her dress bunching up beneath her ass – good – as she slid over the polished surface. He kissed her, kept it brief though it blistered, and sank to his knees before her. She made a sound that was half question and half gasp, knowing what he intended without having to ask and relaxed slowly back against the desk as Cullen hiked the hem of her dress up her thighs.

She wore no smalls, and he groaned at the sight; copper curls made dark and damp with her excitement, tension along every cord of muscle that felt like silk-covered springs beneath his lips. There was no need for slow acquiesce this time, with the sting of her fingernails on his scalp, guiding him though he didn’t need it. Cullen kissed her there, open-mouthed and hot; they both groaned aloud, him at the taste of her and her by the sinful swirl of his tongue. He gripped her hips and pulled her closer, her bottom resting on the edge so he could bury his face against her sex, following the rise and fall of Sevanna’s cries, bringing her to the precipice quickly with nibbles and licks and gentle sucking.

“O-oh, C-Cullen – doors?” Sevanna panted, struggling for coherence against his onslaught; he knew she was asking if they were all locked.

He hummed in amusement, brushing soft kisses at the juncture of her thigh- he loved the way it made her jump. “No one comes through at this time,” he murmured into her skin, “as to not…disturb me.” He slipped a single finger inside her, drawing out a long mewl from her as he lapped at the bundle just above where his index vanished within her. She bowed off the surface of the desk, and Cullen knew she’d forgotten all about the doors, unlocked or not.

“Come for me,” he implored, his breath ragged, and she did - clenching hard around his finger and
gasping his name. And oh, he wanted to watch her writhe with the pleasure he gave her; but there
would be a chance for that yet, so for now he tasted her climax, lapping at her slick as Sevanna
tried to re-catch her breath.

The stone floor beneath his knees was cold and unforgiving; with a stifled groan Cullen stood up,
wiping her pleasure from his mouth. She was watching him with glittering, half-hooded eyes as his
hands went to his belt, and her tongue – Maker, that tongue – skated over her lower lip. His clothes
were discarded just like the pieces of his armour, scattered and strewn like the carapace of some
metal creature, and he was naked before her, his desire jutting out heavy and hard.

She braced her heels against the desk, arching her body up to shimmy the dress up and over her
head, let it join the debris on the floor. The candles had burned low, gilding her curves in fire and
picking out the gold in her hair. Cullen traced every burnished limb, committing her to memory;
the way she lay sprawled for him on his desk, and replayed the sounds of her cries so they drowned
out every echo of lyrium that remained.

“Beautiful,” was all he could utter when his heart beat in his mouth, when all the poetry in the
world could not describe the elegance with which she had been shaped. She smiled, the way she
only would for him, and it was what crumbled his reverence - he lunged forward to crawl over her,
moving with the feline and predatory slink of a lion. She welcomed him with her warm and naked
embrace, draping her legs around his waist as he settled into the cradle of her thighs. They kissed,
deep and unhurried as she tasted her spend on his lips – though Cullen was soon groaning softly,
with the underside of his cock pressing and gliding along the dampness at her core. A small hand
worked its way between them, and he lifted his hips to allow Sevanna to grip him at the base and
guide him in.

They sucked in the same breath as the blunt head cleaved her – Cullen muffled his arduous groan
against her neck as he slid deeper, feeling her hot, wet and quivering walls relax around him as he
sheathed himself wholly inside her body. Sevanna locked her ankles around his ass, keeping him
snug against her and let out the breath she’d been holding since he first pushed his way in.

There was hardly room to move as she held him there, every inch of flushed and damp skin
pressed together; Cullen rocked his hips in a shallow thrust, groaning anew as Sevanna moved with
him, grinding together slowly in the only way this position – with his weight braced along his
forearms, her slender legs wrapped tightly around hips that longed to thrust hard and fast – would
allow. It was a scorching but languid pace, made tender by the gentle rocking of their hips and the
sizzling space between their lips, whispering words of love and pleasure between kisses that felt
like cool rain on metal that was still hot from the forge.

It was quick, this joining that Cullen intended as the first in what was to be a long night; he came in
crescendo, not caring who heard his roar of the pleasure that blinded him to the world so that all he
knew or felt was the magnificent clench of Sevanna’s body and the fingers that bit into his
shoulders when he did. She cried out as he filled her with the hot rush of his seed, holding him
tightly against her so he could ride the wave in her embrace, and made no sound of complaint as he
relaxed over her, sated and heavy.

There was only the jagged sound of his panting, though he could feel the wild frenzy of her
heartbeat under his, and heard her lips shape the sighs that signalled she, too, was satiated as he.
The sweat cooled from their bodies, their pulses waned and became calm once more, when she
began to wiggle beneath him.

“You know what would be nice?” Her voice was rose petal-soft, husky from her cries.

“Hm?”
She nuzzled his ear. “If we did this in a bed.”

He chuckled lightly, placing kisses along the sweep of her neck. “It just so happens I have one upstairs, if my lady is so inclined…”

“The lady’s backside is certainly inclined,” she muttered, shuffling her bottom under him once more.

Cullen pushed himself up with a laugh, slightly ungraceful due to his shaking arms – he would be very sore tomorrow. “Allow me to escort the lady’s backside to the bedchamber, then.”

She hummed softly as he withdrew from her, the mess of their lovemaking dripping along the surface if his desk like candlewax. Sevanna giggled as he helped her off the desk, holding onto him for balance as her trembling legs retook her weight. Her eyes scanned the clothing strewn about the room, her expression amused. “If someone walks in on this mess, they might think the Commander exploded.”

