Anyone who believed in love at first sight had a profound misunderstanding of what love is and should be. When they tell the story of the Lion and the Huntress, the bards will sing that as soon as eye met eye they had fallen in love. The true keepers of the tale, though will scoff and call bullshit.

And if you remember nothing else throughout this tale, remember, the bards are full of shit.
Anyone who believed in love at first sight had a profound misunderstanding of what love is and should be. When they tell the story of the Lion and the Huntress, the bards will sing that as soon as eye met eye they had fallen in love. The true keepers of the tale, though, will scoff and call bullshit. 

And if you remember nothing else throughout this tale, remember, the bards are full of shit.

That's not to say they weren't attracted to each other at first sight. Maker no. After all both were young well formed individuals, objectively good looking, just ask anyone around. When they met formally, outside of the bewildering din of battle and waking up in chains, that first time in Haven's war-room she thought he looked like something out of a cheesy romance novel. Tall and blonde with a bone structure that made angels sing, weep or do whatever the fuck angels did when they find someone like him so devastatingly handsome.

Did she love him at first glance?

Fuck no.

But she'd be amenable to taking him over the war table.

Then again, she thought the same of Solas...and Varric would do in a pinch too and...Fuck had it been so long since she'd been properly laid?

And was right now really the best time to be having these thoughts? She was supposed to be focusing on whatever the hell this Sister Nightingale was babbling about not figuring out which stable boy...or templar...she intended to take out back behind the Chantry.

Though...Lady Trevelyan thought, Why not now?

The war between mages and templars tore through town and country leaving lakes and rivers and cobblestones dyed red with blood. The Divine was dead, with some believing she was the one responsible--Seeker Pentaghast specifically. Everyone from the meanest peasant right up to the Left and Right hands themselves were questioning if the Maker had abandoned them. Fuck there was a gigantic hole in the sky from which poured forth every manner of demon the Fade could produce.

This was some of end of days bullshit and it had all fallen in her lap...or on her hand as it were. If she died tomorrow she definitely wouldn't die a virgin, but if these chucklefucks insisted on making her save the world and by all likelihood die in the attempt she should--at least--get the courtesy of a good screw before she went.

Or a glass of wine.

Lady Trevelyan sighed audibly--the weight of her charge settling uncomfortably on her shoulders and her left hand.

"Are you alright my lady?"

His voice cut across her mental fog like a cool soothing breeze. He meant only to ask after her
health, she had just tumbled out of the Fade only hours before, the world having upended in her absence. She looked at him, really looked beyond the rugged five bell shadow and lips that no doubt made mouths water to find a pair of kind honey colored eyes shadowed in worry for a woman who was having too much too soon put on her all at once.

"Just wondering when the wine break is. That's all Commander."

He laughed-- a short chuckle flavored with his Ferelden accent-- musical and infectious, it warmed up her insides bringing heat to her cheeks in the very same way wine did.

Love at first sight: ridiculous tripe shitty bards concoct to make their patrons swoon and small clothes drop.

Love at first sound though...now that was a story worth telling.

Chapter End Notes

Brace yourselves people, this is going to be a long fic. I'm going to mess with the canon a little bit to suit my needs but nothing too canon breaking. Comments and con-crit are wonderful.
First Impressions

There should be drums that sound when she walks. With the way she stomps the ground when she moves across one part of Haven to another, she should accompanied by drums. She sounded like she summoned war with the whooping shout she gave whenever she departed and arrived, a war cry, a hunter's cry.

She did not act like someone who was the Bride's Chosen, Cullen thought. She acted as though the moniker meant nothing at all, an ancillary thing unimportant to the mission at hand. He wouldn't say he was displeased for her general disregard of the sanctity of her post. Maker knows he knew enough holier than thou Chantry officials hiding behind their self proclaimed sanctimony and ostentatious title.

Still, there was something vaguely unsettling about the way she carried herself.

She had a drawl, a twangy accent unlike anything he's heard before. She was from Ostwick, yes, but she looked like no Marcher he'd ever met.

For one, she was of a color. Dark skinned, darker even then the Antivan ambassador.

And Holy Maker her hair.

Thick black ropes of hair sprouted from a neat but poofy nest on the top of her head. They hung down, framing her face, the tips long enough to brush her shoulders and beyond. They were thick as a finger and looked like the rigging of a ship...or snakes if one was feeling particularly poetic. He'd never seen hair like that on a human before, maybe the odd Dalish elf wore their hair in such a way but never a woman, and never a woman like her.

Commander Rutherford never possessed a trait like intense curiosity before, preferring instead to go through life according to the principles of the Chant and of Command. Follow the word of the Maker, protect His children, follow good orders, give good orders. Yet even he had to admit, while the other pilgrims flocked around their Herald asking her seemingly endless questions, he too tingled with the same kind of burning curiosity.

She was a riot of color and sound and texture and he wanted to know her.

"You limp wristed fucks call that shooting!"

Oh yeah, he thought ruefully. She also cursed like a Rivani pirate.

They hadn't really spoken since their first war table meeting and he had been consumed with the rigors of command since then. But she stood with his archers now screaming foul curses whenever one of the recruits missed a mark or notched their bow incorrectly.

"My lady, they are quite new at this, perhaps you should go easy on them."

His address of her as 'my lady' made her bite the inside of her cheek and warmth flood her face.

"They shoot like shit!" She growled, trying to cover up her fluttering insides. “Here is how you shoot a bow."

She slowly and deliberately took an arrow, notched, drew, and loosed. The arrow whistled briefly before striking the center of the target, she made it look effortless, as easy as breathing.
"It's not hard. Have none of you hunted before?"

All shook their heads.

"You hunt?" Cullen asked.

"Bears, deer, the occasional lion." She quirked a curious half smile and caught him in the pierce of her gaze. She owned brown eyes, the color of light trapped in dark amber glass, and suddenly Commander Rutherford wanted to be anywhere else but under her gaze.

"They call you the Lion of Ferelden, yes?"

He nodded dumbly.

"Let's see if you have teeth."

"Come again?"

She handed him her bow, an old and dried looking thing covered in grey ash and showing its poor age.

"I imagine you have some training as a man-at-arms yes?"

"In the Order we were required to at least be proficient in most martial weapons, bows among them but I'm..."

"Good. Show 'em how it's done, since I'm so poor at instruction."

"My lady I didn't mean to imply..."

Her stomach fluttered again, she squashed the feeling and shouted over him.

"Shoot." She commanded.

Reluctantly, the Commander reached for an arrow and...

"No no no no... index and middle finger, not index and thumb. With her hands she moved the arrow in his hand from the wrong configuration to the correct one.

Haven sat high in the mountains, the only vegetation being the short scrubby bushes and evergreen trees that could withstand the fierce winds of the Frostback Mountains. They smelled like pine and sticky sap, they smelled like cold endless winter. But when she was close, he smelled flowers, citrus and spice-- a warm summer smell that drove all the cold from his bones and reminded him of the rare and expensive oranges they sold at the market at Honnleath.

Damned if he didn't blush.

So corrected, he notched and drew.

"Pull your arm back father and higher, bring your hand to your chin. No, farther. No, farther."

She giggled, a haughty though good natured kind of laugh before taking her hand again and pulling his high and back the way she wanted, back by his cheek. Her gloved fingers just brushing the side of his face.

Both their stomachs flipped.
She groaned soundlessly, still wondering if taking the man behind the Chantry was still a good idea. Frustrated and annoyed with her damnable feelings, she kicked apart his legs, perhaps a little too harshly.

"Widen your stance." She barked. "Alright, aim... Loose!"

To his credit, thank the Maker, he did not embarrass himself and he actually hit the target. He looked to her for her approval and found her smiling, dark lips parted, with a flash of white teeth.

"Not bad," she said. "Good even. I like my lions with teeth."

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck feeling the blush creep slowly into his skin. The Maker heard his silent plea and sent a strong bitter wind on which he could blame his red cheeks and ears.

"Thank you my lady. I will endeavor to train our archers so that they meet your approval."

"You do that, I'll be around too, to check your work. Alright! The rest of you, hope you took some fucking good notes!"

**

"Commander, have you seen Lady Trevelyan?" Seeker Pentaghast asked some days after their impromptu archery training.

"I haven't, is something the matter?"

"She's been gone for several hours. Twilight approaches and no one knows where she is or if she's alone."

The Commander remembered her blistering treatment of his recruits. "She doesn't seem the type that would require an escort."

Cassandra made disapproving face.

The Commander internally rolled his eyes. He was a military man not a babysitter especially to women who were not babies and did not ever sit still. "However, her safety is paramount. Would you like me to send a search party?"

"Not yet, allow her some time to return."

The dusk wore on into twilight and on again into night. No word from the Herald yet. By the time the crescent moon hung a quarter way through its journey in the clear winter sky, the Commander admitted that he too was worried and prepared to lead a search when the sound of her excited screaming woke half the camp.

She rode in, her body wafting steam into the frigid night air. She rode hard, driving her mount almost to collapse but her white hart was a hearty thing, it steamed too in the frigid night.

Seeker Cassandra arrived first, face scowling and red. “Where were you?! Where did you go?”

The Herald slid down from her mount like water sliding down an icicle. She and the animal seemed as though one body now separated. It leaned into her, nudging her with its nose and she pet it softly.

She whispered something to the hart and the creature rode off again into the night. She howled again like a wolf.
“Must you always yell like some kind of feral thing?” Cassandra asked, still embittered her questions remained ignored.

“It is custom for a hunter to cry her leave and her return. It brings her luck.”

“A Dalish custom.” Solas responded. A crowd had gathered eager to see what the fuss was about. The templar sensed a fight between the Seeker and the Herald, judging from the anxious ripple of murmurs from the lookers on, they sensed it too.

“Aye.”

“I was not aware the Herald was of elvhen ancestry.”

“I am not.”

“How come you then, by your knowledge.”

“I was raised by...”

“Excuse me messere Solas, we were speaking.” Cassandra interrupted still fuming. “I am sure you two can discuss culture and heritage another time. I am tasked with finding out just where the Herald has been all these hours.”

“None of your fucking business.”

Dead silence broke across the crowd.

Cullen knew there was no love between the Seeker and Lady Trevelyan, partly due to the fact Cassandra was less than hospitable when the woman emerged from the Fade. She even accused her of plotting the destruction of the Conclave and the murder of the Divine—an accusation that Lady Trevelyan took deadly personal.

“I go where I damn well please.”

“No, you can’t!” Cassandra protested. “You have a duty to the Inquisition, you cannot go traipsing about whenever you feel like!”

Lady Trevelyan stepped forward and for a heart-stopping moment everyone thought the two women would come to blows.

Cullen stepped between them. “Seeker Pentaghast, given that I lead the Inquisition's forces and am personally responsible for the safety of all involved. It might be better left to me to handle this matter.”

He did not know who would win in a fight. The Seeker had martial training that the Marcher woman did not. However, Lady Trevelyan possessed a certain undeniable spirit that could possibly prove devastating if not lethal if so provoked.

And, he admitted, he was starting to form a bias.

For the Herald.

Cassandra huffed and stormed away. Iron Bull groaned and handed some gold coins to Varric who looked particularly pleased with himself. Sera did as well.

“Herald.” Solas spoke. “I look forward to speaking with you on the subject of your elvhen knowledge.”
“Dareth shiral.” she replied.

Solas regarded her with a contemplative look. “Your pronunciation is unusual.”

“So my elven nanna told me.”

“Fair enough. Goodnight.”

The elf left them.

When everyone was outside of eye and ear shot, the Herald sagged, falling backwards ready to crash into the snow yet crashed into the heavy metal breastplate of a templar quick on his feet.

“You are injured.”

“That happens hunting wolves.”

“You went on a wolf hunt? That's where you were?”

“Isn't that better than sneaking off to be with a lover or something?”

“No its worse.” He set her upright.

“You want me to have a lover?” He detected disappointment in her eyes and while his conscious mind struggled to keep up with the implications, his unconscious mind had already set his brain and tongue into knots.

“No!..I mean...yes I ugh Maker's Breath” He ordered his thoughts and his words and tested them first in his mind before he spoke again. “At least if you were with one, I could be assured of your safety.”

“I don't need anyone worried about my safety.” She favored the right side of her waist. He lifted the arm she used to cover herself and found three scratches that dug through her leathers and into her skin. They bled, but time and cold had mostly staunched the blood.

"I'm supposed to protect you, Herald." He said, releasing her.

"Thank you Commander, but I've been protecting myself long before I met any of you." 

"This isn't a game," he said, reiterating Cassandra's sentiment.

Lightning flashed across her face and her eyes narrowed. In the space of seconds she went from almost helpless damsel to fierce huntress. She held up her left hand, it crackled with green magic that made him flinch and a flash of acute pain streaked across her face.

"Think I don't fucking know that? No Commander this was never a game to me." 

He took a step back, caught unawares by her flash flood of anger. "I'm sorry I'm.."

The woman took a deep breath, her anger subsiding as quickly as it had come.

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you.” She softened, looking remorseful and took a step towards him bringing them back to the same closeness they were before.

“You said what you felt and I respect that. But I didn't ask for this, I'm not some messiah come to save us all but thanks to a fluke born of a thrice damned tragedy I'm the only one who can save us
all. So if I gotta do it, I'ma do it my way. And if I need to take my bow and take a trip to the woods just to take my mind off the pain and the nightmares, then shit yeah, I'm gonna."

His mouth dropped, before he had the good sense to close it back up. "I didn't know...Maker's breath I am sorry."

Her smiled warmed him in the chilly night. "Don't worry about it Commander."

"I do know a thing or two about nightmares and chronic pain. If you need help I can possibly lend my assistance."

"Oh?"

As he told her about his decision to quit lyrium, her face softened into something sweet and secret, a serene and caring look at odds with her previous fierceness. "You're brave." Her voice quieted into something he’d never heard from her before. She was always vile curses or iron cold seriousness. It bothered him if he was honest with himself, her tenderness disarmed him. "If it gets too hard let me know. We'll figure it out. Gotta keep my lion in shape right?"

"Right," he chuckled making her chest tighten. "And now we should seek a healer. For your injuries."

"Nah, I earned these scars, let 'em stick."

"As opposed to scars you didn't earn."

"Yeah, exactly that." She replied. They stood in silence for a moment, their eyes connected both glowing gold in the torchlight.

“So you really yell because it brings good luck?”

“Yeah. Like a prayer almost, a sign you respect the animals you have killed, you are no better than they, you are just as feral. You kill or you are killed.” She started to walk around the quiet tents, he followed.

“Have you been hunting long?”

“Since Assan put a bow in my hands.”

“Your mother?”

“No.” Lady Trevelyan broke her gaze, and her stride slowed. “A touchy subject, I don't want to talk about it.”

“I understand.”

They circled the tents maybe twice, deep in conversation unbothered by the cold of the night or the stinging of her scratches. The Commander insisted several times that she see a healer but the Herald heard none of it.

“Look you have experience with field dressings yes?”

“I...er...yes...”

They arrived at her tent and she gestured inside. “Then if you are so concerned, you dress these
wounds yourself, otherwise leave me be.”

His eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. “I...you...it...” Maker's breath, if this were combat he'd tear off her jacket in a moment... Cullen steadied himself, unprepared for the knee weakening image that thought conjured. Suffice it to say, were she in peril of life and he the only aid, yes, he would dress her wounds. They were bleeding, they did require some attention but.

“Perhaps a woman would be better suited to...”

“I'm fine, I'll just rub some dirt on it and leave 'em be. Since you're the one so bothered by 'my injuries' I figured I'd let you address them.”

“Honestly my Lady, they really should be.”

“I've suffered worse.”

“You shouldn't have to.”

He didn't mean it that way, he was just being polite. Yet the tender way he said it, the way he tenderly said everything to her. Her breath hitched.

He heard it.

“I'm sorry.” she said softly. “I'm making you uncomfortable. Ahh stupid,” she smacked her palm to her head. “I'll tend to them, for your sake. You're just looking out for me.”

“Wait no I want to...” He protested a little too quickly.

This time her eyes widened.

“Maker's...” he started.

“Fuck...” she finished.

“Maker's...fuck?” He felt the curse turn his lips blue.

“We're both being stupid about this aren't we?” She asked, meeting his eyes again.

The Commander nodded. “They are just scratches. But you should let me see to them. Your previous admission of 'just rubbing dirt' in them doesn't leave me confident in your bandaging abilities.”

A soft laugh bubbled on her lips. It felt like spring, a warm breeze in the depths of a frosty landscape.

“I was joking.”

“I doubt it.”

“Ass.”

“Lion.” he corrected.

She laughed again and this time it sounded musical.

She was a riot of color, texture, and sound.
She gestured him into her tent.

The herald lit a brazier inside the cold tent bringing some light and the promise of heat to the space. Her tent was larger than others but still demurely furnished. A chair and a small writing desk her only furniture.

“You don't have a cot?”

“Don't need one, furs are all I need.”

“Is that why you went hunting, are you not warm enough. I could have the requisition officer...”

“Shh...stop worrying. I hunt because I do. It soothes me and serves a purpose. I heard some of the pilgrims to Haven complaining of being harassed by wolves and mountain lions. Oh shit! I forgot.”

She dashed out of the tent and into the cold leaving the templar alone. There was a pallet of luxurious looking furs on the ground. Wolf, deer, lion, and hart. It appeared she worked her kills herself spying a stretched out pelt of a pair of rabbits in the corner. They were scraped free of sinew and tissue and left hanging to dry out before being scraped again and ostensibly sent to Harrit's small tannery.

She also had a mountain of parchments on her writing desk and strewn about its wooden feet. He did not wish to be nosy yet curiosity directed him to crane his neck ever so much, just to the bottom of the page where the signature BB was scribbled.

The Herald returned holding an oilcloth she placed on her desk. “Forgot to drop the carcasses off at Harrit’s I’ll dress them in the morning.”

“Who is BB?” he blurted. He hadn't really been paying attention to her, letting his mind wander at the wonder of her tent. She kept wine and whiskey bottles in here, favorite vintages she no doubt wanted to keep away from The Iron Bull's thirty throat. Trinkets and trophies of antlers, jawbones, and precious stones hung suspended on strings from the tent poles that tinkled when the wind blew.

His question made her face tighten at the edges, the smile that blossomed was bittersweet and devastatingly beautiful. It made his heart clench in earnest, it made his arms twitch and tingle, and every impulse in him screamed to comfort her.

He actually wanted to hold her.

“BB is me.”

“Your name?”

“Not my birth name. No. My birth name is Evelyn.”

“A pretty name, Evelyn” He said gentlemanly.

“I hate it, though it doesn’t sound so bad coming from you.”

“Oh.” Maker's breath, why did he always sound so silly talking to her?

“My brother called me BB, as a nickname. B for short.”

“What does it mean?”
“I'll tell you about it another time.”

“I look forward to the conversation.”

Her smile shined taking up all of her face before she could stop it. She quickly ruled her childish glee and handed him a box of bandages and elfroot ointment. “You gonna do this or...”

He set to work deftly smearing the paste over her scratches and wrapping a bandage around her middle. She held her jacket up but kept it on, thankfully keeping her modesty and his sanity intact. Within minutes, it was over and both, though unwilling to admit out loud, were saddened by it.

“It's late.” He said making it sound like a regretful thing.

“Uh huh. Listen, uhh. Thank you for...for this. I didn't need it, but it was nice to have.”

“I am always here for you...I mean...to help you.”

“I know what you meant. Good night Commander.”

"Good night Herald.”

The next morning, he woke to the sound of her departure, whooping and screaming riding off to The Crossroads, and a package wrapped in familiar looking oilcloth and sitting at foot of his tent. Opening it, he found 6 yellowed feline fangs and a piece of parchment covered in tiny yet impeccable script.

* I like my lions with teeth. *

Cullen wore a bright smile for the entire week she was gone.
"The question now becomes, who do we approach first?" Josephine said, mouth biting the edge of her quill.

She passed her gaze between each of her advisers before answering perhaps a little too quickly.

"I will go to Redcliffe and speak with Grand Enchanter Fiona."

Josephine nodded, scribbling some notes while the Commander furrowed his brow looking intently at the Herald.

"If we contact the mages, that will preclude us from recruiting the Templars, perhaps we should discuss it further."

"Thank you Commander," her voice was cooler but not cold, it had the sophisticated lilt of someone gently born. He remembered, suddenly, she was indeed gently born. "But no. We recruit the mages."

"We should not reject the possibility of a templar alliance out of hand."

"Commander if there was a way to do both, rest assured it would be done. But since there is not, again, we recruit the mages."

"There is just too much opportunity for blood magic or corruption. We cannot put the Inquisition at risk." The Commander pushed feeling the blood rise in his face.

"The mages are too powerful of allies to leave neglected." She fired back, voice rising.

"You are correct, they are too powerful. I advise against this, Herald."

"Noted Commander. But my decision stands, and I'll thank you to let the matter drop." She silenced his retort. He gulped it back up behind an exasperated sigh.

"I leave for Redcliffe on the morrow, when I return we will assault the Temple of Sacred Ashes."

"Yes Lady Trevelyan," Leliana answered.

Lady Montilyet nodded, scribbling furiously.

"Yes. Herald."

She dismissed them. Sister Nightingale and Lady Josephine filed out exchanging furtive glances feeling a storm brewing between the Herald and the Commander.

"Herald. A word please."

The Commander fumed, she dismissed him without even hearing him, without even considering the possibility. He gripped the pommel of his sword, flexing his hand feeling the anger rise and subside with every squeeze.
She hung back, leaning casually against the war table.

"Don't look at me like that." Just like that, her familiar drawl came back, the Commander remained unphased. "Like you're mad at me or something."

"I must protest."

The Herald sighed. "I understand with you being a former templar that you would be more comfortable around your comrades-in-arms rather than the mages. I get that. But I can only pick one, I feel I've picked the best one."

"How can you be so sure without even listening to me? You dismissed me as though I had nothing important to say."

"So do you have a problem with my choice or my tone?"

"Both."

"Fair enough. But if I'm gonna be the leader y'all want me to be. I have to be confident in the decisions I make. I know it's a huge ass risk bringing mages but if something happens to me, it'll be their power and their power alone that will be able to seal the breaches. Not Templars."

The Commander thought about this for a moment. The breaches that littered Thedas would need to be closed and the Herald was the only one with the power to close them. However, if she should be lost, there was no power the Templars had that could possibly repair the breaches. And as far as he knew, mages did not either but they were possibly better equipped.

"I...I wasn't aware that you."

"Had considered the options so finitely? Yes. I have." She stepped closer to him bringing with her the scent of citrus and spice. "I won't apologize for making my decision, but I will apologize for being a bitch about it."

He pinked at her self-referential swear. "My lady I'd never think..." She cut him off.

"The mages have been through a lot of bad shit. You yourself already know the horrors of Circle life. They are gonna need us as much as we need them. This Inquisition was formed to protect the people of Thedas and right now I feel they need our protection more than anyone else. They are being hunted, murdered. There's open war all over the Hinterlands and innocent people are dying just because their walking stick looks like a staff. I can't abide that Commander."

"And what will you do with them when they arrive? Haven is no Circle."

"Nor should it be."

"So they just run free?"

"That's the point."

He looked at her mouth, slightly open. She took her finger cocking an eyebrow and a smile and pushed his mouth closed. The contact warmed them both.

"Look, they way the system was before didn't work. The way the system was before allowed Kirkwall to happen. And you know..."

He nodded desperate to get away from the topic of Kirkwall. “Yes I know.”
"So the system has to change. We're in a position to change it. Believe me just as you're fighting me now, so too have I been fighting with Madam de Fer. I'm not a mage..."

"Which is why your position is so baffling, my lady."

She shivered; she always shivered when he called her that.

"I gotta be a mage to sympathize with them?"

"No...and I'm not saying I don't. It is just that..."

"You just think the templars are a better, safer bet."

"Yes."

"You are doing your job. I need you to do that. You've seen the horrors of blood magic and harrowings and corruptions. I don't know shit about that, I don't have the foggiest. So, Commander, I need you to watch my back. Mages are powerful and we need them but they aren't without their risks, on that I hear you. I'ma need you to look after me in that regard. Can you do that? Will you be okay with that?"

The candle light flickered in the war room, the soft light made the gold in his eyes sparkle like currency. He wore an expression half-way between exhausted resignation and obstinate determination. Possessive even. It made her feel like a coveted thing, like he kept trying to put his shield up in front of her and she kept stepping out in front of it. He wasn't angry with her, she wasn't angry at him, this much they could both tell.

"I will always watch out for you, my lady."

Her color precluded red from rising in her cheeks, but he could tell from the way her confident gaze morphed into almost girlish shyness that he actually had achieved the impossible.

"Did I make you blush for a change?"

"No!" she answered a little too quickly. "I don't blush. Too dark."

"Maybe not in color but in feeling." He chuckled. "Serves you right for that 'vow of chastity' question."

"It was a legit question, I was curious!"

They left the war room laughing, standing too close to be just friends.

**

He knelt for his evening prayers in his tent preferring to pray alone than under Mother Giselle's intimidating eye. The Mother was a sweet woman, he found he enjoyed her conversation during the times he attended service but he felt he needed to commune with his Maker in private. He knelt and clasped his hands and found his eyes drawn not to the small statuette of the Maker's Bride he kept--one of the rare personal effects he took with him from Kirkwall- but to the oil cloth bundle on which rested his lion's teeth.

A gift from the Herald. Cullen suddenly felt silly and embarrassed, she'd given him a gift and he hadn't in all this time thought to return the gesture.

"Maker what she must think of me?"
He found he actually cared what she thought of him, and not in the respect as a comrade way but as a friend...as a man. The thought sat on his mind, weighing him down when he should be praying. It shouldn't matter what she thought of him beyond anything more than his capabilities to do his job and he was sure on that note, he had her utmost respect and she his.

Full stop.

End it there.

Doesn't end there.

He liked her drawl, he loved her hair (in a curious obsession kind of way not in that kind of way Maker's Breath). He enjoyed her smile, their easy friendship. He looked forward to hearing her return, curious to know what other sounds she could make with her mouth and...

Oh Holy Maker did he just think that out loud?

"What I meant...her battle cries are interesting...amusing...not the sounds..." Even when he was alone, she made him blush and now his mind went there wondering the kind of sounds she would make if he...held her or kissed or...

"She's a beautiful woman, it's perfectly acceptable to have these thoughts." He said firmly to himself as though the words spoken out loud could absolve him of the niggling guilt he had for thinking of Andraste's Herald as anything less than Andraste's bloody Herald.

And yet, she took great pains herself to remind everyone she was both more and less than what she was. She drank with the Chargers, he often saw her and Bull staggering back to their tents snickering and laughing in friendly conspiracy that he...sigh...will admit to being jealous of.

Nearly every morning her curses (foul ear burning curses) rang through the training yard as she berated, never too harshly, the archers who were slowly improving under her care. She talked to everyone and no request was too small. She seemed to give much of herself without looking drained or worn as he often felt, quite the opposite; the more she gave the more she shined.

She was a breath of life in their frigid cramped hamlet.

A breath the Commander was increasingly worried (thrilled?) he would be unable to live without.

"Maker keep her safe." He finished his prayer as he had every night since the moment they met.

**

She paced, up and down back and forth, she paced mumbling to herself unaware of the divot she was wearing into the ground.

"You know better. You *know* better." She hissed through her teeth. "It always ends badly. You can't. Not this time!"

But it's different here. The stupid fucking voice of hopeful reason cooed in her head, luring her into a false sense of security that vaguely felt like the dulcet tones of a certain pretty blonde man saying 'my lady' over and over again.

This lay him out behind the Chantry thing had now become a little too much more. She hadn't meant to flirt with him and she wished she was one of those people who flirted with everyone so she could have an excuse. But there was no excusing this, no lying, no covering up.
He made her feel.

Like really honestly feel, in her heart and in her body (possibly her soul too though not that intense yet, check again later.)

"No. No later." She shouted. "This has to end."

Why?

"Because."

That's not a good enough reason girl.

"Because I'm me and when it comes to this, I ruin everything."

The voice stayed silent, acknowledging the point. "I mean how do you know he won't be like the others."

He's too good to be like the others. And remember, it's different down here. You got women like Josie and Mother Giselle, and Vivienne far, far, more than you had in Ostwick. It might actually be normal down here. You might actually be normal down here.

"Since when have we cared about appearing normal?"

Since you learned that appearing so makes falling in love easier.

"Is that where I'm at? Falling in love?"

Possibly.

"Maker's fuck."

You could do worse you know.

She could do far far worse than he and still end up with a perfect man, Commander Cullen Rutherford was that damn good. He looked like golden sunshine and when he laughed, he sounded like gentle thunder. He carried himself with such a strength that made her feel protected just by looking at him. And yet he respected her enough to know to ask before he starts throwing up shields. She did not intimidate him, since he was ready and able to lock horns with her over the mage/templar issue, but she could still make him blush if she wanted and he could return the favor.

He stuck in her heart and rooted himself firmly. She was afraid of what this would mean. War was not the time or place to fall in love--and yet-- also the perfect time because in war, who was promised tomorrow? Snatch life, snatch happiness when and where you can.

Assan had taught her that, her hunting hound, Cousland, had also taught her that. Take your happiness wherever and with whomever you can find it because you never know when you might die.

Die as they had.

Die as she might tomorrow when she goes to face the Grand Enchanter.

She stomped her foot into the ground, trying to crush her feelings under her heel and leave the pieces for her to ruminate on at a later time. Now was better served focusing on the mission ahead and not fretting over a pair of soft brown eyes.
Golden eyes, sweet and warm like honey.

She fell asleep dreaming of those eyes and that voice.

My lady, my lady. My. Lady.

Chapter End Notes

For all the Couslands, Aeducans, Tabris', Brocas, Amels, Hawkes, Mahariels, Suranas, Aadars, Cadas, Trevelyans, and Lavellans who can't blush.
The Redcliffe That Never Was

Time magic was a bitch and when she saw that bastard Alexius again, she'd rip out his throat with her teeth. However hotblooded her vengeance may be though, it wouldn't help them escape Redcliffe castle's flooded dungeon.

“Could the other's be here? Transported too?” She asked Dorian. The Tevinter mage shrugged, concerning this, he knew as much as she did which unfortunately at this point was very little.

“Split up then. There are two wings of the dungeon, you go west, I go east. See if we can find the rest of our companions.”

Dorian was the kind of man who decided whether he liked someone or not within minutes of meeting them. That didn't mean his opinion was immutable from that point, but it definitely flavored his ireactions. For the record then, he liked the Herald immediately. She was nobly born, a trait she tried very much to hide but someone who could tell the difference between an Antivan Red and a Rivani Blush was definitely either gently born or an alcoholic with expensive tastes. In her case, he thought, it was most likely both.

He nodded solemnly before heading off in the commanded direction. Dorian looked capable, felt capable. She met him as he was beating back demons with his staff without mana. She didn't have any hang ups commanding him to go off on his own.

The door to the east wing of the dungeon loomed large and she hoped she could find any traces of Vivienne or Iron Bull. She had a feeling she was going to need them.

The long hallways swallowed up the echoes of her footfalls. Her keen hunter's ears heard nothing, not even breathing in the cold lifeless cells. Red stained her vision, big ugly crystals growing from every nook and cranny not already infested with doom and depression.

“Hello?” Her voice echoed within the stone. "Look if there's anything out there, malicious or no, just save me some fucking time and show yourself.” She called, unable to suppress the childish grin when the swear echoed off the walls.

“My...my la..dy.”

Oh fuck.

She would know that voice anywhere, anywhen. Even so far away from Haven in time and space, the way he said those words... Her heart surged and stopped and sputtered all at the same time.

The fucking templar.

She zeroed in on his pained gasp and found him locked within one of the cells.

“Oh fuck me.”

He was encased almost completely within the large ugly red crystal. Everything from the waist down trapped in red glass while the upper half of his body hung free. His face was scared and cracked with red, one arm was swallowed up in the red rock while the other hung free. A sharp looking crystal grew from his neck and another from his free wrist. The one in his neck moved whenever he breathed sending sharp spasms of pain to whatever flesh was still left free. A dull
clacking noise sounded, so soft like the whisper of a lover.

“Hang on, I'll get you out.” She set to work immediately picking the lock. “How the fuck did you get here. What happened? Are you alright? Where are the others?”

Her mouth fired a mile a minute with questions while her fingers worked just as fast to pick the lock. The door swung free and open and she was on him within seconds trying to pull him out of the crystal. But the red crystal, the lyrium she remembered Varric's description, burned her hands when she touched it, stinging her hands even through her leather and woolen gloves. She grit her teeth and pulled harder, Cullen screamed.

“Stop! Stop! Please. Hurts too much.”

“Deal with it. I'm getting you out.”

“No. Please just don't.” she heard the defeat in his pleadings and took a heartbeat to look at him, really look.

“Oh Maker no.” She cried out, voice twisting into a thick sob.

He hadn't seen her since he watched her ride off to Redcliffe. He had formed a habit of always watching her leave, maybe it was something about the carefree way she sat her hart, or how she insisted on spurring her mount into a fierce gallop whenever she departed whooping and screaming for good luck.

He never saw her again.

The loss of the Herald shattered morale, shattered him. Only after, when she was gone, did he realize just how much she meant to him and just how foolish he had been to keep those thoughts to himself. He marched against Redcliffe to bring her home, only to find the city gutted and overrun with darkspawn, demons, and abominations. Her name was his battle cry ever poised on his lips roared for luck as he and his soldiers charged again and again and again, each time, his army dwindling in size.

Samson himself fed him the red lyrium himself when he was finally captured, alone surrounded by a ring of dead soldiers and an even thicker ring of dead monsters. Samson held open his mouth and poured the red liquid down his throat before pinching his nose and clamping a cruel hand over his mouth. He tried to inhale the liquid into his lungs so he could choke on it and die before it changed him.

No such luck.

They let him rot in this dungeon, the fever and the shame burning away all coherent thought save the cruel desire for more and more and more.

He remembered her though, what she looked like when she rode away; her hair swinging free in the wind. He, in the small dark hours of the night when sleep proved just as elusive as death, liked to think that she was somewhere out there, still riding, still smiling.

And now she was here with a look on her face he had never seen before.

Fear.

Fear of what he wondered? Surely not of losing him. He was long gone.
She was on her knees, she pulled an arrow out of her quiver and was ineffectually chipping away at the crystal with it. The iron arrowhead broke into flinty pieces and she cursed so fiercely that even now at the end of his tired faith it made him blush. He placed his free hand on her shoulder, the sound of tinkling bone drew her eye to his neck. A necklace of lion's teeth rested, strung together by leather. Her gift; he fashioned it into a token he always carried with him even now.

“Not going to work. My lady.”

“Stop calling me that damn you!” She reached for another arrow and began clanging it against the rock.

“Stop.” His voice was gentle, in his condition it really couldn't be anything more.

“You can't save me.”

“I'm sure as shit gonna try. Dorian could maybe melt...”

“Stop!” His roar startled her, she dropped the arrow, tears welled in her dark amber eyes.

Maker, he missed those eyes.

“Herald!” Dorian calling for her.

“You have to go.”

“Not leaving you motherfucker.”

He smiled. He honestly really truly smiled at her. “You have such a foul mouth.” He chuckled.

She felt her tears brimming and now falling, knowing what came next. She wasn't going to leave him, and he wasn't going to let her stay. There was no way she was going to free him and equally no way she was going to leave him to this nightmare.

“My lady please...” And he knew she knew.

This was untenable, un-fucking-bearable. Her heart raged against her ribs threatening to claw its way out of her chest. There was no fucking way she'd be able to put an arrow in Commander 'My Lady' Rutherford's chest.

“Herald!” Dorian's voice was louder, getting closer.

“Please!” he insisted louder pain hitching in his voice.

She swore to herself long ago to never cry. She hated it, made her feel weak and childlike and weak children get hurt. Still, she covered her face with her hands and started to sob. If it were Cassandra or Iron Bull in the same situation, she'd have put an arrow in their chest from jump. But something about seeing him trapped in that red glass undid her, made her unable to act.

Afraid to act.

It hurt too much. Why did this hurt her so much?

At Haven, he was a good friend. Solid and reliable. Someone fun to tease and talk to. She crushed her feelings for him nightly, unwilling, unable to ruin this beautiful fragile thing by stupidly falling in love.
Men like that didn't love women like her. They just didn't.

Right?

She rose to her feet and took a very long hard stare at the templar. Eyes still honey though now flecked in red. Oh Maker.

“Hurry.” He insisted.

“You aren't supposed to die like this.” She whined, hating the sound of her tear cracked voice.

“We all must, I'm just glad to see you again before the end.”

She removed a glove and placed it tenderly on his cheek scarred to hell and back cracked and glowing red with the makings of infant crystals growing underneath. She broke apart in grief when he leaned into her touch despite the obvious pain it caused him. The first tenderness he'd experienced in a very long time. Now the last tenderness he would ever feel.

She felt angelic, soft and sweet and warm. When she was around, he tried and failed to not think so much about her, perhaps on purpose to keep him focused. But since she disappeared, he was consumed by her. He thought constantly of the night when he bandaged her up, how her skin felt, the little gasps she sighed whenever his fingertips pressed too hard into her injuries.

He should have kissed her.

Then, like a Maker given miracle summoned by his thoughts, she placed a tender kiss on his lips. Nothing spicy, nothing heady, just a chaste kiss that brought her the closest to him she had ever been. The loose locs of her hair brushed against his cheek, they smelled like flowers, spice, and citrus. A summer breeze in the coldest winter.

She began to pull back, tears running freely and unchecked down dark skin the color of earth, the color of warm nutty bread fresh from the oven. Uncaring of the pain, he reached for her, his free hand grabbing the edges of her longest locs turning them over in his fingers before she pulled away completely. They felt soft.

“I always wondered,” he said while she notched her bow. “What your hair felt like. Always curious. Too scared to ask. Weird question.”

A sob burst forth. No one loved her hair. “And?” She drew her bow.

“Feels soft, smells beautiful. You're beautiful.”

She held the arrow notched and drawn in her bow, her arm shaking from the weight of the draw.

“Herald! Are you still alive?” Dorian screamed, voice echoing off the chamber.

She couldn't do it. She can't do it. She won't do it. "Cullen...I.."

“Do it!” He commanded.

She let her hand go with a violent, watery shout. The arrow flew a very short distance and struck with a hard sharp thunk into his chest, like an axe cutting firewood.

Red tears leaked from the corner of his eyes, looking like blood though it was probably not.

Before his head lolled to the side as the life left him, she heard him mutter with blood stained lips.
“Maker...keep...my lady...safe.”

**

The Herald kicked through the door trying and failing to bust it off its hinges. Dorian stepped back, quirking a well manicured eyebrow.

“Find anything?”


Leilana sliced Felix's throat open as easy as butchering a hog. Not the route she wanted to take but fuck, results were results. And honestly, at this point, it wasn't like it mattered. She would reverse this, make it so it didn't happen. Leilana would never cut the boy's throat and she would never have to pincushion the only man in Haven worth a damn.

“Time to go Herald,” Dorian yelled halfway through the portal back to the correct and proper time.

“Fuck me thank you.” She exhaled, running up the dais and stepping through. It hurt to watch Viv and Bull give their lives to aid their flight, but once through the magic, none of it mattered. Dorian laughed nervously.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

She laughed. “I make it a point to explicitly not kiss my mother.”

'Oh yes,' Dorian thought. 'I really like her.'

***

She returned to Haven with a horde of mages behind her and a chip on her shoulder the size of the Frostbacks. She was criminally sober and still very much affected by the events in the Redcliffe that now never was. Dorian had filled in Bull and Vivienne complete with gory details of their own demise while she herself remained silent, eyes fixed on the village as it grew closer on the horizon.

“Are you alright dear?” Vivienne asked, sidling her horse to match pace with hers.

“Do you have to ride sidesaddle?” She asked questioning Viv's ridiculous insistence to sit her horse that way.

“It's comfortable. And proper for a lady.”

“You'll slide off.”

“You're dodging the question.”

“Yeah. So.”

Vivienne chuckled indulgently and ran expertly manicured fingers through the younger woman's hair. “Honestly you must let me style your locs, they're beautiful and could be more so with the correct attentions.”

Behind them, Dorian nudged Bull with his elbow. “Women,” he sighed sarcastically drawing a lopsided smirk from the qunari. As far as 'Vints go, this one was tentatively alright.

**
Once returned from Redcliffe, she of course had to brief her advisers. She did so, leaving out the specifics and unable to look either Leliana or Cullen in the eye.

Especially Cullen, in fact.

He smiled warmly when he greeted her, his teeth free of blood, his skin whole and absent any red crystals.

However, one detail from that time and place did travel back with her to the now. She heard tinkling, the soft clatter of bone on bone and found when Cullen leaned over the war table to move one of his markers, yellow fangs slipped out from underneath his armor, tied around his neck by a leather cord.

Lion's teeth.

She covered her sob with a nervous cough.

She was back in her time, that future had been averted. The Maker is in his Golden City and all is right (mostly right) with the world.

Unless... unless that future hasn't been averted only postponed. And if it was postponed, there was no way she could know what decisions made or not made could possibly lead her down the path where she meets up with a templar locked in a dungeon. And...fuck...who knew if what she decided meant there could be worse futures waiting for her.

One where he's sticking the sword in her belly. Or one where she's rocking his lifeless body in her arms or....

Maker's fuck.

“My lady?”

Might not matter if that future came for her, she'd murder the templar now if he kept.

Calling.

Her.

That.

It was like auditory poison, or rather auditory liquor, it surged within her, warming her better than any whiskey or wine. She loved to hear him say it, who wouldn't with a voice as sweet and strong as cinnamon whiskey? But it left her feeling needy and wanting something she wasn't quite sure she could have. Torture was the better word for it.

“Are you alright?”

All three of her advisers were looking at her concerned. She glanced between them, one after the other after the...Cullen's eyes, honey colored.

Shit.

No use lying. “No.” she answered swiftly. “I'm tired, should probably go lay down or something.”

“I understand Herald. We'll pick this up tomorrow.” Josephine said, dismissing the meeting. The Herald all but fled the war room, her quickened pace not unnoticed by the templar.
There was something he couldn't quite name that bugged him ever since she returned from
Redcliffe. The story about an alternate bloody future full of death and destruction was one thing.
But he felt there was something yet she held back; either out of respect for the others or her own
fear of voicing something she saw out loud. Then during the meeting, he'd never seen her that way.
She usually attended them with sharp focus asking pointed, intelligent questions and picking apart
their strategy until something more serviceable could be constructed in its place. She was an astute
and shrewd tactician, a leader even though she tried her best to disabuse you of that notion.
Preferring instead to lead from the shadows and allow all three of her advisers to claim the credit
and glory.

That herald was absent from this meeting, instead a woman with a burden heavy enough to
outmatch the world was in her place. She seemed distracted, pained even, like every word spoken
was a knife in her gut.

He should speak to her.

Cullen rolled the idea around in his head, trying to think of justification for it outside of 'you just
want to hear more about what happened to you specifically at Redcliffe' which was actually a
thinly veiled excuse for 'you just want to be near her'.
The lion shook his head as thought the physical act might shake free the thoughts of her from his
head. And always, it never worked.

Still, his concern fell neatly within the purview of 'protecting her' and satisfied with that very
flimsy excuse, he headed for her tent.

**

Dear BB,

Hey! I know, I'm sorry. It's been too long since I left and I promised to write but I didn't. I'm a bad
brother. I know. I broke a promise to you. Don't deny it, I did. I left when I said I'd take you with
me. I left you with him. You are so strong though, and I am not. I couldn't wait for you, I knew I'd
die if I did. That's why I left. I knew you'd be strong enough to go on without me and now look
where you are! The most famous hunter in Ostwick!
Anyway, If you're interested, I'm headed to the Conclave! I'm going to be apart of the movement
that brings mages and templars to peace. Can you imagine that? If you still want to come over, I
know a mother superior. Her name is Dolores. She's a super sweet lady, I told her all about you. If
you still need to leave, she'll take you. You can keep Cousland and she won't make you cut your
hair either. Conclave is in two months, if you're interested, come.
I'd love to see you again. I miss you so much. How's mom? Give Cousland a scratch behind the
ears for me.
Your brother,
Alphy

Her tears wet the paper for what was possibly the ninth time that night. She hated crying, but it was
okay if done in private with no prying eyes...and a big bottle of liquor.

A loud deliberate cough interrupted her thoughts. “My lady? It's me, Commander Rutherford.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.
She wiped her eyes frantically and took several deep breaths in vain attempts to calm her tears.

She opened her tent's flap and sure enough the templar was standing there, warm and alive, blessedly missing an arrow in the heart.

“Yes?”

He knew immediately she had been crying. Her eyes were red and her face was streaked with the evidence of her tears.

“You seemed off at the briefing. I came to check on you.” He’d give her the opportunity to tell him herself of her troubles. He wanted her to trust him, to confide.

“Fine. Really. Thanks for coming.” Her voice betrayed her, cracking with a dry sob. They both heard it.

“You've been crying,” he said tenderly.

Her hands flew up to her face to obscure from him the fresh tears that fell. If it wasn't the letter from her brother, it was the memory of the Commander's murder at her hand. It wasn't going to stop, she was going to cry. Her pride and her hatred of the act be damned.

She turned from him and fled deeper into her tent, hands still covering her face in shame.

“I'll be okay.” she hollered from within her hands keeping her voice high and light as though nothing were deeply and truly wrong.

He stepped in, not waiting for an invitation and tied the tent closed behind him. The second time in as many months he'd been in her space.

“Herald?” His warm voice ripped another sob from her. Curse his voice! She only heard it as he begged her to kill him.

He reached for her but she spun around quickly hands falling, revealing a tear stained face that he felt she should never ever make. Oddly, she covered her visage as best she could with a bright smile, fake yes, but still cute...Yes cute was the word.

“I thought the best way to cure sadness was with more sadness.” She laughed swallowing down a moan. “I was wrong.”

She motioned for him to sit, taking her place at the edge of her fur covered pallet on the ground. He sat opposite her crosslegged, close enough to reach for her yet not too close to crowd. The letter from her brother rested in front of her, sitting ominously in the firelight. Glowing almost. A bottle of something with a very high proof sat next to it half gone. She poured some into a glass, uncaring that he saw she had been drinking straight from the bottle and offered him some.

“Fireblast. Whiskey. It's sweet.”

Cullen, in rare form, accepted the drink. It was warm, and sweet, like she said. It burned like fire and for a moment the lyrium in his blood was replaced. “What are you reading?” he asked, starting off light.

“A letter from my brother.”

“Oh!” until this point, she had never really spoken of her family. “How is he? What did he say?”
A fat tear brimmed and rolled down her dark face. “He's dead.”

“Maker's breath, I'm sorry.” Foot firmly in mouth, Cullen took another drink.

“My mother and father had 5 kids. Two girls, three boys. I was the youngest of them.”

Cullen nodded.

“My brother Alphonse was my youngest brother.” She motioned to her letter. “He was the one I loved the most.”

He wanted to say something to tie their experiences together. He wanted to mention his sister and his family in Honnleath. He wanted to say something, anything that might make her stop crying but he let her keep talking as she took a monstrously deep pull from her bottle.

"We were the closest in age so we were thicker than thieves. He used to read to me from the Chant of Light and I swear, I never felt more connected to a Maker than I did when he read. I was his shadow as any doting sister was for an older brother. It got me in trouble more than once.”

Cullen laughed, rich tones filling the space between them as he imagined a tinier version of her getting mud in her hair catching frogs with an older brother.

“He promised, when he got to be of age, that wherever he went he'd take me with him. On his 18th birthday I actually packed my bags.”

“What happened?” He offered his glass, she filled it.

“He told me, I'm sorry BB. There's only room for one.' And he left.” More tears fell. “It was a very long time before I saw him again.”

“When was that?” He was not a lightweight, a man of his size and constitution, the liquor could barely cause a tingle. She however, having already drank most of the bottle before he even arrived, was already wobbly even at rest.

“The Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

“Oh,” he said, upset with his pathetic sounding voice. She drank deeply another sob hitched and she swallowed it down.

“Want some more?”

Cullen offered his glass.

**

An hour in and they were laughing. The Fireblast whiskey had long since been drank to nothing and the somber story of her dear dead Alphonse replaced with trading stories back and forth of troublesome siblings.

“Mia's hair was black for a week.” Cullen laughed so hard he bent forward, arms about his waist. She needed to hear him laugh, to know he was still here and still alive. This Cullen lived; he would not die, especially not by her hand.

Her smile glowed hotter than the fire in her brazier. She tipped her head back towards her pillows, letting the alcohol push her the rest of the way down.
Cullen watched her closely, hands ready to reach for her.

“It's time for bed.” She slurred pleasantly.

Cullen rose to his knees and scooted towards her.

"Whatcha doin?" She asked flat on her back, hair splayed on the ground like thick rays of black sunshine.

"Tucking you in. It is cold outside." He murmured. He leaned over her, he kept his face neutral as he hooked an arm under her knees and around her shoulders but that half dreamy look she gave him when he touched her coaxed an unbidden smile from him so deep and wide it made his toes tingle.

He found her beautiful in all ways, to further deny it would be sinful. Whether she was screaming curses at her archers or screaming curses at the war table, she glowed. But here, in firelight, she was radiant.

He moved her toward her furry bed with cautious movements so slow as to suggest he didn't want to let her go. She almost told him 'Please don't let me go.'

He was not perfection.

He stammered when flustered, and his archery was only moderately passable. He slouched at their meetings and made the most ridiculous face whenever Sister Nightingale insulted his intelligence. And the fact that she knew all that, meant that there was never a moment when her eyes were not on him. Like now. Her gaze never wavered as he held her, drinking in the honeyed gold of his eyes as though a parched woman in a desert.

He laid her gently in her furs, loath to let her go. He drew the blankets up to her neck.

"More, please." She sighed. "I hate being cold. It's so cold down here."

Cullen chuckled. "I am sorry my lady mislikes the Ferelden climate."

"I like other things." A pregnant pause passed between them, like their less than sober minds knew what their sober ones did not yet wish to acknowledge. A request balanced on the edge of his lips, and invitation on hers, but they remained silent.

Cullen stood to leave, but a hand quick as a viper's strike reached and caught him by the wrist. He fell back on all fours over her jostling his lion tooth necklace free of his safe place tucked inside his breastplate.

“I'm so glad.” She said, the corners of her eyes held tears.

“Of?”

"You aren't dead."

He slipped his hand down so that she clutched his hand instead of his wrist and squeezed.

"I was dead in your Redcliffe." A statement.

She nodded. Fresh tears leaked from the corners of her eyes trailing down until they got lost in the springy curls at her temples yet the smile she wore told him, no sorrow caused their fall.

"No more tears, I yet live my lady.” He brushed away her falling tears.
“Thank you.” She whispered. “I didn’t think I would end the day smiling.”

“If ever I could end your day with a smile, I am yours to command my lady.”

Cullen left, concealing the stumble in his step as he rose to his feet. He caught her eye as he buttoned closed her tent, a huntress in her furs, waiting for him to be gone before she could travel off to sleep. She looked lonely in her large and empty tent and were he not a coward, afraid of his own blooming desire, he would have asked to stay.
Dreams

Chapter Notes

In which we finally earn that explicit tag. I hope it tides you over for a time, it'll be awhile before we get explicit again.

She sank into the soft furs feeling what exactly? Lonely? Hollow? Yet warm and tingly at the same time. Cullen had just left, indulging her alcoholism and trading stories of good memories long lost.

It was easy to admit he was attractive. That was simple.

“He’s attractive.” She said aloud to prove her point.

What was hard was admitting to the ‘extra’ that came with that initial confession. Something trailed after him, attached to him as inexorably linked to him as was his shadow. Something she wanted to get at with her fingers, pull and tease apart until all secrets spilled forth and she knew him utterly.

What the fuck was that? What did that mean?

“That you like him more than just admitting he's cute.” She said aloud again.

“Fuck.” she swore. The churning liquid closed in around her head, she was slipping under, drowning in molten gold.

Fuck indeed.

“So what do we do about it?” She said, completely comfortable with her pluralizing herself so long as no one else heard.

“Do we have to do anything about it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because if he calls you 'my lady' again without knowing what it does to you, you're going to crawl out of your skin and possibly claw him out of his own.”

It really was love at first sound with her. Since day one, when he cooed his first “my lady” from across the war table she had been infatuated with his voice. Sweet and clear and strong, like the best liquor. He was intoxicating, more potent than anything she could ever imbibe. He commanded the respect of his men, of his peers. He proved to be capable and caring, a sweet lamb hidden in lion's fur.

With the voice of a desire demon.

Laying across the bed, the Herald hummed, filling her with warmth. That voice. That stubble. That hair, those eyes. She saw him train with his soldiers; the solid way he wielded sword and shield. And even if he couldn't, even if he was the weakest trainee on the pitch, she’d still love that voice--
and the body attached to it.

“My lady,” she mouthed to herself hearing his voice in her reverie. Another warmth, a more carnal one hit her right in the pit of her stomach.

**

The cool night air washed away any intoxication he felt leaving him with clear mind and clearer heart. The sight of her tears distressed him, made his heart throw fits. He wanted to comfort her more than just providing a sympathetic ear. Cullen, Andraste preserve him, wanted to reach and hold her, kiss her eyes until the tears stopped. He wanted to clutch her, anchor her through the waves of her pain, be the rock on which she held to keep her grounded in the world and not swept away into grief.

“Maker's breath man, when did you appoint yourself the guardian of her happiness?”

Just now he suspected.

He stepped into his tent, pulled off the heavy armor and climbed into his bed. The alcohol might help sleep find him a little easier this night than others, but the feel of her weight in his arms.

No. That'd keep him awake a little while longer.

**

She started with her fingers dancing around the flesh of her neck. She was under the fur covers now, the candles blown out and her brazier burned down almost to embers. She slept in her smalls, no breast band, a quirk of habit that made her actions now a little easier to accomplish.

She played her fingers across her skin and tried to imagine they were lips instead of digits. She imagined he would be a very tender lover, taking his time to savor every bit of her skin. He would not call her mudskin. He would call her beautiful.

“Hmmm,” she hummed, eyes shut to the vision she conjured. Her fingers traveled up and down back and forth stopping at her breasts to play with the peaked nipples, tweaking them rubbing them softly, gently. Cullen was a tender lover after all.

She let a small moan escape her as she imagined the commander’s wonderfully scarred lips teasing her breasts and nipples, blowing cool air over her heated flesh. He whispered to her in the dark with that damnable voice, singing of all the pleasures he wished to share with her.

“My beautiful lady,” he teased, licking a firey path down her body. “My beautiful, beautiful, lady.”

**

He felt his flesh harden with the memory of her in his arms and the way her eyes ripped him apart and laid him bare. Those whiskey eyes saw everything about him, exposed him and Maker help him... She was unlike anyone he'd ever met. Loud and free, she was so noisy with her curses and her screamings. It grated on him before it grew. Then she spoke with him, teased him, trusted him, confided in him. The Herald proved herself to be more than just the feral war monger he initially thought she was. She led them capably and threw her whole heart into their cause and that made her attractive.

Her beauty made her irresistible.
“Her hair,” he groaned aloud, trying and failing to talk himself out of his erection. Her hair was his quiet obsession, he yearned to know what the thick vines would feel like wrapped in his hand, curled around his fingers as he...

No.

She was the Bride's Chosen.

Andraste's Chosen.

Hair and eyes and body and lips crafted with the expert hand of the Maker, his small clothes tightened with the thought.

Cullen reached a sinful hand down and grabbed a handful of himself trying to imagine what those god crafted lips would feel like on his own.

**

She teased herself, slicking her fingers with the wetness she found between her thighs, summoned by her less than chaste thoughts about the Commander.

Another hum vibrated in her chest and throat. She opened her mouth to call out and found his name on her lips. In her mind's eye, he was on top of her now, his delicious weight pressing her into the furs of her pallele. His lips would be on her neck, suckling on the tender flesh there while his hand would play down in the deep black curls of her sex. Bow calloused fingers became thicker, wider sword calloused fingers that stroked the satiny wetness of her, teasing apart her sensitive folds, exploring her traveling up and down her dripping cunt until he traveled higher and higher still, rubbing against the pearly flesh of her clit.

She cursed sharply and she imagined him smiling at her, pleased he was able to elicit such a response with hands alone.

Her hands would be at his back, nails pressing just so into muscle, not deep enough yet to leave a mark.

But oh, would he desire her to leave a mark.

No longer content to play with his hands, Cullen would shift above her bringing himself to rest at her entrance. He'd kiss her lips, her cheeks, eyes, forehead begging with his body to enter her.

“My lady please,” he begged.

She lifted a strong thigh up and off the bed, wrapped an ankle around his backside and pushed.

Him.

Down.

“Oh!” she cried out. Her fingers working almost frantically at the nub that crowned her entrance.

Slow down.

Too good.

Slow down.
She'd be on top because, of course she would be. He'd seen how she rode; never in his life had he been more jealous of a beast of burden. She rode bareback too sometimes, rearing her hart in the air, keeping her seat by virtue of nothing more than the grip of her thighs. She crowned him like the goddess she was bestowing favor on her most humble and loyal servant. She rode him relentlessly, strong earthen colored legs raised her up and then sank her down around him, her hot wetness gripping him tight the entire way up and the entire way down.

A grunt curled and rippled in his chest but he stopped it by keeping his mouth shut tight. He pumped himself with a steady pace, eyes knit shut, mind racing with the thought of her sighing on top of him, calling for him, moaning his name. She shuddered and keened with how good he felt hilted so deep inside of her. She praised him with her body, her vines rising and slapping across her tits and back, sounding like rain striking window glass.

“Yes,” he hissed, finally opening his mouth.

Her legs wrapped around him, she flexed to guide him down and released to let him back up again. He dictated the pace with the expert snap of his hips while she dictated how deep he’d go. And Maker's breath, he reached deep.

Tongue and teeth found the shell of her ear whispering filthy encouragements.

“Just like that. Right there. Do you like it when I strike you there?”

Her breasts heaved against his chest, her mouth kept in a constant 'o' of pleasure. She called his name, begged him to keep going. He reached deep, obliging her, the facade of the tender lover long abandoned in favor of deep and abiding pleasure.

She wanted him to fuck her now, drive into her and crush her to the ground. She wanted him to obliterate her senses, to eclipse her world in gold.

He cooed to her, knowing the incredible power of his voice. “Yes my lady, Maker yes...” And she thought she might die.

She moved too slowly for him. Perhaps that was intentional, designed to drive him deep into the lust filled rage that would cause him to jump up and flip her onto her back. She'd giggle, giving him an evil glare that would drive all coherent thought from him. He ground into her, desperate to actually try and break her in half. She proved more than capable of taking him, matching him, she could stand rougher attentions.

She liked him rough.

Oh Maker, she did.

His cock was slick and heated and painfully hard against his hand. He was ready, more than ready, the thought of her writhing under him as he pushed and pushed and pushed and damned if he tried to fuck her through the floor.

A sharp cry from her pierced his lusty fog, she screamed for him, called his name, she came begging and whimpering completely undone. He felt all of it, every last delightful shudder.
He came, hand frozen mid stroke cock spurting its sticky burden, her name a growl on his lips.

“Maker's mercy Evelyn!”

**

“Come for me my lady.” he would command. And she would obey, her body would surge forward, legs clamping, arms tightening, nails raking at the skin of his back leaving bright red marks no one could see, but he could feel. On his command would she let go; falling so far and so deep into the ocean of lust, happily drowning with him tumbling down not too long after.

Her fingers struck the exact right point of her slick crown at the exact right time and she howled his name before turning over to stifle the rest of it into a pillow, body locked and vibrating with receding waves of pleasure.

She smiled when she regained control of herself, imagining him kissing cool her heated flesh. He whispered sweet things in that tender voice of his, punctuating it often with 'my lady' this or 'my lady' that.

A good dream.

**

They came down from their high together, limbs tangled and wrapped around one another like hopelessly knotted string. He would lightly grab a fist full of her hair and bring it to his lips kissing it reverently.

Then she disappeared. Cullen was alone, in his bed, hand and stomach sticky with delightful shame.

**

“Good morning, my lady. Feeling better?” Cullen asked on their way into the war room. She had designs on the Temple of Sacred Ashes today. With the mages, she hoped to close the breach.

Evelyn beamed at him, eyes slipping shut for the barest of seconds to imagine the feel of his lips on her neck. “I slept pretty good. How about you?”

“Very well.” he agreed, the sound of her moaning his name echoing in his ears.
He felt odd on horseback, marching up the mountain while his men trudged in the dirt. It was a practical necessity; meant to keep him in constant communication with the Herald's party and his reserves and auxiliaries at the tail end of the trail of soldiers and mages. Still, he felt like he should be humping it in the dirt with the rest of them-- he'd feel better, more right that way. However, if it wasn't for his elevated seat on his white charger, he would have missed her kicking rocks by the roadside.

He kicked his horse into a light canter, she was bent over, hands in the gravelly rocky soil. It looked like she was playing in the dirt.

“Herald?” He rode to her on a white horse because of course he rode a white horse. She groaned in the back of her throat, she had not, could not forget the night before. Their shared company over a bottle of Fireblast whiskey, then...the solo activities later that left her sweaty and sweet, his name curled on her lips. She couldn't pull him apart from her, couldn't extract him from her mind, and it would be especially hard now considering he looked positively fucking perfect, a prince on a white horse.

She tried to force a nonchalant smile.

“Your party should be at the temple by now, they left over an hour ago.” Mountain winds howled threatening a storm, she shivered, he saw.

“Yeah they're up there. Party can't start 'till everyone arrives so I hung back a little bit.” She knelt back to her task, arranging a mineral flecked rock into the circle pattern she built of other smaller colored stones of various shapes and sizes. He dismounted and stood behind her curious but silent. She seemed reserved, almost prayerful in the way she arranged her stones back and forth and back again until she finally stood back and judged her creation to be suitable.

She reached inside her coat and pulled out a yellow sheaf of parchment, the letter from her brother.

“I feel like he should have something...”

Cullen understood. “Alphonse.”

“Yeah,” she choked up but stopped the tears. Seeing her cry would be a luxury he would be granted only once lest he begin to think she was some easily emotional thing.

“They should all have something, really. When this is over, I'm going to build the biggest fucking monument our money can buy.”

Though touched, Cullen blushed at her swear...so close to sacred ground it seemed especially blasphemous. “That's noble of you my lady.”

“Got nothing to do with nobility. I want to build a big fucking statue in the middle of the blasted
crater so nothing else can be built there ever again. That place took my family from me, the only living soul left who cared for me. I'd salt the earth too if I could.”

She kissed her brother's letter, then she began to giggle, memories—the happy ones, came rushing back as she prepared to say goodbye. She placed the letter under a rock in the middle, her shrine at last complete.

“I'll see you again Alphy,” she shouted, laughter in her voice. “But not yet!” She let the howling mountain wind freeze the tears on her face before they could fall. Cullen saw and yet remained quiet.

One deep breath later, and she was herself again. Ready to end this or die trying. She turned her back on the shrine, never to take a second glance at it again. Buried in her heart if not in the earth, Alphonse lay rested. The Herald fixed a grim expression on her face and focused it on the mountain's summit. The Breach swirled malevolent and green, a gaping maw open and drooling looking to consume her and all the world.

She said 'not yet' but just how long or short that would be was anyone's guess.

An armored hand appeared in front of her face, Cullen, remounted, perfect on his white horse. “Climb on. We'll ride up.”

She smiled and gently brushed away his hand before vaulting up onto the horse with a powerful standing jump.

“Impressive, I forgot how much of an accomplished horsemistress you are.” She shrugged wrapping her arms around his middle as he spurred his mount into a light gallop.

He felt awkward standing there, watching as she said goodbye to her brother. He wanted to do something, Maker, every time she hurt he just wanted to do, but was so blighted inept he could only stand and listen, nodding mutely as she laughed her tears away.

'She doesn't need your help, you fool.' He thought to himself as they raced up the mountain. Though something else bothered him, tugging at his mind like a loose string slowly unraveling a sleeve.

'Not all,” he blurted aloud, regretting it immediately.

“Beg pardon?” She asked. He cursed her sharp hearing.

“You said the temple took from you the only soul who cared about you. I'm saying it didn't.”

Her mind chewed on that for a little bit, a dog worrying a tasty bone. There could be any number of ways he meant that, but there was only one that came back to her mind...the one that made her heart race faster than the horse's legs.

“Does that mean you Commander?”

A bug, most likely imagined, caught in Cullen's throat and he coughed. “Ah err...no I mean...yes..I mean...Maker's breath you are...These soldiers care about you. Josephine and Leliana care about you. Iron Bull and Sera, and Blackwall, and even Solas care about you in their own ways. We all care about you. Myself among them.” He meant what he said, still he felt like a coward saying it. What he felt he couldn't quite define in words but it went beyond the way a Commander would care about a colleague.
“Thank you Commander,” she squeezed his waist a little tighter- Maker, how long had it been since a woman held him like that. Yes they were on a horse, yes she did it to stay astride, but mercy it felt so good.

“Any time my lady.”

On the summit, she didn't wait for him to slow his horse, choosing instead to vault off mid gallop sliding to an impressive stop in a cloud of gravel, dust, and snow making Cullen wonder if she actually needed to hold him to stay on.

“Show off!” Dorian called taking her attention away from the seriously conflicted looking templar and bringing it to a more...literally pressing issue.

Heavy oppression glowed green and sickly, a malicious entity she was convinced could breathe and feel and know its hate. It hurt to stand, made the air taste like static and metal the same way it tastes right before a mage's or nature's lighting strike. The breach pressed down on her, a physical weight on her shoulders and while not actually choking her, it made breathing on the worrisome side of uncomfortable.

Electric shocks of light pain laced up her left arm. The breach was very much like, yet also unlike the smaller breaches she sealed across the Hinterlands and the Storm Coast. The energy, the weight remained the same but the sheer evil and size of the thing was enough to give her pause.

Not yet, she'd said, but possibly soon.

She made peace with her brother and had no gods to whom she would appeal. She tried to think of other affairs she needed to settle that could be done in the next minute or two before that thing could swallow her whole. None really came to mind except...

“Okay, I'll make you a deal,” she said to herself. “The next time he calls you 'my lady' you kiss him. If he likes it, you'll kiss him again, if he doesn't well...you'll have your answer so you can stop fucking fretting about it.”

Good plan. Solid plan. If she survived to hear the next 'my lady'.

Her hair hung loose and dark and thick as always before she hastily tied it into a messy ponytail. She nodded to Solas.

“Let's start this fucker!”

Cullen, off with his men, chanted a prayer. One for the breach, two for her, then he drew his sword.

The mages made their magic crawl up her skin, ten thousand tendrils of electricity, ice, and fire. It did not hurt but there was a sort of phantom pain that made her skin shiver, itch, and bleed. She kept her bottom lip firmly pressed into her teeth to keep from screaming but when that power coalesced in her hand- she raised that hand and roared.

You should not hold up your hand, close your eyes, and wait for the world to end. A lesson learned far too late, for when Lady Trevelyan opened her eyes, a pride demon greeted her with a sinister laugh and a swipe from clawed hand that sent her flying.
The war for the end of the world began when she crumpled into the blasted bricks. Iron Bull bellowed, Dorian screamed, even Vivienne let loose her own immaculately stylish battle-cry, with her, you knew you were fighting a lady. The energy of 1000 spells concentrated in the air creating a microcosm of a summoned thunderstorm. Sharp lighting left ragged tears in the flesh of the clouds striking down around them scorching already scorched earth. Somewhere within the Fade a levee broke releasing a flood of demons into the besieged temple.

Cullen led his men spitting and screaming sending forth toward the beach a wall of shields to staunch the tide, prevent them from further overrunning their already overwhelmed forces. She recovered from her inglorious encounter and made up for her folly by smiting every shade and wraith that came near her friends, sometimes requiring only one arrow to do so. An arrow buzzed far too close to the Commander's ear. Though instead of finding its author, he faced its owner, a wraith that had just appeared from the earth poised and ready to take a chunk out of him had not an arrow been bored right between its eyes.

Fletched with gray feathers, he knew that arrow was hers.

She whooped, her blood singing in her ears, (literally dripping in her ears making the roar of demons and zing of magic and clank of swords blur and buzz into a weird song like noise). She called for Cousland forgetting for the briefest of seconds he was no longer there to fight with her. Enraged at his loss, enraged at the demons that took her brother, she roared for the Iron Bull to flank the pride demon, an order he happily obeyed. The qunari swerved around the monstrosity and lodged a double bladed axe in the back of its knee. A fire spell engulfed its face as a withering poison disabled all attempts by the creature to rearmor itself.

"Boss! Now!"

She was on flat ground in the bowl of the crater, the wind was against so was the angle. She scrambled up a small pile of rubble to get better wind and vantage while an unseen wraith climbed up after her.

He saw her climb the rubble, saw the demon climb after her, she would never see it in time. Cullen bashed away the shade that assaulted him and ran toward her on the tiny rock mountain.

Her companions harried the pride demon while she readied her shot. Her vantage improved but the wind did not, nothing she could do about it now. She knelt and notched her arrow, blood impaired her sight making it red and blurry, she drew and held waiting for the right second. One chance to get this right one arrow left, her reserve quivers rested on the other side of the field. She held her arrow, one breath, two...on three she released hearing the shriek of a wraith so loud in her ears it deafened her. Her arrow loosed, she turned too late to defend herself from the other monster's wicked claws even as she heard the pride demon behind her roar as her arrow struck him in the eye. Before its claws could rake her eyes out or possibly decapitate her, a soldier's sword exploded from its chest. The wraith screamed and fell limp around the blade before the soldier kicked the demon away revealing no simple soldier but a templar.

They paused searching for something to say, thoughts interrupted though by an explosion of green and a dying pride demon with an arrow in its eye.

"The Breach! Herald you must go!"

She vaulted off the top of the gravel hill and raced toward the tear in the Fade dodging spells and swipes and swords aimed for her head. She dodged a blade, sliding under it scraping her knees up as she came to rest right before the breach. Her hand shot up and she screamed, a sound that ripped through the din of battle and pierced the Commander straight in the heart. He scrambled down after her, her cries thumping in his ears. Before he was even aware, his own cry for her burst from
his throat.

“Herald!”

She had to hold her arm up by the wrist with her other hand watching in horror as the green energy ripped and peeled off the flesh of her left hand. The magic crescendoed, no other sound or feeling left in the world except her and the breach and the roar. Higher and higher, louder and louder, tears leaked from her eyes and she was sure her feet dented the rock beneath her as she fought against the pressure of the magic assaulting her. The breach pushed back, pushing her back as she herself pushed forward, willing to throw herself in if it meant her Inquisition would be saved.

But before she stepped forward to make her sacrifice, she was pulled back by a pair of strong arms and the Breach exploded in magic and energy popping her eardrums and knocking her into black sleep.

**

A dog barked, a familiar window shaking woof. Someone hummed the Chant of Light. She lay sleeping, light pouring through the crack in her drapes. A wet tongue licked her, urging her to wake. There were deers to hunt and bears to slay. A woman with a dry voice like kindling called her, heavy accented Dalish.

Alphy.

Assan.

Cousland.

Family.

But they were dead, she remembered as she slumbered. Dead, dead, murdered, no more. What family did she have now? A mother who at best ignored her and at worst ignored her when she screamed. A father...one who made her scream.

If that was all she had, why wake?

“Because you are not lazy, my child.” Assan's voice, dry and scratchy, she smoked too much and was thankful her charge never picked up the habit. “You are needed.”

Cousland barked, reaffirming her point. Your pack needs you, he seemed to say.

Alphonse chanted, slow voice rumbled with the distant thunder of spring. She did not believe, his voice though, made her believe.

“In My image I forge you,
To you I give dominion
Over all that exists.
By your will
May all things be done.

“I'll see you again sister,” he said smiling, looking up from his text, “but not yet.”

She came to consciousness slowly as if eased back into life by her dead family reluctant but willing to let her go. Her face was wet with blood or tears, or both.
“Not yet.” she repeated before sitting up.

They cheered, they shouted. The heaviness that assaulted her the moment that she arrived at the temple was gone. The sky still bore the scars of their war, but it no longer churned and swirled. The breach was gone. The sky partially healed.

The Herald shook her head trying to remove the fog of unconsciousness and possible head injury. The action made it worse, she stumbled, an armored hand caught her.

Iron Bull.

“Easy Boss, you saved the world. Its time to party not loose your lunch in front of your army.” The qunari grinned through the blood on his face and in his teeth. There were huge rents in his flesh he seemed unaware of or unbothered by. He laughed as though this were any other day, any other battlefield. His confidence put her at ease. She offered her fist and he met it with his own. Fast friends the two of them as he kept her steady on her feet.

Cullen watched as Iron Bull helped the Herald to her feet. No jealousy stirred in him, just simple happiness that she was alright.

“You alright sir?” a soldier asked as he helped the Commander to stand. “Just fine.” He replied.

They won with minimal casualty and relative ease. They accomplished that, she accomplished that. The celebration at Haven kicked off immediately with Varric and Dorian literally breaking open casks of wine and spirits. Haven's pilgrims cheered music and laughter floating up to the Maker as though an offering.

Cullen stood alone against wall sipping halfheartedly a mug of ale mind far from the dancing and the singing and the roaring bonfire.

The Inquisition wasn't truly over. Work needed to be done still but the conflict that threatened the world seemed over. Which meant that in time, everything would be done for good.

Why did that sadden him?

He heard the crowd break into low whistles and cheers. The Herald had come to dance. With a pair of dwarven men and two busty looking women she chugged a proffered mug of ale and casually tossed it away with a dainty sounding belch.

“Dance with us!” one of the dwarves asked.

She grinned and nodded, “I can't dance to this pipe and fiddle shit. Too Fereleden for me. IRON BULL!”

The qunari looked up from this two tankards of beer one in each hand. “Yeah Boss?”

“You got any drums?” Iron Bull's face lit up like a child at his first fair. “Fuck yeah I do!”

“Get 'em.”

He returned carrying one huge hide and fur covered drum while his lieutenant Krem carried another close behind.

“We usually use these as an intimidation trick, make the enemy think there's more coming than there are, but yeah we use 'em to party too. Whatja have in mind?”
“Something worth moving to.” She took the leather cord out of her hair letting it tumble free and wild.

Krem laughed. “Bull can’t keep rhythm for shit.”

Fereldens dance on the heels and balls of their feet favoring the boisterous bouncing of swinging circles and arm hooking and the general dances one would find at a country fair. Orlesian's much the same preferring the steady three-step of a waltz, feet guiding hip guiding shoulder guiding head.

She danced on the tips of her toes, to the rhythm they banged from their drums. She bent and flexed her body, made otherwise obscene gesture with her movements that defied logic, sanity, and propriety. That was how she danced.

She moved. Heart beat and lung breathed and hair flipped as she moved. The Commander watched her from across the bonfire hiding his thoughts behind an overlarge mug of beer convinced if anyone could look him in the eye they would know what he was thinking.

That he wanted her.

And Maker yes he did want her, more than the plant craves the sun or the drowning man craves the barest piece of flotsam.

Krem and Bull fought each other with their drums, hands determined to outdo each other in pace and intricacy of the beats they pounded out on their instruments.

She just moved. Unphased by interruption of time, or measure, or coherency.

The drunken revelers and the children joined her. Some found her beat but most could not devolving into ridiculous offbeat clapping. Most others though just watched scandalized or in awe or in scandalized awe wondering how the Maker could allow Andraste's Herald to move like that.

“Do they dance like that in Ostwick?” Blackwall asked, lips wet with constant unconscious licking. Cullen stifled his snort of disgust in another long pull of his ale before answering.

“SheSmil５ed when she moved, eyes knit tight in either concentration or sheer emotion. Her dark arms came up slapping her hands together in a clap she accented with a fierce yell before ending with a curl of her arms that splayed her fingers out in a sensuous looking fan that she brought down over her eyes.
Dark amber eyes that glowed in firelight.

Eyes that popped open and somehow some blighted way found him above all others from across and beyond the fire.

He seized as she found him. Her eyes the beacon that chased away his shadows. Her eyes and her movements laid him bare, exposing Cullen Rutherford for what he was, a man with a fierce and heady need for a woman he had no right to.

She belonged to the people, to the Maker, to His Bride. She had to be theirs and could never be his. She protected the people, saved the people, loved the people, cared for the people and as such could never do any of that for him no matter how badly his heart ached for her.

It didn't matter much anyway. The rift that tore open the Temple of Sacred Ashes had been sealed through her blood and her command. This Inquisition, whatever it was now, would soon be ended as soon as her brilliance discovered a way to heal the sky.

Krem and Bull, their rivalry overtaking their charge, fell apart and came to blows abandoning their instruments in favor of cursing and fighting each other over who fucked up first.

For a few blessed seconds she kept dancing, playing out the rhythm in her mind and heart before she bent forward again almost to the ground before whipping back up flipping the black vines of her hair so that when they came up the fell behind and across her face, her dark eyes peeking out from behind them.

Had his glass been a little more fragile, his grip would have shattered it.

Dancing did an indescribable thing for her. It set her soul upon the world to drink its life dry.

She had no problem admitting that she liked to shock the dog lords. She imagined nobody in Ferelden had seen anyone dance like that. Bull was most likely familiar her movement because his people were just a tad bit more comfortable with their bodies and the way they expressed themselves. She did steal a couple (most) of moves from a troupe of qunari dancers that traveled around the Free Marches with fairs dancing for coin and adulation. She had only been a young girl at the time, still under Assan's care. The elf took her to see the show and was mesmerized by the way they moved.

When her father caught her emulating the sinful sway of their hips, he beat her, and the next day with bruised neck and chest (but never ever face), she practiced the mincing steps of the Orlesian court and learned them to perfection.

When her danced ended, she found him from across the fire and let her gaze linger. The Commander made her breathe a little deeper, made her sigh more often. She was a huntress, killing for sport and for survival with bow and arrow and wit. She chased down deer and wolf in the forest yet he made her want to be chased, to be hunted. She wanted to run as far and fast as her legs could carry her while he ran her down, the lion getting closer and closer until he caught her within his strong arms. She wanted him to chase, catch, and devour her, wanted his lips to come away from her wet and stained.

She shivered.

"Well that was certainly a display my dear. We should get them to dance like that in Minrathous, the parties would be much more lively."

An easy smile crept back onto her face. The Tevinter mage, Dorian, wrapped an arm around her
shoulder and whispered some secret thing into her ear that caused her to toss her head back laughing shaking her vines. How could such a woman be the Maker's Gift if all she inspired in him were jealousy, lust, and covetousness?

Because Cullen knew full blighting well that she did so much more. He resolved to tell her, to not let another minute go by without her knowing just what exactly she inspired in him. He swallowed the last of his drink and made ready to interrupt her conversation with the mage, then somewhere off in the distance...a horn of war blew.
"I'm starting to feel validated in my choice of allies Commander." She snorted looking irritated, a face like thunder with a tongue that struck like lighting.

"These are no templars I know Herald. They fight with darkspawn." The Commander answered defensively.

"Whatever, but judging by the fires coming down the mountain, this is a numbers game we lose. So what are our options? Make 'em good."

Her companions all began to talk at once, she silenced them with a quick cut of her hand.

"No. We save the people first. We get them out. Commander, tell your men, by any means, get what you can and get the people out." He nodded gravely.

She looked around, looking for a solution, a way out, an escape.

"Varric?"

"Yeah."

"Those trebuchets, if we aim them at the mountain..."

"Let the Frostbacks do the damage...yeah that might work."

She grimaced, she didn't like waging lives on a might. "We'll have to settle for that then."

She raked her hands down her face contemplating with a spreading sickness that lives were going to be lost in this gamble. Specifically, hers. You can accept death and still be afraid. Can't let 'em see her shake though.

"Okay, Dorian, Bull, Blackwall with me. The rest of you, get. Out. Now."

Her tone brooked no argument. She counted the arrows in her quiver, they numbered too low.

***

They came, like ants on a corpse they swarmed. She heard the soldiers' scream, the people died in the snow, in Haven's fires. She pulled as many as she could out with her own hands and still she suspected it would never be enough to assuage her guilt. Her failure.

War ended a lot of lives, lives she knew she couldn't bear responsibility for. But these sonofabitches attacked her at her home, in the middle of a damned celebration. If this was unavoidable, she should have at least known. She could have prepared.

She took a sword's swipe to her side, magic fire burned both her hands until the flesh bubbled and cracked, making it impossible to shoot like she was used too. A hammer's blow almost caved her skull in, she stepped back just enough to have it crush her collarbone instead.

The Commander returned from his retreat, bloody and ashen faced, barely able to meet her eye when he announced that the only way out now was through death, that they should make the enemy earn the rest of the lives they took.

They regrouped in the chantry, the conclave to decide their fate.
The boy...the odd one...he said he had a way out.

He pointed ghostly fingers toward the back of the church, a secret exit through caves of ice and rock.

But they needed time.

And she'd give it to them.

Cullen saw the thought in her head before she voiced it.

“Commander.” There was no familiarity. No warmth. A command he obeyed. Possibly the last time she'd speak to him, and her voice held no smile. Cullen regretted his cowardice, regretting not kissing her early and often. A fools regret, he knew, but the sticky sickness didn't abate.

“Every last one you can save, save them. Get them out. Bull, Dorian, Blackwall and I will give you time.”

Her fighters lingered by the door checking potions making sure the rents, tears, and burns in their armor would see them through one more fight. Outside, the beasts screamed and roared tearing through the hamlet, razing whatever fire hadn't yet destroyed. She trembled where she stood, her blood dripped on the floor, she favored her left arm and he saw as she bit her bottom lip to keep it from shaking. The eyes though, like candlelight trapped in amber glass, her eyes did not waver or water, staring at him in way that made everything in him revolt at the idea of her death.

They were at the end of everything, their triumph turned to failure. Everything they felt for each other, each emotion, thought, or idle wondering now confronted them here at this crossroads, the two separate doors they would take. She folded her lips together, like she wanted to say something else but couldn't. She didn't want to lay her feelings at his feet then run away leaving him with that burden. She couldn't do that.

The Herald must fight, and it killed him to let her go. He felt unworthy, too noble or just too blighting stupid to put the words together he needed to say.

I don't want you to go.

I think I'm in love with you.

Selfish, greedy, all the worst emotions born from the best one. She wasn't his to keep, to monopolize with that kind of confession. It hurt like the worst headache. They stood, separated by maybe an arm's length. To touch would require just a step forward, a heartbeat's echo, or a decision made.

“What of your own escape?” Was all he managed to say.

Be what he needs you to be. Give him the confidence they all look to you for. 'Don't let him see your fear girl.' She thought.

Her laugh was unexpected and glorious; it lit up the chapel with vibrant light and sound.

“Don't worry Commander, I will see you again.”

He believed her.
It loomed above her, a spiteful entity, an eldritch thing from the sewers of the Black City—a darkspawn.

And she was not Grey Warden, ill equipped to prevent or stop what looked to be the Sixth Blight. Save the world? Maybe. Stop a Blight. Fuck off.

That thing, that monstrous being made of too little flesh stretched over too much bone and claw and red lyrium terrified her—made the anchor on her hand split and bleed. It'd seen through her shield, its words cutting up her bravada to splinters and shards, disintegrating the mental strength she needed to beat this fucking thing. It knew she was weak, knew she had no power. It was exactly and precisely right: she had no fucking fathomable idea what she was doing and to prove it, it summoned an arch-demon. A dragon fused together with metal and crystal and nightmare—the herald of her death.

It flapped leathery wings, scattering her fighters like dandelion fluff blown away by a child. It left her alone, unprotected, and very afraid.

If the story ended here, the bards would make up some bullshit about how she faced down death unafraid, that she roared into the face of her mortality challenging it unflinchingly.

But we've already established that the storytellers are full of shit.

And the story does not end here.

"Fuck it," she said, striking the trebuchet. It's cargo exploded, huge rocks hurling and smiting the side of the mountain upsetting a heaven's worth of snow and ice. It thundered down to bury the dragon, the darkspawn and her. Wind and pressure lifted her up and off her feet, she flew careening end over end a snowflake in a wind storm.

Her back broke her fall.

His confidence that she would return was as solid as his faith; though even the most unshakably devout can still be beset by doubt.

The remains of the Inquisition huddled like burned out rats, clumped together around fires so weak they died whenever the wind blew too harshly. It was a Maker given miracle so many had survived this far, most of his troops and most of the townsfolk. He hoped, that in exchange for their lives, her's was not forfeit.

A grim exchange priced too high.

Withering winds sliced through the cracks in Cullen's armor, cutting down to bone. His marrow froze and his fingertips lost feeling but he remained unmolested by the cold. Head bowed in intermittent prayer, his only bother was her safety. His stalwart heart remained convinced of her return.

"I will see you again." She had declared and he believed her as though Andraste herself had decreed it prophesy.
"I will see you again." He whispered to no one.

**

The Herald woke in semi-darkness surprised that she woke at all. Gingerly, she tested her limbs from her toes to her neck waiting to see which broken appendage would condemn her to lay there immobile and alone until she froze to death. Aside from unfeeling toes, a sore back, and a collarbone that screamed whenever she moved it, she could walk. It hurt to breathe though, it hurt to think. When she got to her feet she left a healthy (or rather unhealthy) pool of blood on the ground tacky and dark.

Her bow lay under her, useless, the string snapped. Even if it was whole, she had no arrows to fire, her quiver emptied long ago during the fight with Corypheus. She thought to leave it, but it was Assan's bow, with her since the elf had passed it on when she died. She could no more leave the bow than she could leave herself behind. It took a full five minutes for her to bend, grab the bow, and get back to her feet.

Debris littered the cavern as she trudged through it, the evidence of the refugee's flight. She followed the trail thankful that the elevation inclined higher and higher, she could hear wind whistling, a low moaning hiss that sounded cold.

No.

That was no wind.

Four of them stood before her, wraiths, thin like the sharpest knives. She spat a glob of blood in disgust. To have faced down an arch demon and lived, to have escaped a darkspawn, only now to be killed where her body would never be found by the Fade's equivalent of cannon fodder galled her. Her only weapon was useless, her dagger was useless in her hands-- too injured to fight, to run, yet too fucking stubborn to go quietly.

She wielded her bow like a club and caved in the face of the first wraith who got too close. She swung with both arms uncaring of the blind, literal bone snapping pain of that fucking broken collarbone. They came for her, screaming. One drew back a clawed hand, her end, she raised her hands over her face and the anchor exploded in magical sparks. The demons screamed as they disintegrated, sucked up into the void of her magic. The cavern lay quiet, light ahead, the wind screamed.

True wind.

**

Hot fingertips slid across his temples and around the back of his head. The lyrium burning dry in his veins called to him, beckoning him close to madness. As the night dawned day with still no sign of her, pain scraped against his head like the flat of a knife slowly and slowly turning until the blade started to cut.

Dorian, Blackwall, and Iron Bull returned without her making Josephine anxious and Leliana dark.

“We have to move. We cannot stay here.” She argued.

“And you'd leave her behind?” Josephine almost shrieked, her frantic voice aggravating the throb in his temples.

“There may not be anyone to leave behind.” The spymaster remarked quietly. “I've had scouts following Bull's trail back and forth, they are combing the snow and have been for hours. They see
nothing, there is nothing to see.”

“Commander! Are you hearing this?”

“Aye.”

“And? Surely you…” Josephine looked hopefully at the Commander, convinced that whatever she thought his feelings were would not allow them to abandon her.

“Leliana is right.”

Josephine sputtered and Leliana looked on darkly. “Her last command to me was to protect the people. If…if she…is no more. I will honor that. We have sick and wounded, they cannot last out here.”

Josephine looked to be on the verge of tears.

“But…but she's…”

“But,” the Commander corrected. “I myself, will not leave until she is found.”

I will see you again.

**

She was made of pain—nerves rubbed raw conducting only electric shocks of agony down her spine. Her limbs were made of brick and her head swam in darkness. Her fur-lined coat and boots were not enough to keep out the cold. Her leather pants cracked and split in the wind, ice grew in her hair turning black locs white. They frothed pink at the roots where her blood and ice coagulated into a sticky ugly mess that would make Vivienne howl. She moved one foot at a time, taking hours to trudge feet. She kept her hands across her chest and tucked under her armpits shivering so hard, her broken bones jostled in her shoulders and chest.

Knee deep snow slowed her snail's pace to a crawl, a literal crawl where she clawed forward on hands and feet just to keep moving.

When the full of shit bards retell this story, far in the future where fact has eroded away in the face of time, they'll sing about how it was her love for the Templar that kept her moving. That he was the sole animus that kept her heart beating.

Again, don't trust the bards.

Survival moved her heavy limbs and nothing else. At this point mind rubbed raw with terror and pain-- she couldn't even recall her own name much less that of the pretty blonde man she saw whenever the snow got too thick to keep her eyes open.

Twice she tripped and lay there, snow blanket almost warm enough to sleep in. Twice she got up and kept moving.

**

The Commander convinced Sister Nightingale to wait another hour before herding their charges on. While he searched in the blizzard, the headache ravaged his brain, like acid pitting metal, it stung and burned, occasionally a sharp crack would thunder behind his eyeballs making his vision swim. He grit his teeth together, cursing its evil. Now, it choose to assail him, to weaken him at the absolute worst time.
“I will see you again,” he said out loud hoping the prayer would drive away the pain. It worked for only a little while.

**

She found the first camp empty and cold.

When she found the second camp, her heart started to hurt, bittersweet and sickly. She began to believe she would never see that pretty blonde man again. Cullen, Cullen was his name. Bent over the ashes of a quickly cooling fire, she knew she was close, but she also knew her body wouldn't make it. Her potions were exhausted long ago. She was no mage, and she was alone. Mind over matter can only get you so far. But she still had a little bit of mind left, still too scared of death to stop trying now, she staggered back to her feet thankful her knees hadn't given out on her yet.

Then they did.

Her knees just buckled and she fell. Falling back, she came to rest sitting on her ankles, like a woman before a headsman's sword.

'I will not die silently.' She though. 'I will not die at rest.'

I will see him again.

She sucked in the deepest breath broken rib and raw throat would allow. She held it for the briefest of seconds before releasing it in the loudest yell her body could muster.

Her death wail.

“Herald!”

She saw red, from the blood in her eyes and the figure wreathed in red that came running to her. A prince. Minus the white horse.

He heard her bellow and had come running.

The Commander moved through the snow as though there was no obstruction as though the lyrium were no more than an itch in the back of his head. She was on her knees, eyes open and focus-less but he could still see so very tiny puffs of air coming from her nose and mouth.

Alive. Maker bless the world, she lived.

She looked frightening. Hair white with snow crusted pink with icy blood. Blood on her face, trickling from her nose and ears and frozen to her skin. He popped the cork on a potion.

“Here, drink this.” he whispered tilting the flask to her lips urging her to drink though it spilled more down her mouth than he'd like and it wasn't enough. It could perhaps stave off immediate death, but she was still dire. He ripped off his cloak and wrapped it around her taking her up in his arms resting her forehead in the crook of his neck desperate to impart as much of his warmth to her as he could.

Thankful he found her, the Commander still had to get her back to the mages wishing he was one himself so he could heal her.

The thought came easily and unbidden, as natural as breathing.

It would have been worth living a mage's life at the Gallows to be able to take away her pain now.
So cold she didn't shiver, so hurt she didn't moan. She lay there in his arms, the life driven from her.

“Stay with me, stay with me please!” he urged as he ran through the snow. “Talk to me, tell me your favorite color.”

The potion restored some of her senses, feeling returned to the parts of her body not already too damaged. The blonde man saved her...Cullen, Cullen she remembered. His name was Cullen. He was the Commander of Inquisition forces, and she was what they called the Herald of Andraste. Slowly, lucidity returned to her aided greatly by the man in who's arms she lay.

“Gold.” she answered breathlessly.

“Gold. A good color.” He had to keep her talking, keep her awake. If she slipped into darkness now, she might never come back. She had kept her end of the bargain, she had come back to see him again, now it was time to fulfill his. Protect her.

“Your brother. What is your brother's name?”

“I have three.”

“Alphy, tell me about Alphy. Tell me about Assan. Tell me about your family.”

“Alphy...not yet...not.” Her head lolled back and a pain so fierce it struck him blind crippled him. He almost dropped her as he stumbled in the snow.

“No!” He cried out. “You will not take me! You will not take her!” He regained his footing, locking her in a vice like grip. The camp was in sight now a small black dot against the whiteness.

“Herald, my lady...Evelyn please.” Her head lolled back, neck bouncing limply with every stride.

“Evelyn!”

She snapped up, reanimated.

'Happy thoughts...happy thoughts might keep her.' He thought. “Tell me of the last time you kissed someone. What were they like?”

Pain blacked out large chunks of her memories save only the most important. Alphone's smile. Cousland's bark. Honey gold eyes.

Flesh trapped in red rock.

Sad honey gold eyes.

“You.” she said, unaware of her admission.

He kept running but his heart stopped cold. “I...I think I would remember such a thing.”


Someone from the camp let loose a shout. Men and women came running toward him Vivienne and Dorian out first their hands already glowing with the spells to save her.

He wanted to hold her, keep his grip upon her as they restored her but he let them carry her away while the others cheered and clapped him on the back in celebration. Shocked into silence, he moved through the well wishers looking for a place to sit and absorb the revelation.
He thought he was dead in that Redcliffe yet somehow, someway they kissed. He touched a gloved hand to his lips and wondered what a kiss from her felt like, wondered how future him had the privilege while current him could only sit and imagine.

**

She stayed conscious through the entire effort. Of Dorian complaining that he'd enjoy being rescued by the likes of the Commander while pressing healing spells to her broken shoulder while Vivienne lamented about her hair pressing warm wet cloths to her scalp to remove the blood.

“Not the time...” she slurred as the pain ebbed away. “I need a report. How many are lost?”

In the end, to make her sleep, they had to put her to sleep. And damned if she didn't stay sleep for long.

The Herald was never comfortable with being called 'Herald' and so was even less comfortable with the spontaneous adoration of song. It tasted like a lie in her throat. She didn't believe she was Andraste's chosen, just really really lucky as she told Mother Giselle. They shouldn't look to her as an agent of the prophetess, bestowing upon her faith she really couldn't bear, was unworthy of. She stared ahead, unable to look at her feet and unable to look anyone else in the eye.

But her eyes picked him out of the crowd by the his curly blond hair and red cloak he had somehow gotten back from her.

He sang to her too.

Suddenly it didn't feel so bad.
Solas told her of Skyhold, and she led them there because...well if they're going to fucking sing to her and bring their souls within a hair's breadth of idolatry she's gotta earn that right? Make it worth it.

She insisted on leading the caravan of refugees to their new home. The mages had healed her as best they could, taking away her injuries but leaving her with illness. Exhaustion leeched into her bones, and though she took great pains to hide it, she could never keep down her food such as it was, and whatever she didn't eat, she gave to the starving frozen peasants and soldiers who followed her. It took them a week to lead them all to Skyhold, and the Commander watched her day by day get weaker and weaker overcome by the burden of her title and her inability to rest when the people needed her.

"My lady, there's an empty space on one of the carts if you'd like to rest for a while."

"Thank you Commander, but save the space for one of the injured." The Commander had been awed to see her set one of his injured soldiers on her personal mount. Jackson protested but after a few short words that sounded like more of her vile curses, the animal bore his charge quietly.

"I'll bloody take it! My poor feet are frozen and exhausted. Though I'd take the offer were I hale and hearty if it meant riding next to you Commander." Dorian, the mage who flirted when he was miserable...and just about every other emotion.

No stranger to his advances Cullen brushed him aside gently. "I prefer to stay with the Herald."

"Yeah we..." Iron Bull pelted the mage with a snowball to the face, cutting off his speech.

"Haha! Bull's eye!" The qunari shouted, then laughed harder realizing his pun.

"Cry havoc!" Dorian screamed as icy water dripped down his face and neck. "I shall win glory for the Imperium here and now by vanquishing these Seheron heretics." Dorian magically armed himself summoning thirty or so perfectly spherical snowballs before launching them at Bull. Some of them, though, did not hit Bull.

Some of them hit Vivienne.

"Ahh, my sincerest apologies First Enchanter do allow me to..."

With a frustrated shout and a sweep of her arms, Vivienne upset a sheath of snow from the ground and used it to bury Dorian up to his waist, trapping him and getting snow down his robes and smallclothes.

He screamed like a child.

"Cold! Cold!"

The magical snowball fight continued as they walked, the children, and the soldiers joining in laughing and screaming, a moment of joy stolen in the darkness. Evelyn sighed, feeling some weight on her relieved. The people would be alright, they could recover from this. Her failure still
stung like a poisoned wound, it festered, but seeing her charges now like this, she would heal.

Cullen kept his vigil by the Herald watching the hard expression on her face soften by some silent, unheard revelation. It warmed him. When she began to laugh, he warmed further. Her laugh though, turned into a wet phlegmy cough that shook her to her knees and made her spit up a small glob of blood.

She waved him off before he could shout for a healer.

"I'm fine, just the dry air. Just a little sick."

"My lady you really should rest."

"Please stop calling me that."

"I err... forgive me Lady Trevelyan. I was too forward."

"No...oh fuck...no I mean, you don't have to be so...B, you can call me B."

"Like BB, from the letter?"

"Yeah, like that."

Another convulsion of coughs overcame her. "My lady...B, please let me help you." His arms were around her, rising her back to her feet. She closed her eyes and let herself swoon against him for a brief stolen moment of weakness recalling what he felt like when he held her in the snowstorm. He crafted a shell around them, tucking her forehead into the crook of his neck, his cloak billowing around her in the blowing, snapping winds. She had never been so cold in all her life, but in his arms, she had never been warmer.

Cullen was content to let her lean against him, glad that her sense of self-preservation had finally overcome her pride. He circled his arms around her under the flimsy pretense of keeping her upright. Even in a blizzard, trudging through feet of snow and ice, she still smelled of warm summer breezes spicy and sweet, and he felt distinct loss when she pushed away from him; donning her stony mask of command.

"Thank you Commander."

"If I'm to call you B, you must call me Cullen."

"Thank you, Cullen. I can't," she coughed wiping her mouth. "I can't let them see me fall. Not now."

She walked on ahead of them, past the shrieks and shouts of the moving snowball fight. She stood at the head of the caravan alone, eyes forward, hair flapping in the bitter wind. She stumbled in the snow.

He was the only one who saw.

**

The first night in Skyhold's bones, they slept in tents as they had in Haven. She maneuvered to get her tent as close to the Commander's...Cullen's as she could...and being the Herald, minor requests like that were usually granted.

Cassandra came to visit her, armed with an uneasy smile and a tray of food.
"Lady Trevelyan, may I come in?"

The Herald nodded with a cough.

"I've brought you some food, soup and tea. I know you haven't been eating well and giving your rations to others."

"Have ya seen Bull?" She joked. "Do you know how much that fucker needs to eat to stay on his feet? He prolly requires at least two full hogs and a bushel of wheat in the form of ale every day just to function normally."

Cassandra smirked, the Seeker was at first largely put off by the Herald's penchant for swears and blasphemy, but now it grew on her.

"Still, you are unwell, and you must eat."

"Thank you Seeker Pentaghast." The Herald gratefully took the offered food and consumed it in little tentative bites, not wanting to waste it if she had to throw it all back up again.

"It is I who should thank you, and apologize. We have not been on the best of terms, I said some things I should not have. I thought you were a spoiled rich brat, you are none of those things."

"Right, I'm only moderately rich. And then that money's not mine."

"Quite." Cassandra smiled. "I accused you of not taking this seriously. Through your actions at Haven, I understand that you are."

"Yeah, I am. I wanna get this blighted thing off my hand and go...end this. You were just trying to do your job Cassandra and y'all have been helpful, the Inquisition ain't just me, it's all of us. You and Cullen and Josie and the rest. I'm confident that if something ever happened to me, you would take care of it in my place."

"On that, you have my word. Though I pray you will continue to hold your position."

"None too eager to have my job, Seeker?"

"No, I simply believe you are the best for it. You inspire the people."

Evelyn snorted, the sound getting choked up in a nasty glob of snot. "If only they could see me now, nose dripping and unable to keep down anything thicker than water. We'll see how much I inspire then."

"Even then, some would still follow you to the ends of the Thedas and back. I would."

"I, thank you Cassandra. I could hope for no better ally."

Seeker Pentaghast blushed with the complement before presenting to the Herald a thick paperback book. "It will be a while before we're operational again. I have brought you something to pass the idle hours while you regain your strength."

"Forbidden Lo...mages and templars? Really? Ain't that a little played out at this point?"

Cassandra smirked. "What would you prefer then? Templars and rogues perhaps?"

The Seeker heard the Herald's sharp intake of breath.
"I will see what I can find."

**

Knowing no better way to knock on a tent flap, Dorian just grabbed the folded edge and shook it, jingling the buckles that were used to tie it closed.

"Commander, have you some time?"

"Come in."

The Commander's tent was cramped, stuffed with an armor rack, a sword rack, and shield rack and writing desk and chair covered in missives read and unread.

"Master Pavus, what can I do for you?"

The mage's dark eyebrows shot up his forehead and into his hairline. But a set up like that, while unendingly tempting, was just too easy and too crass to take advantage of.

"That's too easy, even for me."

"If you've come to flirt with me I must..."

Dorian waved a hand. "Commander Rutherford, I am nothing if not a conditional creature. Am I me? Yes? Then I am flirting. I always flirt, with everyone. And I know your proclivities; I just do it because it's fun. I came here because I heard you were a man of culture and breeding."

Cullen laughed nervously. "I don't know where you heard that."

"You play chess do you not?"

"Yes, avidly."

"Then you are a man of culture and breeding. Would you like to pass the time with a game?"

The two men were fairly evenly matched, yet whenever Cullen was up a game Dorian insisted they play again to even out the scores.

"You put up a spirited defense Dorian though I have yet again won..."

Dorian watched as the lion fell silent mid-sentence ears perking, listening.

Coughing, he heard her ragged, wet, painful, sounding cough.

"Ahh, most likely our Herald. Being out in the snow like that, she'll probably be ill for..."

"Excuse me," Cullen rose to attend to Lady Trevelyan.

"You can't leave in the middle of a game! Chess is a bloodsport in the Imperium I'll have you know. Men have died over lesser slights!"

Cullen returned a knocked over his king, the universal sign of defeat. "You win." He said simply before walking out.

Cullen arrived at her tent, (conveniently located next to his own, a boon granted by the Maker if there ever was one.), armed with tea and herbs for her cough.
"My la...B? B may I enter?"

She moaned and coughed again, hacking, nasty wheeze. Against all propriety, he entered, fully prepared to avert his eyes were she not decent. The brazier had burned out, leaving her tent cold. One of those times he wished he were a mage so he could light it instantly and warm her.

The brazier lit instantly.

Cullen spun around and found the Tevinter.

"Easy, easy, don't Tranquil me. Just offering help. Poor thing."

Cullen envied the easiness with which Dorian approached the Herald.

"Evelyn...Evelyn..."

She groaned, like old wood creaking. "What..."

"It's Dorian, you are very ill. The Commander and I are here to help you."

"Go away,"

"Now why on earth would we do that? Two eligible bachelors enjoying the company of a beautiful lady, how could we resist?"

"I look like shit, and I'll get y'all sick. Go away."

"Well don't you sound like the oddest little country girl?" Dorian asked, ignoring her.

"The Herald likes to tease my accent but her's is a drawl I've never heard before." Cullen teased.

Bleary eyes opened, looking angry, her face trying and failing exude fierceness and instead exuded only illness.

Dorian touched a hand to her face.

"Maker she's a furnace!"

Cullen placed a hand on her forehead then drew it back. "I'll get Madame de Fer, she needs a healer."

"At this hour? She'll burn your eyebrows off. Sit. I am a mage, she'll be fine with us."

Dorian cooled the palm of his hand, turning it icy white forming a magically dry but very cold piece of ice and handed it to the templar.

"What am I to do with this?"

"Hold her up, place it on her temple, keep her cool. I'll use my mana to sustain it."

"You should probably..."

"Me?" Dorian stalled for a proper excuse. The way the Commander clutched the Herald's body after emerging from the blizzard, there was no mistaking the feelings that lay buried there.

Plus, it was mischief and after Haven, they could all use a little bit more if it.
"I'll get cooties or something. You do it. I'll...yes I'll do this. There's soup here, it looks untouched. I'll warm it, and feed her. She needs to eat something."

The mage reached for the cold bowl of soup, spying a curious looking novel, already half way completed. *Daggers and Dangers: A Love Story.*

He put the bowl in his lap waggling his fingers heating up the soup.

"Ahh...Herald, I'm going to...ahh." While Cullen stammered, he awkwardly shifted and crawled and pulled her into him so that her back was to his chest, legs on either side of her. Too weak to move, Evelyn allowed his closeness, even with the brazier lit the cold fused to her bones and she shivered rattling her teeth.

He placed the magic ice to her forehead.

"I am not...a" A cough. "Child. Come near me with that spoon and I'll feather you both!"

"We're only trying to help my lady." The Commander admonished. "And I technically out rank you, so I'm making it an order."

"Ooh, I love it when they're feisty," Dorian giggled earning him a sharp foot in the ribs. "Be on your guard templar, she is unarmed though not helpless."

All three laughed. One started coughing again.

She did as was commanded and finished her bowl burping rather unprettily which sent Dorian into a disgusted fit.

"See? I would have tossed her out on her pretty little arse had she burped like that so close to me! Your manners are atrocious."

"I'll toss you out on your 'pretty little arse' if you don't quiet down so the lady may rest." The templar threatened, smirking.

"Well it's about time someone recognized the merits of my spectacular ass. Oh Maker, I may yet die happy."

She laughed again and this time didn't cough her lungs up.

"Thank you, both of you. You're both good friends."

"Good friends who only wish to see you well. You know you can ask for help from time-to-time."

Cullen's chest rumbled when he spoke a soothing vibration.

"And reveal I'm not divine? We'd lose half of our soldiers. Fuck that."

The Tevinter snorted with laughter.

Dorian's opinion of the Herald had only grown since their first encounter at Redcliffe. And though it had dipped slightly when she asked him to remain behind with her and possibly die while facing down an Archdemon, he could not deny she was a worthy friend to have. It felt good having someone else from a nobly born family around. Seeker Cassandra did count but her taste in literature was atrocious as well as her annoying habit of sneering at everything he said most likely because he was from the Imperium.
Lady Evelyn Trevelyan had all the grooming of a well mannered lady and was very much not a well mannered lady.

Like him.

Excepting the 'lady' part.

She shifted against Cullen, resting her head back on his shoulder grateful he wore no armor.

They passed the time trading tales, Dorian recounting a story of little importance and only half true. The Herald's eyes began to droop as she sank more and more into the Commander's arms. While one man talked and the other man held, she felt the safest she'd ever felt since leaving Ostwick. In a warm place with warmer friends she drifted off and away to sleep.

They looked supremely comfortable. Well she did, he looked ready to bolt at the movement of a shadow he was so nervous. But the templar looked as though he held a precious and fragile thing and, if Dorian thought about it hard enough, he was. So he left his teasing tongue behind his teeth and faked a tired yawn.

"Well, I'm beat. Commander, keep an eye on her temperature. If she gets back to normal, flick your wrist and it'll disappear. I'm actually proud of you, a templar holding magic in his hands for a full two hours and nobody got hurt or possessed."

Her even, deep breathing free of phlegmy rattles told him she slept. He looked Dorian in the eye.

"She's worth the risk."

Dorian smiled, genuinely pleased he had the opportunity to save the world, look devilishly good doing it, and watch a love story unfold right before his eyes.

'How interesting.' He thought.

"Goodnight Templar."

"Goodnight Dorian."

**

Cassandra came to collect the Herald in the morning. She found the Lady and the Lion as Dorian left them the night before, propped up against the back of the chair, the Herald in the Commander's arms, both smothered by furs. The ray of sunlight from the open tent woke Cullen who, to his credit, did not jump up with a start having been caught in an otherwise scandalous situation. Aware of the precious cargo still in his arms, he released her and placed her gently down on her pallet of furs.

"Not a word Seeker." He growled, face as red as his cloak.

"I don't know what you mean. I didn't see anything at all."

They let her sleep.

Chapter End Notes
I very much intend to stuff this with as many fluffy tropes as I can.
Why?
Reasons.
I am going to mess with the canon a little bit, playing with the timeline and other things which will come up later. I know this interaction doesn't happen for a long while yet in the game but indulge me.

Evelyn found him the next day playing chess with Dorian in an overgrown section of Skyhold's courtyards. They were ringed, semi-obscured with bushes and shrubs locked in the red orange glow of fall and she would have to step around the foliage in order for the pair to see them.

Yet she decided to keep her presence a secret and capitalize on a wonderful opportunity to stare.

He's perfect, she sighed realizing once and for all she'd lost the daily internal battle she waged within herself.

He's perfect, and you want him, and you can't help yourself. You want to make him smile the way he makes you smile when he calls you 'my lady.' You want to make him laugh, you want to bundle up everything that ever troubled him and carry it on your shoulders so he doesn't have to.

You want to make him sigh the way you do in your dreams.

But what happens when you go to him with your damn heart bleeding in your fucking hands and he says to you "I'm sorry but..."? And you'll hear his rejection in your ears yet again from all those years ago.

‘Mudskin...’

"He likes mud."

Evelyn bit her tongue to keep from screaming. Cole appeared as though he'd been chatting with her the entire time, peeking at her demurely from under the wide brim of his hat. Against just about everyone else's wishes and possibly her own better judgment, she let the spirit boy remain, citing Cole's assistance at the battle of Haven as good enough reason to keep him around.

She might possibly regret that decision now.

"Splishing, splashing, too cold to swim. He loves mud, stomps in it when no one watches. It reminds him of home."

"Are you talking about...?"

"Guts, kinked, coiled, knotted, just like your hair. Major, minor, major, minor. Keys of a piano. You want to make music with him. He'd let you."

"You can't do that to people Cole." She admonished him gently. "People's thoughts should be their own."

"But I want to help you."
"Thank you dear, but no."

Cole shimmered and began to fade away. "I will try."

Evelyn approached their game arriving just in time to see Dorian check Cullen's king.

Cullen dismissed the move. "Gloat all you like, this game is mine."

"Are you sassing me Commander? I didn't think you had it in you." Dorian flashed him a suggestive grin, reclining decadently in his chair.

"Why do I even..."

They heard her try to contain a snort of laughter behind her hand. Cullen shifted in his seat to stand as the lady approached.

"Leaving are you? Does this mean I won?"

"No no, don't leave on my account, I came to thank you, both of you, for what you did for me yesterday."

“Don’t thank me, my darling, thank the Commander. He was the one who put up with your snotting for the night.”

The strategist in him learned to recognize the sign of her blush in the absence of any redness. Her eyes flitted to the ground and she wrinkled her nose, pursing umber colored lips together in a small pout.

In a word, adorable.

“I did want to thank you especially Commander. You saved my life in that blizzard.”

“It was nothing. Really. I only wish that it never happened.”

“If there’s anything you need...please...” her words faltered, finding herself unable to finish any of her sentences trapped in his sunlight stare.

“How about a game?” He gestured to the chessboard.

Dorian hollered. "You can't just start a new game! I haven't won this one yet!"

Cullen smirked and gestured for the mage to continue. It was over in three very short turns that saw Dorian get increasingly petulant.

"Don't get smug Commander," Dorian leered offering his now vacant seat to the Herald. "There'll be no living with you."

Evelyn smiled eagerly as she sat across from Cullen. "Prepare the board Commander."

**

Maker’s balls. The woman was a consummate leader, a fierce fighter, and a terrifyingly beautiful woman but she was a garbage chess player. He counted no less than 8 times he could have ended the match but he kept moving his pieces lazily and aimlessly around the board prolonging the matchup and keeping her in his presence for that much longer.
"I used to play with my sister. She'd get this stuck up look whenever she won which was all the time. My brother and I practiced for weeks, the look on her face when I finally beat her..."

Cullen smiled, and Evelyn thought he was made of sunlight. A ray of golden sunshine only for her.

“Check?” She called, moving her bishop against his king.

“Aren’t you sure?” He smirked pulling at his scar and tempting her to lean over and lick his lips for him.

She checked the board again before smiling confidently. “Yes!”

“Then that’s checkmate, Herald.”

A smile cracked across her face in surprise. “You mean I actually won?”

He nodded, uncaring that he literally handed her the game if that was the reaction he received. She played fair unlike Dorian and Leliana so she deserved this little victory and so very much more.

"Well played my lady, we shall have to try again sometime."

Evelyn nodded before hastily excusing herself to find Dorian. She needed somebody to teach her how to actually play chess.

**

Her first official act as Inquisitor was to bury those who died during the flight from Haven to Skyhold. Eleven men, seven women, two children. Thirteen were human, three were elves. Four were dwarves. Twelve of the twenty were Inquisition soldiers, the rest were merchants or pilgrims. The three elves; a mother and her two sons-had come to Haven from Redcliffe to visit their father.

They arrived on the wrong day.

Cullen gave the eulogy for his soldiers while she stood next to him mute and stone faced-- a show of the Inquisitor's care for her people. She did not know these people in their life but she committed to memory their names, etching them on her heart as deep as she could mark, loathing herself because she knew, in time, she would still forget them.

The healers had fixed her, but she was not yet well. In the days after reaching Skyhold she worked constantly with the builders, the planners, the requisition officers, and her advisors hour after hour going over in painstaking detail the steps that needed to be taken to ensure Haven would never happen again.

No more names of the dead to never know and then forget.

Her incessant work did not allow her the time to recover fully from her injuries or her sickness, and in due time, it only aggravated them, worsening her.
Cullen heard her ragged coughing and wheezing as she worked through the night, and woke each morning to find her first on the makeshift practice field, the twang of her bow louder than birdsong. He approached her cautiously, they both had been run ragged since arriving at Skyhold and outside of that chess game they really hadn't had more time to sit, talk, and maybe decompress about what happened. He remembered her blood slurred confession about being the last man she kissed. The thought gnawed at him with all the other things that gnawed at him; chief among them his lingering hunger for lyrium...and for her.

Her hay bale target stood pincushioned by her arrows though most of the shots weren't lethal.

"You could strike the wings off a fly then hit the body before it struck the dirt. You are off today." Cullen approached her trying and failing to smile like a normal person and not a lovestricken idiot.

The Inquisitor yanked the bowstring so far back the weapon itself came apart in splinters in her hand, the bowstring snapping violently, popping her in the face and aggravating her still tender collarbone. She clamped a hand over it and groaned annoyed.

"Rrrgh! Stupid fucking bow, cheap piece of nugshit. I'm fine." She spit harshly before devolving into a fit of coughs.

Angry, frustrated, sick, and tired, there wasn't a positive emotion should ascribe to herself.

"I don't think you're fine at all, and you haven't been for quite some time."

She smiled weakly at the Commander, his voice the only soothing thing she'd heard in a long while.

"Is it that bad?" She winced again, her shoulder burning.

"Well I've never seen you be so angry you snapped a bow in half."

"My real one is destroyed, and I have to keep practicing to rebuild strength in my fucked up arm."
A flush crept up Cullen's neck. "I might have something that could help."

**

"How the shit did you get your quarters before I get mine?" He opened the door to his newly appointed office. It only contained a desk and a chair but pretty soon he would fill it with some bookcases and other trappings to cozy it up a bit.

"The builders thought you deserved something special, so yours will take a while longer."

She clicked her tongue. "They just like you more than me. Perhaps they find you better looking?"

Maker's bloody fuck, had she really said that out loud?

He noticed. He still blushed a little bit, but he noticed. Both, at times, could be horrendous at flirty small talk--like that time she asked about templars taking a vow of chastity and he almost choked to death on air, or the time he asked whether or not she preferred the company of beats to men.

She had blinked at him, mouth screwed up in an unreadable expression.

"Err...I mean like as a companion."

She blinked again.

"Maker's breath woman, you know what I meant!"

She had replied by saying she preferred animals for some tasks but other things "Just require a man's touch."

The thought kept him up for a week.
"It's where I sleep." He answered gesturing for her to sit.

"You gotta climb a ladder to get to bed? Wouldn't that ruin the mood?"

Cullen rummaged through his desk, "Ruin what mood?"

"Well say you had a lady friend and... you want to carry her to bed. Wouldn't a ladder impede that?"

The templar produced a jar of greenish white paste that smelled minty.

"I am very strong." Maker, he didn't mean to make it sound so...suggestive. "Here, take off your shirt."

She gawked at him, eyes wider than the moon. He waggled the poultice in front of her face. "Why does everything with you..."

"With me what?"

"Never mind. Please remove only half of your shirt...the top half....your shoulder woman, show me your blighted shoulder."

Giggling at his adorable frustration--while insufficiently hiding the sudden spike in her body temperature--she removed her jacket and pulled down the tunic under it so her skin from her neck to the curve of her shoulder was exposed.

Removing his gloves, the commander dipped two fingers in the salve and dropped a dollop on the stuff on her tender shoulder.

He'd touched her skin before, way back at Haven after her wolf hunt and disastrous near fight with Cassandra. The experience was not new to him, though he still tingled at the thought of placing gentle fingers on her soft, dark skin.
A cooling heated sensation spread from his fingertips up and down the length of the newly knitted bone and tender muscle, she felt instantly relieved though unsure if it was the medicine or his touch.

"What kind of apostasy is this? It's wonderful."

"No magic, just a recipe from a friend. Good for burns, sore muscles, broken bones. Sometimes, after what templars had seen in the harrowing chambers, we didn't want any magic touching us, so she came up with this to help us."

"She?"

"Yes. Her name was Amell. Good friend." He applied a little more, his honeyed eyes distant in the memory. "She died when Kinloch fell apart."

"She sounds special."

Cullen turned his gaze back to her and she lost herself in his gold. "She was. It was rough to lose her."

Amell was special. His first love. And she died while he sat trapped and powerless. By Andraste's sword, he won't let that happen again. Amel was special. Evelyn was special. Cullen would not lose another heart to war's madness.

"Have you lost someone special like that?" He asked. The ointment had long since been rubbed into her skin but he still kept making little circles across the bone, forgetting everything except the intensity of her stare and the sadness in her eyes.

"Yes." Her mouth dried up, tongue thickening into uselessness. That man had left her raw and fearful, terrified of what she was feeling now. The slur dancing on the edges of her memory reminding her she was different, a specter of rejection that haunted her steps and stopped her from seizing Cullen and kissing the smile back into his face.

“Evelyn?” Her name brought her back from her shadowed memories.
"Sorry...I was just. How do you deal with it? Loosing people I mean. People rely on me for their very lives and I just feel so fucking torn up that I couldn't save them. And I know there will be more. How do you deal with it?"

He hummed, pleased that she would confide in him. He wanted to be her confidant, he wanted to be more but he'd settle for close friend. He'd settle for damn near anything if it meant he got to be so close.

He felt like a thief, stealing little moments like this, the chess game, that time in her tent. He hated his selfishness, she was not his to steal.

She could not be.

This was what Maferath must have felt like. Bound in service and love to someone he could rightfully never have, cursed to watch her sacrifice herself for people who would never love her half as much as he would.

"I don't think I have yet. You're never supposed to get used to it. But you, you need to stop punishing yourself. Allow yourself to rest and heal, you went through a lot to come back to us and then to lead us here."

"I made a promise. I keep those. Try to anyway."

“A promise?”

“To see you again.”

He rubbed more on than he needed to and he really didn't care. She was close, warm, smelling of summer and citrus though how he did not know. He focused his eyes on the task at hand avoiding her gaze, he might do something supremely stupid if he got trapped in her amber eyes.

"Would you be so kind to me if I were a mage?" She asked relishing the warmth and tender closeness.
There was a scratch on her cheek from where the bowstring snapped and bit her. He placed the tiniest bit of the paste on his thumb and swiped it across the scratch letting his touch linger there stroking her face.

"For you? You could be darkspawn."

They were so close, just a few inches forward and they'd be...

But a knock at the door interrupted both their desires, just mere seconds before it could be done. He coughed nervously while she re-adjusted her tunic and jacket.

She took a calming breath, and walked out as the report bearing scout walked in. "Thank you Commander, for everything." She said, unable to look him in the eye as she left.

She didn't see him again for three weeks.
The Inquisitor paced around the camp, ringing it with her steps staring at the stars, the moon the ground, the bottle of wine in her hands trying to look at something anything that wouldn’t turn into a pretty blonde man with honey colored eyes.

She fucked up another one. Another Maker given perfect opportunity to kiss him she let slip by. Though, to be fair, they had been interrupted as their breaths mingled over one another’s lips.

“Strapping young Templar problems?” Dorian asked reaching for the bottle in her hands, taking a swig before making a disgusted face.

“We really need better spirits if we’re going to be pining like this.”

Evelyn took the bottle back from him and took a pull. “We’re pining?”

“Well, what kind of gentleman would I be if I let you pine alone?”

Evelyn smiled, suddenly grateful for the mage’s company.

“So what is your particular hang up? You are clearly smitten with him, who wouldn’t be? And you aren’t the type to let something so trivial as boys trouble you, so…”

“Its different where you’re from. In Tevinter, everyone looks like you.”

“Well, excluding the help.”

Evelyn made an ugly face, they had discussed the politics of slavery in the Imperium and both had agreed to disagree for now.

“In Ostwick,” Evelyn sighed running her hands down her face and taking another long swallow of liquor that didn’t burn nearly hot enough as it slid down to her belly. “I loved him, I was prepared to marry him, he promised me the world. I gave him what he wanted, I gave him everything. Then he tells me ‘mudskins aren’t for marrying.'”

So many years later and it still hurt.

"Oh darling, did he really call you ‘mudskin'? I happen to find you a delightful shade of river silt, but really? Mudskin?"

“Love doesn’t come easy after something like that. If it comes at all.”

“No, I imagine it wouldn’t.”

They paced together around the camp in silence passing the bottle between them.

“Well, Inquisitor, let me ask you this. You wouldn’t care for him as much as you do if you thought he’d be the type to care. It’s different down here, you realize. One of the rare things the south gets right is their hang ups on more important things like the Blight and which ass should sit on which throne. And we all know he likes you far more than a Commander should like his Inquisitors.”
Evelyn sputtered mid swallow and gazed at Dorian with booze clouded, hope filled eyes.

“Dya think?” she slurred.

“Oh darling, you didn’t see him when dragged you out of that blizzard. He almost bit the Enchanter’s hand off when she reached to heal you.”

“It’s true!” Chimed a dainty voice that was supposed to be asleep.

She remembered first meeting him. His voice, the soft coolness of it...they way he called her 'my lady' the way hearing that made her feel. She fell in love with his voice before ever seeing his face, and Maker's fuck when she saw his face...

Cullen was sweet and strong like the cinnamon whiskey they once shared, as kind as his voice was tender. He saved her life, nursed her to health, he was the protector she never asked for but always needed.

The sunlight to her earth.

“Remind me again of your family motto.”

“Modest in Temper, Bold in Deed.”

“Well, you certainly aren’t ‘modest in temper’ but coins to croissants you are ‘bold in deed.’ It’s time for you to be bold, my darling, and snag yourself a lion.”

Skyhold grew more and more with each passing day, trains of pilgrims and would be soldiers, merchants and bards and nobles poured through the gates, some stayed, and others did not. But no matter how boisterous and bustling the keep was, when she was gone, it felt lonely.

She led the drinking games in the tavern at night and still woke to shout swear laced insults at archery practice in the morning. She argued with Josie and Leliana, she argued with him, her voice rising so loud sometimes they all put fingers in their ears, laughing at her at time hysterical insistence. When she judged the guilty, her back was so straight he always thought it would break in half. Her drawl was gone replaced with sharp iron. And she was always fair, never vindictive, and never murderous even when she should be.

Her presence filled the walls of Skyhold from the Undercroft to his lofty tower, and when she was gone, he was convinced the stones felt the loss the way his heart did.

Tonight the Chargers led the tavern in a rousing rendition of "The Bull and the Maiden Fair" a song coined after Iron Bull turned down one of the busty tavern servers. Cullen drank with his lieutenants keeping the conversation light and excused himself when they began to talk of their spouses or soon to be spouses, or spouses who didn't yet know they were spouses.

He sat in the quietest corner he could find, nursing his ale and thoughts of her.

"She does not make the headaches go away, but she makes them not bother him so much.”

Cullen started, tipping his glass splashing beer all over his fur mantle. Cole, the spirit boy, snapped into existence the same way light snaps when you open your eyes. First darkness and then light, only you don't notice seeing the light appear, it's just there. He didn't notice Cole appear, then suddenly he was sitting in front of him eying his beer stained cloak.
"You really have to get better about that."

"I am trying," he said sheepishly. "He prays for her every day she's gone. He knows she'll come back safely but it's a habit that makes him feel better. He misses her hair. He misses her cursing. He misses her life. He thinks she's made of life."

"When I said 'get better about that' I meant that not the random appearing acts." Cullen snorted.

"I am still trying." He answered hiding his gaunt face under the wide brim of his hat. "I want to help you. You hurt but in a funny sort of way."

"What are you talking about?"

"There is pain but it is good pain. I don't understand good pain."

"Just wait until you fall in love."

"That's the first time you've said that word out loud to anyone but yourself. Will you say it to her?"

"Cole..." he warned.

"Trying."

**

"Commander...Cullen...you got a minute to talk?" She barely had time to stable her hart before she sprinted off to the Commander's tower.

"I...Of course, would you like to take a walk?" He hadn't seen her since he almost kissed her and he wasn't letting her get away this time. He felt nauseous and nervous and drunk and wonderful. She indeed did not make the headaches go away, but Maker if she made the hurt worth it.

Together they walked out into the windy afternoon, sun high and bright shining benevolently down on the pair as though blessed.

"Nice weather we're having..." he commented and immediately regretted it. Suddenly, the Commander was very ready to pitch himself off the battlements and into the rocks below. 'You're a man, not a boy. She's a woman, not a child. Stop talking like you just bloody learned how.'

"What?" So wrapped up in her own anxiety and her desire to throw herself off the battlements, she hadn’t heard him.

"I was saying...ahh...was there something you wished to discuss?"

Oh, the weather. He was talking about the weather. "Not the weather..."

His face softened, warming into a secret smile she'd never seen before. She grew hot all over, her toes flexed in her boots, she wanted to run away and hide from that smile because it tore her utterly to pieces in the best kind of way.

"I often thought about what I would say in this sort of situation..."

She gulped and was convinced he heard it.

He heard it.
"So what's stopping you?"

Her dash up the steps ripped one of her vines from its messy bun, it swung freely on the side of her face. Gingerly, sweetly he grabbed it and tucked it behind her ear. The gesture would have been knee melting if the vine wasn't so thick it wouldn't stay. As soon as he let go, it popped loose to swing free again.

Maker take the reins.

He didn't understand how he could be confident in his movements as he drew closer to her yet so scared in his heart as his brain fought to find the right words to say.

"You're the Inquisitor, we're at war you..." Are the most wonderful creature the Maker put on this earth and I can't...I'm not... "I didn't think it was possible."

Her entire body sang with nervous energy, but she ruled her face, calming the nervous exhale that bubbled in the bottom of her throat as her tongue almost tripped and fell over what words to say next.

They had come so close so many times before one would think they enjoyed the hunt rather than the kill but as she closed the space between them her arrow was ready to fire, ready to sink into his heart and lodge there forever. A rather unfortunate metaphor considering but still...oddly appropriate. She wanted a lion like she had never wanted anything else in her whole life.

"And yet I'm still here."

"And so you are. It seems too much to ask...but I want to."

So close they almost touched. So close she thought she could smell the honey in his eyes. A hand pressed into her back, her eyes fluttered close.

"Commander!"

Maker. Take. The fucking. Reins!

"You wanted a copy of Sister Leilana's report."

They both turned to look at the scout with such a fury that if they were mages there'd be nothing left of him, not even ash.

"What!" Cullen growled rumbling like an actual lion, the sound was nigh unmistakable.

"Sister...Leliana's report you wanted it delivered without delay."

This poor bastard, he kept missing the hint.

Cullen summoned all the evil in his soul and channeled it into his eyes. Finally, blessedly for all their sakes, the poor man got the message.

"Or...to your office? Right."

Poor bastard (as would be his name whenever Cullen got done with him) scurried away, leaving them alone again. She spoke without thinking "If you need to..."

She shot snakes mid-strike, she could outmaneuver a full grown deer if she needed too, she had fought demons that literally appeared from the air and still, she had never seen a living thing move
Mouth and lip and tongue connected, they kissed right there in full view of all and sundry and she was too drunk on him to care. Eager and anxious he pressed into her demanding his tongue be let inside her mouth. She obliged him, like this, she would deny him nothing.

He heard her sharp, short moan and almost nothing else. She was sweeter than any wine, any lyrium. She sang in his blood as he kissed her and it was more wonderful than anything his imagination could conjure. She folded into him, bodies pressed close. Such a powerful woman and she melted at the grasp of his hands, it empowered him and weakened his bones all at the same time.

Reluctantly he pulled away and bold Cullen was replaced by his awkward cousin. “I'm sorry...that...that was nice.”

After a couple of heart stuttering seconds she found her voice. “I believe that was a kiss...but I can't be sure...it was such a blur.”

The hands at her back squeezed them closer again, He was softer this time, slower. He savored the taste of her, marking her flavors and textures down in the part of his mind that still functioned normally. He let his tongue linger over hers before pulling back to run across her teeth and taste her dark colored lips. It was agony to pull away again.

They stood, both trembling in each other's arms, both excited and scared and...

“I've wanted to do that far longer than I should admit.”

“I've wanted you to do that for far longer than I should admit. In fact, I bet I beat your time.”

He kissed her again, smiling into her lips. “Oh? How long?”

“Since the time you first called me 'my lady'.”

Cullen recalled the memory immediately as he could remember every moment with her with perfect clarity.

“That was the day I met you.”

She nodded. “It drove me crazy. Still does.”

“Is that why, on the way here...”

“Yes.”

“Why did you never say anything?”

“Believe me I tried.”

She pressed her forehead to his and together they rocked for a bit in the daylight just absorbing each other, breathing in one another, so glad and so relieved that the desires they harbored for so long had finally borne a sweet, sweet fruit.

“My report...” he said quietly.

“I know...I'll uhh...see you again right? This isn't a dream?”
He shook his head. “If it is, don’t wake me.”

With great, earth shattering strength he let her go, backing away from her smiling crookedly, his scar quirking at a weird angle.

She leaned casually against the battlements no longer so desirous of pitching herself off, instead leaning because he left her with the inability to stand straight. He surprised himself when he backed into the door, almost as though he didn't expect it to be there. His hand found the knob, he turned it, and with a stumble disappeared inside his office.

When the door clicked shut, she rose to stand, wobbling for just a little bit before jumping up in the air, whooping as though she’d landed an impossible shot. Now more than anything, she wanted to run. So she ran. She pitched herself forward and ran across the battlements narrowly avoiding the odd scout or two patrolling the walls. She hollered as she did so, the huntress' victory cry. The wind burned her eyes, her hair flew free, she wanted to fly, she felt like she could fly.

He made her fly.

After a heart bursting, leg aching run, she found herself in the library face to face with Dorian who looked confused at her disheveled state.

“Dorian. Help me.”

He tossed the book aside immediately, alarmed. “What happened? What did he say? Do you need me to beat him up? He's a templar but I think I can take him.”

She shook her head, her vines dancing with the movement. “No.”

“Are you sure? Bull could get some lumber and Varric could...”

She was smiling, so hard her eyes watered.

The mage quirked his lips in a smirk so twisted it hurt. He knew.

“Why do you need my help dear, you have everything...one you need.”

“Because I feel like I want to run and scream and...everything!” She scraped her nails through her hair. “I feel like if I tipped myself over this rail I could fly. I feel so scared I could vomit. I think I'm dying. Help me!”

“My dear, there is no cure for what you've got. There is no helping you either, you are on your own. But trust me. He'd be a fool to let you slip through his fingers.”

She felt manic, ready to jump out of her skin. She started to giggle and when she did she started to shake, when she started to shake she began to cry.

Dorian took her trembling form in his arms and hugged her like a brother would.

Like Alphy would.

“Maker please...I’ve been on my own for so long. I don't want to be alone anymore.”

**

He was ludicrously out of his mind if he thought after that, he'd be able to competently read a report. The words blurred and ran on the page reforming into the shape of her face, the light of her
smile. He touched the parchment thinking he could feel her skin on the paper. It was the lyrium he knew but for the first time ever, he welcomed the illusion.

He folded sister Leliana’s report, making a mental note to buy a drink for the scout who interrupted him, let him know there was no hard feelings and to also let him know if he breathed a word of what he saw to anyone he'd put him on latrine duty for the rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Like what you see? Leave a comment or a kudo!
He paced at the bottom of the stairs a sickly sweet feeling roiling in his stomach. His precious cargo lay wrapped in brown wrapping paper that he kept pressed to his back like a child trying to hide a forbidden thing.

She might not like it. She may not appreciate him taking the liberty. What if she prefers her other's better? He wracked his mind with every conceivable rejection she might have before sighing and coming to a stop right before her door.

Harrit arrived with it just in time. Together the two men spent weeks scrounging for the materials while Dagna flitted about the Undercroft with excitement over getting to test out her brand new runecrafting techniques. He was certain it wouldn't be finished in time for her departure from Skyhold. Her party planned to leave for the Fallow Mire tomorrow morning. It had come right on time.

Cullen swallowed and blew a nervous breath out through his nose. He had been consumed with thoughts of her since their kiss. (Which took place five days, seven hours... and judging by the bells 45 minutes ago.) And work kept them too far from each other to follow up on that first encounter. She passed shy smiles at him from across the War Table, casting furtive glances at Leliana to ensure she didn't see as the woman could deduce an entire life history from a look. Whenever the Inquisitor had a quick minute, she would pass through his office hoping to steal a few kisses but always found him occupied with scouts and rangers who were there so often she thought they lived under his desk.

Now with the mission to the Fallow Mire starting tomorrow, it would be a while before they could see each other again. He worried.

When she left him at Haven, she came back almost a corpse. Almost. He did not want her snatched from him like that again, and he could not go with her to ensure she remained safe and whole. He did not doubt her abilities, her miraculous survival at Haven was proof enough she was damned capable but still...every little bit...

He ran a finger over his gift satisfied that this would be enough.

**

"Fuck reports, bugger them in the ass. Don't being the Inquisitor mean that I have people to do this for me?" She asked herself hunched over her desk. She reached for her glass of wine hoping to use 'I was too drunk' as an excuse for when Josephine asked why she hadn't read and personally responded to the Duke du Farlon.

"He's an asshole Josie! I'm not getting involved with his fucking land disputes. I'm not!"

A knock at the door interrupted her indignant tirade.

"Whaja need?"

"Inquisitor...ahh B. It's me."

"Oh! Be right there!" She ran to her vanity and inspected her face hoping to find it suitable.

No.
It wasn't.

She never felt suitable.

Her hair lay loose, locs flying akimbo across her head from when she flipped it to keep them out of her eyes. She grabbed a leather cord and quickly wrapped it up in one of her spider leg buns sighing at a look that would make Vivienne curdle with second hand embarrassment. She slapped her face a few times to get the tired out of her eyes then she sat back at her desk crafting the illusion of hard work.

"Come in."

He climbed the steps to her room and whistled appreciatively. "At least you don't have a hole in your roof."

"I've offered to get it fixed for you, you know." She answered beaming at him. It'd been too long since they'd been alone. She rose from her desk and stepped to hug him.

He backed away quickly, as though he feared her touch.

"I.. I'm sorry. I just wanted a hug. I missed you. I'm sorry I didn't mean to..." The face she made when he pulled away could break the hearts of angels.

"I arrgh...no. I want to hug you but I can't...I mean not yet. I will hug you. Later. If you want me to. Maker, you make me foolish you know? I have a surprise for you, and I should have said that first."

She laughed, her nervousness abating. "Yeah, lead with that next time, I thought I stank or, you wanted to call it off or something..." She smiled. "I'm glad its neither...I mean I don't stink do I?"

"No, you don't."

"You sure? I mean I bathe regularly but I spend a lot of time in the woods and hunting and shit so you can tell me if I do...I won't be offended just mortified, but thankful you told me."

He chuckled softly, her ears buzzed. "No. you don't stink. Now. Your surprise. Close your eyes. No peeking."

She smirked closed her eyes and then popped one open when she heard him take a step close. "Hey no peeking!"

"Ok...ok." She closed her eyes in earnest.

"Hold out your hands palms up."

She complied.

Cullen placed the gift in her hands and stepped back waiting.

"Open." He commanded softly.

"You got me paper, I love paper." She joked.

"It's what's inside." He couldn't keep from smiling, excited to see her reaction. He was well rewarded.
She tore off the paper to the gift inside. "Oh Andraste's...I can't even curse at this. I know what this is...but it's...how could..."

A bow made of cherry wood restored to its original glory. Harrit wore away the grey buildup of age and abuse revealing the beautiful red color of the wood. The broken halves he sealed together, joining them in a hand grip made of pale silverite and embellished with vines and halla horns, a Dalish motif. The bowstring was made of druffalo hide, sturdy and strong, it hummed musically when she plucked it with her fingers.

"It looks as good as it did they day she gave it to me. I thought it was ruined and lost...Cullen how?"

"You saved the pieces, we saved the rest."

Tears came and welled in her eyes. Assan had given her this bow. Assan, the closet woman to a mother she had.

A green light flicked from within the handgrip, distracting her from the memories of her elven caretaker. "OK what's that? Assan's bow never glowed green before." She asked. Cullen stepped closer and took her in the hug he mistakenly denied her. He pressed his lips to her forehead and whispered against her dark earthen skin.

"I know better than to worry about you, you made a promise to see me again. I hold you to that. But I wish desperately that I could go with you, to ensure you're safe."

She planted kisses on the edge of his jaw, trailing up to ply at his lips, enjoying the texture of his skin and stubble. "That's sweet of you," she murmured. "But I save myself."

"You do. I know. I asked Dagna to put a healing rune there as extra insurance so that no matter what, some part of me can keep you free of hurt or harm. You missed your other gift..."

"Cullen there can't be any more than this...This is already amazing as it is."

He released her and unwrapped more of the paper revealing a single arrow fletched in feathers dyed red, the same red as his mantle. He handed her the missile.

"Also given so that some part of me will always be there to smite your enemies. There are several quiver-fulls in your supplies for your trip tomorrow. Ask one of the apprentices, they will get you more if you wish it."

Speechless, she reverently placed the arrow and bow down before leaping into his arms. "Thank you, thank you," she said between kisses to his face. "You're amazing. You're wonderful. I don't want to leave you but I'm too fucking excited to have my bow back. You have no idea what this means to me."

He exulted under her rain of kisses, relieved his gift had been well received. "You really like it?" He asked between her sweet onslaught.

"How could I not?"

"I don't know. I'm just so glad you do. I want you to come back to me." He held her there as her kisses slowed warming into something with a sensuous edge. She tried to keep the want out of her sighs against his hot and tender mouth but was no good for it. He returned her wants, humming pleasantly as his tongue swept across her own, their mouths sealed sweet embrace.
They seemed to come to the same realization at the same time, and lest they tumble too hard and too fast into something very much desired they pulled away, breathless and panting.

"Thank you," she said again.

"Think nothing of it...my lady." He took great pleasure in the tiny whine she sounded when he called her that. Glad to know he could have such an effect on her that she did on him.

Her heart ran marathons in her chest and her face burned with a pleasant heat. The gift was overwhelming almost literally as she locked her knees to keep them from trembling. She did not want to leave tomorrow, wishing instead to spend every waking second with him to feed off the manic high he gave her.

"It is late, you need your rest. I bid you goodnight." He said finally, bowing like the chevaliers of Orlais. He turned to leave.

Without thinking she rushed forward and gently grabbed his wrist. "Wait. Stay." She asked in a tiny voice unable to meet his eye. "It's very late, and cold outside. You can stay here...if you like I mean. You..ah you can have your own side of the bed. I got plenty of room, plenty of pillows..." She rambled, sounding stupid to herself.

Maker above he wanted to stay, wanted to hang caution and propriety and stay the night with her.

'You want her. So much you sweat for her. She just wants to sleep and you... She'll think you base. And...what if you...in the middle of the night...'

No. He wasn't ready for that yet.

"I am a terrible sleeper. I'd keep you awake." It wasn't a lie, but it still tasted sour.


"Sweeter ones to you."

The click of her shut door thundered in her chest like the clapper of a bell. She knew he wouldn't lie to her, that his reluctance to join her in a platonic cuddle off to sleep had more to do with the fact that if he did stay, she'd never leave the bed. Though still, the childish parts of her heart, working in tandem with her obsessive brain conspired to infect her with doubt.

'You are crazy for him, and he is the measured type. You will rush him away from you if you keep it up. '

Stupid fucking brain.

**

"Ahh Commander! Come to see me off!" Dorian teased as he tried to climb his way into the saddle. The horse chuffed, annoyed at yet again being stuck with the terrible rider from Tevinter. "Oh blow it out your ass you future glue jar."

"Don't be silly my dear, he's clearly come to see me." Vivienne said extending her hand to the Commander and demanding with that sweet death glare that he assist her onto her mount. "Would you be a dear and..."

Begrudgingly, he helped the lady onto her horse.
Bull laughed. "You all know he's not here to see any of us right?"

From their mounts, all three of them were in a good position to stare down the Commander trapping him in a prison of knowing glares.

So they knew.

"Are you harassing my Commander!" She was dressed in her coat and leathers, new bow strapped to her back, accessorized by a quiver full of red arrows.

"Only if you mean sexually." Dorian answered grinning at the new blush on Cullen's face.

"Of course not dear, perish the thought." The way she said perish and the way Vivienne accented the word with an eye dagger thrown his way, her message was loud and clear.

It made him smile to know they had her interests in their heart, gave him the security to know they would look out for her when he could not.

Vivienne and Bull exchanged glances and kicked their horses off toward the gate. Dorian tragically bounced after them, a terrible fucking rider.

"Pay them no mind, Commander." She said when they were gone from eyeshot. She brought her hart around, Jackson’s body blocking them from view of the rest of the yard. She took the opportunity to steal a kiss from his cheek but before she could pull away he grabbed her and stole several more from her mouth.

"Sleep well?" She asked.

"Not as good as I could have with company much to my regret." He said giving her a sincere look from his honey colored eyes.

"You don't have to apologize. I shouldn't have asked, I probably scared you off."

"I was indeed fearful."

"Afraid of me?"

Damnit Cullen why do you always get her to make that face!

"I meant me. But don't worry about it. It's my job to worry. About you. Be safe out there."

"I will not say I always am. But I will say I will see you again. And with this gift, I'll keep better too." She kissed him again before he released her.

She leapt up into her saddle and saluted the commander before whooping her hunting cry laughing as she did and kicking off Jackson into a fierce gallop, Bull and Vivienne following after.

Dorian, sneaky, duplicitous Dorian had circled the yard and come back around after the Inquisitor charged off and pulled his mount to a shaky halt in front of the Commander.

"We know.” Dorian said affecting the air of some dwarven Carta boss.

“So I gathered.”

“She can be subtle as smoke when she needs to kill or negotiate something but she's too in love with you to hide it from us."
Cullen flustered when Dorian dropped the 'L' word.

"Which brings me to my point. I don't like my family very much, but I like her. Like her enough to wish she was my blood sister instead of the pieces of shit I was born with. You break her heart Templar and I'll go to war with you."

"I'd rather be possessed by demons than hurt her." Cullen answered sharply, respecting Dorian's seriousness though unable to keep the smirk out of his face.

"Therefore you, Mage, keep her safe and bring her back to me or Tranquility will be the least of your worries."

"I knew I liked you. I have excellent taste in men." Dorian offered his hand to the Commander, and together they shook. An agreement sealed in friendship.

The Tevinter paused before riding off. “You know, if she finds out we had this discussion..."

Cullen grimaced. "She'd kill us both."
He hadn't even thought to ask if he could write her, he was so wrapped up in her. So when her first letter arrived buried at the bottom of a stack of missives the courier left behind, Cullen was inordinately surprised. He almost didn't notice it, mistaking it instead for a scrap of paper torn off from a larger piece. But when he turned it over, he found words scribbled on it. Small immaculate handwriting, unmistakably her.

Midday, and he still had hours of reports to read as well as drill instruction to oversee and his own sword practice to attend to. Before he could read the note, he placed it faced down on his desk, as a promise to read later when he could savor her words and let them comfort him in the small hours of twilight and dark when there was still much to do but no energy left to do them. He felt a tingle in his hands, an anxiousness. He didn't wish to wait, he wanted to read it now and consume what little sustenance of her he could after being left so long in her drought.

It did not matter she had only been gone a week.

Only a week.

For him, it felt like ages. Long, long, ages, eras and eons, a dearth of her, bereft of her.

He felt almost grief.

“You are being melodramatic.” He said to himself even as he opened the top drawer of his desk and placed the note inside as extra insurance against temptation.

He returned much much later than intended, intentionally working himself to exhaustion so he could earn the respite of a glass of wine and her letter. He racked his armor and climbed the ladder to his bed, glass and letter in his hand, wine bottle between his teeth.

Maker, she’s right. He thought. This is bloody inconvenient.

He slept in smalls only, so dressed, he fluffed his pillow, sat back against the headboard and finally
reached for the paper. Excitement tightened his chest. He literally waited all day for this. He turned the parchment over.

*I miss you.*

There was a long expanse of blank paper. In fact the letter itself consisted of that message at the top, a long empty gap and then at the bottom:

*I really fucking miss you.*

And that was it.

Cullen groaned in frustration, shaking his head and laughing foolishly to himself. All worked up over nothing, though he honestly didn't really know what to expect. He’d have to show her how to write a proper letter and bridge the gap of distance that separated them. Eight word messages just weren’t going to cut it, damnit.

The Commander could be elegant in his written word if the occasion required. After all, he had to coordinate forces far and wide and the ability to make his emotion known to those far flung soldiers ensured his orders were met with respectful action and not casual dismissal.

He downed his glass of wine, chuckling softly, and went back to his desk.

**

“I hate this place.” Dorian whined, pushing his fingers into his face to wring the water out of his mustache.

“Say it again 'vint. I'm sure the sky gives a shit about what you think.”

Vivienne rolled her eyes and kept quiet, her silent scorn enough to inform them all that this place was a piece of shit.
Soaked to the bone and mercilessly fucking cold she agreed, the Fallow Mire was an awful fucking place. But her soldiers were taken hostage here and damned if she was going to let someone fuck with her people. And, she got to meet an honest to goodness aavar. A shame they were sentient, she'd love a chance to hunt them.

“My dear,” Viv called in a clipped tight voice. “I think we should call it a night. The rain is too thick to continue on and there's something unspeakable lodged in my boots.”

“I could work that out for you if you like.” Bull teased, tone suggesting far more that what his words implied.

“I doubt you could reach that far.” She retorted, bending down to trace the long outline of her stylish boots from knee to ankle.

"Ouch," The Iron Bull winced and retreated from the line of conversation, knowing he had been outmatched.

“Ha!” Dorian laughed. “The mighty Bull, shot down again. You're honestly having no luck with the women of this campaign.”

“Maybe I should start looking at the men then. Got any suggestions Dorian?”

The way the qunari purred his name made the grin slid right off Dorian's face as though melted away in the rain.

Vivienne and Evelyn exchanged wide eyed humorous glances while Dorian uncharacteristically sputtered, looking for a witty comeback and finding nothing.

“Alright.” He held up his hands. “I'll admit when I'm bested.”

“Do that often?” Bull purred again as the four trudged on in the muck and rain.

“What?”
“Get bested.”

“Argh, Andraste's puckered ass!” Dorian threw his hands up in disgust and defeat and retreated from the qunari back into the relative safe company of the women.

“Not a word, you.” He grumbled, shooting Evelyn a withering glance

“Are you threatening her? When she has a templar wrapped around her little finger?” Vivienne smiled wryly. “You've got a fancy new bow and he was seen leaving your quarters the night before we left. I wonder what you were up to?”

“Nothing!” Bull hollered from the front. “Couldn't have, she isn't smiling hard enough. Or walking funny.”

“No no no!” The Inquisitor interjected. “I'm not letting you fuckers change the subject. Dorian. Wanna tell me what that was all about? Never seen you blush like that.”

“It was nothing, Bull just enjoys being crude. And you and I both know, I don't blush.”

“I'm just saying, Dorian,” Bull carried on. “You carry around this picture of the qunari in your mind. Like you see us as this forbidden, terrible thing, and you're inclined to do the forbidden.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about!” The Tevinter shot back.

“Viv...sounds like we need to give them some privacy, eh?” The other mage elbowed her in the ribs.

“Shush girl, this is good.”

“All I'm saying is, you ever want to explore that, my door's always open.” None of them could see his face but they could all hear the wicked smile in his voice.
"You are impossible! This is—“ Dorian blew out another exasperated groan.

"Good! I like that energy. Stoke those fires, big guy!"

The four of them argued back and forth and around again almost ignoring the Fade Rift that opened before them as they tried to find a dry space to sleep. The Inquisitor sealed the Rift almost singlehandedly as Bull and Dorian still bickered while Vivienne observed eagerly seemingly powered by all the sexual tension.

**

"No love, don't expose your knight like that."

After establishing camp and swallowing down meager meals, Dorian engaged Evelyn in their weekly chess practice. The mage punished the novice mistake by capturing the offending piece and placing her king in check. Evelyn groaned in despair. "This game is awful."

"Bite your blasphemous tongue! And anyway, you have improved dramatically. You might actually win against your Commander now."

"I've won against him before!" she cried defensively.

He answered her with a look.

"You mean he...?"

Dorian kept staring.

"Aww."

"Well, I'm turning in. You kids don't stay up too late!" Iron Bull yawned before heading to his tent and making a particular show of both winking at Dorian and leaving the flap on his tent pulled open. Both watched as the qunari shucked off his bracers and harness exposing miles and miles of
lickable muscles and scarred torso. And both turned away very quickly when he began to shimmy suggestively out of his pants.

"Vishante kaffas!" Dorian cursed.

"Uh huh." Evelyn agreed.

"So, ehh... what do you think?" Dorian asked, finally able to breathe when the tent swung closed.

"You're asking me?"

"Well yes, you're the only one with experience in these matters and yours is the only opinion worth a damn."

"Experience with?"

"Dating in the workplace."

Evelyn snorted. "Go for it. With the end of the world coming, you don't really have the time to second guess yourself or hesitate really."

"Yes, I can see it now." Dorian scoffed. "As I lay dying a final thought occurs to me: 'I really should have boned The Iron Bull when I had the chance.'"

"You laugh now but what if it's true?"

"Impossible."

"Why's that?"

"There's no way in the void you'd let me die. I'm too pretty. I'm too much fun, and I'm the only one
with the patience to teach your sorry little arse how to chess properly."

Dorian emphasized his point by declaring checkmate. Evelyn groaned again.

"Yet I suppose there is some merit to your suggestion to just 'go for it'. It would be a shame if we all die gloriously in combat before getting thoroughly stuffed."

“Shame indeed. And I bet Bull could do some pretty thorough stuffing.” She waggled her eyebrows at her friend who returned the waggle.

They set up another game. "I guess I might as well hammer home the final nail in my coffin." Dorian muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm from the Imperium, bedding the enemy would be the one last oil soaked log to throw upon the pyre of my disappointing life."

"Your family hates you too." She didn't ask it, rather she confirmed her long suspicions. "Is it for...?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry, my friend. It's a special kind of hurt when the people who are supposed to love you don't."

Dorian put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "That's why then, we must choose our own families, yes?"

Evelyn smiled.

**
She found a letter waiting for her on her bedroll when she retired to sleep, addressed to her in bold, blocky handwriting.

It was from Cullen.

She opened her letter, read the first few words then clutched it to her chest like something secret. She dressed for bed quickly, forgoing most of her usual routine, eager to devour the letter’s contents without delay.

_That's not how you write a letter._ He started, chastising her, she could almost hear the wry smirk in his voice.

_To my Beloved Huntress,_

Her face bloomed heat, like a fire put to dry kindling. She pursed her lips together to keep from smiling, but she pressed so damned hard her cheeks began to burn.

_Skyhold is an empty shell without you. When you are gone, it feels like you took all the light and heat and joy out of the world with you. My days are a merciless trudge through gray boredom, my only solace is the thought that another day suffered without you, is another day closer to your return. My nights stretch even longer, darkness looming without the radiant light of your smile._

Her heart thumped wildly in her chest. This was sappy as shit, sappier even than that book she borrowed from Cassandra.

A book that she secretly read cover to cover in the span of four days and did not have the courage to ask the Seeker if she had suggestions for more.

No, of course Varric didn't know her secret shame because if he did, the dwarf would pile books on her desk and she’d never leave her room.

And here, fucking right here, her boyfriend (Wow that's a pitiful word for what he is and lover sounds too sordid. They'd have to discuss this nomenclature issue upon her return.) is in real life giving her the same fix those books did.
Tailored personally to her.

Her life felt just a little too perfect right now. Time to die of happiness.

*Your memory is my sole comfort and I despair until I may see you again. My arms hang empty and listless without you to fill them, my heart is a lazy sluggish thing without you to quicken it. Please, please my lady, end my misery and return to me.*

*Forever Yours*

*Your Lion*

*P.S. That's how you write a letter. But seriously, I miss you as well. Next time try to give me a little more to work with okay?*

*Love*

*C*

She buried her face in her pillows and blankets and screamed like a little girl.

**Chapter End Notes**

Writer's block man...damn.
His brothers told him he'd hear singing, like the most beautiful song he'd ever hear in his life. More beautiful than any song or sigh from a lover, more beautiful than the laughter of the children you dream of but will never have. And it was, sweet Andraste, it was like the choirs of the Golden City had taken residence in his ears and sang the sweetest paeans all for him, only for him. This was what it meant to be a templar, he felt the shining light of the Maker surge through him, strengthening him. He heard the voice of his Lord singing sweetly to him "Well done, thy good and faithful servant".

When he struck down abominations he heard "Well done thy good and faithful servant."

When he tracked down escaped apostates and made them safe for the rest of mankind he heard "Well done thy good and faithful servant."

No matter what he did in his life of service to the Order, he heard the voices of his Lord and His host singing to him "Well done thy good and faithful servant."

As long as there was the singing, he could endure.

The singing was gone now, fled from him by his own choice. The songs weren't worth the chains, weren't worth the blood, the paranoia, or the hatred anymore. And the silence it left behind, thundered. A sick gasping sucking noise of dead and hollow quiet rang in his ears now bringing with it persistent pain like a drum corps' pounding instead of a choir's singing.

The lyrium kept the demons at bay, it's bright shining song enough to drive out that darkness. He no longer heard the voice of his Lord, and the demons howled.

Hissing, whispering, suggesting, conniving, bribing, and begging. They tempted him, pleaded with him, seducing him like a mage in the Fade on Harrowing day.

They terrified him. Sent him unholy visions and nightmares that used to be Amell's face twisted in the grimace of death but was now replaced by Evelyn's face twisted in the grimace of death and worse.

He felt the icy wind, heard the crunch of the snow under his boots.

He felt the blood slick on his frozen fingers.

He felt the weight in his arms, heavy, cold and dead.

Arms flopped, legs bounced as he ran, but his speed, his urgency didn't matter anymore.

She smelled of demon gore, dried blood, and flowers. She smelled of death. Her eyes, her beloved eyes that made him remember the light of his Maker had lost their glow. Light trapped in amber
transformed into just dull brown rocks that stared forward seeing nothing.

Most of the time, that was enough. Enough to break him into a sobbing, quivering mess of a man unworthy to even stand next to her let alone call himself the Commander of her army. He avoided her on those days, made excuses about paperwork or tiredness. It was the excuse he made when she asked him to stay right after giving her the bow.

It sickened him, made his stomach rot in his belly and his heart squeeze and squeeze until it could beat no more without pain.

He loathed himself.

"What would you have done?" The demons hissed.

"You found her half buried, her blood had turned the fucking snow pink! What would you have done if you didn't hear her? You saved her life by minutes only. WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?"

"How can you protect her like you are? You nearly dropped her, you were so weak. How will you feel when she comes back wrapped in a shroud because you. Weren't. Strong enough!"

Cullen moaned, tipping over his desk, slamming his forehead against the wood. That hurt more than the blinding pressure in his skull and for that, he was grateful.

"She doesn't need me to save her," he reasoned out loud. "She saves herself, she always has, she's never needed me."

But he needed her.

She stomped when she walked, she screamed and hollered and laughed. She sighed, and giggled when he held her, she moaned when he kissed her. She was riot of color, texture, and sound. Sound that drowned out the silence in his head, her noise kept the demons at bay.

Cullen dug through his neglected reports searching for her letter.

I miss you.

He could hear her voice in her letter, as though she were standing right there whispering to him in his ear.

It soothed him.

If only for a little while.

Then the hate returned.

And so he struggled, little by little, day by day some days better and some days worse.

And it was always worse when she was gone.

He cared for her too much to let her down. How could he expect to command her army, if he shook and shivered every other day? How could he love her, a woman like that, if he was reduced to this kind of weakness? How could he fight for her if he couldn't hold his sword straight? She deserved the best of him, she demanded the best of him. Every day she gave everything of herself to the Inquisition and to her friends, how could he give less? He could not live, not only as a Commander, but as a man, he could not live if his weakness led to her harm.
He prepared a mixture utterly disgusted at how his hands still remembered what to do as if he had never stopped—as if he ever could forget. Tiny glass—filled with blue he stared at the poison realizing this was right thing to do.

Right?

But worth it?

Was it worth it?

Worth him being chained to a substance that never truly loved him? Something that numbed him to the horrors he committed or let others commit.

He couldn't be that man anymore. He did not want to be. He knew she would not want him to be.

It was the panacea that absolved him of his crimes. Lyrium swallowed up his victims' faces, made him forget their screams.

And Maker take him, He. Must. Not. Forget!

Cullen smashed his fist against the desk upsetting the glass and its contents all over the floor. Blinding pain slashed across his forehead and his arms almost went slack like a puppet with cut strings, pain beyond what a mortal should endure sanely.

He summoned his control, breathing quickly until the tremor in his limbs reduced to an inconvenient shake. He replaced his tools, the glass, and the vial back in their box and flipped it closed. It went back into its drawer.

He called for a scout. Rylen, one of the good ones, one who heard his Commander fight his demons and had the courage and the sense to say nothing.

“Yes Commander.”

“When the Inquisitor returns, inform her I need to speak with her.”

Well done, thy good and faithful servant.

**

The landscape beyond his window, though caught somewhere between spring and summer, looked cold to him. He felt cold all over, weighed down with what he was about to do. The yellow fangs of a lion clinked together softly in his hands. He had removed her token with the intention of returning it to her.

He could no longer be her lion. Not the way he was now.

She brought the sun in with her when she walked through his door. She also brought a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“So, I figure we need to have a conversation about what I'm supposed to call you.” She clinked the glasses together. "Boyfriend is silly and lover is...sounds kind of sordid don't you think? I figure we settle the discussion over wine."

“No, no wine this time.” he answered softly.

“Oh, okay then. Next time.” She replied cheerfully with another smaller smile that did very well
but not enough to conceal her disappointment. "You're scout said you wanted to see me."

Cullen swallowed the cancerous, traitorous lump in his throat and it stuck, making his next words the hardest words he has ever had to speak. The Commander held up the token of his Lady's favor.

"I must return this to you."

Her heart froze and fell in her chest like a heavy stone tossed into a lake. Her ears burned and she felt like she was freezing and on fire all at once.

But she smiled.

"What are you talking about? That was a gift for you, it's yours, my lion."

"Don't," he hissed, sounding crueler than he meant to. "Don't call me that."

"What's this about Cullen?" She asked warily, feeling the world sink under her.

“I've spoken to Seeker Pentaghast about finding my replacement-- all that's left is to speak with you.”

"You're leaving." Evelyn deduced quickly.

"Yes."

"Well don't!" She snapped back quickly.

“I...” he faltered, knees giving out from under him as if they weren't there. Her hands were at his shoulders within heartbeats. There was strength in her arms, to hold him up was effortless.

"The lyrium. You know I haven't been taking it for months now, but I never meant for this to interfere...”

"Interfere? Like how?" She rose him back to his feet.

“Headaches, sleeplessness, nightmares...” he trailed off. “I am not fit to lead the Inquisition's forces. I am not at my best and as such I must leave.”

"Shit then, if that's the criteria of 'not being at ones best'. Y'all should have never made me Inquisitor.”

“For once in your life can you be serious about something?” He snapped angrily, annoyed with her flippant sarcasm.

“No you be serious! As in 'you can't fucking be seriously thinking about leaving us!'” A stab of guilt rent her in the chest. That 'us' meant 'her' and she fucking knew it. Her temper cooled quickly and Evelyn backed down apologetically.

“I'm sorry. Shit I'm so sorry. That was unworthy of me.” She let him go, stepped away, eyes firmly fixed on his bottom eyelid and unable to go higher. “Please...ahh say what you need to.”

Cullen eyed her warily, thrown off by her sudden bite of anger.

“You asked me once, what happened when Ferelden's Circle fell. It was taken over by abominations. The templars, my friends were slaughtered. They...tortured... me.”
Torture was too light a word, too delicate a sentiment for what was done to him, what he was made
to endure. And though his words were somewhat sanitized, Cullen could not hide the reality of his
experience from her eyes.

There was no mistaking his meaning. Her heart broke into ten thousand little pieces made smaller
because there was nothing she could do for him but provide a sympathetic ear and a strong
shoulder.

She was the blighted Inquisitor. The whole of Thedas looked to her for their salvation.

What good was she if she couldn’t save one man, one beloved man from his demons? Was there
even a way?

Possibly.

“I wasn't the same person after that, how could I be?” He continued. “But, I still wanted to serve so
I was sent to Kirkwall. I trusted my Knight Commander and for what. Kirkwall's Circle fell and the
city turned into a charnel house... What I did...what I was complicit in.”

He flexed his fingers inside his gloves, feeling the blood he spilled on them. Unclean and tainted.

"I don't want anything to do with that life anymore. The lyrium was apart of that life so I gave it up
too. At the cost of this." He made a vague gesture with his shaking hand. "But how many lives
depend on us? I promised myself I could not give any less to the Inquisition than I did the Chantry.
I should be taking it. I should be taking it! Tell me!” He demanded more than asked.

"No!" She fired back, too quickly.

Everything about him was wrong. He didn't sound right, he didn't stand right, his face lacked the
warmth she had come to identify as distinctly Cullen. His hands had a tremble about them,
something he tried to hide by moving them often, gesturing, gripping this pommel of his sword.
This is not right, how could she get him right?

Give her a demon, give her bandits, and she could fight.

Give her intractable lordlings and petty nobles, and she could negotiate, flirt, or swindle.

But she can't fight his nightmares, she had no weapon, tool, or magic.

Or...maybe she did.

"Then it would be better for all if I left and handled this on my own! I cannot be your Commander
if I can hardly hold myself together. I cannot...I cannot be with you if such things un-man me every
other day. It's better for you.”

"No!" she snarled. "You don't get to decide what's best for me, anymore than I can tell you what to
do about this. That's not for me to decide Cullen!"

"Then what would you have me do!? I can't very well leave and I can't stay either."

"Then take the damn lyrium!"

Were his knees not locked, he would have toppled over. After all he told her, after what he went
through, why would she say such a thing to him. Did she not hear him?

Did she not care?
Maker have mercy, this was too much to bear.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I...thought, I thought you'd understand. But I think I do. You need your Commander. This... This interferes with that. I am sorry to have burdened you with this.”

"You haven't burdened me with anything. I was only suggesting..."

“You don't understand!” he snarled. “It is a chain around the neck dragging you down and down into a hunger unbearable. Yes you are stronger and sharper, but you are consumed.”

"But you're hurting. I just want you to be okay. Alright?"

"No. You'd have me simple, easy, uncomplicated. A toy to play with." His eyes hardened into a cold stare that froze her soul when he looked at her.

"Cullen that's not what I'm saying at all." Panic spread through her chest blooming like blood on a white cloth.

"It doesn't matter, I understand your meaning."

“Cullen please, listen to me. I didn’t…”

“Listening to you would put me back in those chains! I won’t go back. I can’t.”

“Cullen wait, I…”

"Good day Inquisitor." The Commander returned to his desk, to his work, nerves rubbed so raw he didn't feel the throbbing pain in his entire body.

She stepped back again, there was a smile in her face but her eyes threatened tears.

*Don't let him see you break.*

With no more left to say, the Inquisitor, not Evelyn, but the Inquisitor turned from her Commander and left. Her necklace, her wine, and her heart left forgotten on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

#realtalk

Making a decision like that should never be up to the Inquisitor. Period.
She paced the floor of her quarters, hands twisted in cruel claws in her hair tearing at the scalp, ripping loose hairs out by the root. A fitting punishment it seemed enacted for her monstrous performance only minutes ago.

"There must be some sort of prize for fucking up something so wonderful so quickly," she muttered to herself.

She felt the old word crawl back into her flesh, lancing up and down her spine pulsing with the magic in her left hand. She felt the rejection and the hate, simmered in it until she boiled over. Cullen had never said that word to her, and she knew from the bottom of her heart she never would because it's different down here. But every baleful look from his golden eyes and the snarl in his voice took on the form of that hateful fucking slur. She felt it burn in her, taunting her.

"No!" she cried aloud, hissing as she tore at her head so sharply a thin loc came lose. She regarded the fallen soldier for a moment before tossing it into the fire, her scalp throbbing in the place where it used to hang.

It didn't hurt enough. Evelyn folded up in front of the fire and began to run her fingers through the thick overgrowth of her roots. Her hair hadn't been maintained in a good while and some of her vines had started to grow together as they did when left neglected. With a grip on the far side of sadistic, she began to pull apart her hair at the root satisfied by the ripping noises and burning discomfort that accompanied each freed vine.

"All I wanted to do was help."

Some help.

"But he himself said..."

It doesn't matter. He trusted you, and look what you did with it.

"I never wanted to hurt him. I don't want him to hurt at all."

One loc popped free with a little more pain than she could handle. She winced and let go of her hair.

"I don't want him to hurt." She repeated. "I just wanted to help him, any way that I can."

But she didn't know how.

And that paralyzed her more than anything else.

The people asked for food and she fed them, they asked for warmth and she provided. She could do
that, give her a hard, tangible goal and she could achieve it, as easy as hitting a target.

She was a good Inquisitor that way. She carried the problems of her people on her shoulders. Weights affixed to her soul that she bore because others could not.

And for Cullen, she'd carry his entire world.

But this was something far harder, far darker. Something she didn't know how to carry.

What would happen if she failed him? If she let him slip into the darkness that danced on the edges of his mind threatening to swallow him up? How could she fight something that existed wholly within his own mind if not by telling him to purge it with the only way she knew he could. With the lyrium?

The shortest distance between arrow and target is a straight line. Lyrium could be that line, evaporating his burdens, chasing them away like silence before a choir.

This wasn't about making him uncomplicated for her. And he was never meant to be her toy.

This was about ensuring the smile never faltered on his face, that his mind and his soul remained untroubled because that's what he deserved.

Because she loved him.

**

She gave him time before she approached him again. A week she spent dodging him, avoiding him, and keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the war table.

But for Cullen, the treachery of his body turned soon to treachery of his mind. Her avoidance, respectful distance, twisted into abandonment. He felt bereft, left twisting in cold winds that howled and cursed, and called her a demon, preying on the affections of his heart and sucking him dry.

He despaired.

And despair, with lyrium in the blood, turned to contempt.

Or tried to.

He put on the veneer of loathing, covering up his acute heartbreak.

Because even as betrayed as he felt, he loved her too much to hate her.

The knock at the door clawed him out of the murmuring shadows of his mind.

"Come in." He answered.

He actually fought the smile that bloomed unbidden on his face when she came in.

"Howya feelin'?" she asked, keeping her tone light, acting as though nothing had transpired between them spurring his anger further.

"I'm fine, nothing you need concern yourself with Inquisitor."

She winced at the invocation of her title instead of her name and she noticed her necklace, while no
longer on the floor, rested half buried under a stack of paperwork.

"Inquisitor, really?" she replied flatly.

"That is what you are." Cullen sniped back.

"Fine, call me what you like, but we need to talk."

"I am preparing a report for you; it'll be ready at the next war meeting."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then there is nothing to discuss."

The sound of his words amplified one thousand fold in his head, the last syllable morphing into the sound of a nest of snakes. He didn't want to talk anymore. It hurt to even talk.

"Cullen, please. You have to understand, I..."

"Just leave, Inquisitor." He cut her off, gritting his teeth.

She left, swallowing and choking on a sob as she fled.

_Inquisitor_, he reminded her. _That is what you are._

And Inquisitors do not sob.

**

The war meeting the next morning remained just as awkward. No familiarity, no warmth. They spoke in clipped tones edging on outright anger. Leliana and Josephine exchanged worried glances wondering how things could have rotted so quickly between them.

“Commander.” She barked.

That is what you are.

And you have to act like it.

Inquisitors do not suffer.

“Yes Inquisitor,” they locked eyes for the first time since the fight. Her amber orbs shimmered, glowed almost violently, like they were made of molten fire ready to immolate, destroy. And he thought them beautiful still.

“I think I'll leave for the Emerald Graves earlier than planned.”

“I will summon Dorian and...”

“No. Fetch,” she took a little vindictive glee in telling the Ferelden to fetch. “Seeker Cassandra, Madame de Fer and Sera. I'll take them. We'll leave in a few hours time.”

“As you command,” he replied coldly.

She left without saying goodbye, little pieces chipping away from her heart.

Inquisitors do not have hearts.
They do not break.

Evelyn's heart however...

**

No hissing whispers today. His mind was free and clear of headaches or hallucinations, so why in Maker's bleeding fuck could he not write a simple report?

Guilt perhaps.

Or maybe shame.

Deep rooted soul shuddering shame.

He'd been monstrous to her and she returned that cruelty with her own.

He shut his mind and heart off to her, locked himself away in his cage where the noise of her life could not penetrate and the whispers overcame him. He sneered at her, wanted to hate her for what she suggested. It was untenable.

So why?

Why did this hurt so fucking much? Why did this burn so fiercely in his body that it precluded normal functions? He hadn't eaten since yesterday and his sleep came in fitful snatches plagued with the worst nightmares.

He knew that taking lyrium was the wrong choice. He knew. Despite the pain, the memories, despite everything this sickness was doing to him, he knew in his heart that he was right and she was wrong. So wrong as to be sinister to even suggest that he...

"She feels dirty, mud on her skin."

"Cole." Cullen sighed; extracting the boy from his office would prove difficult if he didn't want to leave. "Why are you here?"

"Because you're hurting, and it's the bad kind this time."

"I don't want you meddling. This doesn't concern you."

Undeterred, Cole stood rocking on his heels in the periphery of his vision, running fingers over the dusty spines of the books on his bookcase.

"She shoots the arrow straight, that's all she knows how to do. She wants to help, but she can't shoot arrows inside the silence."

"Cole. Stop."

"Blue song fills the silence where she can't sing. She only wants to help."

"No."

It didn't matter to her whether or not he was leashed to his addiction so long as he was well. It didn't matter and yet it should have. She should care, care about his body, his soul, his memories, his freedom. He didn't want that life any more. He wanted to be free, he was determined to be free, damn what she thought. How could she love him and...
“Rrrgh!” Cullen bit his bottom lip until blood flowed easy and free. She doesn't love you!

"But she does. Evelyn came to tell you, but the Inquisitor got in the way. Because that was what she is."

Oh no.

Cullen tore away from his desk scattering paper and quill and ink. He wrenched open his door and ran, full tilt and in full armor toward the gates of Skyhold determined to reach her before she departed. Anger blinded him, hurt blinded him, made him unable to see the truth and the emotion that guided her words.

Only love.

She loved him.

Down the stairs taking three at a time. Across the practice field and through the market area. The horn blew. The Inquisitor departed, her name burned in the bottom of his throat but he held it back, panting uselessly, dejectedly as he saw the gates to the keep close behind her. She did not howl, her hart did not gallop.

She rode away in luckless silence.

**

“What in the Void do you mean she's gone?” Dorian snorted incredulously, spilling too much of his brandy down his face.

“She rode off with the women just a few hours ago.” Bull explained, chuckling at the mage's dishevelment.

“And she didn't bring us?”

“Guess not.”

“What was she thinking?”

“Might have something to do with the templar.”

“I'll pound his fucking face in.”

“I enjoy the imagery that vision creates.” Bull said though whether or not that was sarcasm or
sincerity, Dorian could not say.

“Now is not the time for your toothless teasing.” Dorian admonished narrowing his eyes.

“And why not?”

“Because we should be chasing after her!”

Bull shook his head. “Look nothing we can do about it. We gotta let them sort this shit out on their own. She's not gonna always have you to swoop in and save her.”

“Who's to say I can't!”

Bull's face morphed into a curious expression, unreadable.

“What?!” Dorian choked.

“You really care about her don't you?”

Dorian crossed his arms looking defensive. “Yeah, so, what concern is it of yours?”

“Easy, easy there tiger. It's just surprising is all.”

“Elaboration?”

“You just seemed the type to care only about yourself.”

“Oh I care about myself alright. Care about my hair, my robes, those sinful shoes Vivienne wears when she wants to look taller. I care about my staff. I greatly care about my staff.” Dorian flexed his eyebrows suggestively. A throwaway flirt, yet one he had to make. Pride and all that nonsense.
This time Bull choked on his drink, uncharacteristically flustered.

“He looks warm. It’s so cold down here.” Cole appeared, sitting casually next to Dorian as though he had been there the entire time. “It’s so cold in the south but he looks warm, like the only bit of true warmth here.”

Dorian and Iron Bull both reached for their drinks before taking long solid pulls of the liquor, both knowing and neither admitting that those thoughts could have come from either of them.

Chapter End Notes

Catch the shameless references and win nothing!
Thank you for your kind words and kudos.
The Emerald Graves were aptly named. Verdant foliage grew everywhere, thicker in some places than the roots of her hair. They bodies they accumulated didn't quite stretch that far, but still, a lot of graves for a lot of corpses.

Cassandra led, Vivienne followed closely behind. For this trip she abandoned her bow in favor of her knife play, one of her rustier traits she needed to re-hone. Sera brought up the rear, bow notched and ready. She chose daggers partly because there shouldn't be two archers in the group and Sera would whine incessantly if bumped down to dagger status. The other reason...it didn't feel right firing arrows to 'smite her enemies' when she felt like she herself should be the one smote.

Her and her allies swept through yet another camp of red templars, destroying all who opposed them. These were young, fresh recruits, and old long corrupted monstrosities. It was easy for the women to subdue the camp and the four of them made another pass through, picking off any stragglers.

The Inquisitor remembered the sound Cullen made when the arrow sunk into his chest. The wet thunk of it and the gurgling sound of blood choking up his airways. She tried to forget that sound now as another templar lay dying at her feet.

"Mercy, mercy please!"

The Inquisitor heard a low moaning whine. A man lay in the dirt, his templar armor stained red with gore though this one had not yet fully turned. His eyes were red, though he did not have the manic snarl of the others. His face was young, hopeful looking where it not for the blood. He was handsome, and blonde, eyes the color of slate but just as well;

They could have been the color of honey.

The boy raised a trembling arm to reach for her, crying as he did.

Dread washed over Evelyn, filling her lungs so that she could exhale nothing more than a panicked sob. She was on her knees in the mud with the man, pressing filthy hands into pulsing, bleeding wounds.

She clutched the young man, sat him up in her lap, uncaring that his injuries bled all over her. Injuries she most likely inflicted. He had no burns, no arrows, just violent slashes across his back and shoulder, where the armor didn't quite cover.

“Vivienne! To me! To me!” She hollered.

“You're...You're the...”

He sagged against her, life draining from him with every pulse of his weakening heart.

“No...no stay with me. What's your name?” Evelyn shook him back into uneasy consciousness.

“Aah...Ashford.” The boy answered as though unsure of his own name.
“Where are you from Ashford?”

“S...South Reach.”

“Tell me about your family Ser Ashford. Stay with me, tell me about them.”

“There's a woman, pretty and blonde.” Ashford wrenched his eyes shut willing himself to remember her name.

“Is that your mother? A wife? A sister?”

“I...I can't.” Ashford sobbed. “It burns everything. Burns everything away. And I'm still so thirsty...Mama...”

Madame de Fer finally appeared and her face registered shock. "C..Commander!...No not him. Maker's breath, they could be brothers."

"Help him Viv! Please!"

Sera and Cassandra arrived, weapons ready in case of ambush or trap. Instead it was just a man dying in the dirt crying for his mother.

“I know you.” He wiggled in Evelyn's grip. “You're the Herald of Andraste.”

"It's okay, it's okay. We've got you." The Herald answered, heart freezing when Vivienne shook her head.

"I am talented but not that talented."

Ashford sighed, his body loosening in the Inquisitor's grasp.

“It's just as well. I just...I just wanted to do good. But I don't want to be so thirsty anymore. You're an angel of mercy. You made the voices finally stop. Thank you, my lady.”

A man lay dying in her lap, a man she wounded unto death, killed with her own hands.

A man who just now thanked her for the mercy of her murder.

Maker keep my lady safe.

“Will you say the Chant with me? I... the words I can't.”

Evelyn shook her head, she felt the tears burn in her eyes but none fell. “Seeker Pentaghast...can you”

“N...no please. If Andraste's Herald...the Maker might...forgive me.”

You are the Inquisitor.

You must be what they need you to be.

She kissed his forehead and he sagged into her lap a look of utter contentment on his face.

“See..an angel.” He murmured as his eyes fluttered open and then closed. Thinking of no better way to save him, unknowing of anything better to do, they prayed.

“Blest...” he started hesitantly.
“Blessed,” she corrected gently.

He flashed her a bloody smile.

“Blessed are they who stood,”

“Stand.”

He paused, heart stuttering, mind trying and failing to find the next word.

“Before.” Andraste's Herald answered.

“The corrupt and wicked and do not falter.” He started to cough up pinkish tinged foam and more blood leaked from the corner of his mouth.

Evelyn, sensing the end, took over for him, whispering the words as the rest watched in observant silence. Even Sera stood quietly unwilling or unable to make a single sound.

“Blessed are the peacekeepers, champions of the just.
Blessed are the righteous.”

She squeezed him tighter at this, a reminder to the boy and his Maker that he was once more than this.

“Lights in the shadow.
In their blood the Maker's will is written.”

The man died somewhere in the middle.

**

When her soldiers arrived, the Inquisitor made it very clear that all the red templars would be given proper funerals.

And she attended to Ser Ashford herself.

“Will you personally see to every templar you kill?” Vivienne asked as they left her soldiers to finish their grim task.

“No.” Evelyn answered darkly.

“And you are aware that there will be more to kill, even today, yes?”

“Yes.”

“I will not gainsay your choices Inquisitor. You knew how I felt about the matter.” Vivienne continued. Sera and Cassandra were out ahead scouting for more templars to purge. “Yet you must always be aware of the cost.”

“I am aware. I knew what I was doing.”

“Quite. Then do not over concern yourself with what you've witnessed here. These men and women have become monsters, slaves to their baser desires. What you do for them now, is a kindness.”

*Red tears leaked from the corner of his eyes...*
Evelyn pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes to blot out the memory of Redcliffe. To erase that blighted dungeon, those sorrowful honey and red eyes that begged her to kill him.

She covered her face with her hands, ensuring to do it when Vivienne and the rest were too far ahead to notice.

“I’m such a fucking fool.” She cursed.

“Inky! We found more!” Sera shouted. “Come on! We need your knifey bits!”

**

"Inquisitor! Heed!” Cassandra shouted alerting her to the crystal behemoth that came crashing down on her head. She narrowly dodged its attack, slicing ineffectually at its rocky skin, chipping off bits of red rock instead of drawing blood. The rogue vaulted upward, one hand and her two feet finding purchase on the thing’s back. She climbed up to its shoulder before searching for any tender bit of flesh to sink her bladed fangs into. The red lyrium crystals burned her skin and hands like lye, she stabbed the beast quickly filleting its neck. The creature pitched forward dead.

Cassandra rooted her shield in the dirt, the wall on which the rest would break while Vivienne and Sera slung spells and arrows from safely behind. Discontent to hide behind a shield wall, the Inquisitor hopped over their defenses and into the open, a vulnerable target to attack. Another one, more human than crystal, screamed curses at her, calling her a demon and howling that her death would return sanity to the world.

"Try me then bitch." Evelyn snarled.

The Seeker watched while fending off her attackers as the Inquisitor let her blades drop for just a moment as she seemed to let the templar slash at her. Their leader ate one or two bites of sword before bringing her weapons back up and making quick easy work of the templar. She did it again with the next one.

The women cleared another the camp, the only injuries suffered were the Inquisitor's own. They returned to base where Vivienne had the task of healing a grumpy uncooperative Herald.

Cassandra paid a visit to her tent.

"If you insist on taking blows like that, wear heavier armor."