“They wouldn’t be entirely wrong,” he said, making her laugh. “Though I suppose I should clean up before someone does see it and…talks.”

“Is there really nothing else exciting going on?” Sevanna huffed, though with good humour. “I’ve already overheard enough about our ‘torrid affair’ from those gossips that dither around Josephine’s office.”

“I suppose our war efforts against a darkspawn magister are quite dull by comparison,” Cullen said, as he bent to gather the pieces of his armour. “But I would never claim to understand how an Orlesian’s mind works -”

He stopped short as he turned back to Sevanna; she had wrapped herself in his furs, made small and delicate-looking beneath its bulk, though it lay bare the mouth-watering expanse between her breasts, and all the way down to her naval.

“I’ll meet you upstairs, shall I?” she said lightly, as though she was unaware that the sight of her in his cloak had rendered Cullen speechless. She bent and scooped their clothes up in her arms; then she was climbing the ladder with one arm, bare toes curling around the rungs and exposing a long stretch of shapely thigh as she did so.

Cullen hurriedly stacked his armour on the spare stand he kept in the corner, for the days he was too weary to haul its full weight upstairs; he did a haphazard and precarious job but he did not care, even when he heard one piece clatter loudly to the floor as he rushed to the ladder to join her.

The room above was awash in moonlight that filtered through the rafters, turning everything to silver and ink. Sevanna was at the foot of his bed, facing away but with her head turned over her shoulder to watch him clamber up the ladder; she let his furs drop to the pile of their clothes around her feet as he approached, the sleek play of her muscles catching the argent light that reminded Cullen of the sun bouncing off the surface of a lake, flashing off the scales of the creatures that lived in its depths. He traced his knuckles down her spine, delighting in her shiver, before hooking his arm around her waist and falling onto the bed.

They bounced together in a tangle of limbs and skin, her silk against his rough linen, and he fumbled for a grip on her hips; manoeuvred himself so he was on his back and he had rolled Sevanna overtop him, her breasts pillowcd against his chest and straddling his hips like she did in his most wicked fantasies. She sat up, her weight shifting so that her buttocks pressed along his twitching and burgeoning erection, one hand braced against his chest and the other tucking
wayward locks of hair that had escaped her plait behind her ear.

It was a dream made real and tangible, Cullen thought with breathless awe as he skimmed his palms up her thighs to her hips and watched the wave of gooseflesh erupt in his wake. He so loved the contrast of her soft flesh against his sword-calloused hands - sand and talcum, feather and bristle. She was his antithesis; his harmonious opposite that slotted into all the right vacant places, rounding out his hard corners and jagged edges the way an ocean softens a rocky shore, smoothing it beneath a patient tide.

Sevanna’s brow creased¸ her lips folding together in a self-conscious line; he could see the shadow of the blush in her cheeks. “Ah, Cullen…I’ve never done – this.”

She tentatively wriggled her bottom in his lap, sending a dull thrush of pleasure through him. He had wondered about her previous experiences, if they had been adventurous, or perhaps too risky for no more than a quick fumble. He did not doubt that the life of a noble girl in a prestigious family would be carefully monitored, and any absence would be quickly noticed; in many parallels, being raised by the Order was similar. Separate dorms with nightly counts reduced blossoming curiosity to hurried trysts between rounds. Even in his wildest adolescent imaginings, Cullen hadn’t even fathomed there were such a variety of sexual positions until he served in the Circle Tower and his interactions with female Templars were no longer closely observed.

He raised a hand to cup Sevanna’s face, smoothing the crinkle of embarrassment in her brow away with his thumb. She pressed her cheek into his hand, turning to brush her lips against the heel of his wrist and finding it surprisingly sensitive as Cullen shivered, his cock becoming rigid under her. He skimmed his fingers along the column of her throat and down the ridge of her collarbone, pausing to lightly tweak the rosy nipple into attentiveness, before coming down to settle on her waist.

“1’ll show you,” he whispered, lifting her slightly to position her more squarely over him; his cock sprang up after her, heavy and weeping and eager, igniting the filthy urge within Cullen to bury himself in her with a swift, upward thrust. His hips twitched but remained obedient, made patient by the sight of her long thighs settling over him, her breasts swaying over his face – tantalising inches away from his wet and hungry mouth – as she hovered just above him. He let out a gust of needy breath as his gaze travelled over her belly to the damp curls at her quim, and he looked up into her face as he curled his thumb and middle finger around his base to steady his cock so that she could impale herself upon it.

“Down,” he said, hushed and pleading. Guided her with fingers digging into her hip to press the head of his cock into her, let her gasp as her muscles clenched around him as they tried to accommodate his girth while also controlling her descent, the mattress creaking slightly beneath them.

Heat, molten and volcanic, rolled through him – turned his veins to lava beds, his blood to melted ore – as Sevanna seated herself upon him, wearing a crown of moonlight and the jewels of the stars on her skin. She uttered the softest cry when she’d taken him as deeply as he could go, pressed to the hilt of his desire, and ground instinctively against him.

Cullen grunted, other hand flying to clutch her hip; she stilled, her wetted lips parted around a worried sound, but he nodded jerkily and his hands wrapped around her thighs. His voice was a rasp. “Again.”