The huntress twisted out of Vivienne's reach whenever the Enchanter tried to place a restoration spell on her skin.

"I'm not bleeding, It's bandaged up. I'm fine."

"You will scar. Darling stop squirming."

"I earned these scars, leave them be."

"Vivienne, may I have a word with her?"

The Enchantress washed her hands of her temperamental charge and left the two women alone. The Herald examined the red marks on her abdomen, a clean strike, not too deep. They would scar nicely.
"You are smarter than this." Cassandra scolded. "Smarter than to let a weak attack like that harm you. You feigned helplessness. You let her hit you."

The Inquisitor shrugged. "I may have played with my prey a little."

"You are not this reckless. What has changed? Do you feel guilty about that templar?"

"Which one?" Her amber eyes met Cassandra's dark nutty ones. The Seeker was no fool.

"I take it you spoke with him?"

"Aye."

"And?"

Shame burned hot on her face. She turned her back to the Seeker.

"What did you tell him?" Cassandra pressed, grabbing the Herald by the shoulders and making her face her.

"To take it."

"You did what!"

Anger flashed like a lightning storm across Cassandra’s face and she began to finger the axe at her belt. "I cannot believe you would..."

"Do you intend to attack me Seeker Pentaghast?"

"I will not hurt you, much."

Both women seemed to consider the option for a moment. And given the events of the day, the Inquisitor wasn’t beyond ending it with a knock-down, drag-out fight with the angry Nevarran. It might actually help her sleep for a change. Something she hadn’t been able to do since leaving Skyhold.

"Put down your blade. I told him I was not equipped to help him make that decision. I also told him that I thought for all the pain and suffering he was going through, for all the memories that plagued him-- lyrium might be worth it."

Cassandra, clearly flustered, got up and began to pace in the tiny tent. "That's...you... You are supposed to care for him or did you forget that? As I've told you before, this isn't a game!"

"Let me finish Cassandra!

"He told me about what happened to him at Kinloch. About what the demons...did to him." She began to shake, out of rage or fear or abject sadness, she didn't know. "I had heard snippets of the story before some from him, some from others, but I never knew what actually happened. He told me about Kirkwall, the murdering in the streets, some of it he himself did. He told me about the nightmares, the headaches, the hallucinations, the pain."

She wiped her eyes with her nails, scratching against her face.

"For fucks sake, he nearly fainted in front of me! If lyrium kept his mind sharp and his body painless, if it allowed him a nights rest free of reliving his life's worst memories. Hell yeah, bring on the lyrium. I'd build him a fucking fountain full of the shit if it kept him safe and whole. Rest
assured Seeker,

The Inquisitor rose to her full height, eyes sharp, back straight a snarl curled in her dark lips. Fury burned in her whole form though Cassandra was not cowed. A long while ago, they almost came to blows but Cullen had averted that disaster. In the time between they grew from rivals to begrudging comrades to even friends, sometimes spending hours in silence reading Cass's novels and sighing dreamily.

In secret of course.

"Rest assured. I’d tear down the sky if it kept him safe. I’d make the Black City turn red for him, if it kept him well. So yes, lyrium seemed like the lesser of two evils."

Cassandra's mouth set into a sharp thin line. "Well, there is no doubting your heart at least and for that I am glad."

"Getting out here though, seeing these templars…It’s not worth it. That boy, he couldn’t even remember his mother’s name. He couldn’t remember the Chant of Light. I don’t want that for Cullen. I wouldn’t even wish that kind of shit on my worst enemies."

Cassandra nodded but remained silent.

"He was at Redcliffe, trapped in that red shit. He was in so much pain Cassandra. I tried to free him, dig him out with my fucking hands until my fingers burned and bled. It didn't work. I ended up killing him." She made the motion of drawing and firing her bow.

"But you didn't really kill him."

"No, I really did. I still see it, hear the arrow sink into his chest. I hear him pray for me as he died. I thought every decision I've made since then, takes me farther and farther away from that reality. If I keep making the right choices, I'll never end up in that dungeon. That he'll be spared that agony. But there he was, suffering the same way right in my face and I panicked."

Her tears dried up, sizzled away on a rage heated face.

"These poor templar bastards. I feel horrible killing them. I understand that his pain and his suffering is worth it to be free. These people--they don't have that choice anymore. The leash the Chantry dropped, Corypheus picked up with no other choice but to follow along. I didn't see that."

"Is he taking it?"

"No." Cassandra's rage abated and she sighed feeling very much relieved. “Though if he listened to me, he might have. And I'm disgusted with myself. Enough to pay for it with my pound of flesh."

She gestured to her new scars.

"Have you told him this? What you've told me now?"

"He'd probably burn the letter, he'd be right to."

"He needs to know. Tell him."

**

You said I needed to give you something better to work with. Here goes.
Cullen,

This isn't really the way we should have this conversation but I have to tell you now. I can't wait any longer or else the time and the distance between us will become un-crossable, even by words spoken to faces.

I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry.

You needed me, came to me for help and I did the opposite of help.

I was scared. I didn't know how to help you or if you even could be helped.

It's funny, you go on and on about protecting me and I go on and on about how I don't need it. And there I was, thinking I was protecting you from the pain and the nightmares by telling you to take it.

When you don't need it.

The lyrium or my protection.

It's a habit I guess. Wanting to watch out for you. I'd do anything for you honestly. I'd light earth and sky on fire if it meant you were safe and happy and healthy.

I understand if you burn this letter, if you don't read it and never speak to me again. I'll have earned that, and it'll be something I'll have to deal with.

But if you remember nothing else about me I need you to know I care about—fuck it, I love you.

I love you.

And I think I always have.

Love
Me

**

With the grim business of the Graves behind them, Evelyn thought it a good idea to maybe spend some relaxation time with her ladies-in-waiting as Vivienne liked to tease. But when such disparate personalities were gathered together, say on the order of:

Vivienne, the pomp and posh First Enchanter of the Montsimmard Circle;

Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast devout Andristian and the second most powerful lady in Skyhold;

Sera, the Red Jenny consummate thief, bandit, and mischief maker extraordinaire;

And Lady Evelyn Trevelyan Inquisitor and Herald of Andriste, the best huntress in all the Free Marches; it was more than a little daunting to arrange activities all four women could enjoy.

None of them hunted, not even Sera. Visiting Val Royeaux for a shopping and Spa day, while being the closest thing to returning to civilization for Vivienne, would bore the other three to tears. A day spent reading shmoopy love stories at a cafe in the Orlesian capital would pacify Cass and Lady Trevelyan. But Sera would most likely set the town on fire while Vivienne contemplated murder most foul against the author responsible for such literary trash.
"Mages and Templars?" she'd say scoffing. "Why it's only been done half a million times before."

And since no one could decide on something to do, and no one was offering better suggestions, Lady Trevelyan overruled them all and decided for them.

They'd go to a tavern and drink it dry.

"Vivienne, please, you will not die if you're forced to drink anything other than sparkling champagne."

"I know I won't die. And I've been forced to go without, subsisting on the swill you and Dorian seem so fond of. I'm no stranger to roughing it if roughing it is called for. All I'm saying dear, that if we're going to spend the money on a night out of drunken debauchery at least make the 'drunken' part worth drinking."

The tavern they came across on the way back to Skyhold didn't seem too 'rustic' to use Viv's words so the ladies found themselves nursing their preferred liquor of choice in four separate corners. Completely counter-intuitive to the whole bonding thing.

Cassandra chatted with a couple of travelling Chevaliers while Vivienne harried the bard to play something a little more rousing than “Once We Were”. Sera, however, took this rare moment of inattentiveness on the part of the Enchanter and the Seeker as an opportunity to molest Lady Trevelyan without their interference.

"So," The elf girl plopped down next to the Inquisitor, nearly upsetting her drink and the drinks of several other patrons at the bar. “You and Commander Scarface Tightass."

Evelyn rolled her eyes and sighed. It was only a matter of time before Sera's wildly inappropriate sexual comments arrow landed on her.

"Yeah?"

"You two ehh..." Sera made a crude gesture with her hands vaguely related to intercourse. Vaguely because the elf either wouldn't or couldn't make the appropriate symbols for the correct sexual organs involved and just ended up banging her hands together.

The Inquisitor ignored her and took a long swallow of her whiskey-- Fireblast--a spirit to recall better memories and forget worse ones.

"Zat a no?"

"That's a no."

Sera's face fell, like she was genuinely aggrieved to hear it. "Aww whyzat? You two are cute together, like a chocolate chip cookie. You're the chocolate, he's the chip--or the part that's the not chocolate. The part that's not so dark. I wonder what kind of cookies your babies would be called, bet they'd be pretty though, pretty enough to eat."

Lady Trevelyan rolled her eyes again, harder, pulling the muscles that kept her eyes in place.

"It looks different. You two... look different. Does it go all the way down?"

"Does what?" She groaned.

The warning tone in the Inquisitor's voice didn't seem to bother Sera. "Your color-- are you all the
way chocolate...”

"Sera! I am not chocolate!"

“I know, I was just, y’know curious. But really, you n’ Commander, I think you two are really good lookin' together. Baby cookies ’n all.”

Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was the fact this little nugget of comfort was coming from Sera of all creatures, but no matter the reason, Evelyn smile. The first of it’s kind since leaving the keep.

“Thank you, Sera.”

“Ahh no problem, but I got a ’nother question for ya.”

The older woman groaned. “What is it?”

“Your hair--down there-- you got a snakey bush or a bushy snake or...”

“SERA!” The Inquisitor swatted at the girl but Sera rolled backward out of the stool and fled giggling, peeking back at the Inquisitor and waving her fingers cheekily.

Lady Trevelyan groaned so hard she gave herself a sore throat and went back to her whiskey and back to her brooding. She sent her letter to Cullen long enough ago to have heard a reply by now. Maybe he did burn it, as she thought. The alcohol sloshed around madly in her head, allowing the bad memories to creep back into focus.

You remember the last time you told someone you loved them?

Don't you remember what they said back.

You really never learn girl.

"You know,” A wine soaked slur interrupted her self pity party. “I too have often wondered.”

A drunk elf, a man, sidled up to her with a wolfish grin and smelling like a still. "If your kind of shem-- I've seen a few-- never so dark before though-- if your kind of shem goes allaway down. And your hands. Different color inside and out. And your hair.”

Horror of horrors, the elf touched her hair, digging his nails into the roots until he scratched the scalp.

On pure alcohol inflamed instinct and out of sheer disgust, she balled a fist and punched the offender in the face.

Then she screamed because when he flew back, his fingernails snatched in the roots of her hair.

And that night, the four ladies learned one of the fundamental rules of a bar fight: One punch is enough to start a bar fight.

Maybe it was that particular bar, that particular night, or those particular people who were maybe looking for an excuse to brawl, but apropos of nothing fists and fingers started flying everywhere some landing on the party of heroines others landing elsewhere.

The brawl boiled over into the streets of the modest village, involving the smithy and a few Chantry lay sisters.
Then the guards came.

"Maker's fuzzy tits, the law-swords! Beat it!" Sera leapt off the back of the largish man she was beating on and charged for the back door.

Cassandra had to bodily haul Vivienne away from her opponent-- drink having made her shriek and scream the vilest swears; half of them recalled from the Inquisitor's own foul language, the other half fabricated entirely from her own imagination.

'Darkspawn's semen drenched leavings' was definitely something Lady Trevelyan was going to use the next time she ran into Corypheus.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I like being meta about the whole mages/templars thing. I'm trash, lemmie alone!
Seriously, don't let strange folks touch your hair.
Next up: The Reunion
He re-read that letter over and over and over again. When he was tired, he read it. When he was hurting, he read it. Happy, sad, hungover, no matter the occasion, he read her words over and over again extracting the very sound of her voice from the paper.

That last part in particular he paid special attention.

*I need you to know I care about. I love you.*

His mantra, his chant, his daily prayer. *I love you.*

More than he could ever hope for, more than he could ever pray for in his life, her love, she had given him unbidden, her heart laying there bleeding in the paper. He crushed it to him, held it tenderly, cherished it.

With a head and heart too full, his chess game suffered greatly. Dorian noticed and quirked his lips in a petulant pout.

"Commander, you are an excellent chess player. And if my insufferable ego will allow the admission, you are even better than me. Me! That inconvenient truth aside, this will be the fifth game I win against you. And while I'm more happy to give you a," Dorian leaned in close and Cullen rolled his eyes preparing for the innuendo "*sound thrashing* -- there! Look I have to do it at least once, my pride as a man wouldn't allow otherwise-- now where was I?-- Yes-- thrashing. It's no fun when you just let me win. How am I supposed to claim Imperium superious if you just let me win?"

"Heart's not in it." Cullen admitted.

"No I suspect your heart is in other places. Did you two quarrel?"

"Yes." Cullen admitted sheepishly. Seems as though there was more than one mind reader resident in Skyhold. And Cole had only left him alone when he deposited the spirit-boy in the barn with Blackwall and the family of rabbits that had nested in the hay.

"I warned you once what I'd do if you broke her heart."

"What makes you think it's broken or that I did it?"

"Because she left on her little trip with neither me nor Iron Bull, so obviously she didn't want anyone around her who would notice something amiss."

"She took Vivienne. The First Enchanter is a trusted confidant and friend." Cullen argued, crossing his arms defensively across his chest.
"Yes who also has the tact not to pry, a skill we do not have."

Sensing his defeat and finding no merit in obscuring the truth anyway, Cullen poured forth the story of the lyrium decision. He trusted the Tevinter enough to even reveal his past sins as a templar. Dorian listened amicably, offering little comment, asking questions for clarification and nothing else. It was the first time Cullen noticed that the man listened more than he spoke.

"And when she returns? What will you say to her? I hope you understand that her heart is not given so freely."

Cullen thought he had the answer to this, but when he opened his mouth to reply only silence came forth.

Dorain shook his head. "Well, I hope you find your tongue soon because your opportunity approaches."

"What?"

Dorian tapped his ear. "Listen."

The war horn blew again announcing the return of the Inquisitor. Cullen perked up instantly, so lost in thought he missed it the first time. He stood from their chess game almost upsetting the board and knocked over his king conceding an already lost game.

"Sorry, we'll finish another time!" Cullen ran off toward the gate.

"You both are utterly hopeless!" Dorian shouted after the templar before rising and chasing after him.

This he had to see.

**

Cole beheld the gangly limbed foal with awestruck wonder. Overnight, one of the mares had given birth and Blackwall invited the lad to come see the new life. Solas attended as well, observing the boy with his usual academic detachment but could not help the little smile on his face when Cole almost cried for his joy.

"Where did this come from?" Cole asked with a dreamy sigh.

Varric stood rocking on his heels nervously trying to find the most delicate way to explain to him the birds and the bees while Blackwall held out a bottle to the boy encouraging him to feed it.

The horns blew, the women had returned.

Three of the deadliest women in Thedas and the actual deadliest woman in Thedas rode in looking travel worn, dirty, and devastatingly beautiful.

Cullen arrived, huffing and panting just in time to see the Inquisitor gallop in rearing her hart in the air like a conquering hero.

"Good boy! Good boy!"

Riding never failed to invigorate her, gave her boundless energy and a secret compartmental joy. At Ostwick, whenever she needed to escape, she always hopped on the fastest creature on four legs and took off. Nothing could harm her and she was never more free.
That freedom shone in her smile, its light invaded him with warmth. Cullen watched her direct her hart to the stables where the others had gathered, he followed locking hesitant eyes with Seeker Cassandra who smirked and waved.

In the stables, she whispered something in Dalish to her steed when a calm yet hesitant voice interrupted her conversation.

"My lady..?"

Oh shit.

She hid her face on the other side of the animal's neck, pretending to not hear, and took two or three deep breaths. She knew this conversation was looming, had been dreading it ever since she sent that letter. She had thought of nothing, dreamed of nothing, but him. He was there now, standing awkwardly holding Jackson's reins.

The group gathered in the barn, while enchanted by Cole's wonderment of new life, most knew something much larger was at play here. Dorian elbowed Bull, instructing him to watch, while Cassandra and Vivienne stood in close conspiracy wondering what was to happen next. They all murmured, quietly enough to hear what was spoken, but not too quiet as silence at this point would alert the pair they were being watched.

Familiar nervousness bloomed red up from Cullen's chest to his neck and on to his face and ears. He had been in love with Amell, or what his younger mind had thought was love anyway. This, what he felt right now holding onto the reins of Evelyn’s mount for dear life as it was the only thing keeping him from flying away, was a feeling beyond anything he’d ever experienced. She was life, loud, noisy, stomping, roaring, screaming, beautiful life and he…Maker’s breath.

It was like their first kiss all over again. So much to say, to apologize for, to repeat and affirm. He coughed, hoping to rouse her attention.

On the other side of the hart, Lady Trevelyan pretended to whisper to the deer secretly steeling herself for whatever was to come. The fact that he was calling her 'my lady' was definitely a good sign, though how good, she didn't know. It could be just a final meal before the headman's axe fell, a final endearment from his lips to hold her as she possibly would never hear them again.

She didn't notice the lion's teeth around his neck again, right where he placed them the day she left. Right where they belonged.

You are the Inquisitor.

You can do this, you'll be alright.

No matter what happens.

She sat up, bending her body back so that she was once again upright. Her hair, always loose during a ride, shook gently, a waterfall of black vines framing a dark skinned face with eyes like amber glass.

All the beauty in the world burned jealously in her wake.

"Yes Commander?"

Eyes of gold, hair of gold, heart of gold. He was her gold.
He extended his hand to help her down.

"Allow me..." he offered.

She took his hand.

Somewhere in the background Cassandra croaked, a failed attempt to swallow a girlish sigh. Varric nodded approvingly making mental note of this for later. The bards will never sing of this in their bullshit songs. A reunion in the hay and shit of a stable didn't make for compelling storytelling as say a mountaintop would. But right then, when the Huntress took the hand of the Lion, the world changed, their story changed--a story to reverberate through the histories though not always accurately.

"There is pain here," Cole said as the foal in his lap sucked greedily at a bottle. "Went through a lot of pain and blood to get here." He petted the foal, stroking it tenderly, lovingly while casting glances at its tired mother, and to those beyond. "But...it is good pain. A loving pain. A pain not tradable for anything in the world or after. I did not understand a good pain. Now I do."

His hands were at her waist to help her down, she put hers on his shoulders, fisted in his mane to brace. They held each other's gaze as he eased her back to earth.

Dorian was beside himself, biting his lip and grumbling, about to explode and start shouting. Iron Bull placed a steady overly large hand on the mage's shoulder.

"Dorian, I appreciate what you're feeling right now." Bull whispered. "And you are probably about to blurt out what every last one of us is thinking. But if you ruin this moment with an outburst I swear I will throw you. Over. The wall."

Dorian cast a murderous glance at the qunari and promptly swallowed his inopportune exhortation for Cullen to just kiss her already.

He didn't.

Maker take the bloody reins.

"Will you walk with me?" He offered his arm, she took it, threading his with her own and together the pair walked away.

Dorian almost swooned.

Bull made sure he didn't.

**

"How was your trip?" He asked. They walked, an easy stroll away from the stables and toward the main keep. He kept her arm, and she made no move to pull away.

"Got into a barfight." She snickered.

"You what? How?"

"Some guy, started touching me, I punched him. Figured that'd be that, nope, started a fight."

"Maker's breath, are you alright?"

"Oh rest assured, I made it hurt. He won't be trying to touch my hair again."
"He was touching your hair?" Cullen, while disgusted someone would try to lay hands on her, still felt a twinge of jealousy that a complete lout received the luxury of knowing what her hair felt like while he was still left with burning curiosity.

"Yeah, wanted to know if my color went all the way down and other such junk. Or if the carpet matched the tapestries."

"Do you not like people touching your hair?" The commander groaned internally, Maker's balls that was a stupid question.

He was fully prepared for an answer to that effect but she remained silent, face looking lost in quiet contemplation.

She remembered, before she murdered him, he touched her hair, stroked it lovingly remarking at its softness.

"Not the way he did, but I wouldn't mind, as long as they asked first... if others..." she let the sentence drop.

They walked the battlements in silence starting from the far corner and working their way around towards his tower. As they drew closer, Cullen inhaled deeply ready to talk in earnest.

"I wanted to thank you for coming to see me that day. If there’s anything...I wanted...This sounded so much better in my head."

She giggled, the world sang. "I take it then, you're feeling better?"

"I..yes.."

"Is it always that bad?"

"The pain comes and goes, sometimes I feel as if I'm back there.. I should not have pushed myself so far that day."

"Listen Cullen," She released his arm and gripped his hand. "I'm so sorry. I didn't understand what I was saying.... I..." She sighed, "I'm just as bad at this as you are. But, I'm so glad you're better."

"I know, I understand why you said what you said. Thank you." He removed a glove and placed his bare hand against her face, stroking her cheek. "I am better now. Much better."

He gestured towards his door, together they went inside.

"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. I'm not proud of the man that made me. Now I can put some distance between myself and everything that's happened. It's a start."

"For what it's worth, I like who you are without it."

"Even...after?"

"You already know how I feel about you." Molten amber eyes captured his gaze, a heavy stare laden with feelings unsaid but well felt. Cullen let the smile shine through on his face before he quickly grabbed a hold of it to rein it back in. He will not look like the lovestruck schoolboy. He will not.

"What about you, you have your own burdens. How are you holding up? Seeker Pentaghast told"
me about what you tried to do for that templar."

She sat at the edge of his desk, tipping papers but leaving it for the most part undisturbed.

"She wasn't supposed to."

"Why not?"

"Wasn't my best moment." She swung her leg idly, his gaze was drawn to her thigh watching the muscle contract and relax. His throat tightened.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm terrified. I didn't ask for any of this, I'm just some girl from Ostwick who hunts with dogs, curses, and drinks a lot and this boy..." She held back the bit about the boy looking almost exactly like him. "He's looking at me like I'm an angel, thinking I can save him. And he dies right in my arms. I failed him, and when I fail people die."

"You did what you could for him. You eased his sufferings, and that's far more than a lot of those templars could ask for or even deserve. And you shouldn't doubt yourself. We've made great strides. You've built an army. You did that. None of what we've done, none of the lives we have saved, would have been possible without you."

"No. We did it. I couldn'ta done this without any of y'all."

Cullen sat in his chair while she sat at the edge of her desk, kicking that leg back and forth. How many times had he imagined that leg naked and wrapped around his waist? How many times had he recalled the look of her legs as she danced in front of the fires at Haven, the way they rippled, the way they moved.

He loved her.

More possibly than the Maker loved his Bride and Andraste help him, he *needed* to tell her this.

"He’s right."

He shifted close, coming out of his chair and rising to his full height above her. Heart pounding against his chest making the metal of his armor jump with every beat. His head swam in thick heat, a haze that emanated from her. Her beauty, her closeness.

"What? Who's right?" She murmured gazing up at him. She hadn't had a drop of wine all day, didn't stop her head from spinning as though she just drank a cellar.

"You are an angel, at least to me. If there’s anything you need, anything at all please…"

He hovered over her, close enough to touch. Without thinking she placed her hands against his chest feeling the red fur of his mantle remembering the way he wrapped it around her after Haven, remembering the red arrows he'd given her.

And she saw, displayed proudly around his neck, a ring of yellowed feline teeth.

"What if..." She tilted up, extending her body to bring her face closer to his own. "I want..."

It'd be a gross miscalculation to call what her heart was doing 'beating' it was flying, fluttering, stuttering in her chest.
His office melted away into a blank and empty space save her, him, and the desk she sat on. Nothing mattered outside his vision, she consumed and subsumed all. Her breath hot against his lips, too close now. Too, too close.

“You.”

The hands in his mantle turned to fists as she grabbed and pulled him into her knocking their lips together in a kiss that by all rights should have chipped teeth. Her hands left his chest and flew, locking around the back of his neck holding him there, fingers twined in his curls. He shifted bringing himself closer to her, eager to get at her sweet mouth, a sensation he'd missed for far too long. She pulled closer to him, moving back across the desk until...

The crackling of broken glass startled her, she released him and pulled away sheepish and embarrassed by her boldness. They both stared at the shattered remnants of the wine glass driven to distraction before a strong heavy arm came across her and upended the rest of his papers, inkpot and quill, knocking them carelessly to the ground before another strong arm upended her pressing her against the desk. He covered her, smothered her, clung to her as though she were the only salvation in a raging sea. Their lips mashed together, almost painfully as he claimed her mouth in a blood singing kiss. Her dark plum colored flesh parted for him allowing him into the holiest of holies. His tongue, penitent sinner entered and made his prayers at the shrine of her mouth. He kissed her as though her kisses were air and he a drowning man.

She groaned into his mouth. Months of fantasies and daydreams all found to be woefully inadequate to this moment.

“Then you,” he smacked his kiss against her lips. “shall have me. My lady.” Her fingers flexed and her nails dug into the skin of the back of his neck, shivering sensations traveled the length of his spine, inflaming him beyond reason and coherence. He needed her. Now. Urgently.

He pulled back for just a moment to pull off his other glove with his teeth before tossing it with a turn of his head to the side. Her eyes widened, surprised by his hastiness, dark and hazy with lust. He smirked at her before lowering himself again on top of her, naked hands now roaming freely against her neck and chest. He palmed one of her breasts squeezing appreciatively, thumbing one of her pert and hardened nipples before reaching lower and lower still.

“Cullen!” she cried his name like a plea, her own fingers fumbling against his chest.


She moaned and rocked against him, the confession of his urgency sending sharp bolts of lust straight to her groin already wet and ready. His hands found the laces of her breaches and pulled them apart clumsily while he kept his mouth clamped around her own, kissing with such ferocity she feared her darkened skin my bruise under his attentions.

It didn't matter though. Her soul needed this, had begged for this for so long. Her templar, her mighty templar loving her the very such way she yearned to be loved.

Her pants came free and like liquid lightning he moved them down until they pooled at her ankles. She kicked her legs until one came free of the restraint leaving her able to part herself to him. While she worked on her restrictions, he removed his own. Unbuckling belt and unlacing pants until he came free, arousal hard and evident, straining against his smalls. She gasped at the sight overcome by a sudden shyness and he too felt a slight reticence.

He pulled her to him. His kisses slowed, evened out. His boldness cooled, though it did not
abandon him for his fumbling awkwardness.

“Is...is this what you want? Am I?” He asked leaving kisses on her cheeks, nose, and eyes.

She released the back of his neck and placed her hands on either side of his face. She kissed him over and over again. “Yes. Please. Yes. Yes. Yes!”

His smile could light up the Fade and make the Black City return to gold. So encouraged, he laid his lady back down against the desk, hand journeying lower and lower until it came to rest in the thick black curls of her sex. Her breath tightened in her chest and she arched her back into him, somewhere in an unimportant part of her mind she was upset he chose to keep his armor on.

She folded her bottom lip between her teeth and hissed. “Yes.” she pleaded. A tentative finger curled up the lips of her sex finding them wet and eager for more.

He groaned and bucked his hips forward. Maker this woman. He did it again and delighted in the strangled noise she made when he touched her. His mouth licked and suckled the flesh of her neck now. She was sensitive there and keened a wailing cry. She writhed on the desk bouncing and bucking desirous of more sensation anything, anything.

“Cullen. Please.” The man groaned, driven senseless by the sounds of her begging. He slipped a finger inside her, to the knuckle. Her hands turned to claws and she arched up screaming before it died in her throat as her body locked up in abject pleasure when he began to move his hand.

Her attentiveness, her heat, her everything made his cock strain and twitch. He needed her more than anything he ever needed in his life, more than his very Maker. He lived for the sounds she made when he moved his hand against her. She clenched bringing her walls down around his finger anxious for something more to stretch and fill her. He slipped in another, drinking in her sigh with his mouth.

“So beautiful.” he murmured like a prayer. His hips bucked against her thigh, his body warning him about what it needed. Cullen didn't care, he needed this, her pleasure, the sound of his name falling, sighing, screaming from her lips. He worked his hands a little faster, bringing the thumb of his hand around to swipe at the crown of her cunt. She bent forward exhaling violently.

“Fuck!” she screamed as he moved more and more within her. Her thighs clamped together forcing more friction and sensation around his hand and into her body. Oh Maker, he felt hot and wonderful and right. So endlessly right.

“I need...I need.” she stuttered, gripping his shoulders hoping he kept her firmly in this world. She smelled of flowers and citrus, already drunk on her, the scent intoxicated him further. His body screamed at him demanding he take more. He pushed harder into her, his fingers curling within, his thumb flicking softly at her pearl that made her thighs turn from muscle to rock. Her legs straightened, her toes curled, her moans grew quieter and quieter as her chest found it harder to expand.

“I'm...I'm...” she gasped, almost a whisper.

“Let go.” he urged. “Come for me my lady.”

Oh Maker, that name. That name!

His name left her as a low moaning wail when she came hard against his hand. His cock leaked and ached almost coming on the sound of his name on her blessed lips alone. Because she was bright, blessed, beautiful noise and he had loved her from the very first for the sounds she made.
“Inside...me...now!” she exclaimed breathlessly bringing her shaking but still strong legs up and around, locking ankles around his hips.

With his hand he positioned himself at her wetness but apparently he waited too long. She flexed her legs pushing him forward and deep into her. She arched again, striking her head against the desk though the pain morphed into a pleasant tingle. Her mouth opened but no sound emerged strangled by the pure feeling of him finally home within her.

“Oh Maker. You feel. Aah...” She was searing him, burning him alive and he loved every minute of it. He felt joined with her, one, home, safe all the best things in the world he felt while being within her. He threw his head back and roared her name.

He began to move, slowly, as slowly as he could knowing that should he do anything else, he'd explode too soon and too early like a teenager's first time. They were still mostly clothed, her tunic hadn't even been unsnapped and he was still full armored. He pressed down against her, locking honeyed eyes with her amber ones trying and possibly failing to convey with his gaze just how much he...

She whimpered. He felt too good, too right. She gripped her hands against the edges of his desk for purchase and to keep her grounded in sanity. Her breasts bounced with every thrust and her gasps and moans wrenched free of her throat with every push.

“Ev...Evelyn!” he cried feeling the coil in his belly contract tighter, the last notch down before release.

“Harder,” she urged. “Break the desk if you have to.” The only coherent sentence she could muster before drowning again in sensation. He was thick, wonderfully thick, filling and stretching and Maker's fucking FUCK!

“FUCK!” she wailed.

He pushed harder, deeper, he filled her, claimed her. This woman, this wild and powerful woman he claimed with the power of his thrusts and the conviction in his heart to make. Her. Scream.

“Cullen!” she screamed clamping down around him, her cunt a hot velvety vice that...

He pushed forward and came hard. “Evelyn!” tumbling down down and down into a whirlpool of tingling sensation and feeling and oh...

He bowed forward and pressed his forehead against her. His weight was delicious but his armor prevented easy breathing.

“You're heavy.” She called from some far off place and he shot up immediately bringing her with him, panting and gasping as they both slid to the floor, his seed leaking out of her, white paleness on beautiful black thigh. She buried her face in his neck ghosting kisses just below his ear. But mostly, they just breathed finding regular function and coherent thought slowly being restored. She trembled. He held her. They did not speak.

Happily he'd fall asleep like this, cock flopping softly while her juices cooled on him. Nothing mattered except her presence, her closeness, her happiness.

“That was...”

“Incredimgazeable.” she answered.
He chuckled, chest rumbling deeply with his laugh before he kissed her. “Yes. That.”

“Someone could.”

“I know.”

“Maybe we should...”

“Give me a moment to hold you a while longer.”

She felt the heat in her face, quieted, and indulged him.

They sat like that, Lion and Huntress, quiet and semi-sleep on the floor of his office happier than either of them had ever been in their lives before Cullen moved, returning feeling to sweetly aching limbs.

Together they rose and redressed in awkward silence. Once done, she turned to him and seized him in her strong arms.

“Okay,” she said. “Gimmie some time to clean up and order my thoughts then, meet me in my quarters. And for the love of fuck, no armor.”

He nodded thickly, still dazed and bewildered that he hadn’t yet woken up.

Evelyn kissed him full and hard on the mouth swiping her tongue over the scar that bisected his top lip. He moaned and his cock twitched again in his pants and Cullen had to think very seriously about whether or not he wanted to bend her over the desk again.

The Inquisitor pulled back and stepped away, wicked gleaming love in her eyes, before sauntering out of his office. Once the door clicked shut his knees gave out and he slid down the side of his desk to the floor again. Only then, once the one door decidedly latched shut did the other one open.

It was Poor Bastard Jim...again. He had reports in his hand. But this time he had the intelligence to wait.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, finally, we really earn those NSFW tags. FOR REAL THIS TIME!
Send me a tumble if that's your fancy.
Or a comment, I like those too.
And as always
Thanks

http://mirabai0821.tumblr.com/
The twilight sun blinded her when she stepped outside, almost staggering her to the ground as her legs shook.

“Maker.” She breathed, tingling throughout her body and another bolt of lust stabbed her in the belly as she remembered what it felt like to have him... She ambled through the keep lost and dazed; she almost tripped and fell over Varric.

“Sorry, sorry.” she apologized dreamily.

“You alright there Viney?”

“Hmm? What?”

“You seem off.”

Oh well shit, is it that obvious? Is the fact that she was well and thoroughly fucked written all over her face?

Perhaps.

Not like she took steps to hide it, he was so damned dreamy and she felt so damned good she didn’t half care if all of Skyhold could tell.

“I'm good.” She replied smiling.
Varric quirked an eyebrow suddenly replete with new ideas...

She found Vivienne in her solar hovered over a boiling pot stirring it with a flick of her wrist magically controlling a wooden spoon in the brew.

“**You look like a witch right out of a fairy tale.**”

“**Is that really so bad? I like witches.**” The older woman replied not looking up from her task.

Lady Trevelyan fell in absolute love with Vivienne at first glance for obvious reasons. Being from Ostwick, and although close to places like Rivain and Antiva, the Free Marches, at least her part of them, were decidedly lacking for a certain kind of diversity. Elves and Qunari, and a few surface born dwarves smattered the population but as far as humans were concerned, her family and maybe less than a handful of others wore the same shades of skin she did. The distinction or perhaps the ignominy (depends on who you talk to) was something Bann Gareth Trevelyan took very seriously to heart. Their family had been around for ages sure, but under Gareth they became one of the richest darkest family in the March. With the Qunari and Dalish running around you'd think the other noble families would have plenty to focus their snobbery on.

Not so.

Never *ever* underestimize the elite's ability to shit on anyone and everyone different from themselves. Because the Trevelyans were a rare breed of very rich, landed, dark colored folks, other rich not-so-dark colored folks took notice. And took aim.

Gareth's sons and daughters, although from a family of wealth and history were still, as their forefathers, locked out of the marriage alliances that strengthened all Marcher lords, forced instead to marry out to the wealthy Antivan and Rivani merchants who were less picky and oft times the 'correct' color. This meant for Gareth that his family remained wealthy and he remained a Marcher lord but it kept him from the 'real' power, the kind of power that elevated him from being a mere Bann to an Arl or even a Teryn. It embittered him, a poison he tried to spread to his children. For Evelyn, all this really meant that it was very hard to see women who looked like her in places other than poor peasant, humble craftswoman, or middling merchant.

Vivienne shattered that paradigm with a snap of her elegantly manicured fingernails. She was a woman unburdened by the circumstances of her looks and even her birth. Maybe it was just that different in the south, but still it meant something to Evelyn to see a dark skinned—mage no less--woman command the kind of power and respect she did. In fact, no one down here seemed to notice. A woman like Viv, in Ostwick? It'd be all they talked about.
Evelyn latched onto Vivienne intending the suck the woman dry of all her knowledge...and shit, just about everything else. She dressed well, spoke well, wrote well, all talents Ev came pre-equipped with being Gareth's daughter but still, Vivienne had a certain 'refinement' that Evelyn wanted to assume as her own.

She wasn't cutting her hair though. No. Fuck that.

“Viv. I need some herbs.”

“Do I look like an apothecary to you? You have a gaggle of mages under your command go to one of them.” Vivienne dismissed with a sniff.


Vivienne, upset at having to repeat herself whirled from her concoction to dress down the Inquisitor. Herald she may be but...Evelyn was never shy, she always met your eye, sometimes even when she shouldn't. Her eyes were cast on the floor now. Embarrassed.

“Oh. OH!” Vivienne immediately took her meaning.

“You know you don't always have to come to me for these things. We mages...especially the women, all of us do...or should have what you need.” Vivienne opened her trunk rooting among the bottles and potions.

“I trust you.”

“I'm glad.”

Vivienne produced a bottle of clear liquid and a small packet of dried and crushed herbs, she handed it to the younger woman before running her fingers through her roots, smoothing down the unruly untamable hair. Literally the only human being on the continent that could do so without having to ask permission.
“You need these redone.”

“I like them the way they are.”

She shook her head, smiling. Vivienne liked the Inquisitor as she was very much reminded of a younger version of herself, hair and all.

“Two drops in your morning tea every day. If you forget, use the herbs in a hot bath within 48 hours. Should that fail...come to me.” Vivienne gave the Inquisitor a stern and pointed look.

“I understand.”

“Good.”

“Thank you Viv.”

“My pleasure. Really. I am happy for you.”

Evelyn smiled, scrunching her face with the flare of the heat in it. “Viv...you and Bastien?”

“Yes..” Vivienne kept her face like an unreadable sphinx but even the Inquisitor could tell the subject was a touchy one. The only tenderness Vivienne could summon was always and only reserved for Bastien.

“He...uh...what did he look like?”

“Not like you or I if that's what you are asking.”

“How do you always know?”

“I know you.”
“And he loves you?”

“Love isn't the word my dear.”

The Inquisitor's face fell a bit. Vivienne took a dainty hand and wrapped it around Evelyn's larger rougher ones.

“You have nothing to fear. The way he looks at you, I'm surprised you haven't seen it yourself. But you are perhaps deaf and blind when it comes to him. You are his joy, his world is better because of you. It is obvious to us all.”

“It's just that...where I come from... I'm just remembering old lessons hard learned.”

“I know darling, I know. It's different down here as you see.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

Vivienne, in an ultra-rare show of vulnerability and friendship kissed Evelyn on her forehead. “Anytime my darling.”

She turned to leave. “You know...I wish...It would have been really nice if you were my mom.”

The First Enchantress covered her mouth with her hand, vaguely scandalized.

“Don't ever say that. I am not that old!”

Both ladies departed company laughing.

**
She exulted in the heat of her bath, the water easing aching muscles not that she minded the ache. It was the good kind of ache the same way a battle scar was the good kind of scar a reminder that something fun happened or that she survived. She bathed and redressed and summoned food and drink that she laid out on the floor of her quarters as the sun dipped low on the horizon shading her room in pinks and golds and oranges.

He'd be here soon.

**

Cullen obeyed orders like a good soldier and knocked on her door clean and armorless. He hadn't been able to think straight since she left, the deadly sway of her hips the only thought he'd been able to hold in his brain.


“IT's open.”

He entered and ventured up the stairs. He found her standing in front of an impressive spread of food and drink. He gulped, she wore a cream colored tunic that stood out against her skin and nothing else. The tunic was long enough to cover to the middle of her thigh, the rest was smooth earthen colored leg all the way down.

He gulped again.

“Got some food, some wine. Hungry?”

“Very,” he nodded though whether he meant for food, she could not discern.

She smiled at him, brighter than the setting sun.

Evelyn motioned for him to sit at her impromptu feast and she poured for him a glass of wine that he did not turn down.
"How are you feeling? Did I hurt you?" He asked, he hooked a hand around her waist and pulled her toward him. She hissed and he pulled away as though touching flame.

"Maker's breath I'm sorry, I did hurt you. Didn't I?"

"Calm down, that wasn't you. A Wound, it's healing."

"You should have said something." Concern darkened his handsome features. She pressed a finger to his lips to silence him and he kissed the pad of her fingertip.

"You didn't hurt me. Let me prove it. Did you try to hurt me?"

He sputtered, "No! Of course not, I'd never." She silenced him again with her full hand and kissed the back of it.

"Do you know your own strength?" She didn't remove her hand so all Cullen could do was nod slowly.

"Ok, so if you didn't try to hurt me, and you know you're own strength you aren't hurting me. I'm a hearty girl." Evelyn slapped her thigh, the sound of the smack made Cullen's teeth itch in desire. "I can take a lot, plus do I really look the type to bruise easy?"

He chuckled. Maker's breath this woman. "No. You don't."

"Okay then, what about you? Are you alright? I didn't...I heard Ferelden men get nervous when the women are a little more...little less submissive."

"Know a lot of Ferelden men do you?"

She made a face and looked away. Only then did Cullen realize the implications.

"What? No, Andraste's ass. I meant..." Cullen groaned and raked his hands down his face in furious embarrassment. "Please feel free to kick me out."
Cullen took a steadying breath and a more than steady swallow of the wine. "Your spirit...inflames me. I've never seen someone with so much life before. Everything you do, you move with this kind of joy, but you're by no means an insufferable sunny optimist. But you live in every moment, draw it out until its everywhere around you. You squeeze the life out of everyone but you don't drain them, you energize them. I love that about you. So yes, I'm alright. More than, you're incredible B."

She thought about this for a while, smiling into her glass and drinking more wine to suppress a girlish giggle.

"To answer your question, you are my first."

"First ever?!"

She gave him a look, tipping her head down and glaring at him from the tops of her eyes.

"My first Ferelden, straw head. My first...he ahh...was the son of one of my father's peers. Beyond that, I wasn't really someone...let's just say other noble boys steered clear of me unless they came to me for a distinct purpose."

"What do you mean?"

Evelyn cursed herself for bringing up this line of conversation that probably made her sound endlessly silly. "It different down south, there are more...more people who look like me."

"Not following."

Exasperated and unsure of how to convey herself, she grabbed Cullen's arm and pushed up the sleeve then placed her bare arm next to it. The bones were the same, the muscles, and the blood were the same. Their hearts and pulses beat the same. But their skin. He was the color sunlight on bleached sand. Not pallid like Solas nor Varric's odd-for-a-dwarf sun kissed color. Combined with his wavy golden curls and the dusting of fine blond hairs on his arm, to her, he looked like sunlight, someone better fit to serve as the Maker's sword in his Golden City. She was the color of earth after a rain, rich and dark, like bread left a little too long in the oven. The contrast fascinated him.
"Oh you meant that."

"Not too many people... who look like me up there. There are some but not like it is down here. They, he...the nobleman's son, I loved him. A lot. And he made me think he loved me back."

Cullen sensed her discomfort at recalling the memory, so he pushed close, snaking an arm around her waist, careful to avoid the injury she pointed out to him earlier.

"He...I...shared myself with him, foolishly thinking he'd be my one and only.

"When my father found out about it, he practically drew up the wedding plans overnight. Not out of any misguided preservation of 'my honor' but because he was so damned excited that he was the son of the Teryn, he practically wet himself with glee. What did I care though? I loved him. And it was the only time my father and I had been happy about the same thing."

Cullen felt a jealous urge twisting in his gut, coiled around the distinct feeling of shame. However this story ended, it didn't end well for her. But no matter that ending, it launched or enhanced or diverted a series of events that had led her to this place right here right now and with him. So while he took no joy in her heartbreak, he took comfort in that fate, luck, or Divine Favor had taken her from the arms of this nebulous sad memory and placed her in his own.

He'd been tall, gangly, he always towered over her even when they were children. That's what felt so right about him, they had known each other since infancy. Bann Trevelyan cultivated connections among the ruling class as meticulously as he cultivated the respectability of his family. With iron fist (literally) he made his three sons and two daughters the most well heeled, genteel, educated, and refined of any of the Marcher families. He made them above reproach and enhanced them with the wealth he rapaciously accumulated in his twenty plus years of Bann-ship after his father died and his mother retired passing the title to him.

With the union of his daughter and the son of one of his greatest (and most powerful) friends, Gareth knew finally, all his work and the work of his forebears would come to fruition.

Evelyn didn't care a whit about that. He was loving and sweet, he kissed the inside of her wrist and called her his little piece of chocolate candy and she never felt more loved in her life.

But she missed the sneer in his smile.
And the sarcasm in the whispered tones in his pet name.

"As it turns out, his father had already arranged a deal with another lady. The daughter of some merchant family, less rich, less prestigious than our own. Which he heartily accepted."

She was 18, and she was heartbroken, the world fell out from underneath her. "When I asked him about it, asked him how he could abandon me so quickly he turned to me and said with a smile 'Mudskins aren't for marrying.' Turns out his bride to be wasn't for marrying either, just something concocted quickly so they wouldn't have to tell my father to his face, 'No my son will not marry your daughter because we think you're all half-qunari anyway and therefore no more fit to be yoked to our house much less have your own.'"

"What was his name?" Cullen asked, his voice was distant but his eyes liquefied and poured golden heat and golden light into her heart, suffusing her with the ironclad affirmation that she would be nothing less than wonderful in his mind.

"Andreas." Evelyn winced, the name, like the epithet he called her, still wielded too much power even this far removed in time and space.

Cullen grasped both her hands like a knight swearing a solemn vow.

"If I ever meet this Andreas, I'll make him eat mud. By the fistful."

The Inquisitor made an unpretty half-sob, half-laughing noise and squirmed happily, withered to remnants of overwhelming joy under his piercing gaze. He sealed his promise with a kiss, extracted slowly from her lips like wine pressed from grapes. They sat in silence for a while, he softly stroked her arm while she leaned into him resting her head on his shoulder.

"Does it bother you," he asked after a time. "That I'm not...that I don't...match?"

She buried her face into his shoulder and inhaled him, shaking her head. "I love who I love. Same as Dorian. I didn't think about it, it just happened. It never mattered what you looked like. Though, for the record, you look damn good boy."
He was glad she couldn't see his proud blush, and a little bit jealous she didn't suffer from the same visible embarrassments. He never noticed the difference between him. Well he did but never in that way, the way that affected her so strongly. It was different down here in Ferelden. Hell, the Heroine that saved him from Kinloch Tower had been cut from the same colored cloth. Something so minuscule like that, he never took note of.

Not even to the various elves and qunari and dwarves that made his casual acquaintances. They just existed, like he did, because Cullen had far more pressing things to worry about (blood magic and mages to name exigent few) in his life rather than get hung up, disturbed, or even spare a passing thought to the differences between him and say Iron Bull or Sera or Varric or Krem.

He found it sad she and said others had not been afforded that same sort of blithe indifference.

They played with their food a bit and drank more wine, turning the conversation away from such weighty subjects and steered them drunkenly right back into other weighty subjects.

"Who was your first?" She asked.

"A mage at my circle. Her name was Amell."

She sat up grinning. "I knew she was special!"

Cullen blushed. "She really was. I once ran away from her, literally turned tail and ran when she flirted with me she was so...I don't even know. I...we... didn't have very many opportunities because she was a mage and I was a templar. We had to take our pleasure when and where we could."

"So that's how you learned to bend girls over desks."

"Girls is plural."

"Yeah."

He was silent.
"Boys too?"

"No, thought about it though." He took a hearty swallow of wine. Wouldn't that confession knock Dorian speechless they next time they played chess.

"Are you saying...?"

"I haven't touched a woman since I left Ferelden's circle. After what happened there, I was effectively turned off so to speak. And Kirkwall, with the way that it was...I couldn't I didn't want to."

She saw the cloud of a half-remembered nightmare pass over him so she kissed him tenderly, thrilled that she could reach and kiss him whenever she wanted. Her tender touch had the desired affect and banished the memory of Amell's bloody face before it could fully form. Maker save him, he adored her.

"Coulda fooled me."

"I have an active imagination at least. I was cloistered maybe, sometimes of my own volition, but I wasn't dead."

She stifled a giggle into the back of her hand, he found it too cute for words so he took her hand and kissed the side she laughed into, hoping to absorb her easy joy into his skin.

"I love you, do you know that? I didn't get the time to say it properly." He swiped his thumb over the back of her hand marveling at her utter softness.

The revelation of those tiny monosyllabic words made her feel like she was soaring so high she could hardly breathe.

Andraste preserve her. He made her fly.
"When you announced you were leaving early with Cassandra, I was still fuming. Confused and hurt. But then I realized that everything you said to me, you said out of love and nothing more. I was looking for an echo chamber--someone to validate what I was doing. But, from you I got an honest answer from an honest heart and I mistook that for something it wasn't. I ran down the stables to tell you so, but you were gone before I arrived. I am sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." She responded quickly. "I should have supported you better. I should have understood you better. I understand now, and I'll help you find Samson. You read those reports I found in the Graves right?"

"I did. But let's not speak of work now. In fact, let's stop speaking entirely."

He kissed her deeply this time, wine mixed with love sprinkled with a heavy dose of lust formed a powerful concoction that made his gut boil and his head swim.

"I want to learn you." He murmured against her neck. "Every bit of you. I want to find all the corners of your flesh you keep hidden. I want to learn what makes you sigh, what makes you shudder, what makes you scream. Teach me, my love."

“You...” she stammered when he kissed her neck. “I thought you said you were...” another pause for another kiss. “hungry.”

“I am."

Her heart crackled in her chest, skipping so many beats a surgeon would think her dead. His hands, pressed into the small of her back, guided her down and onto the fur covered floor reminding him of her tent at Haven. Once she was down, he sat back to admire her. She gazed back at him, desire evident in her eyes yet flavored with a certain kind of shyness. She lay on deer skin and wolf pelt, her hair fanned out from her head looking like the roots of a tree or the dark black rays of her dark faced sun. Her's was a primal natural beauty, set against the trophies of her kill. She belonged here, a goddess of the hunt, and he welcomed blasphemy to worship her.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” He whispered, a calloused hand stroking the side of her face. “You are...you are.”
He kept secrets in his smiles, he always had. His brain always worked quicker than his tongue and she knew first hand just how quick his mind was. She could almost see the thoughts running through his head as he regarded her with his honey eyes. It worried her for just a moment, worried that he saw something too different to like. Be her hair or her skin or just something that put him off. Maker she wanted him so badly, wanted to love him, make love to him. Evelyn needed to release the love in her heart long kept locked up by fear and insecurities. He was her sunlight, her gold. She cherished him.

“Cullen.”

The sound of his name quickened his desire and he leaned back down over her, lowering his lips to hers in a slow kiss. Not sharp and piercing like it was in his office but slow and languid drawing across lips and tongue as easy as the sun traveled the sky. He intended to take his time. To learn her, to kiss every scratch and scar and learn through mouth and tongue and fingertip what had left them there.

He tilted her head to the side to get at her neck. The first secret he learned was that her neck was deliciously sensitive. He used that knowledge now to elicit soft sweet gasps as he suckled the flesh there. No teeth, just lip and tongue, he laved her neck while her hands clenched at his shoulder blades and her legs squirmed and kicked under him. Sharp bolts of maddening electricity sparked and hardened her nipples, how had he learned so quickly what made her breasts heave and cunt leak?

She moaned.

Traveling lower, he found three thin scars evenly spaced across her neck. He released his mouth’s hold on her and pressed lips to each scar. One. Two. Three.

“I love your scars.” He said. Only a needy moan answered him.

Her hands pulled his tunic loose from his breaches and up and over his head.

Oh Maker.

Years of plate armor, sword training, and discipline left him as perfect as she could ever wish for. His chest was a solid wall of muscle with divots of definition carved with an artisan’s hands. And all hers for sampling, devouring.
"You're beautiful." She spoke in an awestruck whisper. "I could die for want of you. Do you know that?"

With an iron grip and a forceful pull, she crushed him to her, capturing his lips between her teeth. He grunted surprised by her eagerness.

“Steady my lady,” he warned as his manhood twitched and tingled and raged against his confinement. After admitting to his dry spell, nearly any kind of attention like that, would threaten his stamina.

“I have to have you.” she confessed. “I feel like I need to...uh...I just...uh Cullen please.”

Confessions like that also threatened his stamina. She could have any man she wanted, he knew, it was his job to know of the attentions she received. He well knew the gossip about her that ran rampant through the barracks and the fantasies of the men and women who would without hesitation bend themselves over desks like he had her, should she ever ask. One word from her lips and half of Skyhold would submit, and here she lay, panting and begging for him. It was almost, almost too much to handle.

Almost.

He dipped his head to her collarbone while his hands worked on her hips and thighs. She groaned and purred and bucked her hips against the air hoping for anything that would alleviate the swelling need to just be touched.

He kissed the mottled scar on her collarbone, one she earned during the attack on Haven. She hooked a leg around his hips and pushed hoping the bumping of their sexes would spur him to urgency.

He only laughed against her skin, blowing cool air against heated flesh and Maker if he wanted to kiss each and every goosepebble her raised.

“Maker, please.”
To answer her plea, a hand came up and up and palmed a breast. She rocked sighing loudly, drawing in a sharp breath between clenched teeth. Pleased with her reaction, he switched to the other and squeezed appreciating their handy size and heft. He ignored her raised nubs, preferring to sample them skin against skin and at present, her shirt was still on.

“Off.” He commanded gently and leaned back.

He saw the images and visions of his most secret desires. Her eyes locked on his and she crossed her arms over her torso, her hands found the hem of her tunic and she pulled up revealing inch after inch of soft sweet smelling skin that made his heart give out. The cream colored tunic rose higher and higher, catching on the swell of her breast before breaking free of it, letting them fall with a decided weighty drop that just...Maker's breath. She slid her tunic up and over her head before tossing it free. She stared at him for a moment, challenging him, anticipating his next action.

This was indeed the first time he'd seen her nude and Holy Maker did she radiate. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth, he wanted to devour her. His mouth watered like a feral thing to consume her. Maker if she kept staring at him like that he would, he would and he wouldn't be able to...

She decided for him. She placed two hands on his chest and pushed him onto his back before locking him under her with thighs of iron, her womanhood hovering dangerously over his trouser bound crotch.

She attacked him. Hands and nails scrabbling and scrapping over him. She was hungry. Licking and sucking on his neck and chest, a wild ravenous woman at a banquet with no fork. She ate with her hands, she ate eagerly, she ate greedily. He stuttered and shorted out, brain finding it hard to communicate with the rest of his limbs. His large hands fisted the furs beneath him as he let her feast. Her mouth clamped on a brown nipple, sucking him, nipping him, holding him hostage between her teeth.

“Need. You.” She breathed before kissing lower. She hooked her hands into the hem of his pants, so eager her nails scratched him and he hissed. Her hands flew away as though burned.

“I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.” She apologized with terror stricken across her face. “If I'm too much, just tell me to stop.”

Maker. He was about to burn alive and she was the one worried about being too much.
“Don’t stop.” He whined, watching her, drinking her with his eyes. She kissed her scratches on his hip in apology before wiggling him out of his pants and smalls.

His sprung free, hard and glistening. She licked her lips ready to consume.

She bent her head low. His eyes widened to the size of the moon. He stammered, tried to stop her, he couldn’t, he’d never survive...

Her hot mouth around him knocked the brain from his skull and he knew nothing beyond pure sensation.

“Evelyn!” he shouted, this time it was his turn to strike his head against a solid surface. She sucked him, hollowing her cheeks and pulling, like drawing honey from a comb determined to extract everything from him and distill it into liquid intoxicating joy. Her hands did not touch his shaft, determined was she to work him with tongue alone.

Her dark eyes snapped shut, concentrating, her head bobbing, her tongue swirling. Maker. Maker...

“MAKEr!” he bellowed, unaware there were possibly people outside of this room, outside of her that could hear him.

And if he did know, he didn’t give a fuck.

On pure instinct, he bucked his hips forcing his cock into the very back of her throat. Her hands pressed his hips down, she slowed to regain air before resuming, meeting his eyes with a reverent stare.

His eyes, in a stare like that, she’d die.

Hot textured tongue scraped up his shaft, lips sealed around his head. She felt him twitch, felt his pulse hammer within his flesh.

Close.
She released him and crawled up his body, her naked wetness sliding across his cock.

They both began to pant, now was the time. She grabbed him, steadied him, guided him up and she sank down and they both howled. She pushed down until hip sealed against hip, together again at last.

Cullen would never get tired of this, never he decided.

Neither moved, she just sat atop him, adjusting to his fucking wonderful stretch.

Then she moved.

Hips sliding forward then back, her back curling, arching, head thrown back mouth open with soundless cries. His hands were on her thighs feeling the strength of the muscle as she controlled her delicious body over him. He kept very, very still, to move would shatter everything, unlock the cage on a beast that would flip her and drive out his pleasure until she was incapable of sound.

She brought herself up, then down, his cock striking perfectly the deepest part of her.

Then she was gone.

She bounced atop him, hands on his waist for leverage and purchase. Her head rocked back and forward little 'ah' sounds escaping her mouth with every downstroke.

“Ah...yes...ah...please...ah...Cullen!” She cried as though about to die. She sank back down on him, thinking to slow herself down, edge out their pleasure. She wanted him slowly; not the white hot whip crack of their earlier coupling but the slow rolling build of a thunderstorm.

“Come here,” she called with a curl of her finger. He immediately sat up, still buried to the hilt within her. His hands were on her back, kneading up and down, calming her knowing the slightest movement would loose her to the depths of her pleasure. They kissed, they calmed, she began to move again while he remained upright. He whispered into her skin “so lovely, lovely, lovely.” A bard having forgotten the words to the rest of the song. Her breasts were free now, he pinched a raisin colored nipple and hissed when it correlated to clamp down on his cock.
He pinched again...then hissed again.

“Fuck! What are you doing to me!?” she cried.

He pinched yet again, this time with his teeth. She wailed.

“Language my love.”

They sat like that, made love like that, his mouth on her breasts while she rode him better than any mount she ever owned. Her fingers were in his hair, her gasps and pleas came out half formed and half forgotten the minute they left her lips leaving them incoherent babble that turned to moans as she came so very close.

A rough hand interceded between them, reaching for her slickened pearl. Cullen made a great show of keeping himself together, but inside he bit his cheek at every opportunity to keep himself from spilling every time she cried his name.

It stopped working. Now he pushed up when she pushed down, the finger at her clit swirled like a damned tornado. He buried his face into her neck while her head arched back ass slapping against his thighs and balls. His nails dug into her back. He grunted.

“Ev...yes...fuck!”

Some part of her registered his swear, the only part that mattered in that moment squeezed him tighter at his vulgarity.

“Say it again!” The only words she could string together.

“Fuck!” He answered. “Fuck me!” he repeated when she tightened. The wet sucking filthy sounds of their sexes slamming together became lost in the sounds of their pleas to each other. Her fucking him harder, and him begging to be fucked.

The sounds though fell away into impassioned formless screaming, her hips vaulted down and froze.
“Cullen!” and she released over him pressing so close she wanted to fuse to him. They didn't stop moving, his hips almost numb from her attentions raised up and higher and up while she stayed still striking hard and deep within her, the deepest he could go before it, whatever it was, ripped free of him with a shake and a cry. He gushed, filled her, and fell back trembling bringing her with him.

She kissed him on the shoulder on the neck up to his ear. Her lips whispered against him “I love you, so fucking much.”

He swatted her sweat slick and sore thigh. “Language.”

They reclined on her furs, the life sapped, drained, also possibly fucked right out of them. Their bodies curled into each other, threading legs and arms over and under each other until comfortable. Her thigh over his hip, his arm across her shoulders, but most importantly their foreheads together, faces veiled in half smiles and exhaustion.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Better than.” she sighed.

“I love you,” He whispered though she did not reply already lost to sleep and so very pleasant dreams.

He followed shortly behind her, dreamless.
He woke to sunlight filtered through glass, casting patterns of color that danced on her skin when she breathed. She did not believe she was an angel, but in this light, with that look of deep serenity on her face as she rested, he more than believed, he knew.

Judging from the angle it was morning still, time enough to wake and start the day.

Cullen wasn't going to.

He meant to stay. Here with her in this sweet microcosm of perfection, he intended to stay for the rest of his days if he could manage. He spent a lot of that time alone simply looking at her wondering how he'd gotten so lucky.

Lady Trevelyan woke like a cat, eyes wide and searching before yawning and stretching languidly fully extending her body until her bones cracked and popped.

"Good morning." She sat up from their furry palette quickly, energy shimmering in her eyes. “We slept here all night?”

“Too tired to move I imagine."

He took supreme pleasure in seeing her bed head form, quite possibly his favorite of her many styles. He took a hand and brushed the locs that sat akimbo across her head so that they hung naturally delighting in the soft pattering sound they made when they fell.

"Maker I'll never get tired of that."

She beamed and hooked an arm around his neck sending them both crashing back into the floor amidst a hail of giggles and sighs and kisses.

"What shall we do today, my lion?" She whispered against his skin, layering kisses on his neck just below his ear.

"Whatever you desire my lady."

The Maker can keep his Golden City, this was all he needed.

"I desire to spend every possible minute with you however," she paused and quieted listening. A knock at the door.

She placed a finger on his lips asking for quiet and she kissed him with her finger between them.

"WHAT!?" she hollered.

"Sorora! Get up!" Dorian.

Cullen and Evelyn snickered at each other conspiratorially. Though greatly pained to do so, the Commander lifted his lady off his lap and went hunting about for his clothes. She went to the basin and splashed cold water on her face, wiping the sleep off.
"Sorora! You asked me to come get you, you have a budget meeting with Josephine and I have some suggestions particularly about the kind of swill you serve at Herald's Rest!"

"Has anyone ever told you, you're an alcoholic?" She shouted back to him.

"I'd say the same of you my dear."

Cullen whispered hopping into his trousers and socks on one leg. "Who is sorora?"

"Tevene for 'sister'."

"I hear voices...Plural! Have you? Are you? Oh this is rich, I'm coming in."

They heard the door jiggle.

"Dorian! I swear I'll..."

Too late. He came bounding up the steps a devilish grin painted on a devilish face.

"Well, this is certainly unexpected!" Dorian practically danced with glee, like a cat in the cream.

Cullen stepped forward, trying to conceal his embarrassed smile under a scowl that no one believed. "If you tell anyone..."

Dorian held up his hand counting off with his fingers.

"Point 1: Everybody already knows. Point 2: Everybody already knows. Point 3: Everybody already knows."

"Is it that obvious?"

"The entire company watched you my lady this, my lady that yesterday when you lifted her off her horse like she was the Queen of Antiva. Nobody cares a whip my dear, except for maybe some of the serving girls ...and boys...and a few of the mages, myself included. Nothing quite stirs the heart like that forbidden mage/templar romance."

"Aww, nobody pined for me?" The Inquisitor looked hurt, pouty, irresistibly cute.

What the Void, already caught. Cullen wrapped an arm around her waist kissing her soundly until the pout fell away into a broad grin.

"I pine for you."

Dorian rolled his eyes. "Be still my shriveled black heart. Now you knave, unhand her and deliver her to me, we have much to discuss."

They released. "Dinner, my quarters?" she asked Cullen hopefully.

Before Cullen could answer, "No, you both will dine with us like normal people in a relationship not cloistered away as though you were actually keeping secrets because we all know. You weren't."

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck, unsure but not wholly discomfit by the idea of eating dinner with the rest of the gang. Evelyn laughed, too pleased by the whole situation as Dorian led her away.
Family.
She had a family.
Finally.

**

"So are you going to tell me everything?" Dorian asked pressing close eager for the information as though he could absorb it through her skin.

"Are you going to tell me everything about you and Bull?"

Dorian withdrew scandalized. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“A) Everybody already knew. B) Everybody already knew. C) Everybody already knew." She mimicked

"You're too damn clever by half. Almost as clever as me, it's the only way I can tolerate you. Don't get any better or I'll be forced to either enthrall you by something other than my roguish good looks or just leave you bereft of my talent all together."

"Are you gonna tell me or what?"

"Of course I am."

**

One thing he admired about Evelyn was that when she came to work, she worked. She stood stone-faced and serious through their strategy meeting with Josephine and Leliana, exchanging the barest of knowing smiles and taking a second to admire him freshly shaved and in his armor. Beyond that, they worked, even argued a little over policy and deployment. When the meeting adjourned and they filed out, she slipped her hand within his own and gave it a quick squeeze before clipping off to her next engagement.

Target practice.

She mandated that all of her inner circle take some time and interest in the army. Vivienne and Solas appreciated their role as mage mentors while Cassandra and Blackwall and Iron Bull worked alongside Cullen to drill the sword and shield bearers. Neither Sera nor Varric however could be counted upon to hone the skills of her ranged warriors, a job she then shouldered herself.

"Notch! Draw! Loose!" She shouted walking behind her soldiers as they followed her command. Under her instruction her archers were excellent.

"My lady, thousand apologies ma'am but we've already done this drill every day for months. We can aim, we can shoot, we always hit our mark."

"Soldier!" Cullen barked sneering. "Are you questioning an order for your Inquisitor?"

Evelyn gave him a secret smile while the soldier stammered his apologies. "Do you trust me?" she asked quietly.

"Implicitly." He answered softly.

"Theodore, notch your bow."
The soldier sputtered and did what was asked.

She walked to the edge of the pitched and stood in front of the target, neck just to the right of the bull's-eye.

"Hit your mark!" She commanded.

Wide eyed, Theodore turned to the Commander. "Sir?"

"Do as she says," he growled.

He drew, he aimed, he aimed, he held. And continued to hold far longer than he should have.

"HIT YOUR MARK ARCHER!" The Commander shouted.

He loosed the arrow and it went high and wild, a danger to no one not even the target. Satisfied, the Inquisitor returned.

"Commander would you be so kind to stand where I did." She gestured to the end of the pitch.

"As my lady commands."

He walked away, grateful to have his back to them so they wouldn't see the worry on his face. He meant what he said but still...

Once Cullen took his place, before he barely had the chance to spin around and signal he was ready, she fired two arrows, one on either side of his neck, so close he could feel the whistling wind of their wake. Both hit the bull's-eye behind him.

He didn't so much as flinch.

Theodore grew faint and almost collapsed at the spectacle. Half the pitch had dropped their activity to watch. She fired two more, one above him just high enough to whiff the curls on his head and another between his parted legs. Every man on the field groaned while Cullen felt his body twitch in unbearable excitement every time an arrow thunked harmlessly behind him.

"Do you see now?" She barked to the rest. "Until you are sure as shit, until you know as intimately as you knew your mother's tit where your arrow will go when you fire it, you must keep fucking, notching, aiming, and loosing. Am I understood?"

The entire field, bowman or not shouted in unison. "Yes ma'am!"

Cullen walked back from the target, she fired two more arrows obscenely close to his body just for show to the cheers of the entire field.

"Thank you for your cooperation Commander." She hummed pleasantly. Her smile faltered when she saw the dark look on his face.

"Inquisitor, May I have a word?"

**

He herded her into a neglected part of the keep. Here the masonry crumbled in places to naught more than dust making this section uninhabitable for now.

"You..." he snarled. His voice dropped low, deep and dangerous. "Do you ...have any idea?"
Before she could open her mouth to apologize he captured her lips in a blistering kiss, using more teeth than lip to kiss her. He gnawed the skin of her neck like he was actually trying to consume her, biting, nipping, sucking as though her skin had the secret to life he was anxious to chew up.

"If...I'd known." She said between gasps. "That shooting at you...ahh...would...make you this...hot!"

"Be quiet." He ordered. With a squeak, sound died in her throat as he continued to rake his hands over her body building a heat in her chest and belly that would...

"No." she answered back playfully and twisted out of his grasp.

"Get back here so I can ravish you properly." At his full height he was half a head taller than she, but she stared up at him unbowed, fists balled and actually ready to fight. A wicked grin curled her lips sensuously and Cullen thought his knees might give out.

"We have a dinner to attend." She floated her voice on silken tones edged with lust and danger. "You'll just have to wait. Can you even wait?"

He glared at her, mind running through all the possible ways he could have her right here and now in this abandoned and oft overlooked section of the keep. Weighing the options available to him and deciding against brash action, the Commander resumed his famous control, taking a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth, while she stood watching waiting, equal parts ready to fight, fuck, or flee and thrilled by every last one of them.

"I can." Cullen replied voice even and still. "I will."

"Good." She smirked before flouncing for the door, paying extra attention to how she swayed her hips when she walked anticipating where his gaze would fall.

"Inquisitor," he barked before she could open the door. He drew closer to her like he was going to trap her body against the door and have his way with her like he did that time in his office panting and bent over the desk. A gloved hand lifted her chin and tipped forward as though taking a kiss. Her eyes fluttered behind dark lashes, she licked and parted her lips eager, anxious for what was next.

He did not give what she expected.

"I will wait. And I will bide my time." He blew against her lips so close she felt the vapor of his breath. "And when it is time, I will have you screaming. See you at dinner."

**

She changed and bathed alone, mind ringing with the deadly sound in his voice.

"I will have you screaming."

"Maker's fuck." She exhaled, the thought made her tingle.

Cullen stood by Evelyn's door ready to escort her to Haven's Rest where Dorian said the dinner would be. He eschewed his armor for a more relaxed look leather trousers and cotton tunic over which he wore a red doublet embroidered around the edges of the sleeves and neck with black filigree.

In a word: devastating.
"I think I should change, I look like quite the pauper next to you," she teased.

He drew her against his chest and kissed her temple whispering "Only if you mean to undress and stay that way."

"You must behave my love, don't spoil the hunt by being too eager." Smirking, Cullen pulled his lady's hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

**

The party was half underway by the time they arrived. Since their secret really wasn't such a secret after all, Cullen didn't stiffen or balk when she slipped her hand within his own, lacing their fingers as they walked inside Herald's Rest.

Dorian cheered when they arrived. "Ah! The happy couple! Come sit, drink!"

All of them were there, even Vivienne and Solas, gathered around several tables pushed together piled high with food, spirits, and even more spirits. Varric led a game of fingers with the Chargers, Krem and Iron Bull both pulling away bloody hands though all their fingers had been miraculously spared.

Blackwall sat engaged in quiet conversation with Josephine who sported a white flower in her never before seen loose hair. Cassandra and Vivienne were arguing yet again over the particularly contentious bit of history concerning Divine Amara III, and Cole looked full to bursting though whether with food or joy she could not tell.

"So much happiness. So much love. So much it hurts. But it is a good hurt. I don't want to fix this hurt."

They took their seats, nestled right in the middle of the group of tables where all eyes could pry and watch. Sera placed tankards of indeterminate liquor in front of them and Dorian raised his glass to toast.

"To friends!"

They all cheered.

"First one done gets a kiss from the Quizzy!" Sera shouted and tipped her glass up vying to be the one to claim the prize.

Cullen gulped and set upon his drink, Bull waggled his eyebrows at Dorian who sniffed and pouted before reaching for his own glass to chug.

The Inquisitor though, was the first one to set her tankard down with a large and very unlady-like belch.

The room cheered hard enough to shake the rafters. KISS KISS KISS! Krem started the chant that rippled to the other tables and up and down their own. KISS KISS KISS!

"Am I to kiss myself then!" Evelyn exclaimed eyes shimmering with delight. "Ahh, I know! I'll claim my own prize."

She turned to Cullen who looked mournfully at his almost empty glass. "Commander?"
He jerked up, booze singing pleasantly in his ears giving the world a fuzz at the very edges of his vision.

"May I have the honor?" She asked bowing like knight. Cullen blushed but played his part well offering his hand daintily like a maiden.

"The honor is all mine."

The chanting seemed to grow louder as she drew closer, a grin curled on both their lips, hearts too full.

She kissed him heartily amid cheers and cries and the exaggerated, playful weeping of the brokenhearted.

The bards will sing of this in their tale.

One of the only points they'll get right.

*Amidst the cries and revelry*
*Of friends and mates and family*
*Two hearts doth beat in symmetry*
*The Huntress kissed her Lion*

Chapter End Notes

I love all my children equally, but in the interest of full disclosure, this is my favorite chapter so far.
They sang and ate and danced and drank. Drank some more, and more yet. Solas had to carry Cole to bed admonishing all of them for letting him get into the liquor.

Josie and Blackwall departed to take a walk along the battlements. Blackwall bowed chivalrously and offered his arm to which Josephine giggled delightedly and took it. Leliana noted this, and would mercilessly tease the ambassador for it in the morning.

One by one, or two in the case of Krem and Lace Harding, her friends...family filed out and into the night leaving her, Cullen, Dorian, and Iron Bull in a quieter tavern though not yet empty.

"So then she jumps a full foot into the air, almost standing on Bull's shoulders screaming 'Kill it! Kill it! I fucking hate spiders!'" Dorian laughed drunkenly swaying before coming to rest on Bull's sturdy shoulder. The Qunari stiffened, caught unawares before relaxing.

"Take him to bed...I mean get him in bed...Make. Sure. He. Gets. To. Bed." The Herald slurred before resting her own intoxicated body against the warm and inviting and sexy and...she lost her thoughts.

A look of understanding passed between the two still sober men. "All the people in the world..." Bull started.

"And we get the two alcoholics." Cullen finished.

"And neither of us would change a thing." Bull raised his glass looking to finish the last few swallows.

Cullen, in spirits higher than high clanked his own glass against Bulls's.
"Aye," he agreed.

**

The night wind blew away the hazy fog of sleepy intoxication, waking and sobering her. She shivered as she leaned against the Commander.

"I hate being cold." She muttered hugging herself.

"I know. Not too far to go. I had a fire built and called for tea to be sent to your room."

They had barely made it up the steps into her quarters before a hard and heavy body pressed against her back.

She squeaked, gasping, caught completely off guard. She almost tumbled forward before a strong arm grasped her around the waist to steady her. A thick lust ridden voice filled her ears.

"I waited, and waited, and waited." He rumbled, his voice purring like the deep thunderous sound of a lion just before it roars.

"I watched you flirt and laugh. I watched you dance. Now I'll watch you as you come undone before me."

She started to shake, desire ripping through her so heavily it caused her knees to buckle under the weight of her lust. He still held her around the waist, his other arm across her chest fingertips playing on her neck while he drew a tongue against the shell of her ear.

"Do you remember my promise, my love?"

The Herald swallowed thickly, nodding.

"Good."
Cullen turned her to face him, keeping her firmly within his arm's grasp. He kissed her slowly, sweetly tasting wine and cinnamon whiskey (their favorite), tasting her as his hands worked slowly at the buttons of her doublet.

As each button popped open, and a hidden bit of skin revealed, Cullen bent forward to kiss it trailing his mouth down the meridian of her body. From the hollow of her neck, to the valley between her breasts and lower still. He sank down to his knees before her, working at her trousers sturdy hand ghosting up and down her closed thighs stopping at their highest length to brush against the juncture between.

Her gasp was so thick and sharp it almost knocked her over. She wobbled from the liquor but the lust in his gaze kept her trapped and trembling. She wasn't about to ruin this game by falling over drunk. Cullen disrobed her from the waist down, removing pants and boots and smalls. Exposed to the air, she shivered, but he didn't seem to take notice. Still kneeling he kissed her thighs leaving little nips on the flesh.

“I have always loved your legs, I envy Jackson who gets to rest daily between your thighs.”

A tongue.

Oh Maker a tongue, pink and rough and deadly poked out between two perfect lips and licked from her knee and higher up and up and stopping.

She exhaled violently and lost control of what to do with her hands. She kept them balled into tight fists at her sides but the feeling of his tongue released them. They flew to her breasts as she bit her bottom lip squeezing herself and moaning.

This was unexpected, the image of her palming herself, pinching and squeezing her dark nipples between her fingers as he knelt before her...fuck, he'd lose himself in his breeches if she kept this up.

Though, he had a promise to keep and she wasn't screaming yet.

“Part for me, my love.”
Her mouth gaped open in a wide 'o' as she tried and failed to process his request.

“Spread yourself for me.” He repeated a little more sternly.

She slid her ankles apart, though just a little bit.

“Wider.” He instructed.

A little more.

Cullen chuckled, amused by her bashfulness. “Open. Wide.” He commanded. “Or I'll split you open myself.”

She groaned, unable to look at his face and yet unable to look away.

She moved, opening herself up to him allowing him the space to slip his tongue up and higher into the cleft between her wondrously thick thighs.

“Look at me.” His hands worked thighs and ass, applying tender pressure to the muscle and skin. She was not yet screaming, he'd soon rectify this.

Their gazes locked, and so encouraged his tongue began to lick at her sopping folds. Just the sight of him between her legs set her off, but feeling him, feeling the rough texture sample and savor her glistening flesh....

She screamed.

He ignored her though noted the accomplishment of his goal. He kept his tongue to the outside of her folds, swirling and lapping drinking. He pulled away to blow against her cunt and delighted in actually seeing her twitch and contract. His cock bottomed out as he imagined what such a movement would have done were he inside of her.
He'd find out soon enough.

He rolled the flat of his tongue up the middle of her gash and his lover almost tipped over backward. Though he knew that wasn't what it'd be to undo her. Oh no. One more trick left before he'd finish her.

Cullen kept rolling his tongue like that against her bringing the entire muscle in contact with her folds. She tasted divine, her wetness his water. Her moans sang to him, encouraged him, hardened him. How on earth could he explain the desire to come from the sound of his screamed and panted name alone?

She tightened again and he felt it, so he stopped rolling his tongue and instead took the tip of his tongue like a pointed spear and stabbed her satiny crown with it.

The result was immediate and immensely satisfying. She bent forward, abs tightening to prevent her for pitching so far she'd fall over.

“FUCK!”

He stabbed again, like a little tap, tap, taps of his tongue against her flesh. She looked so good she looked pained. Both lips were wedged in her teeth, she could not keep her eyes open, her hands were claws at her breasts, every muscle in her body seemed tightened like a bowstring. He got ready to fire.

He tapped out a pattern. Short short short, long where he took his pointed damn near forked tongue and dragged it up and across her nub. Roll flat, repeat.

His lady began to hyperventilate, losing it, losing it so good until she was lost.

She howled when she wished for luck. She howled when she was in pain. She howled for him with his tongue against her cunt and it was the loudest he'd ever heard her scream.

With pointed tongue he kept tapping at her button, amused by the unintelligible babble that spilled forth from her mouth. Then she fell, knees collapsed dramatically bringing her to the floor and face to face with him. She attacked him licking her juices off his face, wild and wanton.
They fought, she snarled nipping his bottom lip and holding it between her teeth, he grunted nails scrabbling and scratching up her back. His lover was not a fragile woman, his claw marks left white lines in her dark skin that would rise into red marks he would kiss and soothe later.

Now was not the time for soothing. He growled back, pulling his face away and clamping his teeth on the fleshiest part of her neck.

“Yough,” her nipples hardened and her cunt rippled ready and eager again for another fucking. His doublet choked him, restraining him from her heated skin, while he kept his mouth on her neck he undid the buttons on his doublet, ripped it free exposing his paleness to the warm air and her warmer flesh.

“Turn over.” They were still on the floor on their knees trying their damnedest to eat one another alive.

She obeyed without question, twisting her body over on all fours before tossing her head back, flipping her hair in a way that made his cock not twitch but fucking pull.

Andraste’s ass he loved her damned hair.

“Fuck,” he groaned. She could make him come from the subtle twists and curls of her body.

With no preamble or endearing word he grabbed his naked cock found her drenched wetness, steadied her and pushed within her burying himself as deep as he could go. He set a ruthless knee shattering pace and both knew they’d have fierce rug burns in the morning but that didn’t matter, didn’t register. They were all wet slapping and hoarse groaning, cries and shouts to the Maker, cries and shouts to each other to ‘Fuck me harder!’

They obliged.

He drilled into, and she slammed back, her generous ass smashing into his hips. She came again with a high sharp shout, neck craned back, body balanced on the tips of her fingers. He thrust forward, tried to thrust through. Three long deep strokes and he screamed, and it sounded like he was dying.
Cullen fell forward, one arm around her waist the other slamming into the floor before he could crush her under him. The plain of his chest pressed against her back, they shook with their passion but did not move, he stayed within her and she made no motion to dislodge him.

This felt right, she felt whole, satisfied, beautiful, delicate, wanton, desired, and worshiped.

He could barely feel a thing save the molten heat of her and the sweet ache of his entire body. He felt ...he felt...

“I feel like I just fucked a volcano.”

A snort burst forth from her sending deep chest rippling laughter through her before he followed snorting and giggling like a child repeating a dirty joke. Then they collapsed onto her carpet, rolling and laughing naked as the day the Maker brought them forth. Her arms wrapped around her middle, her stomach ached from the laughing tears leaking down the sides of her face. He tried to hide his laughter in her neck, thoroughly and utterly embarrassed that he could fix his mouth to say such a silly thing.

She calmed, too pained to keep going and in the silence their minds would replay the scene again and a new fit of giggles would be reborn.

He could die like this. Of embarrassment and joy.

“You're perfect. You know that?”

“Not perfect, I'm a volcano.”

“Maker's fuck, am I going to ever hear the end of this?”

“Never ever.”

“If you breathe a word of this to the dwarf I'll smother you with a pillow.”
She rose from the floor, inspecting her knees finding them red and ashen.

“Fuck it, deal with it in the moooorning.” She squealed. He suddenly had her in his arms, up and off the floor. He carried her to bed kissing every surface his lips could reach.

Her heart thrummed, surprised by how utterly sweet he could be after an almost brutal fucking like that. Under satisfied desires and wanton displays of lust beat a pair of hearts that fully and completely loved one another.

“I love you,” he whispered tangled within her limbs

She did not answer having already fallen asleep as soon as head struck pillow, her hand over his heart.

"This is going to be a thing isn't it?” He asked, whispering to no one conscious.

Chapter End Notes

I've no idea why I've decided to bog down the story in fluff. It'll pick up I promise.

Drop a line on tumblr eh?

mirabai0821.tumblr.com
He worked too much, this he knew. And he didn't think that about himself in the way of false humility, so others would think Cullen was a dedicated Commander—which he was undoubtedly. But the man knew he worked himself entirely too much and that if his ego had anything to say about the matter, he'd work himself into an early grave. It was an uncorrectable fault, a detrimental quirk of habit that had the added benefit of making other's around him work just a little bit harder so they could measure up favorably if not equally.

Truth was Cullen had to work too much, neither his mind nor his body would permit him otherwise.

In the dark of night, idle hands and idle mind gave way to uncontrollable shaking and bloody visions in his waking hours.

Symptoms wholly separate from his regular trials with lyrium withdrawal.

So he learned to cope by throwing himself literally into work, staying up nightly until the candles in his room had burned to stubs thus making him the darling and the bane of every chandler in Kirkwall and now Skyhold.

The first few months with Evelyn introduced a novelty into his life that sufficiently distracted his mind (and his hands), but as time progressed and the pair fell into a rhythm of cherished affection both stolen and planned, old afflictions resurfaced.

So he combated them the best way he knew how.

To work.

“You can stay you know, you don't have to ask, nor do you have to feel like you have to leave.” Evelyn searched his face, checking for boredom or discomfort feeling the slight twinge of fear that she’d done something wrong.

The Commander buttoned up his gambeson and set the straps right as he slipped his breastplate over his chest. “I want to, I do, but as the Inquisition grows, so does the stack of papers on my desk.”

“Bring them here, I have more than enough space.”

Cullen considered this, it was a viable option, one that satisfied at face level the desire of just being near her and preoccupying himself with work before he fell apart into a quivering, shaking mess.

But he didn't trust himself, she'd seen him pretty bad when they argued about lyrium, but she hadn't seen him at his worst and he wanted to keep that from her for as long as he could.

“My gratitude, B, but I work better alone.”

“Ah, I see. No worries then, I don't want to crowd you out.”

Cullen kicked himself mentally in the nuts with an armored boot as she kissed him goodbye at her door.

She withdrew from him a little bit over the next week or so. She attended some light business with
Dorian in Redcliffe that kept them apart for a few days and he guessed that she was trying to give him space.

“Damnit, I don't want space.” Cullen cursed on day nine without Evelyn. He wasn't completely bereft of her no, they still managed to share dinner every night she was in the keep. But after the plates were cleared away he'd politely kiss her on the cheek and make his way back to his lonely, cold, and hissing office to work himself to an exhausted sleep.

But tonight, upon his stack of reports rested a curious note on parchment scented with oranges, flowers, and spices. He broke open the seal perhaps a bit too eagerly and read.

*Let's see if my Lion can hunt. Meet me at the stables tomorrow at dawn. Pack for a day or so.
-BB*

**

By day eight of her self imposed exile from Cullen, Evelyn had successfully scratched up every wall in her room and destroyed Dorian, Leliana, Solas, and Iron Bull at chess.

“I've taught you too much.” Dorian mocked swallowing the last bit of wine. “Now the pupil must assume the mantle of master and climb the summit to challenge her ultimate foe.”

“I'll never win against him.”

“I never thought you'd win against me, yet here we are.” Dorian ceremoniously knocked over his king. “Speaking of me, why am I here, entertaining you when I could be entertaining far more enjoyable company with far more enjoyable games? Preferably ones that employ the use of the qunlat words for 'yes', 'please', and 'don't stop'."

Evelyn snorted only moderately scandalized by Dorian's abject and unapologetic lewdness having become inoculated to it by now. “I'm giving him a break.”

“Oh dear, have you worn him out so quickly? Need he and I engage a conversation with Bull? I'm sure that randy bastard has a plant or poultice tucked away, brought from some dark corner of Par Vollen guaranteed to...” Dorian saw the mock fury in her face and arrested that line of thought immediately.

“No, you ass, nothing like that. I think I might, I don't know...be scaring him away.”

Dorian chuckled. “Sorora, you could manifest as a desire demon right now and he still wouldn't flee you. However, I must. I've a bed that summons me.”

The mage departed but before the door could close, he poked his head back in and shouted up the steps. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For?” She hollered back.

Realizing he couldn't do this with so much distance between them, Dorian re-entered the room and sat back down in front of Evelyn.

“Redcliffe, my father. Thank you.”

“Dor, don't...” she held up a hand trying to stop him.

“No, it needs to be said."
Seeing his father again almost ruined him and only the presence of the Inquisitor could keep him together. His grin stretched across his entire face when she suggested they remain in the tavern afterwards for a bout of alcohol flavored comfort. It went a long way to see him back on the road to being himself again. Getting back to Skyhold, specifically getting back to Iron Bull's particular talents for a different kind of comfort also went a long way.

"He says we're alike you know. Too much pride. Once I would have been overjoyed to hear him say that. Now I'm not certain. I don't know if I can forgive him."

"Don't then. I haven't forgiven mine. He tried to change you."

"Out of desperation. I wouldn't put on a show, marry the girl, keep everything unsavory private and locked away. Selfish I suppose, not wanting to spend my entire life screaming on the inside. Though, I imagine, it's a damn sight better than screaming on the outside."

Evelyn shot him a pregnant look and Dorian took her hand in apology, stroking it tenderly.

"He was going to do a blood ritual. Alter my mind. Make me... acceptable. I found out, I left."

"Maker's bleeding asshole Dorian! It's a good damned thing you didn't tell me that otherwise I would have shot his ass on sight! Can blood magic even fucking do that?"

Evelyn shuddered and was suddenly slightly relieved that Alphonse was no longer in this world and desperately fearful for family that still remained. The heart in Dorian's chest, already overrun by emotions, suddenly burst apart at his Sorora's fierce protectiveness. He was not used to being so cared for.

"Maybe. It also could have left me a drooling vegetable. It crushed me to think he found that absurd risk preferable to scandal. If he had succeeded, I can't even imagine the person I'd be right now. I wouldn't like that Dorian."

"Nor I. You're an ass, and a snob, and a terrible fucking rider which is tantamount to being a maleficar in my book..."

"Woman, I'm from Tevinter. We have litters for that sort of thing!" Dorian interrupted indignantly.

"Pulled by slaves!" Evelyn countered.

"I didn't say it was perfect!"

"The point is, you're an ass Dorian, but you're my ass."

The mage snickered.

"Thank you very much for the offer, Evelyn. And I must compliment you as well on the shapeliness of your own backside. However, it is with great regret that I inform you that my tastes lay elsewhere."

"Ass!"

The Tevinter guffawed. The brother and sister shared a few minutes of tearful laughter before quieting back down again.

"You a'ight?"

He wiped an errant tear, one not from laughter, and was grateful she probably couldn't tell. "No, but
thank you, again. For taking me out there. It wasn't what I expected but, it's something. After that petulant display, Maker knows what you must think of me now."

"I just told you. I couldn't think any less of you. You are my brother from several twice removed mothers."

"The things you say."

"I mean it."

"My father never understood. Living a lie, it festers inside of you like poison. You have to fight for what's in your heart, Sorora. So I also wanted to thank you for what you said about the Iron Bull. I don't..."

Dorian shuffled nervously, most of these particular emotions he had only barely come to grips with in his own mind much less admit them out loud.

“I don't know what this is yet beyond the best physical feelings I've ever experienced in my life. But you encouraged me to 'go for it' to use your words, and for that, I am grateful to you. I don't have to live a lie here. Bull doesn't--won't let me. And I...it's really nice. And so, I must use your words on you now. Go for it. Don't leave him in that tower to rot because you're scared of chasing him away. You won't, you couldn't."

“Thanks fratoro.”

Dorian beamed, pleased to hear someone speaking Tevene this far south. He couldn't let her know that though, he had a reputation to maintain. “Your pronunciation is horrid.”

"Ass."

**

Following Dorian's advice which--as it turned out--was her own advice, she decided to 'go for it'.

But how?

"We should go hunting!" she thought to herself. She shoved her criminally neglected reports—if Cullen worked so hard she should too right-- and follow-ups to the side and began to pen a note to Cullen before she stopped, doubt creeping up her hand and stopping her quick, light quill strokes.

What if he didn't like hunting?

She scoffed at the thought, who didn't like hunting?

Dorian.

Vivienne.

Solas.

Cassandra.

Varric and definitely not Cole.

She once even tried to take Josephine on a small little excursion, just to get the ambassador out of doors for a change and bond with another gentle-born lady. An egregious miscalculation as Josie
wept bitterly at the sight of the squirrel she caught.

"I thought you just go out and shoot them and come back and have the cooks put them in a stew! You didn't tell me you have to skin them and gut them and...Maker's mercy I just can't right now."

She imagined Cullen blubbering over a dead rabbit and giggled. Still, potential aversion to animal guts aside, he may just not like hunting. She really didn't know what he liked outside of chess and that one particular expensive brand of candles she had to ship in from the Free Marches.

"That's the point though, isn't it? To find out? Spend some time together away from Skyhold and figure out more of what we like about each other."

Reassured, she set to work on her note.

**

The next day he met her at the stables just as the rising sun splashed dark colors of orange across a still blue-black sky. She tossed a blanket over Jackson, cooing to him in Dalish, the animal regarding her with a casual eye and occasional snort as though he understood her.

Dressed in her practical looking leather coat lined with fur-she looked every bit the huntress she was. Her cherry wood bow lay draped around her as well as a quiver full of arrows fletched in red. Her hair rested in a tight looking bun, but no matter how much she twisted and pulled every loc to fit the form, some would pop free and hang like vines or spider legs around her face and neck.

Having learned his lesson and knowing better than to try and tuck one of those things behind her ear, Cullen boldly grabbed one and tucked it delicately back into the bun where he knew it would stay.

It did.

She hid her embarrassed grin behind the collar of her coat before looking at him curiously.

"What are you doing?" She asked waggling her finger up and down at him. He stood fully dressed in armor holding the reins of his courser, White Luck, a fine horse--if very Ferelden-- and fit for a prince of the realm. Both were ready to ride.

"Getting ready to go off hunting with you." He looked puzzled.

"Not in that you're not."

Cullen blushed. "Prefer you I travel naked?"

The image ran away from her before she could catch it and Cullen watched as she drifted away on the fantasy of him, nude on a horse.

"Evelyn..." he chuckled waving a hand in front of her face to snap her out of her pleasing reverie.

"I ah..your armor, you can't wear your armor."

"But I always wear my armor."

"You'll clank. Scare the game."

"If you think for a moment I'm going to escort my lady anywhere without armor..."
She twitched and he grinned, ever since revealing to him her weakness for being called 'my lady' he used it often to fluster her.

"Being cute won't win you this. We aren't going far, no more than a day's ride from Skyhold. We won't be in any danger."

"But my lady," he drew out the words stepping closer to her, wrapping a solid armored arm around her waist. "There is danger everywhere, even from me." He purred.

He snuck a quick kiss which she eagerly returned before pushing back against his breastplate.

"Fine, you win. But no horse. We ride the hart, Jackson knows how to take care of himself, he won't spook like a horse and he smells like he belongs."

"He smells like prey." Cullen scoffed, knights rode horses, not deer.

"Even better."

With sinful grace, she vaulted up onto her mount and grunted a command at which the hart knelt docilely waiting for its second rider.

"How do you keep seat that way?" He asked suddenly regretting the answer he might receive.

"I have very strong legs Commander. As you well know."

She kicked her hart into a fast start, forcing Cullen to take a tighter grip around her middle. She shifted and bounced against him, her ass rubbing against his crotch making Cullen immediately and profusely thankful she hadn't made him remove his armor.

The Commander felt a little guilty ditching his work in favor of a tiny vacation with his lover. But the moment he read her note the other night, the shaking in his hands had stopped as he imagined all the things they'd get up to alone with no one to hear them scream.

"Kya! Kya!" She whooped, pushing Jackson as fast as the animal could travel.

Nothing was better than the freedom of a fierce gallop, the wind whipped at her until tears streamed and ran down her face. As the sun rose, breaking across the horizon flooding the sky with beautiful yellow warmth she started to laugh, just so pleased to be riding and hunting with her perfect man hanging on around her middle.

Her joy infected him, the best disease he could ever want, driving all care, worry, and nightmare from him. His shadows dispersed in the flood of her light. Emboldened, he began to holler with her, screaming and laughing into the wind as Jackson bounded over fallen logs and boulders as though the terrain were flat and free.

He didn't know where specifically they were going, but after maybe an hour's ride she slowed stopping them in the thick of a dense forest. A country road cut up the mountain side to Skyhold a mile to the east. They were in the Hinterlands somewhere, but leagues from Redcliffe or anything else resembling civilization as he knew it.

"I've gotten reports of fade-touched wolves in the area. Nothing serious. But we have to keep the road safe for our supplies and whoever's visiting. There's also the odd bear and mountain lion, but those we hunt for fun."

"Only you would describe the idea of confronting a bear fun."
"Dragons are more fun."

She found a decent spot for their camp; close enough to a river for water yet far enough away so no predator could stumble upon them on its way for a drink.

"Will you pitch the tent here and maybe gather some firewood. I'll try to pick up the wolves trail. I'll be back in an hour, then we hunt."

Finding the wolves proved easy enough. They were fade-touched, maddened by the leaked energies of the rifts, they left trails of ragged, sloppy kills right up to their den. Perhaps while she was here, they could close the rift responsible.

She got back earlier than the hour she declared, looking for a bit of mischief, she snuck back to the camp ready to startle the Commander right out of his armor.

But when she saw him, he was already out of his armor.

Out of his shirt too.

Maker's breath but he was beautiful.

Morning sunlight illuminated his entire being making him look too holy to have ever stepped foot on this blighted earth. He raised the axe high and grunted when it chopped into the log, splitting it neatly in half. Golden hair hung in sweaty curls around his face that was relaxed and light. He was half-humming half-singing something, a hymn, the same one they all sang to her after he pulled her out of the snow. She hadn't heard him specifically that day, his voice swallowed up in the others of that impromptu choir. Hearing him know though, made her knees weak and her desire strong. Cullen had a beautiful voice.

And even if he didn't, because honestly she was no proper judge, it'd still be beyond beautiful to her.

This was what he looked like when he had no reports to write or meetings to attend. This was Cullen carefree and the happiest he'd been in years. All his obligation and worry and self-imposed isolation carried away on a single handwritten note and her offered arm.

Evelyn felt suddenly rude, as though she were intruding on something private. She had to go out of her way to step on a twig to alert him.

He spun, axe in his hand no longer a tool of convenience but a deadly weapon. His face darkened into something intimidating and powerful. Cullen the warrior.

"Who's there!" he called, voice sure with its authority, unafraid at being caught armor-less and sword-less.

"Just me." She answered back emerging from the tree line. His face softened immediately and he smiled.

"Just get back?" He asked.

"Yes," she lied.

**

She moved through fallen limb and leafy bush as though made of smoke. Her body seemed to fit
between the gaps and spaces of the forest, touching nothing she didn't mean to. Her bow was out in front, an arrow notched and ready to fly. Before them several wolves dozed in the sun, fat on a deer kill, unaware that murder made flesh stalked them. He followed closely behind; surprisingly quiet in his armor with only minor clanks and clangs. She brought a bow for him, he wasn't the best archer but he had improved making it a point to practice every so often after that first instruction at Haven all those months ago.

She held up a fist halting their approach. They were close enough for the kill.

She made an 'after you' gesture, light glittering in her amber colored eyes.

Cullen notched and drew and waited. When the moment seemed right, he let his arrow fly. The twang of the bow startled the wolves awake, but he caught one right in the meat of its back leg. The pack on alert rushed them snarling and howling, the injured one yelping closely behind. He shouldered his bow and drew sword and shield as she exploded from the bush firing three arrows in quick succession. She roared her own battle cry, whooping and shouting. This wasn't life and death to her, this was fun.

It felt fun.

He never thought a wolf hunt could be fun. His grin was so wide, his cheeks hurt.

Cullen stepped forward shield raised, a bulwark against the onslaught of fur and teeth and fury.

"My lady, take care." He thundered. "Let your lion handle these wolves!"

The first wolf crashed into his shield, he knocked it back with a powerful bash sending it flying against a rock. Another wolf attempted to rip off his shield arm, it bit steel and nothing else as he whipped around and stabbed it in the gut. Enraged by the power of the fade and larger than any wolf he had ever seen, these creatures were still much easier to face than the demons that poured out of the Breach back at the Temple.

Cullen did well to occupy the wolves' immediate attention while she picked at them from a safe distance. They thinned the pack of 12 down to three when those remaining regrouped and gathered with otherworldly coordination to overwhelm Cullen's shield.

He shouted, more alarmed than hurt as one tried again to wrench him from his shield as the other tried the same with his sword.

"Cullen!" She fired one last arrow catching the sword wolf in the ear, then quickly shouldered her bow drawing instead the dagger she kept at her hip for last minute desperate close quarter attacks.

She vaulted forward, striking the second wolf in the face with a kick that wrenched the animal free of the templar. Caught off guard and already frenzied by the arrow in its hindquarters, the wolf tumbled into the dirt. Before it could find its feet, she fell on the animal stabbing it viciously in the neck releasing a torrent of blood and gore all over her.

Over in minutes, the pair of them stood in the quieted forest surrounded by a ring of dead animals.

"You alright?" She asked him.

"Fine just fine, You?"

With a nod, she knelt over her kill and set the blade to work separating the dead animal from its pelt. She worked nimbly, knowing just what joint to cut and the proper way to slide the knife up
under the animal's hide in the connective tissue between fur and flesh. Quick work though not bloodless, she came away with a hide of luxurious looking black fur and a pleased grin.

"This will make an excellent pair of socks."

Cullen quirked his head, "Wolf skin socks?"

"Better than wool."

"Won't you get too hot?"

"I'm never too hot. I am always cold. After Haven, I feel like I'm always cold." A light breeze blew as if to tease her and she shivered deeply, chilled by the memory of the attack and the icy wind.

Cullen holstered his weapon and shield and approached her. He vividly remembered pulling her out of that drift. So cold, she didn't shiver, ice in her hair, her plum colored lips turned grey blue. She looked as though a victim of a despair demon, frozen, a dead block of ice in his arms. When the lyrium came for him, that was what it showed him.

"You pulled me out of the snow." Her eyes shimmered in gratitude.

"I did." He answered. "And I wrapped my cloak around you like this," with grand chivalrous flourish, the Lion of Ferelden took off his mane and wrapped it around his huntress. "So that you'd never be so cold again."

Warm like a glowing hearth, the cloak drove the chill from her. She hugged herself, pulling the cloak closer to her, absorbing it and hoping to absorb more of him though the caress of the fur. Indifferent to the blood that peppered them both, they kissed in that ring of corpses. Wind whipped down from the Frostbacks and the mountain air chilled as the day waned. Neither, though, felt a thing save the warmth of easy kisses and cherished sighs.
She shot two pheasants for dinner and stole their eggs for breakfast later. Nighttime now and newly cleaned, the Lion and his Lady sat close by their fire, turning the fat fowls over and over on a spit.

He bit into his bird, grease dribbling down his chin.

"This is incredible. How did you make the bird taste like this out here in the middle of nowhere?"

She giggled, chewing on a thigh, "Assan told me to always carry spices with me on a hunt."

"Assan?"

"My nana, a Dalish elf."

"You were raised by the Dalish? How could you be Lady Trevelyan?" Cullen asked with a mouthful of meat.

"No, I was born and raised in Trevelyan Manor. Assan was my nursemaid. I am the youngest of five. When I was born, my mother passed me to my father who then passed me to Assan and I'm pretty sure neither of my parents ever touched me again after that. Assan taught me everything. How to ride, to hunt, to shoot. She gave the bow you restored to me. It's the only thing I have of hers. She raised me like a blood born daughter, taught me her language, told me Dalish myths for my bedtime stories."

"Where is she now?"

"Dead." She answered frankly. "Long, dead."

"I'm sorry."
"I am too. I think she was the closest thing to a parent I had. A loving one anyway. I feel kinda like an orphan sometimes. With Assan, Alphy, and Cousland gone."

"Cousland?"

"My hunting hound. You Dog Lords aren't the only ones who make good use of mabari. I named him after the Heroine of the Fifth Blight."

"I actually met the Warden-Commander, back when she was still Lady Cousland."

She perked up and leaned forward, locs brushing dangerously close to the flame. "Get the fuck out, you knew the Heroine of Ferelden? What was she like?"

"She was covered in blood, huge greatsword strapped to her back. The way she spoke, you didn't argue, but she didn't make you afraid of her either."

"What about her dog? Did she have her mabari with her?"

"That's right she did have a mabari. Huge hulking thing, well trained. Better trained than that templar the Warden carried around with her."

Evelyn squealed like a child. "When I was younger, I dreamed of meeting her and watching our dogs play together. Damn I miss my hound."

"What happened to him?"

B chose her next words wisely. This was not the time, if there would ever be a time, to discuss the nature of her relationship with her father and the rest of her family. If the Maker was a benevolent god, she'd never have to worry about him again.

"We were out hunting."

She was in her bed, sleeping. Cousland curled up at her feet. In the morning, she planned to slip out
quietly and enjoy a few days freedom in the woods and up and down the coast.

"A man attacked me."

Not just any man, but her father. Drunk again and fuming. Somehow, someway he'd found out about her unplanned, unapproved trip. All of her hunting excursions were unapproved as the diversion he foolishly indulged his daughter in her youth, had grown into a distraction overwhelming her good senses and precluding her from doing the things that mattered--like trying to find a worthy husband for her intractable ass.

She was 26 years old and still unmarried. The debacle with the Teryn had been a setback but damnit, it was almost if she was being intentional in her foolishness. How was he supposed to keep the image of his family sacrosanct if she kept consorting with knife-ears and oxmen? It enraged him, he had to put a stop to it once and for all.

"Cousland barked, alerting me."

The hound was getting old and was far too deep in sleep to notice his mistress' sire sneak into the room, his gauntleted hands reaching for her throat. He only barked after the man had clamped the hand around her neck squeezing the life out her.

Evelyn remembered vividly the feel of the metal press against her airway, saw the sneer in her father's dark, wine soaked face. "You will not make a fool of me!" he slurred.

"He attacked."

Old as he was, Cousland was still a loyal hound. Gareth made it a point to never approach his daughter when the hound was near but he was too drunk to notice tonight. The mabari snarled and clamped bone crushing jaws around one of the wrists that were choking his daughter to death.

'Dad, please!' she gasped, her hands still weakened from sleep, were ineffectual against him. Her hands were always ineffectual against him.

She always let him explode his anger upon her. It was safer this way, safer for the younger one and for the one who didn't know how to fight back.
Gareth screamed as the dog bit down on him, trying to wrench him away from his daughter. The gauntlets on his hands left three thin scratches finger width apart scoured into the flesh of her neck. As she gasped and choked she began to scream.

"Cousland was getting old, not as quick as he was when he was younger."

'Cousland Sen'tha! Sen'tha!' Disengage! Disengage! With the gulps of precious air she could snatch from the onslaught, she didn't scream for her father to stop his assault. She screamed to stop her dog.

"The man killed him."

A dagger disengaged him, striking the hound in the belly. He gave one long pained howl and relaxed back onto the bed laying down for his final nap. His death saved her. Lord Trevelyan would have possibly killed her that night had Cousland not intervened. Her father, disgusted and wounded released her and left her there crying and rocking her dog.

"Did you get your attacker?"

Evelyn emerged from the fog of her half-truth tale. "He got away."

She ran away.

That night, she grabbed the letter from Alphy and packed her bow. She didn't say goodbye and left no note. But Evelyn couldn't just disappear. Gareth would track her down, use his considerable resources to find her no matter where she fled. If she was ever to be safe from him, she would need to find a place where even he could not touch her.

The next day she was on her way, ready if not reluctant to trade the prison of her home for the prison of a Chantry.

The next day she departed for the Conclave.
He kissed her eager to restore the smile to her face. Eager to banish the memory, she returned his affections. She kissed like summer rain and summer breezes, refreshing and sweet. Evelyn nibbled on his top lip, paying particular attention to the scar that bisected it. He moaned into her mouth, a sound that encouraged her further before she remembered a task she needed to accomplish.

B scooted away from him, breaking the kiss with a satisfied sigh. Cullen growled a bit, complaining. "Diner is done and I require a proper dessert."

"In due time," she purred rising and disappearing into the tent before quickly returning. "But I just washed wolf's blood out of my hair. Now that it's dry, it must be oiled or else Vivienne would kill me."

She pulled the leather cord that held her bun in place and her vines, thick and black and lovely came falling down in a way that made Cullen's heart clench. He bit the bottom of his lip and scratched the back of his neck nervously. 'Maker have mercy.' he thought.

She produced a vial of yellow-orange liquid and popped the cork filling the air between them with the smell of flowers, citrus, and spice.

The smell was summer breezes in the coldest winter. It was the smell of oranges he loved but knew were too expensive for his father to afford. It was the look on his father's face when he presented his son with an entire bag of them, entreating him to eat them slowly and share with them his siblings. That bottled contained the memory of Mia's spice cookies and how he and Branson and Rosalie burned their mouths because they couldn't wait for them to cool. Her hair smelled of the flowers he gave his mother, plucked from the fields where their windmill spun. The same flowers he placed on her grave, smiling not crying because he knew--wherever she was--she enjoyed them.

"That's it!" He shouted sounding very much like Dagna after discovering a new way to craft a rune. "That's the smell."

"My hair oil?" She hid the bottle against her chest, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I'll do this later. I didn't know it smelled so bad to you."

"Maker's breath no, I love it. May I?" He reached for her and she hesitantly handed him the vial.
"No, I mean, if you want me too, if you don't mind could I...could I help you put this in your hair?"

The heat that flooded her face made her think her skin was on fire. She handed him the bottle and sat between his legs her back against his stomach.

Her hair was a thick nest of loose hair from which sprouted her long rope like locs, looking closely he could see the scalp was parted in patterns of squares and diamonds before being covered by all the newly grown hair. He dabbed some oil in his hands.

"More."

He dripped more.

"More."

More yet.

"I've got a lot of hair Cullen."

He covered his palm with the stuff, wonderfully intoxicated by the smell.

"How should I?"

She grabbed his hands and rubbed them together, smearing the stuff over both his hands. With comic flourish, she popped his hands on the top of her head then made them rub against her hair.

Cullen curled his fingers penetrating the roots to get down to the scalp, the effect was immediate. She sighed contentedly at his ministrations-- this half beauty regimen, half scalp massage. Delightful tingles raced from her scalp to the base of her spine and back up again relaxing her and energizing her all at once.
"It's so soft," he murmured wondrously. Like woolly silk, springy, curly, and soft as cotton fluff. For far, far, too long he'd been curious about her hair. A fact which might have derived from his general curiousness about the woman who wore it, but the nature and texture of it fascinated him endlessly. Her locs didn't hang like average hair, it had a weight to it which seemed to animate it with its own personality.

He massaged the oil into her scalp from the tip of her widow's peak, all the way down to the nape of her neck. He didn't miss the edges of her curls by her ears and took the opportunity to playfully flick her earlobes.

B snorted and squirmed in his lap before devolving into more satisfied noises as he rubbed up to her temples.

"You have to..nnngg...get the shaft."

Cullen's fingernail snatched on a root, B yelped in surprise. "I meant the hair Chantry boy!"

"I know you meant the hair!"

Grabbing a handful of locs, he separated each one into the grooves of his fingers and worked his hand down the shafts of each.

"When Viv does this for me, she just snatches the hair apart and applies the oil with her nails. It never feels this good. I'm sorry if I ask you to do this for me every time."

"I wouldn't mind." At the ends, some of the locs came apart in tightly wound curls or ended in blunt tips. "I've only ever seen this kind of hair on the Dalish, and then not often, which I guess makes sense now because of Assan."

She nodded. "I grew this after she died, been growing them since she died actually. A way to keep her close. I'm surprised, not many men or women for that matter, like it."

"It looks good on you, makes you look unique, beautiful..."
"Exotic?" She supplied with a soured tone.

"No. I mean it's a good reflection of you. There's so many unique textures and looks you have with it almost like how there's so many facets to you. Rest assured, you make your hair beautiful, not the other way around. And all of it, I love."

Satisfied with his job of erstwhile hairdresser, just ran his fingers through her hair careful not to snag anymore knots in the roots or unravel a loose end. He enjoyed the feel of it, the weight in his hand. It felt substantial, sturdy like she was, it would withstand demon's fire while his own might be signed black. She leaned back against him, resting her head in the crook of his neck. He continued to play in her hair though he brought his arm down around her middle and pulled her closer to his chest. Together they dozed in the light of the fire, lulled into peace by the cracking and popping wood.

"B?" He liked the way her nickname felt on his lips. B could mean anything, best, beautiful, bride... "We should head to bed."

"Ok," she murmured sleepily. Cullen rose to his feet, back a little strained from leaning against a tree. But the way she looked at him with her half-sleep half-adoring eyes made any pain not already eased, completely worth it.

They crawled into their tent, she took the initiative to push their two bedrolls closer together, not suggestively though, as she did everything with the motion of a woman ready to get back to sleep and not interested in any other activities. She took off his cloak and offered it back to him.

He declined it, preferring instead to sleep in a simple woolen tunic. "Good. I didn't want to give it back anyway," she answered draping it over her, using it as a second blanket. "Always cold." She muttered before her head struck the pillow.

He fought the pull of sleep for as long as he could, marveling at the sight of her looking so peaceful in her slumber.

They woke tangled up in each other's limbs, arms wrapped around chests and legs fitted between one another.

"Hi," she woke smiling crookedly
"Good morning love."

They took their time heading back to Skyhold, instead of racing the animal, they let Jackson amble at his own pace up the road. They spent the time talking, teasing laughing, her back to his chest. They even found time to sneak a good snog or two in the saddle. By the time they arrived, dusk had settled on Skyhold like dust on a neglected vase, slowly evenly, until it was covered in the black-blue of night.

"Think anyone will mind we've been gone two days?" He asked, feeling a bit nervous but not the least bit regretful of shirking two full days worth of reports.

"Fuck 'em."

"You have such a dirty mouth!"

"One that you enjoy." She licked her lips for effect, drawing a nervous groan from the templar. He dismounted, nearly catching his foot in the stirrup.

"You're going to kill me woman!" He hissed, scandalized and loving it.

"Only a little death." She replied swinging her leg over the hart yet waiting to slide off. "Excuse me. Ser Knight, would you help me out of the saddle?" She asked with the fake air of an arrogant marquess.

"Of course my lady," he answered back enjoying their game. He settled his hands on her waist and lifted her up and off Jackson. He brought her down slowly, letting her slide down between his hands bringing them in contact with hip and waist. When her feet touched the ground his hands were on the sides of her breasts, he pulled his hands away letting fingertips linger as they separated from her body.

Her eyes darkened and she checked the stables to see if they had company.

"Blackwall's with Josephine I bet." He whispered huskily, guessing that's what her darting eyes were searching for.
"How long do you think he'll be gone?" She asked, licking her lips.

"Long enough," he answered before pouncing, pinning her against the barn wall.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I'm pretty sure the fluff bloc is done.
With my side projects done and the unfortunate unholy mess of last week concluded, I can get back to my baby. But I can't work on Into Darkness all the time (I can...I really can) without having something to break it up. So... Send me prompts! Here or tumblr. Send 'em, I'll write 'em. Everybody's happy. (I guess)

Lyrium's cruelty can manifest quickly and without preamble. One minute he could be writing reports at his desk and within the span of seconds, he could be a panting, screaming, violent mess.

Nighttime, of course, was the worst. A dreamless sleep came rarely but most of his nightmares were forgotten by sunrise. Some of his nightmares startled him awake with the sound of screaming fading with every moment he remained in the living world. He shook them away, said a small prayer, and returned to sometimes restful slumber. Other times the dreams woke with him, morphing his waking world into his nightmare where the images of his daily life were replaced with visions of the terror.

Bodies lay stacked in the corner of his room. The smell of blood, sweat, sex, and death assaulted his senses. He could hear the muffled cries of poor mages twisted and warped into raging abominations and he alone, no armor, no sword was all the stood in the way of Thedas and its destruction.

Strike! Templar! Strike! A holy voice thundered.

Take up arms and smite the demon!

Purge the world of its defiler! Its deceiver. Let not your flesh be tempted. Succumb not to her corruption. She has deceived so many with her blasphemy. She is a demon sent by the unholiest. She is Maferath's whore!

Strike!

The Knight Commander trembled, his body rejecting the call to arms.

See how she deceives you?! See how she makes you weak!

You alone can save us all but you must act.

Strike!

Her hair was one thousand black hissing snakes, her skin deep and dark like black, ugly mud, unlike any of the Maker's children.
A demon.

He moaned, pained. Her image pained him. He reached his arms for her.

Strike!

He did not want to strike.

Something twisted violently within him, begging him, moaning and pleading with him not to strike.

Do not be corrupted!

Stop. Stop!

Shouting screaming, in his head and in his ears.

Her smiling mouth held fangs.

"Cul-len" She cooed and her hair hissed. "Cul-len...your pretty mageling. Look what I've done to her..."

Solona, dead in the demon's arms. Not ripped apart but pierced by arrows.

Fletched in red.

Strike! Look what she has done! STRIKE!

No. Please no!

He could feel her scratches on him. He could see the visions she induced, the moaning and the writhing and the sin. He cried out against his will, twisted and manipulated into her dark embrace...his body betrayed him.

Save us Templar. Holy warrior. Do what your Maker has commanded!

Do not do this. I'm begging you. Cullen. Please.

He fought with himself, torn between action and inaction.

Hands closed around the demon's throat.

Yes! Strike!

He squeezed.

**

She woke to the feeling of hands around her neck and the air being choked out of her. She lay there for a moment, alarmed but unafraid. This was a dream, one of many, of her father almost killing her the night before she fled Ostwick for Ferelden. If she stayed still, the sensation would pass. If she startled, she could wake Cullen and he deserved his rest.

But as the hands squeezed harder, the sensation did not fade as all dreams do when its awareness is acknowledged.

Cullen's pale hands, not her father's, were wrapped around her throat.
His thumbs tightened, pushing her airway closed.

Oh shit.

Her hands shot to his wrists trying to dislodge him, digging her nails into his skin hoping the shock of pain would awaken him.

"Cullen! Stop!" Evelyn shouted feebly, no more than sharp gurgle strangled too short. Cruel irony bit into the flesh of her neck restricting even more air.

Men who were supposed to love her, always wound up trying to choke her to death.

Caught as unaware as one could be, she had no leverage to struggle against him. She writhed and thrashed, kicking ineffectually at his chest with her powerful legs and pulling at his wrists as hard as her screaming muscles would allow.

She was strong, in limb and constitution. On an even playing field she could best him. His bed, where she was supposed to be safest, was no arena. She struggled, vision blackening at the edges. Spots danced before her eyes that bulged and strained with the pressure. She began to wheeze as fire lit up her limbs and the fight slowly drained from them.

"Cul- Plea-!

The sounds of her dying satisfied him. Finally, he would take his freedom and release himself of the prison of shame he'd lived in for over ten years. He destroyed her with his very hands, smiting the demon as the Maker had intended him.

Already its hold over him was slipping. The bodies disappeared and the screams subsided save for the harsh gurgling strangling sound of the monster dying within his grip. His senses returned, free of corruption and influence. Knight-Commander Cullen took a deep breath ready to press down and wring the final bit of life out of the creature when he smelled citrus, spice, and flowers.

Let go! Let go! Let GO!

A voice, his own voice, tore out of his mouth in an anguished cry to the heavens.

"Let go!"

He released her.

Air washed over her, a cool wave in a burning desert. The last salient bit of her animal brain took over her body and she kicked him away and rolled as hard as she could, scrambling to escape her attacker. She fell with a hard crash to the floor, coughing and sputtering and moaning.

Overwhelming nausea gripped her in the bowls and she pitched her head out the window and voided her guts, hoping there were no unfortunate soldiers stationed below.

Cullen's sleeping nightmare washed away, replaced with a greater waking one.

"Evelyn!" Cullen jumped up from the bed.

"Stay back! I love you, stay back please. Just." She spat away the final bit of ejecta. "Give me a moment."

Evelyn gulped for air, willing the trembling in her form to stop.
That wasn't him. She told herself, burned it into her consciousness. That wasn't him. Not. Him.

She closed her eyes for just a moment, her breathing finally evening out from the racing terror that had overcome her. It felt just like it did before. Except she had no hound to save her, her only protector being the one who closed his hand around her throat.

*Don't do this.* She willed herself. *You can't do this, not right now. He needs you, he needs you. Summon your strength and cast it about you like a shield. Now is not the time. Now is not--*

The sob let go before she could stop it.

There were no words for him, for the piece of human filth he had become.

He hurt the woman he loved, and not the accidental elbows to the face that sometimes occurred when her vines tickled him in just the right spot in just the wrong way.

No.

He almost killed her.

And now she stood before him, arms wrapped around her body, the imprint of his hand etched on her throat, blood swimming in the white of her left eye. Marked fleetingly in body and indelibly in heart.

He did this.

Him.

A bloody, demon wrought death would be far kinder than the vision of his hands upon her throat.

"Evelyn." Her name drowned in his throat with a watery gasp.

"Are you alright?" She asked him, breaking his world apart under his feet. "The nightmare, are you okay? Does it hurt? I can get a healer for you."

He didn't realize he had crumbled until he was on his knees sobbing as tears fell. And Maker's balls she's got strong arms. She pulled him into her and held him like he was the one hurt.

But they were both hurt.

So they cried together, each one soother and soothed in equal parts.

*Hold him together,* she thought. *And you yourself will stay whole.*

And it worked. For both of them. She held him together and thereby stayed whole. The memory of her father lay forgotten and buried, a story for another time if it was ever to be told.

He should have left, should have demanded she leave. He was dangerous as the bruise on her throat and the blood in her eye screamed. But the grip of her arms around his shoulders was stronger than the grip of his hands on her throat.

"Don't even think about it." She whispered, kissing his hair. And he sobbed just a bit harder, undeserving of her...everything.
Half-naked and shivering, they sat on the ground, moonlight leaving slatted rays of silver against the floor of Cullen's chambers.

A blanket lay discarded across the bed.

Neither attempted to reach for it.

So they stayed together, kept warm by body heat alone.

"What did you see?" She asked.

"Kinloch's demons. Except they wore your face. You...the demon...she was hurting me, she murdered Solona in front of me."

"Solona?"

"Amell."

"Will you tell me about her? The good memories." Evelyn asked, curiosity momentarily overwhelming her better senses. "I understand if you don't want to." She amended.

"No, it's fine. It's not like I was going to get back to sleep anyway."

"Nor I."

He chuckled, no more than a heavy chuff, but at least it was something.

Solona Amell was a brilliant mage with a brilliant heart. Nothing frightened her, not her Harrowing, not the demons who assaulted her, not even the templars who snickered in her hearing saying that Tranquility existed for reckless mages such as her.

If she lived, she would have ran that Circle by the time she turned 25.

Instead she died at 19. Ripped apart by an abomination. Right before his powerless, wide open, bloodshot eyes.

He suppressed the memory of her because it was always associated with her bleeding, broken, body...a thing he once touched, kissed, caressed, and loved.

But now he fished for her in his mind, avoiding the lyrium laced traps baited with her screams, searching for his favorite memory of her.

There.

"It was late, Solona was in the library. That was her favorite place. I went looking for her and found her there."

"What are you doing up so late?"

Solona startled as if having woken from a dream. The book in her lap lay open, her finger under the passage she was reading. She hadn't been asleep, not truly, just enraptured by the tales of the book. Stories so far away and so bright; better than the dingy, dark tower she was consigned to for the rest of her life.

But, Solona thought, not all was dark.
In walked her sunshine, curly head glowing like a corona.

"I was reading."

"That much was obvious. I was inquiring as to the lateness of your activities. Find a sordid passage in some chapbook? Afraid to leave it lest a younger apprentice snatch it away from you?"

She smiled at him, patting the empty cushion next to her. "Come see for yourself."

He remembered balking, he was still a good templar, she could get in dire trouble if caught out of her quarters so late. Solona enjoyed more privileges than most as she was very helpful to Enchanter Wynne but still, rules were rules.

But she smiled at him, eyes glowing in the candlelight, and he felt compelled to obey.

His armor clanked when he took up the seat next to her, and he had to bend in uncomfortable ways to lean close enough to kiss her neck just under her ear.

But his discomfort at her rule breaking and his chafing armor melted away when she sighed into him.

She began to read.

Her voice was music without instrument, enhancing the singing already in his head. Together they made such heavenly sounds that it threatened to reduce him to tears.

His joy only increased as he gleaned the title of the tale, The Witchwood, a story his mother was fond of telling him.

"Do not go past the edge of the wood. You are too young and too foolish to face the dangers within." Solona finished, red lips curling into a smile. "You once had an older brother who would've agreed."

He always shuddered at the end, remembering his mother and the look of warning she would shoot him, entreating him to not become that older brother to Branson and Rosalie.

But with the tale told under her voice, he could only sigh with contentment, wonder, and love.

'I'll never love another woman in this life.' Cullen thought, and was greatly pleased.

"Do you think of her often?" Evelyn hadn't meant it to sound like that, petty and jealous like. Merely curious about the woman who held his heart before her, if she held it gently or if she tossed it about like Andreas had done her.

"No, not really. I used to, in Kirkwall. But now that I don't see her in my nightmares so much anymore, I thought I might let her memory rest."

"I'm sorry for disturbing that peace."

"No. No I should be thanking you. You reminded me that not all my memories of her have to be so violent and that I still have good memories of my past left to recall. Not everything is so dark back then. Thank you." He pulled one of her arms from around his shoulders and kissed the inside of her wrist. He turned in her grasp and brought his hands to the side of her face. He applied a kiss of apology to the corner of her left eye, the bloody one. His lips found the bruise on her throat and left a gentle caress of his lips there, careful not to press too hard and aggravate the pain.
"For everything."

Chapter End Notes

I am a fan of melodramatic and referential titles. I can't help it. Deal with it.
But Deliver Us From Evil

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning for: Light self-harm and violence
I apologize for neglecting this warning last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She postponed her next departure to see him through the week. He was bad, not always, but as worse as she'd ever seen him. So she tried to drag her stay at Skyhold out for as long as she could. She made excuses and called unnecessary strategy meetings, pulling out every trick in her repertoire to remain until he got better.

One morning she woke in her quarters alone, finding his side of the bed empty and cold. His armor was gone and he left no note, just disappeared as though he'd never been there. Understandable, he was an early riser, and despite her insistence that he rest, he seemed determined to continue his work as the activity usually made him feel better and inactivity worse.

So she went about her day as usual.

She drank with Dorian. 'It was after mid-day!' She explained to Cassandra.

She abused the archers with Sera--one of the only times the elven girl could be bothered to actually practice. 'What I need ta practice for? I shoot the arrows into the fleshy bits, thingies die!' Sera huffed indignantly after the arrow she fired at the practice dummy missed the heart and hit somewhere decidedly lower. 'I dun care whatcha say, that's a lethal shot.'

She fought with Vivienne yet again over the Inquistion's lax policies and freedoms given to the mages under their command.

"Honestly darling." Vivienne sipped her tea in her solar, "Blood. Magic. Have you no fear?"

"No." Evelyn snipped back. This argument was getting pretty tiresome. It's been months since the Mages came from Redcliffe, there hadn't been an incident yet nor whispers of one.

"You should."

"I trust them to govern themselves and when this is over, we'll see about getting everything changed. Until then we treat them no differently than I treat my other soldiers. Treating them differently was how we ended up like this in the first place."

Kirkwall. Evelyn was determined to never allow such an event to happen again as long as it was within her power to do so. She owed it to Cullen.

"But how would your templar feel if...Actually, how is your templar? I haven't seen him at all today. He's usually barking at the children, scaring them into believing he's more than the sweet little lamb he is."

Evelyn snorted into her tea. She had a few bite marks in a few places that would put lie to that characterization. Turned out there's more than one way to treat a lyrium headache and said
treatment usually ended up as a balm to them both.

"I haven't seen him either, now that I think about it." Evelyn frowned. She figured he'd been gone to work, if he hadn't been working today..."We'll finish this fight later Viv."

"You should address me as Enchanter Vivienne, Court Mage to the Empire of Orlais, or Madame de Fer. Not, 'Viv.'" The enchantress called after her as she departed.

"Talk to you later, Viv."

Vivienne sighed, but smiled nevertheless.

**

She carried a bag with her to Cullen's tower, a gift and a vial of her hair oil, the latter brought in hopes to beg, bribe, or connive him into oiling her hair for her again. His fingers felt divine against her scalp.

She knocked on the door.

No answer.

The door unlocked, she went inside.

His desk stood untouched in an unlit room. His ladder was missing.

"Cullen? You in here?"

Nothing still.

She closed her eyes and quieted her breathing letting her hunting skills take over. Assan taught her how to measure the sound and tempo of her breaths, to make it easier to hear the game and harder for them to hear her.

She heard shivering and a muffled moaning sound--like someone had stuffed a rag into their mouth to quiet the noise. A smell assaulted her, something reminiscent of unwashed flesh and vomit.

"Cullen!"

She gazed up the porthole to his room seeing the edges of the ladder poking just over the lip, drawn up, retracted like he was locking himself in and others out. Even with her most powerful jump, she couldn't reach it. The bookcases and the desk were too heavy to move and his chair was too short to use as a boost.

"Cullen! Let me up!"

"Go...away!" he sounded like he was strangling.

One of the many secret reasons he loved her was that she slept like death. Almost nothing save an earthquake could wake her from sleep, and for that, he was glad. She missed his nightmares, not all, not the ones where he woke screaming (or the ones where he almost choked her to death), but the sinister ones, the ones that eased him back into consciousness, the ones where it felt like he was waking into the dream and not reality--she missed those. He woke such a way this morning, still in the thickest blackest part of the night, he woke still feeling his hands around her neck as he throttled her dead in his dream.
He didn't wake up in time.

She went limp under him, eyes bulging, tongue thick and lolling out of her mouth.

And when he woke to her still, rock-like form in her bed, he fought to remember that she still lived. There were nine agonizing seconds where, in the dark, he could not tell if she was breathing. When his eyes adjusted to the dark and he saw her chest move, he almost wept for joy. But she turned over, revealing to him the healing bruise around her neck, and that joy soured.

*Smite the demon!*  
*Save us!*  
*Save yourself!*

He didn't trust himself to remain, so he left, went to his quarters and drew up the ladder to keep him from her and she from him until the pain and fugue passed.

She knew already of his obsessive work habits, and he, foolishly, thought his absence would be attributed to that.

She noticed.

Her voice sounded like a scream. When she called again, it sounded like a moan. A moan of pain, or demon's moan.

Cullen remained where he sat, terrified to let her in lest he lash out again. He almost fucking killed her the last time.

He heard his door click shut and he sighed, relieved that she took the hint and had left him alone.

It was better this way.

She was safer this way.

But then he heard a sound, thumping and curses coming from outside.

She was climbing his wall!

He staggered to the window and looked down.

Thank the Maker! Of course she wouldn't be so foolish.

Loose mortar fell into his hair, a pebble struck him in the back of his head.

Cullen looked up.

And found her almost to the roof.

"Evelyn!" His voice broke hoarse across the grey sky. Grey-blue clouds hung low in the sky threatening imminent rain. "Stop! You'll fall."

From her hand holds in the divots of the stone she bent her body just a little bit to look down.

Cullen looked haggard, made worse by the wild look of fear in his eyes. "Climbed trees higher than this. And they didn't even have nifty hand holds."
The Maker didn't like her hubris apparently. As she climbed higher to reach the hole in his roof, her foot slipped, shaking loose an entire brick. It bounced down the side of the tower, missing Cullen's head by miles. "Ok, so It'd help if you let me concentrate."

She climbed higher, up and over the top of the tower. "Please! Stop! Leave me! I am not well."

"That makes me want to leave less you understand?" She called down after him as her feet thudded on his roof.

"This isn't..." he dry heaved, falling back to his knees.

"Cullen!"

She dropped down the hole with an ankle tingling thud. From the floor he looked up and saw her.

And then ran for the opposite corner.

She did not look like the Evelyn he knew.

And it was not fear he felt.

He flattened himself as small as he could, clenching his fists into tight balls to avoid lunging at her with them open into claws.

"She is no demon. No demon. No. Demon." He chanted.

"Oh baby...no."

A wraith had run through the room, upending nearly everything, including his sword and armor rack leaving disaster and splinters in its wake. She set down her bag and reached for him, but thought better of it. She would give him some time first.

Evelyn gingerly stepped around a half-cleaned pile of vomit and a plate of food left stale and half-eaten. His bed sheets were tangled and half off the bed, books and candles littered the floor.

She found a basin of cool water and a rag and used it to clean up the hazard on the floor. She set the books and candles to rights. Remade his bed and re-racked his armor, sword, and shield.

As she worked, he watched her.

She wore nothing less than a smile, annoyance free from the glimmer in her eyes.

Her skin remained dark brown and muddy colored, but he remembered that he liked mud.

Her hair went from snakes to vines, and as they moved they sounded like the patter of rain and smelled soothing, like old comforting memories.

Her fingers were no longer claws, the smile in her mouth did not reveal fangs.

She was Evelyn, and she was no demon.

Done with her task she kicked the ladder back into place and began to climb down. "I'll be back shortly. Don't move this unless you want me to start climbing again."

Downstairs and outside, she flagged down a servant scurrying to the kitchens.
"Inquisitor ma'am?"

"Prepare me a bath, send it to the Commander's quarters." The servant's face warmed in a knowing smirk that died once she saw the frightening looking darkness in the Herald's face.

"Yes ma'am. Right away ma'am."

"Bring food, something warm. If there's any of that stew left, bring it. Bring wine."

"Right away ma'am."

"One more thing."

"The servant stopped, wiping the conspiratorial smirk off her face as she turned to face the Inquisitor."

"You tell a soul about what I asked you, you talk to your little friends and you will know the wrath of Andraste herself. Do you hear me? My Commander is ill and I'll not have you gossiping about it to all of Skyhold. My ears are sharp, my arrows sharper."

The woman squeaked, her message loud and clear. "Yes ma'am."

The Inquisitor smiled sweetly and genuinely hoping to take some of the bite out of her threat. "Thank you Valenna."

Valenna's eyes widened in shock, she had no idea the Herald knew her name, unaware that the Herald knew all their names. Every last servant, stablehand, bard, and barmaid. She knew all the people under her command just as her father knew every servant and vassal and vassal's grandchild. A trick to garner the loyalty and love of her common folk.

But right now the only name of concern to hers was Cullen.

She returned to his room, thankful she didn't have to scale the sheer side of the tower to get to him. Once back in his loft, he was still crouched in his corner. Arms wrapped around himself and shivering.

"Okay love," She kept her voice low and soothing as best she could. "I've got a bath coming for you, but we need to get you down. Can you get down?"

He seemed to hear her, he met her gaze and nodded slowly. "Y-yes."

"Alright honey eyes, alright."

She knelt in front of him, bracing herself against the floor before wrapping her arms around his shoulders and lifting. If she needed to, she could carry him.

She'd carry his entire world.

"Strong..." he mumbled.

"I frequently use 40, 50, and sometimes 60 pound bows. Yeah, I gotta be strong. Strong for me, strong for you too my lovely."

A sharp knock made the Commander twitch and jump. She heard the scurrying and thumping of a pair of servants bringing in a tub of hot water and the fixings she requested. They kept silent as they set about their work. Good.
“It’s just the bath sweetheart.” She cooed. They’d made it to the hatch by the time the servants left.

“Let...let me go down first. In case I fall.”

“Nope. I go first, that way if you fall, I catch you.”

“You...can't...”

She made a mockingly mean face. “Don't tell me what I can't do.”

Cullen felt the corners of his mouth twitch. “Maker I love you.”

"There you are," she smiled taking his face in her hands. "You're coming back to me."

She hopped down the ladder. “Okay, one leg at a time.”

“Alright.” He nodded, his confidence building with every step. He took the ladder one rung at a time with slow, tentative movements. She hovered below him, not much to do if he fell except hope to break his fall against the floor.

She made it to the bottom of the stairs. One, two, three shaky steps and he too made it to the bottom.

“In you go.” She gestured to the tub.

“Let me...I have to...” he looked nervous and began to tremble, his shaking hands pulling almost uselessly at his smalls as though he were afraid to...

She saw the red marks around his hips, unmistakably fingernail scratches. She felt sick.

She also felt the need to march down the stairs, past the courtyard, and set the Chantry on fire. They did this with their fucking lyrium. They were the reason he suffered. She would discuss this bit of blasphemy in the morning with Dorian, leaving this part out of course.

Evelyn spun around and even made a great show of covering her eyes with her hands. Grateful he didn't have to explain his trepidation, Cullen quickly peeled off his smalls and hopped into the bath.

"O...okay."

"Do you need help?"

"No."

He watched as she kept her hands over her eyes as she turned back to face him. In the dark, she had to grope about for a bit before she found the tub, but when she did, she found him within it and kissed him on the temple.

"I'ma be right behind you. Call me if you need me."

He washed in silence and she did not watch, choosing instead to turn her back and stealthily uncork the bottle of wine she had brought.

Ditching the glass, she drank straight from the bottle.
She had been afraid of what the lyrium withdrawal would do to him, and afraid that when his sickness did strike, she would not be equipped to help him. Even as she listened to him bathe, she didn't know what effect, if any, she was having on him.

Evelyn didn't know how to help, didn't know what to do. And she hated her impotence.

She took another swallow and thunked her head against his bookcase.

Hot water and clean, sweet smelling soap went very far to ease him out of his terror. The soap washed away the blood, the sudsy water concealed the damage done. Cullen didn't know how to ask for help, and did not expect anyone to offer it to him. He was expected to be strong, to swallow fear and hurt and to soldier through. He was a soldier, that's what they needed from him and for the most part, he didn't have too much trouble meeting that expectation. On days like today, he shut himself up in his tower until the pain and the need went away. Without help. Without aid.

It's exhausting being the strong one.

And here she was, come unbidden to aid him in ways he didn't know he could be helped. He felt like crying, but tears didn't shed.

Someone knocked at the door. "Commander! Com--"

"Leave. Now! Before I send you to the Void!" Evelyn roared.

Cullen laughed, truly laughed as the footsteps of whoever that was retreated quickly across the flagstones.

And that was how she knew she helped.

**

He finished his bath and redressed in clean clothing. She got him back up the ladder, convincing her she didn't need to lash him to her back so she could carry him up.

"No. That's ridiculous."

After she tucked him into bed, the servants returned to take away the tub and bring the food. They ate in comfortable silence, her relishing the little pleased noises he made as he devoured his favorite Ferelden goulash.

Clean, full, and calm, Cullen sagged into his sheets feeling the best he had in what felt like an age. He felt like he just walked through fire and come out the other side better than when he entered. She had done that for him, that wonderful creature, without question, without even being asked. And somehow some way, she was able to intuit what he needed.

She hadn't coddled him, hadn't rocked him to her breast like a babe. She cared for him in a way that kept his pride whole, he was weak but she didn't make him feel it.

"I have something for you."

"What more could you do for me?"

Evelyn dressed for bed, went fishing in her bag and pulled out a book. The woman kept it close to her breast, almost afraid to show it to him, unsure of the effect it would have.

"You once gave me back something I thought lost. My bow, it was the only possession I took with
me from when I left home. The only thing I really cared about. After Haven, I couldn't leave it behind, even though it was broken, I felt broken. But you gave it back to me, better than what it was before--and I was restored along with it. I thought...I thought I might give you that feeling back."

She opened her arms revealing book. It was thin and yellow, bound with blue lining on the spine.

Cullen's eyes widened, eyebrows disappearing into his hairline.

He knew this book.

*The Seer's Yarn.*

She used to read to him from this book.

She read his favorite story to him from this book the night before she died and it was the most wonderful thing in the world.

"Evelyn." He choked. "How?"

"Dorian and Helisma have read just about everything in that library. I gave them a description of the story. They found it for me."

"Maker's breath." He went to kiss her, but she held up a finger.

She opened the book.

And began to read.

'I will never love another woman in this life.' Cullen thought, and was greatly pleased.

Because this time he was sure.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all are awesome.
Keep being awesome.
Chapter Notes

And now for something completely different.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Now Dorian adored the Inquisitor, loved her like a blood sister. She was funny, she enjoyed her drink, and she was generally an exciting person to be around if one enjoyed mucking about the Storm Coast with Bull, his Chargers, and an ass of an elf with a ridiculous name.

However, Dorian thought, and he did think the notion might have something to do with his insufferable superiority complex or his less sinister run-of-the-mill arrogance, he could be just as good if not better an Inquisitor than she. Stick glowing, rift sealing magic on his left hand and not only would he have had Thedas ship-shape by Harvestmere, but half of the Free-Marches and a good third of Nevarra too.

Not to mention the incredible hand jobs such an enhancement could provide.

Especially if the office of Inquisitor came packaged with that delightful piece of man-cake Commander.

But let's not get greedy.

Evelyn was a good leader, that wasn't the issue. His issue, and again it might have been something only a little--little tiny bit flavored by jealously, (because who wouldn't want all that loving attention from the unwashed masses bowing in reverence, collecting the dirt in the wake of her steps, and reaching hands to kiss the hem of her leather coat hoping to gain some small blessing from it), was that she took far too long to come to a decision.

Lady Trevelyan dithered, prevaricated on choices that, to Dorian, should have been made 5 minutes ago. It frustrated him, her unwillingness to go with her gut, wasting precious minutes, hours, days of his time. And now, don't misunderstand, some things require careful consideration.

"Grey leathers or black?" Evelyn asked Dorian as they prepared for their trip in a few days.
"Where are we going?" He asked, sifting through his immense chest of robes.
"The Storm Coast." She answered.
"The Ignis then."

"Chardonnay or Vinum Ignis?" Vivienne asked, upset that she was being left behind.
"Do you have anything important to do in the morning?" Dorian questioned thoughtfully.
"Not really." She replied.
"The Ignis then."

"The whip or my hand?" Bull purred in Dorian's ear as the qunari plied both instruments up and down his naked back.
"How loud would you like me screaming?" Heat suffused him, lust crushed him, made his voice shake under the weight.
"Loud." Bull growled back.
Dorian shivered. "Both then." He answered, and almost drooled.

"Dreadnought or Chargers?"

See, this was one of those times where Dorian would serve as the better Inquisitor, because while Evelyn considered the choice, as Bull looked positively helpless, Dorian would have already decided.

Frustrated, annoyed, and fucking cold from all the rain sticking to his grey robes ('Smart trick, see no one can tell you're soaked Sorora') Dorian decided to ply his hand at being an Inquisitor.

"Why choose at all? We don't have to."

Evelyn quirked an eyebrow. "Explain."

"Give me Blackwall. We'll go down to the coast, fend off the Venatori, and protect the dreadnought. You take Bull and relieve the Chargers. No one has to choose."

"Dorian," Evelyn stood infuriatingly silent for a moment before answering. "The Venatori..."

"Are the pass/fail cast off of the Imperium Circles. Average at best. With Blackwall's shield, and my superior magic we'll be more than enough."

Bull went from helpless to looking *pained* but kept his mouth uncharacteristically silent. He was paralyzed, used to knowing what to do, used to being told what to do. There were no clear cut directions for this, Dorian needed to help.

Now if Evelyn would just make the fucking choice already...

"Alright. Do it. Blackwall, you good?"

The man nodded and together the mage and the warden headed off toward the beach.

**

"Ok," Dorian thought as another fireball singed his grey robes until they were only black, burnt, fabric with hints of grey. "There is definitely a reason why she is the Inquisitor and I am not."

An unfortunate lesson learned far too late.

The Venatori on the beach were the children's magicians he thought them to be, but even party magic starts to hurt when its cast on you by a bloody coliseum's worth of mages.

"Magister!" Blackwall called, shield only barely blocking an ice spell. "We can't hold the ship!"

"I'm not a Magister! I'm an Altus damnit!" Dorian cried back unwilling to accept the truth of Blackwall's words.

Oh Void, stinking, rotting, putrid Void, Dorian had fucked up. The Venatori were crawling up the beach like flies on shit and if they didn't escape now, they'd be lost along with the dreadnought. Panic surged through him.

What would Iron Bull think? Would he be upset? Even worse, would he think Dorian somehow tried to sabotage the operation to destroy the dreadnought in the first place?

As much as he got off on playing naughty magister(altus)/ Seheron captive, Dorian didn't really
harbor that much ill-will to the qunari. The conflict between his homeland and Bull's was a matter of pride but nothing else. If a war broke out tomorrow he'd not think much of it, being too far removed in sentiment to even care. And it wasn't really like he was 'rah-rah' Tevinter!' in his heart, that was just an act because like Evelyn, like Bull, and like Vivienne, they all had their roles to play, faces to construct for the outside world. And Dorian's face was that of the arrogant Magister (Altus!) from the all perfect, all powerful, Tevinter Imperium. An act he thought to put aside to help a friend.

And he failed miserably.

"Dorian!" Blackwall shouted.

His mana lay in the bottom of his spirit; the last dregs almost run dry like the sediment at the bottom of a wine bottle. He summoned one more spell, but miscalculated (thank the fucking Maker Vivienne was not here!) and shot it wide. The magician he faced did not miss and hit him in the chest with a spell of indeterminate magic that knocked Dorian out cold.

**

Bull watched the dreadnought burn, heard the screams of the sailors, and watched as the mages on the beach hurled spell after spell at the ship until finally the dreadnought did as all dreadnoughts do.

Gatt fell to his knees when the ship exploded, before exploding his anger upon the Iron Bull (Hissrad).

"All these years, Hissrad and you throw away all that you are. For what? For this? For them!" he sneered.

Krem stood next to Bull somehow managing to look guilty just for living. As did Skinner, Rocky, Stitches, and Grim. They knew what it cost the Chief to save them.

Dalish was with Evelyn in the tent, tending to Dorian while Blackwall sat by silent observer as he always was.

"My name is Iron Bull." The lead Charger answered.

Gatt sighed, shaking his head. "I suppose it is."

**

Evelyn emerged from the tent with Dalish behind her, wiping off her hands with a bloodied rag. Gatt was apparently gone and Iron Bull was left pacing back and forth shooting obvious and murderous glances at Blackwall.

"Boss,"

In a game of Wicked Grace, Iron Bull could play poker and still win and Evelyn valued that particular flavor of his cool duplicity.

But his voice was clean of any dissembling and raw honest concern painted his face like a vitaar. "Dorian is he...?"

The Inquisitor suspected something and decided to poke at the Bull with a stick perhaps a little too sharp
"He's dead."

The look, _that look_, when his face plummeted with the news, confirmed her suspicions.

"Of embarrassment Bull, Maker." She chuckled and patted the qunari on his massive bicep. "You know Dorian, wounded pride is just as bad if not worse than an actual blood drawing wound. He'll be fine. You can..." She tested him again. "Go talk to him if you like."

She saw his flash of anger and saw it cool when she suggested he go talk to the mage, further confirming her suspicions.

"Yeah Boss, I'll do that."

He angrily pushed past the Inquisitor, mentally vowing some sort of payback for that little stunt later. Perhaps he'll arrange to have her 'questionable' reading material left behind in the Commander's office.

He charged into the tent, throwing back the flap before almost ripping it to swing it back closed.

_Kaffas_, Dorian thought.

"What the fuck Dorian!" The tips of his horns poked the fabric at the top of the tent. If he kept pacing like that, he'd rip the whole thing apart.

Dorian groaned a bit and lifted himself off the ground and onto his elbows. "I'm sorry Iron Bull. The dreadnought..."

"I wanna know," Bull cut him off. "I wanna know exactly what the fuck was going on in that puny little..."

"Wait Bull, please." Dorian shifted to sit up, uncaring of the giant bruise he bore after taking that magical blast to the chest. "Please don't think I did this on purpose."

Bull paused a moment, his rage supplanted by another emotion he well knew. "Wait, what do you think I'm talking about."

"The Dreadnought, it's destroyed isn't it? I don't want you to think I..."

"Yes it's destroyed but I don't give a fuck about the destroyed, damn dreadnought. I wanna know what made _you_ think you could go down there with fucking BLACKWALL and try to fight off a horde of Venatori mages?! You could have been killed. You were almost killed."

Dorian was shocked silent.

"You're a mage, a good one. But you should have been up here with us. You would have been safe."

"But Bull, your people..."

The qunari shifted uncomfortably on his feet, finally pausing his nervous pacings. "Yeah well, I've been Ben-Hassrath so long, the qunari...they really weren't my people anymore."

"Yes they were. Are. They are. And now they are gone from you. I didn't want that for you. No one should have to choose between their heart and their home. And Evelyn, who knows what she would have done since you well know how she likes to _consider_ things. I thought...I thought I'd help."
The mage's face was so beautifully expressive; subtle twists and quirks that Iron Bull loved to catalogue when his cock was deep inside him. It let him know just how hard to push, how hard to hit, how soft to kiss, suck, and lick. Iron Bull could read his face like it was a fucking map pointing to all the places in the Dorian's heart. He read that map now, the directions clear, but should the path be trod or not?

Iron Bull knew the road, could see the path very clearly. He knew himself better than Dorian knew Dorian and Evelyn knew Evelyn and he knew the moment he took the first step, the qunari that emerged on the other side would no longer be Iron Bull. He would be something greater, and he would be something less.

No matter the outcome, he knew he would be made weak, guided by the map of Dorian's smile.

The Iron Bull groaned and fell to his knees in front of the mage, crawling to him, getting inside his personal space. "All this was supposed to be was a way to relieve excess tension. Get your kicks in, get your rocks off, maybe do a little self-exploration along the way, push your boundaries little. We did that. We enjoyed that. And that's all it was supposed to be. No feelings, no emotions. You can't change the fucking rules like that Dorian."

Bull and Dorian had kissed many times before. Passionate fiery kisses that sometimes made the sheets actually light on fire because the things Bull could do to him, set his mana off like gaatlok in a burning dreadnought.

But this kiss was rain, sweet torrential rain that filled, crested, and flooded their souls. Dorian was surprised at how soft the Iron Bull was and how much he enjoyed that utter softness.

He pulled away before Dorian could whine for more and placed his hands on either side of Dorian's face. Bull could crush small boulders with his hands but he held Dorian like it was the most fragile thing in the world.

His eye bruised purple and black, his lip split, and his moustache was frayed and wild and completely unlike the waxed perfection Dorian usually wore. He feathered his thumb back and forth across the mage's bruised cheek. "I'm gonna throttle Blackwall." Bull muttered.

Dorian was rendered speechless, again, a first for him. He could believe that the Bull could display this level of untold sweetness, just not for someone like him.

He made him feel like a precious thing, a beloved thing, and damned did Dorian need something like that.

"What do you want Dorian?" Iron Bull placed another impossibly soft kiss on his lips and this time, Dorian did have the chance to whine for more. "Tell me. Say the word. You know the one. Say it and this'll all stop. But tell me, I need to know, do you want to change the rules?"

He knew the word. The one in qunlat. The one that ended everything.

But Dorian was a scholar. He knew other words too.

"Na'am." He said, unable to tear his gaze away from the Bull's molten stare.

The Iron Bull slid his thumb down the bridge of Dorian's nose causing him to shiver with emotion and desire.

"Meravas." Bull whispered his answer and kissed him again.
"Na'am" - My bullshit attempt and finding an arab slang term that I could appropriate as qunlat because it was difficult to find a word for 'yes'
"Meravas"- Actual qunlat for "so shall it be."

Questions? Comments? Concerns?
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She thought the slow sucking icy feeling in her chest would go away after a few days, unaware that it only got stronger the longer and farther away she was away from Skyhold.

“Sigh like that again, and I'll pour this whole blighted bottle down your throat until you can't remember which way is up let alone pine so damned hard.”

“Leave her alone Dorian! At least you won't be hurting for your desired company.” Vivienne snapped. Evelyn had intended for Blackwall to join them on this trip, but after the shit show at the Storm Coast, (and Bull's constant vicious threatening of the man) she sent the Warden back to Skyhold with the Chargers and called for the Enchantress.

Bull chuckled, while Dorian...well he didn't quite flush but they could tell the Enchantress had embarrassed him.

“Viv,” B called from some far off memory. “Do you miss Bastien?”

Vivienne's eyelashes fluttered, the only sign of emotion on her serene looking, expressionless face.

“Yes, fondly.” her voice thickened.

“When this is over, will you go back?”

“I suspect not.”

“Why not?”

“My darling, you and I both know why I joined the Inquisition. I will have more waiting for me when this is over than just being the mistress of a Duke.”

Silence settled, each of them wondering what they'd do when this was all over, provided they lived to see the end of it.

Vivienne would take up her mantle as First Enchanter, and resume her duties as Empress Celene's advisor (granted the woman survived her cousin's treachery). She would bid Bastien adieu, close up the final door on her heart, deadbolt it, and throw away the key--transform her last bit of softness into iron.

Bull had his Chargers now, and that suited him well. His life would continue on just as it had when he was under the Qun. He tried not to think about Dorian in that future, the little bird perched on the shoulder of his heart. He couldn't imagine the mage forsaking his cushy life in Qarnus to rough it in a mercenary company with him. No more than he could imagine being a Qunari living within the stuffy and hostile confines of the Imperium. Bull was no man's slave, not even a pretend one,
and not even for Dorian.

Dorian himself intended to ride out this Inquisition thing for as long as it held, even after Corypheus was defeated. Sorora would need competent and trustworthy companions to manage the holdings she had accumulated as Inquisitor--the land, the soldiers, the alliances. Maybe he'd get himself set up as a Bannling or something--who the fuck cares--he'd do whatever it took to stay in the Maker forsaken south for as long as he could because it's different down here. No expectations, no bloodlines to carry forward, and no one (at least not yet) to look at him crooked when he kissed a qunari and sighed contentedly into his shoulder.

Evelyn did not think of the future, for she felt in her heart that her life came with a very distinct and clear end point. The final fight with Corypheus, whenever that came, would end her. She knew it. Felt it in the green mark glowing in her hands and aching in her bones. She would not survive this, the malignant cancer in her hand sapping away all her strenght every time she stitched a rift. But she swore on the honor of her heart everyone else would.

'Nobody dies for my hide.' She thought.

"And what of you Lady Inquisitor?" Dorian teased. "What will you do when this is all over? Make an honest man out of that Commander of yours and go have a gaggle of curly headed children?"

The notion startled her a little bit, wrenching her out of somber thoughts. She imagined chubby, curly haired children with their father's eyes and a complexion somewhere between his sunlight and her silt.

But she'd have to be alive for something like that to happen...

"I don't know."

"What about you Dor?"

"I don't know either. I tend not to think that far ahead."

"You don't think that much at all." Bull quipped. "Especially when I'm around."

"Discretion isn't your thing, is it?"

"Three times!" The qunari roared with pride. "Also, do you want your silky underthings back, or did you leave those like a token? Or... wait, did you "forget" them so you'd have an excuse to come back? You sly dog!"

"If you choose to leave your tent open like a savage, I may or may not come."

"Speak for yourself."

Evelyn laughed manically for the better part of an hour while Vivienne rolled her eyes and retired to her tent.

**

Cullen admonished Evelyn once for her personal missives being too short, lacking any substance to tide him until she returned, a failing she corrected immediately and spectacularly.

She brought him with her in her letters.

*The Maker carved the Western Approach out of orange rock, scrub brush, and pale yellow sand that reminds me of you because of how it manages to find itself in every nook and cranny of me.*
Sand in my hair, in my boots, crunching in my mouth making me think I'm eating some of cook's peanut brittle except far less tasty. The winds blow hot and dry, and it also reminds me of you, your breath hot over me as you breathe my name.

I think everything here reminds me of you. You're everywhere. Except with me.

And I miss you.

Love,

Me

And she always enclosed a curiosity or two in her letters. Sometimes flecks of jeweled rock, sometimes a rare desert flower pressed in the folds of the parchment. Maker's breath, a woman was sending him flowers. He could smell the rain where she was, feel the howl of the wind on his face. She made his cold, stone tower a little less stony, less cold. Sweet and exquisite, her letters always served to soothe him, make their absence from each other less keenly felt--and also drive him crazy for how powerfully he missed her.

B

I think I'm going insane without you. I can't sleep, or eat, or think straight when you're gone. Leliana has threatened to have me thrown from the battlements.

Send help.

I love you,

C

**

Leliana,

We met up with your scouts in the Exalted Plains. They informed us about the Dalish camp and we found an army of Orlesian soldiers holed up in a church assaulted by Darkspawn. Please consult with Josephine and send the necessary aid to bolster their camp. We need the support of chevaliers for the Winter Palace operation.

Me

P.S. Leave Cullen alone, isn't he cute when he pines?

**

Inquisitor,

We received your request for aid for the chevaliers but be advised our resources are spread thin enough as it is without yet more mouths to arm and feed. However, the Crossroads are seemingly doing better, I will negotiate a turn down of aid there in order to assist the chevaliers.

L

P.S. No. And also, no.

**
Cullen,

Dorian and Iron Bull make this trip un-fucking-bearable. They're either fucking or fighting or fight-fucking. All the time. Non-stop. They're like horny teenagers or something. It'd be sweet if it weren't so damn infuriating! And Maker's Balls they're loud! Cotton balls, a pillow, nothing seems to drown them out. Viv and I are fucking miserable.

Assholes.

Cullen read the letter as he walked the battlements, her frustration clearly felt even through the parchment. He spied that scout, Jim, who glanced at him, blanched, then scurried off in the other direction. Cullen smirked, not necessarily at the skittish soldier, but for the idea he inspired in him. He made a note to himself to buy the scout yet another drink, to thank him even if he didn't know what exactly for.

My love,

Maybe I can offer you an alternative. Next time you find yourself assaulted by Dorian and Bull's vigorous couplings, imagine yourself pressed under me, writhing the in the sheets-- my headboard clacking against the wall as I well and thoroughly fuck you. Can you hear them now, over the sound of your panting and your moaning? Can you hear them over the sound of my voice hot in your ear? I would command you to scream-- and wouldn't you just love to scream for me? To drown out all the competition? I've heard you, I know the kind of sounds you make when you holler for luck from the back of your mount. Apply that for when I mount you.--your delicious backside slamming against my hips.

My love, I would make you voiceless. Remember that the next time you find yourself so assaulted.

Until I See You Again,

C

She made the mistake of reading this missive in front of the others. Bull and Vivienne noticed when her eyes went as wide as oranges and she tried to hide her face in the paper.

"Get something good in the mail darling? Do share." Viv almost cackled like a witch. She remembered the days when Bastien would send her ribald letters that she would read only in the darkest part of the night when she was assured all the other girls who shared her quarters were fast asleep. She remembered how she had to bite her knuckles to keep from sighing wistfully (lustily) as she imagined her dear Duke whispering those written words into her ears.

"Ah...no it's nothing, just something sweet from Cullen. That's all."

"Oh I bet it's sweet alright." Bull snickered.

Dorian though, was the only one bold enough to actually walk behind her, surreptitiously reading over her shoulder. Evelyn was so caught up in the heat on her face (and heat elsewhere) to notice him.

Dorian read a few lines (only a few, after all he was a gentlemen and gentlemen shouldn't read a lady's private letters) mouth falling open as he hadn't realized the Commander had such a devilish streak in him.

Lucky girl.
He nodded to both Viv and Bull, grinning cheekily, confirming their suspicious about the letter's contents.

Yet all had the good sense to keep their mouths shut.

Later, cloistered in her tent with her teeth ground together to keep quiet, she slipped a sorely inadequate hand down her body and into her smalls. She thought of Cullen, his voice, the roughness of his stubble, his calloused hands, his everything. She worked herself until she was modestly soaking though never the fountain she could be within his arms and under his attentions.

She allowed herself one sigh of his name. “Cullen,” moaned softly while rubbing at the aching nubbin of flesh that crowned her sex. Her release was soft and muted, though needed to ease her aching muscles and tired bones into sleep.

She almost cried afterward she missed him so deeply.

**

Her next letter was surprisingly short it but didn't stop him from laughing out loud when he read it and then snickering to himself for the better part of the week.

Damn you!

He imagined his poor frustrated huntress sneaking off to her tent to relieve herself of her arousal, her fingers dancing against her as she tried to keep quiet. But Maker could she make a racket if she needed to.

He reached for his glass of wine and even after swallowing a thick gulp, his mouth was still dry from the thought of her. She was all around him, she penetrated the air he breathed, she was in his veins, in his eyes, ears, nose, mouth...Andraste's tits, she was everywhere. He imagined her as he sat his desk, naked as her name day, bouncing and rolling on his cock, hands clasped around his neck, his hands buried in the soft flesh of her hips holding on for dear fucking life. She fucked him, raw and unforgivingly, coaxing every shudder from him, squeezing him dry, earning twice over every scream of her name. She was a harsh and burning, vindictive mistress, she exacted her pleasure and his own, ripping it from them like hairs torn out at the root--satisfying and painful. She whispered filthy things in his ears that made him flush from scalp to toe. His cock throbbed in his smalls begging his immediate attention.

Damn he missed her!

Like a youth still in the Order, he undid his belt and breeches and fisted himself in a cruel grip pumping himself into his hand, imagining her cunt or her mouth, their wetness working over him, dripping over him. “Evelyn” he sighed, clamping a free hand over his mouth, sucking on his fingers, worried someone would hear him. He jerked his hips through his tight hand, clamping down every now and again to simulate the feel of her velvety channel swallowing him whole.

“Maker...Evelyn!” he came with a heavy grunt, like he'd taken a spear to the chest, his seed running down the length of him to drip on the floor.

And he wasn't the least bit ashamed.

**

B
What did I tell you about giving me something to work with? I might have to punish you for your error now. As soon as you get back, I'll tie you up to my bedposts legs wide open and wanton--your delicious drooling cunt practically soaking my sheets. What a treat you'd make, a feast and all for me. I'd devour you, savor you, lick you up better than the sweet rolls you steal from me when you think I'm not looking. Oh yes love, I'd eat you alive, tongue working your slit until it's a sopping, juicy mess. Maker, just the thought of fucking you with my tongue has me hard for you. Only for you.

I'm waiting for you. 
Return.

Soon.

Love,

C

**

Commander, Inquisitor,

Your 'correspondence' got mixed in with my messages from my contacts at the Winter Palace. While I understand the separation is a hardship for you two, please be aware that our ravens are for official Inquisition business only, not to ferry smut back and forth between you love lustbirds.

Regards,

Josephine

P.S. That's what couriers are for.

Amateurs

-J

**

Cullen was unable to meet Josephine in the eye for a week thereafter and he and Evelyn managed to keep their messages chaste for the time being.

Cullen,

We finished up business in the Oasis and the Western Approach before heading back to link up with your builders in the Exalted Plains. We'll be assaulting the last demon hold-out before heading back to Skyhold. Wait for me, my love. I'll be back soon.

How are you feeling? Are the nightmares bad? I'll drop everything and run to Skyhold if you need me to. Say the word, I'll come running. And I run very fast.

My love forever,

Me

Evelyn,
I miss you constantly. Your laugh, your smile, the way your hair sounds when it strikes your back after you let it loose from your ponytails. I noticed you put a few drops of your hair oil on my pillow. It makes sleeping easier. My headaches and nightmares are manageable. Cole once told me ‘she doesn’t make the headaches go away, but she makes them not bother him so much.’ It’s true. You are my cure, I’ll only be well with you back in my arms. I patiently await your return. Please come home soon and Be. Safe.

Love,

C

**

Their letters had been on a fairly regular schedule with each party receiving one every 5 to 7 days. It was day fourteen before he received her response.

And instead of her tiny, neat script it was something hastily written though not without a flourish or two. Perhaps Dorian?

Cullen,

We eradicated the demons in the Exalted Plains. The Inquisitor is badly hurt. We are heading back to Skyhold.

Cullen allowed them one day to make it back to the keep. If she didn't show up after a 24 bells, he'd ride to meet her wherever she was. She was supposed to stay safe damnit! How can she not obey a simple command? Stay. Safe!

But the Commander lied to himself, he couldn't even wait a day. After about two hours (and he surprised himself by being able to wait even that long), he had his horse saddled and ready to ride. He would carry her back to Skyhold, bury her in his kisses and his bedsheets, and command that she not leave.

For the rest of her natural life if he could manage the feat.

“Commander? Where are you...” the Seeker started to ask before he spurred his mount through the open gate. Gone and with a howl for luck no less. Cassandra smirked to herself before burying her nose back in her book: Daggers and Dangers II: Love is a Battlefield.

**

After the Revenant in the Exalted Plains mangled her bow arm, after Dorian knit the bone and healed the flesh as best he could. After Vivienne went behind his work with a condescending cluck of her tongue (“Really? You warp the Veil through the wound not around it to get the most thorough healing!”) Even after both those fucks had poked and prodded and bandaged and potioned her up until she was fucking half-drunk and damn near invulnerable to all ailments they still wouldn't let her ride home.

She watched the sky, face up in the wagon they commissioned from their forward camp in the Emprise du Lion, the white clouds rolling by lazily on a field of powder blue. They were two days out from Skyhold and honestly, she was fine. Demons were shitty, the demons in the Plains were extra shitty and extra tough to beat. They all took a fair number of licks in that battle, the fucking skeletons just kept coming and arrows don't work so well when they strike the gaps in the bones.

Jackson trotted faithfully next to her cart, pawing the ground impatiently asking with brown eyes
so deep they were almost black ‘So we gonna run or what? Because you and I both are sick of this fucking child's pace they've set us at.’

Evelyn laughed and stroked her hart's nose. “We'll run soon.”

“No we won't. You are on bed rest for at least a week.” Vivienne clucked still riding fucking sidesaddle on her Orlesian courser.

“All that fine horseflesh I bought for you, wasted by your arrogance.” She yelled, head still fuzzy from all the healing magic and potions they drowned her in. “You are supposed to gallop into the Void and back on those things, not bounce like a dainty waif on them. Ugh, such a waste.”

“But ma'am is a dainty waif.” Bull called from the back of his Abyssal Hang-Tooth. Bull needed a decent mount as the horses were too damn skittish and none too hardy around him. She was going to have one void of a fight when the ambassador asked how much the damn thing cost. Well worth it though, Bull rode strong and sure and was completely in love with the fact that it was a damn dragon. Dorian often found himself having to fight the blasted thing for the Bull's affections—and the mage did not take well to being number two in that love triangle.

“I am neither dainty nor waify,” Vivienne answered, actually looking offended.

Dorian laughed.

“My dear if I hadn't seen you fight, I'd think a stiff breeze would knock you over.”

Said stiff wind, summoned from Vivienne's staff, knocked Dorian over, twisting him up in his saddle and reins on his plain Ferelden Forder. Ten months. Ten whole months of near constant riding and the ass still...still couldn't keep his seat.

Her friends laughed, even Bull who at once reared, halted, and helped Dorian back upright.

“Here, just ride double with me.” Bull offered, voice soft and tender.

“On that thing!? It's as like to eat me rather than suffer my weight!”

Dorian knew better. He knew first and second hand how strong the Iron Bull was. However that didn't stop his heart from turning completely over in his chest when the qunari lifted him free of his saddle and placed him neatly on his own as though he were more fragile than crystal and weighed no more than air. “There, see? Better.”

His grey arms came around the mage, regaining his grip on the reins, and caging Dorian in a circle of strong, sweet arms that would never let him fall.

And damned if the Tevinter, for the first time in ever, felt comfortable on a horse...well dragon.

The First Enchanter recalled fond times of riding with Bastien and actually let a smile grace her face while the Inquisitor groaned and fell back on the cart hard, head striking the wood.

“Worry not, my dear, you'll see him soon.” Vivienne called intuiting the reason for her heavy sigh.

“How about now Boss?”

“Ha! Now would be great but we're still two days away from...” She heard a horse's whinny. A fine sounding specimen but so entirely, impossibly, fucking Ferelden.

Evelyn bolted upright, aggravating the tenderness in her arm, but her eager joy superseded any
sensation of pain.

Two months had turned to three because of the demons in the Exalted Plains and all the thrice damned shards in the Forbidden Oasis that Solas almost...almost got down on hand and knee to beg her for. It had been three months, three, long, agonizing, lonely months and there he was, her prince on a white horse come to greet her on the road.

The sound she made was somewhere between a scream, a laugh, and a squeal. Cullen heard it, and saw his lady leap out of her cart and onto her awaiting hart, who seemed just as eager to greet him. He found them at the bottom of a twisting mountain road after 8 hours hard riding. The Commander smelled of horse and sweat and any number of unholy things but to see her vault from cart to mount, a dark brown blur of energy and eagerness, he felt his fatigue wash away replaced with life.

Her life.

Finally returned to him.

He spurred his horse as she galloped toward him on hers and they met somewhere in the middle, their white mounts circling around each other while they tried to embrace from the saddle.

“Maker, you had me so worried. I told you to stay safe!”

The Inquisitor swung a leg over and landed hard on her ankles in the dust. She pulled, pulled with her one good arm, her Commander out of his saddle and together they crashed into the dirt and snow of the mountain road all smiles and laughter and cold and love. He crushed her under the weight of his armor, neither cared.

“I'm safe now.” she answered between kisses. Kisses to his temple, his cheek, his nose, his ears, his eyes and also his lips. “Safe. Now.”

**

They rode until dusk before setting up camp, each of the party regaling him with the tales of their months long travels.

Vivienne has a penchant for pickles when she's on her monthlies and Iron Bull almost lost his remaining eye for divulging the information. Cullen listened halfheartedly focused only on the fingers that wound their way within his gloves dancing in and out of his grip. Evelyn let the rest tell their tales, marveling at the sheer miracle of his presence. Three months was too damn long.

Apropos of nothing, the Inquisitor rose from the fire and disappeared into her tent, her intent for Cullen to follow all but obvious.

All four of them gawked at her retreat.

“Well Sorora certainly is eager.”

“She's injured.”

“You think that'll stop the Boss?”

“Can you three not talk about that like I'm not here?” Cullen flushed, even his scalp turned red. Vivienne waved a hand to dismiss the conversation. “Just try to keep it down, and don't hurt her!”
Cullen gulped. “Yes ma'am.”

“Honestly ma'am, you should worry more about her hurting him.”

If embarrassment were a fatal thing, he'd be half way to the Maker's side and back by now.

**

Her two over protective healers had long since mended her broken arm. It was still tender though, a tenderness she tried to work out by ripping off her sling and flexing the muscles back and forth and back again, mimicking the motion of drawing her bow.

“Good as new?” Cullen entered the tent, the evidence of her companions' incessant teasing still obvious on his face.

“I should tell them not to bother you so bad, you might never come out and meet me again if you have to keep fending them off.”

“Tis no bother to be nearer you, my lady.”

The phrase had it's desired effect, perhaps too effective because the Inquisitor choked back a real and raw sob before she swallowed him up in an embrace.

“Damn I hate it when you call me that.” She murmured into his neck.

“You're lying.” he whispered back, fingers threading through her hair. It was fuzzier than when she left, the roots had grown up and over her scalp again obscuring the patterns that separate each thick rope of hair.

“Your hair is longer.”

“Yours is darker.”

“It always gets a little more bronze in the winter.”

“It was fall when I left.”

“Yes.”

“I've been gone too long. And I will have to leave again.”

He felt her grip on him tighten, felt her swallow her sobs, only a short sniff gave her away.

“There should be no tears here.”

“Can't,” A sighing shudder. “help it. I don't think you understand. I missed you.” They stood there for a full ten minutes just rocking back and forth and side to side, breathing. Simply breathing. And neither of them made any movements to recline into a more comfortable position. Comfort be damned. All the world. Be damned.

“No, you're clearly the one misunderstanding.” He moved them now, withdrawing from her to remove plate, pauldrons, and vambraces. Under her gaze, he slowly stripped himself of armor leaving nothing but naked skin. Closing the distance between them, he had her wrapped up in his embrace again. Tiny kisses bloomed against her cheek, jawbone and neck. “But words,” his lips found her pulse in her throat. “Were never my gift.”
“I beg to differ, some of those letters...” His laugh vibrated against her throat and she discovered her joy had returned to summon her own laugh. This was indeed no place for tears, no place for melancholy. He gave her the strength she needed. Indeed their love consumed them both, putting in place something stronger than was extant before. All things were possible so long as they loved each other.

He made her fly

“Allow me then, my lady, to make good on some of the promises made therein.”

On the ground now, a pallet of furs crushed against her back. She whispered his name in a breathy sigh while he closed his mouth around her throat. “You stole my shirt.” A statement, not an accusation.

“Needed to keep warm.” her hands touched his chest. She felt his breath flutter and arrest. Gone too long.

“You spent most of your time in a desert.” Strong hands, calloused alighted on her waist. There was a new scar there, he cataloged it with fingers intending to sample it with tongue later.

“Needed to keep warm.” She repeated. Rough tongue, felt almost new.

“Always cold.” He answered. Index and thumb, pulling down her smalls. He did not remember her hips being this lovely. Round and curvaceous, they had the most perfect flare. “Maker, “he mumbled, hardness raging against his waist.

“Not anymore.” She bent her legs at the knee and squeezed his hips with them. He shuddered, he could never forget the strength of her legs, and if he ever did, Maker would she remind him.

“I don't remember you being this beautiful.” On his side now, her thigh draped wantonly over his hip.

“Are you saying I'm forgettable?” Her smile stretched across his neck, her tongue stretched farther. “I'm saying I look forward to re-learning you.” Squeeze to her arse, he doesn't remember it being that soft. She sighed.

She hissed when he was inside her again, and for a moment, she's an idea of what he was talking about. Maker, it almost hurt.

So tight he almost looses it, so he resolved to burn her slowly. They lay like that, him sheathed within her, and her hissing and breathing and clutching him, re-learning the feel of his wonderful stretch.

“Maker, Evelyn...Maker.”

Cullen was a gentleman, he could never be anything else around her. He kept mindful of her healing injuries and set a pace that rolled like wave and distant thunder. She didn't melt under him, and he didn't want her to. She matched him, stroke for stroke, strong legs guiding her hips up when he guided down.

“Look at me, my love,” he directed gently, no higher than a husky whisper. Amber and gold clashed, and she came from the look in his eyes alone, the intensity of his gaze, the love.

Her mortality didn't seem so obvious now, her fate not so close. She was alive with him. Right.
Now. And that was all that mattered.

“Cullen,” not a scream but a prayer. A promise too. *I will always come back to you.*

He made his own promises not too long after.

**

“Would it please you to know that I’ve convinced Leliana and Josephine that with the Winter Palace operation taking place so soon, it would be best that you remain at Skyhold to prepare.” They rode on his horse for a change, her back was in his chest, his arm wrapped around her waist, fingers poking her belly button.

“Best news I’ve heard in a long time. Thank you.” Her dark fingers encircled his wrist and brought his hand up for her to kiss.

“Are you worried about Orlais?” He asked.

“No, but it'll be good to rest for a while.”

He hid a grin in the nape of her neck. “I suspect you won't rest all that much.”

“Well you know how I enjoy working hard.” She bumped her arse against him.

“I bet we're both workhorses in that regard.”

“And our work is never done.”

Chapter End Notes

The next like 8 chapters are gonna be Maker-damned CRAY.
A couple, man and woman, they stood by the double doors leading to the western garden terrace, the lady lazily waving her fan before concealing her masked mouth with it and leaning closer to the gentleman.

"Girard, shame on your lies, you told me the Inquisitor was a Marcher lady!"

"My dear, that is the Inquisitor and she is a Marcher, Lady Evelyn Trevelyan to be precise."

"Her? A lady?!"

"I know, strains credulity."

Another pair, this time two women. Their gowns were inverses of one another, one was silver with blue embroidery, the other was blue with silver embroidery. They did not use their fans to speak, a bolder move, it informed her that they meant their whispered conspiracies to be overhead and known. Possibly spread.

"Her hair though, how savage. Her kind are just a half-step above the qunari, and they should all be thrown out with the elves."

"My dear how can you say that? The First Enchantress..."

"Oh! Madame de Fer? I do hope Duke Bastien puts out the lights before he touches her. But then, she must disappear in the dark." The women laughed as Evelyn walked by.

An older man, golden masked, whispered to a younger lady, bronze masked.

"But did you see her? She spoke with the Duchess in Orlesian no less! Perfect accent. Her advisers must be exhausted after all that no doubt tiresless instruction. Oh, and speaking of advisers, have you seen their Commander..."

Maybe it wasn't so different down here.

Lady Evelyn Trevelyan kept her back straight and her eyes forward. A dip of the head in the direction of the gossipers meant that she'd heard. An outright confrontation of eye contact meant
that their barb had a particular sting that she acknowledged, but would not dignify with comment. Only the most outrageous and cruel whispers could be addressed with verbal confrontation and even then, her particular flavor of vulgarity was verboten. Here she slipped back into old skin and waged war with the flip of her fan and the direction of her gazes, bow and arrow left behind tucked in shadowed corners for the wet work to be done later.

The injuries suffered here would not be salved with healing spells and potions. The wounds to her heart would be left to fester until they healed with time and distance. Fortunately, these wounds did not scar too deeply, she had been hurt this way numerous times before. Their comments and remarks recalled an old song and dance where she had to hear and pretend deaf, speak and pretend dumbness. An outburst from her would ruin The Game and the Inquisition could not afford such a loss.

So she bit the inside of her cheek, dug her nails into the palms of her hands and sought out the people who would be the cure for what ailed her.

***

Dress uniform, Maker's breath.

Cullen Stanton Rutherford, as the crier was so gleeful in calling him thus revealing his secret middle name to all and sundry, hated his dress uniform. It gave him the contradictory feeling of being both criminally overdressed and woefully naked. No sword, no armor, Leliana didn't even want him carrying a kitchen dagger, but he snuck one or two anyway into the cuff of his boot. He'd be damned if he would allow his Inquisitor to roam around Halamshiral, that damned nest of coiffed vipers, unprotected.

He bowed stiffly to the Empress and her party, trying and failing to keep the contempt out of his face. It might have something to do with his hotblooded Ferelden nature and thus inbred aversion to anything Orlesian, but being here felt anathema. He'd rather be at home in Skyhold with B, wrapped around him, on top of him, within her but always close. This place disgusted him, and this was no place for her. She belonged in wood and field, beneath blue sky and shining sun. That's where she thrived. Not amongst these silly nobles who had servants wipe their asses for them.

He smirked as he joined the others, nestling between Dorian and Iron Bull waiting for the Inquisitor's entrance. He looked forward to their scandalized gasps when she walked in, possibly in her hunting leathers with her hair wild and free. She'd give them something to gasp and gossip about.

This was going to be fun.

Dorian yawned. “Wake me when the bear baiting starts.”

Iron Bull's eyes widened, excited. “They do that here?”

Bull was a (former) Ben-Hassrath. He made his living knowing the secrets and desires of others, yet it never ever failed to please Dorian that the formidable male could be reduced to child like levels of joy at the mention of bloodsport and violence.

“Oh Amatus.”

One by one the members of the Inquisition made their entrances on the grand stage.

“Where is the Inquisitor?” Cullen asked impatiently.
“She must make her entrance, saving the best for last I suspect.” Dorian answered.

The herald then called her forth.

“May I present, Lady Evelyn Cecilia Renee Marie Trevelyan of Ostwick, Grand Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste.” Both Dorian and Iron Bull gasped while Cullen craned his neck to witness her arrival, a woman in a green dress obscuring his vision.

“Wait, where is she?”

Dorian laughed, still choking on his awe. “Right there you fool. Open your eyes.”

He comically swiveled his neck from side to side, flitting in between his friends looking for a better vantage point.

“Where?”

The Iron Bull placed his hands on either side of Cullen's face and pointed his gaze at the woman in green.

“Wait that's not...Maker's breath!”

She was not wearing her leathers.

Instead she wore a dress so green it looked to be made of cloth spun emeralds. Sleeveless, the dress sported a high collar that wrapped around her neck before swallowing up her chest and torso. The sunburst of the Inquisition was cut across her chest, the eye opening at her cleavage with rays of hammered gold emanating from without.

The garment, so well tailored, the Inquisitor would have to be liquefied and poured into it to make it fit. Cullen could swear by the Maker he could see the outline of her bellybutton and every dip and divot of her waist. Her skirts did not poof as was custom in Orlais, instead a sheaf of green fabric wrapped around her waist pooling down at her feet and cinched on her hip by a golden broach in the shape of a bow and arrow.

She did not stomp when she walked, she brought no war, no drums with her steps. Instead she glided as though moved by wind and angel's wing. No mask marred her face keeping her eyes clear and free for all to see, and her hair hung loose, the puffy roots somehow sucked back into her scalp, the individual vines adorned with pearls of gold and ivory that tinkled musically with every graceful step.

She greeted the Empress, engaged in rapid fire back and forth conversation. Her voice held no drawl, accented with no colorful curses, in fact it didn't sound coherent at all.

“Is ...is she speaking Orlesian?”

“Uh huh.” Dorian nodded, amused. “I knew she spoke Elven and she's got the mind for Tevene...but I had no idea she spoke Orlesian too.”

“Nor I,” Cullen decided.

Lady Evelyn, hard drinking, foul mouthed, bareback riding hunter goddess Trevelyan was chatting with the Orlasian Empress in their own language as easily as she shot a demon out of the sky mid-flight at 100 paces, defying all his logic.
“You two are both missing the most important part of this.” Bull interjected, mouth, had it not been held in place by a jaw, would have been on the floor. “What in the name of the Qun is she wearing? I mean, beautiful is an understatement at this point. It’s just fucking incorrect.” Bull turned to the Commander face dark and serious. “Commander, your girlfriend is fucking hot!”

“Bull!” Dorian quirked an eyebrow and gave a vicious looking side-eye at his lover before devolving into a fit of ungentlemanly giggles. “I’m the only one allowed to ogle others!”

“But would you just look?! I mean...damn.”

"Iron Bull..." Cullen growled, feeling suddenly possessive.

“Shh! You fools! She's coming this way.”

She glided—who knew she could glide?-- over to the men smiling a half smile that made her look sexy and possibly tired at the same time. Her eyes were half-lidded in a veiled smile unreadable to everyone not wearing it. She looked different as though a desire demon had come and assumed her form. She didn't speak, look, or walk like the woman he so desperately loved. She didn't even smell like herself, orange and spice and flowers supplanted by something rich and cloying; like ambergris or some other such nonsense.

He sniffed, Maker knew he thought her beautiful like this, painfully so. Cullen could agree with the Iron Bull's assessment, calling her beautiful would indeed be inadequate and almost like a vulgar swear, but all this; the rouge the powder, the pearls, the perfume, this wasn't her, couldn't be her.

“Good Evening Gentlemen.” Maker she purred. She did not drawl nor curse, this wasn't even her working voice. She became a creature entirely and wholly different. Cullen decided then and there he didn't like it.

Dorian, possibly the least of the three affected by this transformation, stepped forward and took her offered hand and kissed it as was proper.

“Are you enjoying yourself Altus Pavus?” She asked in Orlesian.

“I am sorry my lady. I am no good with our hostess's tongue.”

“Your tutors did not instruct you?” She asked, seamlessly transitioning back to the common language.

“No, my tutors simply did not waste time teaching me in language of heretics and warmongers.”

A fan, green and gold, appeared. With a dainty flick of the wrist it expanded across her face hiding her smile and practiced giggle. Her laugh felt like it had been dusted with a sparkly powder, it was a chortle, a polite titter one used to dismiss a bad joke or diffuse an embarrassing situation.

“Too wicked Altus, what if our hostess should hear?”

Dorian grinned widely, it’d been far too long since he'd seen a fan properly employed.

She switched her attentions to Iron Bull making the Qunari's stomach somersault with her playful teasing.

"Messere The Iron Bull, how fair you this night? Everyone wants to ask about the 'pet' qunari I've managed to tame. It is a shame I cannot set you loose upon them."
He kept his laugh short and controlled, not the window shaking, belly rumbling guffaws all were used to.