She did, until they were both groaning and breathless – until she was crying out, over and over, as she hit an angle that had her louder than Cullen had yet heard – until her slick was sticky along his thighs and dripping down his sack –
“Ohh – Maker -!” The oath spilled from him as his control frayed and tore apart, unravelled like a rope tossed into the abyss; he flipped Sevanna onto her back, rolling over her and pushing her legs over his shoulders. His mouth bumped wetly into the crook of her knee as he dragged her hips into position – and thrust himself in deep once more, having her cry out around his cock in a way he hadn’t dared dream.

He came so hard it was like being blinded by a thunder flash; strung up in oblivion, weightless and spinning in space and darkness, sight and awareness returning as gradually as an ash cloud settles. He was braced on his arms just above Sevanna, her hair bleached by the moon and a tangle around her face. Her chest was rising and falling as sharply as his, the flush in her cheeks mirrored across her breasts; her legs were still over his shoulders, bottom tucked snugly against his thighs and sticky with their mixed juices.

Sevanna blew the hair from her eyes, and Cullen watched it resettle on her damp forehead – she was smiling, happy and wide, as she reached up to brush the curls that had broken rank back from her equally sweaty brow. “I like the bed,” she said earnestly, stealing the last of his breath in a laughter.

He pulled gently away from her, eliciting a rush of fluids that was sure to leave very telling stains, and rearranged her legs along the bed. There was a basin of chilly water on the nightstand, the one he washed his face in that morning; he dipped a washcloth into it, the coolness a delicious contrast to his hot and flushed skin. “Sorry,” he whispered, when he swiped the cloth along the mess at her thighs, startling her with the cold, and she simply hummed as he wiped her clean. He tossed the cloth aside and reached for the blankets at the foot of his bed, pulling them up along them as he pulled Sevanna against his chest.

She sighed into his neck, and he felt the flutter of her lashes against his throat. “Better memories?”

He smiled into her hair, tracing an arbitrary pattern upon her shoulder. “Yes.”

She slid her leg up his, hooking one calf with an ankle. “Good.” She shifted slightly, nuzzling closer into the heat of his body. “Cullen?”

“Mm?”

“Don’t let me sleep alone again,” she murmured.

He curled his arm around her waist. “Never again.”

She mumbled something else, but she was slipping too quickly into slumber and Cullen felt her limbs go soft – she always asleep in a space of a few seconds after several orgasms, of which he was absurdly proud. Usually, he followed suit within a few minutes; tonight was no different, and he soon feel deeply asleep.

Far too deep.

The withdrawal had prowled the edges of his mind like a wolf just beyond the light of a fire, and he had failed to see the eyes in the darkness; now, when he was vulnerable in sleep, it pounced. Jaws of nightmare opened wide and swallowed him whole, locked him deep in the dark gullet of the Circle Tower. The eternal prison that awaited Cullen when he was at his weakest and weariest, and in this dark dream he gulped down philter after philter until he vomited blue as he watched Red Templars slit the throats of all those he held dearest, never becoming strong enough to break free of his confinements. He only ripped himself from the thorn bed of this anguish when it presented Sevanna for slaughter and he could not bear it, the press of the knife that made a dent in her throat
He awoke in cold sweat and tight-chested, his panicked breathing harsh against the silent night. He was still on his back, each muscle rigid as he made certain of where he truly was. Sevanna had rolled away from him, her cheek pillowed on the soft underside of his elbow and her hair like streamers across his pillows. He hadn’t stirred her, which was good; turbulent though his dreams often were, there were the ones that seemed much, much too tangible and held him down like the gnarled roots of a Terror demon, as if to squeeze the very life from him. The Circle was his most haunted of graveyards, his most tormented ghosts, and thus was frequently the setting of such nightmares.

His skin was too tight, cold in a way that felt as though he were turning to stone; bloodless feet and hands flooding with renewed circulation that felt like acid as he flexed them back to flesh. Used to running warm as he was ought to do, Cullen particularly hated the iciness that came with fear, these rare times when his blood ran cold.

New tides of withdrawal often brought an old reckoning; the choices he had made like stones dredged up in the sand, polished and smoothed by churning in the undertows of his subconscious. When the pull of the lyrium was a waxing moon over an ocean and commanded it break; these were the nights he found himself at his desk without memory of coming down the ladder, sleepless and snagged on the handle of the drawer he kept it in. There had to be a point, surely, that unused lyrium turned to dust like the ore it’d been smelted from; it was with morbid curiosity that Cullen checking his last, meagre supply once every few months, and he had not been around his kit in a long time.

His side of the bed must’ve cooled, alerting her to his absence; Cullen wasn’t even aware of Sevanna descending from his loft until her slim fingers were curling over the lid of his kit, closing it against his intent gaze. He blinked up at her as she slid onto the desk in front of him; she was wearing the shirt he’d peeled off earlier, the sleeves long and loose over her wrists as she took his face in her hands.

“What is it?” she whispered to him, forcing his unfocused eyes to hold hers. “What’s wrong, Cullen?”

He swallowed thickly on a dry throat, his neck suddenly aching, and he laid his head wearily in her lap. “Just a nightmare.”

She curled protectively over him, one hand soothing down his back. “Was it about taking lyrium?”

His stomach curdled at the admission – still weak, after all this time. “Yes.”

Her fingertips probed the tension in his neck. He groaned slightly, turning his face into her bare thighs so she could press along the ache at the base of his skull. Her voice was quiet, a soft balm to his ears after the cries in his nightmares. “Would it be better if I took it away?”

“No,” he said, then sighed. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.” He stretched his arms behind her, curling his hands into fists where she wouldn’t see. “I don’t fucking know.”