"It is okay my lady," He didn't call her 'Boss' not here, not appropriate. They both exchanged knowing smiles. "I have heard such things often enough."

"Too often I imagine."

Dorian and Cullen exchanged odd glances feeling as though there was a secret conversation going on above their heads.

"Well I for one can barely recognize him in a shirt," Dorian exclaimed patting Bull on the chest of his uniform. "Are you alright in there? How long did it take you get this fabric over that massive chest? All this frippery must be tiresome for you."

The qunari and the lady frowned.

"Dorian, enough." She clicked her fan shut, displeasure wafting off her. Dorian read the cue and promptly buttoned up his mouth looking wide eyed and visibly chastened.

"Ahh, it appears some congratulations are in order, Lady Trevelyan," Cullen interjected hoping to save this awkward conversation from veering off a cliff. Her smile returned and the fan opened again waving lazily. "Your accomplishments on the dance floor to be precise, I didn't think you'd be able to pull that off, you must have worked really hard with Leliana and Josephine."

Lady Trevelyan's smile faltered and she clicked her fan shut again, the sound sharp as a finger snap. The mage and the qunari took a step back, if a lady clicks her fan shut at you with that kind of snap, Maker help you.

"Commander, I have had instruction in Orlesian dance since I was five."

"Ahh, I didn't know. Your dress is something beautiful to behold. I honestly expected you to show up in leather and fur."

Evelyn's face soured again. Messere the Iron Bull took another half step back.

He smiled and when she didn't return it, his smile faltered. "Is there something wrong my lady? You seem not yourself. It must be very difficult for you to handle all this. Don't tax yourself too much with all this finery and focus on rooting out the assassin, then you can go back to being Evelyn."

Expression, gesture, and wit were the tools with which the Grand Game was played. Its most masterful players could kill you with a simple look, the twitch of an eyebrow or the flutter of a fan. She ruled her face and fixed her gaze upon Cullen with a stare made of venom and anger so sharp it made the Commander take his own half step back.

"Oh shit," Iron Bull cursed.

Her fan opened then closed, she then drew it through her hands, motions done too quickly, as easy as breathing, rote memorization taking over propriety as anyone else could see her distress. Dorian saw it, and understood. And Bull didn't need to speak fan to understand as well. She was hurt.

“Commander, you think because I speak and drink and curse and fuck like I do that I can't be like this? Like I shouldn't be?” She spoke slowly hissing with every word.
“I...I ahh.”

“You think this is a result of Vivienne's and Josephine's and Leliana's extensive and exhausting teachings? That they had their hands full trying to instruct me in the ways of court?”

Cullen, completely at a loss could only stare mouth agape at her sudden burning fury.

'Oh shit.' Dorian thought.

“You forget Commander Rutherford that I have been raised the daughter of Bann for the last 26 years. That I was instructed in the ways of language, dance, and manners since I was old enough to speak.

"You call me 'Lady' everyday and forget I am noble. What is worse is that you think this,” she gestured to her frock. “Is somehow an act or a ploy put on to impress others and not who I am. Yes, I prefer the hunting, the drinking and the cursing but that was never all of what I was. That was never only what I was.

"You say I dance and speak so well as though I were incapable of it, that it was exclusive to me. You lauded others for my own achievements. Master Pavus said much the same of Messere The Iron Bull, and he's a Ben-Hassrath, a spy, such things like this at one time were his job. Yet you both seek to underestimate us. Surely such barbarians as we could never learn to speak Orlesian or how to wear a doublet.”

Her fan clicked open again seamlessly in conversation to hide the deadly flare of her nostrils and the red snarl of her mouth.

Then, like a sun parting rainclouds, her smile returned.

“Serah The Iron Bull, I grow tired, will you escort me to take some air in the gardens?”

He offered his arm and she took it. "Of course my lady."

The air sucked out of Cullen's chest as he watched her go.

Once the two had gone and Dorian felt safe enough to move; he stood next to Cullen, grey eyes somber as the pair walked away.

“My friend, we uhh...we kinda fucked up.”

Chapter End Notes

#realtalk

These next two chapters are the nucleus around which Into Darkness, Unafraid was written. They contain very real and personal sentiments that I and other's like me carry
around with them every day.
She released the Iron Bull once they were out on the terrace.

“Are you alright my Lady?”

She smiled, Bull never dropped his character, and was all too familiar with how many ears could potentially be listening. Ears she was supposed to be ferreting out in order to stop a murder.

“I'm fine Serah, thank you for your concern.”

“In the interest of full disclosure, I want you to know that dressed like this, I find you extremely attractive.”

“And other times?”

He wavered his hand back and forth. “Ehh.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

Bull nodded. “Thank you for what you did back there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dorian can be an ass, in fact he's an ass a lot of the time. And I can deal with it, I'm used to it. I
kinda even like it sometimes. But other times it's good to get your ass kicked, you know?"

“Any time my friend.”

“Are you going to be alright? I know that look, that thousand mile stare. You're right I'm... well I was Ben-Hassrath, and you and I both know that wasn't the first time we've ever heard such a things come from someone's mouth. The only thing is you didn't expect such words to come from a mouth so close to your heart. You know he meant well.”

“The ones that hurt the most always do Serah.”

Bull leaned closer bring his bulk down to his lips could be close to her ears. “I really can't wait for us to get the fuck outta here so you can stop talking that Marcher shit and I can start calling you Boss again.”

“I know Serah.”

She clicked her fan open obscuring their faces from view and kissed Bull on his cheek.

**

They still whispered as she walked, hearing their contempt for her, an intruder on their Grand Game, one unfit and unworthy to play. They thought of her as less than, sometimes intentional but sometimes not. But she belonged here, by virtue of her birth, wealth, history and holdings she belonged here and her family always had.

Their ire made her understand her father's contempt for damn near everyone and everything including his own children. She wondered as she walked and talked what her father would think to see her now. When she was younger, still clinging to the possibility of making him love her, she tried so hard to master the manners and mannerisms of the lady he wanted her to be. But her posture was always too crooked, her smile too wide and laugh too deep, unrealizing that his displeasure sprung from the fact that she (and all his children) were just too dark. Hair too kinky, nose too wide, lips too thick.

'Mudskins are not for marrying.' She remembered, recalling the cruel twist of that boy's smile. They hated her family and yet her father wanted nothing else so desperately than to be one of them.
Erase every perceived fault and ascend to something he thought he deserved. She tried to give that to him, once long ago, tried to be one of them.

She was young maybe 12 or 13 and had been invited to a gathering of other noble girls hosted by the Duchess of Wycome. She remembered the look of pride on her father's face when she came down the grand staircase of their home, resplendent in a dress of blue midnight, studded with sparkles that shone like the stars. Even Assan, who normally detested such shemlen finery, kissed her cheeks and whispered that she would surely shame the other girls with her unmatchable charm and beauty.

And she did. She spoke well with the adults, beaming with pride when they complemented her on her skills, unaware of the insults veiled between the words.

"How extraordinary, she passes for a lady."

The girls themselves were cold, gathering up into groups based on comparative wealth. Only the Duchess's daughter and the Teryn's niece had more riches than she, yet when she approached the two girls they gave her a once over before laughing openly.

"Lady Trevelyan I was not aware you had mages in your family." The oldest girl said as though making polite conversation.

"I do not. There is magic in my family elsewhere but not in my father's house."

"Oh? Surely there must be some magic at Trevelyan Manor for how else could you explain your mud-less dress and turning sheep's wool into fine silk." The girl ran her fingers through Evelyn's neatly heat pressed hair.

Assan would never allow her to take the insult, and would demand she extract an apology with a balled fist. But the princess in her, the little girl who appeased her father swallowed their laughter and left the gathering earlier than intended.

Assan burned the dress and stroked her hair as she cried into her nana's lap. "You not one of them whenan and yet you are. You are something more, greater, and you must never again allow them to shut the door on you in places you belong."
It's different down here, she told herself over and over again. Cullen meant well. She knew it. But she still heard their insults and their cruelty covered in the golden tones of his well-meaning voice.

But now was not the time to ruminate. She was the Inquisitor and she had a job to do.

She whistled a light trilling birdsong alerting Solas, Sera, and Iron Bull. Let Halamshiral see their Empress saved by a company of knife ears, mudskins, and ox-men, and let them burn with shame.

**

In the end, Gaspard was hauled away for treason along with Florianne, kicking and screaming about the 'will of her master'. The Herald smirked and looked forward to hauling her immaculately dressed ass in front of her throne for judgment. Brialal's cause won the day and Empress Celene remained on her golden throne. In the span of an evening, the Inquisition headed by it's charmingly elegant and beautiful Inquisitor resolved years of bitter civil war, restoring peace and guaranteeing years of stability and harmony in the process.

“Not bad for a mudskin,” she muttered to herself smiling wryly as she sipped the tiny glass of wine that passed for drinking at this party.

"Not bad at all my lady." Iron Bull quipped tilting several tiny glasses at once into his mouth.

"Are you still cross with me?" A penitent voice asked behind them. Dorian had spent the entire evening pacing about the palace, practicing what he would say in apology. Yet his eloquent speech fled from him under the piercing stares of both his lover and his best friend.

Bull swallowed thickly, a tactic used to suppress a very un-qunari like whine he made whenever Dorian was being cute, pathetic, or as in this case pathetically cute. Truth was, he didn't give a piss about what Dorian said back there. He was used to hearing such bullshit for most of his adult life, it didn't mean anything to him anymore. It never had. But it was still nice to have the Boss come to his rescue for a change.

Her sound and fury in a dress like that.

Damn.
"No kadan, I'm not." He answered.

This time Bull couldn't stop himself from making that whine-growl noise when he saw Dorian's look of relief.

"I owe you an apology too my lady." Dorian bowed low. "Meatus Culpae."

She let her green and gold fan, attached by a cord wrapped around her wrist, swing loose from her hand. A gesture of continued friendship.

Dorian nodded, smiling and pleased before making an odd face.

"Amatus you're injured!" The Tervinter exclaimed.

Bull patted himself down checking for blood. "Uhh...no I'm not."

"Yes you are, come now, we can't have you bleeding all over yourself. Come come," Dorian ushered a decidedly confused Iron Bull away.

The lady smiled to watch them leave. She knew damn well Bull wasn't injured.

**

The party carried on deeper into the night and Evelyn still had rounds to make. She checked in with Vivienne who complemented her impressive dance skills.

"Are you alright Viv? I heard some women talking about you and Bastien."

"Oh darling, you well know I've heard worse than that before. Ignore them when it's prudent, and destroy them when you are able. Speaking of destruction, your Commander..."
While engaged in conversation with Solas, a Marchioness tried to direct him to fetch her a glass of something to drink. The elf and the Inquisitor enjoyed the flush on the woman's face when they both turned to insult her in increasingly vulgar elven phrases, overheard by some of the actual elven servants who could not contain their peals of laughter.

**

She ignored him for the entire night, a punishment he well deserved for the ass he made of himself earlier. Cullen watched with increasing bitterness and envy as she chatted, flirted, and danced with every two-bit mask wearing Orleasian while he wracked his brain trying to figure out what went so wrong.

Maker help him, he didn't know. How could he? She cursed like a sailor and fought like a demon. In her spare time she enjoyed sparring with Krem, the Bull, and his Chargers, or hunting bears and wolves in the wilds with only her bow and her wits. How could he know that she also enjoyed silks and satins with Vivienne or gossiping with Josephine and not find it to be an outrageous departure from character? Something concocted for her, imposed upon her, in order to 'fit in' with the rest of the fops here.

'You never asked,' a small voice answered inside of him.

No, he never did. He just assumed that the huntress had always been a huntress, never realizing she had also been a princess. And now she was both. And if he looked, reached back into deep memory, he would find she had been both all along.

Her hair, vines and ropes and so wonderfully wild, was always neat and well groomed, clean, and immaculately arranged- smelling sweetly of the flower oil she anointed it with.

She conversed with Solas in Elven, and Josephine in Antivan, and Dorian in Tevene.

She was the one who chose the drapes, statues, and throne that adorned the Great Hall. She was the one who chose the uniforms they wore tonight. And she was the one who appeared in Val Royeaux to petition for the Du Paraquette's return to noble status thus saving Josephine's life. No arrow fired, no blood spilled. She bargained with the merchants for cheaper goods and entertained the visiting nobility effortlessly at Skyhold. She had always done so, and he never noticed until she did it wearing a dress, speaking in perfect profanity free sentences.
“Maker I'm an idiot,” he lamented as he watched her disappear into the shadows.

**

Air, air would be good right about now. Maybe there was a reason for the sinfully tiny glasses they served their wine it. It was powerfully potent and made her head swim more than the pleasant buzz she preferred to carry herself with.

She escaped the oppressive atmosphere to the balcony, deferring requests for her company with expertly placed excuses and winning smiles. Being Lady Evelyn et. cetera Trevelyan, while a fun and refreshing change of pace from being Inquisitor Lady Evelyn et cetera Trevelyan, was still exhausting. The deceptively potent wine didn't help much either.

The gardens of Halamshiral spanned on and on in the distance stretching to the walls of the palace and beyond, a sanctuary of flowers and terraces and fountains. Trevelyan Manor kept its gardens a little more practical than this, but sometimes, just sometimes in the corners of her mind she tried to suppress with alcohol she missed home.

“Am I intruding, my lady?” He said it on purpose, the calculating son of a bitch. He knew it would disarm her, cool whatever wrath he thought she still had.

“No, this place ain't mine, stand where you like.” The drawl was back, he wanted to think she was back to normal but that, after all he thought about, would be incorrect.

“Only if you wish me near.” He sounded wounded.

Her shoulders sank, relieving a little bit of tension but ruining her perfect posture as she bent over the balcony railing. "I get so tired sometimes of hearing the same thing over and over again. And here, I have to ignore them, just swallow it up and pretend it doesn't affect me. But it does. I can't imagine what Solas and Iron Bull and Sera have to put up with here."

Cullen leaned over the railing next to her, his posture also suffering for it.

"What do they say?"
"The same things you did. Whatever they think I'm supposed to be, a 'proper' lady isn't one of them."

Cullen winced.

"And sometimes I know it's not malicious. I know you weren't being malicious. I know I certainly don't cut the figure of a princess anymore."

"Anymore?"

"I told you my Dalish nana raised me, for a time my mother had a small hand in it as well. Everything I learned about hunting came from Assan, and everything I learned about this, came from my mother. Couldn't let anyone accuse of us of actually being the barbarian implants they all thought we were...are."

"How could anyone think...?"

"Well that's the thing. We've been around for ages, I got extended family all in the Chantry, the Templars too, but with the way they treat us, you'd honestly never think it. We're good enough to be neighbors, sometimes frosty friends kept at arms' distance. But family? Never. We've had to marry out to Nevarra and Rivain, and Antiva even the Imperium. I am actually literally related to Dorian. But the kind of marriage and business alliances my father and all those before him really craved, we can't have."

"And all just because you..."

"Look like this," she pointed to the back of her hand, "And not like this." She laced her dark fingers within Cullen's paler ones. Light and dark, sun and earth.

"I like how this looks."

She smiled, a real one this time. One that lit up her whole face.

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier. After my embarrassing display, I realized you were right. You've
always managed to weave your nobility into everything else you did that I don't think I ever really noticed. I was so blinded by..." Cullen sighed before looking at his lady with honest, glowing eyes. "I was stupid to think there could be a limit to your wonder.”

"Oh, damnit boy, come.." She closed the distance between them in fluid dancer's steps and wrapped him up in her arms kissing him unashamedly on the lips, unable to remain mad at him after a confession like that. Her insistence surprised him, he expected her to remain angry, not kiss him senseless on the balcony for the entire Orlesian court to behold.

He let her linger on his lips before he drew away. "Will you walk with me?" He offered his arm.

"Of course."

"For what it is worth, I am proud of you. You did amazing work...with the Duchess and the Empress I mean...I...with the assassination attempt...not the other stuff."

"From what I hear, you did too. I expect some marriage proposals to arrive at Skyhold this time without my name."

Cullen pinked. "They were awful, like squawking chickens! Did you know one of them grabbed my bottom!"

"Vivienne told me. I asked her to point out the culprit, Marquis du Lamperouge. I found him and let it slip that the Marquis has a fondness of tearing through the bathhouses and brothels and had picked up something nasty. All in front of his paramour."

"I don't think it's possible for me to love you any more than I do right now." Cullen said dreamily.

The Inquisitor laughed, her full belly, tingling laugh. Dark hands threaded behind Cullen's neck bringing the Commander down toward full red lips the color of dark roses. She had to hide her anger and her hurt from the scrutinizing eyes of the Orlesians. One thing she wasn't going to hide was her love for him. Let the eyes watch.

“Do you dance Commander?” She pulled her lips away but kept close pressing her forehead to his
own.

“For you? I'll try.” He said before he began to move and lead her in confident steps. She let him guide her, sighing blissful love into his neck and shoulder.

They danced to no music. To no beat he moved her. She hummed a song softly, getting most of it stuck in the back of her throat making the song come out in sporadic off tune bursts of sounds. He let that music direct him, holding her closer, spinning them over and over again until the world blurred to nothing that mattered.

The eyes watched. Companion and stranger alike watched as the templar danced with his lady. Jealousy seethed in some, longing in others. Others still had long said 'fuck it all' to the party and found some darkened corner to rut in. And that was hard considering Serah The Iron Bull didn't hide very well in most darkened corners.

Chapter End Notes

Are you holding your butts? Because now the real fun begins.
Chapter Notes

Light it the fuck up! Y'all got no idea how long I've waited to post these next 5 chapters.

TW: ABUSE AND MENTIONS OF ABUSE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were waiting for her when her party returned from Orlais fresh from their victories at Halamshiral, sprung on her like a fucking bear trap. She recognized the carriage, even with her family's heraldry struck from the side, and she definitely recognized her father's destrier, rearing and biting in his bed. He always rode for war. Jackson kicked and snorted when she stabled him next to it, the hart wholly discomfit at being roomed with such an unpleasant guest.

"What in the void is that thing?" Cullen asked pulling in his white courser.

"I don't know," she lied. "Someone must be visiting."

Only Dorian knew her history with her family, specifically her father. The Tevinter could relate, their fathers having spilled ample quantities of both their blood. Hers in a consistent and brutal pattern of abuse, his in a malicious attempt to 'correct' through magic what he thought defective.

She told him everything her father did to her or had done to her. The beatings, the maimings, the murder of her dog during his attempted murder of her. She told him of her mother's willful insistence to see nothing. How when she screamed for her mother's help, the woman only turned her head and pretended not to notice.

"Why did you never leave sooner? Even cut off from your family's wealth, you could have made it on your own." He asked her one night, his brandy swimming pleasantly in his head.

Fireblast whiskey, straight from the bottle as was her way, she took a long pull before answering.

"He would have found me, sent his goons to drag me back from wherever I was, kicking and screaming." She took another swallow, guilt washing over her.

"Sorora, I don't buy it." Dorian pressed, scooting closer.

Evelyn sighed deeply, her weight settling uncomfortably about her shoulders. She adjusted her burden, took a deep breath, and began the story.

"It started with my brother. Alphonse. Father hated him because he...he found him once in the stables. Our houndmaster had an apprentice, an elven boy...I don't remember his name. Father went crazy, and Alphy, he's no fighter, he just lay there. So I ran up to him. I pushed him out of the way, told him to stop. Father stopped hitting Alphy and started hitting me."

"You protected him."

"Yes. And every time after that until father started skipping Alphy all together."
"But then he left for the Chantry."

"Yes."

"So why not..."

"My oldest brother Vaughn has a sweet wife and a son I adore. They live on our estate given that little Masan stands to inherit after his father. My brother is always away, either conducting father's business or cavorting with his mistresses. We're not good enough to marry, but fuck? Yeah that's okay sometimes. As such they are under my father's care. Assan was dead. Alphonse was gone. I wanted to leave but I couldn't because then he'd go after them. I couldn't let that happen."

"And now? What has happened to them now?"

"I don't know."

**

Shame stilled her tongue, preventing her from telling anyone else. How could they know their Inquisitor had spent the last 26 years fighting her father, hiding under beds and in closets while his rage thundered through the halls? How could she explain how she learned to flinch whenever a hand was raised too sharply in her presence. They trusted her with their lives, to lead them, and inside she was still a little girl deathly afraid of her father, and too damn cowardly to kill him or break free. Not even Iron Bull could wrench from her family secrets and if Leliana knew, she had the good sense to keep her mouth shut. Evelyn was a river, her waters never visiting the same painful place twice. Her scars did that enough for her. Until recently, most of them belong to him, scars she didn't earn.

A messenger, one of her father's servants, intercepted them huffing and panting. "My lady you're..."

"I'm not doing anything until I've had a bath and something to eat."

The man's look of abject horror puzzled Cullen who was hoping to get the Inquisitor to share her bath with him.

The servant passed a furtive look to the Commander before dropping into a low whisper. "But my lady he's been..."

"And he'll continue to."

"With all due respect..."

"Apparently not enough. You have your instructions."

The man sighed, his shoulders slumping almost to the dirt. "Oh, and James."

"Yes my lady?"

"Good to see you again."

James fled as though evil chased him.

"What the Void was that all about? James? I've never seen him before. Is he a new page? What did he want?"

"Nothing important."
"Okay now I know something's, " She placed a finger on his lips and kissed him around the digit. "I'm gonna go bathe and then I have some business to attend to. Debriefings and all that."

Cullen removed her hand and kissed her lip to lip, still puzzled but ready to trust her. "Okay, will I see you later then?"

"Don't wait up."

The Commander pouted.

"Don't make that face at me." She grinned, covering up her trepidation as best she knew how. "Go play chess with Dorian or something or beat a recruit into submission. I promise you haven't seen the last of me."

**

Josephine and Leliana had of course kept tabs on the comings and goings of Skyhold, right? They had to have known Gareth Trevelyan was there the moment he arrived. B went looking for them, Sister Nightingale specifically.

She found the woman in her rookery, catching up on reports that had accumulated in their absence.

"What the hell Leliana?"

"Inquisitor?"

"Don't look at me like you don't know what the fuck I'm talking about? My father, Gareth Trevelyan, here, waiting for me like a fucking ambush."

A moment of pregnant silence passed.

"I gotta hand it to you, your shock looks genuine."

"It is genuine, Inquisitor. I had no idea!"

"You know everything."

"I know! I'm shocked. What does he want?"

"I don't know yet."

"You must see him immediately; we can't have your father...Maker, where will he sleep? We must entertain him, how was I not notified? Are one of my spies...?"

Evelyn put a hand up, requesting silence. "Have him wait for me in the War Room, I will address him there."

"Inquisitor," Leliana looked puzzled, smelling the duplicity. "What are you not telling me?"

"A lot."

"Are you..."

"Just do what I ask okay?"

**
She let her hair fall loose because it'd piss him off. He hated her hair, said it perpetuated the notion that the Trevelyans were all savages and unworthy to be in polite company. He frequently demanded she cut it, even going so far as to pay a servant to sneak into her room at night with a pair of shears.

Cousland tore her dress to shreds.

'He cannot hurt you here.' She reminded herself before taking a deep breath. She straightened her spine and summoned her most spectacular scowl before heading to the War Room, convenient and appropriate considering the battle ahead.

**

Skyhold was magnificent, a wonder to behold, Alexia Trevelyan thought. She sat in the courtyard, her son Masan playing in the grass with a pale shy boy not too much older than he. She was grateful Gareth decided to travel unannounced and incognito. The attention of being the sister-in-law to Andraste's Herald wasn't worth it, especially when she could watch Masan play carefree and safe from his grandfather.

"He has his father's eyes," the mother of the pale shy boy said somewhat cryptically.

"Ahh...I'm sorry but how...?"

"I can tell because I've seen those eyes before, on the child's aunt. You are a Trevelyan, though judging, not by birth."

Alexia was Antivan by birth, the ninth child of a wealthy merchant turned not-so-wealthy by kid number six. Still, their name carried some weight on their side of Thedas and since Gareth Trevelyan was having a hard time striking a balance between a worthy mate for his son and someone who would actually be agreeable to marry the man, his eyes settled on her. Father and son hated her immediately. A consolation prize while the bigger fish swam in ponds denied them. Vaughn Trevelyan carried his father's hateful poison in his heart, always made to feel less than because of his color and the color of his peers. He resented his dusky colored wife with her meager dowry, pining instead for paler women with the greater riches and greater titles.

How ironic. Scorned for their color, he in turn scorned her for the same, breeding a distinct kind of self-hatred that at times turned violent.

She would see her son escape that sickness and Alexia would do anything to assure it. Anything.

“You are correct...your name is?”

“Morrigan,” The pale lady with the cat eyes extended a hand and Alexia took it. “How old is your son?”

“Masan is seven.”

“Ah, Kiernan is close to 11 by now.”

“And his father?”

Morrigan did not answer, though she knew Warden Alistair was somewhere close by traipsing about Thedas like a wounded mabari looking for his lost love. The witch bore him no ill will and how could she? He had given her Kiernan in exchange for his Warden-Commander's life, but
Alistair, after 8 years of happiness lost his beloved anyway.

“I see,” Alexia answered.

The two women chatted amicably about the joys and pains of raising boys while they ran screaming through the courtyard. Masan was a fine boy if a little scrawny. He had not the talent for swords and shields much to father's and grandfather's dismay and he had not, as yet, manifested any magic much to his mother's dismay.

Were he a mage, he could be spirited to the safety of a Circle. Though perhaps now, Circle life was not as safe as she once hoped.

As the 'not it' in a fierce game of tag, Masan ran full tilt fast as a rabbit, heedless of the adults who blurred by him until...

SMACK!

He ran into a solid wall of man clad in metal and fur.

Cullen looked down and found a boy tangled in his legs. A boy with buzz cut hair dark as onyx and eyes wide and wounded. Children were not often seen at Skyhold; sometimes families come to visit if parents just can't seem to find time for leave. But the Commander was particularly softhearted about that and granted such time even when he knew he shouldn't. He knew B was squeamish about having children in the keep, not because of bad influences like Varric and Iron Bull running around, but because she wanted to bury no more children in case another Haven occurred.

The small boy at his feet began to wail, no doubt injured from running into his grieves.

Alexia rose to rush to her son, Morrigan stopped her.

“No need to worry, that is our Commander Rutherford.”

Alexia paused, she recognized that name.

The Commander knelt, “Hey, hey there. It's alright. Don't cry. You really should keep your eyes open when you run. You’ll see better that way.”

Masan sniffed, fat tears leaving dark streaks down his face. “I'm sorry serah.”

“No need to be sorry. What is your name?”

“Masan.”

“Hello Masan. My name is Cullen. Why were you running?”

“I was running like a halla so Kiernan wouldn't catch me.”

The older man chuckled. “Fast like a halla eh?”

“Mhmm. My auntie says they're the fastest animals the Maker made and one day I'll run away like them.”

A yellowed fang hung from the boy's neck tied by a leather cord.

“Now what's this?”
The boy clasped a covetous hand over his token.

“A gift. A lion's tooth. My auntie gave it to me before she went away. She runs faster than a halla.”

Wheels sputtered in his head. “How funny. I have one too.” Cullen reached into his breastplate and pulled out his necklace of lion's teeth. The boy's eyes widened when he saw so many fangs compared to his paltry one. “Given to me by a lady who also runs faster than a halla.”

**

Gareth Trevelyan had somehow managed to discover the secret to eternal youth. Whether that involved ancient rituals of blood magic or pickling himself in the sheer acidity of his contempt for most things, she didn't know. But she was aware that the man was 54 winters old and had the body and constitution of one of 35. When she was younger and found herself in his company in public, they often mistook her mother for his older sister, and she for his wife.

“Beloved daughter.” Gareth exclaimed opening his arms for an embrace she would not partake in. He hugged her awkwardly while her arms remained rooted to her side as Susana, her mother, stood by passively, face blank of expression or emotion. She looked as she always did, like a mage long in Tranquility-- a side effect of the deathroot extract she took for her 'nervous condition' and to numb herself to the memory of her eldest daughter who died screaming in childbirth several years ago. Unfortunately, it numbed her to the screamings of her living children and grandchildren as well.

Her father was darker skinned than she, wrapped in flesh a half a shade lighter than plums. He owned a charismatic smile that he wielded as deadly and gracefully as he wielded his daggers and money. No one who superficially knew Lord Trevleyan could dislike him. By all outward appearances, he was the perfect nobleman save the one obvious physical quirk. He had amassed a decent holding for his family and conducted himself competently concerning the political matters of the Free Marches-- as much as his peers would 'allow' him to anyway. He knew, or knew of, every judge, merchant, and Chantry official in Ostwick and counted as friend or acquaintance nearly every noble family in the area and beyond.

He had a pretty wife, Susana , fecund of womb and fecund of mind. She brought considerable, though not quite enough, prestige to their marriage being the daughter of a wealthy yet titleless merchant from Rivain. Susana bore Gareth 5 children, three sons, two daughters the youngest and greatest of which stood before him now.

“The fuck do you want?” Gareth's only living daughter asked.

He smiled, chuckling softly at her childish vulgarity. “Always to the point, straight to business, no better proof that you are my child.”

“The fuck. Do you. Want?” She asked again staying ramrod straight and still.

'He can't hurt you here,' she whispered to herself.

“Don't be rude.” He admonished, smile never leaving his face. Behind him Susana stared listlessly at the figures on the war table seemingly bored by father and daughter's conversation. “Very well, I won't insult your intelligence nor waste your time with pleasantries we both know you don't care for. I came then, to impress upon my daughter the duty and joy of matrimony. In short, you must marry.”

She laughed, full and loud and hearty. “That's a shame then, that the only daughter that could
benefit from the 'duty and joy of matrimony' is dead. I've got a world to save or didn't you notice.”

Evelyn's gut twisted, she probably could benefit from the joy of matrimony at least, but she'd never allow herself to entertain the thought. Marry the man she loved then leave him a widower in a few short months? She couldn't do that to him.

Gareth's smile twitched in the corner of his mouth but did not falter. “Ever more reason why you should marry soon, lest calamity befall you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence dad.” She spit the word out like it tasted foul.

“Oh I have every confidence that you will succeed. However, it is important that you secure your legacy for your family and for yourself. Something achieved easily through marriage. My dear, you have no idea what your title of Inquisitor has bought for us. Families that wouldn't even invite us for tea are now throwing their sons at us. First and second sons no less!” Bann Trevelyan exclaimed. He spoke as though announcing the second coming of Andraste and not merely the status of the sons being thrown at her feet for her consideration.

“Think of what this will do for us. We can finally have what we have always deserved, the power and prestige to become more than mere Bann-lings. You can do that for us, my child. We need not scrape among fourth daughters and widowed wives and penniless merchants. We can secure our legacy, save our family.”

“Wasn't aware we needed saving.”

The man's temper flared. “Don't play with me! We've worked so hard for so long to build the kind of reputation we need for this. You know how it is. For us, we have to work twice as hard for half the recognition. You know they see us as damn near no better than elves! Elves!” Gareth regained his control. “Think of your Inquisition, think of the power you hold so tenuously. A marriage alliance would secure you. This serves dual purpose my love.”

Evelyn bristled. Only one man should be allowed that phrase and it was for FUCK's sure not him.

“You can elevate your family, and you can cement your power as Inquisitor. You were always intelligent, you see the wisdom in my words.”

She did. She ignored them.

“I don't have time for that bullshit.”

“Must you be so vulgar, child?”

“I am not a child! The Temple of Sacred Ashes exploded a year ago. Your son died in that blast a year ago. Yet you only show up now to whore your daughter out to the highest bidder?”

"Alphonse's death was a shocking blow to us all. We were buried in grief." For a split second, Gareth looked pained and Evelyn's heart lurched. Alphonse never said goodbye to either of his parents, he disappeared in the night much like she did. "Imagine then, our grief turning to joy when the marriage proposals started landing on our doorstep."

“I'd rather die alone than marry someone you chose or approved of.” Evelyn sneered. "Anyway, the point is moot. I've got way too much shit to deal with than think about marrying right now.”

“I wonder how much your reluctance has anything to do with your Commander? A miller's son? A disgraced templar? Really Evelyn, you are good with your bow. Aim higher.”
Gareth grinned joyously when his daughter's next retort froze cold in her mouth. “Don't be surprised dear, I have friends all over Ferelden and Orlais. Well done at Halamshiral by the way, though next time, consider your allies. You don't give lie that we are no better than qunari when you're seen kissing one.” Gareth tapped his cheek, the same one she had kissed Bull on. No wonder Leliana didn't know he was here, his connections rivaled their own.

“Get the fuck out.” She cursed, she wasn't going to stand in her own damn War Room and have her friends insulted.

Gareth's smile finally faltered and a stone dropped in her stomach. Still, she remained steadfast and unmoving. She was not a child anymore, he had no power here while she held all of it. The dynamic had switched in her absence from home, and while ruthless, her father was ever an intelligent man. He knew as well as she did, that he had no right, no power, no ability to command her here.

“My daughter.” He approached her, arms wide for another hug. "You've grown so much in our time apart. I am very proud of you.” He grazed her cheek tenderly with the back of his hand. Maker damn her if she didn't feel actual tenderness.

“My beautiful nug.” he whispered. “You finally grew a spine.”

He wore light mail on his arms since he always rode for war. Quick as thought, his armored hand struck her, the metal scratching deep grooves into her face that began to bleed. She fell to the floor with a wordless cry, knocked off balance by her father's vicious strike, so startled and stunned she didn't make a sound.

“But don't you ever speak like that to me again.”

Evelyn Trevelyan, in some ways a 26 year old Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste. In others, a frightened little girl afraid of her father, still, even after all this time.

"I expect there to be a formal reception, I'll talk to your ambassador about it."

He left the War Room before she could dismiss him as she pressed a hand to her face, more to obscure the injury than to stop the bleeding. Old habit. Dying hard.

Once the door clicked closed, she pressed her other hand to her mouth to muffle her bitter tears, feeling the sting of the newly forming scars she didn't earn.

Chapter End Notes

The shit.
Is so.
REAL!
As a writer one always hopes that seeds planted early on bear sweet fruit for readers to enjoy later.
Regardless, I hope y'all are enjoying this now and will stick around to enjoy as this goes on.
And for those who have enjoyed it, are enjoying it now and have told me so: thank you.

Another TW: abuse

“And who is this strapping young templar-to-be?” Dorian asked peering over Cullen's shoulder at the child who had taken to the Commander like a little boy very much enamored with the bigger boy's sword and mane.

“This is Serah Masan Trevelyan.” Cullen introduced. “And this is my dear friend Dorian.”

Dorian's smirk turned to an ashen faced stare. “Masan you say?”

“Yes? Something wrong?”

“I can only assume then the fetching woman over there talking to Morrigan is Alexia. Is that your mother little man?”

Masan nodded, attention diverted for the barest of moments before returning to the sword Cullen wore on his belt. “Masan was just telling me of his aunt's gift...”

“Where is she?” Dorian cut him off.

“She said she had business to attend to.”

Dorian groaned. “Oh fuck, don't tell me she's alone with him?” Dorian took off running to the War Room, his best guess as to where she was.

“Where's he going?” Masan asked, but his question remained unanswered as Cullen left to chase after the mage.

“Pavus, just what in the Void is going on?”

Dorian either didn't hear or didn't answer, but he burst through the War Room's door and confirmed his fears.

Blood leaked through her closed fingertips and down her arm staining her tunic with little rivulets of blood.

“Vishante fucking Kaffas!”
Her unmarred eye turned to the intruder before she hid her face in both her hands. He was not supposed to see. No one should see this.

“Go away! I'm fine. This is nothing.”

“Evelyn!”

His voice cut clear across her pain turning it to embarrassed shame. “You told him! Dorian you swore!”

“I said nothing. He followed me here, he should not be kept away from this anymore.”

“What is going on? What happened, why are you bleeding?”

They ignored him while Dorian knelt on the floor trying to peel her hands away from her face. “Let me see, let me fix it.”

Her hands remained covering her wound.

“Sorora please.”

“Evelyn, talk to me my love, what's happened?”

“Her sonofabitch father that's what's happened.”

“Dorian stop!”

“Lord Trevelyen? I don't understand...” Wheels in his mind spun a little bit harder, spun towards darker places. Pieces fit together, things began to make sense.

“You haven't been paying attention Templar.” Dorian growled.

“Dorian stop it please!” She sucked in another sob to swallow it back to no avail. His hands were on her face, wreathed in blue, repairing damage though unable to undo it.

The bleeding stopped but three thin scratches remained on her left cheek, three scratches evenly and perfectly spaced like fingers, very similar if not identical to the three scratches on her neck and...

Like a bucket of water dropped in boiling oil, his rage bubbled over violently scalding his skin in a red-hot conflagration. At once he understood everything and he burned. He actually unsheathed his sword and began to stalk off.

“Cullen stop!”

He ignored her.

She shoved Dorian off her and rose to her feet. “Commander Cullen Stanton Rutherford, I order you to stop right fucking now!” Pain edged her voice, raw with tears and injury. He halted, swiveled to face her and obeyed.

“Don't. Please. Just don't.” She pleaded.

“I could kill him. I will kill him.” Cullen cursed, knowing how foolish he sounded. Yet he was willing to murder the bastard, hang the consequences.
Tears rolled down her face smearing the dried blood all over her injured cheek. Her face would scar, three thin scratches right under her left eye reaching from her ear to the middle of her face from where his mail bit her flesh. She saw a look in him never seen before. Anger was one emotion, common to most men, but this went farther and darker than anger, than even rage. He was something unnamable and dangerous.

“You can't hurt him. You are not to lay a finger on him. He is our honored guest and we can't undermine our...”

“So he just gets away with this?” Dorian screamed.

“Why not? He's gotten away with it for decades before.”

The Commander paled, sick and seething all at once. “Maker Evelyn, why did you never tell me?”

“Because I didn't want you to look at me the way you are now.”

Cullen screwed his gaze to the floor shame burning in his face for not having realized sooner. Her father was the man who attacked her, who murdered her mabari and tried to murder her. She never spoke about her family save Alphonse and Assan, leading him to understand that she was not very close to her parents nor they her. What he mistook as the common neglect of the nobleman for his child was something much deeper and sinister. He should have seen it, he should have realized it.

Cullen opened his arms to embrace her, seeking to comfort her. She flinched from his raised hands before her mind could catch her body.

Another old habit.

Still dying hard.

Horrified, she fled from them, hand over her scarred face.

He chased after her, "Evelyn, wait, please."

"Auntie!"

He ran into the adult on purpose this time; seven years worth of cherubic face and childlike energy slammed into her legs, little arms wrapped tight around her waist.

"Auntie!" he cried again. Her hands dropped from her face and if she could suck her tears back up through her eyes, she would have. But Lady Trevelyan summoned a smile and wiped her eyes for her beloved nephew.

"There he is, my little halla. Look how fast you run!" She knelt to hug him properly, surreptitiously checking for bruises and finding only one. Only one, at least, on the places she could see.

"Good to see you well, B." Alexia greeted, the two women did not embrace but allowed an affectionate nod to pass between them.

"Alexia, Masan, this is the Commander of the Inquisition forces Cullen Rutherford and Altus Dorian Pavus. Commander, Dorian this is my sister-in-law and my nephew Masan."

"An honor my lady." Dorian nodded.

Cullen bowed tightly, ill at ease but nevertheless polite. "We have not been formally introduced my lady, but your son and I have become fast friends."
"He has a lion's necklace like me. But his has more teeth. Why does he get more teeth than me?" Masan asked mouth curling into a pout.

Evelyn smiled and bent to whisper to the boy. "Because he's a lion, my dearest."

"Nu uh!"

"Oh yeah, with the helmet and everything. And he has a fierce roar like you've never heard before."

She cast a withering glance his way that made the temperature under his armor suddenly very uncomfortable. *Say nothing* her gaze commanded.

"It is true," Cullen rubbed the back of his reddening neck. "They call me the Lion of Ferelden, not a name I would have chosen myself though."

"Well then Serah Lion, Serah Pavus, would you allow me a moment alone with my sister? We have so little time and much to speak about." Alexia smiled coolly.

Dorian gave a curt bow and disappeared, purpose in his steps. Evelyn knew Dorian was angry, but she trusted him to keep the vow of silence she imposed upon him to protect her secret shame.

Cullen cast a glance at the sister before turning it to Evelyn, the three scratches on her face still an angry red on the deep brown of her skin. Evelyn caught the fall of his gaze and shook her head ever so slightly.

*Don't you fucking dare.*

He glared back, challenging her as if to say 'We'll talk about this later,' before his face softened and he offered a hand to Masan. "Well then Ser Masan, would you like to see the armory, it's just this way."

Masan's eyes widened. "Grandfather says,"

"Grandfather isn't here," Cullen cut across the boy a little too sharply. "I'm sure he won't mind."

Cullen led the boy away while the two women remained behind in semi-awkward silence.

"How was the trip?"

"Uneventful. As much as Gareth wanted to parade from Ostwick to Skyhold hawking you like an expensive tapestry, he kept us travelling in silence. As a surprise."

"Figured as much. Are you well, is Masan well?"

"More or less."

"Alex...I'm sorry."

"No. Don't apologize. I know why you left. He would have killed you."

"I should have sent word, you could have come to Ha...Skyhold."

Alex shook her head again. "As absurd as it sounds, Masan and I are safe where we are. He doesn't need to be in the middle of a war. And now we are safer than we've been in a long while."

"How can you say that?"
Alex gestured for the women to sit on a bench. Her people flitted about the courtyard working in the gardens, heading to the chapel, or enjoying the early spring afternoon. Masan and Cullen emerged from the armory, a lion's shaped helm vastly too large for the boy, sitting akimbo on the child's head.

Something about the scene made B's heart tighten to the point of tiny tears forming just under her eyelids. For a brief moment, her father's violence was forgotten, and she observed in this quiet heartbeat, what a father should look like. An unbidden thought bloomed in her heart before she wiped it away dismissing it harshly.

"Because Gareth has something else to focus him, he no longer drinks himself stupid beating on the women and children of the household."

"What do you mean?"

"You and your power to save us all."

Recognition dawned on her. "How can you..? Maker's fuck Alex, you too?"

"Think about what you can do for us, for Masan."

"Look at your life, your life with my brother, with my father. And you'd wish that on me?"

"I wouldn't wish it on my cruelest of enemies, but you can save us." Alex took her sister's hands within her owns and gripped them, pleadingly almost like begging. "Gareth poisoned Vaughn, and had since birth. They both have been made to feel less, and it's horrible, petty, and so stupid. But that was their life, scrounging and scraping for the respect both granted and denied by quirk of birth."

"Respect is something earned."

"Tell that to a Bann who believes himself a prince.

"The marriage proposals we are flooded with now open so many doors that were once closed. Without them, the family will struggle. Our name...your name only goes so far. But now, your title, with the alliances you can make, you could be a princess, and my son, a teryn. And he'll never have to feel what his father felt, he'll never be poisoned with that disease that ate generations of your family alive. We could be made comfortable in our skins. Validated."

"I was never uncomfortable..." She caught her words before her mouth lied.

"Twice the struggle for half the spoils' you could finally balance that equation in our favor."

"You want me to elevate a family that never gave a damn about me?"

"We're all you have!"

Evelyn raised her arms to encompass the stone walls of Skyhold. "No. This is what I have." Her voice quieted and she glanced to the man and the boy playing swords and shields and her heart burned again. Masan smiled like she had never seen him as he lifted the wooden sword to Cullen's gentle instruction, the haunting shadows chased from the boy's wide and sweet eyes. She used to read to him while his parents squabbled. His favorite story was *Tale of the Champion*. He would draw pictures of himself pretending to be Serah Aveline or Serah Fenris.

"This is what I have."
"And how long will you have it?" Alexia gripped her hands harder, her pleading rising in pitch, begging Evelyn to see the reason in her words. "Think about it! Don't be obtuse. How long after the threat is gone will you keep your little fiefdom? How long before the next Divine, whenever that will be, decides to declare an Exalted March on you for heresy? Andraste's Herald. Do you know what they call you in the villages?"

"They drop the Herald part."

"Yes! Now imagine the full weight of the Chantry bearing down on your home and you've nothing but the paltry few you command! They'd burn you at the stake as well as spike the heads of everyone you've ever cared for."

Evelyn gasped. Raw imagery of blonde curls stained red, gold eyes open, gaping, and sightless.

"This won't last, I'm tearing it all down once this is over. Give everything back."

"Oh, so then you abandon the people you do have? Turn them back to their destitution? They depend on you, you are their savior, the Inquisition is now their lives and they have nothing to turn back to. Would you plunge this place into war? You are the buffer between Orlais and Ferelden, the only thing keeping the two from tearing the continent in half."

Alexia was fragile in body, strong in spirit, stronger still in mind. Her shrewdness was wasted on her mediocre brother and the love of her son kept her in bloody chains she was never strong enough to fight against.

"So you're saying if I keep it up, I'm fucked, and if I don't I'm also fucked."

"Isn't that always the way with our kind? But even if you don't think about saving your family, saving your people, think about saving Masan. You have always protected him, he needs you to protect him..."

"Don't dangle him like that in front of me! You just want the same power Gareth and Vaughn want."

"I do! For sake of my boy. So he never has to hide from his father again. So he never cowers when he hears him coming. So his children and their children and your children are never less than what they are and what they could be. You can't do that for us, for Masan, married to a miller's son!"

Cullen's full throated laughter carried across the courtyard as the templar had taken a 'crippling' blow to the chest from the mighty Ser Masan who now 'stabbed' him over and over all giggles and tickles and joy.

Alexia caught her sister's wistful gaze and felt her heart tear. What she would not sacrifice so her son could keep that smile on his face. "That's what you want isn't it?"

"Now is not the time." Evelyn answered quietly.

"No, its not. But it will be soon. And you will have much to think about." Alexia rose and called for her child. "Masan come, we must see to your bath and dinner."

"But mama..." Masan pouted, Cullen's face mirroring the boys.

"Now, my dear."

Dutifully, Masan returned his wooden short sword and shield to Cullen before hugging the man
goodbye. "Thank you Serah!"

Cullen nodded to the little knight and his mother.

"Alexia, what makes you think I'll even survive any of this? If you know the future, please clue me in."

Before the woman could collect her son and depart, she hugged her sister, whispering in her ear. "I know you will. Of the two of us, you are the survivor."

She kissed her cheek paying pointed attention to the new scars on her face. "You always have been."

**

He waited a full five minutes after they departed before he darkened her with his shadow.

"Inquisitor, a word please."

Cullen didn't let her gather her thoughts to protest, instead he laced his fingers though her own and pulled none too gently back into the quiet solitude of the empty War Room, passing by Josephine who was so deep in her work, she didn't notice the pair storm by.

Through the vestibule, into the War Room, Cullen closed the door with a thud and whirled on her as though she were wielding a sword and he offering a riposte.

"Inquisitor, I cannot allow that bastard to sleep soundly under your roof."

Evelyn's temper flared again, her heartsickness forgotten.

"You will because I ordered you to stand down already Commander. You makin' me repeat myself? You have a problem followin' orders?"

"Yours? Never. But this...I can't abide."

"Abide it!"

Cullen carded both his hands through his hair, exhaling violently, he was unable to look at her, unable to see her face without flying into a rage.

"I am supposed to protect you."

"He can't hurt me."

"He already has!"

"You think this," She grabbed his hand and put it on her face, fingertips brushing new scars. "Is a hurt?"

"I saw you on the floor crying and bleeding. Had you found me in such a way and the culprit within your arrow's reach would you not fire it?"

His voice cracked under the weight of his passion. Evelyn's breath hitched and heat rose to her face. It was a fair question and she could only answer honestly. "Yes, without thought."

He let his fingers wander over the wound on her face, they were cool and soothed the burning on
her flesh. "Then you understand."

"I am not weak." She grit her teeth.

"Never."

"I am not a child." She said, more as reassurance to herself.

He let her come to him this time, keeping his arms down until after she wrapped her arms around
him. He felt her sag against his chest, muscle and bone popping as though her body had been drawn
tight for hours only now finding rest.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Cullen asked gently as he held her.

"I didn't want you to think I was some walking bruise, something pitiable."

"Evelyn, I'd never..."

"Then why couldn't you look me in the eye?"

When he didn't answer, she answered for him. "Because you'd stop seeing me as me and only see
what was done to me."

He held her tighter, knowing she was right.

"That's exactly what I didn't want."

"Evelyn, I won't apologize for hating him or for wanting to protect you. I cannot bear to see you
hurt and know the person who did it remains unpunished. Mostly I am angry at myself for not
having noticed it sooner. But I am sorry for forgetting the most important part of this equation.
You. I'd break Heaven apart for you, know that."

She breathed in his scent, the leather and metal, the plain lye soap and his sweat, the mélange of
her Commander that made her feel the safety her father denied her. Her eyes slipped close and she
 breathed deeply, his hand still remaining on her wound, stroking so softly.

"We have our roles to play, so while he's here, and I suspect he won't stay long, we'll all have to be
fucking cordial. He is still my father, and a Lord besides. It would not bode well for us if
something happened. I hate him, but I love him too because I think I still remember what it felt like
when he loved me."

"I love you," he affirmed, ground it out through his teeth so it would break the walls around her
heart and root that truth in its foundation. "And I swear I won't touch him unless you command it.
And were you ever to command me so, I would destroy him utterly."

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Dorian, however, swore no such oath.

"His hearth is to remain unlit. No one will alert him or his wife to the breakfast bell. His chamber
pot will remain un-emptied and if he asks for water he must draw it from the well with his own
damaged hands. Give him the unwashed sheets and his privy will have no linen strips for cleansing
afterwards." He gave the wide eyed serving girl, Valenna, a bag of gold coins. "Throw a party and
have it by his door. Make sure you get the soldiers good and drunk and tumble one or two or
several if that's your fancy. He will not know a night's comfort under this roof. If I find he hasn't,
you will be richly rewarded. If I find he has, I'll be very cross. Oh, the woman Alexia and her child Masan are to be given every comfort as though they were visiting royalty. And not a word to anyone, this is our secret."

"Master Pavus," Valenna was breathless with glee.

"Why do you hate Lord..." Valenna caught herself before correcting. "Actually I don't know who he is. Why do you hate him so?"

Dorian grinned, grateful she understood. "He hurt my sister."

Chapter End Notes

Totally forgot there was a Dragon Age character named Velanna. Complete coincidence.

Also: thoughts so far? Where do you think this train wreck of a family reunion will go?
Josephine, to her eternal credit, was able to pull off a fête in under 6 hours. Her and her army of servants, cooks, retainers, valets, and footmen transformed the Great Hall into a banquet hall festooned in the heraldry of the Trevelyans and the Free Marches as though it had been planned since Creation and not pulled out of one ass barely hours ago.

The Inquisitor dressed magnificently, yet tastefully, wearing a dress of black samite embroidered with gold laurels that circled the hem and chased around the deep v-neck and cap sleeves. Her hair remained loose and she was unadorned by jewels, her's being a classic and muted beauty that stole the sound from everyone else.

Her mother, Susanna, was particularly impressed. She was a lighter skinned woman the color of a pumpkin squash, dark brown freckles strewn haphazardly across the bridge of her nose. She had with bone straight dark hair freshly straightened that came down just barely to her shoulders. Evelyn's grace was Susanna's gift, her fierceness her father's but she bore little physical resemblance to either and for that, the Inquisitor was grateful. While her father, Alexia, and Masan milled about, introducing themselves to her inner circle, Susanna approached her daughter face tight though graced with smile. The first show of any emotion Evelyn had seen since their arrival.

"You are magnificent." She moved to kiss her youngest but recoiled when she saw the distasteful scar's on her daughter's face. "You should cover these." Susanna remarked.

Evelyn glared, face constructed of disgust and animated with contempt. How fucking dare she.

"You mustn't anger him so." Susanna continued. "You've no idea how to deal with powerful men. You cannot bait them. And you have always baited him."

Evelyn scoffed, her eyes falling on her father who was introducing himself to Vivienne, his smile
and body a little to open and warm for her comfort. Typical, when she complained of her brother's lecherousness, she knew he got it honest.

Gareth lived for these kinds of occasions. He possessed an air of irresistible charm that everyone fell for, everyone without exception. His smiles were genuine, looked genuine, lit up his entire face and his eyes so they felt genuine. Yet such was the deception that no one but the blood of his blood could tell they were not. He bedded his many women this way, he cultivated his web of connections this way also, too bad it never served to earn him what he desired most; a way to break that pale fleshed glass ceiling.

Gareth leaned close to whisper something to the Grand Enchantress placing a hand on her upper arm. Evelyn watch the imperceptible shudder course through the mage and hoped she wasn't falling for his bullshit. Her body language suggested interest but Vivienne could write dissertations with her eyes, dissertations that she herself had learned to read and reproduce. The thesis of the look that found Evelyn: "Get me out of here before I immolate him."

Good girl, Viv.

She flashed a look at Dorian, always resplendent in his royal blue mage robes. Dutifully her friend arrived and bowed with a Tevinter flourish, extending his arms and twirling his hands in tight circles as he bent his body.

"My lady." He exclaimed breathlessly.

Susanna blushed, taken aback by the handsome man's deep bow. "And you are?"

Dorian gripped her hand tenderly and kissed it. "A bird given wings by your beauty."

Good ole Dorian. You knew he was insincere when, if flirting, he actually complimented the other person instead of himself.

As Susanna tittered, Evelyn slipped away and arrived just in time to prevent Gareth from offering Vivienne a bite of strawberry from his fingers.

"So sorry to deprive you Madame, but Father must meet the others." Thesis: I got you.
"How shall I survive?" What happened to your face?!

Gareth chuckled warmly, thinking his careful flirting was earning him results.

Barely, just barely her eyes flicked toward her father before coming back to Viv. She was actually surprised when the older woman bit her lip, a habit she often said belonged to children. Gareth thought it meant she was really interested when in fact it was a desperate attempt by the woman to keep from lighting the man on fire.

"You'll make due." Evelyn answered and Vivienne, iron face returning, nodded.

Sera fell for his charm and complimented all of Gareth's womenfolk. "You sir, have a family of great tits."

Gareth clutched his daughter's arm and led them away quickly.

Blackwall kept his conversation gruff and monosyllabic whenever Gareth pressed him for information about life with the Wardens.

Leliana was appreciably cold, citing tending to her ravens as her excuse for leaving early. A pointed glance from her Spymaster let her know she recalled their conversation from before and would root out whatever Evelyn was keeping from her.

Josie adored Gareth, Gareth adored Josie, and while the two conversed in rapid fire Antivan, Evelyn saw Alexia with Seeker Cassandra and Masan with Kiernan playing around the Inquisitorial Throne.

"So you're Viney's pop eh?" Varric asked offering Gareth a mug of ale.

"I'm sorry Viney?" He looked at his daughter. She twirled one of her vines around her fingers.

"Ahh, I see. My daughter's only failing. She'd look so much better without don't you think?"
"There are things she would better without," Varric said smiling warmly while tapping his hand absentmindedly on his left cheek, "Her hair ain't one of them."

Gareth stiffened yet his smile remained but Evelyn almost cried for joy. She cast a grateful glance back at the dwarf while her father shuffled them on.

"Laughter in pale faces. He makes them scream to cover up his screaming. I do not wish to help his hurt."

Solas ushered Cole away, unconcerned with offering a polite excuse.

She had been avoiding Dorian and Iron Bull which of course meant they'd pounce on them together.

A good thing too.

Bull saw her face, but his expression did not change.

Dorian saw Bull see her face, but didn't see the large fist that Bull was preparing for a spectacular haymaker.

He didn't need to see it.

Dorian felt it.

Evelyn saw all of this wordless exchange, but Dorian, quick as lighting, placed a tender hand on Bull's wrist all while the four of them carried on a fluid, uninterrupted conversation about the politics of the Qun, the Imperium, and the apparent thin line of blood that ran through the Trevelyans and Pavus families.

"That qunari was really charming." Gareth said as they departed company.
Evelyn rolled her eyes. The concept of irony and hypocrisy apparently lost on her father.

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Cullen's anger had not subsided, though it was mollified when, every time Gareth met another companion, eyes would flash to her then immediately flash to him alarmed, disgusted, surprised, or enraged. They knew and they wanted to be sure that he also knew so that when, if, there came a time for the wrath of the Maker to fall on that rat bastard, her greatest champion would be there to draw first blood.

"Serah,"

Masan appeared at his hip, his dusky little shadow. The boy reminded him of his nephews, Mia's children, people he hadn't seen in years. Maybe it was time to rectify that.

"Yes?" He tore his eyes off them for a moment and directed them towards the boy who was playing with his lion's tooth.

"My auntie gave this to me because she said she loves me. Did she give yours to you because she loves you too?"

Taken aback, Cullen nevertheless answered the boy's question. "Yes."

"Do you have babies?"

Sipping on a calming glass of wine was not a good idea with this kid. "No," he sputtered between coughs.

"Why not? You love each other, you make babies, and I could have a friend to play with. I promise to be nice. I'll read to them like auntie reads to me."

More coughing. This kid was murder on his heartstrings.
"Masan." Gareth Trevelyan's voice stilled the boy to his very soul.

"Yes Serah."

"You shouldn't bother the adults."

"No Serah."

Before his grandsire could suggest he find his mother, Masan fled.

Cullen had been the last and the most dreaded of all her companions to meet. Evelyn trusted him to respect her wishes and just let this night pass without incident but the fear still remained. Get through this one time and hope they need never meet again. "Commander Rutherford, allow me to introduce you to my father Lord Gareth Trevelyan."

"And her mother Susanna." The elder Lady Trevelyan arrived and took up her place by her Lord's side. Evelyn released her father and stood between them all, ready to body block if fists started flying and perhaps land a few long overdue punches of her own.

One heartbeat.

Two.

Cullen thought he earned his place at the Maker's side for his self-restraint. For his ability to look her parents in the eye and smile pleasantly when wanted nothing more than to throw them in the dungeon for a few ages or cover them in honey and feed them to Storvacker.

But he made a promise.

So he took Susana's hand and kissed it politely.

And he shook Gareth's hand.
Evelyn sighed inwardly as the three of them chatted amicably and for a moment she allowed herself to forget that all four of them hated one another but couldn't voice that hate out loud. She imagined this encounter didn't have to be a farce put on for propriety's sake, that this...could become a normal thing.

She tried to imagine her Commander, older with a full beard instead of his perpetual stubble talking to her salt and peppered haired mother while she bounced a baby on her...no Susanna didn't bounce babies.

Nor would Evelyn live too much longer to produce any. These kinds of stories, they don't end with 'happily ever afters' and big weddings in beautiful chapels. They end with heroic sacrifices and big funerals in beautiful chapels. The mark on her hand burned, a reminder of her mortality, eliciting a pained gasp she hid behind a calculated yawn.

"Evelyn?" Her father's voice cut through her distraction.

"What?"

"I was merely saying that we're retiring to our chambers." Dutifully, reluctantly, Evelyn kissed her father and mother goodnight and watched them saunter off into the cool evening.

She felt him move, the displacement of air so swift it felt like the wind. The moment they disappeared behind the doors, he was at her back as the steel in her spine gave way to water and she sank against him.

"Thank you," she sighed.

"Auntie!"

Her spine straightened again, refitting the mask on her face. Masan ran arms up and eager to be lifted. She pulled her nephew up into her arms as he kissed her cheek and lay against her shoulder.

"Did you have fun my halla?"
"Yes, everyone was nice."

She looked right like this, Cullen thought. She looked right in battle, arrows flying a wicked snarl slashed across her lips. She looked right in a ball gown, words flying like barbed arrows, slaying her enemies with glances and smiles. She looked right when she clutched him, her brown and his blonde fused so tight together that their two colors became one love. And she looked right like this, a child on her hip, looking up at her with adoring eyes.

Oh Maker.

The hazy anger and madness of the day parted leaving only bright and clear truth. He was so terrified and so thrilled with the sudden revelation he almost laughed out loud.

But he kept quiet as she returned her nephew to his mother. Kept quiet when she kissed him goodnight and returned to her quarters alone. He didn't follow, she didn't ask. But when he returned to his tower, he pulled out a clean sheet of parchment and began to pen a letter to his sister.

**

The Trevelyans made ready to depart the next morning.

Gareth, after having one of the worst nights of his life, needed exertion to work off the stress of overflowing chamber pots, missed meals, and bedbuggy sheets. The training pitch was full, their Commander himself getting hands on with his soldiers barking orders and waylaying the inattentive or lazy with brutal blows of sword and shield. His blighted daughter stood by to watch him with the First Enchantress.

Gareth purred in his throat.

He regretted his eldest had learned his lecherousness from his sire but a man was a man and as such he had needs. Susanna was his wife, not his lover and she understood.

What was good for the gander....
He meant to embarrass the Cub of Ferelden in front of his daughter and her soldiers to remind her of the fragility of her position while possibly enticing further Madame de Fer, a woman built like a whore’s sin with a lady’s grace.

She was damn near wet for him when his daughter pulled him away yesterday, maybe after this display he might get to tumble her before they departed.

"Commander Rutherford!" Gareth put on a winning smile, the one that disarmed everyone who saw it. The one that showed his full mouth and brightened his hazel eyes.

Cullen froze as Bann Trevelyan addressed him, noticing the daggers on his back and the sick syrupy sweet smile other's might mistake as warm.

"My Lord."

"I wonder if you would be so kind as to assist me with my morning exercises. I think I might prove a little more challenging than a green recruit."

Cullen's spirit rejoiced. Truly the Maker answered prayers.

A loophole presented itself unto the Commander, as there's no way Evelyn could be angry with him if he beat the shit out of her father in the practice ring. But, Cullen tried to hide the devious smile working its way across his face, he must cover his ass first.

““My Lord, forgive me, but I don't think I could bring myself to strike the father of our Inquisitor.”"

“Nonsense, treat me like you would a recruit, or better yet an enemy.”"

““You? An enemy? I could never imagine.”"

**
The women saw Gareth and Cullen speaking, a twisted unrecognizable smile crossing the latter's face.

“Oh...oh no... Maker no.”

Vivienne, true to her name, placed a hand on the Inquisitor's arm that gripped like an iron chain.

“Shh...dear. Just watch.”

Evelyn struggled against the lady's grip, though definitely not in earnest.

“He'll kill him.”

“One hopes.”

The recruits parted, their blades stilled, and the makings of a crowd formed around the two. Dorian and Bull showed up, along with Cole, Varric, and Solas eager to see the source of the fuss.

Gareth pulled his daggers free and blew a kiss towards the women watching, ostensibly for his daughter but actually for Vivienne and both women knew it.

With the loophole successfully exploited, Cullen began.

While Gareth was grandstanding, the Commander, his blade flashing in the early morning light, brought it down hairs away from Gareth's body.

The well trained rogue vaulted backward as the point of the sword thudded into the dirt. His daggers appeared in his hands and he rushed forward slashing them in wide arcs like a windmill, body twisting again and again and again, the silverite slicing blades biting into Cullen's templar shield.

Lord Trevelyan was a tornado of blades, all Cullen could do was hold his sheild and pray his arm didn't give out under each withering blow. His arm vibrated with every slash rattling the bones in
his arms and clacking his teeth together.

A frenzied smile broke across Gareth's face as he pushed the templar back and back with his attacks. His blades were made of fade-touched silverite, they cost a fortune and enchanted with runes that added additional sharpness. They sliced through the Commander's shield like a knife through butter, would that he could get a piece or several of the Commander's flesh.

Sparks flew with every hit, the 'oohs' and 'aahs' cresendoed.

Gareth was fast, the Commander judged, and his weapons were bar none which attributed much to his opponent's fierceness. But Lord Trevelyan relied on having better equipment than his foes creating a sense of arrogance easily exploited. The daggers sliced, bit, and stuck into his shield.

Cullen bashed it backwards, the knife came free but Lord Trevelyan lost his footing and therefore his advantage. Cullen roared startling Masan making the little boy firmly believe his new friend really was the lion his auntie said he was.

“Mama, he's a lion!”

“He is indeed my love,” Alexia agreed, a rare smile forming on a face so unused to the gesture.

The Lion of Ferelden thrust his broadsword with the finesse and agility of a rapier, precision strikes designed to tangle up the man's feet.

Gareth, reading his opponent's intentions, rolled into Cullen's guard space taking away his advantage of reach.

Evelyn's startled shriek almost tore open the Veil as Gareth drew first blood, blades tearing through his padded practice gambeson opening up a bright red bloody smile down the length of Cullen's arm.

“I can't watch this.” Evelyn moaned.

“I can!” And Vivienne actually leaned closer.
Evelyn buried her face in her hands, put parted two fingers just in case.

“Do you yield Serah Templar? A good thing you're in so much padding, I don't want to hurt you too badly.” Gareth taunted.

The daggers stung but the cut was barely superficial, he'd taken worse (and far more gratifying) wounds from Evelyn's nails and teeth. The Commander, pleased to see that Gareth was no more than a parchment dragonling, actually smiled before removing his practice gambeson and tunic revealing bare muscled chest.

Evelyn was glad she kept those fingers parted.

“I don't need armor against you.”

Gareth intended to end the fight quickly, knock the cub into the dirt within the first minute or two and embarrass the boy in front of his army. But the Commander had proven at least moderately competent and had managed to stay on his feet while keeping Gareth on his toes. He always made fools of younger men on the practice ground, letting his age and sweat demeanor fool them into thinking he was more fragile and less threatening than he was. Cullen somehow managed to see his hand and made him earn every blow landed against him.

Cullen lunged forward far too quickly for the winded Trevelyan to dodge. The sword sliced his thigh and the blood debt was repaid. The Inquisitor's sire cursed inelegantly, sidestepping and appearing behind the templar hoping to skewer him in the kidneys. But the cub jerked his sword arm back greeting Gareth with an elbow in the mouth preventing that hope. The elder man staggered backward as his most prized possession, his face, bled freely from a lip split on his teeth.

“Uh...my dear, this has gone beyond a sparring match. They might actually kill each other.” Vivienne cautioned

Hoots and hollers from the enthusiastic crowd drowned out the Inquisitor's calls to stop while Cullen pressed his advantage, snarling and slashing, the whole brunt of his fury contained in every blow. Off guard and off form, Gareth stumbled back and back avoiding the brutal onslaught but only just barely. He tripped and fell in the dirt and within seconds a templar's knee was in his chest, deadly pointed sword in his face.
“Do you yield my Lord?” Cullen asked smugly, taking the time to glance up at his lady love and wink.

Evelyn melted and the crowd cheered.

In good taste and point well made, the blonde man offered a hand to his opponent to help him to his feet. Gareth swatted away the peace offering and stood on his own, rage wafting off him. He took the proffered hand and instead of shaking it, he pulled the templar to him, hissing in his ear.

“You offer a most challenging diversion cub.” Gareth spat.

“Hopefully something more challenging than beating on women and children, my Lord.”

Lord Trevelyan ignored the accusation. “I can admit when I'm defeated, but can you? You may have your diversions with my daughter now but remember, cub, she was born nobility while you tilled blighted dirt. She was meant for men far better than you.”

Cullen dismissed Gareth's words, suppressing the sinking feeling they created in his gut. “Maybe so, but still, you have my gratitude, ser.”

“You're thanking me?”

“Yes,” The Commander answered simply. He turned to Evelyn. She was with Varric and Vivienne counting the coins wagered on the fight. The smile had returned to her face, bright and beautiful, evoked by the family who truly loved her. He turned back to Gareth, his voice a low, threatening growl. "I thank you because you fathered the most perfect creature on the Maker's earth. And I swear by that same Maker you'll never hurt her again.”

His sincerity truly disarmed the father, hitting harder than his shield slam. Gareth drew back, flashing winning smiles again. “Good show Commander, you've earned your name well.”

**

One should not say 'goodbye' to family. Goodbye was too finite, too ominous. Instead she kissed
Masan and Alexia and bid that she would see them again. Hovering close to her sister-in-law she whispered, "Skyhold is your home should you need it. Never hesitate."

Alexia nodded. "Thank you, and don't forget what we spoke about." She glanced at Cullen, then back to her. "You have much to think on."

Susanna did not embrace her, and Evelyn made no move for one herself. Gareth though, would always and forever keep up appearances, no matter how abhorrent. That fiasco with the Commander soured his mood considerably and he meant to impart a sharp reminder on his daughter about their earlier discussion. But the Lion's words echoed in his head, their sound made sharper by the murderous look he received from him as he went to embrace his daughter farewell.

No matter, a miller's son wasn't going to ruin his chances. Evelyn will marry and it won't be him. He swore it.

"Next time, inform me." His daughter hissed in his ear as they hugged.

"So you can be well away when I visit?"

"Precisely."

Gareth sighed deeply. "You've built something powerful here and I would see that you maintain it. Think about what we've discussed."

She ignored him.

"I made something for Alphonse, since he'll have no true grave. If you cared at all, if you ever cared, it's halfway up the mountain."

Gareth made a sour face, confirming in a look that he indeed never cared. "Our journey takes us other places."

Bann Trevelyan kissed his daughter and mounted his horse, nodding to the Commander in a respectful salute the other man did not return.
As their horses departed, her body unclenched releasing several years worth of breath she was completely aware she had been holding in.

"I need...I need..."

"A drink perhaps?" Cullen offered.

"You!"

She whirled on him.

"Me?"

"No, not me, you!"

"Something tells me that 'you' isn't the 'you' I'm hoping for."

She shook her head gravely and jabbed a finger into his chest so hard he could feel the skin start to bruise. "You beat the shit outta him."

"Ah...I...he said!"

She fell upon him and kissed him, hard and unyielding, grateful.

"Oh goody, they're kissing! Thank the Maker! Things can finally get back to normal around here and I can go back to being the center of attention!" Dorian shouted, tossing a nondescript bag of unknown contents to one of the serving staff...Valenna? behind him.
She broke her kiss prematurely noting the Commander's distinct growl, a sign of his displeasure and other emotions.

"And you Commander," Dorian continued. "You put on quite the show. Though, between you and me, next time behead the bastard."

"Stop it. Dorian."

"You know I'm only half-joking. So, why on earth did they visit you anyway?"

"They want me to get married. Tons and tons of rich Marcher boys eager to marry the Herald of Andraste."

Cullen's throat tightened as he remembered her father's threat. She was meant for men far better than you.

"I told him I'm not ready."

"Well, why not?" Dorian prodded, "Obviously, you aren't lacking for eligible suitors."

Cullen coughed to cover up a rather undignified choking noise.

"Dor, stop. Leave 'em be." Bull interrupted. "You've caused enough trouble."

"Trouble? Whatever do you mean?" Dorian said with mock innocence.

Iron Bull glanced at the weighty purse Valenna was carrying away, laughed, and said nothing further.
Chapter End Notes

You think this is over? WE AINT DONE YET. KEEP THOSE GLUTES GRABBED BECAUSE THERE IS MORE TO COME.

Speculations?
That night she found him in his quarters, pouring over stacks and stacks of reports left neglected during their trip to Halamshiral and their distraction by the Trevelyan clan.

They hadn’t been alone since before the Winter Palace and seeing her now leaning casually at his ladder awoke something primal within him. Throughout the day, he stewed in Lord Trevelyan’s parting words, *She was born nobility while you tilled blighted dirt. She was meant for men far better than you.*

There was no denying that he often thought she deserved a better man, one already whole and not so broken. But to hear those words echoed in the sneer of her father’s mouth, no, he wasn’t letting anyone take her from him. Not her father, not the Maker, not even death.

“Come to Ferelden with me.” He blurted, his mouth outrunning his mind.

She blinked a few times, cocking her head to the side in confusion before her mouth curved in a half-smile. "Only two days back at Skyhold and already you wish to leave?"

"The Winter Palace was stressful, having your parents here was *stressful.*"

"You conducted yourself amicably Commander. Your restraint on the practice field was exemplary."

"He's lucky."

"I'm lucky." She insisted.

"I'm luckier." He countered. "Anyway, I thought maybe we'd go since we haven't had a moment alone in some time."

"We're alone now." Her back was against the ladder to his loft, her eyes shining with her best 'come hither' look.

"Maker, woman, I'm trying to ask you out on a date!"

She laughed, "A date?"

"Yes."

"To Ferelden."
He grit his teeth, blushing. "Yes."

"Ferelden." She drew out the syllables with her tongue.

"It may not be the pampered comforts of Halamshiral my lady. You must forgive my humble..."

Evelyn hid her giggle and her warm face in the back of her hand. "Shut up, you know I'll go, you're just so cute and easily teased."

"The last thing I wish to be is cute." Cullen growled annoyed.

"What do you wish to be then?"

"Inside of you."


The Commander rose from his desk, reports forgotten and stalked over to his lady peeling off cloak and armor along the way.

"You don't know how beautiful you looked in that dress yesterday." He murmured against her. "And you owe me from earlier." A knee pressed between her thighs, the lady squeaked.

"I..." Her eyes fluttered shut as he kissed her without preamble, resuming the hungry devouring that was interrupted earlier.

She pressed her back against the ladder, he had her trapped not that she would flee.

“Up.” he said between slips of tongue.

“See,” she groaned when a hand roughly palmed one of her breasts. “Told you this would ruin the mood.”

She scrambled up the ladder, he behind her, landing pinches on her bottom every other rung.

Up the ladder, clothes hastily shucked, mouth and teeth and heat clashing, so much heat.

“Evelyn.” He growled teeth desirous of sinking into her neck. She granted his wish, craning her head back against the pillow offering, surrendering.

He bit, hard, shocks of pain tingling through her extremities, hardening her exposed nipples, sweetening her cunt. Her cry stiffened him harder than he thought possible. He wouldn't let her be taken from him, he wouldn't let her marry some random faceless noble. She belonged to him, his lust hazy mind reasoned.

“You're mine.” he growled against her neck as her thighs squeezed his hips, her legs working to bring his hardness closer and closer to her aching core.

“Yes. Please Cullen.”

“Say it again! Say you're mine.”

“I'm yours.” She whimpered again when he clamped cruelly around her pebbled nipples, tongue soothing teeth's hurt. He bit her again on the curve of her breast and she moaned, clenching uselessly around nothing. “Please, please.”
“What do you need?”

“What you need?” she strangled.

“That’s a where, not a what.” Cullen answered darkly.

Before she could answer two fingers, pressed, entered, and stretched her silencing her protest eliciting a wanton moan. Her nails left half moons in his shoulders, in his back. His lady panted into his neck, begging with every breath for more.

He did not work her slowly. He fucked her with his hand, pressing deep inside her, scissoring her open, priming her for the deep slide of his cock.

“Cullen!”

Her back arced as he hit deeply, but his weight kept her down. He crushed her, smothered her, possessed her, mine, mine, mine.

“Mine,” he roared, biting her again. The shock of the pain accentuated the sweetness of his hands, she came unbidden and without warning, a whipcrack flood of painful pleasure.

Her wave was short and surprising, he hadn’t even bothered with what he knew would have her keening. A mistake easily rectified as Cullen, masterfully fingered Cullen, swiped a slick fingertip across and around the crown of her sex. She choked back her scream, hand's flying to her mouth to stifle a sound they heard all the way in Orlais.

“No, I need to hear you.” He pressed her again, she screamed again, throat open and wide, ripe for singing his songs. “How would you like me to take you to the Free Marches instead?” He crooned in her ear.

His skin felt too tight, stretched against too much desire. He needed to have her now. Needed to feel her press around him, to sheath him, to open and accept and Oh holy Maker. He moved, shifted and drove into her so fiercely she almost struck her head against the headboard. Evelyn bent her arms back against the wood to brace, nails scratching away the lacquer as she scrambled for good purchase. Her words had no meaning, but her sounds, her squeaks, and sighs did as they served to spur him forward, deeper.

“We can go to Ostwick.” He panted, relentless in his thrusts, both hands death grips on her hips.

“To Trevelyan manor.”

Maker her moan. She read his thoughts and bucked her hips against him. She gripped him, tightly and he hissed through his teeth.

“The master suite,” she answered. “Up the grand staircase, east wing.”

"Would we even make it that far? I'd fall upon you on that staircase. Fucking you right there on the floor. Make your servants watch as some Ferelden brute claimed their Marcher princess."

A feral grin more tooth than smile, split across Cullen's face. He hooked an arm under her back and lifted her up. “Turn over, show me that backside of yours.” Evelyn obeyed, could not obey fast enough, she canted her head back, flipping her locs knowing what that would do to him. Cullen buried his mouth into her presented cunt, dragging tongue up and down, lips sucking her very soul out.
She fucked herself on his tongue as he devoured her, she could smother him dead and he'd die happy and she'd not care. She came on the power of his tongue on her clit, walls shuddering and spasming still needful of something thicker inside of her.

He kept her on hands and knees, rising from her dripping core, he hilted himself inside her. Cullen curled over her back and bit her shoulder, one arm around her belly, the other braced against the headboard.

“Would you like me to fuck you like this in the master suite?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Louder. Tell me.”

“Fuck me Cullen, Please!”

He smacked the side of her ass as he slammed into her. Again and again, the sharpness of the blows wrenching screams from her throat arrested by the pure sensation of his cock filling her, stroking her to the core.

“I'll fuck you. In the master suite of your father's house, making you come again and again, making you scream for me. Because you're mine.”

“Yo-” her affirmation drowned out in a wail of passion. He thrust within her so hard his teeth began to click together. His fire rumbled, the pit of his stomach clenched and..

“Fuck!” He came in a flooded rush, buried to the deepest. The lovers stilled, quiet except for ragged panting. She rolled onto her back and flopped onto the bed, hissing as his thickness withdrew from her. He followed, curling into her body, face buried in her neck, kissing his bites.

“Mine,” he murmured wrapping her tightly to him, uncaring of the near oppressive body heat between them.

“Yours,” she answered, completely unable to summon the mental fortitude to ask why such a passion had come over him.

And this time he fell asleep first.
Did you really think I was gonna let this opportunity slip by me without making that reference?

They rode for a day and a half from Skyhold, south, following the curve of Lake Calenhad.

"You haven't really told me where exactly we're going." Jackson ambled at a sedate pace being careful not to outclip White Luck, Cullen's courser. The two mounts had taken a liking to each other, as much as a hart could like a horse.

"I have family in Honnleath, but they fled after the Blight. They now live in a village in the South Reach. I thought you might meet them."

"You..your parents?" A soft question, spoken in alarm.

"No. They died a long time ago. I mean for you to meet my siblings."

Cullen's mother died when he was still young, old enough to understand death but maybe a little too young to understand the lasting and finite consequences of it. Death was something everyone did, like going on a trip. He thought his mother had died and would come back.

He cried when they buried her. He placed the flowers on her grave and buried his face in Mia's neck weeping while their father held both Branson and Rosie. But days later he asked when Mama was coming home. She'd been dead long enough, it was time to come back, he missed her.

Oh, did he weep when he finally understood that death meant 'not coming back.'

The memory of his mother's death distracted him from the pained noises coming from over on his left. Evelyn pitching side to side on her mount like she was going to either fall off it or loose her lunch.

"Is something wrong, love?"

"Do they know about...me...us?"

"I wrote a letter to Mia, they know we're coming so it's not like we're dropping out of the sky."

"But do they know about me specifically?"

"They know I'm bringing a plus one, I surmise they'll parse out the rest. What's bothering you?"

She had a look of wide-eyed semi-panic. She groaned as though mortally pained and pitched forward on her mount.

"Why didn't you tell me?" She groaned.

"I'm telling you now."
"With almost no time for preparation! I have to bring gifts, I have to pack the proper clothes, I have to burn all those silken underthings I bought in Orlais!"

"Wait...you have to...what?" Cullen's brain, stuttered and stopped, pausing on the idea of her in said Orlesian silken underthings before restarting again. "You don't have to do any of that you know, especially that last part. You are fine the way you are."

"Oh Maker's fuck!"

"You know, I actually haven't heard you say that in a while, I think I missed it."

"Shut up! Do they know I'm the Inquisitor, that I'm noble, that I'm... I'm not... urrr Rutherford, why didn't you tell me!"

"I didn't think it'd be...I'm a farmer's son, we're simple folk, we don't need month in advanced invitations and announcements. We just go."

There was another, more precient reason for keeping quiet about true nature of the trip. He slipped a hand into his pocket, squeezing to make sure the token still rested there securely.

"But still, the last time I had family sprung on me, which, I'll remind you, was no less than four days ago, you almost killed my father."

"More's the pity I..."

"That joke has run its course!"

He buttoned up, no time now to test her temper.

Evelyn stressed, contemplated tearing her hair out. After everything that's happened, how could he not understand...

"I don't want another thing like what happened in Skyhold to happen again. It's obviously important to you that I meet your family and I want this to go way better than what it did when you met mine."

White Luck matched Jackson clop for clop allowing Cullen to wrap an arm around Evelyn.

"Once they see you, they'll love you. As I did, as I do."

It’s not that simple. It’s never that simple. She thought. But she swallowed her trepidation and summoned her best smile. She would make this work for him damnit.

They rode on in amicable silence taking in the distant sounds of the lake. While Evelyn wracked her brain about how to salvage what she thought was impending doom, Cullen mused on the tiny piece of metal tucked safely in his pocket. He'd give it to her at the end of the trip, or try to anyway.

He loved her, of that, he had no doubt. And he was slowly coming to the realization he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, yet the logistics of that little fantasy were harder to imagine.

She was rich, born a noble. Born into circumstances of responsibility he couldn't possibly imagine. Gareth Trevelyan's warning replayed like an annoyingly popular song in a tavern She was meant for men better than you.

She was, he admitted to himself yet again.
Maybe it's better this way, just the way they are, no promises, and no heartbreaks.

“Oh!”

Evelyn leapt off her hart, strung her bow, and grabbed her quiver. Always red arrows.

“What are you doing?”

“There are wild boar in these hills!”

“Now is not the time for hunting!”

“It'll take no longer than an hour, boars are easy. I can shoot dinner. It's not the gift I wanna bring but it'll do.”

“You're insane!”

“Stay with the mounts, I'll be back!”

He cupped his hand around his mouth for another retort but she was gone, leaving him with the horses. He reached for Jackson's reigns and damned if the beast didn't look at him with what could be described as sympathy.

'You're the one in love with her, I'm just here for the oats.' He seemed to say.

Half an hour passed and true to her word, she returned except she was coming from the road ahead. On another horse...and considerably paler than...

“Mia?”

“Cullen!”

His eldest sister, a woman he hadn't seen in a decade, galloped towards him.

He left in his teens, right after their father died. Mia was his best friend and yet his constant torment as only an insufferable older sister could be. She encouraged him to follow his dream to become a templar, often enlisting his other siblings in his 'training'. Branson was his brother-in-arms and Rosalie always the abomination to be smote.

And he smote her often.

Poor Rosalie.

“Maker's breath Cullen!”

She was off her horse and on him, crying, sobbing into his neck. She pulled back, and took her brother's face in her hands. “You look just like Daddy. Just like him. Maker's breath!” She exclaimed again, hugging him tighter.

“What are you doing here on the road by yourself?” South Reach wasn't exactly the most dangerous place in Ferelden. If he was being objective about it, his home probably wouldn't merit inclusion on the list. But still...it was his sister.

“I couldn't wait, I thought to come out to meet you and ride with you the way home. Is that a hart?”

“Yes it is. Mia, I have to...”
An adult boar flew through the air and landed at their feet blood and viscera splattering from the
gash torn down the beast's middle.

“Cullen, I got dinner!”

The forest seemed to part around her as she emerged from the bushes and into the open road. Her
arms were covered in dark blood up to her elbows, her hair was wild, and loose, roots rough and in
desperate need of attention. One of her pant legs was slashed across the calf from the boar's tusk,
but by the looks of it, the boar got it worse.

The two pale people stared at her, mouths agape and eyes wide in shock, disbelief and possible
fear.

“Oh...oh shit.”

Evelyn tried to hide her face in her hands which only served to streak even more blood across it.
She noticed this far too late to stop herself and now, with her face stained dark maroon, she
marched to her saddlebag, uncorked her water skin and dumped the entire thing over her head
which helped, though only marginally.

Now the dirt on her face turned to mud.

“Oh Maker's...f.. breath! Just...please, let the earth swallow me whole.” She prayed to a Maker who
unfortunately didn’t hear or didn’t care. The ground under her remained firm.

Mia stared wide eyed at the positively feral looking creature that emerged from the woods while
Cullen stood equal parts amused, horrified, and embarrassed by what just happened.

“Mia, give me a moment.”

She hid behind Jackson's flank, trying to obscure most of her horrific visage from the woman who
could only be Cullen's sister. Cullen joined her, and offered her his water skin to get the rest of the
blood off her face.

“I want to die.” she hissed.

“We'll get you bathed when we get home.”

“I can't show up like this.”

“You didn't have to go kill a boar.”

“I needed to bring something!”

“Well get out from behind the hart so I can introduce you.”

“Wait,” she grabbed his wrist, serious now. “Don't tell her who I am. Not yet.”

“But why?”

“Everything alright?” Mia called.

“Fine!” they answered together.

“Just...please, I don't want them to know just yet. I just want this to be normal. I'm not the
Inquisitor, or a noble and you're not the Commander. Just you and me. B and Cullen. Okay?”
“Alright, but we have to tell them eventually, and I won't lie.”

“Fair enough.”

They stepped out together, her hand squeezing his until he thought his fingers were blue under his gloves.

“Mia this is my...we never did come up with a name for us did we?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No, we never did. Anyway, just call me Bea.”

**

She lashed the dead boar to Jackson, promising the hart in Dalish, for a thorough cleaning when they got back to Skyhold. All three remounted and began the journey to the Rutherford farm.

“Branson has come by with Kiyah, she's pregnant.”

“His first?”

“Yes, he's so excited.”

Evelyn...well Bea for the time being, sat quietly as Cullen and Mia went over the last 10 years of family history. She learned his parents were long dead. His older brother, Branson was a carpenter and blacksmith for their village. His work kept him usually at the forge in town, but he tore away to see his big brother finally come home. His younger sister Rosalie, still lived at home, supplementing their income from the family mill with seamstress work.

Mia herself had three children and a devoted husband who tended the farm and the animals. The Rutherfords were a quiet clan, unassuming in wealth and stature, their oldest brother Cullen by far the most well traveled of the three siblings with Mia, Branson, and Rosalie never leaving their little corner of Ferelden, the farthest any of them have travelled being their flight from Honnleath to village they inhabited now.

“How did you end up in Kirkwall? I wrote and wrote and wrote to Kinloch until someone finally told me you weren't there anymore. What happened?”

Bea only knew about half of this story and never pressed for more since he seemed genuinely pained by the retelling.

“The Circle fell. Overrun by demons.”

Mia gasped, hand at her breast. She was a pretty woman, eyes like her brother, hair a wavy dark dirty blonde.

“Why did you never say?”

“I didn't want to.”

“Bea do you know anything?”

The first time she'd been addressed all ride. “I know as much as you do.”

Mia huffed and spurred her horse forward.

It was midday by the time they reached the farm. The trio pulled into the barn, greeted by a gruff
looking older man with a full beard of black hair, dark, deep set eyes, and a form that suggested every one of his days was spent at hard labor.

“Cullen, Bea, my husband Tanner.”

“Cullen? Good 'ta meetcha.” Tanner had hands like bear and a demeanor to match. He felt larger than life and warmer than it too, Bea liked him immediately.

“Maker's balls, iszat a hart?”

Bea pat Jackson's flank appreciatively. “Yes a Royal Sixteen.”

“Bless my soul, you know horseflesh?”

Bea's smile could outmatch midday sun.

"Will you ever tell us what happened? Why you disappeared?" Mia commented while her husband and the woman traded tips on stabling and breeding horses.

"I will. But it's hard to talk about sometimes. Terrible things happened, things that I've done and were done to me. I didn't want to saddle you all with my burden, and I foolishly thought keeping quiet would make everything go away. I hurt you, my family, with that silence, and I've wasted years we can't get back. But hopefully now, we can start again, with more time."

Mia nodded. "Father fought in the wars with King Cailan. When he came back he hardly spoke at all and had this look in his eye that would send you fleeing, Rosie too."

"I remember."

Stanton Rutherford gave his son his serious mouth and his kind eyes. He had been deep and quiet and strong like a river at rest, another gift bequeathed to his son. If Cullen Rutherford was the Lion of Ferelden, it was because Stanton Rutherford made him that way.

His childhood was a joy. Chess with Mia, swimming with Branson in Lake Calenhad, and smiting poor Rosalie whenever he played at being the templar he knew in his heart he always wanted to be. His mother Almira was too sweet a creature for accurate description, an angel literally and the first woman Cullen ever fell in love with. Cullen was a consummate mama's boy to his very soul.

"Our mother brought him back, perhaps not all the way, but enough so he could be the other father you remember too."

The father that gave him piggy back rides. Who paid him in copper coins whenever he mucked out the family stables. And then when his earnings accumulated, took him to the market and gave him free reign of sweets stall.

"I thought going to Kirkwall would bring me back. That if I threw myself into it, I'd remember what it was like to be that boy again. But ..."

In the safety of his family's barn, Cullen spilled forth the truth of Kirkwall, of Kinloch, and the murderous things he had done for sake of his Knight-Commander and his own fearful prejudices. Thankfully Tanner and Bea rambled on and on about horses, harts, and nuggalopes (that's a hedge witches tale, there are no such ma'am I swear) ignoring the quieter more somber conversation taking place nearby.

Bea snuck glances at her lion every now and again, watching the wrinkles at the corners of his
eyes pull tight, and his mouth press into a very serious thin line. She knew the flavor of their conversation, and was glad he felt comfortable enough to divulge it to his family. She kept Tanner talking in the meantime.

"So what changed?" Mia asked as he finished the tale of Meredith Stannard's fall. "Why after everything, quit? You were in a position to rebuild your Kirkwall templars or go somewhere else."

"I didn't want to, too much blood, sacrifice, death. I wanted to do good, I thought I was. Seeker Pentaghast showed me another way to do the good I desired."

"With the Inquisition?"

"Yes. Being their Commander makes me feel a little like myself again, not like I was before but better." He nodded toward Bea. She was petting an old mabari, crooning to it in Dalish while the dog rolled about on its back indulgently seeking belly scratches from the pretty lady with the snakes for hair.

"She brought me all the way back."

Mia smiled, nodding. The incident with the boar before hand was slightly off putting for sure and her appearance was...well...a little unusual, but her brother's dreamy dazed face absolved the woman, Bea, from any further misgivings.

“She's...interesting.”

“Yes.”

“You're in love with her.” Not a question.

“Deeply.”

“And she's good to you, truly?”

“More than I deserve.”

Mia smiled and hugged her brother. “Then she is family.”
Mia gave her some towels and left her to bathe in one of the rooms off the main hallway. Her boar had been set to roast over a spit for the next few hours and would be ready to eat come dusk. Talking to Tanner had been fun, the man knew his breeds and it was interesting to talk to someone other than the dour Dennet about horses. It set an auspicious precedent for her visit despite its near cataclysmic opener with her literally throwing a dead pig at Cullen's sister.

Three hours in, and nobody had any scars on their faces.

So far so good.

Someone knocked on the door mid-soak. “I uhh...someone's in here!” she called before the door opened anyway.

“It's me, my lady.”

The tub was too small to turn all the way around in. “Cullen?”

“Who else?”

He knelt by her tub and kissed her now dirt and blood free hair. “Better?” Cullen wasn't in his armor anymore, just a linen tunic, breeches and boots, a common man if she ever saw one.

“Much. You should be with them.”

“I should be with you.”

“You haven't seen them in years.”

“Then what's a few more minutes? Besides, they are as much strangers to me as they are to you. I want you to be with me when I see them again. I think I need you with me.”

A pale arm snaked out from behind her, wrapping around her neck and shoulders, fingertips gliding over wet flesh.

“Cullen,” She purred.

He kissed the back of her neck, down and below her ear, pushing her vines aside, reveling in their freshly washed scent. She shouldn't have, but she bent her neck to accommodate his kisses, toes curling in the water.

“Cullen,” she hissed again.

“Shh..” His hand travelled to her chest, palming her breasts, tweaking wet nipples hardened by chilly air. “You have to be quiet, there are children around.”

“Cullen!” she hissed. He pinched a nipple, testing her. She stifled a gasp with bitten lip. “Evil...bastard...” she ground out between needy bitten back moans.

Cullen chuckled softly, one hand worrying her breast, the other travelling lower under the water line.

“Don't you dare!”
“You are always so...vocal, in your adoration of me, yet I wonder how quiet you can be.”

“Please...Aah...” She bit the back of her hand while a fingertip pressed her little button under the water.

“I'm going to make you come, my love.” he murmured into her ear as an insistent finger swirled and poked and stroked her pearl.

Bea had to keep so still, too much movement and she's splash water all over the floor, an embarrassing situation she didn't want to try to explain away to the lady of the house. Her hands gripped the sides of the wooden tub, flexing and clenching. Sonofabitch, there was no way to retaliate like this, she was completely under his control. A tongue flicked her earlobe, teeth softly grazed her neck aware of the harsher attentions he had paid to her in the days previous. Had she been a paler woman, she'd be marked all over in places that might cause a scandal. He was glad she wasn't.

She drew in a sharp breath between pressed teeth rapid and ragged, hyperventilating.

“Breathe my lady.” Cullen encouraged as he slipped a finger inside her. Her control snapped, her legs thrashed a bit, sloshing water about before she regained control.

“I'll kill you.” She breathed before swallowing another moan as a second finger pushed inside pumping her slowly.

“I welcome your attempts.”

“W...why?”

“Because I love you, and I can't keep my hands off you. Because there is an air of danger, because it's Tuesday. Need I a reason to please my lady love?”

Third finger curling inside, second hand teasing her satiny jewel. She didn't know what to do with her legs. The tub was too short to extend them fully and it was getting to the point where...where they...

“Come for me, my lady.”

Her body locked, frozen in ecstasy. Her neck craned over the lip of the tub, her mouth open but soundless. Never was she more beautiful.

“There you are my love, ride it out.” He stroked her softly, leaving trails of kisses along her neck and jaw. When her quiet thrashing stilled, he withdrew from her.

“Wh..where are you going?” Evelyn's voice was breathy and distant, desperately trying to return to the real world.

“Nowhere, we're going down together remember. I thought, since you were so nervous earlier, I might relieve some of that tension.”

Bea splashed water on her face. “Holy Maker.”

“Cullen will do.”

She threw a bar of soap at him. He dodged it with a chuckle.

Finally clean of boar's blood, she emerged from the tub wet and naked in all her glory. Cullen's
arousal stirred but now was not the time. Water gathered in her bellybutton before travelling blessed paths down her back, over the delicious swell of her ass, and down muscled thigh and calf.

“Maker's breath but you're beautiful.” He didn't want to hand her the towel, she had to snatch it from him.

“Lech.”

“Only for you.”

“No village girls struck your fancy?”

“There was an elf girl once, but she liked to pull my hair.”

“You have great hair, hair meant for pulling,” she teased. Bea toweled herself off taking extra effort to bend over and reach the wet skin of her ankles and feet, exposing all of her backside to the Commander's less than chaste eyes. He recited the Chant of Light to keep himself from falling upon her.

'Blessed are the...the...who?'

The Inquisitor pulled a simple robe over her head, dark purple the color of the richest grapes. She cinched it at the waist with a brown belt and there was no way to tell she was anything more than a simple country woman.

If only she could be. He could be a famer and she could be a tanner and they could be together. The Maker in his golden city and all would be right with the world. He allowed himself a moment of fancy, just a moment, imagining what that kind of life would feel like. That Cullen didn't have to be a half broken man, the remaining pieces of him held together by her glue. That Cullen was a whole man, though she still held him together. Business didn't separate them months at a time, and the only real danger came from her smelling of rotting animal flesh and cured leather.

They'd have a legion of children they commanded, or just one who commanded them. Chubby babes with complexions somewhere between sunlight and silt, the perfect merger of their bodies, their souls, their loves.

But it was just a moment's reflection, gone as soon as it'd come. He was the Commander again, and she the Inquisitor, and she was meant for men far better than he.

“Here.” She tossed a vial of her hair oil delighting in his smile as he caught it.

“With pleasure.”

It was simple quick work to anoint her hair, the scalp massage combined with that other massage served to chase the anxiety from heart, though not completely. She was no longer completely terrified of the rest of his family, only moderately so.

“Ready?”

He laced her fingers in his hand, a gesture that meant far more to her than he realized.

“Ready.”

**

They came down the stairs together to a kitchen full of people. Mia, her three children, Tanner,
Branson, Kiyah his wife, and Rosalie. No elves, no qunari, and not a darker face among them. The Rutherfords were all of a form, pale skinned with hair colors ranging from blond to earthy brown. The siblings though all owned the same pairs of eyes, light honey, golden and warm.

"Maker's Balls!" Branson, for he had to be Branson given the curl about his darker blonde hair and the impish smile on his face. "I thought it was Da come back from the Fade!"

Branson was handsome and had a sweet, guileless face. Working as a blacksmith had put some muscle on the boy but his older brother still dwarfed him in height and size. Cullen hugged his brother warmly, all smiles and delight and for a moment Bea thought of Alphonse and the easy way he once smiled.

After greeting his brother, Branson turned an eye to dark-skinned woman beside him. She seemed pleasant enough, and anybody who could elicit such a fond gaze from his famously dour brother was okay in his eyes. "Cullen was always terrible with hunting. I assume then that great beast roasting out back is yours Miss..."

"Bea, call me Bea. And it is ours."

Rosalie stood from her chair and regarded her brother at arm's length. The youngest Rutherford had a pinched face full of freckles as though her Maker took a brush and splattered paint haphazardly across her skin. She smiled, but it was thin and impatient, something watered down by too much weariness.

"You look just like Father." She said coolly before embracing him. "And you..." Rosalie's eyes started at her feet and worked their way up to her face, Bea got the distinct feeling of being evaluated for faults like a prized horse. "Welcome."

"Thank you. You must be Rosalie."

"I am."

"It is a pleasure."

Her compliment hung unanswered.


Three children, dark haired like their father, stood stairstep next to their mother. Two boys and a girl, the youngest. The girl unashamedly hugged her uncle, arms too small to even wrap around Cullen's thigh.

"I'm Selcie. That's Stanton and Morgan." Selcie said pointing to the tallest then second tallest boys, the oldest no older than 8. The children were all spitting images of their father, save for the curl in their hair and the gold in their eyes. Seeing the trait so strong in the family, Bea surmised that her own child might have such eyes if they inherited nothing else.

But wait?

When did she start thinking about kids?

"Bea?"

"Eh? What?"
“Did you hear me?” Cullen asked.

“Err no.”

“Mia asked where you were from.”

“Oh...uh Ostwick.”

Three pairs of eyebrows rose. “Ostwick...no no I meant where you were born.” Mia corrected.

“Yeah, Ostwick.”

“A Marcher? I figured you Orlesian or at the least Rivani, though I guess Cullen'd be daft to bring an Orlesian home.” Rosalie laughed sipping her wine.

Bea gave a half smile.

“Has your family been in Ostwick long? Where are they from?” Branson asked.

That smile grew harder to maintain, everyone always assumed she was from elsewhere. Born on an Antivan beach or a Rivani wharf before immigrating to Ostwick. Their shock bordered complete disbelief anytime she mentioned her family was one of the founders of the city. “Just Ostwick, we've been there for...” the revelation of her family's history in the March would give away the game too soon. “For a while.”

“And how did you come to meet Cullen?”

Cullen turned an amused glance her way. *Go on,* he taunted in his smirk.

“I uhh, had some unique skills that assist the Inquisition.” That wasn't a lie, he didn't want to lie, and that wasn't one.

“Boar killing?” Tanner asked, only moderately joking.

“I am a decent hunter.”

“So you feed the Inquisition?” Branson asked.

“After a fashion.” Also not a lie.

“Have you met the Inquisitor? What's she like? We've only heard about the rift closings and clearing the mages out of Redcliffe, beyond that, we don't get much news down here. It's all 'Maker it's the end of the world,' or just business as usual.” Mia asked.

Rosalie stiffened and asked for more wine.

“She's nice.” Cullen supplied squeezing Bea's hand under the table.

“A ball buster?” Branson asked.

Cullen laughed, full throated and loud. “Definitely.”

Bea jammed the heel of her foot into Cullen's and to the templar's credit he didn't shout. Oh, he'd pay for that one later.

Branson and Bea tended to the boar roasting on spit out back while Mia's children asked her
continuously inappropriate questions.

“What is your hair made out of?” The middle boy, Morgan, asked.

“Hair.”

“Can I touch it? It doesn't look like hair.”

'They're just children Bea' she reminded herself.

“So you hunt?” The pregnant wife, Kiyah, asked, hand passing over swollen belly.

“Aye.”

“I used to be good with a bow before Branson.” She gestured to her stomach, as big as several ripe melons.

“A baby doesn't preclude the use of your arms Kiyah.” Bea handed the woman her bow. "I'd love the chance to shoot against someone who isn't like to cheat.”

“There are skilled archers in your Inquisition?”

“Oh yes, there's one, an elf, Sera, she cheats. She knows I can beat her on even ground at 100 paces so she cheats. Once we were having a speed competition and she smeared all my arrows with paste. I couldn't nock one to save my life.”

By the end of the conversation, Kiyah had a bow in her hands, her grip out of practice yet steady. Under Bea's careful instruction, (with far less cursing than the instruction she provided to her archers at Skyhold), Kiyah found her mark more often than she didn't.

“Thank you Bea. Next time we meet I hope to offer proper competition. Your bow is exquisite yet I know of no bird with red feathers to fletch your arrows, how did you come by them?”

Bea smiled quietly. “A lion gave them to me.”

**

When it came time to eat, Mia insisted Cullen bless the food. Bea heard Alphonse in the tones of his Chant, in his cadence, and his timbre. It was always Alphy who made her believe in a benevolent Maker on the merit of his prayers alone, now Cullen filled that role.

Having a Maker watch over her might not be so bad. She wondered where He'd been earlier in her life, but if He chose to show up now, to keep an eye on her as the days grew inevitably darker, she'd welcome the extra help.

She wore thin leather gloves, and made excuses about the cold when asked. In truth they served to hide the anchor on her hand that glowed and sparked at random moments and inopportune times. It also hurt, fiercely, like little electric teeth chewing through the flesh and bone of her hand. Sometimes it faded to a dull roar, other times it arched up her arms and down her spine filling her body with what felt like 10,000 of the tiniest sharpest paper cuts, flaying her until she felt her skin might come off.

When she got back, she'd have a discussion with Solas.

“Mistress Bea, this boar is incredible.” Tanner said with a mouthful of meat.
Bea smiled at the compliment, her nerves drained from her.

The Rutherford's ate heartily trading inappropriate stories about their childhoods. Bea learned quite possibly more than she wanted to about her Commander as a boy, specifically his penchant for picking his nose and forgoing his diaper and other clothing...often.

Once the boar was mostly eaten, and Maker that family could eat, the children were put to bed while the wine and spirits were taken out. Conversation turned toward more adult topics and sure enough settled on the current state of Ferelden with demons, the breach, and Queen Anora's hatred of everything Orlesian.

"So where do you fall on the subject of mages versus templars, mi'lady?" Tanner asked.

"Templars obviously!" Mia answered. Bea's smile covered her soured stomach. She was going to reveal her identity as the Inquisitor before the end of the night, perhaps that time had come.

Rosalie chuckled darkly, taking a large gulp of wine. "Honestly, Cullen, we're all simple folk here. What do you really think of your Inquisitor? The Lady Trevelyan."

"She really is a wonderful person."

'Don't squirm girl.' Bea thought, stamping her feet to keep from fidgeting awkwardly.

"Oh?" Rosalie questioned. Bea could tell she was drunk. The youngest Rutherford held herself together nicely, but there was a cruel looking glint in her half-glassy stare that made Bea worry.

"You've always been too trusting, Cullen. Too sweet and too ready to blindly follow orders."

Cullen winced a little, taken aback by his sister's cutting yet accurate description.

"Rosie," Mia called, exhorting in sweet tones for her sister to be nice. Rosalie didn't hear, perhaps intentionally so.

"She let the templars die at Therinfal Redoubt all for a handful of mages and apostates. Surely you can't think she's so 'nice' after that?"

This time Evelyn, the Inquisitor in Evelyn, flinched. She did not regret her choice, she felt she made the right one. But sometimes even making the 'right' choice can have its consequences. Evelyn placed a hand on Cullen's thigh. It either meant, 'let her speak' or 'I'll handle this'.

For now, she let her speak.

"Be careful around her brother, and this one too," Rosalie pointed an accusing finger at Evelyn.

"Rosie," Branson cut in almost defensively. "You've had enough."

"Shut up Bran! How do we know she's not using him to keep from having to go back to whatever Rivani shithole she came out of?"

That tender hand on his thigh, squeezed a little tighter. Instead of 'let her speak' it became 'I'll handle this.'

"I'm from Ostwick, I said." Polite but stern, the two women made eye contact, one of challenge, another of quiet defense.

'It's okay, she's drunk.
She doesn't know what she's saying, perhaps she forgot.

It's okay. It's okay.

Don't lose it.

Don't panic.

*It's different down here.*

Rosalie laughed again, cruel and cold. "Yeah right, as if some mudskin could be from there. I'd believe you better if you said you were half-qunari!"

"Rosalie!" Mia rose to her feet, Cullen too shouting a foul oath.

"No. Let her speak!" Bea was gone, the Inquisitor in her place. Kiyah fanned herself, this excitement seemingly too much for her and the baby and Tanner had gone ghostly pale. Cullen shot Evelyn a surprised look, the one she returned asked without asking to trust her.

"I'm just looking out for you brother. I don't want to see you get taken advantage of; not by her nor by your beloved Inquisitor who kept you from us for so long. She allowed your templar brethren to die. How do you know she's not an abominatio? They say she walked out of the Fade and from the stories I've heard, she certainly sounds like one."

"Rosalie I'm warning you..." Cullen growled.

"No I'm warning you! Those nobles aren't like us, they don't understand, they play with people's lives like so many pieces on your damn chessboard! We mean nothing to them, we're collateral damage, expendable if it doesn't fit their budgets or their cause."

"Rosie please, now isn't the time." Mia called soothingly, hands flat on the table, her spine curled like an angry cat ready to pounce on her wholly inappropriate drunken younger sister.

"What are you talking about?" Cullen stood bewildered, torn between defending Evelyn and letting her defend herself, Maker knew she was capable.

Rosalie took another long swallow of wine before tears burst from her eyes. "Phillip was at Therinfal! Why didn't she save them Cullen?!"

"Phillip?"

Mia sighed, "Her fiancé, Cullen. They were due to be married this year."

Cullen deflated, sinking back into his chair. He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly as flames under his skin turned his cheeks red. He was at a complete loss.

"Maker's breath Rosie, I am so sorry."

Huge tears were born in her eyes and died on her cheeks leaving behind trails of wetness on her face. The Lady Inquisitor quieted her rage, morphing back into her more tempered persona. Rosalie's grief disarmed her, taking the venom out what would have been her bite.

"As am I." Evelyn said, pulling off one glove, reaching for the other.

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Rosalie spat.
She pulled off her other glove, her left hand sparked with fel energy that made the entire table jump back and Evelyn grit her teeth in pain.

“Cullen! She's a demon!”

“I am no demon, at least as far as I'm aware. My name is Evelyn Cecilia Renee Marie Trevelyan, youngest daughter of Lord Gareth Leandro Trevelyan. Grand Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste and I am so, so sorry for your loss Rosalie.”
The room exploded with the sound of tables and chairs being pushed aside and every last adult save Cullen and Evelyn raced to see who could bow the lowest the fastest. Kiyah stood, swooned, then fell back into her seat, but compensated by tipping her head to the table.

"Maker's Breath, please forgive us our...our..." Mia struggled for the words.

"Impertinence!" Tanner supplied.

"Get up! Get up! All of you please! Cullen help!"

Oh yes, now this was a grade A darkspawn-are-at-the-gates disaster.

"It's alright everyone, please." He rushed to his sisters and his brother, urging them to get off the floor. Mia, of course, was the hardest to help up lamenting their shame into the floorboards.

"You! Why didn't you tell us?! We must sound like total fools."

"No, it was my idea." Evelyn protested, grateful they were all returning to their seats. "I intended to tell you all, but I wanted you to know me as me first, and not have my title or birth color the experience." She winced at her unfortunate choice of words, sparing a glance at Rosalie who looked away embarrassed but not entirely remorseful. Her grief-ridden anger burned too hotly for shame.

"But I don't understand. Why lie?"

"Well for starters the minute you all found out who she was, you started bowing. And we never lied. Just stretched the limits of the truth. She does have skills unique skills that assist the Inquisition."

Evelyn wiggled the fingers on her left hand, the anchor flickered and glowed as though it were a playful bit of magic and not some kind of ominous beacon of death.

"And I do feed the Inquisition. With money, lots of money. Do you know how much he eats?" She nodded towards Cullen, who blushed. He didn't really eat that much; being an ex-templar really took a chunk out of his ravenous appetite spurred by lyrium burning metabolism. On a good day though, he could pack it away, but she was willing to sacrifice his pride for a joke.

She was gonna pay for that one later. He thought.
Her ploy worked, everyone--except Rosalie--laughed, tension whistling out of the room.

"Did I mention she was a ball buster?" Cullen retorted salvaging some of his dignity.

Branson laughed harder, as did Tanner. Evelyn smiled and Mia giggled so hard she began to snort.

A glass shattered, taking with it the half restored good mood. Rosalie stood from the table, the broken remnants of her wine glass at her feet, and marched off without a word.

"Rosalie!"

"Let her go Cullen, she's still raw about losing Phillip. We heard about Redoubt's fall some months ago, long before we got your letter and realizing you were with the Inquisition. Rosie was devastated. She was so excited, so happy to marry a templar." Mia patted Cullen's face, the one so much like their father's. "She had a brother whom she adored, whom she let 'smite' her almost daily as they played Templars and Abominations. Is it no wonder then that she fell in love with one? Phillip was such a sweet lad.

He looked kinda like you too, except his eyes were gray."

**

It took some convincing to get the rest of the Rutherford clan to address her as Evelyn or B..."Not B. E. A. just B, like the letter, short for BB."

"Whatzit mean?" Tanner had asked.

"A story for another time perhaps."

They decided not to tell the children at all, too complicated. As for Rosalie...

"Evelyn, I am so sorry for how Roaslie acted today, not just about the whole...mud-" Mia refrained from repeating the slur out loud. "Thing but everything else too."

Evelyn smiled tightly. "It's not the worst I've heard in my life."

Mia's face soured. "Evelyn, if there's anything we can do to make up for it."

"Rosalie's opinions...at least about the Templars are valid. I can't, the Inquisition can't save everyone. I made a choice; people were sacrificed in that choice. Phillip included."

"I...I understand."

Evelyn could tell there was something else on Mia's mind, desperate to be said. "Mia, you can speak freely in your own home. I'm not the Inquisitor here, just a woman. Please think of me as your friend, or at the very least remember we share a common bond."

"And that's the thing my L...Evelyn. I can't help but think if Cullen were still a templar, could he have been at Therinfal? Would he have died with the rest of them and we'd never ever know? It frightens me."

Mia teetered on the verge of tears but kept her face solid. "He's my brother. He's not all we've got but he's a big chunk of it. You can't save everyone Lady Inquisitor." She chose to use her title deliberately, the invocation of a desperate supplicant. "I know that, I know. But can you at least save him? Please, don't let him slip away from us again."
"I love your brother truly, I promise I'll never let anything happen to him." Evelyn swore quietly, her whispered will as strong as a fade touched diamond. Mia hugged the woman earnestly, a full bodied embrace saved for only the most beloved family members. "Thank you, thank you." She sighed.

**

"They are getting along." Branson said, cocking his head over to the embracing women. "That's a good sign."

Cullen nodded, heart too full to really say anything else.

"Oi!" Branson knocked on Cullen's head turning his attention back to their game of chess. "It's your move."

Cullen haphazardly moved his knight across the board, eyes still flitting between the chess pieces and the women.

"If Kiyah had a boy, we were gonna name him Cullen, after you."

"Branson," Cullen paused, overwhelmed by the sentiment. "That's...wow."

"Don't get too flattered. We decided it because we figured the family should at least have a Cullen in it, and the way things were going we'd take whichever one we could get."

Shame pulled his face from his brother's and buried his gaze on the game in front of him. "I...I'm sorry."

"I'm just glad my brother is back. I don't know...without Da. I'm about to be a father Cullen. I haven't the foggiest what I'm doing."

Cullen blushed again, recalling his earlier guilty fantasy. "And you think I do?"

"Well yeah. Aside from the noticeable slip in your chess game you always knew what to do. Reliable, responsible Cullen, just like Da."

"You have him in you too Bran."

"Not like you."

Cullen's bishop took Branson's second night and the younger Rutherford had to reconsider the earlier remark about slipping chess games.

"You never needed me Branson. There is enough of our father in us both."

"No, I did need you Cullen. I needed you to teach me how to fish, or how to mend a fence. I needed you to teach me how to shave, though judging by the look of you that would have been a poor lesson."

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck pointedly avoiding the patches of skin overgrown with his unruly stubble.

"She likes me scruffy." He muttered.

"I was so angry, Cullen. You were my best friend. We used to play templars and abominations together all the time. Always. And I was so proud of you when you went off. I couldn't wait to see
you come back all shiny and knight-like in your armor. But you never came back. Worse than that, we never even heard hide nor hair of you. The only peep we got was when I was toying around with the idea of following after you.

"Do you remember what you wrote?"

"Various interpretations of the word no, not, and never."

"Yeah. Then after that, nothing. You don't have to tell me what happened. I got the gist of it from Mia. I just wish. I just wish you'd came home sooner. Maybe then I wouldn't be so blighting scared."

"Of being a father."

"Yeah. I don't know the first thing about it. Sometimes I think I can barely manage being a husband. But somehow Kiyah puts up with me. And man, when she smiles...." Branson whistled, unable to put the sentiment into words.

"I'm glad you have someone who makes you feel like that. I couldn't be happier for you Bran. You've got more of father in you than you think. You'll be an incredible father."

Cullen smiled at his brother, and when Branson returned the gesture, it was Stanton beaming back at him.

They heard the women laugh in the kitchen, heard the sound of a wine bottle drained dry.

"I hope she makes you feel the way Kiyah makes me feel, brother. After hearing what you've been through, you could use a little love. What Rosie said in there was inexcusable. I hope she doesn't hate us after this."

Cullen remembered Halamshiral and frowned. "She's heard worse."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No, it doesn't. But she's got a hide thicker than leather. Stuff like that never seems to stick for too long."

"Is it different? Being with her."

Cullen pinked. "What do you mean?"

"Ahh...err..the noble thing not the whole." Branson awkwardly pointed at his pale wrist. "Not ehh...that. Rosie was right about one thing. Those nobles, they really aren't like us. What happens when some prince with a bunch of land and money tries to take her away from you? Charming as you are, brother, you're no lord."

He never told her about Gareth's threat.

He understood he didn't need to.

"I don't think that's going to happen."

"How're you so sure?"

"Because I trust her. I love her and I know she loves me. And I've got luck on my side. Remember?"
Branson nodded, grinning. "Yeah I remember. Though apparently that luck didn't count for much with this game. Checkmate Cullen."

The older brother examined the board and found, yes, Branson did beat him. "I was distracted!" He retorted casting a furtive glance at Evelyn.

"I'll bet. So she's...she's good to you right?"

"Mhmm." He waved at Evelyn. She waved coyly back and whispered something to Mia, making them both erupt into gales of laughter.

"No I mean is she good to you?"

"Wha--"

"Like when you two are alone and...intimate."

"Maker's Balls Branson!"

"What? You're my brother, I have to make sure you are well, taken care of."

"We are not having this conversation!"

"Why not? Look at them. They seem to be having a very intimate conversation themselves."

Both women glanced in Tanner's direction. This time Mia whispered something to Evelyn causing the tell-tale colorless blush of Evelyn's scrunched face like she had tasted something sweet and sour.

"There was this one time, I heard this awful noise, I thought a wolf had gotten into the chicken coop. So I get up to investigate and when I pass by the barn I see Tanner with pants rucked down and Mia..."

"Goodbye Branson!" Cullen rose far too quickly from the table upsetting the chessboard. He stormed over to his sister and his...girlfriend?

No. Too juvenile.

Lover? That could work, but it's still a little lacking in level of sentiment.

Beloved?

Ah. There we go. That'll work. Cullen decided.

"Mia?" Cullen asked, eager to break up the ladies' intimate conversation before state secrets started getting revealed. "May I borrow Evelyn?"

Mia saw the blush streaked across her brother's face and neck. "Ah, perfect timing, we were just talking about you. Evelyn has so many wonderful stories about your exemplary service to the Inquisitor...ahh Inquisition.

Cullen did not like the way his sister said service.

And he did not like the man-eating grin stretched across Evelyn's face.

"Ahh...err...right. Um...Evelyn will you come with me?" He immediately regretted his choice of
words.

Both women started to cackle madly.

Cullen seized Evelyn by the wrist and dragged her away.

Chapter End Notes

Did you catch it? That little slip in there? Let me know if you did.
Cullen kept pulling on Evelyn until he felt the embarrassed flush finally leave his face. For her part, Evelyn didn't much mind it. The night was dark and cool, spring ascendant in the South Reach, warm enough to kick off her leather boots and walk in the grassy fields barefoot. It was a fingernail moon tonight, but the stars and the lightning bugs were enough to light the way. Yet Cullen didn't rely on vision to get him where he meant to be, he knew the road by his feet, by his heart.

When he could hear the calm lapping waters of the lake and smell the heavy peaty scent of the water flora, Cullen let go of Evelyn's wrist to take up instead her hand, threading his strong fingers between hers. Evelyn glowed warm, face burning and heart twisting because she never grew tired of the sensation or the sight--seeing her dark fingers interposed between his paler ones as though there were nothing else more natural and right in the world.

For now, under the moonlight and above the flowers, the ugly business with Rosalie could be forgotten. The disaster of Clan Trevelyan's visit distant as though separated by years and not days.

She was beautiful in moonlight, Cullen thought.

In samite and silks, she was resplendent. Covered in jewels or blood, she could stop his heart. But Cullen found her the most beautiful at her simplest; in a dress of Ferelden spun cotton dyed the color of violets in spring.

Would that they could stay like this for the rest of their lives, and all the lives that come after, if the Maker would grant such wishes.

He stopped their walk at the end of a very short pier. Evelyn wasted no time plopping down and sticking her feet in the water, kicking back and forth and back again. "Where are we?" She asked dreamily, reveling in the cool water, wishing it were warm enough to shuck clothes and propriety and go swimming.

"You walk into danger every day, I wanted to take you away from that, if only for a moment."

"Forgetting then the dangers associated with meeting one's family?"

"Evelyn, about Rosalie..."

"Stop it Cullen, everyone's already apologized enough to me for her. And for it to mean anything, she's gonna have to be the one to apologize. I know y'all mean well, and it's not your fault. Considering recent events, I got off considerably light."

"Still. I'll talk to her before we leave."
"Don't. If she has anything to say to me, let her say it herself without your prompting. Rosie's grown and hurting. I don't think I'd be able to make nice with my fiancée's proxy murderer either."

"Evelyn," He growled. "You are not a murderer."

She leaned against him sighing softly, the anchor--blighted thing--chose now to let loose a crackle that made her wince in pain.

"It hurts?"

"Yes."

"How can I help?"

"Cut off my hand or keep talking."

Cullen chose the latter.

"I loved my siblings, but they were very loud as you can imagine. I'd come here to clear my head. But they found me, eventually."

Evelyn sniggered, recalling protracted games of hide and seek with Alphy. The boy would fret almost unto tears if he couldn't find her.

"You were happy here?"

"I was. I still am. I'm glad I finally came back. I didn't realize how much I'd missed my family. Thank you for sharing this with me."

"Well I'm glad that at least one of us can have a loving family."

His hand, infinite in tenderness, turned her gaze from the murky cool water to his face. His fingertips traced the line of her jaw, following it around the outline of her face, up to her ear to tangle in one of the soft ropes of hair that got left out of the messy bun she'd tied them in.

"You do have a loving family." He replied, meaning more than what he said. Her pounding heart demanded that she kiss the life out of him, but before she could set her lips to the task, he broke their sweet contact to go fishing in his pocket.

"The last time I was here was the day I left for templar training." Cullen's own heart raced, nervous and giddy and afraid. His fingers fumbled against the metal token as he tried to grasp it and pull it out. "Branson gave me this. It just happened to be in his pocket. He said it was for luck."

Cullen opened his palm to reveal a coin emblazoned with the serene face of Andraste.

"This was the only thing I took from Ferelden that the templars didn't give me." He took her hand and placed the coin within it, curling his fingers so that hers curled closed around it.

It was old and careworn, the rough edges of the coin rubbed soft from the constant swipe of nervous fingertips.

That coin had been pressed between his hands as he prayed for his life in Kinloch Hold.

It was in his glove when he drew his sword against Knight Commander Stannard, mind sure but heart still hesitant.
He clutched this coin when he stood on the outside of her tent that night she came back from Redcliffe.

And again as he fought snow and ice to find her, his lips cracked and bloody but always moving in a prayer for her luck and her life.

He kissed it before he first kissed her, a wish to have a heart fulfilled.

That coin had been his luck, it had seen him safely through so many trials.

She was his luck now, the coin made flesh and blood and love.

"You howl for luck every day. But you don't know what you'll face before the end, so I figured a little extra can't hurt."

"But," her words trembled. "Don't you..."

Cullen caught her, intuiting her words before she spoke them. "You're my luck."

The lump in her throat stopped up her air, Evelyn was surprised she wasn't wheezing. That old familiar feeling boiled over within her, the energy that made her limbs tingle and itch with the urge to run, to fly.

Maker's breath.

He made her fly.

"I'll keep it safe," was all she could manage to say, unwilling to speak more for fear of falling apart into a million tiny shards of joy.

***

Only the Maker knew how they managed to get back to the relative safety and comfort of the house. And only He knew how they managed to stay so quiet. Because a coupling like that, by rights, should have set the house on fire.

He loved her in that dress, he liked it better when he ripped it from her, popping several button and tearing the neck. It pooled on the floor at her feet, the whisper of the fluttering cotton far more arousing than any silk or satin she ever wore.

Except...

Cullen swallowed thickly. When he could finally tear his gaze away from the dress and the potent promise of her nudity that the discarded garment implied, he found her covered in black lace--those Orlesian silken underthings alluded to from before.

Triangles of fabric hung from thin straps that hooked over her shoulders and tied behind her neck. The garment covered nothing and promised everything, her dark nipples hard and visible through the designs in the lace.

A sheaf of fine diaphanous silk hung from the lace, covering the curve of her belly and stopping at the tops of her generous, fleshy hips. Strings and straps of cloth wrapped around her hips and dug into her skin, keeping her from being completely bare but did nothing to preserve her modesty.

"Holy Lady." He breathed, voice thick and husky with want.
"Evelyn will do." She teased.

Cullen grinned, looking more beast than man, before divesting himself of his clothes. His manhood stood proudly hard and insistent, jutting out from his hips just begging to be caressed, kissed, licked, and buried.

"Come here." He crooked a finger, watching with delight the slow deliberate steps she took towards him, the sinful stretch of her legs rippling and flexing with every step. She trapped his cock between them, the sheer, silky cloth around her belly heavenly yet torturous against his heated flesh. Lazy arms wrapped around the back of his neck while his hands sought purchase at her hips.

They kissed slowly, both their bodies screaming and begging for something harder and hotter.

She let her hands roam, her touch ghosting over his thick arms so light it almost tickled. He shivered, gooseflesh rising in the wake of her fingertips.

He hooked his fingers in the band of those sinful little smalls, stretching them, pulling them, but leaving them on her.

"Don't you wanna take those off?" She gasped between scorching kisses.

"That'd be a waste of coin. You were meant to be seen in these, and I want to get your money's worth." Rough hands, agonizing in their restraint, groped her chest, squeezed her backside. He fisted a tight but tender hand in her hair, stretching her neck back, opening the flesh there to more of his toothy demands.

Her ardor slicked and ran down her thighs, but she kept her screams at bay. They tumbled into the tiny bed made for two yet only big enough for one. The wood creaked under their combined weight and with every shift of their bodies warning them that the poor piece furniture would possibly transmit the rhythm of their lovemaking to the rest of the household. Cullen stifled a giggle into his lady's neck before lifting her up and off the bed, her legs wrapping around his waist.

"Where?" he asked urgently.

"Doesn't matter just soon before I decide for you."

He purred low in his throat, nipping at her lips and slowing his strides. Evelyn huffed in frustration, his prick rubbing teasingly against her dampness.

Her back crashed against one of the walls and she dropped one of her legs for balance while other remained solid around his hips. Using the wall for leverage, she pushed against him bumping their bodies together demanding yet again that he stop with the preamble and get on to the overture.

"Greedy." He admonished, licking that tender spot on her neck that always sent her howling. He managed to only tease from her a quiet, snake like hiss drawn in through clenched teeth. "Good girl." He praised. "Keep it quiet."

Fingers flurried around her midsection, pushing that poor but wonderful excuse for smalls to the side before he hilted within her with one long thrust. They both groaned, swallowing up the sound in an opened mouthed, sloppy, and searing kiss.

Cullen rolled and snapped, his body jerking as the thin tether on his self-control continued to fray.

His voice guttered, "Maker's breath, so tight." He wanted more, wanted to plunder and delve and
dig so deep. He wanted to fuse to her, be closer to her than her own damn skin.

Her hot breath blew softly in his ears, she panted little pleas for more that tore him to pieces.

"Maker yes, harder." She moaned. "Cullen, Maker, I love you."

They rutted, hips bouncing and snapping, jerking wildly with a rhythm less tempo both maddening and sweet. The angle allowed for delicious friction on the smooth button of flesh that topped the gate to her center. He closed in on her pleasure, chasing her up that steadily building peak of rapturous joy. She looked divine with her eyes open and focus less, mouth wide open with a soundless cry. Her breasts bounced and rubbed between them, the lace scoring his chest in light scratches that electrified him. The thin cord of soft material that parted her sopping folds rubbed against his cock with every thrust, creating extra sensation, like a wet finger sliding back and forth against him as he slid up and down inside of her.

"Please please PLEASE!" She let her cry go, couldn't stop it as her head struck back against the wall when she came. She tightened, pulsed, shuddered around him, dazed senseless and numb except to the point where their two bodies merged into one flesh, where they were made whole through wild love.

He drove harder now, lifting her leg just a little bit higher to reach a little bit deeper. "Maker, Evelyn, I love you, love you, love you…"

His words morphed into a formless grunt, spilling from his lips as he spilled into her.

Surprisingly, she remained on her feet while he sank into a boneless puddle to the floor.


Evelyn chuckled, bent, and gripped Cullen by the shoulders. "Get up."

And lifted.

**

"Must you leave so soon?" Mia fretted stuffing a few more pieces of cured ham into Cullen's saddlebags. He'd gotten so thin in ten years. Her brother tried to explain that it was muscle that was gained in place of the lost extra weight (which he steadfastly denied having) to no avail.

"Yes, The Inquisition can run without us, but they don't like to very much." He answered sadly, hopping up onto his courser.

"Mainly because Bull gets antsy and starts challenging people to drinking duels. Things break." Evelyn agreed.

Mia hugged Evelyn again. "It was so lovely to meet you. May I write you?"

Evelyn's eyes widened, startled at such a gesture. "Uhh...yeah, I'd like that a lot."

"You'll tell me he's eating?"

"I will make sure he does. Heartily."

The two women exchanged a look that had them burst into a fit of knowing giggles that elicited blushes from their men. She saved the boar tusks and gave them to each of Mia's children and wished Kiyah and Branson a safe and healthy birth.
Rosalie stood aloof as the pair departed sparing a curt nod to her brother and no acknowledgment at all for Evelyn.

Nothing's perfect, Evelyn thought, only workable.

"Commander."

Cullen snapped to, a soldier at ready.

"Send word to our scouts in the area. Have them investigate Therinfal Redoubt for any personal effects left behind by the templars and have them sent to their families and loved ones. Then send word for our builders to have a monument erected in their memory."

"At once Inquisitor." Cullen's heart swelled, he spared a glance and Rosalie to see the grateful tears in her eyes. The Inquisitor, however, did not look back at all for in the distance, Skyhold waited.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand family arc is done.
Can you guess what fresh hell will happen next? Let me know!
Evelyn rubbed her anchored hand idly during the meeting, trying desperately to ease the pain that flared constantly. Now the damn thing stole the sleep from her, waking her in the middle of the night with pain so sharp she thought she'd wake to find a rusty spike driven into her palm.

"Are you alright love? I'm the only one allowed to wake up screaming in the middle of the night." Cullen had griped, head buried in a pillow.

"Oh shut up." She groused, anchor glowing a bilious green color that only grew more malevolent as the days passed.

"Josephine, send word to Varric and Lady Hawke, I will meet with their Warden contact within a fortnight."

"Of course."

"Leliana, I will need you to tell me about this Warden associate of Hawke's. You said you knew him from the Blight?"

"Yes, Senior Warden Alistiar and I were good very good friends. I also have a letter here from Warden Commander Cousland."

Evelyn quirked an eyebrow. "Really?" She squeaked uncommonly loud. "She wrote a letter to me?" Her advisers gaped at her. Josephine had a skeptical look about her while Cullen hid a snicker in the back of his hand. They all knew their Inquisitor had a mild hero-crush on the Warden Commander. Inquisitor Trevelyan coughed, replacing the girlish pitch in her voice with an authoritative command. "Prepare a briefing for me for later."

"At once." Leliana smirked.

"Commander?" She turned to her soldier.

"Yes my lady."

"Ready your army, I don't like what I've been hearing from Lady Hawke concerning the Southern Wardens, a confrontation may be inevitable."

"To work then," he asserted.

So tasked, their meeting concluded with Evelyn running off to her appointment with Solas.

"So you say the pain is troublesome?" The apostate asked, turning her hand over and over in his pale grip.

"Like a fucking stab wound every five seconds."

Solas bristled at her oaths as he always did.

"I can give you something for the pain though..."
"I want you to teach me how to use it."

"Inquisitor?"

"I'm getting tired of holding my hand up at rifts and hoping that the shit works. I need to be able to make it work for me. Not just react."

A curious look passed across Solas's face, like a cloud obscuring the sun...or more pointedly in the case of the dour and reserved elf, like the sun peeking out from behind the clouds.

"A lofty goal. Though I am unsure if I can help you with such an endeavor. Since you have no latent magic, no connection to the Fade save your dreamings, I don't know if I can teach you how to manipulate its energies."

Evelyn almost laughed out loud. There was no way Rift Mage Solas could not instruct her on how to use her anchor to her benefit. Perhaps he feared what she could do with such an increase of power, or perhaps he simply didn't want to instruct the boorish human with the atrocious Dalish accent in the ways of magic.

She kept Solas at arm's distance, a trusted companion of course but a frosty friend at best. When she first met him, he did make her short list of 'men she wanted to take out back behind the Chantry'. But one (actually two) words from Cullen 'My Lady' Rutherford had obliterated all other competition and most of her more coherent thoughts. Still, she enjoyed rankling him from time to time trading elven conversations with him, watching him cringe whenever she didn't wait long enough during pause breaks or put emphasis on the wrong syllable.

Assan had taught her enough elven to carry on intermediate conversation, but Solas liked to tease her by couching his tales of the Fade she enjoyed in elven far above her mastery. In the end, it served dual purpose, her elven improved and Solas made a friend unlike most humans he'd ever met.

"Oh, well then, I guess I'll just have to ask Vivienne, I'm sure she has..."

Solas scoffed. "I highly doubt the Grand Enchantress has any knowledge of manipulating the ley energies of the Fade as I do. You'd be better off asking Sera for assistance."

"All the same, Solas, I need to know how to use this. I'll gladly take Sera's help if it means I have another weapon to wield usefully on the field."

Solas blanched even paler than normal at the idea of Sera directing the Inquisitor.

"That won't be necessary. We can begin our lessons immediately."

"Thank you hahren." She replied with a wry smile. Solas indeed.

***

A week later, Cullen kissed her hand goodbye as she departed with Blackwall, Dorian, and Varric for Crestwood to rendezvous with Senior Warden Alistair.

"See you soon, lovely." She whispered before making a show of tucking her new lucky coin into her glove. He winked at her before slapping Jackson's flank, sending her off with a whoop and a howl. The more luck she had, the better.

The Iron Bull visited him in his office a few days after that, Krem in tow, the two of them looking
positively up to no good.

"Other Boss, we need your help."

The Commander pinched the bridge of his nose, "What, no 'Commander Scarface' this time?"

"No, that still doesn't fit, and I'd hardly call that shaving accident a scar." Bull answered. For a while now, the three of them had been going back and forth for an appropriate nickname for the Commander, emphasis on appropriate. The men almost came to blows during the first round of naming, fighting over pseudonyms like; Commander Lion Dick, Commander Red Wings ("You know, because of your fur thingy," Krem offered lamely) and Bull's personal favorite (which meant it was Cullen's least favorite) Commander 'My Face is the Boss's Seat'.

"What can I assist you with Iron Bull? And no, I'm not helping you judge a 'best ass in Skyhold' competition. Not only is it wildly inappropriate but the one worthy of the title is already gone."

Cullen smirked from behind his reports as both Bull and Krem deflated instantly, the latter excusing himself dejectedly.

"But we needed a third judge," he muttered as the door closed.

"As sad as I am to hear that, no, that's not what I was after. I was hoping you'd help me with a more personal matter."

"You're asking me for help?"

"Yeah, you and the Boss have got a good thing going and I..."

Cullen raised an eyebrow. "You want my help with a relationship issue. Me...You're asking me? The damned fool who can barely keep his words straight around the woman he loves?" Bull turned his gaze to the floor.

Maker help him, "Bull...are...are you blushing?"

"Qunari don't blush." Bull crossed his arms defensively.

"Heh, wonder where I've heard that before." Cullen chuckled.

Bull frowned, trying and failing to look stern.

"Why don't you just come out and say what you want....Maker's breath, never thought I'd be the one saying that to you."

"Alright, alright, laugh it up. But seriously. I heard about the little token you gave her during your trip to meet the family. I was wondering maybe you could help me in the gift giving department."

"While I'm sure she'd appreciate the gesture, I believe the lady is already spoken for." Cullen growled in mock outrage.

Bull glowered, knowing the Commander was having him on. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"Possibly." Cullen lobbed back, delighted in being on the other side of 'awkward conversations with The Iron Bull' for a change.

"I need you to help me get something special for Dorian." Bull ground out the confession behind clenched teeth, very clearly embarrassed. The Iron Bull loved, was in love, Bull was all those funny little words for affection the Qun don't really acknowledge. The Iron Bull loved Dorian.
And he had it bad.

Kaffas.

And since Other Boss was the only other person he knew (and trusted) that was just as sprung as he was, Bull figured the man would be game to help.

"Ah, well why didn't you say so? Do you have something in mind?"

"Yeah." Bull practically danced with glee. "How do you feel about dragons?"

**

Cullen and Iron Bull were required to table their dragon hunt for another time, for when the Inquisitor returned from Crestwood, they marched for war on the Grey Wardens.

She rode with her army, leading from the head, Jackson resplendent in the battle armor Dagna forged for him.

"She's fearsome. I'm glad I'm on the other side of all this shenanigans."

Cullen wracked his brain for memories of Senior Warden Alistair Theirin. Back then, at Kinloch, he'd only been a regular Warden fresh from the massacre at Ostagar. But the Commander, who had only been barely templar then fresh in his vows, tended to forget most of his life at Kinloch, all memories flavored by the horrors he suffered within that circle. He did remember that Alistair was a youthful joker, ribbing his comrades with inappropriate jokes while mages and templars died bloody deaths around them all. The Warden-Commander, then just Warden Cousland, did not seem amused, and Cullen remembered thinking she'd either sic her hound on him, or skewer him with the incredible bastard sword she had strapped to her back.

Looking at him now, from what he could scant recall, he hadn't changed much. Same ruddy hair, same youthful mouth, always curled in a wry smirk. The years had hardened his face, making it gaunter and sharper, and his light brown eyes held a certain shrewdness that only comes with years of service to a cause like the Grey Wardens. When they met in the War Room, the apostate Morrigan was quick to notice.

"Ahh, we now have a dog and for the first time in ever Alistair is not the dumbest one in the party."

She quipped noting the huge but elderly mabari accompanying the Warden.

Josephine gasped in shock, ready to intervene lest there be a confrontation while Leliana looked to be on the verge of nostalgia driven tears.

"Good to see you too Morrigan, now all we need is a fire, inappropriate sexual comments from an elf and..." He dropped his train of thought allowing instead to fill the silence with a vacant stare and a distant smile.

"Yes, t'would be good to see her again." Morrigan supplied quietly.

Cullen scratched at an itch just below his armor, turning to Alistair. "Yes, Inquisitor Trevelyan is a born leader as much as she tries to make you think she's not."

"Sounds like someone I knew...know."

"You mean the Warden-Commander?"
"Yes."

"How long has she been...?"

"Two years, 11 months, and 27 days but who's counting? I'm not counting? Am I counting Dog?"

Alistair leaned in his saddle to address the old mabari who dutifully kept pace.

The dog rumbled in its chest but did not bark.

"Is it hard?"

Alistair met the other man's gaze ready to ask for clarification, but seeing the look in the Commander's eyes, one turned insistently on the Inquisitor riding the white hart at the head of their column, he knew.

"It is the hardest and the easiest thing I've ever done, and I've swallowed darkspawn blood with no sugar."

He had done other things far harder than his Joining, but it was best not to speak of that now...or ever. A duty done in service to country and love was no sin despite the stain of it still blackening his heart ten years later.

He met the boy and felt somehow relieved that he bore no resemblance to him. Or perhaps that was just his mind trying to protect himself.

Looking ahead to the Inquisitor, she reminded him so much yet so little of his Issa. Lady Trevelyan's strength was an agile one, she was quick and nimble with a bow, twisting and dancing out of enemies' reach and feathering them with arrows before they noticed their jaws had closed on nothing but air. Issa was very much like the mabari she had left behind as his protector, bullish, wall like. She cleaved her foes in half with her greatsword, wielded by a frame wider and heavier built than most swordswomen.

That dour lady from Nevarra, Seeker Pentagram? She wouldn't stand a chance.

Cullen idly fingered his lion's tooth necklace pulling it out of his breastplate to examine the yellow fangs in the desert sunlight. He wore his token constantly, a comfort to him when she was gone. During his nightmares, if she was not there to soothe him, the pain of pressing his palms against the fangs was often enough to pull him out of his hallucinations. The soft tinkling of enamel acted like a focus, something to center himself on in case he got lost or confused in his waking nightmares. His headaches were eased by the scent of her, and she now made it a habit to leave a drop or two of her hair oil on his pillow or on his favorite shirt.

She did not make the pain go away.

But she made that pain, livable, survivable.

She was precious and not only to him. Without her, he and the whole world would crumble.

"How do you stand it?" Cullen asked.

"I sit back and relax, comfortable in the knowledge that while everyone is looking at her, she's looking at only me. It's a wonderful thing semi-anonymity. Nobody notices me when I nick cheese from the larder. By the way, my apologies to your cook."

Dog barked eagerly, the oft times benefactor of such thievery.
His joke didn't land so well with the Commander, the ex-templar still sat stonily atop his horse, gaze never wavering from the woman at the head of the army. Alistair could tell the Commander was of a serious type, not too easily charmed unless you were tall, dark, and handsome like the Lady Trevelyan.

"It is difficult to love the hero of the story as the dwarf would put it." Alistair sobered. "You let her protect herself when she can, protect her when she cannot, and you let her protect you when you cannot. And hear me when I say, never lie to her, even if you think it's for her own good."

Alistair would never forget the look in her eyes as Morrigan told her what they'd done. A darkspawn blade to the heart would have been less cruel than the cut of her tears.

Anxious to steer his thoughts into happier waters, because Maker knows he's swallowed enough lonely grief in the last two years, 11 months and 27 days (but really who is counting?), Alistair turned back to joking.

"Oh, and give her chocolate when she's cranky, or wine, or something large to hit. On second thought, just stay away when she's cranky."

Cullen finally laughed.

As the column of soldiers marched on, the two men shared stories of their Chantry and templar training. Cullen told stories of Kirkwall, unaware that Alistair had been there during the qunari invasion while Alistair recounted stories of the Fifth Blight, taking particular care to mention the bit about Leliana and an unfortunate incident with a pair of nugs.

"Do you know what I miss most about her?" Alistair wasn't paying attention anymore, he didn't know nor care if the Commander was listening. It just felt good to have a pair of ears nearby who somehow understood the joy and pain of loving the woman in charge.

"Hmm?" Cullen was listening.

"Her hair. Maker, she had this incredible poof of hair and it was so soft and when I could get my fingers in it...ah." Alistair sighed wistfully, body relaxing in the saddle as the fond memories of Issa's hair washed over him. "Damn. I miss her."

The Grey Warden fortress loomed ever larger in the distance. Soon the time for conversation ended, and the time for war began.

**

The anchor all but bled in her hand, scratching and stabbing so hard Evelyn thought it possible to die from the pain of it. Working with Solas to control it hadn't helped. It gnawed at her, making her feel a pulling sensation reaching for her heart and soul. Something was consuming her, eating her up.

Killing her.

She rose from her bed pallet deep in the night only hours before her assault on the fortress. She slept alone that night, the twilight of dawn her only company.

"I'm going to die today." She said aloud.
Yes I'm being self indulgent. No I don't care.
Here's hoping for some more Chantry Boy bonding in the future.
"Stupid fucking Wardens!" Her arrow flew striking a shade in the chest, enraging but not killing it. "This is without a doubt the dumbest fucking idea I've ever heard!"

"Inquisitor, perhaps you should focus on killing the demons instead of lamenting the reason of their summoning. Only the former will serve a purpose." Solas intoned as he froze the rage demon coming up behind her.

Solas, Blackwall, and Cole accompanied her, much to Dorian, Vivienne, and Iron Bull's disapproval. She relegated them to the rear guard, away from the thickest parts of battle in the more barren parts of the fortress.

"Inquisitor!" Cullen, with his vanguard and Warden Theirin arrived, looking harried but none too damaged.

"The battlements are sorely defended by arrow and siege weapons! If our soldiers are to gain any purchase in the fortress, that threat must be eliminated!"

Fighting with the Inquisitor was a rare pleasure for the Commander. She was quick, serious, and efficient. In another time, in another life he would have been pleased to have her as a subordinate or a superior. If she had been Knight Commander at Kirkwall, his fate would have turned out much differently than what had transpired.

But, no matter what she was or when she was, Cullen mused, he would have loved her. From the lowest peasant to the loftiest queen.

"I hear you Commander." She turned her eye to the upper battlements watching the trebuchets and fire arrows fly. "Warden, with me!"

"Don't you say please?!"

"Now!"

Evelyn spared herself the quickest glance back to Cullen as he directed his soldiers for their next mission. The anchor flared painfully, wringing from her a hissing gasp.

She balled the hand into a fist and willed the pain to dull. 'I'll see you again,' she whispered. 'One way or another.'

"Inquisitor!" Blackwall summoned. "We need your ranged support!"

Evelyn notched her bow, healing rune sparkling in the midday sun, and fired.

The Commander turned at the mention of her name, hoping to steal a smile before she left. All he saw was her advancing back, red arrows dwindling one by one.

'I'll see you again.' He thought to himself.

**
After two frightful encounters with pride demons and greater shades, the battlements were secured allowing the bulk of Cullen's forces to flood the lower levels of the keep. From above, she saw Warden-Commander Clarel and her Wardens falling on their swords left and right, the pooling blood a catalyst for the demons they pulled into their bodies, consuming their souls.

The Champion of Kirkwall adapted well to war. Her staff thrummed with fire and lightning, her enemies falling in a half circle of bodies around her. She was powerful.

A red streak of war paint or blood slashed across the bridge of a wide nose, a stark shock of red against almond colored skin. Lady Trevelyan liked Marian Hawke the moment they met, agreeing with the woman's sweet and diplomatic demeanor.

"Hawke! We have to get to that courtyard! That's where Clarel is!"

Hawke nodded, barked orders to the force of Inquisition soldiers she commanded before falling in line with Trevelyan's party.

The main courtyard looked more like a slaughterhouse. Heaps of blood drained sacrifices lay piled around an altar of stone while other wardens stood ready to have their lives taken from them in service to a grand lie.

They arrived just in time to see Clarel slit the throat of the young Dalish woman Hawke, Trevelyan and Theirin met in Crestwood. And at the head of this carnage, Magister Erimond, a Tevinter with a ridiculous beard and an even more ridiculous bow.

"Stop them!" He shouted at the Inquisitor. "We must complete the ritual!"

"You sonofabitch Erimond! And Clarel, you DUMB ASS. Can't you see you're doing exactly what Erimond wants!?"

"Oh my, I've wanted to say that to Clarel for years. I like her." Alistair whispered to Hawke who simply rolled her eyes.

"What!" challenged Erimond. "Fighting the Blight? Keeping the world safe from Darkspawn? Who wouldn't want that? And yes the ritual requires blood sacrifice. Hate me for that if you must, but do not hate the Wardens for doing their duty."

"We make the sacrifices no one else will. Our warriors die proudly for a world that will never thank them." Clarel called, her gaze hardened in the face of her impending martyrdom.

"Oh of all the stupid fucking... Alistair, please talk some sense into her before I kill her!"

Alistair nodded. "And then your Tevinter ally with the horrible moustache binds the mages to Corypheus!"

"Corypheus?" Warden Commander Clarel paused. “But he's dead."

Hawke choked on a sigh behind them.

"These people will say anything to shake your confidence, Clarel." Erimond hissed in the woman's ear.

She looked torn, but not torn enough. Evelyn notched an arrow. The less Warden blood spilled the better but Maker's fuck this woman...
"Bring it through!" Clarel commanded.

Evelyn roared in rage. "Fuck this!" The Inquisitor meant to pierce the woman's skull but Hawke stepped forward blocking her shot.

"I've seen the horrors of blood magic first hand!" Kirkwall's champion cried, charging her staff with magic. "It is never worth the cost!"

"And I helped fight the Archdemon in Ferelden! Could you consider listening to me?" Alistair knew Issa would not want him to kill their brethren, but he also knew she wouldn't agree with this either.

The portal's maw grew, calling to Evelyn like a beacon, tugging at the anchor like fish hooks in her flesh slowly reeling her into madness.

One more chance to stop this. After that, people start dying.

"Listen to me!" The pain of the anchor flavored her words, made them sharper and louder. "I have no quarrel with the Wardens! I have spared those I could. I don't want to kill you but you are being used and you fuckers know it!"

Some of the wardens paused, glancing back at one another remembering today's carnage of demons and sacrifice. A murmur of assent began to rise into a din, then into a roar. Clarel heard that roar and finally her hand stayed.

Erimond, his entreats to his puppet useless now, turned to her with a sneer on his face and magic in his hand. "My master warned me you might come here Inquisitor! He sent me this to welcome you!"

Fear made flesh swooped in on cracked leather wings. The dragon from Haven, the monster of her nightmares came back, red fire igniting half the courtyard.

"Swooping is bad!" Alistair roared, diving to avoid the blast.

Pandemonium exploded as the dragon descended upon them. Clarel, her error finally revealed, attacked Erimond and the dragon with a strangled cry of grief, rage, and shame.

"Help the Inquisitor!" She called chasing after Erimond's fleeing form.

Evelyn's heart should have eased, but the mark started to spit and split, green magic snaking up her wrist, showing out from under her leather gloves. It felt like it did the day she woke with it, remembering pain that brought her to her knees. She did not fall this time, but her knees did buckle.

"Inquisitor!" Solas called. "Your anchor!"

"Not now!" She replied through grit teeth. "We must find Erimond and Clarel." She barely kept the quaver out of her voice as the dragon roared and screamed above them, raining fire on the Wardens as they scrambled for a way out of that pit of carnage.

**

"Would someone please tell me why we're on mop up duty?" Dorian whined as the last demon fell.

"Are you upset magister that our Inquisitor didn't pick you to play today?" Vivienne teased wiping gore from her face.
"Quiet, both of you." Bull hushed them, uncharacteristically tense. Something wasn't right, hadn't been right all day. The Boss kept quiet and stern. Usually for missions like these she needed her best with her. And they were her best allies, her closest ones. There should be no reason for them to be here and not at her side.

"Commander Rutherford!" Bull shouted. "Something's wrong with the Boss."

He'd been briefing one of his scouts before sending him off to the camp where Josie and Leliana waited for updates.

"I've heard no reports," Cullen answered.

"And that's what worries me."

"Bull," Dorian questioned. "What's got you off?"

"It ain't right Dor, we should be in there with her. No offense to Solas or Cole but she's got not even her B team in there with her. Boss is spooked on something, so spooked she's trying to keep us outta the fray."

With most of the Warden forces subdued and captured, there was not much left to do here but sit on the captives and wait for news. Alarmed by Bull's premonition, Cullen drew sword and shield and led the way into the heart of Adamant.

**

First Enchanter Fiona had been the only person of note left behind at Skyhold, which was fortuitous because the elf was the object of a long search of confirmation and absolution. The soldier meant to stay and await the Inquisitor's return, but Morrigan had been there too, with that boy standing next to her all wide eyed and sweet faced and wrong but not wrong.

The soldier did not stay but headed for Adamant as fast as the horse could run.

**

Erimond fled, cowardly heels clicking against the stone. Evelyn caught up with them, as Clarel cornered him against the edge of a broken chasm. Her anchor burned so hot and so bright the Inquisitor knew that not even cutting off her hand now would relieve the pain.

"Fuck fuck FUCK!" she muttered to herself.

"You destroyed the Wardens!" Clarel accused, Erimond's magic pinging uselessly off her barrier as she descended on him.

"You did that yourself you stupid bitch!" The magister countered struggling to rise to his feet.

Before Clarel could retort, the blighted fucking archdemon dragon appeared as though summoned, clamping its jaws around the Mage Warden, tossing her about like a dog with its bone. The demon came so close Evelyn could catch the scent of its fetid breath reminding of her encounter at Haven.

"MAKER'S FUCK!" Evelyn staggered back, notching and loosing a reactionary arrow that bounced wide and harmless.

That thing stalked forward, eager to accompany its Warden snack with an Inquisitor chaser. With nowhere to go, the party staggered back and back on the bridge.
"Evelyn!"
"Boss!"
"Sorora!"

Oh fuck.

Cullen and his party arrived to view Clarel's mangled body slide across the stones lubricated with her own blood as she summoned her last bit of strength.

“In death...sacrifice!”

Her lightning bolt smote the demon and smote the bridge sending both plummeting to earth and death below.

Time moved as though sifted through syrup, every moment sticking together stretching a few heartbeats into agonizing hours. Cullen watched helplessly as the bridge Evelyn was on collapsed, he watched as the stone crumbled beneath her feet as she ran for solid, steady ground. He watched helplessly as one by one Solas, Cole, Blackwall, Hawke, and Alistair fell into dead air.

He watched her hand shoot out and up. Reaching, reaching for something on which to hold.

Cullen watched helplessly as she fell into nothing.

He screamed.

**

This kind of pain had no worldly acknowledgement, no word in any language to describe it. As she plummeted, with the screams of her companions outstripping the rush of the wind in her ears, she summoned her very soul into her aching hand. The mark exploded as she tore and clawed at the Veil the way Solas had showed her until a seam popped open like a poorly done stitch swallowing all of them in green light.

**

Cold.

Oppressive, bone freezing cold even worse than Haven assaulted her the minute she rose to her feet. The landscape was blasted grey and sickly green, jagged rocks jutted from the ground forming a distinct snaking and branching path in many directions. There was no sun here, the only light a pale sickly thing with no warmth or comfort.

But Evelyn drew in a breath and knew she was alive.

She laughed. Hysterically.

“I fail to see what's so blighting funny.” Warden Theirin complained rising to his feet, perpendicular to the ground on which Evelyn stood.

“We were falling.” Hawke staggered to stand. “This...are we dead?!”

“We are alive. We were not going to be. But we are. She fixed it before it broke.” Cole spoke softly.

“No,” Solas answered. “This is the Fade. The Inquisitor opened a rift, we came through. It is good
to know you were actually listening to me instead of just staring at the door facing the Commander's tower.”

Evelyn sniffed and rolled her eyes.

“Look, the Black City,” the elf exclaimed, words tinged with excitement. “Almost close enough to touch.”

“Too motherfucking close.” Evelyn snapped back. “Anyway, getting out should be simple. I ripped a rift open, surely I can do it...”

She raised her left hand to wiggle it. The pain faded, as did the anchor's light.

“FUCK!” She screamed, her oath bouncing off the rocks echoing endlessly. “How the screaming fuck do we get out of here?”

“I get the feeling she curses. A lot.” Theirin poked Blackwall who rolled his eyes.

Everyone always rolls their eyes with Alistair.

Evelyn knew upon meeting him that Alistair Theirin was going to be a problem.

Nothing serious, no burning hatred or anything else so sinister. Just a simmering, skin deep attraction for the strawberry blonde Warden Templar.

He was cute, okay. Maker's fuck.

It didn't help that when she met him, he was accompanied by a mabari old enough to eclipse the age on Morrigan's boy, though the hound still had a certain spryness about him that Evelyn missed in her own hounds.

“This is the Warden-Commander's mabari, Dog. Aptly named don't you think?” Alistair said as he introduced her to his protector when they were at Crestwood. “He's my bodyguard in all this. Can't have Queen Anora finally realizing she should have killed me when she had the chance. Not that anyone's flocking to my banner eager to see Maric's line restored because really? Have you seen my banner? It's just a wheel of cheese.”

“I raised hounds in Ostwick. The best of them I named after your Warden. Cousland.”

“She'd consider it no finer honor.”

“In the real world, the Rift with the demons in it was nearby in the main hall.” Alistair said. “Can we get out the same way?”

“Beats fucking waiting around for demons to find us right? Let's go.”

Chapter End Notes

For your kind words, comments, and thoughts:
Thanks
Fear

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little jittery and jumpy. While that is the point, I apologize if its hard to understand.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dark whispers crept into her ears, the smoke before a conflagration.

"Anyone else hear that? Am I crazy? Have I officially gone crazy?" Alistair panicked.

Demons charged them, appearing from the very air. Snarling and snapping, the creatures haunted and hounded their steps as the party tried to struggle through the Fade to freedom. Legions upon legions attacked them with no end in sight.

But her party fought brutally, earning every inch of ground they covered. Solas kept them walking soundly. Blackwall’s shield kept the demons back. Alistair and Hawke wounded them grievously with sword and shield and staff while Cole and Evelyn finished them off with dagger and bow. They travelled for indeterminate time, passing the scenery in silent, shocked awe while fearful whispers lingered, shadowing all their minds.

Bethany! My baby girl! My Bethany! No!

Alright men, he's an Orlesian traitor, spare no one!

Ma.. ghilana.. mir din'an.. ma vhe...

Ali...no...tell me you didn't. Not with her. Anyone but her...


Maker...keep...my lady...safe.

Her headache beat like a parade march when they found the pale woman in the resplendent robes. A benevolent smile stretched over a wrinkled face, she greeted them with a thick Orlesian accent.

“What?” Alistair breathed overawed. “That can't be.”

“I greet you, Warden, and you Champion and you...Inquisitor.”

She met her briefly, only so briefly, her face only barely recalled.

The Divine. The Most Holy.

“You think my survival impossible, and yet here you stand alive in the Fade yourselves.”

Her party questioned the Divine, skeptical, even hostile. The Fade was home to all manner of cunning things eager to lead astray with pretty lies wrapped in the most convincing looking truths.
"I am here to help you." The woman affirmed. "You don't remember what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Inquisitor. You must reclaim your memories and you must kill your nightmares.

"The Demon who rules here is the servant of Corypheus. It was this creature that facilitated the false Calling, driving the Wardens into making such grave mistakes."

Alistair shuddered. Could Issa be hearing this infernal noise? Did she lay dying in some corner of the Deep Roads crying for him?

Or cursing him?

"This place is its lair, you must destroy it by escaping and leading your people against Corypheus. But first, your memories. Reclaim them and shield yourself in their armor."

The Divine led them through the twisted paths, they fought demons as they went external and internal.

As the demons cut flesh, the Nightmare's words cut soul.

Blackwall, ah, there's nothing like the strength of a grey warden, and you are nothing like a grey warden. The Nightmare rumbled for all to hear.

Evelyn and Cole casted askance glances at the Warden who only shouldered his shield and gruffly replied. "I'll show you a Warden's strength, beast."

Evelyn's head felt overstuffed as she crammed each new memory back into her skull. She saw Alphy's smiling face as he led her through the Temple, so excited to be with his BB again.

The nightmares and the demons screeched, assaulting her ears and her mind. The anchor glowed to life again, it's power resurging. Each step strengthened it, until it began to scratch, itch, and hurt.

Are you afraid, Cole? I can help you forget, just like how you help people forget. We're so very much alike you and I.

Cole was a strong boy, but that didn't prevent him from gripping Evelyn's hand, as though he needed her touch to remember himself. To remember what he was and what he was not.

He gave the Inquisitor a wan smile as he said back. "No."

"What made you finally come B and where's Cousland? Mother Dolores said the mabari would be welcome. You didn't have to leave him behind." Alphy asked.

"Father," the one word was all Alphonse needed to hear to understand. But a frown never darkened his features. "The Maker has a plan for us all, even men like him. You were meant to be here sister." Alphy hugged her, bringing tears to her eyes.

Tears that fell now as she and the rest of them fought bitterly through damnation.

Dirth Ma harello, ma banal ensalen mar solas ena mar din.

Solas shot a worried look to the Inquisitor, the only one there who could understand the Nightmare's words. But she seemed lost in memory and pain and did not hear anything.

"Banal nadas." Solas muttered in reply.

"Oh!" Alphy jumped and grabbed his sister by the hand. "The Divine! You must meet her, she is so
Evelyn's steps staggered and she faltered into the dirt. No. No don't make her relive this.

"Inquisitor?" Hawke inquired, wrapping the lady in the comforting blue mana of a barrier. "We can rest."

"Get off me!" Evelyn snapped harshly, shoving the woman back.

"We must keep moving." Solas urged.

Evelyn nodded and dug her heels into the mud, stomping and cursing under her breath, desperate to do something to keep the memories out.

Did the king's bastard think he could prove himself? It's far too late for that. Your whole life, you left everything to more capable hands, the archdemon, the Throne of Ferelden. Who will you hide behind now? Especially since your beloved is never... coming... back.

"Is that all it's got!" Alistair shouted, false bravery covering palpable fear. "I've heard worse from Morrigan!"

"B? Do you hear that?"

"Keep the sacrifice still."

"Wait here, Alphy, I'll go see what's going on."

"Wait! No!" Alphy clutched her hand harder as she burst through the doors. Grey Wardens, with their enthralled minds, they held the Divine as she struggled and screamed.

"What in the Void is going on here?"

Bright light.

Bright green light.

Blinding pain in her left hand.

Alphonse's terrified scream.

She felt it in her body, reliving that nightmare again. She saw her brother's face contort in agony as he died, as the world went black.

Did you think you mattered Hawke, did you think anything you ever did mattered? You couldn't even save your city. How could you expect to strike down a god? Fenris is going to die, just like your family. All of your family. And everyone you ever cared about.

"The Wardens go too far!" Hawke screamed voice drowning out the Nightmare's vicious taunt and her own whimpering.

"They were under control by Corypheus," Alistair shot back. "Who, may I remind you, you were supposed to have killed!"

"ENOUGH! ALL OF YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Pain sparked in her hand, she collapsed groaning, perhaps a bit too loudly, her sounds keeping the
nightmare’s whispers away.

Ahh, Inquisitor Trevelyan. Herald of Andraste. Do you know what they call you when you’re not listening? Do you know what he calls you? You’re so foolish to think history wouldn’t repeat itself. So very foolish to think he could love a filthy mudskin. And perhaps you are most foolish for thinking you will save any of them.

You are nothing.

You are filth.

And you will fail all of them.

Cole stooped to soothe her. “He’d never hurt you.” Cole whispered, helping her rise to her feet through her pain. “He loves you, so much he can’t find the words. So he just stares and quietly whispers ‘thank you’ over and over.”

For a moment, she sees Alphonse in Cole’s eyes.

For a moment she feels him.

But she remembered the sound of his terrified scream, the vision of his face, the feeling of his hand going limp in hers right before the world stopped. Alphonse died holding her hand.

She could not protect him.

How could she protect any of them?

The hope in her heart crumbled to dust. They were in the blighted Fade, with nightmares cutting to the quick of their greatest fears, leeching away their strength with every step.

How could they escape? How would they live through this?

Worry sparked in the faces of her companions, even self-assured Solas. For all his fascination with the Fade, he still wore a concerned face—that this might be the last time he sees the Fade in any form.

No.

No one dies here gods be damned. No one will die here.

They walked further. Hawke felt nauseous, a twisting in her belly. Sickening dread of what was to come, of what was to become of her. He didn't know. He might not ever know now. The Inquisitor, the fiery woman from Ostwick, had saved her from a bone shattering ruin only for her to die screaming, cold and alone in the Fade.

Hawke felt nauseous.

A twisting in her belly.

The Nightmare showed her the graves of her companions etched with their names. Their fears. Evelyn etched them on her mind.

Blackwall: Himself

Cole: Despair
If she had a grave, it would read 'Their Eyes'. The eyes of her companions, her watchers, her
game, her lion.

Her companions looked to her for their salvation, their shield against the tide, the demon banisher.
Not always though. Sometimes they saw her as only the woman she was, but always and ever she
would first be their Herald. Though Andraste did not bestow upon her the Mark, her circle knew
with the conviction of their whole hearts she would save the world.

That she had to.

*Solas: Dying Alone*

*Sera: The Nothing*

Her watchers were the cutting stares at the Winter Palace. Roving and judging and always finding
her wanting. That mudskin with the wild hair, that half-qunari, that inferior thing better suited for
*(Cassandra: Helplessness)* being scraped off a boot than being among peers.

*Dorian: Temptation*

Her father's eyes, ever shamed, ever cruel, rimmed with fire that spit forth and burned her, *(Varric: Becoming his Parents)* left their marks on her skin. Masan's eyes, with hope and wonder, regarded
her as the shining light of his world. When his grandfather terrorized the child, *(Hawke: Motherhood)* his voice called to her and not his *(Iron Bull: Madness, Vivienne: Irrelevance, Leliana: Faithlessness)* mother, the woman too weak to protect him with anything more than a
whispered plea.

*Josephine: Failing Expectations*

*Alistair: Losing Her*

Cullen's eyes were red rimmed, reflecting the sickly glow of the lyrium that bonded itself to his
body. They begged her to end him and end his suffering. Golden honey eyes begged. She found his
grave last with a broken headstone, smashed and nigh unreadable.

*Cullen: Corruption*

**

The light at the end of the twisted tunnel of nightmares and fear swirled a balmy green against
black sky and for the first time, the glow of a rift did not sicken her.

Yet the way was shut to them, guarded by a spider with too many limbs and too many eyes set in
pocked sockets. Evelyn bent over and wretched. Hawke too, queasiness suddenly trigged.

"There's no way," Alistair whispered, more awestruck than afraid. "We can't....fight that!"

"Have faith Warden, Champion, Inquisitor. Have faith. And if you would please..." The form of the
Divine, be she spirit or the woman herself, glowed a bright soothing gold as she ascended against
the Nightmare. "Tell Leliana..." Her final words were cut off in an explosion that staggered the
beast, weakening it.

Have faith.

Evelyn notched her bow and fired.
Her party fought bitterly, mana, arrow, and stamina stretched to the limit of endurance. Spiders
crawled around them, aiding their leader. She felt the creatures crawling up and over her, tingling
under her skin, in her brain.

*They will die. By your own hand, you will destroy them.*

*Have faith.*

The fel general screamed, flailing as Cole delivered the final blow.

The way opened, the exit loomed close. Cole, Solas, and Blackwall were the first beyond its
reach.

The first ones out and gone.

"Inquisitor come!" Solas beckoned. The spider demon rallied and blocked their way, leaving
Hawke, Alistair, and Evelyn cut off from escape.

Have. Faith.

No one dies. She thought.

No one fucking dies.

Not.

One.

"Go! I'll hold them." Hawke enveloped herself in blue, though the barrier would not hold long.

"Hawke, you can't." Evelyn said. And as the decision settled on her heart, her anchor flared with
stinging, burning, acid flame.

"Why bloody can't I?"

"Because I know," she drew a hand across her belly. Hawke's face grew ashen.

"It doesn't matter, I'll stay. You were right, Hawke, the Grey Wardens broke this; a Grey Warden
will fix it."

The anchor bubbled again, magic crackling, streaking up her arm and neck. If she could see
herself, she would see her deep brown eyes replaced by white green energy.

"Alistair, take Hawke and get the hell out of here." The Inquisitor commanded blowing the spider
back with the strength of the anchor returned. The thing staggered but surged forward again hissing
and screeching, tearing at them with clawed appendages barbed with poison stings.

"Are you..?" Alistair started.

"DON'T ARGUE! FUCKING GO!" The Lady Inquisitor bellowed. She drew herself to her full
height, her fatigue swallowed, and her fear suppressed. She repeated her prayer over and over,
prayers to no god but prayers unto herself. Have! Faith!

She was not Divine, that much was sure, but by the power given to her by mistake she would, just
once, be the goddess they all wanted her to be.
She would be Andraste and she would save them all.

"Inquisitor, Evelyn. You can't!" Hawke screamed.

She held up her hand. "I tore the Fade to get here, and I'll do it again going back. Too fucking many have died today as useless sacrifices. No more damnit! Not even me."

They hesitated.

So she pushed them.

With the power of the anchor manifested and slaved to her will alone she pushed them back and back and up until both were through the portal. Then with a crush of her hand she sealed it from the inside, magic rippling both inside the Fade and out.

A voice cut through the din, one voice she had to strain to hear. An anguished cry that echoed when the rift closed tight.

"Evelyn! NO!"

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said canon divergence. ..yeah about that.

My deepest condolences to anyone who had to choose between a romanced Alistair and their Hawke. I couldn't do it, I'm not doing it, I don't have to, you can't make me.

Comments cure the space between updates!
Faith

Chapter Notes

Wow, you guys are so amazing and oft times inspiring. These chapters the first go round did not look like this. And now thanks to y'all they do. And they are much better for it.
So in honor of all the love I decided to post the next chapter earlier than anticipated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Commander couldn't bring himself to look over the lip of the broken bridge. He stayed rooted where he stood, body and brain stricken into paralysis.

"We have to...we have to..." Dorian struggled against an invisible force that rendered him confused and terrified. He began walking towards the edge of the bridge. "We have to..."

Huge grey arms arrested him, locking him up in a vice grip that crushed the mage so tenderly it broke Dorian's heart. "You can't. That bridge isn't sound, the rest might..." Bull faltered, voice thick in his throat.

"But she's down there!" Vivienne screamed.

"Who's down where? Ya mean you tits who where sa'posed to be watchin' the lower bailey? Didja see that dragon?!

Sera arrived with Cassandra and Varric before freezing. "Whasa matta? Where's Inky and the rest?"

"Commander?" Cassandra's voice shattered like a fragile thing held too tightly. She knew before she asked. "What has happened? Where is the Inquisitor!?" The Commander's haunted eyes answered all.

“Holy Maker. We are lost.” Cassandra moaned.

"Hawke and the rest, no...?!" Varric pressed a hand to his face, hiding his grief. Fenris would burn down the world when he found out. And Varric would have to be the one to tell him.

The mabari, Dog, whined smelling the sorrow wafting from the people. He zipped back and forth, flitting between legs and sniffing, his nose high in the air searching for any trace of Mistress's Mate, Master Cheese. His scent ended at the bridge and stopped. Gone. Dissappeared like Mistress was.

“Dog,” she had said to him holding him by the scruff of his neck. “You are to keep him safe okay? Promis me.” The mabari chuffed and growled, serious in his solemn charge.

Alistair asked the Commander to keep an eye on him while he went with the Inquisitor, something about Fereldens sticking together. He failed his Mistress. He failed Master Cheese. Dog tilted his massive neck back and gave one long solid howl of grief before collapsing where he stood.

Who would be his pack now?
"They're all gone." Vivienne whispered, leaning against her staff, using the thing to keep her upright because without it, even her iron would rust and crumble.

"She ain't!" Sera called, nimbly skirting the edge of the bridge.

"Sera, stop." Dorian warned. The Iron Bull held him tight and neither knew which one needed it more. The Boss somehow knew and she didn't want them to die with her, accepting Solas and the rest as necessary sacrifices. If there were a way to save everyone she would, but those most precious would be guarded first.

Damn her. That shouldn't be her decision to make.

"There's a bunch 'a stone but there ain't no red." They heard the tears in Sera's voice.

"Sera!" Dorian screeched, unable to hear it, unable to hope.

"No broken bits!"

"Sera enough!"

"NO! You come off it. I'm tellin' ya she's not there, nobody's there. They ain't dead, they're just gone!"

The elf scanned the faces of her companions looking for hope in anyone's eyes, finding none.

"Oh she's gonna be so pissed when she gets back." She huffed with a watery gasp. "That you all were so quick to think she'd just up and die on us! Even you Commander Tightass! I thought you were supposed to be all kissy love with her! And you give up so quickly! Tits! All a' ya!'"

Cassandra locked Sera in a stifling embrace before she could say more. The woman needed it, succumbing to tears and loud wails. "She ain't supposed to die like this!"

No she wasn't.

In a perfect world, she would never die. Like in the tales of old, the hero would ascend to the Maker's side whole and unbroken. Her body would be written in the stars, her soul left to linger in the rocks and trees and air of every place she ever stepped.

Not here.

Not in gritty sand and harsh sun. She couldn't die here. He didn't believe it.

'I will see you again.' She always said that, he always believed her.

Even now.

"Sera's right." Cullen found his voice again, testing it gently so it wouldn't crack under too much weight.

"She always comes back."

"Cullen..." Cassandra, ever practical Cassandra placed a tender hand on his forearm that he wrenched away from, unwilling to accept what everyone else had, what he had only moments ago.

"And anyway, now is not the time. We must capture the magister and round up the rest of the surrendered Wardens. She will want to speak with them when she returns."
"Curly, nobody wants to believe that more than I do..."

"Then believe damnit!" Cullen cut the dwarf off.

Blessed Maker, his faith was rewarded.

Suddenly, the rift in the courtyard simmered and popped like fat frying on a skillet. It spit out three bodies.

Solas.

Cole.

Blackwall.

“Maker's mercy!” Cassandra swore.

“Ha! Haa! I toldja, I TOLDJA!” Sera gloated, dancing on tiptoes.

The circle pressed closer, waiting for the rest.

Alistair pitched through, a weary Hawke around his shoulder.

“We must go back she means to...” Alistair started.

Cullen felt his heart fall, buffeted on hope only to have it plummet back into the depths again. The world slowed, just as it had when the bridge collapsed.

She would save everyone.

Of course she would.

At the expense of her life.

Of course she would.

Cullen sprinted for the tear in the Veil as hands scrambled to hold him back.

“Curly! NO!”

“Commander! Don't.”

He shrugged their hands off him. He burned the lyrium in his blood, like trying to ignite a lamp with very little oil.

But fire caught. It empowered him even as a monstrous, brain shattering headache split across his mind. He vaulted forward, so close. He would rip her out of the Fade with his bare damned hands. He would not let her...he could not let her...

The rift sizzled, it began to shrivel, shrink, disappear.

“Evelyn! NO!” he screamed.

**
The Nightmare demon fell dead at her feet, the power of the anchor overwhelming and overloading it. Several of its eyes popped and splattered, spraying her with gore that burned when it touched her bare skin.

But the thing was dead.

And her friends were alive.

So a little bit of demon gore wasn't going to bother her right now.

"Okay B," she flexed her left hand. The anchor stung but it'd probably be a while before she could tear open another rift. Should she wait here? Search for another thinness in the Veil?

That seemed to call the anchor's attention. It sparked a bit, like a needle poking in the center of her hand. It seemed to pull, like something tugging at her, leading her.

"If this fucking thing is sentient now..." She banished the thought before she could make herself sick thinking about all the things she'd done with a possibly sentient hand.

Which meant her thoughts inevitably turned to one person.

"Holy Maker. Cullen. I'm so sorry..."

She couldn't let herself think about what he was going through right now. She gripped the luck in her right hand and brought her mouth to it, whispering and hoping somehow her thoughts would get through.

I will see you again.

The mark led.

She followed.

There were no demons this time to assault her as she walked. The winds in the Fade blew cold, chilling her. She stuck her hands under her arms just as she did at Haven. Her walking slowed. She felt snow crunch under her boots and...

Oh fuck.

The landscape turned from blasted grey and green to stark white. The winds howled louder, biting like teeth against every inch of exposed skin.

She kept walking, snow getting deeper by the step.

"Not real," her teeth chattered in protest, cold feeling very much real to them.

"Not real," she repeated. Like Redcliffe this was just another lie, an illusion sent to make her falter. She tripped, legs getting tangled in the drifts. She fell into the snow, icy cold getting down in her gloves and between the tongues of her boots.

"Fuck!" she shivered, but when she put her hands out to stand, they brushed against something hard and smooth.

Not rock.

But frozen flesh.
Evelyn dug, emotion overcoming reason. She clawed at the snow until blue-grey skin lay exposed. Cassandra.

"Fuck!!" Evelyn flew back, crawled back on the snow to get away from the sight of her dead friend until she hit something else. Sera.

And her eyes were torn out. Evelyn stood, she ran, heedless of the anchor's direction. Another body tripped her up. Blackwall, his chest a broken cavity filled with frozen blood.

"Not real! Not real!" She shook her head, trying to ignore the violent reaction in her stomach and heart.

He felt real. The bits of tacky, flaky blood that scuffed her boots and her hands certainly looked real. Evelyn kept running, tears blurring her eyes as she ran past the corpses of her friends.

You are nothing.
You are filth.
And you will fail all of them.

That wasn't the Nightmare anymore. It was Corypheus. It was her father, it was Andreas. All of them, shouting the same refrain over and over and over again. Spiders skittered up her flesh as the snow melted away, crawled into her, tore at her, poisoned her with barbed bites that stuck like one million needles poking her flesh and in her eyes and in her neck and...

She ran into another body. Upright. With her eyes screwed shut and on sheer instinct she grabbed her bow, nocked an arrow, and loosed it. Straight into Cullen's chest.

She heard a sickening thunk. The sound of her greatest nightmare, the hollow, echoing thud of an arrow striking dead center.

"Evelyn?" Cullen croaked.

The hunter opened her eyes to see her Commander with an arrow in his chest right above his heart. He hit the ground before she could catch him, blowing snow morphing back to blighted Fade. She hadn't moved very far from where she started, the illusion causing her to walk in circles.

On her knees, she pulled him off the ground and cradled him.

"Cullen, baby no. No no no. How did you get here? Why are you here?"

"I...the rift...before it closed. I had to get you out. I saw you. You shot me. It...hurts..."

Cullen's words ended in a watery gasp, blood aspirating into his throat and lungs.

"Oh Maker...no no no oh please." She pleaded. "Please Maker, I'll do anything. Please."
"Its okay," a small voice, choked with blood answered from within her arms. "Of all the ways to die, this one is not so bad. I love you, Evelyn. I love you so much."

Tears wet his face, hers and his own. He began to gasp and shake as he choked.

"M..Maker," he mumbled, words half formed and drowned out in red. "Keep...my lady....safe."

He did not smile when he died, his face twisted in a grimace of pain, blood dribbling from his lips. He went limp in her grasp and Evelyn, too shocked to open her mouth, let him die without telling him how much she loved him.

She curled forward, caging his body in her arms as though to shield him.

From what though?

As she had been the one to harm him.

She couldn't think about Mia or Branson or Rosalie. She couldn't think about Iron Bull or Leliana or Cassandra.

She couldn't think of anything really, mind gone blank with grief.

Evelyn threw her head back and roared.

And as she did, her anchor

Exploded.

Chapter End Notes

My gifts are poison.
Chapter Notes

If I don't occasionally make you cry or feel at least something (not like revulsion at like bad writing or something, hopefully I don't make you feel that), I have not done my job.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sky split.

Green and black energy split the fabric of the Veil with arcing streaks of lightning and thunderous booms of exploding magical sound. The crowd that had gathered dispersed quickly once the energy became too unstable to be near, lashing out with tongues of fire, licking the ground and making the stones burn.

The air pressure rose and then fell, popping ears and upsetting fragile stomachs.

Hawke doubled over, vomiting. Varric rushed to her side.

“Easy Hawke, easy.”

A tear opened.

A body appeared, kneeling, chin in her chest.

The tear closed.

She meant to remain there until the dust of her bones blew away with the winds. The Nightmare, while defeated, was never truly dead. One cannot kill such evil, a creature that existed before the very concept. She stayed behind, foolish thing, thinking she could hold it back while preserving the lives of her comrades. Once they were safely away, the Nightmare meant to make her a victim of such pride.

But the will of the anchor was something it had not calculated. The power of her grief, of her love, far stronger than initially thought. She slipped away, Veil tearing around her before pulling back, leaving empty space where she once knelt. She was gone before it could bury the knife in her back and accompany the sting of a shattered heart with a pierced one.

**

Everything switched.

The ice tipped winds of the Fade gave way to sandy gales. The grey and green light replaced by bright, burning sun.

There was no body in her arms.

She was the body in someone else's.
"Maker's breath, Evelyn."

Her world became heavy, steel-clad arms and furry red surcoat. She felt his stubble scratch against her cheek and neck, she heard his half-babble, half-prayerful whispers.

"Thank you Maker. Thank you. Thank you."

Her arms just hung limp even as he clutched her tighter. In truth she was too scared to move. Too scared to hope this was real. From her strangled embrace, the Inquisitor counted the lives, hoping she got her math right.

Solas.
Cole.
Blackwall.
Varric.
Sera.
Cassandra.
Dorian.
Iron Bull.
Vivienne.
Alistair.
Hawke.
Cullen.

All hale and hearty.
All living.
All.
Alive.

"Evelyn, sweetling, are you alright? Say something please."

She felt their eyes.
Felt them watching, searching, probing for her weakness.

You are the Inquisitor. She thought to herself. You cannot be weak.

They are watching.

Her arms were still heavy and cold when she embraced her Commander.

"I'm fine, love." She lied.
**“Ser! This fortress is under the protection of the Inquisition. State your business!”**

The soldier regarded the young guard curiously, making note that Adamant was a Grey Warden stronghold.

“Not anymore, it belongs to Inquisitor Trevelyan. The Wardens are defeated, their madness forgiven, and our Lady Inquisitor has graciously allowed them to add their strength to hers.”

The soldier hummed quietly, then made to pass.

The guards blocked the way.

“State your business!”

After a half-minute long bloodless struggle, the guards no longer blocked the way.

**

Time passed differently in the Fade it seemed. What Evelyn had thought to be a separation of hours was only mere minutes. To them, once the one rift closed, the other opened only a minute or two later.

Feeling tingled back into her limbs, her heart beat again in earnest, strong pulses. Her body warmed, life--thought destroyed by grief--returned but she felt no warmth. Not even under the smiles and happy laughter of her companions (none frozen, none dead).

Hawke absorbed Varric in a hug that lifted the dwarf off his feet. “Put me down Hawke!”

Cassandra and Solas exchanged a sedate greeting, so too with Vivienne. The rest of them crowded around their Inquisitor, laughing and cheering, patting her on the back, congratulating her for a job well done. The entire keep cheered, their horrors pushed aside for this one moment of joy. She wiped away the danger with a swish of a green hand. Their savior, their Herald. Their Andraste.

*They are watching.*

Dog screeched with happy whimpers around Alistair, his short stumpy tail wagging so fast it threatened to separate from his body entirely. “Good Dog,” Alistair laughed between hearty licks. “No worries now, I'm back.”

Cullen stepped away from her, allowing her to be absorbed by those eager to offer their congratulations. He had to let her go, if only for those brief moments.

Because when he touched her again...

Dorian crushed her in a hug that could have cracked a rib were he inclined. “You are an insufferable show off! You need to let others be the hero sometimes, Sorora. Stop stealing the damn thunder all the time!”

“Good to see you too Dor,” Evelyn answered quietly, kissing his cheek. “You also, Iron Bull.”

The qunari shook her hand, but held on longer than he should have. “Boss, there's a talk we gotta have later about all this. But for now, I'm glad you're back.”

“Yes, a talk about why you didn't bring us? Oh Maker's Mercy your hair!”
Evelyn suffered Vivinne's fingers in her hair, trying to forget the look of those same fingers rimmed in ice and broken at every joint. "Ok Viv, I'll..."

"Just shut up and hug me darling, we'll deal with your hair later."

"Impressive work with the anchor Inquisitor," Solas complimented, raising her hand to examine it.

Evelyn bent her fingers and the glowing light swelled then subdued.

"It's mine now. For the most part."

"Please don't use it for more trips to the Fade."

The Inquisitor shuddered, eyes trapped in a moment now removed in time, space, and memory. "Never again. Ever."