Her other hand began stroking circles on his scalp, and he muffled a groan against her skin, tension draining down his spine. She said nothing else, instead focusing on rubbing the tension from his muscles, small knuckles pressed into knots Cullen forgot he had. Slowly, painstakingly, he relaxed; no longer tensed as if about to bolt, prey ready to flee a looming predator. She pressed and rubbed
and soothed with persistent fingers until he was limp over her, his heartbeat against her knees no longer a painful throb.

“Do you think you can get a little more rest?” Sevanna murmured above him. “It’s near dawn.”

“No,” he said again, though his voice was groggy to his own ears. She eased his head up and slid off the desk, guiding him blearily to the ladder. He kissed her clumsily at its bottom, putting his gratitude into the soft sweep of his tongue against her lips; she kissed him back sweetly, sloppily, before patting her hand against his bottom to tell him to get it up the ladder.

The bed had grown cold in the starlight; though it became easy to forget when Sevanna pulled him to nestle his face against her breasts, pillowing his cheek with their lushness, and wrapped her arms around his back as far as she could reach. Her heartbeat was a hummingbird’s wing, soft and quiet beneath his ear, like the whisper of a waterfall drumming on a mountain pool in the distance. Though he had doubted it, Cullen actually managed to fall asleep, the ragged corners of his mind soothed by the memories of waterfalls and a warm, rocky spring. He’d hardly dared dream that one day the darkness that blotted the sun would bleed away; yet here he found himself, on the other side of the long and lonely plain he’d first embarked on, walking in the light of a shifting eclipse.
A Good Night

Chapter Summary

They prepare for the Winter Palace, and enjoy a quiet night together.

Chapter Notes

This is very much a filler chapter, and I had originally intended it be part of the next one. But I figure this one is decently long enough to post on its own, and its been approximately a decade since I posted anything, so here you are! If you are still reading, thank you for abiding my turtle pace for updates <3

The morning drew in lavender and gold; Sevanna had missed the sunrises at Skyhold, the way the mountains’ ivory caps turned to gilt, their craggy slopes brush-stroked by the watercolours of dawn. She watched the sky lighten beyond the rafter’s, knowing she would have to get up very soon – Josie had insisted upon an early morning in exchange for the night off – but good mornings like this were always far between each other, and she decided to enjoy lying in bed with Cullen a little while longer.

He had managed to fall back asleep about an hour ago, disturbed by the nightmare that had Sevanna finding him below at his desk, staring into the contents of his lyrium kit as if it were a ravaged corpse he was intent on identifying. She knew his dreams were awful, of course, though she’d never asked him to reveal the details; the horrors he had told her about the Circle Tower were enough to make her suspect the subject of his dreams, and she would not have him relieve them anymore than he already had to. But never had she thought they were bad enough to drive him from his bed and moor him once again to the very chains he’d wrestled himself free of – nor did she think he had revealed this struggle to anyone, which only served to ache her heart further.

But Cullen slept soundly, for now; once more on his back, his head turned away on the pillow so she could see the curls the pillows had mussed into existence. The blankets were low on his hips – he slept hot during the night, something Sevanna was intimately familiar with after having shared a tent with him – treating her to an admirable display of taut abdominal muscles and the golden trail of hair that disappeared beneath the sheets. She bit down on her bottom lip as she traced her eyes over his slumbering form, remembering the feel of his strong chest beneath her palms when she’d braced them for leverage – remembered the strangled sound he’d made when she’d sank down on him, each of his fingertips a brand where they’d clutched her hips.

Sevanna rested her chin on Cullen’s shoulder, watching his eyelashes flutter as she moved, but he did not wake. All for the better; she didn’t want to turn up late for Josie, for fear of suffering her wrath. The upcoming ball had frayed the poor Ambassador’s nerves as of late, and Sevanna wanted to do whatever she could to help ease her friend’s burden – even if it meant standing still for a snooty tailor without having had a morning of sex to tide her through the long hours. She pressed a
kiss to the hollow of Cullen’s collarbone; at least the memory of last night was more than enough to steam her eyes to a glaze.

Her eyes fell on the mark at the bottom of his throat, left by her teeth and wreathed in a bruise. That was not the only one; she traced her fingers over the angry red bloom she had left on his pec at some hazy point in the night, counted the crescents her nails had left in his shoulders and biceps. Though she was sure to find plenty of her own love bites when she next looked in a mirror; her Commander’s mouth was just as every bit of attentive as she’d ever dreamt it would be.

She slipped quietly from the bed, tiptoeing over creaky floorboards to locate her dress. It was balled up beneath Cullen’s furs – wrinkly to boot, she did not doubt – and she decided to wrap herself in the cloak as well, as the morning outside the tower was sure to be chilly. Taking great care to not trip herself up going down the ladder, Sevanna stole one last glance over the topmost rung; Cullen peaceful and undisturbed, the creeping sunlight dancing off the dust motes in the air. She knew he’d be disappointed when he awoke and she was not there, but also figured taking his cloak was as good of an excuse as any for him to find her later, and reclaim it. She left a hastily scribbled note on his desk informing him it was now her hostage, and slipped out the southern door to reach the stairs; it seemed like a lovely morning to take the long way to her quarters through the courtyards, where the fragrant smell of damp earth and growing grass hung with the mist she swirled with her feet.