Solas nodded, satisfied.

Marian Hawke approached the Inquisitor eyes wet with grateful tears. “Lady Trevelyan.”

She held up a hand to stop her. “No Hawke, Evelyn will do.”

“Evelyn, you don't know how grateful I am to you.”

Evelyn hugged the Champion whispering, “You will be a wonderful mother.”

“That I have the chance at all is because of you.”

“Whoa, whoa what!? Hawke! How come you didn't....” Varric staggered as though the revelation were of personal significance to him.

Hawke knelt before her best friend and kissed him on the forehead. “Yes Varric, you're going to be an uncle.”

Alistair watched the Commander as he watched the Inquisitor. He observed them trade glances back and forth, little gestures passed in gazes that reassured the other this was not a dream. The Warden caught their glances and his heart swelled a bit, he felt like he was looking into a mirror from ten years ago.

What he would not give for just a glance of her now.

"I remember something like this," Alistair sidled casually up to Lady Trevelyan as she was pulling away from a hug from Cole. "Issa had just destroyed the Archdemon. She stumbled down from the top of the castle positively drenched in blood."

Evelyn listened curiously. They hadn't had much chance to talk about the Warden-Commander and Evelyn never pressed the topic once she saw the pained but fond look on his face.

"I wanted nothing more than to run to her, give her a big ole hug. But I didn't. I let Zevran and Shale and Wynne and the rest all get their licks in because I knew if I got my hands on her, I'd lock us both in the nearest room and she'd never leave it. Walking upright anyway."

Evelyn gasped, taken aback by his frankness.
"Ha! Finally, I make someone blush with a dirty joke. Take that Zevran!"

"Warden Alistair...I'm not blushin..."

"I wish you women would stop with that. Yes I'm perfectly aware of how much you don't blush. Issa says the same things. Now go kiss your Commander, you both have been through all kinds of torment. And make it a good one, Maker knows the morale could use it."

Alistair watched her go as he fiddled with the wing pendant around his neck. It was broken off a little silver carving of a griffon, left on her empty pillow the day she left. He brought it to his lips and kissed it, knowing that though separated by time and space and touch, he was kissing her.

"Maker's breath but I do miss that woman." He said quietly as he watched the Inquisitor and her Commander. Dog whined, sharing his grief. "I know boy, I know. But hey, at least they get to be happy."

She did not run, nor jump into his arms like she thought she might, like she probably should. Instead she quietly stepped closer to him, as though he were a guest at a ball and she a solicitor for a dance. She approached him as if he were almost a complete stranger, like she couldn't feel the absolute burning in her chest to touch him, make sure he was real.

"Commander Rutherford, may I have a moment of your time?"

He had been talking to Cole and Blackwall, piecing together their experience in the Fade. It unnerved him at how easily she tried to throw away her life.

"They told me what happened. Evelyn, I don't know whether to kiss you or kill you for being so reckless." He gripped her, like he was about to shake sense into her. "You can't do things like that, you're too... important to our cause." He tried to keep composure, make his words sound less desperate than what they were.

He stepped back, expecting a fight from her, another affirmation that she could take care of herself. But instead she gave him a reserved sigh and a quiet nod.

"Yes Commander," she answered visibly chastened. And somehow that stunned him more than her potential protest.

"Good," he nodded, holding back a relieved sigh.

"Ser Alistair says I should kiss you now."

"Did he?"

"Yes, something about it being good for morale."

Cullen chuckled. "And what do you think?"

"I suppose I could suffer it, for duty of course." She tried to smile and found it didn't hurt on her face, she didn't have to force it too hard either.

Cullen faked an exasperated sigh and even rolled his eyes for good measure. But the smile in his face gave lie to any supposed inconvenience; he'd kiss her forever if such things were possible.

"Ah well, for duty then."

Their kiss did not crash, it did not upset the mountains of the world. They pressed together slowly,
sweetly, a savory thing sampled like the best wines. Evelyn heard the fervent 'I love you's in the press of his fingertips in her back, she spoke her adoration with her tiptoes arching just so to reach him better.

The Lion and the Huntress kissed in the middle of a smoking ruin, in the middle of a dozen or so of their closest friends and companions.

Everyone cheered, even the Wardens.

The bards will too.

**

The Wardens mourned and buried their dead and Alistair discussed leaving for Weisshaupt at first light to explain the situation. Her party returned to base camp to update Leliana and Josephine and sent word to Skyhold of their victory while Erimond whimpered piteously in his shackles. She would judge him at Skyhold as soon as they all returned.

“Evelyn, May I come in?”

She sat gazing into the brazier in her tent, bloody memories dancing on the edges of her consciousness. She shook her head free of them, casting them aside and hoped to bury them.

Cullen poked his head inside, finally free of his meeting with Warden Stroud, the senior most warden left at Adamant.

“You should know by now you never have to ask.”

He stepped in, shirking his armor and cloak. “Are you alright?”

“I could not possibly be better.” She smiled but it fell short of her eyes.

“No really, are you alright? You said you were in there for a very long time before you ripped the Veil open again. What happened?”

Singing arrow.

The thunder of a stricken chest.

His dying choke.

“I don't remember.” Twice now she had lied to him, the number matching the number of times she murdered him with her own hands. She never lied to him, outside of the little white ones like 'why no, Telly the Barber didn't cut too much of that wonderful hair off, why do you ask?'

Her lips burned with the deception, but she'd rather not dwell on what happened for any longer than she had to. To speak of it would ruin her worse than what she was.

If she couldn't be strong, she had to at least fake it. She couldn't let him see her suffer, she didn't want to shake whatever faith he had in her.

“Maybe later you should talk with Solas, perhaps he can recover the memories.”

“No!” She shrieked, catching him off guard. “I... I don't want to remember. The Fade was terrible. And what's still stuck in here,” she tapped her head. “I'll remember forever. Whatever I can't recall, I should leave it.”
He sat next to her, on her furs, before her fire. He tipped her head to meet his in a soft kiss. “I can tell you still hurt. Tell me how to help you. Please.”

Sweet soldier, he wasn't going to give up. Not without a distraction anyway. She pulled him closer, kissed him hard. “I want new, better memories. Starting with you.”

**

Dog dozed fitfully at his feet, chasing blighted rabbits or whatever else it is mabari dream about.

“And what do you dream about Alistair?” He asked himself tipping a much needed glass of wine down his throat. “Is it death? You dream of death now? You were ready to die today, ready to give it all up because, let's face it chief, you're finally ready to stop believing she's ever coming back.”

The Nightmare had gotten to him, wounding him deeper than he thought.

“She'd call you faithless for that you know.”

Alistair took a sip, finding that he had the best conversations with himself.

“I know.”

“Are you?”


Dog chased his phantom bunnies right back into the waking world. He regarded Master Cheese with a sorrowful whine before pawing up him to rest his head in his lap.

"We should be with her, boy."

The old dog barked, an agreement. He scratched behind the mabari's ears to earn him a satisfied growl. The Senior Warden slammed his fist into his palm. "I never cared about the damned Calling." He replayed their argument again for the millionth time.

"All I want is to spend the rest of my days with you. That's it. And when it's time, I'm going with you. End of discussion."

"Ali...You think I'm gonna watch you get swallowed up by the taint? You deserve better than that. You deserve." She faltered thinking of Morrigan and her child, or Anora on a throne that should have been shared with him. "You deserve a throne, and a crown, and bright happy children. I took that away from you. Let me at least give you back your life."

"You. Are. My. Life. Issa. And you know bloody well I didn't want the throne if I couldn't share it with you."

Bann Teagan begged Alistair to take the deal. Loghain's blood still dripped from his sword and yet every Bann at the Landsmeet was already clamoring for him to wed the man's orphaned daughter. They'd willing give the throne of Ferelden to Maric's bastard provided Anora was at his side.

Anora and no other.

"I ain't watchin' you die like that Ali. I'm going."

"I should have gone with you."
"You needed to be here."

The Warden of the Fifth Blight thought for a moment, taking another sip of wine, before realizing that he could neither a) throw his voice nor b) impersonate hers so well.

C) His dog was gone.

D) There was an infernal yapping noise coming from the mouth of his tent. It sounded very much like a grown, 13 year old mabari that had chewed up and spit out every flavor of darkspawn while asking for more crying like a newborn pup.

“I haven't drank enough to be having hallucinations.” he said aloud, afraid to turn around and face his disappointment. “Unless I have and I don't know it yet. But I swear to the Maker if I turn around and no one's there...”

“Ali.”

She first called him that during one breathless night after she had stolen into his tent, not long after he'd given her a rose, plucked from Lothering.

So much beauty in so much darkness.

“I love you Ali,” she whispered into his sweat slicked skin. Both were still trembling, happy and exhausted.

“Ali?”

“Yeah well you call me Issa, it's only fair.”

“Ali and Issa, it sounds nice.” He threaded his fingers between hers sighing wondrously at the contrast, her dark and his not-so-dark.

Senior Warden Alistair, ten years older, but no less in love, rose and turned to face the woman who had stolen into his tent just like she used to all those years ago.

“Issa.” He breathed.

Warden-Commander Elissa Cousland stood half an inch shorter than Senior Warden Alistair Theirin. She was dark like a pine forest without the green, her thick black hair lay braided against her scalp in neat rows that looked like furrows of tilled soil. She had a huge bastard sword strapped her back, and a huge mabari trying to strap itself to her front, licking and whining and yapping.

"Dog!” Issa commanded firmly and the dog put ass to ground immediately. "Give me a moment and I'll greet you properly."

He looked no different, like he'd been preserved somehow for her. Time stopped when they parted, their hearts unable to move forward without the other. And now that she was back, time could flow again. They could grow together, grow old together, die together. But now, for all her work and search and sacrifice, that death wouldn't be at the tip of a darkspawn blade with dark whispering in their ears, but old and grey and sound asleep in their beds.

“I'm home Ali,”

“Are you truly?”

“Yes, and I can save you now.”
This kiss crashed. This kiss shattered mountains. His hammer met her anvil and they exploded into one another.

Two years, 11 months, and 28 days (but hey, who's counting) of separation finally ended in 1 long overdue embrace.

Cullen kissed the bone between her breasts, he kissed lower, then higher, he bathed her in kisses. Kisses with his fingers, kisses with his lips, kisses with his eyes that said 'I love you so much' with no words or sound.

“Cullen please.” Evelyn begged him, driven mad by desire and want, she begged him with her thighs pressed together, and her neck arched and open ripe for licks and bites.

He denied her with a simple no before descending upon the wet junction at her hips to drink like a man parched.

Earlier he resolved to kill her for her recklessness, what better way than this, his lips over hers, kissing and suckling her wet ripeness, pulling from her sweet moans and pushing into her unbearable pleasure that every so often stopped her heart in ecstasy.

Cullen kept his promises.

Every lick plucked a 'please' from her throat, a desperate begging.

“No,” he hummed again against her pearl.

Not until she unraveled completely, would he free her. He even kept her empty of his fingers, choosing to drive into her with tongue and lips.

“Maker, Maker Cullen please.”

Cullen remained patient, the grip on his control tenuous but still intact. He would make her wait the way he waited for her. He would torture her so sweetly the way his heart was tortured, waiting for her to return to him. Vindictively sweet in his punishment, he answered her whimpers with a single finger slipped inside her folds, not enough to fill, to satisfy, but just enough to heighten the teasing.

“No.” He insisted again, pushing the solitary finger deep and then curling it.

“Ah, Cullen!” A hard shudder wracked her body, clacking her teeth together with the force of it. More like that, and she'd be finished quickly, forcefully, almost painfully.

He pushed her, dangled her over that edge with a finger buried inside her and his tongue on her crown. When she got too close to oblivion, he pulled her back into his embrace, cooing and soothing her with kisses flavored with her body and tender whispered words. He robbed her of her ability to reach him, grab him, push him insistently where she needed him, she could only shiver and shake within his grasp driven to madness with his teasings.

“I love you Evelyn. I love you so much. Don't ever do that to us again.”

Push her close, pull her back. He carried on like this for what felt like hours. Her pleas didn't come
from any language known anymore.

Then and only then did the tether on his want snap. He climbed up her body and pushed home with a good solid thrust. So much sensation, she came howling on the first stroke. Her head snapped back, tears of relief escaping from her eyes drawing trails down her temples lost in the thick roots of her hair.

Yet still he took his time.

Rolling slowly, pushing deep, withdrawing fully then pushing deep again he dismantled her, each other, letting love piece them back together.

“Cullen, Oh Maker, I love you.” Her words were beyond coherent, and he was beyond hearing.

Evelyn shuddered, her legs and thighs quaked, but she matched him again and again tightening around him, turning her slick channel into a hot vice that wrung a scream from his throat.

“Evelyn!”

He howled her name, uncaring who heard, who was scandalized by his cries and shouts of pleasure. Let the Maker hear, let the Maker hear His loss. Andraste could not compare, could never hope to measure favorably against the dark skinned beauty, the warrior, the queen who writhed below him.

Close now, like a suicide on the tip of a cliff she came close to losing every coherent thought she ever had save the love in her heart and the pleasure in her body.

A welcome distraction from pain in her soul.

He jerked his hips against her, taking his pleasure from her, driving and controlling the coil of sinful pleasure in both their guts that would release at any moment.

He cried her name like an exhaled prayer, spurting and spilling himself within. The Commander felt his lady shudder violently underneath him, shocked mute with her own final explosive release as though dead.

The Commander kept his promises.

**

“Maker's breath, is that what it's like? Is that what Leli and the rest heard when we...?” Issa questioned, whispering into his sweat slicked skin.

“I guess. I never realized we were that loud.” Alistair chuckled kissing her forehead. “We were younger.”

“And in the intervening time, we've learned to be quieter.”

“Though no less enthusiastic.” Alistair waggled his eyebrows. “Something something warden stamina, something something.”

“They will learn.”

Alistair kissed her hand, the one with the silver ring on the third finger. “Yes, they will.”
Oh! Happy? endings with a side of fix-it with my Warden babies? Hop on the self indulgence train. Toot tooot!

Hey, Grey Warden shenanigans? Yeah or Na?

Also, for everything

Thanks
Old School, New School

Chapter Notes

Representation matters folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Issa woke to swords in her face and the sheepish visage of the guard she roughed up to get here. "That's her! She barged in, beat us up, we've been looking for her all night!" The sheepish one yelled.

Alistair groaned, burying his head under a pillow. "Issa if you would just tell people who you were you could avoid all of this. Nobody cares about the old and busted heroes of Fifth Blight anymore. They're all on that new hotness, still reading Tales of the Champion or eating up the bards' songs about the Inquisitor!"

"Get up! Both of you! We're to bring you to the Lady Inquisitor straight away!"

"Well, I needed to meet her anyway." The Warden Commander groused.

**

He woke her early, they needed to get back to Skyhold as there was much work to be done with their new force of Wardens.

"My Lady Inquisitor, Lord Commander." Both the Lady Inquisitor and the Lord Commander quirked their eyebrows at the address. It was Poor Bastard Jim again, apparently under the mistaken auspices that the Commander earned an extra title somewhere overnight (other than Maker). Cullen liked the sound of it though, Lord Commander, not for the title but for the way it sounded next to Lady. Lord and Lady, he could grow used to such address.

"We have a matter that needs be brought to your immediate attention."

Evelyn spent ten years living in the daydream that she could be the Heroine of Ferelden, a fantasy harbored in no small part because she knew the woman wore the same skin she did and that went very far for a 16 year old girl's imagination. Imagine her absolute horror then, when Evelyn laid eyes on her personal Andraste being led to her at spear point by her own soldiers.

"Maferath's fucking BALLS you lot put those spears down now and...and go run laps or something! Blighted ass, don't you know who that is?" Evelyn howled, while Cullen hid a smirk behind a glove.

"Ali, she's like a taller, browner Oghren." The Warden-Commander quipped to Alistair who'd been brought along also under guard as an accessory for harboring a potential spy.

"Much better looking, much better smelling."

"Warden Commander, I apologize for the disrespect. It is an honor to meet you." Evelyn felt like bowing, knowing it was probably inappropriate and serve more to embarrass both ladies than to
The Inquisitor imagined the Warden Commander smaller and shorter. She took a certain amount of pride in picturing a tiny, fine boned thing wielding the greatswords and greateaxes all the stories mentioned, mowing down creatures twice her size. But it made sense that she'd be a wall of a woman, wide of shoulder and hip with a broad thick stomach that would have made her look dwarven were she not so tall. Her eyes were dark brown, same as her skin, and anyone else would call both Warden and Inquisitor Rivani had they not known their birthplaces. Trevelyan in Ostwick, and Cousland in Highever.

Pretty in her plainness, the Warden wore no makeup save the barest bit of color on her lips turning plum colored flesh into wine colored flesh. Yesterday's battle serviceable corn rows gave way to today's shock of twisted spirally hair that poofed on the top of her head like curled cotton wisps—the style Issa knew Alistair favored on her. She was the magnificent woman of her legend, one the Inquisitor had been in love with since she was 16 years old.

"The honor," the Grey Warden answered. "Is assuredly all mine."

Evelyn beamed, melting a little in place.

"Ser Rutherford, you're a long way from Kinloch Hold and a long way from the Order judging by what Ali has told me."

"I left Kinloch not long after you did."

She wore the same grave face she did when they met ten years ago. Age sharpened her lines but there was more laughter in her eyes now. Most likely put there by the Warden at her side. The Wardens stood close, bodies moving in silent cooperation. When she shifted, he adjusted. If he turned, she pulled closer. But never where they more than mere inches apart, close but now crowded, intimate.

Maker's breath he wanted that. That kind of easy closeness earned only after years and years of loving the same person fully and ardently, with the whole of one's soul.

"Gentlemen, would you excuse us for a moment." Evelyn watched as both men stood straighter, soldiers snapping to attention. The Warden's tone was soft but she spoke in such a way that demanded nothing but absolute compliance.

Cullen nodded respectfully and took his leave while Alistair lingered, ghosting his hand around her waist that softened the hard thick lines of Lady Cousland's lips into a lazy smile.

"I won't run off, I promise." She answered though Alistair had said nothing.

'It is different down here.' Evelyn thought, and for the first time since meeting the Rutherfords, the phrase made her smile.

**

Evelyn was surprised she slept at all the night before, but she still woke weary eyed and weary hearted. It showed in the circles under her eyes, worn deep like a track dug into her skin. Lady Cousland noticed immediately.

"You're afraid." The warden stated simply.

They walked the blackened battlements of Adamant fortress. The bodies of the dead and sacrificed
Wardens had been blown away as ashes on the hot desert winds, but their blood remained, staining stones already marked with dragon claw and sword strike.

Evelyn looked at the woman who was only about three or so years older than her.

"You can be honest with me, you know. Ain't like we haven't been in the same places."

Evelyn warmed, grateful she understood.

"But I'm not you. I'm not Hawke either. I could be the one that fucks this all up."

Evelyn clamped a hand over her mouth, mortified. "Ah, I'm sorry my lady."

Issa waved a hand. "Please. I spent my days with a hilariously amorous Antivan and a drunken dwarf. I've heard worse. And you won't 'fuck it up'. You've got people like Leliana and Morrigan, and that Commander of yours too. Let them help you."

"You don't see the way they look at me. All their faith hinges on me. I can't break. I can't show weakness."

"You are still human."

"No, I'm the Herald. The Inquisitor. And they are watching me."

The Warden Commander sighed deeply. She understood this. Hell, she went through this.

She thought killing Arl Howe would make her better, so she thought of nothing else. She let it consume her. Being a Grey Warden was secondary only to her revenge. When she finally took it, his skull was a bloody pulp under her fists.

And she was supposed to feel *better*.

Instead she felt as dead as Arl Howe looked.

Wynne had been disgusted with her. Sten inclined his head in a slight nod, the only sign of his approval. Alistair though.

He picked her up, just lifted her off the bloody ground uncaring of the bits of brain still stuck to her knuckles. He shushed her and instructed her to close her eyes to the carnage she wrought.

“You’re actually lighter than you look. Uhh..aahh!… not to say you look heavy…or too light…You are the perfect…ugh Can I start that over?”

She laughed.

Alistair, in that moment and all the moments after, made her remember how it felt to laugh. Without him, the madness of being the Heroine of Ferelden, Warden-Commander Elissa Cousland would have eaten her alive years ago.

"Listen. Lady Trevelyan." Elissa Cousland placed a wide hand on the Inquisitor's shoulders. "Alistair told me what happened. You saved his life. I can't tell you, but I think you understand just how much that means to me. If you ever need me, I am here. You saved his life and as such I owe you mine."

“Thank you,” the younger woman replied sadly.
‘She’ll learn.’ Issa thought.

There was a meeting going on below. Stroud, Theirin, Rutheford, some nameless Wardens and Inquisition soldiers stood hashing out requisitions, quartering, and whatever else comes with absorbing part of Thedas's oldest and longest order under her banner.

Issa watched as the Inquisitor’s eyes landed on the templar in red. She remembered that look, the one Leliana used to tease her about. Same song, same dance, different players.

"A thing for templars hmm?" Issa teased, leaning over the railing and staring appreciatively down at the two ex-choir boys. "Hope you didn't get to close to mine."

"Why, think he'd share?"

"Would yours?"

The women laughed, sharing a sweet moment of kinship bonded by the ridiculously handsome blonde (or blondish) templars they both loved.

**

"They're laughing about us you know." Alistair whispered to the Commander.

"How do you know?"

"You don't hear that self-satisfied cackling of women up to no good?"

Cullen looked at the Warden, wide eyed, afraid almost.

Alistair clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll learn."

Chapter End Notes

OT4?!

Worry not, the Wardens and the Champion will return. Not soon, but they will.
The Whore of Skyhold

Chapter Notes

Somebody take these babies away from me and make them happy because I can't won't.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her name changed, depending upon to whom you spoke. To most she was remembered as the Whore of Skyhold, others though remembered her as the Herald of Andraste.

Still to others, she was simply Evelyn-- yet those who called her thus were becoming an endangered species on the knife edge of extinction.

The Red Lion burst through the doors of Skyhold's main hall, the last refuge of abominations, apostates, rebels, and her. Cullen forgave her long ago for what she did, denying him the solace of the blue song. Had she not, he would have never come to know the strength and truth of the red. If blue lyrium were a song, the red lyrium was a symphony, a heavenly host of voices lifted in adulation that moved his soul to tears every time he consumed a sip.

Her inner circle surrounded her, shielding her to the last with their bodies.

Sera and Blackwall fell first.

Seeker Cassandra and the apostate soon after.

The Spymaster died well, screaming the Chant of Light as Samson tore through her like tissue paper. Cullen gripped her hand and finished the verse as she succumbed, wishing her well on her journey.

He didn't hate any of them, only pitied that such good soldiers had been so deceived.

The Red Lion told his soldiers, save Samson, to wait for him outside, that their power should be sufficient to bring the last dredges of the Inquisition to heel.

Vivienne's spells bounced harmlessly from his red armor and he swallowed her magic with a dark laugh, amused by the shock of the Enchantress's broken hubris. He took no joy in slicing her from neck to hip.

"You hurt her! You hurt her! I will help!" He killed Cole with little regret; abominations like him were not to be suffered in the Elder One’s new world. The dwarf died after, thick hands reaching for the dead child with the pale hair turned pink with blood.

The Iron Bull fell soundlessly on Samson's sword, the huge qunari landing in a lake of his own blood with a soft thud. The Tevinter screamed for him, standing over his lover using his staff to beat back the Knight-Captain when his magic failed him.

Dorian died with a high sharp shout, falling into the Iron Bull's chest and coming to rest as though sleeping. Green mist swirled and Dorian rose again, exhausting the last of his very soul to defend his sister and his lover. But he fell again, sparing one mournful glance to his Sorora before
disappearing into wisps of smoke swallowed by Cullen’s Silence.

The Iron Bull, using the last of his coherency threaded his hands through his lover's hair and died with a contented sigh leaving only her left.

Samson knew better than to lay a finger on her, that the pleasure of taking her head would be reserved for the Knight-Commander alone. He sheathed his sword and stepped back quietly, eager to see the end of the war unfold in front of him.

Cullen also stood silently, Vivienne's blood still dripping from his blade to the floor. He let her stand there in the ruin of corpses that had once been her family, he let her remain for a moment to absorb the carnage she wrought when she refused to submit to a will and power that far outstripped her own.

And yet, Cullen knew in his crystalline heart that he loved her. He never stopped. He forgave her foolishness, her pride, even her cruelty. Seeing her again like this, resplendent in her blood soaked armor, he found her beautiful.

He always found her beautiful.

"Samson," Cullen barked, and his lieutenant understood, leaving them alone in the grand hall of what would be the Master's new seat. He would rule them from the throne of the Golden City but here upon this rock, He would build his earthly church.

Once Samson had gone, Cullen stepped closer, arms open wide with soft smile on his cracked red face.

Her tears mixed with the grime and blood on her skin, her hair a wild mane about her dark and lovely face.

Utterly. Beautiful.

She snapped her bow over her knee, the green rune fizzing and dying with its magic released. Her last arrow, fletched ever in red, she also snapped in half.

He heard the soft tinkling sound of coins, and looked to find his gift cast at his feet.

"Come here, my love." He directed, ignoring her tantrum, and she obeyed, closing her eyes, shutting out the stench of blood trying to imagine that this encounter was anything but what it was.

She embraced him tenderly before she let her weight sink into him, her body given over to wretched sobs and gasps.

"I know, my love. I know. I'm sorry. But we all knew this was the only way any of this would end." He stroked her head sweetly, inhaling the scent of her blood flavored with underlying notes of orange, spice, and flower.

He rocked her against his chest, content to hold her like this until her crying subsided.

"I love you, damn you," she whispered. "I never stopped."

"I know." He responded, hand tenderly tracing the scars on her left cheek.

His sword slid through her belly with ease and she made almost no sound save a startled little gasp of pain. He pulled it from her quickly to spare her any extra agony. She fell backward in his grasp,
and he crushed her to him, kissing her face, her eyes, cheeks and lips.

"I had to, I'm sorry. I had to. You failed. I had to."

She died in the light of his red gold eyes and was strangely content.

They called her the Whore of Skyhold, but Cullen only ever called her Evelyn.

Now the last one who ever would.

**

The nightmare released her gently into the waking world, the pieces of it fading the longer she remained awake until it left nothing but a deep sense of sickening dread that made unbidden tears fall from the corners of her eyes.

Gasping, Evelyn remembered she was in her quarters at Skyhold with Cullen. The space next to her lay empty, worried she might have woken him, she searched in the darkness to find him splashing water onto his face.

"Did I wake you? Are you alright?" she asked, hoping her terror hadn't robbed him of what little sleep she knew he could get at night.

"I'm fine love," Cullen lied breathing deeply to quell a racing heart. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just too fucking hot is all, present company included." Cullen chuckled as he settled back into the bed and pulled her tightly to him, willfully ignoring her previous complaints about the heat.

The lingering feeling of dread robbed him of sleep, though what specific form his nightmares had taken he could no longer remember.

The dream forgotten upon waking.

Evelyn fared no better, but swallowed her nausea and summoned a playful face for her Commander.

*He is watching.*

She kissed him deeply, chasing the anxiety from their bones.

He kissed her back, rocking against her with a sudden need.

**

The old man with the bloody bundle shuffled through Skyhold like a walking corpse. He didn't heed the shouts from the guards and the soldiers and actually pushed passed Cassandra knocking her to the ground when she tried to stop him. It took Cole standing by his side with a hand on his shoulder and tears in his wide, expressive eyes to stop the Commander from sending a cadre of soldiers after him to stop him with swords instead of words.

“Where is the Inquisitor?” The old man with the bloody bundle asked.

Evelyn actually smiled when she saw the man, remembering him from her journeys. “Elder Habib. What brings you to Skyhold?”
It was raining when they met months ago, too muddy for their mounts to continue on. They were somewhere in Southern Orlais, somewhere far from cities, far from attention, far from wealth or importance as well. The Inquisition had long since declared those lands under her protection, having been abandoned by Celene as worthless in her battle with Gaspard. The villagers welcomed the Inquisition forces, they brought the tiny village much needed wealth and distraction. It was a tired, dirty, out of the way little hovel and they needed to rest there until the storm passed.

Elder Habib and his wife Fatima ran the inn where they stayed. They would take no coin from her or her party citing her presence was payment enough. But yet they did not worship her, nor speak to her with worshipful words. They called her Lady Trevelyan and they did not ask her about the war but about the harvest.

Dorian and Vivienne fought each other to entertain their little boy with their magic tricks (Vivienne won), little Abdul shrieking with delight at the swish and sway of Vivienne’s conjured magical swords. Iron Bull flirted with the lady of the house, completely enamored with the spicy stew she made for them that reminded him of home.

Evelyn felt fingers in her hair and readied herself to give a sharp lesson in personal space when she saw a little girl with fat cheeks petting her vines with starry-eyed wonder. “Your hair is so pretty.”

They left the next day to the waving shouts of the villagers all wishing her well upon her journey. Her visit the one spot of brightness in both her life and theirs.

Elder Habib held no brightness in his eyes now as he fell to his knees, bowing his forehead to her feet.

“My Lady Inquisitor. I have come to beg your favor.”

Evelyn stiffened and stood straighter, slipping on yet again the heavy mantle of her title. “Name it.” She said stonily.

The Elder man, wrinkles set deep in his face like the sandstone caverns cut from a river’s knife, opened his bloody bundle revealing a little girl with sunken cheeks and eyes that contained neither stars nor wonder. “Justice.”

**

When Bull heard of the village’s massacre, he personally led his Chargers to find the culprits. He proved that even a former Ben-Hassrath in a strange land was still a formidable force, and he found the bastards. A gang of petty thieves looking for a quick and easy payday. They slaughtered the village because it was easy, because it was fun. Cullen was actually surprised the mercenary group brought any of them, much less all of them, back alive.

All seven of them knelt before her.

Evelyn sat upon her throne of judgement looking ready to either throw up or burst into flames. Cullen stood with the rest in the Grand Hall.

Watching her.

Waiting for her judgement.

The Hall remained silent, Josephine tried to pronounce their crimes but Evelyn cut her off with a
cruel wave of her hand. The Inquisitor wore her crown that day. The only time she has ever ever worn it. The silver rays of the Watchful Eye poked up from her forehead like spikes on which to plant heads.

She walked up and down the line of kneeling men and women, glaring at them, cursing their crimes one by one out loud for the whole of the keep to hear. She described in perfect detail the wounds on the women and the children relayed to her from Habib’s rage filled sobs. Six of them were reduced to sobs themselves and three threw themselves at her feet for mercy as she stomped by.

She lifted one, a stocky dwarf, up by his collar with both hands, her rage giving her the strength to pull him into the air, his feet kicking uselessly.

“Beg louder for my mercy. Cry and weep, tear your clothes and your hair. BEG! Like you made the mothers and the fathers of that village beg!”

No one begged loud or hard enough to her satisfaction.

**

The three leaders were beheaded by her own hand. Cullen stood by as her ceremonial sword (the only time she’s ever used it) sliced through tender neck, shocked mute by the ease with which her strike fell home. He’d never seen her wield a sword before, she had never executed anyone before, yet she carried out her judgement with an ease that made him nauseous.

The dwarf, the grand orchestrator of the theft and massacre, cursed and spat at her as he laid his head on the block. He called her the Whore of Skyhold and prayed to the Maker to put an end to her blasphemy.

Cullen saw her smile a bit when her blade severed neck from head.

No, this was not his B.

She threatened the mage of the group with Tranquility and it scared her so badly she immolated herself.

The other three she locked in her dungeons and sent them out the next day to dig proper graves for their victims.

Elder Habib had not thanked her and offered neither his approval nor his scorn. He disappeared after her rendered judgement. None found him until hours later, in a secluded corner of the gardens, a smile on his face, his wife’s headscarf in his hands, and poison on his lips.

Solas was not pleased with how she handled things, something about too much blood being spilled as it was. And her treatment of the mage only rankled him further.

At least he had the balls to express an opinion one way or another. The rest of her companions remained silent or offered some prevaricating response like ‘it’s your show’ or ‘I’d never presume to second guess your decisions.’

**

“Why are you here?” She asked coldly as Cullen mounted the steps to her quarters that night.

“Come see the Whore of Skyhold?”
“To check in on you.” He answered simply, wincing at her casual use of the epithet.

Her wounds were still obvious and she had not yet recovered from Adamant’s horrors. Her eyes sunk into her skull and her cheeks hollowed with poor nutrition.

“You are unwell.”

She laughed darkly. “Understatement of the age, Cullen.”

“Let me help.”

“Stop trying to help me, I do not need it. I’m fine.”

The way she fought, with the way she led, Cullen always forgot she was only a nobleman’s daughter. That was obvious now in the concealed shake in her hands. But Cullen knew a thing or two about hiding tremors, her tight fist did not fool him. He had seen war, what happened to that village looked and felt like war.

Kirkwall looked like that, so did Kinloch. Actually, he mused darkly, if that was the worst either had offered he’d probably be a little less broken than he was now.

But she was not used to this. She was not immune to the damage war caused, not only in the body and the mind but in the soul. As she gulped down a glass of wine, face buried in reports, he could hear her soul break apart with every ragged breath.

And there was not a thing he could do.

He promised to be her sword, her shield, but no shield he carried could protect her from this blow.

“You were never meant for war my lady.”

“Oh good, throw in the ‘my lady’ bit, rub it in that I’m some sheltered bitch playing at soldiers and spies.”

“Evelyn! Stop!”

He glared at her, fire in his eyes turning his gold molten.

“I killed three people today. Executed them. How did that make you feel?”

“You did what you had to do.” Were it his judgement…he was glad it wasn’t his judgement.

“That’s not what I asked you!” She shouted.

“I was…” He considered lying but remember Ser Alistair’s words. “It shocked me. I’ve never seen you like this. Why?”

“Because those were good people who didn’t deserve that. Because I failed those good people. That land had been under my protection for months. It should have never. Happened.”

“That’s not your fault.”

Evelyn’s wine glass swallowed up her dry laugh. “You think Elder Habib cared about that or not? His daughter is dead, his village and his people were slaughtered. He relied on me for protection. I failed that simple task. So I repaid blood with blood.”
“My love,” he hoped to soften her, hoped to bring back the warmth of her he remembered. “This isn't you. That was never how you worked Evelyn. You were a better Inquisitor than that.”

“Were?” She looked at him, pain flashing in her dark eyes ringed from lack of restful sleep.

“Are, you are a better Inquisitor than that. You have to be.”

He was ashamed of her, she realized. Sickness washed over her, clenching up her stomach and bowels. Unbeknownst to the Commander, that was her second bottle of wine of the day, she needed to vomit but couldn’t do it in front of him.

She couldn’t shame herself further.

“Goodnight Commander.” She dismissed him coldly.

Cullen didn’t fight her, understanding she needed her space.

He left her, sighing brokenly, missing the sound of her retching.

**

She was never a better Inquisitor after that. Dutifully, she attended her war council meetings offering suggestions, issuing commands, heeding her advisers and planning for the continued war against Corypheus and his allies. Everyone from the Undercroft to the Rookery had what they needed and knew to approach the Inquisitor if they had any concerns.

But cracks began to show in the facade of her strength, broken pieces of her chipping away like crumbling masonry. They spent less and less time alone together, choosing instead to sleep in separate quarters. At first, he thought her growing distance arose from the weight of her workload. The war's end yawned before them, a gaping sucking pit drawing them inexorably forward.

Strategy meetings, placating the nobles who funded them by attending pointless time consuming salons, closing the rifts scattered to the very edges of Thedas as they appeared, negotiating finances, taking beating after beating from Venatori and Red Templars, it was enough to overwhelm anyone. During the times she was present at Skyhold, she ended her days far too exhausted to spare him a second or even a third glance, which was just as well, his headaches and nightmares had been increasing of late, leaving him sullen and moody and certainly in no condition to provide that kind of attention.

Or, maybe...as he was beginning to think...it was her absence that left him in such a state. Now instead of sparing him that second or third glance, she spared him no glances at all.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” He smiled to cover up his concern, but his eyes were too beautiful and too damned expressive to hide the hurt within them.

“Of course I’m not,” she rapped his arm lightly. “As if I’d want to avoid you.” He felt the lie in her kiss, cold and tasteless, like something given to a meddlesome relative and not a lover.

“I just have so many reports to go over from our expedition to the Emprise du Lion. We’ve taken out Suledin Keep and the Sarhnia mines. The red Templars are on their last legs. I’m gonna be up late, and you need your rest. You’ve not been yourself lately.”

That much, at least, was true. The lyrium burned within him like a fatal fever, he kept the symptoms hidden mostly, but of course her eyes could always catch him.
“I could say the same for you, my love. Are you alright?”

Evelyn’s face darkened. “I’m really tired of everyone asking if I’m okay.” She snapped.

“You hate having to lie to them when you say you are.”

“It’s not a lie. I am okay.”

“Is that why you pace the keep at night until you pass out in a dark corner?”

“I’m going to kill that scout, I made him swear not to tell.”

“Evelyn.”

“Cullen.”

“Please don’t fight me like this Evelyn, you haven’t been right since Adamant or the executions.”

“I imagine no one would be right after that. Have you talked to Solas? Cole? Blackwall? They all went through the same things as I, yet you only seemed to be concerned with me. Not very Commander like of you.”

“You’re the only one walking around like a corpse. I haven’t seen you smile in a month, you haven’t laughed in two!”

“Maybe you’ve stopped being funny.”

“Evelyn!” Pain flashed in his head, cracking like a broken glass. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grunting but her eyes missed nothing.

“I’m sorry, Cullen, I didn’t mean that.” The hand on his face imparted no warmth, a tender gesture yes, but formless, emotionless.

“Please don’t run from me. I want to help you.”

She raised her voice several pitches, anger suddenly snatching her up and carrying her away.

“Help me!” She laughed darkly, not the kind of laugh Cullen was after. “Can you take this fucking thing off my hand? Can you end the war? Can you beat Corypheus? No? Then you can’t help me. I’ll keep my promises. I’ll keep all of you alive, I’ll keep this Inquisition going, I’ll beat Corypheus. I’m the only one who can. And fuck if I’m not so tired of all of it.”

She snapped at him, tongue clicking on the final consonant of her tirade reminiscent of a mabari snapping its jaws shut. Anger flash fired in his gut, boiling over his control, a neglected pot of water over a roaring fire.

“You think you’re the only one in pain here? I haven’t had a full night's sleep in months! My soldiers are fighting darkspawn in the Western Approach and we are running low on food and supplies to keep them alive! Peasants flood Skyhold because war has burned their crops and villages. Our resources are stretched to the limit! Yet you walk around here like a martyr, silent in your suffering, eyes blind to everything else because your pain supersedes all!”

The lion roared, yet the huntress remained unbowed.

“Who have I ignored Commander!” she bit out his title like a swear. Cullen didn't flinch, instead he drew himself up higher defiant against her anger. “We march on Dumat within the month, as I
recall that was at your request! But, since I have been inattentive, perhaps you can chase after Samson yourself. You have my leave Commander, in your state, could you even handle it, or would he elude you again? Maybe when I catch him, he'll prove to be the better templar? Maker knows he's committed at least.”

The rage boiled just under the surface of his flesh, and a flush crept up his neck streaking across his face like war paint.

How dare she? After everything he's suffered, how dare she throw his weakness in his face? His mouth opened and shut like a beached fish gasping for breath, his pallid skin was streaked with red. Pressure built in his temples shooting down the back of his neck and curling around his eyes and bridge of his nose. Cullen was livid.

“No,” she answered snidely, satisfied with his silence. “I didn't think so.” The Inquisitor pushed past the Commander only to have his arm shoot out and grip her by her forearm, his hands vice like on her body.

“Let me go!”

"No. We aren't done yet! You can’t just say that to me and walk away!"

On reflex, a fist curled in a punch aimed for his face, but he put lie to her assessment of weakness and with lightning quick reflexes his other hand caught her fist easily in the palm of his hand with a loud smack.

She felt like a mage within his grasp, utterly powerless and fragile, if he but twisted just a little bit he could break every bone in her wrist. His lyrium empty blood moaned over and over again that it would be nothing, show her with action rather than words just how much he could handle.

Maker's breath, he wanted to.

Her temper had always been short. Made shorter now by long nights and short sleeps plagued by never ending nightmares. The anchor was a chronic pain again, it’s throbbing pulse a reminder of her mortality, and of the title she bore but had no right to.

But they watched. Scrutinizing, scoffing, sympathetic too. It was too much, far too much. And her only port in the storm now glared down at her like she was nothing, like she was filth.

She heard the whispers again. But instead of inciting sadness, it ignited rage. She would destroy him.

They held there for the barest of seconds, struggling against one another before they flew apart as if their touches were suddenly repulsive like oil and water.

She fled his office with no further words, and he had none for her retreating back. The door swung shut behind her with a final booming thud.

Chapter End Notes

**Being Inquisitor is hard y'all.**
Equivalent exchange. She brought the Warden and Hawke out of the Fade, so something else has got to give.
What happens next hmm? Share your thoughts here or with me on tumblr at mirabai0821.tumblr.com
Reasons

Chapter Notes

If you aint hurtin'
I ain't workin'
Excuse the lame titling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He spent yet another night in restless nightmarish sleep when he heard the thud of boots against the flagstones and screaming.

Someone was screaming.

Evelyn was screaming.

Panic seized him along with a wave of nausea, as he twisted himself out of his sheets to reach for his sword. Once on his feet, he doubled over, body clenching with a painful spasm that knocked the wind out of him.

"Assassin! In the Inquisitor's quarters! An assassin!" his soldiers shouted below.

Holy Maker no.

Evelyn was in danger, possibly dying, and he couldn't get himself out of bed. By the time he made it up the stairs to her chamber, he found her alive, Dorian crouched over her offering her a glass of wine.

"It was just a nightmare Commander," Solas explained to the late arrival.

"She is unharmed?" He pressed.

The apostate sighed. "Unharmed in no place we can see at least."

She mechanically took the offered glass of wine and swallowed it with two gulps, a drop of the deep red liquid escaping the corner of her mouth to trickle down her throat. With a barely human expression she pushed the empty glass back to Dorian, imploring him for another which he dutifully offered.

"Best way to combat nightmares, Sorora, drink until you're too drunk to be afraid of them." He swallowed his own glass, a gesture of goodwill so she didn't have to drink alone. "If you like, I can stay the night with you." The mage offered.

"N..no. I'm fine. I'll be fine now. I'm sorry to have woken you. Thank you all for coming, but please..."

Solas nodded and departed quickly while Dorian squeezed her shoulder, yawned and left for his shared quarters with the Iron Bull. The soldiers filed out one by one while Cullen stayed in the back of the room, silent and seemingly unobserved, she hadn't even asked for him.
Evelyn rose from her bed to the side table and poured yet another glass of wine, ignoring Cullen as the man gripped the pommel of his sword anxiously. This was the first time in a fortnight they'd been alone in the days since they almost came to blows.

"Evelyn, is there..."

"Get out," she hissed into her glass, now her fourth.

He remained rooted in place, his gaze fixated on her as she abandoned the glass and swallowed the rest of the wine straight from the bottle before throwing it to the floor where it didn't even have the decency to shatter. The Inquisitor snorted falling back onto her bed before burying her face in her hands.

"My lady..." she heard him call, and it sounded just like the Cullen of her nightmares as he clawed her apart. Or the Cullen that shook his head at her, disappointed in her many failures.

"Get out!" she shrieked again, voice wet with a sob.

"I'm not leaving until you talk to me." He mumbled trying to sound like a Commander of something.

She turned to him, chest heaving before flying onto wine shaken feet. She stormed down upon him to possibly chase him away but Cullen remained firm in purpose. He wouldn't leave.

So she left him.

She grabbed her jacket, boots, and coat and flew down the stairs into the main hall and out into the cool night air, Jackson whining as she kicked him into a gallop and out of the gates.

**

In the weeks leading up to Dumat, she was a ghost, present during daylight hours but gone from the keep at night. The whole of Skyhold, her home for the last two years now was so poisoned she couldn't even sleep there anymore.

And he, Cullen reasoned, was the impetus for her flight.

The Commander moaned, rolling to the side in his bed fighting the urge to retch the scant dinner he ate. Sweat beaded across his back and forehead, his heart pounded painfully in his chest, thumping hard against his ribs. His headache rolled and churned like the breach had been reformed just behind his eyes.

One swallow would cure this, one drop of blue. It couldn't hurt him, no worse than what he already suffered. Who would know? He still had his kit, it would be nothing.

Simple.

Easy.

It would be nothing.

And maybe, just fucking maybe, he could get some sleep and forget, for a time, the disaster of his life.

She was too good to be true and she always was. He understood that now. The Maker decided he hadn't earned his forgiveness yet and it was time to remind the sinner of his transgressions.
They howled at him, the hissing voices, somehow strangely beautiful and haunting in his head. They reminded him over and over again that she was never real. Her love was a dream he was finally waking up from. How else could he explain her absence, the sudden cold void where there had once been endless, easy warmth?

But the blue could make him forget, obliterate the memory of her smile. Or, if not that, make him forget why he cared at all about it.

One drop.

And he could be whole again.

The man rose from his bed, hands trembling and shaking, vision swimming and bleeding at the edges. He stepped towards the ladder, heeding the calling coming from the locked box in his desk. But as he stepped toward oblivion, Cullen heard the light sound of tinkling, clacking, and looked down in the darkness to see six yellow fangs hanging from his neck.

*I like my lions with teeth.*

He is her lion.

He must be, he *has* to be.

Ignoring the painful desperate urge, Cullen returned to his bed, twisting up in his sweat soured sheets. He let himself weep, given over wholly to the pain and the loneliness.

"Please come back." He cried to no one, so shamed he smothered his mouth with a pillow.

"Please."

"Please."

"Please."

He whispered until his jaw hurt, until the sun rose, until sleep finally settled on him like death.

**

She hated being cold so she punished herself in the cold. She spent her nights in the trees, sleeping fitfully tucked between two branches and always freezing. Evelyn wasn’t daft enough to venture too far from Skyhold but she was still crafty in her weakness, always avoiding the scouts Cassandra and Leliana dispatched after her to track her nocturnal escapes.

She couldn’t stand to be in Skyhold for longer than was required. And it was unbearable at night, unbearable to sleep alone in sheets they once shared. Unbearable to see the darkness in his eyes when they retired to separate quarters. Unbearable to suffer the gazes of concerned friends asking without asking if everything’s okay or in Sera’s case offering to have Cullen ‘poked with so many arrows the feathers could make him fly’.

He didn’t deserve their ire. She did. The Whore of Skyhold.

The whispers followed her as she walked the keep in the daylight, soldiers and civilians stealing glances and gossip at the broken Herald.

“...execution...”
“tyrant…”

“That poor Commander…”

“…whore…”

“You should at least talk to him.” Dorian said, trying to pull from her the third glass of wine that hour.

She snatched it from him and gorged it down, too drunk to give a fuck about the half-concerned, half-ashamed stare (it was honestly all concern but her mind wasn’t quite able to tell the difference anymore).

The nightmares wore his face, spoke with his voice, ripped her apart with his hands or sometimes she did the ripping…or more pointedly, the shooting. How could she just talk to him when his mere presence reminded her of all the horrors of the Fade? Dorian couldn’t understand, he wasn’t in there with her. How would he feel if he was assaulted hourly with visions of him ripping Iron Bull to pieces, or suffering under his baleful gaze as his amatus shook his head in disgust at him?

Evelyn scoffed, ignoring him, and headed for the stables.

Yet.

No matter the hurt, no matter the nightmares, in her self-imposed nightly exile from Skyhold, she always slept facing his tower. Easing down into uneasy sleep whenever she saw the candlelight snuff out.

“I will see you again,” she whispered, holding tightly to her luck, hoping and praying she could be lucky again.

**

Despite the utter disaster of their personal lives, and Dorian knew without a doubt the Commander's and Evelyn's personal lives qualified as nothing less than an utter shipwreck of a disaster, the mage was grateful they could at least keep their professional relationship free of that baggage.

"To your left Commander!" Evelyn shouted, her arrow's deadly whistle sounding just a little too close to Cullen's head for comfort. It struck the Red Templar guard in the chest, staggering it, giving the Commander the needed seconds to run the creature through.

It would take two weeks of travel to cover the distance between Skyhold and the Shrine of Dumat. After nearly two months of avoiding or possibly actively hating each other, the Commander and the Inquisitor would be forced into close quarters as they worked together to bring the last of the red templars to heel. They fought together well, they always had. Her arrows always caught what he couldn't, and his shield bore the blows she could never endure. They even chatted amicably in the daylight hours discussing the plan for a siege against the shrine should Samson prove difficult. She deferred to him and his military expertise but he was never above considering her suggestions.

Only at night, with no work to distract them, did things get awkward.

They set up camp far from the road in the cradle of a crumbling ruined courtyard, the stone skeletons of a forgotten temple or perhaps palace, ringing them in a semi-circle that opened west.

Four people, two tents.
Vivienne travelled ahead of them to Val Royeaux and would link up with the party when they passed through the capital city, the last stop before the Shrine. That left Dorian, Iron Bull, Cullen and her to come up with sleeping arrangements that, three months ago would have been simple to figure out.

The qunari and the mage exchanged conspiratorial glances at each other before making a huge and undeniably fake show of being tired and heading to bed, leaving the poor Inquisitor and her poor Commander

("Are they even still...?"

"Look, kadan, I don't know. All I know is if they don't fix whatever they got broke I'ma lock them in a tent until they fuck each other senseless or kill each other."

"Yes, quite, but amatus, how do you lock someone in a tent?")

Sitting opposite a dying campfire in dying sunlight.

He was striking in the sunset, sitting with his back to the sun, it ringed him in orange light that made him glow with a heavenly aura. Cullen was made of gold, so handsome and lovely it hurt to look at him knowing that whatever they had before had now rotted and festered into something unrecognizable and maybe even unsalvageable.

She had to get away from him.

Without thinking, the Inquisitor rose to her feet, and began to run her hands along the stone wall that surrounded them. Her fingers found divots and cracks in the mortar looking for pits big enough to support her feet and hands. She intended to climb to the second floor of the destroyed structure where a balcony lay opened and empty, where she could sleep in solitude away from his devastating eyes.

She found suitable purchase in the wall and began to climb.

"What are you doing?" The Commander asked.

"You can have the tent."

"You didn't answer my question."

Pausing in the middle of her climb, the Inquisitor tilted her head back to face the Commander, her vines dangling and swaying.

"I'm looking for a decent place to sleep."

That came out woefully wrong and she regretted her poor word choice when she saw his face flash in pain.

"No... that's not what I..."

"Your meaning was clear, Inquisitor." The wound, intentional or not, staggered him. Cullen rose to his feet and disappeared into the empty tent.

She deserved the stiff back and frozen limbs she earned during her night's sleep.

**
The power of the anchor surged through her and she felt like she was free-falling from a mountain top, her stomach in her throat. Sealing rifts never got easier as time passed. Even with her newfound power over the anchor, it still hurt and she still closed her eyes and grit her teeth every time thinking this rift will be the one to finally explode her into nothing or stop her heart cold. It pulled on her, like it was pulling her fucking soul out of her body, she learned to stop screaming but the pain and the fear never went away.

This happened every time.

The rift closed with a thunderous boom popping her eardrums like it always did. It always drained her too, leaving her feeling like she had just run miles and miles without stopping, unable to bear the weight of her own body. Her companions knew the routine and understood she needed a few moments of rest before they resumed the day.

Cullen however, had never seen her close a rift except at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. He was totally unprepared for when she sank to her knees, her chin in her chest, sagging as though the very life had been sucked out of her.

Neither Dorian nor Iron Bull opened their mouths to explain that either.

"Evelyn!" There was no helping it, he moved on reaction rather than thought, driven by emotion powered by fear. He had her in his arms cradled like precious, beloved thing and she was too exhausted to tell him his concern wasn't really necessary.

"Cullen," she whispered. "What are you...?"

"Maker's breath, are you alright? I thought you had..."

He checked her for injuries, threading his fingers through her hair searching for gashes in the scalp. He reached to the back of her neck, sliding his hands down the side of her abdomen and hips all while he kept her close to his chest; his gold eyes piercing her darker, amber ones looking for the signs of a concussion (but finding her gaze, finally not directed at him in hate, to be an added bonus).

She couldn't blush but...

"I'm fine, this happens every time." She tried to push him away, but he caught her hand in a tableau reminiscent of their earlier fight. In fact, this was the first time they'd touched since they almost tore each other to pieces. The gesture was not lost on either of them, but it was decidedly far more tender than the last.

"Every time?" He asked horrified.

Evelyn nodded feebly. "I just need a moment."

She wore armor made of leather and reinforced in places with steel plating. A dagger pressed into his hip as he held her, and her metal gorget clanked against his breastplate. But she felt soft in his arms, fragile even, though he knew beyond all doubt she was anything but.

He was loath to let her go.

"You can let me go now." Evelyn spoke, her voice a reluctant sounding whisper.

"Oh. Right. Sorry." He released her and the archer rose to her feet, patting herself free of dust and dirt, retreating unusually quickly to where they'd hitched the mounts without so much as a
moment's glance back.

Cullen remained on his knees briefly contemplating the cool emptiness of his arms where there had once been her beautiful, heavy warmth before looking up to see Iron Bull and Dorian looming above him.

Grinning.

Maniacally.

**

That night, the warrior and the mage were determined to cause as much mischief as otherworldly possible, prancing about the camp calling each other by the most ridiculous pet names and assaulting the stricken love birds with outrageous acts of affection.

Why?

Reasons.

"Would you like another bite of stew, my grey skinned lover?" Dorian cooed, even his impossibly curled moustache seemed to be twisted in a grin. He offered the heaping spoonful to the Iron Bull who opened his mouth wide and accepted the gift, curling his tongue lasciviously around the spoon.

He hummed his approval. "You try some of this Other Boss? It's damned tasty. So good, whoever made this I’d lock down immediately so they’d only ever make it for me."

Cullen reddened, his own spoon poised halfway between bowl and open mouth.

Evelyn made the stew.

And was now trying to drown herself in her bowl.

With no ruined balconies or trees to sleep in, Evelyn opted to curl up next to the fire. Orlais was hot, agreeably hot for her, but the night brought with it cool temperatures that nearly always had her shivering. She pulled her cloak and blanket up to her neck to prevent waking up frozen when a red surcoat magically added itself to her coverings.

Its owner had disappeared inside the tent before she could react.

**

The journey across the sea would take two days and Evelyn noticed that the Commander never once ventured below decks. He chose instead to eat the trail rations they brought along with them rather than descend the stairs into the galley to eat a proper meal or sleep.

She approached him now, cautiously, a bowl of stew in her hands and a pillow tucked under her arms. She remembered from their conversations long ago that he favored the open air. Kinloch and the Gallows had been prisons of stony, low ceilings that made him feel like he was trapped and choking. He kept the hole in his roof for precisely this reason, and preferred, when he slept in her quarters, to keep her balcony doors wide open no matter the season. When she protested against the cold in the winter months, he never failed to keep her warm himself.

The memory made her lips crack and twitch in a smile, exercising facial muscles that had gone
unused in weeks. Evelyn cleared her throat to announce her presence and when Cullen turned around she offered him another thin but earnest smile pushing towards him the food and pillow.

“I know you don’t like closed spaces, so I’ll bring you more in the morning.” Her gaze remained on the wooden slats of the deck, too shy, too timid, too afraid to meet his gaze lest she find it blank of any emotion or worse yet, find within it distaste.

Cullen accepted the gifts, fingertips brushing against her just barely as they changed hands. A delicious smell wafted from the bowl. Cullen inhaled, recognizing the scent.

She brought him Ferelden goulash.

His favorite.

But before he could offer his gratitude, she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Have faith that I adore my bruised up babies as much as you all do and won't make them hurt for too long. Its honestly humbling that you guys like my characters and what I've done with them. I didn't think anyone would care about B or Masan. Glad you do.

All my love,
Me
Moments of Glass

Chapter Notes

You are all amazing, beautiful people. The love for this has been overwhelming and humbling and awesome. Thanks for coming with me on this trip.

We ain't done yet, still a ways to go. But journey's end is in sight.

And how do you think the journey should end?

Vivienne was there to greet them at the docks looking curiously tired, as though she'd spent this last week without them up late every night.

“Inquisitor, Evelyn.” Even the woman's voice sounded worn, broken down into only something barely resembling the Grand Enchanter. “Will you come with me please?”

Dorian opened his mouth to crack a joke at the Enchantress’s less than perfected appearance but both Iron Bull and Cullen gripped his shoulders knowing if he did there would be blood in the streets, extracted from him by Evelyn's own hand.

You don’t get to talk shit about Madame de Fer in her hearing.

“Of course Vivienne, lead the way.”

The three men watched as the two women climbed into a gilded carriage and sped off, left to Val Royeaux and their own devices.

“So, what shall us three red blood virile men get ourselves up to with a full evening ahead of us and no hens to peck us to death? Drinking, carousing, whore-mongering perhaps?”

Both Cullen and Iron Bull rolled their eyes.

**

Only the Winter Palace could compare to the lavish appointments of the estate Vivienne had led her to. Yet the mage walked through the gilded halls and sumptuous furnishings without offering a moment's pause to explain the rich origin of that chaise or how many sovereigns that tapestry cost. She led her to a master suite that dwarfed Trevelyan manor's entire grand hall which contained a bed that shamed most boats.

Within the enchanted cool sheets rested a man whose every breath groaned and rattled in his chest. A pale man on death's door, sweating and swearing with each passing moment.

“Vivienne!” he moaned. “Where have you gone?”

The old wrinkled thing thrashed about, shoosing away the elvenyu servants who tried to ply him into rest with glasses of wine and cool compresses.
“No! Void take you! Where is my Vivienne?!”

“I'm here Bastien,” Vivienne called, shocking the servants into flight and Evelyn into silence. Viv always plated her voice in iron, never silk, and here her voice was the softest she'd ever heard it. The most tender.

The weakest.

The man, Bastien, seemed to ease at this, sinking down into the pillows and comforters and blankets until they swallowed him up.

Vivienne sat halfway on the bed and placed a magically cool hand onto Bastien's forehead making the scowl the old man wore fade away into sweet contentment.

Vivienne beckoned Evelyn closer. “Don't worry my dear, he doesn't see much these days and he hears only when he wants to. He does not know you're here.”

“Why am I here?” Evelyn asked.

The Enchantress drew into herself a deep shuddering breath and met the younger woman's questioning eye. “Because I need you to be.”

“Vivienne.” Bastien moaned.

“Yes love, what is it?”

“Where had you gone? You promised not to leave.”

“And I won't my darling. Not ever.”

The wrinkled face pulled into a wan smile and he leaned into his mistress's touch. “I had such a lovely dream.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“Remember when we went riding with the Empress at Halamshiral?”

“Oh Bastien, how could I forget?”

“You were splendid that day. You were so nervous meeting the Empress but you were so wonderful. No one could keep their eyes off you. Or maybe that was only me.”

Vivienne laughed a light chiming noise like crystal baubles tinkling in a breeze.

“You were beautiful. You always rode so beautifully, did I ever tell you that?”

“Yes my love, you have.” Evelyn felt heat and guilt flush her face. She always teased Vivienne about her riding style, now she’d never do it again.

“Vivienne, I must tell you something.”

“Anything, darling.”

“I love my wife, I love my children.”

“Of course you do.”
“But I am afraid, that when I finally leave this place, the Maker will not accept me at His side.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because, I love you most of all.”

Madame de Fer transformed into Madame de Verre; iron turned to glass. Glass that cracked and shattered under the weight of a profound grief, the pieces of her scattering on the ground. Her lips moved, and Vivienne said something Evelyn could not hear and did not wish to hear.

He coughed, wracking his entire body. The mage woman produced a familiar looking vial from her pack containing a thick red liquid. She offered it to him encouraged him to drink deeply.

“Vivienne?”

“Yes darling?”

“It's going to be alright my love.”

He offered her a smile, one she returned that made her dark eyes and dark face sparkle with a light that Evelyn had never seen before. Vivienne kept her expressions and emotions guarded. Her smiles were wry, calculating, cold sometimes-- her laughs much the same. This was so different as to be heartbreaking. The only emotion she'd ever seen in her friend had to be wrenched out at the death of the only person Evelyn guessed that the older woman had ever truly loved.

The man's hand slipped from Vivienne's grasp and he gave a deep sigh with none to follow after.

After a moment of heart rending silence, Evelyn spoke. “Vivienne, I am so sorry.”

Vivienne ignored her, placing her lover's hands across his chest and kissing his quickly cooling forehead.

“There is nothing to be sorry for my dear.”

The iron had returned to her voice, all softness fled.

“Bastien and I...Our time together was short, shorter than I'd like. But every moment we were together, was worth all the moments we could not be. And now he's gone, and I'll never get another moment with him in this life. Thank you, darling, for being here for me. I needed it.”

It was Vivienne who hugged her, held her tight in gangly arms that could flick up a firestorm with the twist of a shoulder. Evelyn was touched, honored that Vivienne chose her to share this glass moment with. More than share, the older woman admitted to needing her presence, as if she didn’t trust herself to remain standing.

“Do not waste the time you have, my darling.” Vivienne whispered into her ear. “For you have far far more time and freedom than I did.”

**

Afforded the rare opportunity to be in the capital of Orlais of all places, Dorian exploited his good fortune by spending damn near every coin he had on two things: better wine, and better books for the library. He had torn through most of Skyhold’s non-fiction and the fiction and was down to reading such things like “The History of Elfroot in Ferelden Cuisine” or even more ghastly “Hard in Hightown.”
Passing by one of the smaller book vendors, Dorian spied a curious tome that demanded to be bought and read immediately: “Incidents in the Life of an Elven Slave Girl”.

**

Iron Bull mumbled something about being hungry and disappeared down an alleyway full of food vendors. After passing every stall, he took a hard left venturing down into Val Royeaux’s seedier, dirtier sections until he ended up in Little Seheron. Here Tal-Vashoth tried their damndest to recreate a life forever closed to them, remaking their little bit of Orlais in the image of Par Vollen. Tamassrans who could no longer be Tamassrans shepherded quanari children, teaching them the ways of a Qun they were never born into and would never be apart of.

He wanted to feel home again, even in this pale imitation. And while he smelled the spices and saw the dancing, he heard qunlat in voices that were thankfully not flavored with Imperium arrogance, he still felt empty—homesick.

The Iron Bull kept walking, searching for fullness, his stomach still growling and forgotten.

**

Left to his own devices, Cullen cringed as he aimlessly walked the streets of Orlais, wary of the city after the events at Halamshiral.

The past few days had been diverting to say the least. The lyrium in his blood had quieted thank the Maker, and the nightmares weren't so bad that he woke up screaming. It was novel to be 'one of the companions' for a while, experiencing all that the Commander missed while the Inquisitor was away. He slept under the stars, ate crude (but delicious considering the hands that prepared it) food, he fought brigands, demons, and wild animals daily while he also fought saddle stiffness and thigh chafing. It was rather refreshing considering Cullen, at any other time, would be behind a desk or beating on recruits largely unworthy of his skill.

Wandering thoughts translated to wandering feet and Cullen found himself in the Grand Cathedral staring at the stained glass scenes of the Passion of Andraste. The Bride of the Maker had always been rendered as a pale woman with white-gold hair, serene in expression no matter if she was wielding a sword or being burned alive. He wondered if the real woman remained as calm as she led armies and succumbed to the treachery of her mortal husband.

Cullen knelt, pretending to pray, finding his Chant snatched away by idle thoughts of Andraste.

What was she really like?

What was the color of her eyes?

Deep brown

Her favorite color?

Gold

Her favorite animal?

A Mabari

As the ex-templar prayed, he wondered when or if he stopped thinking about the Bride and started thinking about Evelyn, finding the two to be eerily similar. How must it feel for a woman like that,
tasked with burdensome purpose and made a symbol for all to follow?

She probably forced herself to keep up such a benign expression even as her world fell apart in war and fire, too many would be watching. Too many counted on her to remain calm.

No wonder she lied and lashed out. Who could bear such a weight and expect to remain upright? And how lonely must it be with no one to really share the burden? The Mark can’t be split, whatever pain she’s in, she can’t seem to get rid of it. Whenever she closed rifts, the life was sucked from her.

And he, her Maferath, betrayed her, uttering stupid and thoughtless words, expecting her to be Andraste, forgetting the mortal woman with mortal foibles and mortal breaking points.

“I won’t let you burn. I promise.” Cullen swore as he prayed.

**

All five of them regrouped at a modest inn on the outskirts of the city, closest to the road that would lead them to the Shrine of Dumat. Dinner was a solemn affair, each of them staring blankly into their plates, quiet and sullen.

One by one, they rose to retire. Dumat loomed before them at the next sunrise. Cullen was the last to seek the solace of sleep. He opened the door to his room…

And found Evelyn fiddling with her hair, wearing a nightgown and nothing else.

No. Not a nightgown.

One of his tunics. One of the cream colored ones that stood out from the color of her skin and stopped just below the swell of her backside at the highest point of her thighs.

Cullen gulped, eyes inexorably drawn to that border where cloth met flesh, willing himself not to stare down the blessed expanse of her naked legs.

“You…are not Dorian.” He said lamely, blushing furiously, eyes glued to the floor.

She had been sitting at the rickety table, working her fingers in between her vines when she expected Vivienne to enter and instead found Cullen. Her eyes widened before she turned away, her invisible flush enflaming her cheeks.

“You are not Vivienne,” she answered back.

“I ahh…I’ll go…the other rooms.”

He backed out quickly, slamming the door far too harshly than intended. He knocked on the room next door. Vivienne opened, face covered in a sickly green paste. “What!” she shouted in a voice far and away nothing like the cultured tones she usually cultivated.

“Ahh…I…” She slammed the door in his face before he could answer.

Hapless, Cullen ventured to the next door and heard the soft sounds of weeping.

“But Bull, you don’t understand, I could feel her pain as if it was mine. There are thousands of her in Qarnus alone. Millions more in the Imperium, and they are all. Crying. Kaffas Bull, how long have I been this blind?”
That sounded like a moment he didn’t want to intrude upon, which meant the Commander would be without sleeping arrangements unless…

He tried to pay the barkeep an obscene amount of money to get one more room, but the owner of the inn was apparently an honorable man and while he had three empty rooms for them, he wouldn’t in good conscious kick one of his patrons out to offer them a fourth.

Defeated, Cullen returned to the Inquisitor’s room. He knocked and opened, hoping to catch her asleep but she was still awake, still fussing with her hair. He faced her back as she sat on a stool facing an open window. The modest inn they lodged in could not provide her with a proper vanity, but Evelyn didn't really need to see to complete her task. Her fingers worked through the puffy roots of her hair, twisting and pulling at her scalp separating the vines one by one by one. A glass vial of orange liquid sat open in front of her and she dipped her fingers into it, coating them with a thick layer of oil that she smeared on her scalp between the parts.

A breeze billowed the ratty cotton curtains and carried with it the scent of the oil that filled the entire room.

Oranges. Flowers. Spices.

The scent he had come to identify with her, the scent he craved nearly every day of his life since that very first time when she brushed her hand across his face as she taught him how to properly shoot a bow. The scent that reminded him of home, of summer breezes in winter’s snow.

From the looks of it, she was only about half way through her head, working her way from the back of her neck to the crown of her widow's peak.

This had originally been his job before everything fell apart. And Cullen was unashamed to admit he was obsessed with Evelyn's locs, the weight of them, the coarse softness of them, the way they hissed slightly when she moved and the way they pattered across her shoulders like rain whenever she let them free from one of her spider buns. He enjoyed running his fingers through puffy, deep dark brown curls of loose new growth and hearing her sighs of content as his fingers dug deep massaging the scalp below.

Neither acknowledged the other, content to let the distraction of her task keep them separate. Cullen removed his armor, eyes scanning the room for a suitable sleeping spot since he wasn’t quite sure the single bed was an option.

She felt him staring, her lips itched to say something but she kept them shut, taking longer than she needed to work in her hair, keeping distracted for just a little while longer.

Viv told her she was wasting time and Evelyn already knew that time was finite. Every second she let pass was a second without him, without his touch. B knew she needed to apologize. But with what she said and the way she acted, how could a simple ‘sorry’ cover all that? So she kept quiet, burning alive on the inside, desirous of nothing more than to just look him and have him know how sorry she was.

To look him in the eye and not flinch or see nightmares.

To look him in the eye and tell him how much she loved him and never stopped.

**

It was agony being without her, watching her curl up alone and shivering by that fire. It was agony watching the life drain out of her closing that rift. For one heart stopping second he thought she had
just died right in front of him, it tore him apart. And to think, she dealt with this daily.

His heart beat feverishly watching her now as she worked in her hair. As much as he once delighted in doing this for her, it was just as mesmerizing to watch her as well.

She looked plain and ordinary, indistinguishable in stature and form from any other person. No one could look at her and think her anything but a simple woman tending to her night time rituals before bed. Maybe she was a traveler, he imagined, bedding down in a quiet inn for the night before returning home after a long trip abroad. Longing to see her plain, ordinary husband again and run her fingers through his plain, ordinary, curly blond hair.

Like this, he remembered who she was, Evelyn, his Evelyn. Not Inquisitor not Herald. Just Evelyn. The woman who snored and denied it. Who blushed by scrunching her nose and pouting her lips. Who kissed him and made his heart beat so loud no lyruim or lack of it could compare.

And it felt like he was falling in love with her all over again knowing he never once stopped.

And he wasn’t going to let her burn anymore.

A pale arm smattered in freckles and dusted with fine gold hairs reached from behind her to grab her bottle of hair oil.

“May I assist?” He asked cautiously.

Though he couldn’t see her face, he could tell by the dip of her head she was wrinkling her nose and pouting her lips in that most adorable little embarrassed scrunch.

“If you like,” she said trying not to croak.

“Nothing would please me greater,” Cullen paused for a moment before a smile overtook him.

“My lady.”

Her face could fry an egg.

Cullen's deft fingertips worked through her locs and scalp leaving tingles in their wake that buzzed through her entire body. Her heart thrummed in her chest so loud she thought he could possibly feel it through her skin. He worked quickly, quietly, expertly; over the times she's had him to do this for her, he'd gotten better at it than she was. And he was a damn sight better than Vivienne who insisted on snatching her hair and raking through her roots with her nails making poor Evelyn feel like she was scratching her scalp clean off.

He drank her sighs and felt inordinately pleased with himself when he watched the tension drain out of her shoulders, she yielded under his touch, relaxed in it, reveled in it.

She hummed pleasantly as he finished, prickling his heart with a warmth he hadn't felt in an age.

“Thank you Commander.” She whispered.

“My pleasure.”

He dressed for bed in silence while she tried and subsequently failed to keep her eyes off his naked chest before he threw a ratty night shirt on.

Maker’s bleeding fuck.

“If you share one of those pillows, I’ll be fine to sleep on the floor.” The man spoke softly.
"You ain’t sleeping on the floor Cullen. I am."

"By the Void you will not.” He protested.

"Then we’ll have to share…that is…ah…if that’s okay I mean…” She sighed, resisting the urge to cover her heated face with her hands.

"That’ll be fine."

They blew out the candles and settled on the bed, each taking the farthest edge not because they were repulsed by one another, but afraid. Shy even, like this was all the way back to day one when they had just kissed and the world was brand new with color, sight, and sound.

“Goodnight Evelyn,” It felt good to say her name again. It tasted good even, not flavored by anger or breathless with fear. It felt right, he felt right. More right than any lyrium could ever make him. He let her have the blanket, Orlais was still too hot for him even in the night, and she immediately tossed it over her head like she was trying to armor herself in the sheets.

“I’ll warn you now,” she said from under her blanket fort. “I’ve been having some nightmares lately and I might wake you.”

Cullen chuffed softly in dark. "So have I."

She seemed to relax at his words, her fetal ball uncurling just the smallest bit.

"We should come up with something to help us get through the night.” Cullen said thoughtfully. "I'll put my hand here, in the middle of the bed. If you need me, just reach. And if I start to thrash, just squeeze and it'll let me know you're here and I'm safe."

Evelyn's arm shot out immediately from under the covers. She threaded their fingers like strings on a loom, weaving them perfectly together.

"I'm here," she replied. "You're safe."

Chapter End Notes

:-)
They woke, hands still clasped, still threaded, still connected but something was wrong. He held too tightly and his grip increased by the second as he thrashed in the wake of an early morning terror.

“No…no…leave me.”

“Cullen, hey.”

She tried to shake him awake but he held fast, nails digging into her skin, scratching. 

“They squeezed tighter, a vice ratcheting close on her hand. Any second longer and his nails would start to break flesh and her bones start to crack. “You’re hurting me, Cullen!”

Her shout broke the spell and he startled awake. His eyes were wild in his head, rolling this way and that trying to get a bearing, to regain his sense of self. This wasn’t Skyhold, there’s no comforting hole in the roof. There’s someone here and he’s always alone. Something’s not right, something…

Her hands flew to the sides of his face, centering him, bringing his gaze to her eyes.

“Cullen. I’m here, you’re safe.”

He sighed, the fight in him draining away. He took one long shuddering breath, still focused on the tidal pull of her eyes before he relaxed completely, finally reassured.

“I…I’m sorry, I thought I would be better today.”

“It’s nothing.” She replied with a small smile, pulling her touch from his face breaking both their hearts just a little bit. Evelyn wrung her hand, checking for blood or other damage.

“Maker’s breath, did I…”

“It’s nothing.” She repeated, turning her gaze away.

He felt sick, like everything they were building had just been ruined, their fragile and tenuous connection, so newly forged, shattered because of his weakness. He opened his mouth to apologize but shut it up tight when she fixed on him a penetrating stare stolen right from Madame de Fer’s handbook.

“Cullen, it’s only gonna get worse today. I don’t know how to handle Samson. And I ain’t gonna
have you hurt. So you stay close to me today, and we'll watch out for each other. You got me Commander?"

She could have told him to stay behind, or to stay out of the way while the rest of them fought. But she understood he needed to be there to take down Samson, no matter what it might cost him. She protected him, but never made him feel weak. He protected her and never made her feel possessed.

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Morning bird song trilled in the few seconds of silence they remained close.

This morning aside, she slept better the night before than she had in ages, the quiet presence of his hand an immense comfort to her. She shifted close to him in the night, pressed against his back. He turned to her, lips cocked in a sleepy smile before his eyes slipped closed, returning to slumber, his thumbs tracing circles in her palm.

She should have kissed him then.

She should kiss him now.

She wanted to.

All she had to do was...

“We should get...” she said stupidly, interrupting the peaceful quiet.

“Yeah,” he agreed.

They dressed in silence. There was no place to change in private so they had to do it in the open, backs to one another and eyes closed for extra insurance.

But Cullen, when it came to her, oh he was a weak man. He turned peeking just a little bit to see if she was finished and instead caught her completely bare. He bit his bottom lip to keep from groaning and his morning hardness the nightmare chased away came back with a vengeance. Evelyn had always been comfortable in her nudity and she had no qualms about being naked before him. She gloried in the shape of her form as much as he did. But Maker, it'd been too long since he’d seen her perfection in anywhere other than his imagination as he shamefully relieved himself during their isolation.

He watched her don her clothes, his mind screaming at him to either turn away or turn closer, forgetting that he himself had only stepped into one of his pant legs; when she turned (ostensibly to check for his readiness but to—like he had—spy) to find him openly gawking.

He was bent slightly, having been caught in that awkward position of pants half on. His white smallclothes clung to his hips and she could see his ardent approval swelling beneath them. Her eyes roamed of their own accord, following the swell of his perfect ass down to perfect thighs that she often fantasized about being under, around, or between in any way he would have her.

“Fuck.” She cursed outloud before clamping a hand over her mouth entirely too late and spinning around to resume dressing.

Both caught, both ashamed, both aroused, they dressed double quick.

**
“Where are you going?” Her hands were on the door knob, it wasn’t yet 8 bells and they had decided to leave at 9.

“I know you say your morning prayers, I thought I might see if the kitchen’s open. Give you some privacy. At least…that kind of privacy anyway…”

“Right,” he felt the blush and hoped she didn’t see it.

She didn’t, she was looking at the floor when she left.

**

On his knees, in the light of the shining sun, he prayed for silence. On most days, the hungering moan in his blood grew no louder than a dull roar. Background music to his daily life, a white noise he had grown used to and could most times ignore.

It could be good sometimes, the whispering rising just a little bit to sound like a chant or the first few measures of a song. Like the night before with his fingers in her hair, it sounded almost like the choirs he remembered when the blue was good. Or when the sound of his name, tumbling sweetly from her lips, mingled with noise to form something greater than the sum of its parts. Those were good days.

Other times it infected him like a malignant cancer, whispering dirges that reminded him of how useless he was or how 'she was meant for men far better than you.' On bad days the hissing and the sickness poisoned him completely, turning him into a monster that could be set off by the slightest misstep. That happened the day he and Evelyn fought about lyrium, and also when he almost ripped Haven's Chantry door off its hinges when Chancellor Roderick suggested yet again Evelyn be burned at the stake for heresy.

On the very best days, there was no noise at all. The day he kissed her on the battlements was a silent day and he could hear all the soft contented sighs Evelyn had made when he pressed into her with that bold kiss.

He prayed for more days with no noise. And once Evelyn departed and the door to room clicked shut, he heard the hissing and the screeching and the moaning begin to build in the distance, like a hunting party coming straight for him. His headaches, now in its infancy, woke to life.

Today, the Maker remained silent and the noise did not.

He could already tell today was going to be a bad day.

**

“Vivienne, I heard about your friend, the duke...” Dorian started, once they were on their way.

Evelyn growled a warning to Dorian, she wasn’t in the mood for their acerbic bickering today.

Neither was Vivienne apparently. “Bastien was not my "friend," darling, and I'll forego your bland and ill-informed observations.” She snapped back, hackles raised, her iron a shield for her still raw grief.

“I only meant to say I'm very sorry for your loss.”

Vivienne made a small noise of gratitude but went no further, desirous of killing this line of conversation at its root.
They all rode on in silence, minds and hearts distracted by their many woes.

In the silence, the whispers came.

The noise was soft at first, like a fly buzzing by the ear too quick and too far away to swat. All except Cullen dismissed the sounds, they’d been through Suledin and Sahrnia, they knew what to expect.

But the lyrium that infested the ground, that grew out from Dumat like the branches of a tumor was something far darker than the human harvested crystals in the Empriise du Lion. Sinister and sneaky, the red lyrium rooted in all their minds, some deeper than most, making all of them agitated and edgy. Even on the worst days of trudging through the muck of the Fallow Mire or sweating to death in the Western Approach, her little family of four could always be counted upon to lighten the mood.

Iron Bull sang ridiculous tavern songs and Dorian and Vivienne traded snobby insults back and forth while Evelyn just laughed, enjoying all their company. Now, none of them could stand to look at each other.

“Vishante Kaffas! Do you even bathe!” Dorian snarled, making a great show of covering his nose and mouth with a handkerchief.

Iron Bull scoffed. “You like it.”

Vivienne made a noise of disgust. “Amusing really.”

“What’s that now?” Dorian challenged.

“The way you sneer at "southerners," pretending to be a shark from a land of sharks. But you are not a shark and never will be, darling. They knew it, just as you do.” Viv lobbed back.

“I could have pretended. Wore fancy clothes, convinced everyone I'm something I'm not. Then I could take a position at court, whore myself out, and desperately hope no one realizes what a fraud I am.”

“Such snapping for a fish without teeth.”
“That's enough!” Evelyn shouted. “Shut the fuck up, we’re close now.”

“And here I thought you were the civilized one my dear. Such language from someone of your breeding. A shame really.”

Another buzz sounded in Evelyn’s ear, this time so close she actually swatted at it, thinking it was a fly. But flies don’t whisper, and they aren’t supposed to sound like…

She shook her head, and refocused her ire on Vivienne. “Y’all got one more second to…”

A red arrow whistled, narrowly missing Evelyn’s mount. Jackson reared, throwing her to the ground as more arrows struck like lightning around them.

“Ambush!” Cullen shouted, vaulting from his mount and unstrapping the shield from his back.

“Red templars!”

They were maybe a good 300 feet from the temple, it was visible and imposing, flanked on either side of the road by rolling sandy dune and scrub the perfect hiding spots from the red Templar archers and shadows.

They had to fight a constant battle from the outskirts up to the steps of the temple. Cullen lunged and kicked and snarled, his fighting eerily reminiscent of the crystalline templars they slaughtered. He charged ahead first, sword and shield gleaming in the late desert sunlight as he cut down enemy after enemy.

The constant action wore thin on all of them, shortening and fraying already tried and tired nerves. After the latest pocket of resistance lay dead, Dorian plunged his staff in the sand and bent over heaving.

“Enough. We must rest.”
“No!” Cullen growled. “We cannot tarry, Samson could slip away.” The Commander shouldered his sword and readied to push ahead.

“I said wait!”

“He’s right Pavus,” Evelyn argued. “Push through it, we’re wasting time.”

Dorian groaned, drained a lyrium potion that made Cullen suddenly rapaciously thirsty. He opened his mouth to ask before he shut it again, shuddering and shaking his head.

They breached the gates of the temple under fire from arrow, sword, and shield. Cullen fought like a man possessed, snarling and snapping, cursing and spitting. He mowed down the Templars one by one not stopping and barely heeding the Inquisitor’s direction.

“Fall back to the main courtyard. We’ll concentrate their force in the doorway. I said fallback! Rutherford!”

Her cries fell on the Commander’s battle deafened ears. He unleashed his rage on their enemies, viciously stabbing and slashing, delighting in the pained almost human sounding moans the bastards made as they died. The lyrium reached for him, morphing the moaning into chanting louder and louder with every sword stroke. He felt like Andraste’s flaming sword, burning through them, bleeding them dry.

The Commander felt a hand yank him by the collar. He swirled, blade flashing only to pull up short when Iron Bull’s face flooded his vision, cooling only somewhat the fire that burned with every heartbeat.

“She gave you an order soldier!”

With Cullen unwilling to fall back, they were forced to stand and meet their enemy in wide open spaces prime for flanking and ambushes. The party survived with moderate injury but it would have been better to choose a more advantageous field of battle.

“I’m startin’ to think this ain’t a good idea anymore Boss.” Iron Bull shouted, eyes never leaving Cullen’s. The qunari was threatening him, obvious in the way he gripped his waraxe. “You’re inviting a starving man to a buffet and askin’ him not to eat. I don’t know if I should question his
ability or your judgement.”

Evelyn checked her wounds and judged them minor before whirling and almost spitting at the Iron Bull. “He stays, end of discussion.”

“Look Boss, just because you fuck him don’t mean he gets…” Evelyn, quicker than a snake’s strike, notched and drew her bow aiming right for Iron Bull.

“Do not. Finish. That sentence.”

“Put it down Trevelyan.”

Dorian, behind her, and though her eyes couldn’t see, she could feel the magic thrumming in his staff ready to strike her.

This was madness. So deep into the temple and they were all ready to rip each other to pieces. Cullen groaned, pained, but shook off the haze quicker than the rest of them.

“Enough!” he bellowed. “We must work quickly, the lyrium, it’s affecting your minds.”

Evelyn lowered her bow, taking a deep breath, holding, and releasing. Her mind cleared, enough to see the threads of her little family tearing at the seams.

“He’s right, we gotta…we gotta do what we came here to do and get out.” She approached her Commander and laid a soothing hand on his pained face.

“Remember what I told you.” With her hands she tried to wipe away some of the blood on his face, smearing it until it made his flesh look like it was cracked with veins of red pulsing underneath. Cullen shuddered under her hand, biting back a ragged moan.

On bad days, her touch soothed him.

Not today.
Today it made him quake, made the bonds on his control clatter as his mind raged against them. A voice lilted in his head. A familiar one.

Destroy her Templar! Do what your Maker has commanded!

The voice exhorted him to tear into her with teeth and hands.

Break her apart, Rip into her, Consume her. Crack her open and make her bleed for you.

Make her scream for you.

Vivid images of her twisting under him and his vile attentions, her body shattered and open and moaning. She screamed his name begging him to stop, but he closed his hands around her throat and…

No!

The Commander, barely able to hold his trembling in check, pulled away from her tenderness grunting an apology.

"If it's too much, you can wait out..."

"No," he muttered. "Its fine, I'm fine. I'll see through this."

The Inquisitor nodded reaching for his hands, trying to soothe them out of their tightly balled fists.

"I'm here, you're safe." She kept her voice low so none but him could hear her reassurances.

For a blessed moment, the red melodies quieted and her voice shone through, her true voice. Cullen
softened, regained more control.

**

“This place is trashed!” Evelyn cried out. Statues had been toppled over and smashed, fortifications placed on every stairway and choke point. Infant flames burned in every corner scorching the stonework and hastily constructed scaffolding erected to make this relic habitable for Samson’s headquarters.

“Maker tell me he hasn’t fled.”

Cullen confirmed his worst fear when they found a man lying on the ground, the sunburst brand burned into his forehead and breaths away from death’s door.

“Hello Inquisitor,” the dying man said in the chillingly flat voice of a tranquil.

“You know me?” Evelyn asked, confused.

“It’s Maddox, Samson’s tranquil, but something’s not right. Vivienne, we need your help.”

“That would be a waste Knight-Captain Cullen, I drank my entire essence of nightcap. It won’t be long now.”

Evelyn shook her head, forlorn. “We weren’t gonna hurt you, only wanted to ask you questions.”

“That was what I could not allow. I destroyed the camp with fire, we all agreed it would be best. We stayed behind so Samson could have time to escape.”

Rage flash boiled in the pit of Cullen’s stomach and the chains on his control rattled just a bit. A lesser Cullen would have hastened Maddox’s death with a sword to the belly.

“You scarified yourself for him?! Why?” Fury burned at the fringes of his voice, he had to force himself to whisper because any less and he would have been screaming. Like sand through his fingers, Samson had slipped away, and with him, the chance to deal a crippling blow to Corypheus.

And it was his fault. He dallied, he was distracted. He turned to the woman beside him.

She distracted him, diverted him from his purpose.

She is your weakness. Eliminate your weakness. Eliminate…

He pushed the hissing down to the back of his mind, straining to hear Maddox’s words through the
shouting.

“Samson saved me, even before he needed me. He gave me a purpose. I… I wanted… to… help.”

Maddox died with a shudder, a woman’s name half-formed on his lips.

“We should keep searching,” Cullen sighed.

“We should bury him,” Evelyn corrected.

“Split up!” The Commander barked, ignoring her. “See if we can find anything of use amidst this ruin.”

The temple grew red crystal from every corner, it came down through the ceiling and up through the floor. It had bonded to the foundation and crept its way into the temple’s bones replacing mortar with malignant blighted crystal that beat with every pulse of his heart. Every pulse ringing in his gut and in his brain, his temples throbbed and pressure built behind his eyes making him feel that any minute they might pop and dribble out of his skull.

He heard Evelyn talking, holding up some intricate looking tool. He ignored her words paying attention instead to the pulse in her throat tapping with his finger against his blade every time it jumped.

He wanted to tear into her neck and feel that pulse jump into his mouth and taste--

NO!

But she’s a demon, the lyrium hummed. She should be destroyed. They’d come so close, the two of them, suffered so much, and he was seconds away from tearing everything down. He was right, Cullen realized. She was meant for men far better than him.

No. No. NO.

Taking a deep steadying breath, Cullen slipped the chains back on his rage and forced himself to listen to her, forced himself to keep looking. The fires were getting thicker now, too thick to tarry for much longer. They needed to find what they needed and get out before they were overcome by fire, or he was overcome with madness.

The rest of them weren’t faring too much better. But unlike Cullen, they had not learned how to rein in the madness.

“I’m telling you, you Tevinter fuck, we need to keep searching.” Evelyn swore, throwing down another empty useless chest.

“This entire excursion was a fool’s errand, Lady Trevelyan. Samson is long gone and our only lead on him lays dead in a collapsing temple. We’re no better off now than when we started this foolish quest.” Vivienne interrupted. “And as much as I don’t like siding with Seheron savages, your judgement has been lax of late. Always lax in fact.” She cut her eyes at Cullen, her meaning plain in her gaze.

“My judgement is never in question when it suits you Vivienne. When I was in the Exalted Plains searching for your damned wyvern heart, I could have been reinforcing my troops and my keep. But no, I went on a damned hunt for your ass. How do you know I didn’t say ‘fuck it’ and give you a plain ole’ lizard heart hmm? I wonder if either would have saved him anyway.
Vivienne lunged at her, hands open into claws, but a loud thunderous boom stopped the two women from coming to blows. A large red crystal shed from the ceiling and crashed to the floor. Fire spread and smoke thickened.

“It’s too late for your harpies to keep bitching, we have to leave now!” Dorian shouted.

The Iron Bull tried to agree but he just coughed, expelling spittle tinged pink.

The fire had begun to melt some of the smaller crystals filling the air with a rich cloying sweet smell, like sugar just on the verge of burning. They ran through the burning temple, Dorian and Cullen having to physically support the Iron Bull to keep him on his feet. Vivienne coughed every second step and Evelyn just couldn’t keep up, eyes watering and lungs burning.

“Wait,” she bent over, chest heaving, “I can’t…”

Her last words were swallowed up in a scream as the floor gave way underneath her. Whatever structure the lyrium had not destroyed, fire had weakened. The floor could no longer support her weight and it crashed through to the red lyrium crusted caves below.

Vivienne heard her cry, saw her swallowed up, and for too shamefully long, the mage considered remaining quiet.

_Inquisitor de Fer_, the crystal’s called. _Far better than being the whore of a minor duke don’t you think? You’d never be irrelevant again, you’d never be hungry, again._

She hesitated, but a voice filled the void.

_Vivienne, it is not like you to cry._

_They insult me, Bastien. We both sin, yet I am the only one who suffers the punishment._

_Sin? What sin? Who sins here? For what sin could there be for a man to love a woman far deeper than he loves his own soul. The only sin is that the Maker only allows us only one great love in our lives. You are no whore, Vivienne. Where the world mine, your title would start with the same letter but have a more pleasant sound._

“Commander! Wait! Evelyn!”

The men stopped running, and could only barely see the Enchantress through the smoke.

They doubled back, Iron Bull struggling to remain upright.

“What hap-,” his question was replaced by a scream, all four of them swallowed up in bright singing crimson.

Where the world mine, your title would start with the same letter but have a more pleasant sound.

Chapter End Notes

Why is everyone fighting? Gawd!