Leliana met her at the base of the stairs that lay below the ones to the main hall, her amused eyes taking in the furs Sevanna had wrapped around her shoulders, over last night’s dress. “Good morning, Inquisitor,” she greeted, as they fell into step; the Spymaster’s pace was just as unhurried, but Sevanna had an inkling there was something more to her leisure. “Might I have a word before you are in Alphonse’s clutches once more?”

“Of course, if it gives me a little more time out of all those pins.” They came to a pause at the top of the stairs, and Leliana held out a small leather pouch in her hand. Sevanna opened it curiously, and found it full of neatly tied teabags.

“Do you recognise them?” Leliana asked when she did not speak, briefly transported back to a time when she packed teabags herself, using her father’s recipe as a gift for Cullen; long before they had been lovers, before they had even really been friends. It seemed odd to even think about, after a night in his bed with the shape of his lips and the scent of his skin still on hers.

“This doesn’t look like any blend I’ve ever made,” Sevanna admitted, plucking out one teabag to examine it more closely, and sniffed it. “It’s quite bitter.”

“I’m afraid sugar makes it useless,” Leliana said, somewhat ruefully, and Sevanna gave her a sidelong glance.

“So I’m to drink this, then? I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what it is first.”

The Spymaster did not smile at her teasing. “It is a blend that was brought to our attention by some of the rebel mages, from Circles where this tea had common use between both them and the Templars. Both Solas and the surgeon, Anthea, have confirmed the validity of these herb’s medicinal qualities.”

Sevanna lifted the teabag so it swung at eye level, unaware of the significance that laced the Spymaster’s tone and exactly what she held in her hands; focused instead upon the telltale veins in a dried Vandal Aria leaf, the dark curls of Black Lotus petals, even the stems of an Arbour Blessing, which she didn’t even know could be used for tea. “What’s it called?”
Leliana’s keen gaze was sharp upon her. “They call it the midwife’s bane, Inquisitor. It is a blend intended to…discourage fertility.”

It took a moment for what Leliana was saying to really, truly, sink in – and Sevanna was seized by a sudden image, one of a towheaded little boy, laughing, and being lifted into sunlight by his father’s arms–

Something in her frozen expression alerted Leliana, and the other woman stepped closer to capture her vacant gaze. “Do not take this is as my disapproval, Sevanna,” she said, her voice gentle and sincere. “I wish you and Cullen every happiness…but it is my opinion, and the one of the Council, that you do not get with child in your current position.”

The daydream turned to ash; turned grey and indistinct as Sevanna slowly packed the teabag back into its little pouch, her fingers stiff and cold and itching with the desire to throw the teabags – and everything they implied – away from her. That in the end, it was never about her choice at all: whether she would lead the cause or die for it, or because the abomination that intruded upon her body would no longer need its host. How long before she was disposed of, like an old and shed skin? Everything she had ever wanted - everything she discovered in Cullen - were all tethered to the chains around her throat, and would be dragged down along her should she fall.

The hinge of her jaw felt like rock scraping against rock, and Sevanna found it difficult to speak. “Is it permanent?”

Leliana’s expression softened, comprehension swift. “Absolutely not.”

Sevanna nodded, breathing out the frost that had gripped her lungs. There had never been much time for pondering what the future might hold for the Inquisitor and her Commander, not when Corypheus loomed over her path, as vague as a mirage in the desert but no less threatening. It felt inevitable, as if this had been her destiny all along, woefully rendering a future with a love and family of her own much less likely.

She managed to arrange her tight lips into a pained smile; despite the unexpected loss that had occurred inside of her, just a moment ago with the teabag in her hand, she knew Leliana was right. It was better this way, that she did everything now to prevent putting a child – Cullen’s child – at every risk she was now faced with.

“You’re forethought is as wise as always, Sister,” she said quietly, curling the hand that held the pouch protectively against the hollow just below her ribs; protection, not theft. She merely had to survive the next steps, like hopping slippery rocks to cross a raging river, and wondering what came next could wait until she was catching her breath on the other side.

“I am relieved you can see as we do,” said Leliana, inclining her head. “Josie was very upset to impose more rights upon your body than we should be allowed; you know, she secretly cannot stand that she is monopolizing your time as of late.”

Sevanna smiled, genuinely this time, at the sweetness of her friend. “She is such a dear. I suppose I ought to be on my best behaviour for today then?”

The Spymaster’s eyebrows lifted from their usual straight line as she laughed; it was so rare that she did, the real kind, where the lines around her eyes softened and her head tilted back. These scarce moments when Sevanna could see the young bard beneath a much harder and older face, and no longer had to wonder if Leliana approachability was simply due to her position as Sevanna’s advisor, but that somewhere along the muddled way they had become friends.
“I would request that the good behaviour continues through to Halamshiral,” replied Leliana as they continued their way up to the main hall. “Josie is beginning to fret about her grey hairs.”

Sevanna pretended her sigh was one of dramatic frustration. “Until Halamshiral – only two weeks away. I suppose I could manage myself until then.”

“Oh, I wasn’t concerned about you,” the other woman said lightly, as they reached the great doors to the hall, which were thrown open to let in the crisp morning air. “But we should figure out some way to keep Cullen from throwing you over his shoulder and running off with you in the middle of a fitting, or in the middle of the ball - like in one of the novels Cassandra thinks no one knows she reads.”

Sevanna laughed so loudly she startled the ravens that had huddled in the exposed rafters above, earning indignant squawks; the nobles that she often overheard gossiping looked eagerly towards the noise, and tittered with interest at the looks of mirth on their faces.

“- I do not believe I have ever seen Sister Nightingale smile before -”

“- look, wearing the Commander’s cloak-”

Leliana swept past them with an enigmatic smirk on her face, and their heads spun like owls to watch her go by; Sevanna grinned when their attention turned to her as she followed. “Bonjour à tous.”

The hushed chatter followed them down the hall, and Sevanna briefly wondered what sort of sordid rumour they might spin by noon, but could not bring herself to care – for the only thing that mattered now was that she kept moving forward, and survive the tide that threatened her.

* *

It was a difficult and frustrating two weeks in which the hours crawled; as if the fittings and Sevanna being kept busy day and night weren’t bad enough, the ball loomed ever over Cullen like the snarling jaws of a wolf that had him pinned to the ground. It felt as though he were slowly boiling up with fever, knowing it would have to get worse before it got better – that he would have to suffer a night in Halamshiral in a sea of gilt and opulence and masks before his grey skies broke, and the duties of the Inquisitor and Commander would, for a time, be burned away by a new sun.

Those convoluted carriages he and Sevanna once took into Fereldan would be used once more, this time carrying the remaining advisors and all of the Inquisitor’s companions. It would take a day to travel to the Winter Palace, so Josephine had arranged that they would arrive after dusk, have a night of rest and an entire day to prepare themselves for the ball. Cullen had apparently be very foolish in estimating the time it would take; surely no more than an hour, to bathe, dress and neatly comb his hair? And perhaps an hour more for the women – it was laughable, as he’d discovered at the Ambassador’s horrified expression and Vivienne’s warm cluck of amusement. No, he learned he was in for a very full schedule the day of the ball; last minute fittings and proper accessorizing, a haircut and proper shave (which was said as though it implied he did not do it well enough on his own, to which he took insult), scrubs and soaks in oiled baths, and something called a manicure that evoked the alarming sense he was to be pruned like an untamed thorn bush.

His suffering was nowhere near the scale Sevanna was due, however; not only would she be up at daybreak, but she was to be plucked and scrubbed and marinated like a peasant for roasting – and that was just for her skin. Leliana had briefly explained all the different washes they would be doing for Sevanna’s hair before it was dried and meticulously styled; the lotions, oils and powders they would apply to her face; and finally, her various adornments that could be used as tools or
weapons, disguised as jewels, that needed to be placed.

It all seemed very contrived to Cullen, and he pointed out that they were going to turn out an assassin, not for a spot of tea and dancing. But Leliana had merely given him the look she reserved for when she found him particularly dense, and stoutly reiterated that how Sevanna was presented at this ball was every bit as crucial as the armor that protected the soft and vital parts of her body. It was a firm reminder that Cullen was out of his depth here; the only dances he’d known had been the ones held in Honnleath’s barns when he was a boy, for which the only preparation was for the men to scrub their nails and the woman to don the dresses they didn’t wear in the fields.

It was small comfort knowing that the sooner they caught Corypheus’ agent, the sooner their duties in Halamshiral would be over – and a night spent in one of the most luxurious rooms in Orlais had to be worth the trouble it took to get there.

The days crawled on at a snail’s pace, until it was time to send Leliana’s agents ahead to secure that the Inquisitor’s journey would be safe, and to hide themselves among the labourers hired to ready the Winter Palace for the Empress’ guests, where their enemies undoubtedly already laid in wait. The Chargers, with Krem leading them in Bull’s stead, followed shortly after; their horses were loaded with the Inquisitor’s best weapons, and those of her companions who would follow her on her search of the Empress’ winter home. It would be the Chargers’ task to hide these throughout the sprawl of the palace, along with potions and salves, ready for Sevanna to find and use should she come under attack.

The night before their own departure was the first night Sevanna had free since the one she spent in his tower; the next morning he had ruefully awoke to her already gone, and all his plans to have her slowly in the golden daylight dissipated like mist. He’d been more exhausted by his nightmare than he’d thought, and when Sevanna had coaxed him back to sleep against the softness of her breasts, Cullen dutifully obliged, and had fallen asleep harder than he meant to.

But tonight she was free as early as dinner, making Cullen giddy with the thought of an evening with her, and spending it in one of the ways they’d discussed on their journey back to Skyhold. He found her in the hall, already sitting next to Dorian. But her face split into a wide smile when she spotted him, and purposefully elbowed Dorian over to make more room. She had his furs draped low over her shoulders and back, wearing them more elegantly than Cullen could have dreamed.

The mage let out a faux squawk as he was mercilessly scooted over, and Cullen took advantage of the distraction to press a quick kiss to Sevanna’s jaw – just so he could feel her shiver as his stubble grazed the soft skin of her neck. Varric, who was sitting in his usual chair at the end of the table, wolf-whistled; Cassandra, who was across from Sevanna, kicked him. But Cullen, for once, wasn’t bothered by the dwarf’s friendly teasing; he even tapped his tankard to Varric’s as he went to drink his stout, which made Cassandra roll her eyes and Sevanna beam.

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The Iron Bull, who was taking up half of Cassandra’s side of the table, was having an argument with Josephine, who was standing at the far end of the table and somehow managed to tower threateningly over Bull despite that he was still taller sitting down.

“But I take it everywhere!” Bull was insisting. “Always keep it with me, even when I go for a piss -”

“Which is a revolting enough reason to leave it behind, incidentally,” Dorian interrupted dryly.

Josephine looked horrified. “You will absolutely not bring it to the Winter Palace - that is final! And if you do,” she added, feathered quill pointing threateningly at the qunari, “I will personally throw it off a mountain on the way back myself.” She marched away, leaving Bull looking
“What is she demanding you not bring?” Sevanna asked.

“My axe,” Bull said glumly, resting his cheek against his large fist. “She stopped my boys from taking it with them, and then she caught me trying to load it into a carriage. She says its ‘offensive’.”

“Well, it is the axe that belonged to a murderous Avvar who used it to crush the heads of countless people,” Dorian interjected, as he carelessly examined his fingernails, “not to mention it has those bloodstains that won’t come off.”

Bull looked hurt. “Boss got it for me. It was a gift.”

“And then you let Sera scratch ‘arseholes killed’ and a tally count into it,” Sevanna replied, sounding highly amused.

“Yeah, when I get to three hundred I get a new one.” Bull ignored the sound of distaste Cassandra made, as Cullen smothered his snort in his drink. “Now I have nothing to pack.”


Bull shared a glance with Dorian, who looked as though he felt sorry for the Seeker. “I don’t need bedclothes,” Bull grunted.

“Everyone should sleep naked in Orlesian silk sheets at least once in their life, anyways,” Dorian said breezily, nudging Sevanna. “Wouldn’t you agree, biscuit?”

Sevanna laughed. “It’s a personal pleasure of mine.”

Cullen’s mind was gleefully conjuring up all sorts of images this inspired, as it was wont to do, and in his haste to gulp down his stout to distract himself, Cullen slopped it over his chin slightly. By the grace of Andraste, no one seemed to notice, though he felt Sevanna press a napkin into his hand beneath the table while she carried on an animated conversation with their friends, and he could not help but grin like a fool.

They said their goodbyes as soon as they’d had their fill of dinner; Dorian had been generous with his private stash of Tevinter wines, so Cullen felt more than a little lightheaded when he and Sevanna rose from the table. Her own cheeks were fairly pink themselves, and she pressed her side eagerly into his to help steady herself as they strode away arm-in-arm. Tonight, they had planned to attend the first item on their unofficial list upon their return to Skyhold: checking the nursery of seeds Sevanna had gathered in her many travels.

The clerics who tended the medicinal gardens they had established in the small courtyard were milling quietly among the trenches of earth, who smiled at the sight of the Inquisitor and her Commander walking among the rows. They had set aside a small corner just for Sevanna, which boasted a square of earth and a haphazard collection of potted herbs; Cullen recognized a few of them from her preferred blends of tea and the one he still often drank for his headaches. By the grace of Andraste, no one seemed to notice, though he felt Sevanna press a napkin into his hand beneath the table while she carried on an animated conversation with their friends, and he could not help but grin like a fool.

Cullen knew a particular cleric tended the Inquisitor’s private garden when she was absent from Skyhold, an elderly man named Bastille whom he’d grown familiar with as he often inquired about its wellbeing. He would have done so himself, were it not for a woeful lack of a green thumb, a trait he found ironic for a farmer’s son.

“How do they fare, my Lady?” came the warbling voice of Bastille, who had been shuffling around
a few rows over, gathering a basket of herbs to dry.

“They look marvelous,” Sevanna replied warmly, accepting Cullen’s proffered hand to help her climb back to her feet and dusted off her knees. “Thank you for tending them while I was away, Bastille.”

He inclined his head, ample beard twitching with a smile. “It was an honour, my Lady.”

They left him to his picking as they headed for their next stop; the little chantry tucked into the walls surrounding the gardens. The doors sat open, inviting the warm evening air to mix with the smoke and incense. The small and dusty space was empty, a scattering of lit candles at Andraste’s stone feet. Though Sevanna did not seek refuge here the way Cullen often did, it had been her idea that they visit together and light the candles in prayer for the soldiers who’d died at Adamant. He had been deeply touched at the suggestion; it spoke of her respect for his lingering devotion even if she did not share it, and though it was a small solace to merely light a flame for every soul they had lost, Cullen felt a little less heavy with the remorse that he hadn’t been able to bring everyone home.

Sevanna knelt with him in the chantry for a long time, head bent and watching the candles burn low, until he felt the edges of the guilt in his chest soften. There had been little time for grieving all those they had lost at Adamant, and the ones who’d succumbed to their injuries on the journey back to Skyhold. Cullen had known most of these men and women for more than a year as he’d trained them, who had showed their loyalty and patience as he grew into his role as their Commander. There were so many names he would never utter in greeting again, and letters upon letters that were all he had left of them to send back to their homes, back their families. And still, he had to prolong a proper mourning a little longer; he would need his utmost wits to endure the Winter Palace.

As they left the chantry hand in hand and smelling of incense, Cullen realized it had been such a long time since he’d been quiet, and left to till his own thoughts in true silence. Lately, when the dreams had been pleasant, he’d dreamed of being a boy back in Honnleath – spending sunsets in the soft hay of a loft, deep in the rumination about his plans, and his determination to set them in motion. Basking in twilight, away from the constant chatter in the fields, or the squabbling of his siblings; no wonder he was so drawn to prayer, and had relished the ages spent staring at the Canticles that he’d long since memorised, later in his boyhood when he had been brought to the Templars at last.

He wanted it, an evening of silence, a few hours in which to retreat to the quieter places of his mind, and forget that burden that had grown heavier once more. These were times that he felt ghostly, when he did not feel a part of this world; like he were a little lantern set out to drift over a placid lake, and all that was dark and wild was a distant shadow beyond the shore. He squeezed Sevanna’s hand, long and steady, but did not speak; she took his silence in stride, and pulled him in the direction of a door that would lead them to the northern ramparts.

He was grateful, as the north was lightly patrolled due to nothing but canyon on the vast drop over the battlements. Sevanna knew these quiet moods of his, as he knew her own – they followed the nights she dreamt badly, and he knew it by the way she would stand very still, her gaze on the ghosts conjured by her memory.

She had told him once, his tell for when he was lost from the world: his eyes fixed on the ground three paces in front of him, marching ever forward but blind as to where. He supposed she was right, as his time spent in these suspended dwellings was always hazy, but he often looked up to find himself unsure of where he’d gotten to. Once, he’d wandered deep into the stables, and
accidentally walked in on Horsemaster Dennet getting dressed for bed in his quarters; the older man had merely raised his eyebrows in bemusement as Cullen barged in and immediately stammered his way out.

There was something rooted deep within him recognized that same lonely distance in Sevanna; had learned the look of it from the day she’d returned from Redcliffe the second time, mourning a death that had never been. Cullen knew that lake of glass behind her eyes when she went to some unseen place, on the days she was quiet and as far away as an island that was only a murky bloom against the horizon. Perhaps she was not as vague and mindless as Cullen could be in his musings, but it was a kinship they shared, the familiar pain of an old scar that was gnarled somewhere deep, and soft, and dark. So she knew not to break the silence, but let him drift across that quiet and shadowed lake; her own little light was out there too, winking back at him when he needed a point on which to reorient himself.

They leant upon the ramparts together, watching the ravens that swooped in the mountain gorge, until Sevanna’s timepiece told them the guard would be by on their route soon. Smiling in that furtive way that Cullen so adored, she guided him to a spot where handholds had been worn in stones of Skyhold’s walls, leading them up to quiet corridors in the small wing of guestrooms. She scaled the wall with nimble grace, but it took a little more effort for him, as he stepped on his cloak more than once. She took his arm once he’d clambered over the wall, and together they stole through the sunset-washed halls, past doors where muffled voices and laughter could be heard. It was like a spell had been cast over them, to move swiftly and soundlessly, as if Cullen’s armor knew it was not wise to squeak.

They managed their way back to her quarters via the long way; there were still many corridors in Skyhold’s interior that had crumbled away, and most had been blocked off so none of Josephine’s nobles wandered into a gorge during their visit. Restoration was slow, leaving scaffolding and ladders in the dark recesses when the labourers went to the tavern to drink their evening away. Climbing them was arduous, with Cullen in his heavy plate and Sevanna in her dress; but Cullen spent the task watching the way she wrinkled her nose and poked her tongue between her teeth as she hoisted herself from place to place, skirt bunched up around her thighs, and catching glimpses of her bottom as he took his time under her, ensuring as ever that she would not fall.

He was slick with sweat when they finally slipped into the stairwell of her quarters, his furs hot around his neck as he followed Sevanna warily up the stairs. On any other night, he’d be ravenous with the thought of an evening spent isolated in her rooms, every surface swept bare for which to take her on. But tonight he was much too tired, and felt much too quiet, to attempt hours of lovemaking; how quickly his lightness at the beginning of the evening had quelled, leaving this grey twilight behind. Another stroke of the withdrawal, a deadened swipe of what used to be much sharper across his mind, sinking any good feeling into the depths he often treaded.

His nose had recognized the soft perfumes in the air, dilating at the subtle scent of dawn lotus, before Cullen registered what was sitting in the middle of Sevanna’s quarters – a large, steaming brass basin with enough hot water and room for two. The light of the room was low and golden from the sunset dying just beyond the Frostbacks, and Sevanna was already pulling the furs from his shoulders, her lips finding the soft skin of his neck they kept hidden.

“Soak with me,” she murmured, reminding Cullen of another luxury for when they were back at Skyhold – take a bath together.

Of course, then he’d had much different intentions with a bathtub full of warm water; now all he wanted was to heat the parts of him that always returned to frost. He let her hands unclip his pauldrons, slide along his arms to pull off his vambraces, felt them thud to the floor around his feet.
Her lips were under his chin, his ear, his pulse, which beat heavy and thick from the exhaustion he felt in his very blood.

“I’m sorry, I’m too tired—” he began, when she pulled at the straps of his chest plate, but she stopped him with a slender finger on his lips.

“I know,” she murmured. “It’s been too long since we’ve had a night of proper rest, hasn’t it?”

He smiled weakly, tucked the errant hair behind her ear. “Thank you.”

She shushed his thanks with a feather-light kiss, a kiss made no less passionate or sweet by its brevity. Cullen let his head fall back, savouring the feeling that it left upon his lips as Sevanna made short work of this rest of his clothing. She shimmied from her dress so that they stood naked, bathed in the sunset that poured through her windows. He’d never spent a night in her quarters, and could only imagine the look of her, bare and silver-skinned by the light of the moon on a clear night, framed by the arch of iron and glass that led to empty sky.

She pulled him towards the tub, and he scooped her up they could go in together; she laughed, the one that told him she was utterly happy but tired, the sound of threadbare silk ruffled by wind. It was the sound of their bathwater lapping the sides of the basin, quiet and fluid and comforting, familiar as slipping into a bed they shared. Cullen settled themselves so he rested his head on the tub’s rounded edge, Sevanna lounging back against his chest. Perhaps it was not the night he envisioned, on the eve of their departure for the dreaded ball in Halamshiral – but nevertheless, it was a good night.

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