Wanna be my friend chat? Find me on mirabai0821.tumblr.com
The four of them didn’t fall very far, but landed hard, crashing against a floor made of red. They had to scramble forward to avoid the debris that came falling down after them, sealing up the hole through which they fell, blocking the way back. Their injuries were minor, and thankfully the sealed hole cut them off from the fire above. They heard a great shuddering explosion, the walls shook like an earthquake, above them, the temple collapsed.

“Holy Maker!” Vivienne moaned. “We are trapped! There’s no way out!”

No way out. A prison of stone and crystal.

Sound familiar Knight-Captain?

Cullen groaned and rose to his feet, keeping the panic coursing through him at bay by tapping his fingers one after the other, the ten taps representative of the ten catechisms of Andraste.

“No, I will not die here trapped with the lot of you. There is a way out. There must be. This…”

Dorian’s wild eyes shifted about, looking for something to jog his memory from lessons long ago. He saw cell bars engulfed in red crystals, saw the chains hanging from the walls.

“Yes. This is a Tevinter temple, in service to the Old Gods. This is where they kept the slaves before the sacrifices.”

Dorian whimpered, hearing the scream of a little elven girl as her master beat her. “There is… there…” more screaming. “There should be a place.” Whimpering. Crying. “Shut up, shut up SHUT UP! Stop your infernal tears!”

Dorian raised a hand as if to strike at the phantom slave girl, but a big grey one stopped the blow. “Kadan…” The Iron Bull’s voice broke, his one good eye was tinged red and his bottom lip was quivering. There was a growl in the back of his throat and even the hand that stopped Dorian shook as if the warrior was trying and failing to hold something back.

Madness. The lyrium was driving him mad, completely and utterly, the rein on his control slipping every moment under the weight of the red crystal. “Focus, please. Or the red lyrium ain’t gonna kill you.”

I will.

They were always right about you Hissrad. A savage, a brute, a beast. Now with no home, no Qun to guide you, you can let that beast run free.

Iron Bull dropped his head, unable to look at Dorian any longer, for fear of him seeing the thing raging inside of him, just behind his eyes.

Cullen helped Vivienne to her feat, she struck her head and was bleeding from the wound. “I’m fine Bastien, I’m fine. Just thrown from my horse is all.”

“We must keep moving,” Cullen summoned his strongest voice hoping it would be enough to get
the rest back to their feet. They still had to find Evelyn and they still had to escape this bleeding nightmare before they all succumbed to permanent darkness.

“Right.” Dorian took a deep breath to steady himself. “There should be a secret entrance. A back door. A place to let the slaves in that wouldn’t sully the temple’s formal entrances. If we keep moving, maybe we can find it.”

“Good.” Cullen praised. “Good. We have a plan. Let’s go.”

**

Seconds felt like days, minutes like months. In those red crystal caves, Evelyn was lost. Ambling, shuffling on weakened knees and blistered feet, she walked crying as the mark in her hand bubbled like acid boiling just under her skin.

She had been down here for ages. Years. They were gone. She was forgotten. They left her behind.

She tripped on a crystal and threw her hands out to catch herself, cutting her palms on the sharp rock.

The anchor flashed, pain ripping through her and she hadn’t the energy to subdue it anymore.

Evelyn wandered, lost in the voices, her bow dragging on the ground behind her, pulsing bright green energy that kept her on her feet.

In the red darkness, she forgot her name, she forgot her friends’ name.

All burned away in the wake of the malignant crystal.

But she kept walking, moved by a purpose unknown to her conscious mind.

_I will see you again._

She didn’t even remember who that ‘you’ was.

The ground shook. Evelyn was thrown to her feet but she got up again, barely dodging the collapsing crystals.

A huge one wrenched free of its mooring on the wall and tipped like a felled tree. She didn’t move fast enough, she couldn’t.

**

“Come on amatus, come on. You can keep moving.” The further they walked, the less the Iron Bull was able to support his own weight. He staggered even under Dorian’s supportive arm, unwilling to go any further.

“Can’t…can’t…leave…..”

He started mumbling in Qunlat, the words nothing pleasant.

The Commander turned to Vivienne. “Will you be alright if I set you down?”

“Of course Bastien, I don’t need you to carry me. I’m fine.”

Tears slipped free of Vivienne’s wide eyes, heart knowing what her mind had stopped believing.
He was not Bastien.
Bastien was no more.

*Leave her, better yet, put a sword through her neck. You're good at that aren't you Knight-Captain? Good at killing mages. You should do the same for the Tevinter for good measure. They are mages after all.*

What are their lives worth?

He set Vivienne down gently and attended to the Iron Bull.

“Have him keep breathing. Have him focus on something in the present. Something important.”

Dorian blinked at him dubiously, unsure he could believe the templar’s words.

“I use this,” he pulled out his necklace of fangs. “She gave it to me. It helps. Do you have something like that?”

“We were…supposed to go…dragon hunting….Other. Boss.” Iron Bull slurred.

“You mentioned something like that, amatus, what’s your obsession with dragon hunting anyway?”

“Can’t tell…secret.”

“That’s it, keep him breathing, keep him talking.” The words encouraged Dorian, he started pressing for more information, determined to wheedle the truth out of his lover.

“Qunari, we don’t…no such thing as…”

Dorian lifted Bull, the warrior found his feet again.

“What Boss and Other Boss got. What Ma’am and Duke Bastien got…we don’t…got.”

“Come on Bull, keep moving amatus.”

“Qunari don’t….not the same. But sometimes…we can…”

Cullen picked up Vivienne and continued to lead them forward.

“I want…what they got…with you…kadan.”

His heart slowed and the fire in his veins cool, Dorian, pretty bird, kept singing to him, keeping him sane.

They kept moving.

**

Worry made him sicker than the lyrium. He heard the bottles clinking in Vivienne’s pack and his irrational mind tried to convince his rational one that just. One. Potion. Would be enough to see them through this. He could focus, he wouldn’t hurt, the headache that speared him in the brain would dull.

He would stop hearing the demons.
That’d be worth it alone.

*Pretty templar, pretty pretty templar. I can make you feel so good. Don’t you remember? All those years ago, how I made you feel so good? I can make you feel better than she can. You’ve never felt so good like you did when you were with me. Come see me pretty templar, I miss you.*

"Evelyn!" The templar shouted, drowning up the sickeningly familiar moans of a sickeningly familiar demon. The lyrium swallowed up his cry and returned it, echoing it off the ruby glass making it sound like a stricken tuning fork.

Someone shouted. Voices, noises.

Familiar and not.

The ‘you’ she could no longer remember.

Evelyn groaned, squirming in her prison, a feeble cry for help escaping her throat.

“It’s her!” Vivienne gasped. The mage stood upright, summoning her strength to throw off the pall of her hallucinations. Together, she and Cullen ran to the source of the sound.

They found her, not buried, but caught. Wedged upright between two very large shards of lyrium. From ankle to shoulder, the blighted crystal pressed fast against her, the top right half of her body swung free limply, made her look like the lyrium was trying to consume her, swallow her up. Only her neck, head, left arm, and part of her torso were free.

“Darling, hold on, we’ll free you!” Viv promised as Cullen began to pull at the crystal holding her tight.

Dorian wanted to help but Bull could only barely keep conscious. “We found her, amatus, we’re gonna get her out and then we’ll get the fuck out of here.”

The Inquisitor opened two weary eyes.

And they were red.

Blind panic seized him, his hands scraped against the crystal that trapped her, the shard large and as big as the owl statues that flanked Skyhold’s main hall. And heavy, so heavy no matter how hard he pulled, the crystal wouldn’t move.

His face was in her nightmares and in her dreams. The image of him released the memories, everything the lyrium made her forget, he made her remember.

Good and bad.

Regret spoken, sins committed, joy and kisses shared.

“Cullen,” The sound of his name invoked a warmth unlike anything she’d ever felt. “Cullen, I’m sorry.”

“What…what are you saying, why are you apologizing?” He stopped pulling on the crystal, fear overtaking him.

“Wasted time, no more time, no more time to say I’m sorry.”

“What are you talking about?”
“I’m sorry I hurt you. And now you have to go.”

The Maker must enjoy irony, she thought. She remembered Redcliffe, remembered finding him trapped in red rock, his voice urging her to go, to escape. She saw her friends, slipping slowly into a darkness from which they could never escape the longer they stayed.

Yes go. Stay and you’ll die. It’s not worth it, to die for her.

Yes, it is.

“I’m not leaving.”

Cullen unsheathed his sword and began hacking at the crystal, chipping off pieces with every strike. Chips and splinters flew in the air, striking him in the face, burning him like little splashes of acid.

Evelyn began to scream, every blow reverberated in her head, driving a spike into her temples.

“Don’t waste time. Go! Leave! You’re hurting me. Just go!”

He ignored her and kept hacking. No way was he going to lose her, not now, not when they were so close.

Blue lyrium sounded like a choir. It was soft and sweet, even when it whispered hateful things. It thrummed like Chantry bells tolling the hour.

Red lyrium sang with a single note, a deep rich voice. A woman's voice, smoky and throaty. It sounded like a Desire demon's moan.

The voice told him to keep hitting. To swing his sword a little bit to the right and strike flesh instead of crystal.

Destroy your weakness. Purge the demon! Be rid of your sin! Strike!

His grip faltered and Cullen let the blade fall between his hands, slicing through his gloves to the tender flesh below rather than release the sword and risk cutting Evelyn. The sting of the wound focused him, the biting pain balm enough to ward the voice away. Pain in his hands, Cullen held his sword again, grunting and screaming as he slashed against the lyrium that trapped her.

His sword clanged against the blood colored rock with one final blow and the whole thing smashed into boulder sized chunks. She fell forward into his waiting arms, limp and barely conscious, her skin burned red in the places where the lyrium touched.

“I’m here,” he said. “You’re safe.”

**

Vivienne had to walk on her own. And Dorian was still working on keeping the Iron Bull from tearing himself apart. Cullen kept walking, kept shouting encouragements to his friends. He had to keep them walking, feet shuffling endlessly forward praying for a way out.

And it never got easier. They all heard the voices, all of them ready to lay it down and give up and just let the red consume them. The voices made them believe it would be easier, far easier to submit than fight to live.

But Cullen kept them fighting, driven by the whimpering body in his arms.
You let her protect herself when she can, protect her when she cannot.

It’s his turn, he thought, to protect her. All of them.

Well done thy good and faithful servant.

**

They smelled damp and rot, mold and mildew. Blessed smells compared to the sugary sweet assault of the lyrium. Water. The crystal in the dungeon thinned, giving way to a cave far beneath the sands, a canal, dug by ancient hands to connect to the river; where slaves were once ferried up and down, sating the Imperium’s lust for them.

Vivienne used the last of her magic to raise the gate that blocked the river to the outside. Dorian uncovered a skiff, thankfully large enough to fit the five of them. Magic stirred the currents and Iron Bull, strength and sanity returning to him, handled the rudder.

“Is this what it’s like?” Vivienne asked, clarity overcoming her as they all floated away from that malevolent place. “You hear that, you feel that all the time?”

“Yes.” He murmured, still rocking the half in half out Inquisitor. “It’s better some days. Worse others.”

“He’s strong.” Bull called from the back. “Look at me, look at all of us. Without him, we’d a’ lost our minds long ago. I don’t call him what I do to tease him, that’s what he thinks anyway. He’s earned that title. Worthy of it, worthy of her. That’s why he’s Other Boss.”

Chapter End Notes

Time for our Commander to be a big damn hero!
Where Hearts Lie

Chapter Notes

I couldn’t sit on this for another day or two for two reasons 1) wanted to finish this arc. 2) y’all are making me cry with what you leave in my inbox.

Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As it had taken him longer to fall under red lyrium’s spell, it would also take him longer to recover from it. The party stood straighter, stronger, almost the moment they floated away from the temple. But the red in his eyes hadn’t bled away, the voices hadn’t cleared back to their normal timbre until well after they were back in the safety of Val Royeaux.

Evelyn took longer to recover as well, returning to consciousness in slow stages, all of them taken within his arms.

On the morning of the second day, she woke with his hand curled in hers just as she had the morning they left for Dumat. It seemed they were alone but well-tended, room filled with empty potion bottles and the elfroot-y scent of healing magic.

“How are you feeling?” Cullen asked, voice more croak than intelligible sound.

“Like I wanna go back to sleep.”

Cullen coughed, trying to chuckle. “You can, no one would blame you.”

Shading her eyes against the oppressive morning sun, she turned to Cullen. He had bruises on his face from where the crystal touched him and freshly healed scars on his palms.

“Cullen…Maker.”

“I’m alright. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

She didn’t mean to sound so scared or so broken, but her question came out like the tiny squeak of a mouse. He rolled in the bed to face her, reaching for her with sore arms. “I promise.”

“Cullen…about everything.”

“I know. And I owe you my own apologies. I am so sorry Evelyn, about everything that’s happened. I…” A deep weary sigh cut his apology short.

“Cullen…about everything.”

“We’re terrible at this aren’t we?”

Cullen nodded, wincing with the movement. “Yes.”

“And we said horrible things to each other, did horrible things.”
“Yes.”

“Can we go back? Back to the way it was before?”

“No.” Cullen shook his head and the life left her eyes. “We’ll make it better.”

“Damn you, you perfect piece of…”

She kissed him, like she should have long ago. She kissed him despite the discomfort in her chest and the ache in her back, despite the pain of the burn marks healing on her shoulders and neck. He returned her kiss, scooting forward in the bed, biting back pained hisses and groans as his muscles screamed and his stitches stretched.

Though as much as their hearts wanted to continue, the flesh protested. Evelyn grimaced too loudly and Cullen drew away looking sheepish, a little over eager with his affections.

“S…sorry.”

“Don’t be. How did we get out?”

“A very long walk.”

“And the others? Are they okay?”

“Resting I suppose, returning to normal.”

Quiet.

“Evelyn?”

“Yes.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

She considered lying again, though only a white one. But she was sick of her deception and so spoke honestly. “Sometimes. I have nightmares, you’re in them.”

“You know I’d never hurt you, right? Tell me you know that.”

“It ain’t always you hurting me.”

“Even still, you can always trust me.”

“I know, and I know I know. It’s just that sometimes it’s too much. You have this look and it’s so sweet I think I might die because I don’t deserve for you to look at me like that. You and everyone else need me to be everything and I’m not…I can’t be.”

“Don’t be.” He interrupted. “I don’t need a Herald or an Inquisitor. I just need you, Evelyn. Only you.”

He gave her that look, that sweet stare with golden eyes that felt like sunlight.

“What am I supposed to say to that? Huh?” She groaned raking her hands down her face, embarrassed and giddy and on fire. “How am I supposed to respond to something like that from someone so perfect and I love you and ugh, Rutherford, what am I gonna do with you?”
“Say that again…”

“What?”

“What you said.”

“I say a lot, I ramble.”

Cullen blushed, murmuring his request again.

“What? Huh?”

“What you said about l..lov…” It’d been so long, he had forgotten what it felt like to hear it from her. He wanted to capture it again, remember it, place the sound in the spot where the demons once shouted.

Evelyn grinned, he went from serious to stammering in-between heartbeats. How could he not be perfect?

“I love you.”

Cullen beamed.

So she said it again.

And again.

And again…

**

The Iron Bull had some gashes in his back, nasty wounds that required Dorian’s near constant attention. He and Vivienne took shifts tending to the sleeping warriors, leaving them to their rest for now. They’d be on the mend soon enough, in more ways than one they hoped.

“Far be it from me to take anything you say seriously, less so when under the effects of that blighted crystal. But did you mean it? And you know bloody well what I’m talking about so don’t make me repeat it!”

Even driven to the brink of his control, Iron Bull always knew what he was doing with his mouth…*always*. “I mean what I say, and I say what I mean.”

Dorian was glad he was seated behind the Bull, the larger male unable to see the embarrassment colorlessly heating Dorian’s cheeks.

“I wish I could see your face. You blushing’ back there big guy?”

Kaffas.

“I don’t blush!” Dorian spat back, unnerved at the Iron Bull’s uncanny ability to read him.

“Yeah yeah, so you keep sayin’ kadan.”

Kadan.

Qunlat.
Often used as catch-all endearment.

But Dorian wondered if the more literal translation applied. Had Dorian been foolish all this time? Had he been throwing around terms like ‘beloved’ when all Bull meant was ‘center of the chest’?

It scared him, the ease with which he’d fallen for the Charger. The Iron Bull knew exactly what to say, what buttons to push, where to press, where to release. And Dorian had eaten it all up because he was a man starved for love and Iron Bull was a feast.

Or, he knew how make Dorian eat air and call it meat.

“I’ma start smelling smoke in a minute if you don’t tell me what’s up.”

“It’s nothing.”

“And they called me the liar.” Iron Bull sensed this wasn’t one of those times to interrogate the Altus so he let the matter drop. “Hey, that book you readin’, it rattled your cage a little bit and again in the caves. You better?”

Dorian finished his work tending to Bull’s wounds.

“No.”

He wished he could say he never laid a hand on his family’s slaves. They were never beaten to within inches of their lives like the way his neighbors liked to indulge themselves, but a backhand every now and again for insolence or laziness was the norm.

And here he thought that counted as ‘treating them well’. Dorian grunted, revulsion roiling in his gut.

“I was young, still desperately clinging to the idea that I could make my father love me. I bought for him this incredible foci orb. All burnished gold and onyx and jewels, family crest inlaid in the crystal, splendid instrument really. Our house had a servant, Frederick we called him but he once told me his real name was Dal’ras. He was my friend you see, a confidant of sorts. I never forgot what he was or who I was to him, but I never really cared to remember either. I was young, we were friends.

I showed him the orb. He asked to touch it. I didn’t want him to but he begged me saying he’d never seen something so fine. It was heavier than it looked, and Dal’ras was a scrawny thing. Well-fed yes, but now that I think about it, maybe he was only comparatively well fed to the slaves of other houses. You can see where I’m going with this can’t you? Of course he dropped the orb, shattered 7,000 royals worth of a son’s desperation. And I couldn’t tell you what was worse. The horrified look he gave me when he dropped it, or the horrified look he gave me from the floor, lip split and bleeding. I never saw him again after that day…and to my growing disgust I never thought anything amiss until now.”

Dorian gave a heaving shudder fighting valiantly against tears that were stronger than his will. “I always thought we were different, that I was different. That I had some superiority for not being like one of them, the cruel magisters that beat and rape and mistreat just because they can. That book…I am just like them. By virtue of owning another life, no matter how well I thought I treated it…no…them. I am just like …” Dorian’s voice cracked into a small moan. “Just like everyone else.”

An arm, thick and grey, latticed with scars, hooked around Dorian’s shoulders pulling him into a chest also thick and grey and latticed with scars.
“Yeah, you were. But you know that now, you’re operatin’ with new information. When you go back.” Iron Bull glided carefully over the ‘when’, ignoring the lurch in his great heart. “When you go back, do somethin’ about it.”

Dorian snorted. “I’m glad I can always count on you to make me feel better.”

“I ain’t here to make you feel better.” Iron Bull planted a kiss atop Dorian’s head, inhaling the perfect and soothing scent of his hair. “I’m here to just make you better, kadan.”

Kadan.
Qunlat.
Where the heart lies.

**

Adamant had passed.
The Ghislain Estate had passed.
This too, her grief and the nightmare of that temple, shall also pass.

Vivienne tended not to dwell. Such things only cause one to get caught up in the muck of the past. And that served her no purpose. You can’t eat the past, you can’t change it either. You can only learn and hope the lesson serves a purpose in the present day.

It’s going to be alright.

“I know my love,” she said to no one, placing his memories on a gilded shelf behind glass, to be looked upon fondly but never again touched.

For it would serve no purpose.

**

Their kisses melted, morphed, transformed, and the weight of their absence pressed down upon them, an avalanche of emotion triggered by a single whimper of need.

“Maker. Evelyn.” Cullen broke first, pressing closer to her, feeling warmth long missed and long denied. His hands roamed from the small of her back around to her belly and higher still. He palmed the heavy weight of her breasts in his hands, thumb ghosting over nipples waking to life.

Evelyn whined, biting her lip to keep from moaning. “You’re injured. I’m injured.”

Cullen pinked, shamed. He tried to back away, but she held him fast. “Maker’s fuck Cullen, don’t you dare stop.”

“But you just said…”

A greedy, seeking kiss shut him up. “Just be careful.”

They fumbled in the morning sun, gingerly removing clothes, avoiding bandages and fresh scars. But such was their need they couldn’t stop, couldn’t be persuaded to put their ache for one another aside for the day. She touched him, relearned the curve of him, his hard flesh and his soft spirit.
They stayed on their sides, injuries not allowing for much else. But it was good this way. They could reach and clutch and hold each other, hands on spines and sides, between legs and around chests. Gentle, silken things, their touches, mindful of injury but also mindful of time.

“Maker’s breath I missed you.” Cullen sighed sinking into her. “How long has it been?”

Evelyn rolled her hips, body seeking what it wanted of its own accord. “Too long,” she grunted, clamping down on her need before she hurt him.

He hissed but not out of pain. “Please…please…” he begged. “Do that again.”

She obliged him, sliding her sex against his, electric contact shooting and sparking in their each and every nerve. Evelyn reached for him, giving him soft slow strokes, mouth slanted against him, her tongue softly gliding against his own. They were lazy kisses, sweet and unhurried. He moved in the rhythm of her touch, sliding himself within her hand.

Her wetness shocked him, his fingers slipped between her folds and he groaned in those deeper registers that only served to make her wetter.

“Cullen, oh,” she whispered breathlessly, working her slickness harder against his fingers. He pumped inside of her with shallow thrusts from his deft middle finger, the length of the digit rubbing against her crown.

“See, I didn’t forget what you liked.” He teased, a bit of his ego overcoming him.

Evelyn twisted and squeezed his cock, thumb pressing against his head with firm pressure. Cullen jerked, speared by pleasure and taken completely unaware.

“Nor I.” Evelyn smirked, tongue curling against his lip. “Though if I did, I would have looked forward to learning you again.”

Her commander started his reply but roguish Evelyn flicked her wrist again and that reply became a long moan.

They stroked and rubbed slowly, pressure building within them at an even pace. Their mouths were spent kissing and licking. She suckled on his neck at her favorite spot, the line where his damnable stubble met the creamy tanned flesh of the rest of him. His lips latched on an earlobe, nibbling with sharp little bites that always corresponded to a rush of warmth between her thighs. It also brought his lips to her ears where he could whisper promises that made her twitch.

“When we’re better I’ll have you properly, screaming beneath me, legs wrapped around me, your cunt a vice on my cock.”

“Yes, that’s it.” She stuttered. “Right there, right there, don’t move. Maker…yes. Cullen.”

“Look at me,” He instructed, slowing down, easing her back from that cliff’s edge of bliss. “I want…” She twisted around him, breaking apart his thoughts. “I want…”

Gentle, steady pressure changed to erratic, tight movements. They rutted against each other’s hands, eyes locked when they weren’t rolling in their heads, slipping closed under too much and too good sensation.

“Ev..Evelyn…I can’t.”

“Come baby, come for me. Please. I need you. Come for me.”
He flew apart in her hands, spending himself between their bodies. His touch wavered only a little bit as he came but he kept sliding against her, kneading her sensitive bud, determined to make her feel what he felt.

“That’s it, right there, I’m so close.”

Cullen bent his head and body, adjusted himself so he could get a mouth around her enticing nipples. When his tongue curled around one sucking deeply, her body arched and froze, mouth open in a scream that never emerged. She came hard on his hand, spasming again and again as he kept moving and kept licking, teasing from her more guttural screams and choked moans.

Evelyn’s back finally fell flush against the bed, her liquid body pooling next to her similarly spent beloved.

“Good?” he asked.

“Now you’re just fishing for compliments.”

“I meant your wounds, brat.”

Evelyn giggled, nipping him lightly, perfectly content with her new nickname.

“I can’t feel much of anything anymore, and if I could I wouldn’t care. You?”

“Same.”

They sacrificed a pillowcase to clean up with, unable (unwilling) to move from the bed to find more suitable linens.

Vivienne came by to check up on them, but found them well healed, curled into one another and snoring in the afternoon sun. She closed the door softly behind her, smiling, reaching for one of those memories, finding they still tasted sweet.

And still served purpose.

Chapter End Notes

Its not a sprint nor a marathon to the finish now. More like a 5K or a turkey trot. Its all done, set in stone. Before, I asked you to hold onto butts.

Now, hold onto your everythings.
Killing Him Softly

The mark hurt.

Honestly, it never trulystopped. Not since Adamant, shit, not since waking up chained to the floor in Haven's dungeon. She'd become conditioned to it, learned to sleep with it, learned to rule her face whenever it bit so hard she thought she was bleeding. It sparked and spat again taking a fair bit of her energy and concentration to make it calm down. Sometimes it made her whole body tingle and weighed heavy on her chest, just under her heart like she had swallowed something spicy and it stuck there.

B made sure she never winced around Cullen or the others. Made sure he never saw her massage her anchored hand, staring into the swirling green magic of her palm lost in its glow. She knew that this thing, as Cassandra had said now almost two years ago, was indeed killing her.

And she was not ready to die.

She was glad she heeded the advice of the infuriating voice in her head, the one that told her that it was different down here and to snatch happiness when she could. She listened. She snatched it with every drink she shared with Iron Bull, snatched it with every prank she committed with Sera (that desk was sturdy), with every letter she wrote to Mia stuffed with escalating double entendres; each woman trying to outdo the last in cleverness and lewdness. She showed one of those letters to Cullen once. He couldn't look her in the eye the rest of the day. (“Maker's breath that's my sister we're talking about!”)

She snatched it with every kiss she stole from him, with every touch she let linger on his fingers when they moved their pieces about the war table and the chessboard.

With every roll of her hips against him that made him gasp just so; with every flick of her tongue upon him that she knew would have him melting against her; with every time she let him pull the cord on her vines because she knew he loved the sound they made when they fell, she snatched her joy.

Because joy at this stage was a rare and fleeting thing she knew would be gone all too soon.

The Arbor Wilds gave her joy.
Evelyn paid only a modicum of attention to Morrigan, wondering just how in the blue fuck the Warden Commander and Leliana had dealt with the woman's voice. Every syllable sounded like the hiss of a snake, like she was plotting something or lying. She paid even less attention to the witch when she arrived at the stage of battle, a green paradise seemingly summoned from her dreams.

The Emerald Graves were magnificent, her favorite place in all of Thedas outside Cullen's bed under starlight. But the Wilds...

“Maker's bleeding fuck.” She murmured awestruck.

Cullen rode next to her as she absorbed the beauty all around her, her neck constantly craned up into the thick canopy of the trees and never on the road ahead, trusting Jackson to steer himself around roots and recesses in the road.

There was never a more perfect place for her to be.

Dumat repaired them. She no longer fled from him, returning to his confidence and his company but the shadows had still not quite fled from her eyes. Whether that be from the lingering lyrium hallucinations or other things he did not know, but he could guess.

As they all could.

The end of the war loomed, a Chantry bell tolling to midnight.

With Samson's headquarters destroyed and Dagna creating the key to his inevitable defeat, the red templars had dwindled to almost nothing now. She had his mages, his wardens, and had destroyed his templars. Corypheus had but a token force left, all of which he concentrated here in hopes of laying hands on an ancient elven artifact, his last desperate attempt to control the tide of conflict.

This was but a practice run for the final battle, the stress test to see if all her work for the last two years would be enough.

Was she afraid it wouldn't be?
Or did something else trouble her?

‘Don’t be daft, Cullen.’ He chided himself. You know what troubles her. She all but screamed it at him when they fought those weeks ago.

Evelyn thought she was a woman on borrowed time.

But he refused to believe it, rejecting the notion that there could be a world that moved on without her. Though she expressed a reluctance of faith, Cullen knew his Maker wasn’t a cruel god. He would never bless His children with such a savior only to call her back too soon.

Somehow he would make her believe that the Maker wasn’t done with her yet.

And if He was, Cullen would risk holy wrath to subvert His will.

**

She came to him that night like a nymph; stealing into his tent to tempt the stalwart soldier into enjoying the forbidden fruits of the forest. She begged his trust and when he gave it, she blindfolded him and led him into the brush; far enough away from prying eyes but not too far as to invite ambush; coaxing him along with gentle words of warning to watch that root or skirt that rash giving plant.

When the blindfold slipped free, he found himself surrounded by earthbound starlight. Fireflies, veilfire, candles, he could not tell what it was that lit the waterfall only that it gave off a warm gentle glow that made her look like an enchanted creature-- a fairy from a fairytale and all for him.

"Wha-?" She silenced him with a gentle kiss, shaking her head and imploring that he open only his ears to hear the sounds of the breathing forest, the rustle of the wind through thick leaves and the far off cries of nesting birds and hunting predators. Yet the only sound the ex-templar could focus on was the hammering of his own heart as he watched her slide out of her clothes and dive head first into the little pool at the base of the short falls.

Evelyn broke the surface of the water and raised a finger to her lips for continued quiet as she beckoned him to join her with a curl of her arm. Throat tight with desire and wonder, Cullen quickly shirked his clothing and splashed in after her.
She teased him, pulling at his ankles or poking his backside as she swam under him. He dove to catch her but Evelyn was the superior swimmer, her lithe form easily twisting out of his clumsy underwater grasp.

He broke for air, coming up laughing before she swallowed him up in a kiss that drowned them both.

The breezes carried away her last soft cry leaving her breathless and panting under him. Her lover nuzzled her neck, overwhelmed and overflowing with love.

There was never a more perfect place for them to be.

**

"D'ya have to make such an ugly face?" Iron Bull asked, shouldering his axe.

"The idea of me and an ugly face is mutually exclusive and besides, nothing could be so hideous as your face after a bender on Maraas-Lok."

Bull grinned, the barb was cruel but the gleam in Dorian's eye meant it was also harmless. "You're just put out she's taking me and not you."

"Don't presume to read my thoughts, you aren't Cole."

"I don't need to read your thoughts, kadan. I know them." Iron Bull's height eclipsed Dorian's by an entire foot, his massive size bearing down on the mage, disarming him to his very soul with his stormy gaze.

But the Bull would have never fallen so hard for the Peacock if such a stare got him flustered; the mage glared right back with eyes made of molten silver glass, challenging him, daring him to push just a little harder.
"Oh? And what am I thinking now?"

"That you want to kick me in the balls."

"Hissrad." Dorian invoked the meaning of the name knowing Bull knew that wasn't what he thought.

Long ago, Dorian was amused by the idea of watching a love story unfold right before his eyes while having no fathomable clue it would be his own.

Bull ghosted a gray thumb down the bridge of Dorian's nose, his eyes fluttered shut with a shiver. Bull had done that to Dorian the day he thought he could take on a dreadnought. The move made him weak, killed him softly every time it happened, the most loving of gestures between them. "I will." Bull said, answering Dorian's silent appeal.

To come back safely.

**

The soldiers cheered when she appeared on the crest of the hill, bowstring thrumming and twanging as her arrows smote their enemies. Cole, Iron Bull, Solas, Evelyn, and Morrigan wound through the jungle pushing through Corypheus's defenses already made soft by her Commander's vanguard. They came upon the Commander and Dorian as the pair were fighting off another pocket of red templar resistance. His gold curls clung to his forehead glued there by the sweat of exertion and the heat of battle, but her shining knight never faltered, blade singing through the air like the Chant of Light at dawn.

Flame red arrows buzzed in his ears and Cullen had learned long ago to welcome that sound. He liked to think he was thorough in his attentions to his enemies, but her eyes always managed to find the blade or the staff or the arrow he missed. One arrow, however, flew entirely too close, pinging off his shield, striking it with a force that paused his forward thrust. He cast a quick askance glance to the Inquisitor and she only winked at him before directing his eyes down where he was mere inches from stepping into a flame trap.

"Keep an eye on him Dor!" She called laughing, blowing both men kisses, her voice echoing through the trees as she led her team deeper into the forest.
Marks that don’t stop hurting, enemies that won’t die, dragons made of madness so large the shadow it cast stretched on seemingly forever.

There were rituals to perform, ancient elves to ally with, Wells to either protect or despoil, but all Evelyn could focus on was a general to defeat and a Commander to return to.

She found Samson, mere feet from the Well of Sorrows, cheering with his soldiers. “You tough bastards! A day’s march, hours of fighting, and still fierce as dragons! The Chantry never knew what it was throwin’ away!”

She could see the closeness in those that still looked like living flesh rather than living crystal. Samson smiled easily, his soldiers drank up his every word, basking in their glow like the lyrium from the philters they so craved.

That kind of camaraderie, that unwavering loyalty she had seen before.

In Cullen.

“Samson! Ser! Watch out!”

The general turned and for the first time she saw the face of her second greatest enemy.

“Inquisitor!” he barked, voice rocky like the stones that grew from his armor and his soldiers.

“You’ve got a damned long reach! We’re here at the back end of nowhere yet here you are.”

“Yeah well, I go lots of places these days, chasing down wolves.”

“Ha!” Samson laughed darkly. “I’m actually surprised it’s your face I’m seein’ at all. Where’s your little kitten Commander? Still pissin’ in his breeches like a little boy?”

The Inquisitor bristled, taking the insult personally. The wolf, sensing weakness, lunged, jaws snapping.
“Or is it that pretty Amell girl he cries for, moanin’ like a baby lookin’ for a teat! No matter! I’ll send your head to Corypheus and send your pretty little hand back to the Commander. That way he’ll still get some use out of you!”

Crimson power surged through the plates of his armor, flashing, igniting like a fire with no flame.

“This is the strength the Chantry tried to bind. But it’s a new world now, with a new God. To arms! But save the whore for me!”

She was glad Cullen wasn’t here. Not to save him from Samson’s crude and toothless insults but to save him from the image of the last of his Order dying at her hands. The Templars were gone. What was once thousands spread all throughout southern Thedas, was now only a few handfuls of the weak and purposeless—the best and most devoted turning in their hour of need to the only light in their darkness. A light wielded by a would be savior with a blighted smile and delusions of godhood.

She could have been that light. He asked her to be that light, and she denied him. It was the right choice, but even the right choices rip up hearts. His guilt and his grief would be his alone to bear, but she could bear this sin for him—this weight she would carry.

Bull and Cole occupied Samson’s immediate attention while Morrigan, Solas, and she handled his escort. They fell quickly, she had gotten good at killing them.

“Dietrich! No!”

He called for every one of them as they fell. Knew them by name, first and last. Every one that died seemed to only fuel him, empower him, his grief cutting Evelyn deeper than his sword. That man could have been Cullen. They were commanders cut from the same fabric, men who loved their soldiers.

His sword was a vicious thing, she’d have been cleaved in half if any one of his blows struck true. She danced and dodged away from him, barely any time to use the armor breaking rune Dagna forged for her.

The red magic of the rune flashed and metal began to pop and snap against Samson’s body. The red glow of his power diminished, the spike of lyrium in his chest stopped throbbing and fell dark.
He still fought bitterly, he still fought valiantly. When Iron Bull disarmed him, he picked up the sword of a fallen comrade and continued. When Cole slashed across his back, blood redder than the crystal that consumed him, he kept going.

Only her arrow, lodged in his shoulder stopped him cold. He sighed and dropped to his knees as though the outcome of this fight was inevitable despite all his attempts.

"All tha' soldiers that coulda felled me and I get beat by The Whore of Skyhold." Samson spat as he knelt before her, another arrow aimed so close to his eye his eyelashes fluttered against the iron arrowhead. The Inquisitor, bloodied and bruised from the fight still had enough energy to crack him in the jaw hard. He respected the shooting pain of her punch and had the decency to keep quiet as they hauled him away for later judgment, give Cullen the chance to confront his demons in the daylight hours for a change.

With the fighting finished and Morrigan glutting in her consumption of the Well, the party rested for a moment. Evelyn taking a second to enjoy the last bit of this unspoiled paradise.

Corypheus aside, it had been a good day, a victorious one. The Sentinals were now their allies and the red templars were finished. Her army, cobbled together from the dispossessed and disparate of Thedas, won. They won. She won.

The Inquisition won.

Maybe...she allowed herself to hope, maybe things...

“Red, red rivulets, burning, bleeding, blacking out. Blessed are the...B.”

Her party stared at Cole in confused silence. Now that she had forced him to reconcile his grief and rage over the slaying of his body's former owner, he was less and less prone to outbursts like this.

Cole fell to his knees gripping his chest. "I can't help. I can't help. Too far away.”
Ice, cold and creeping, snaked up her limbs, numbing them. Her heart arrested, stopped, frozen fear taking over it and every ounce of her. But she remained patient, reason fighting for the last bit of control over her body. She knelt and took Cole into her arms, lifting his chin so that his blue eyes met her amber ones.

"Cole. What are you saying? It's okay," She shushed his sobbing with a tight hug. "Just tell me okay?"

"Templars die with the Chant of Light on their lips." Huge tears rolled incessantly down the boy's face. “You are his Chant of Light.”

Someone called her name, another reached for her, Bull maybe. But his fingers slipped over her, grasping nothing.

She was already running.

**

His blood drained faster than Dorian's mana could stitch up the wound and stop it. The mage saw the red templar cleave Cullen almost in half, the savage red lyrium ripping clean through his breastplate, before the templar's momentum skewered the beast in the gut.

He fell without a shout, just crumpled silently, the whiff of the displaced foliage the only sound that a man was dying.

Dorian had the healing spells in his hands and was on him in seconds. "NO no no no no!"

Dorian was never a good healer. He knew the basics but he left the real injuries to Vivienne or Solas. Cullen was dying under his hands and he had not the magic to save him.

"Help! Help! The Commander has fallen! TO ME!" Dorian shouted cursing and screaming, looking for anyone with a staff to help.
"D-Dorian," Cullen, wrenched back into tenuous consciousness. "L...listen to m-me."

Sunlit sand colored skin now turned ashen. His lips trembled and a font of blood spilled forth from a wound so deep the mage could see the organs throbbing and failing within. The magic knit him, slowly, painfully slowly. Without more help, it wouldn't be enough and this man would die right here in his arms instead of Evelyn's arms where he belonged and Dorian could not bear the thought of losing his friend or the look on her face when he had to tell her...

“Warp the veil through not around. Manifest your mana…” Dorian worked his mouth through the lessons trying to remember what to do. His hands slipped in Cullen’s blood as the man tried to move.

“Stop, stop squirming damn you! Be still!” Dorian cursed, angry at his own ineptitude.

“L-listen…p-please!”

Dorian ignored him, his magic sputtering and failing. “Help! Anyone! Please! The Commander is dying!”

“D-Dorian.” Cullen fingers trembled as they fumbled and slipped, searching for the pocket in his trousers. “You must…”

He found a goldsmith in Val Royeaux and could barely look at the women as he asked for what he wanted. He was surprised that something that was going to mean so very much to him cost so little.

Help arrived. Soldiers. They rushed to him, too few of them mages of any skill to help. They carried him away, their limbs his bier.

No time to wonder how or why, to remember if it was his carelessness or his enemy’s strength that made him falter. All he knew was that he was dying, the lower half of him completely numb, the upper half of him burning up in pain and blood.

No time to say goodbye.
No time to beg forgiveness.

No time to say thank you.

No time to ask important questions with one word answers.

No time to say ‘I love you.’

Cullen was out of time, his Maker was calling.

“B-blessed are…” It was too hard for him, he couldn’t remember the words, he couldn’t get his shaking lips to repeat the phrases that would save his soul. But her name came easy, slipping from him like his very own Chant of Light. He would go to the Maker’s side praying her name, hoping it would be enough. “Evelyn…”

A tiny box of red velvet slipped free of Cullen’s hand as his entire body fell limp like the cut strings of a dead puppet. It fell into the dirt, trodden underfoot…forgotten.
“Hahren!” Evelyn panted, hands on her knees, teeth clattering as her muscles screamed for release. “Please. I can’t…”

Assan made them run for miles and miles and miles without stopping but Evelyn just couldn’t do it anymore. The woman doubled back, unfatigued, looking fresh and rested and not as if she had just run at almost full speed the last 3 miles.

“Will you stop when the bear chases you down? When the dragons come after you?” Assan snarled, shaking her young charge to her feet. “Get up and run girl. You will be faster than halla. You must be.”

“I don’t run from my kills! I run from nothing!” Evelyn shouted between pants of indignant anger.

The elven woman clucked her tongue, shaking her head in disappointment. “There will be a time when you will have need to run, silly girl. When you must run, when your life or the lives of those you love will count on it. And whenever that time comes, vhenan, and it will come, you will fly.”

**

The anchor crackled and Evelyn didn’t realize she was making it spark. The Veil bent around her, a rift opened and she ran through. As it closed behind her, another opened in front of her sometimes feet, sometimes miles away from where she was before. It didn’t feel like teleportation. It felt like flight.

*He made her fly.*

Her heart thundered, threatening to tear loose of its anchors and explode through her chest. Evelyn remained unbothered, body conditioned to run, to fly. Her legs carried her heedless of direction, she flew by blind faith alone.

Faith that was rewarded when the jungle cleared to tents and fortifications, to men and women dressed in Inquisition armor, milling about aimlessly as their Commander lay dead.

Evelyn began to shriek.

They formed a half moon around his tent, waiting, watching.

Some hoped, others prayed. But they all fell silent waiting for whatever whispered word of their Commander.

She pierced that silence with her screams. She saw the thick press of bodies around one tent and knew that’s where he lay.
Maker she flew.

Blackwall, brave and foolish, decided he would be the one to step in her way. She ran so fast into his outstretched arms that she almost bent in half over them, almost broke them.

She shrieked Cullen’s name, pounding fists into Blackwall’s shoulders and chest, cutting her hands open on the edges of his armor.

“Let me go! Damn you!”

"Inquisitor! Inquisitor!" Blackwall shouted, struggling against the pure iron determination of a woman who crossed miles in minutes, who bent the Veil and tore the Fade to save the man she loved.

She kept shouting, no deep bellowing war cry but high pitched shouting of panic and distress.

"He's not dead!" Blackwall cried back trying to calm her or at least get her to stop fighting him because Maker's balls she hit hard. "He is grievously wounded, I'll tell you that, but he still yet lives, just please...stop."

The fight in her evaporated, fatigue finally catching up with her body. She went limp, sinking into the dirt, eyes fixed on the closed tent flap. "Dorian and Vivienne and Cassandra and the rest of the healers are in there with him. He is in good hands Inquisitor."

"Why is Cassandra in there with him, she is no healer?" Her voice was not her own, it was some otherworldly sound part horror, part grief, part some unnamable emotion that allowed her body to live while her heart withered and died in her chest.

Blackwall's face paled. He hadn’t lied, the Commander still lived, but to see the stricken faces of the Enchantress and the Tevinter told him what he needed to know. "To pray."

Iron Bull and the rest arrived shortly after, having traveled the more conventional way back. They found the Inquisitor still kneeling in the dirt before the medical tent.

Where she stayed, unmoving.

Knight-Captain Rylen had tried to move her, suggesting she wait in the tents for word.

Knight-Captain Rylen walked away, failed in his task and with a broken nose.

She lay there like a Tranquil, uncaring of who saw. On the day of a blessed victory their Inquisitor, the shining Herald of Andraste lay in the dirt weeping like a common beggar.

And no one, not even Empress Celene herself dared to reproach her.

Dorian emerged from the tent a short time later, covered in blood up to his elbows. He caught a glimpse of Sorora's anguished face and disappeared quickly to find some kind of water to wash the gore from him. He bent in front of a small stream, shaking as the blood ran free of his robes.

“She told you to keep an eye on him. She trusted you. Because of your weakness he will die and how many other innocents have you sent to their deaths?”

The templar hadn't given up his ghost just yet but he wouldn't survive the night, even with all the magic they'd pumped into him to keep him breathing.

With a wound like that, he just wasn't going to wake up.
Cassandra was in there now, lips hovering between praying for his recovery and issuing Last Rites.

Kneeling by the stream, the blood on his clothes was fresh and wet, it sluiced away easily, but Dorian kept his hands in the water trying to wash away the lingering unseen stain of his friend's blood.

He could not imagine what his death will do to Evelyn.

No, he could.

His death would kill her, ensure that she would not come back down from whatever mountaintop she climbed to face Corypheus. As for the Inquisition itself, losing him would hit as hard as losing the Inquisitor herself. Possibly harder since the average soldier had far more interactions with their Commander than they would have with the constantly absent Inquisitor.

And it was his fault.

Dorian prided himself on being a mage that lived free of the southern Circles' tyranny and repression. A mage educated in the ancient places where magic was born. Hailing from the place where his ancient forebears, for good or ill brought the very Golden City, itself to its knees.

And he could not summon a simple healing spell to save his friend.

What if that were Iron Bull? Dorian shook harder before burying his face in one of his hands choking back a sob.

They loved each other, even though neither had been so possessed to say the word. It was unnecessary for they loved as easy and as simply as breathing, bodies and hearts moving as one while their heads trailed along behind, pulled on heartstrings.

What would he do if Bull's string snapped?

"Grab the frayed edges and tie them back together," he resolved darkly. Whatever happened today, no matter what, Dorian would never be so inept again.

"Kadan..."

After everything they’ve been through, Iron Bull got foolish. He’d gone soft like he knew he would. And for a moment, after getting through Dumat, he thought they were all invincible, riding high, indestructible.

But this was war and Bull knew war, one of the only things he knew balls to bone other than Dorian’s heart. And in war, anything…everything can be snatched from you in less than a heartbeat.

An arm draped across Dorian's shoulder and pulled him tight to his chest. "You ahh...” Bull swallowed thickly. "You make sure you take care of yourself alright?"

Dorian swiveled in his lover’s grasp and yanked on Bull's chin, pulling the man in for a rough, husky, and desperate kiss. "As long as you promise the same, amatus."

"Okay...okay.” They pressed close together, foreheads touching, both feeling supremely guilty that they could have this moment while their friends could not.

“Dorian? Be honest. How bad is it?”
The mage didn't answer and averted his gaze.

"Oh fuck..."

**

After Dorian left, Evelyn could stand waiting no longer and entered the tent hearing Cassandra's murmured Chant, the tinkle of metal instruments, and sloshing bloody water. Her eyes fell on him and she sucked in a pained gasp of air before biting her lips and covering her face with her hands to knock the sight of him out of her head. From shoulder to hip, he was torn open, the organs had been knitted and the muscle above stitched up but the flesh, his flesh still hung open, like a tear in fabric exposing skin underneath. Vivienne's hands were wreathed in green magic, hovering over where his heart was, the skin slowly, too slowly sealing up.

"Inquisitor." The enchantress spoke with no tenderness. The invocation of her title a reminder that should the worst happen, there was still a job to do.

Damn her.

"You were not supposed to see this. We are almost done. Please wait outside."

"Let her stay," Cassandra said rising off her knees. "She should be here."

The Seeker pulled the Inquisitor into a hug the other woman did not return, her whole body having gone numb and responseless.

"It is in the Maker's hands now, and Cullen's. He will come back." Cassandra tried to sound reassuring but the Seeker was never adept at deception.

"And his heart may give out under all the magic we've surged through him. Or he may never wake up again because he lost so much blood."

"Enchanter!" Cassandra hissed in warning.

"She deserves to know the truth. And she should prepare for it. The war won't end just because the world has. Trust me. I know." Vivienne finished, the scar left behind was an ugly wine color and two fingers thick.

Evelyn's body loosened when she saw his chest rise and fall, unsteady and shallow but breathing. Cassandra placed a hand on her friend's shoulder and squeezed. "Take as much time as you need."

"But not too much," Vivienne warned. "We will be back to check on him."

Both women left the tent.

He lay on the ground, a pallet of furs, blankets, and large pillows underneath him. She pulled off her coat, greaves, most of her armor, leaving her in a simple tunic and trousers. She crawled to him, too scared to touch him. His life was made of glass, less than glass, and a touch my shatter him. So she curled up next to him, her fingertips barely brushing his limp and cool hand.

"I am here, you are safe." She moaned a watery whisper, eyes locked on the tidal pull of his chest, his breath didn't make a sound.

“You promised. You promised! You said you wouldn’t go anywhere! You promised me!”
Vivienne was right, she felt her world ending, slipping from her, the ground underneath morphing to quicksand, sucking in her feet, pulling her under. Drowning her.

Assan, Alphonse, Cousland, and now this. The only thing left to take from her would be her own life.

“When we were fighting, it was so bad I didn’t want to wake up anymore. I hoped that the anchor would kill me in my sleep so that this would all be over. I could never tell you this, you’d have me locked up. You’d never let me leave your sight. I didn’t want you to know, I didn’t want you think I wasn’t alright. Id didn’t want you to know how bad it was. The nightmares just weren’t worth it anymore. Unbearable. But you, you make it worth it.

“You make this all worth it. You always have. You were the one who let me know I could do this, that it’d never be so unbearable.

“Do you hear me Cullen? I love you so much and I cannot do this without you. And you made me a fucking promise soldier! You better come back!”

Her outburst did not rouse him. She looked upon his grey ashen face twisted in the grimace of pain and sleep. Unknowing of what to do, she lay there against him, weeping into his shoulder, straining her ears to hear his breathing and her eyes to see his chest rising and falling.

And rising.

And falling.

And...

Stop.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you,
Thank you,
Thank you.
Y’all are the reason, I can keep doing this.
OK. SEND HELP, THE MUSES HAVE LOST THEIR MIND!
He woke to sunlight streaming in through the hole in his roof, a gentle breeze summoning him from the depths of a long and harrowed slumber.

"Oh holy Maker!" A warm body pressed against him, pinning him to the pillows. "I thought you'd never wake up!"

Cullen blinked the sleep out of his eyes and focused them on the face hovering above him. A beautiful woman wrapped in skin the color of cloves, thick hair cascading around them arranged in thick black vines that swayed in the sweet breeze of the morning. She smelled like oranges, spices, and flowers, she smiled like summer.

His Lady.

His Evelyn.

And as she brushed her hand against his cheek, he felt cool metal press against him. A golden ring.

His Wife.

He kissed her hand and smiled. "I had a terrible dream."

"I could tell. I tried to wake you but you were dead to the world. Want to share, or was it one of those dreams?"

The longer he remained awake gazing into the warm amber of her eyes, the less and less he remembered of the nightmare.

"In the dream you were the Inquisitor and I was the Commander."

Evelyn snorted. "Me? Inquisitor?"

"It’s true, you were. And I was your Commander. And we were fighting these big horrible monsters and one hurt me and I...you were screaming, crying. I died."

Evelyn shuddered and kissed her husband soundly, halting any more discussion of his morbid nightmare.

"Well it’s gone now. And you've gotta get up. We've work to do, you're finally gonna fix our roof!"

He watched her from his perch on the roof of their modest cottage, heart swelling with joy as she set her knife to the doe skins she was working for the pair of gloves the actual Inquisitor had commissioned from her.

Inquisitor Aadar heard of Evelyn Rutherford's talent for hunting, skinning, and leatherworks and
had come here personally to ask for a pair of thick gloves to keep the Ferelden cold at bay.

Cullen tried and failed to keep an eye on his task of fixing their roof which had caved in during a particularly nasty spring storm. But his eyes kept raking over her, searching for any sign of distress or discomfort, paying particular attention to the very large swell around her midsection.

Their child.

"Greetings Clan Rutherford."

"Ah Dorian!"

Cullen continued to watch as the mage kissed his wife on the cheek then bent to give a welcoming pat to her belly. He surmised he had come to visit for a checkup as he often did at this late stage of the pregnancy. The mage lived in the repurposed Circle tower at the edge of town, the place having been abandoned when all the Circles fell some three years ago. The village healer and resident alchemist lived there with his ancient tomes and his partner, a massive qunari by the name of Iron Bull who hired out his services as body guard, bouncer, handyman; whatever needed breaking or fixing, the Bull was there to do the job.

No. That's not right. That's not who he is. This is not who you are.

Cullen shook off the sudden sharp voice in his head, waving it away like he did most of his lyrium flavored hallucinations.

"Need some help up there Other Boss?" The Bull shouted up to Cullen as he sat perched precariously on a thin beam trying to align the new slats of his roof straight this time.

"Other Boss?" Cullen questioned.

"Yeah, that's your name."

That is your name. But you are not this man.

It was a young man's voice, cool and low, monotone, almost like a Tranquil.

"No Bull, thank you. I've got to do this myself."

"You'll be no use if you fall and bust your ass. And you'll be no use if the baby doesn't have a fixed roof by the time she arrives."

Cullen bristled. "I'll have you know that child is a boy."

"Can't be."

"Why can't it?"

"Because I already put 50 royals on it being a girl down at Varric's!"

"He allows bets on my child!"

"Varric allows bets on anything, that's what he does, he takes bets."

Cullen accepted the Iron Bull's offer for help and together the two men made not quick but at least not sloppy work of the broken roof.
She is dying. Without you she withers. She fails.

"Cullen, you alright?"

The ex-templar shook his head, then nodded. "Yes, yes I'm fine."

"You better be fine because I'm about to kick your arse at chess."

"Dorian you haven't won a game against me since I let you win at Skyhold."

Three pairs of eyes stared at him.

"Skyhold? When did you go to Skyhold?"

You have to come back. We need you.

"Yes when? And without me, I hear Inquisitor Aadar is quite handsome." Dorian preened.

"Fetishist." Bull grumbled.

"Am not, it's no sin to find an attractive man attractive."

"Even if you've only found qunari men attractive?"

Dorian guffawed, so did Evelyn, though she began to hiccup and sputter when the baby decided to kick in with all the laughter.

"I'll have you know I don't just find qunari men attractive." The mage waggled his moustache at the templar who contemplated his ale as though it held the secret to life.

"You sure you're alright there dear? Do you need to lie down?"

No. You need to wake up. You're going too far away.

"I am awake."

"I know, I didn't say..." They trapped him in their confused stares. Cullen sputtered and excused himself.

"I ...I'm going to take a walk. Get some air."

He retreated quickly, unable to hear them cluck their tongues and whisper 'lyrium'.

She'll die without you.

The voice had only the barest flash of a face. Young and pale, with hair whiter than snow in a blizzard.

Like the blizzard he carried her through, clutched to him, the most precious thing in the world held tightly to his chest as she lay bleeding and dying.

"No, that's not..."

Come back to us.

"Tempt me not, demon! My place is here Void take you!"
"No its not."

"No!" he denied again. "My place is here!"

"Not. Your place is not here."

"This is my family, my home, my friends. My wife, my child." Cullen whimpered as the memories bleed through him like blotted ink on paper, spreading and spreading until the parchment turned black.

They returned to him. A lake, a gift given to protect, swirling snow, the sounds of her laughter.

He remembered the sounds of her screams, the smell of her blood, the feeling in his chest when she said 'I love you,' the feeling of his blood singing louder when he heard it, louder than the hissing that was already there. He recalled the feeling of her hair between his fingers, the taste of her on his tongue as he brought her to ecstasy. The way her skin bent when his fingers press into her hips, her brown flesh unmarred by his nibbles and bites.

She was a riot of color, texture, and sound.

And he knew her.

Yes. That's it. You can't go any farther, you won't be able to return. Come back!

Inquisitor.

Evelyn.

His Lady.

Outside in his fields where he once hoped his baby boy would play, Cullen crumpled to his knees and cried. Not because he did not wish to leave but because his dream, this dream, was beautiful and exquisite and he'll never have it.

Because it was not real.

"FOOLISH PRETTY TEMPLAR!"

His fields melted away, the grass turning to blighted stone. The night sky grew darker, malevolent, faded green and grey.

His dream bled away into his nightmare. Ferelden transformed into the Fade, and before him stood a figure wrapped in scaled, purple flesh.

A desire demon.

It tsk’d at him, clucking her sinuous tongue. “Pretty Templar, go back. I gave you everything you ever wanted. All of your desires, you had. Go back, love. Go back.”

“No!” His voice did not waver despite his fear. For far too long this beast tormented him, plaguing him with nightmares unending. No longer. He made a promise. And Commander Rutherford would keep his promises.

“To return to your world would mean suffering and death,” she pleaded, circling him slowly. “Stay here with me. You already know I know what you want.”
The creature changed forms, purple skin morphed to pale porcelain flesh, her horns melted into hair black as ravens’ feathers.

Solona.

“Knight-Captain, come home. I miss you so much.”

Years ago this vision would shake him to his knees, undo him, now his face barely even registered shock.

He smiled even.

“Begone demon whore. I am your plaything no longer!”

Because Cullen Rutherford made a promise.

A sword, wreathed in flame, appeared in his hand, he struck the thing wearing the illusion. The demon shrieked, reverting to her true form before shimmering and changing yet again.

“Oh my lion.”

The Evelyn from his dream, beautiful and ordinary, as he had always desired. She held a child, a chubby, pretty thing, somewhere between sunlight and silt with eyes unmistakably Rutherford gold.

“Come home, baby misses you.” The mother cooed, bouncing her child on her hip.

Cullen remained un-phased, he shouted at the illusion breaking it apart. “Your lies have no power over me anymore!”

He struck again and the form fizzled and disappeared, revealing the demon with tears and burns in her flesh.

“Templar, Pretty templar, think on what you do! I can give you everything! Name it!”

“I already have everything.”

Andraste’s flaming sword came down, fire scorching the very air and blackening the flesh of the creature as it struck home. It moaned again and tried to escape, to flee, to finally give up this tender piece of flesh she had been worrying at for over ten tasty years. But the Commander would not let it escape, another sword strike and the beast was crippled, falling into the blighted dirt.

“No…no…pretty Templar, no!”

The light of his Maker suffused him, his sword shone brighter. He needed no lyrium to defeat her now.

“Those who oppose thee.” He swung, hacking away an arm.

“Shall know the wrath of heaven.” Another strike, half a horn flew from her.

“Field and forest shall burn!” He drove his sword down into its leg and twisted.

“The seas shall rise and devour them! The wind shall tear their nations from the face of the Earth!”

It tried to change again, morphing through form after form, trying to find something that would
make the man pause his assault but nothing worked.

He had a promise to keep.

“Lighting shall rain down from the sky! They shall cry out to their false gods!”

Cullen, the shining knight, brought the blade of the Bride down upon the creature’s heart, wrenching from it a terrified scream before it fell limp and dead, body shuddering and flickering before being burned to ash, carried away on the wind.

“And find silence.”

His verse echoed through the Fade and any demons who sought to finish what the desire demon started fled from him, shadows chased away in his Light.

Cullen thought he heard a voice, booming in his bones, filling him up higher and brighter as his eyes slipped closed into sleep.

*Well done thy good and faithful servant.*

**

Cullen woke just like he did in the dream to a distressed but still beautiful brown face marred by tracks of dried tears.

"Evelyn," he whispered because his dry throat could do no more.

Cullen always kept his promises.
She made him kneel.

Every time she sat in judgment (baring one extenuating exception), her prisoners were bound but at least allowed the dignity to remain standing.

She made Samson kneel.

And he knelt without a snarl or a curse but with a very large purple bruise on his jaw that Iron Bull told Cullen she put there.

"He called her a whore and she popped him right in the mouth, just like that." The qunari made a punching motion in the air.

"Her knuckles and his jaw cracked something nasty but he shut up after that."

Such power made him tingle, coursing through him, suppressing the infernal itch of his healing wound. He stood in Josephine's place for this judgment after the long and exhausting process of convincing the ambassador he was fit enough to do so.

He was, but only because he had friends like Dorian and Iron Bull and a nurse like Evelyn. She stayed with him the entire time as they prepared to return to Skyhold. Feeding him, ("I do not require such attentions, I can hold my own fork thank you very much") changing his bandages, crying. Maker she cried a lot, more than he had ever seen from her ever. He could barely parse out the 'I love you's from the sound of her tearful sobbing.

"I'm alright, I'm alright." He had tried reassure her but when he went to hold her, the wound stretched and tore causing him to bleed anew. Evelyn remained wholly unconvinced.

"I'm not going anywhere. I promised remember?" He mumbled sheepishly as she dabbed away the fresh blood with a cloth.

His soldiers cheered when he finally emerged from the medical tent. Evelyn was concerned he wasn’t ready to walk on his own but kept silent. She understood it wouldn’t do to let the rank and file see their Commander carried out on a stretcher. Dorian and Iron Bull flanked him immediately, punching him on the back repeatedly in congratulations. Sera and Blackwall pressed close whispering lewd questions in his ear about just what kind of healing had gone on. And Rylen stood just within arm’s reach, debriefing the Commander with the after action report.

He wasn’t ready to walk on his own.
But his friends kept him on his feet.

Once they were packed up and headed back to Skyhold, the Inquisitor kept him company in the wagon (pride or no, he could not ride back) telling him unfunny jokes and recounting her stories of hunting with Assan.

She made him laugh, played in his hair, and tickled him lightly when his wound began to burn and sting to take his mind off the pain. And every night during the journey home in that wooden, jerky cart, she fell asleep holding him tightly to her chest, so close he could only breathe her air and only hear her noisy, stomping heartbeat.

"Safe and solid, protecting and proud. You feel like quiet, stronger when she holds you."

"Thank you Cole," Cullen whispered, rising his head from her chest as she slept. "You brought me back."

The boy rode beside the cart on Jackson, the Inquisitor's mount unminding of the unorthodox rider.

"You're welcome." He beamed. "I helped."

He wasn't well enough to don armor yet so he stood in judgment without it, preferring a simple cotton tunic and the comfort of his cloak.

His voice boomed, bouncing off the stones of the Main Hall as he read aloud the charges against Raleigh Samson.

His former friend kept quiet as his voice rang through the silent hall enumerating the many sins against him. But Samson’s eyes never wavered from his judge’s face; from his knees, he stared the Inquisitor down. Defeated, but defiant.

“The red lyrium will steal your vengeance,” Samson snarled, his first words since she damn near broke his jaw. “You know what it does. Corypheus only delayed my corruption.”

The giddy bubbly feeling of watching her work, watching her be powerful was only matched and suddenly superseded by his anger. The Order was destroyed and ruined and corrupted. His brothers and sisters and friends gone and given to madness.

Because of him.

“Are you still loyal to that thing?” Cullen hissed, keeping his voice down lest he start to yell. “He poisoned the Order, used them to kill thousands!”

Samson’s laugh came out more like a bark. “templars have always been used. How many of them were left to rot like I was? After the Chantry burned away their minds!”

Samson spat. “Piss on it.”

Evelyn’s face didn’t even register disgust, just cold icy indifference and Maker’s breath Cullen loved her for it.

“I followed him so at least Templars could die at their best!”

The Inquisitor seemed to consider this, leaning back casually in her throne, remembering the easy camaraderie she witness at the Well, still regarding her prisoner with the same icy burning in molten glass eyes.
“Same lie as the Chantry, the prophet just isn’t as pretty.” Samson licked his lips obscenely, knowing it’d rile the Commander something fierce. He respected the Inquisitor, respected anyone who could land a punch like that. He harbored no such respect for that piss-stain Commander of hers though, it’d be good to get under his skin.

Cullen squeezed his hands into fists and regretted at least not wearing his sword so he could have something to grip. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself in check.

“Don’t bullshit me Raleigh. I know what your templars thought. I know what you thought. They believed your cause righteous. They believed Corypheus’s madness. So do you.”

“Not your business Inquisitor.”

The Commander, sensing a vulnerability, positioned himself to twist the knife a little bit. “Your friend Maddox was so loyal, he killed himself. For you.”

It worked. Samson broke her gaze and cast it to the floor.

“They were always going to die,” Samson rejoined after a slight pause. “I saw what Corypheus was doing, so yeah I fed them hope instead of despair. I made them believe their pain had purpose just like the Chantry does. Ain’t that right Commander?”

Red rimmed eyes clashed with golden fury and this time Cullen flinched.

Because he was not wrong.

“It ended, as well as anything else I’ve ever done. Everything I’ve cared about is destroyed.”

The Inquisitor stood, something she also never did during her judgements (again, barring that one exception). They always stood, she always sat. They never knelt, she never stood.

But there they were.

“Very well… Raleigh Samson…”

**

They put him in the undercroft to consult with Dagna but the arcanist was under strict instruction to not experiment on the man. He would tell Dagna everything he knew about red lyrium, while he would also tell Cullen everything else he knew about the corrupted wardens, red templar holdouts, and Corypheus’s final plans.

The Commander entered his cell. He snarled a dismissal to Dagna who fled from the Undercroft with a squeak leaving the men alone. Samson glared but didn’t move or speak from his position on the floor. The bed was entirely too soft to be slept upon.

Cullen dragged in a chair and sat, folding his hands over one another, breathing deeply, regaining control of his wild heartbeat. Just being this close to the man, after knowing what he’s done, after knowing what he’s said to the Inquisitor, how he hurt her. It took every last ounce of his training to not throttle the man to death, injury be damned.

“I want the location of every last red templar hideout down to the blade of grass.”

The red templar general yawned and gave a half bored look. “Piss on your map. I ain’t giving you shit.”
“Don’t make me ask you twice.”

“Or what? You can’t harm me. You ain’t got it in ya. Never did. Prolly why you sent your whore after me instead of comin’ yourself.”

He knew better than to use the slur in front of her, his jaw still throbbed. Him, however, oh yes, it’d burn him up something pretty. But to his credit, Cullen didn’t even pink.

“Ha!” Samson barked. “Half a dozen years ago you’da been redder than a whore’s cunt. Tell me something, that darkie make a man outta you finally?”

The muscles in Cullen’s neck bulged as he clamped down on the inside of his cheek again. Samson would not unravel him. Not anymore.

“Don’t do this. You have a chance to make right—do good for a change. Do better. Help us do better.”

“Help! By throwin’ away my soldiers—my kin—if that’s helpin’, fuck your help. I’ve got my honor. Unlike you.”

“You call leading the army that burned half of Thedas to the ground honorable!” He wasn’t screaming, not yet, but he was close.

“No, but those were my soldiers. Mine. When I had nothing else, I had them. And they had me. And I will. Not! Give them up to be slaughtered by your pretty little Marcher whore.”

White pain thumped behind his eyes. The hissing picked up on Samson’s insults and echoed them louder in his head, chanting *whore, whore, whore!*

“They are monsters. Not soldiers.” He ground out through clenched teeth.

“From where I’m sitting Knight-Commander, you’re the monster.”

“I am nothing like you.”

“No, you ain’t. Tell me somethin’ does your whore know about what you really are? She looks at you like the sun shines outta your arse. Does she even know? Know about the babies you ripped from mothers teats. About the beatings and rapes you pushed aside? About the scores of poor fucks you gave the rite of tranquility to for no more an offense than talking outta turn. You coward!”

Samson spat, a nervous tic of his it seemed before rising to his feet to stare down the seated Commander. Only he hadn't had a drop of red or blue in a desperately long time and his footing wobbled.

"I am no coward!" Cullen answered standing. The Inquisitor under no uncertain terms decreed that Samson not be harmed. But if the bastard kept pushing... "I fought against Meredith. I knew she was losing her grip."

"You only did that when the Champion put the writing on the fucking wall. Where were your BALLS before all that! How dare you stand there and judge me for taking care of my men when no one else would! I did right by them, best I could. And a damn sight better than you did by any of the people you were supposed to take care of!"

Cullen felt himself ready his old standby retort. They were mages, they were dangerous. I was protecting the people. But that wasn’t, that couldn't be his old defense anymore. The Inquisition
showed him so much, did so much to shatter his old paradigms. His best friend was a mage and his lover was a woman who, at one time, chose mages over the Order and made him accept why.

So he let Samson's accusation stand.

After all, it was the truth.

The wolf sensed an opening a lunged for it. He would make the lion bleed. Remind that golden fucking Chantry boy that you should never corner a dangerous animal. Twist the knife in his gut just like that rat bastard did with Maddox.

"How would you feel if I stole into her quarters late at night and raped her bloody just like how you let all those templars do to all those mages? Make her scream, break her in half and rip her from you the way you've ripped everything from me! Treat her like you treated those mages! You're a coward bastard Rutherford, and you've got a lot of fucking nerve to call me the monster."

Action exploded, several things happened all at once far too quickly for either man to realize who did what first. Someone roared, someone else roared back, furniture overturned, hands were scrabbling and scratching and then twin arrows whistled so sharp and so close that both men staggered back, falling onto their asses.

"Enough!"

The Inquisitor.

Neither men knew how long she stood there watching.

"Commander, I believe your interrogation of the prisoner is at an end for the day."

"Yes Inquisitor." The Commander answered, suitably chastened. He rose to his feet and stalked out of the Undercroft, fleeing from her glare.

Evelyn turned to her prisoner.

"Samson, I didn't take your head for a reason." Two more whistles, arrows flying so close to either side of his ears that their wake stung him. "But I can still take parts of it."

"Yes Inquisitor." Samson replied before closing the door on his cell.

Chapter End Notes

Bae is problematic. We understand this. We aren't gonna hand wave away what he's done.

Is there anywhere in the canon that references Samson being compared to a wolf? Or was that just something I saw in AU fanart and took it as gospel truth?

Another Question:

If I double post every day this week, I could be done with Into Darkness, Unafraid by my birthday. (Friday)
Should I do this thing?
Let Me Give You My Life

Chapter Notes

Can't help it, the reference is too perfect. Fits too damn well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She found him much later, hands clasped in solemn prayer, kneeling in the chapel before the silent statue of her boss.

"Though all before me is shadow, Yet shall the Maker be my guide.."

Evelyn didn't wish to interrupt his prayers and focused on the sound of his voice as it coursed through the Chant. The Inquisitor saw the muscles in his back tense and flex, his entire body seeming to vibrate with every verse. The candle light and the sun struck him from all angles, illuminating him with an ethereal golden light that stunned her still.

"I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."

She stood in the presence of the Bride, in Her holy place. She'd been in the Fade, and seen the Black City with her own damn eyes. She felt the magic of the Maker course from her left hand pulsing and undulating, ripping up her flesh just under the skin. Her family, nuclear and extended, were some of the most devout patrons of the Chantry, but Evelyn Trevelyan never felt closer to any god than when Cullen Rutherford whispered the Chant of Light.

"A prayer for you?" She asked when he finished.

"For those we have lost and those I am afraid to lose.” He rose from his knees to his feet, wincing a little. His wound had healed well but it still pulled and stretched in places that made him itch uncomfortably. It didn’t hurt, no, and it didn’t really preclude him from fighting, but he still felt odd somehow.

“How much of that did you hear, Samson and I?" He turned to face her, hope in his eyes that she hadn't heard too much. The smile she returned was strained, pulling at the corners of her mouth and her eyes.

“Enough.” She answered, offering no more explanation.

“All of it then.” He looked mournful, in grief as though he lost something. If she ever believed he was a good man, a noble man, she didn't anymore.

"I know what you're thinking.” She whispered in the solemn silence of the chapel.

"Oh, know my thoughts so easy do you?” He smiled mirthlessly.

"You're not a monster."
He gasped softly, confirming her suspicions. "How can you say that? You heard what he said."

"You did things, Cullen. Let things happen." B answered. "People suffered, people died. I won't insult you by saying none of that matters now because it still does. Your past informs who you are, Cullen. And that past got pretty damn dark. Your present actions though, those define you. And your actions during the rebellion and here now, as the Commander as my Commander; you haven't been a monster for a long time now."

"Evelyn, stop. Don't try to..." He tried to approach her, but she backed away from him, nearly knocking Andraste's offerings over.

"No." She drew away from him. "I'm the only monster here. I murdered people. I murdered templars and wardens and people I've never met. Sliced the heads off a couple of bandits because I was so fucking angry. Let a mage burn herself alive because I intended to take her humanity away. That was me. All me. I was that monster."

She remembered the shame in his eyes when she asked him what he would have done. Evelyn would never forget it, she would never allow that to happen again.

"And yet a man loves me all the same. A man who didn't let his previous hatred of mages stop him from becoming best friends with a damn necromancer from the Imperium. A man who struggles every day to give the best to his soldiers when it's a Maker-damn ordeal just to get out of bed."

Passion bled all over her voice as it pitched between hissed whispers and almost shrill shrieks. Her beloved vines danced against her shoulders with every slice of her arm, and her eyes glittered in the Chantry candlelight caught on the razor's edge of tears. She would make him know he wasn't the monster Samson said he was.

"You were the one that got us through and out of the temple. You were the one who kept us from tearing each other to pieces. That was you. When I stepped out of the Fade, when Cassandra and Leliana put me in fucking chains, you didn't look at me like I was some terrorist or murderer or thing to be examined. Yours was the first voice who asked me if I was okay. And you didn't call me Herald or Lady Trevelyan. What did you call me?"

"My lady." He answered with whispered nostalgia.

"And I've been yours ever since." She beat her fist on her chest, the thump of it echoing in the tiny chapel.

"I thought I lost you back there, and I was ready to let everything to fall apart because your strength, all that strength, keeps me together."

"B," He breathed her name, whispered more solemnly and more lovingly than any prayer he ever uttered. He pulled her to him now, and they fit together as though no one else was ever meant to be in the spaces between their arms.

"You can't believe that, can you? That you're a monster?"

"I remember the look in your sister's eyes, the look in that mage’s eyes, I remember the look in Samson's. If he's a monster, what does that make me? I could have saved them, those Templars. And I didn’t. I could have stopped Samson before he even got started. Those lives, the ones the templars took and the templar’s themselves, could have been saved. Phillip could have been saved. There could have been another way and I'll never know. How can you even look at me? Those were your brethren."
Cullen was a templar, in his heart of hearts, soul of souls, he would always be one. But he did not serve his charges the way magic served man.

He ruled them, almost to his ruin.

"You're right, we will never know. But you saved those who needed you the most. Of the two of us, you should have been the templar, my lady, you protected your mages better than I ever have. You did the right thing, it was always the right thing. With the work you’ve done, nothing like Kirkwall will ever happen again."

"Cullen." A tiny revelation, yet no less shocking. She held him tighter in the quiet of the chapel and together they both trembled, the weight of the said and unsaid pressing down upon them.

"I am afraid." Cullen confessed after a time of easy embrace.

"I am too. Oh Maker I am too."

"What more is this war capable of?" he continued, seemingly pulling the words straight from Evelyn's mind. "After Mythal, with Samson in our hands, it's only a matter of time before Corypheus retaliates and Andraste preserve me, I must send you to him." He gripped her, hands holding so fiercely they were on the cusp of shaking, digging into her skin. "And I...well I'm not as hardy as I’d like to think I am."

His close call in the Arbor Wilds had proven that at any time, at any moment, even at the height of their victory, their power, everything could be taken from them. They could be ripped away from each other as quickly as a sword’s strike, or a heartbeat’s failure.

“You ain’t allowed to go anywhere, you hear me? I cannot do this without you.” She murmured, his neck wet with her silent tears. “Even with luck on my side.”

He squeezed her tighter, his kisses were chaste and sweet and hungry and feverish.

"I know, and whatever happens, you will come back." She kissed him harder, pulling him until her back struck against one of the stone walls of the chapel. He pushed her harder into the wall, slipping his thigh between her legs. So frustrated with his own inability to guarantee her safety, her life, he almost cried out in anger, in grief. He kissed her harder, commanded her with his mouth, demanded of her. His hands on her arms flew to grasp at her hips and he rolled into her, his body roaring at her his need.

Evelyn mewed, body on fire from what could only be described as ardent worship. Cullen, sweet Cullen, felt hot and desperate against her, utterly torn apart.

"Cullen." She moaned, caught between Divinity and Profanity.

"Allow me this." He quaked, she shivered, and they held on. “You will live. And I will live. And you will come back. And when you do, we will live together.”

Oh.

Right now. In this moment, crushed up against one of the walls of Skyhold's Chantry, they were alive.

He was alive and she was alive and together they lived. Fingers pushed and caressed and pulled and untied and they lived. Mouth seared against mouth, tongue slid tenderly against lip and teeth
and neck and they lived.

She moaned his name and he sighed hers and they lived.

He pushed inside of her and she joined with him and they lived.

Bright and full and golden and noisy.

They lived.

Chapter End Notes

There are six chapters left.
Six.
You might wanna hold on right now.
She was smiling, hadn’t felt a smile like this in ages, the kind that stretches from your toes to your scalp and makes everything tingle with the good kind of hurt along the way. This felt good, and she needed a good feeling after everything...

Cullen came up behind her, in the tavern after Varric managed to wheedle out of her a game or two of Wicked Grace. His face was still a little drawn, sullen, but seeing his friends and her friends and her…that face broke apart and the sun shined in even though twilight just ended.

“Deal me in,” he said, sitting between Iron Bull and Dorian.

“Me too,” she answered sitting across from him.

**

“Now I think it’s time for our resident storyteller to spin a tale, don’t you think Cole?”

Cole nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, please.”


“C’mon B, tell us a story.” Dorian encouraged slumping drunkenly against Iron Bull.

Cole sipped his warm milk, having been thoroughly put off liquor from his previous experience and witnessing Sera snoring loudly under the table. He stared at Evelyn wide eyed and expectantly. The boy loved stories, especially ones about rabbits.

Evelyn didn’t have any stories about rabbits but maybe...

"They call Fereldens the Dog Lords," She started, smiling softly when Cole perked up at the mentioning of dogs. "And rightly so, but we have Mabari in the Free Marches too. I had one, a strong, loyal hound who I named Cousland in honor of the Heroine of Ferelden."

Evelyn the younger was a wild thing, made so by her desperate bone deep need to be free of the circumstances birth had bestowed upon her. So although she could not permanently escape the violent attentions of her father for fear of those violent attentions being paid to her beloved brother and half-beloved sister-in-law--individuals who would never survive said attentions--she could escape them temporarily. She took bow and arrow and fled into the forest, never staying gone for more than three or four days because that's how long it took for Gareth to come back around into one of his moods.
She took little liberties where she could since she was afforded nothing greater. She let her hair grow out into the thick vines her mother and father hated, she insisted on dressing in the Dalish hunting leathers Assan had left her when she died. She bathed sparingly, nothing so rank as to be filthy, but she let herself go long enough where the odor of the outdoors, of horseflesh, wet dog, and animal blood were slightly noticeable.

Her mother ignored it, as was her way. And her father, for the most part, let it go, blaming her intractability on her youth unknowing that she was to be this way right up until she fled from him for almost murdering her in her bed some 8 or so years later. But the times when her wildness reflected poorly upon him, or made him think they were reflecting poorly (because that was just as bad), that's when things got dark.

"There was a man," Evelyn didn't wish to specify exactly who this man was. But she knew that everyone at the table, with the possible exception of Sera considering she was under the table, understood she was speaking of her father. "I insulted him."

She cursed at him during the throes of their fights, made his anger burn hot and bright because it meant it'd be longer between bouts of it. Most of it was drink fueled brought on by the perceived impotence of his station. He was a man with wealth and no power with no real way to gain access to the latter for no other reason than the shading of his flesh--something he could not control.

And damn did Bann Gareth Leandro Trevelyan hate things that were out of his control.

Like his panty waste of a youngest son who had no more ambition than to be a priest in the Chantry. Not even a Chancellor, but just a simple Chanter. At least that'd keep him away from that damn elf boy.

Or his useless daughter-in-law with barely a penny or parcel of land to her name.

Or his youngest daughter, the only one of his children with any real talent or shrewdness who insisted on wasting those gifts hunting in the forest like those damned Lavellan knife-ears or sleeping in the barn with the dogs like a Maker-fucked Ferelden.

"So he said I 'was a bitch better suited to the barn than to a noble's house.'"

She smiled at him with blood in her teeth, and Gareth's fist paused for moment.

"The man seemed confused when I laughed at him. I raised some of the best hounds in Ostwick. Ate with them, slept with them in the barn. With their mothers, I eased them into life, and when they got too old or too sick or too pained, with my own hand I eased them out."

Her friends, the closest of her Circle listened to her tale with rapt attention, especially Cullen. Her voice made him unable to focus on the fact that he was naked without a stitch to his very name. Even though she'd seen him thus before--that didn't preclude this particular kind of rank embarrassment.

Varric schemed from across the table, no doubt planning to turn this incident into one of the more sordid chapters in the trash he wrote. Something that would most likely end with him giving or receiving some sort of sexual favor in some very public place.

And Iron Bull smirked next to him, knowing that no matter what he will never, no matter how long their friendship lasts, let him hear the end of it.

They'll be in their fifties and Cullen could already imagine the conversation.
"Hey, Other Boss."

"What?"

"Remember that time when..."

"Yes Bull."

"That was great wasn't it?"

"No Bull."

Cole nodded enthusiastically leaning closer to Evelyn as she told her tale. He felt a weird and unexplainable connection with the Inquisitor about the need to ease the suffering of her beloved creatures.

She understands, he thought with a dreamy rapturous sigh. She understands what I am, she feels what I do too!

Cole had many friends. They had feathers and squawked, or had fur and growled. Varric was his friend too, making sure he ate good food and not pancakes and cookies with Sera all the time. And Solas too, who made sure he understood that it was impolite to blurt out what people were thinking.

“Straight, structured, strong, her magic is ordered, beams of a building, tall and true. He wants to get his fingers on the blackprint.”

Solas blanched paler than cream spilled in snow. Madam de Fer had a curious look on her face when she addressed Cole who let the words slip free.

“Cole, dear, don’t you mean blueprint?” She asked, talking to Cole but never removing her eyes from Solas.

“No.” Cole answered. Vivienne smiled, one of her true ones, at the elf before walking away. And they never spoke of the incident again.

But Evelyn, as she told her tale, she more than cared for him. She understood him. And oh was that wonderful.

"Calling me that." Evelyn continued softly. "Was possibly the greatest compliment he could have paid me."

Alphonse cowered in the corner, the sole witness to his father's display of madness. Alphy saw his sister laugh in his father's face and knew everything would be alright.

"Alphonse knew that. That the man's words would only enhance me instead of degrade me."

Alphy was the older brother. It should have been him to protect her. But the Maker made him a certain way, gave him a certain weakness and a certain strength. The Maker also gave Alphy the sense to know what he could and could not do with it.

He did not have the strength to fight, but he had the courage to retreat. He just prayed his sister, his BB would forgive him.

"So forever after he called me 'BB'. Barn bitch. Or just 'B' for short."
Most of the table cheered the ending of her story. Dorian pounded his tankard on the table. "Here here! Well done my dear!" He grinned infinitely proud of her.

Varric smiled wildly. Oh yeah, that was definitely going in a book.

Cullen swallowed a bitter grimace. It was distasteful that such a term had been applied to her, but this had been her secret name with a secret strength. Its use granted to the most trusted of her friends. He cherished that privilege and held it close to his heart.

Iron Bull, however, hated the tale. Not because of what was in it, no. A story like that made him understand why the Boss was the Boss and why he would follow her into Madness and back with a smile on his grey, scarred face.

He hated the story because it was the kind you told when you knew you weren't going to be telling any more.

The warrior and the Inquisitor made eye contact.

And both knew it.

**

With that cathartic tale, one she'd never told anybody, the night of Wicked Grace ended.

Josie and Blackwall departed, dainty hand within well-built arm, to hoots and hollers that Evelyn was thankful weren't directed at her and Cullen for a change. The couple's departure alerted her to the lateness of the hour and the fact that she was now in possession (on bequeathment from Josie) of all of Cullen's clothes and that she had the incredible power of deciding what to do with them and him.

She cast mischievous glances at Varric who got the hint extremely quickly, and while she pointedly avoided the Iron Bull's glare because of the little revelation they had shared moments before-- she knew if she landed the same glance at Dorian, her qunari problem would be avoided for just a little while longer.

She waggled her eyebrows at her drunken friend and had to knock her head in Cullen's direction when he didn't understand her cue in his ale soaked haze.

The Tevinter made a comical 'O' face when the hint finally fell upon him. He snickered uncontrollably and started to pull on Iron Bull's wrists which caused Cullen to blush even harder than the permanent red that settled on him the moment he lost his smalls. The Charger though, while gracious enough to heed his lover pulling him to bed, wasn't going to let the moment that passed between him and his Boss slide without comment. Yet when a pair of sepia toned, impossibly soft lips found his in a very urgent come-along-now-love kiss, all thoughts flew from him double quick.

Cole, the only patron left in the room (besides Sera but she was passed out and thus didn't count), would prove a little more difficult to remove.

"Cole, darling." Evelyn cooed as both pairs of eyes, Commander and Inquisitor, alighted on him.

"I know," he answered sighing, wishing for more tales about dogs and understanding. "You're wearing too many clothes."

As Cole shimmered out of view, Evelyn quickly placed a hand on his still yet corporeal form.
"Cole" she admonished gently.

The human boy, ghostly child smiled sheepishly, mumbled something about trying, and rose to bodily walk out the door.

Alone (mostly) at last.

The Commander's breastplate, greaves, vambraces, tunic, breeches (Cullen was a very *shitty* Grace player and a dumb one too for betting against Josephine), gambeson, boots, socks, gloves and smalls lay temptingly at his Inquisitor's feet. His cloak though, she wrapped around herself-- the mane of it sitting so high around her neck and head that it actually looked like a lion's mane on her and not just a furry mantle as it did on him. She pressed the fur to her face, inhaling deeply, relishing the scent of him, elderflower and oakmoss. Under the spell of the primal odor of his sweat, his soap, his metal, and his *power*, she moaned lasciviously, extravagantly, wantonly; partly because of what it would do to him and mostly because of what his nudity and his complete and utter helplessness was doing to her.

Cullen remained on his ass, table hiding a half-hardened cock that fully hardened when she moaned *that* way and when she looked at him *that* way.

"Are you going to make me walk...?"

"Silence," she corrected with a sing-songy voice.

Neither noticed, but at this point, Sera woke from her stupor yet took great pains to ensure she remained undetected. She grinned, mouth splitting wider than that tavern girl's legs when she heard the audible gulp coming from the Commander.

'Atta girl, Quizzy.' Sera thought. *Didn't know ya' had it in ya'. Kinky bitch. Lucky bastard!*

"Beg for it back." She hugged herself to his mantle yet again, rolling her eyes to the back of her head as though in the throes of ecstasy. "And I may be generous."

"Evelyn, please." He started.

She tsked at him, waving her index finger back and forth. Cullen gulped thickly, his manhood twitched even harder as she waited, hoping, *expecting* that he'd correct his mistake himself.

"Inquisitor," the bottom of his jaw trembled and he had to rule his face to prevent his teeth from clicking together under the sheer power of her gaze and her expectations. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Allow me the honor of having my cloak back. Please...my lady."

Oh he was good, throwing that extra bit in there at the end because he knew the power of that particular phrase.

"Oh but darling, my darling Commander, why would you deprive me of the vision of all your glory? Rise." She commanded, imperial power dripping off every word. Back straight, chin high, oh she was queenly. Any order that came from her like that...he'd follow. "So that I may see it."

Sera stuck a fist in her mouth to keep from screaming. Not because of anything Cullen had going on (but if she was being appreciably objective he had a great good deal going on) no, but Adraste's flaming arse the *Inquisitor*. 
Cullen felt it too, but he didn't suppress his moan as he stood slowly to reveal all of himself including his aching, leaking arousal.

Evelyn watched with delight as his knees knocked and with greater delight that he took no pains to cover himself. She clenched her thighs together, almost overpowered, mind almost overruled to forget the whole damn thing and have him right there on the table.

Instead.

She stepped forward and he reached a hand out to take the cloak from her.

Bad move. She swatted his hand away with a light smack, aroused reproach shining in her feral flavored amber eyes.

"You take nothing from me, dear heart. You only get what I give."

With that, she swung the cloak around his shoulders a little disappointed that it was long enough to cover the important bits of him.

"You are to follow behind me no more, no less than 5 paces. Eyes on the ground, and I trust you'll keep them there. Follow these instructions and any more I choose to give and you'll receive back the rest. Am I understood?"

She watched his face. Keen huntress' eyes looking, searching, scouring for the barest hint of embarrassment, reluctance, or shame, knowing this new game would end immediately with profuse apology if she found it. Instead, oh Maker help her, his eyes burned brighter and he licked his lips because if it were at all possible, his mouth went both dry and wet from anticipation.

Truth was, Cullen was so hard, so impossibly, relentlessly, achingly hard-- he was about to explode from the sound of the command in her voice alone.

Sera was too.

**

“Kneel.”

She gorged herself on the tiny whines he made as she made him touch himself during his half-naked walk of shame. Took pleasure in the gasps and the pleas he tried to suppress thinking she wouldn’t hear them as he walked dutifully behind her, eyes to the ground. The battlements had been cleared of patrolling soldiers and prying eyes.

Thanks Varric.

And so he was spared that particular bit of ignominy, yet he wasn’t going to even pretend that the thought of capture or observation didn’t thrill his cock to the hardness strength of silverite.

Back in the relative safety of his quarters, she sat on the edge of his bed, an imperious look on her face as he waited patiently by the ladder access hatch for her instruction.

She commanded him to kneel.

“You seek absolution for your sins. Name them.” How she managed to sound like both the madam of the Blooming Rose and the Mother Superior of the Chantry unnerved him.

Enflamed him.
“Lust.” He groaned.

Cullen opened his mouth to confess more but she held up a finger for silence.

“Lust, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Describe for me the sin of your lust.”

“I… I desire a woman. I wish to do things to her. Sinful things.”

“Name them.”

“I wish to… Oh Maker.”

As he summoned the courage to continue speaking, Evelyn took her bow calloused fingers and started to unbutton the claps on her tunic. Starting at the topmost button revealing the tender curve of her neck. He did not miss the way her fingertips lingered on the dip in her throat and every bit of skin each button revealed. Divested of top, she began to ply at breastband, then pants.

“Go on sinner.” She encouraged while she worked. “What will you do to this woman?”

He groaned her name but swallowed it back when he saw the fury in her eyes. He was not permitted to speak her name yet. “I… I want.”

“Give voice to your desires and you will be cleansed of your sins.”

“I want to fuck her!” He moaned. "I want to bury myself between her thighs and fuck her until my legs stop working.”

Cullen’s skin burned, hot desire blistering his self-control. The Commander let loose a ragged, grateful breath when he saw a reflection of his pained look flash across her face. Testing his limits and hers, he continued. “I can’t control myself, I wouldn’t be able to, she makes me pant like an animal in heat, and I’d take her like an animal, rough and ragged. I’d pound into her until I’d fill every inch of her with every inch of me. I’d claim her, make her mine, fuck her until she’s bowlegged.”

The bulge of her clenched jaw let him know it was working. The volume of his voice bottomed out and Evelyn strained to hear him whisper.

“I’d make her come, over and over, with lips and mouth, and tongue and cock. I’d worship her as she begged me for more. I’d give her…”


On trembling leg he approached her. She was nude completely, dark skin shining like lacquered ebony in the candlelight. It was nigh impossible to keep his eyes on her face when her legs were still parted, wide open and inviting. He didn't dare, he was almost afraid of the punishment she'd extract from him.

And thrilled.

Mostly thrilled.

The Inquisitor halted him inches from her, so close the heat of his body scorched her.
Cullen moaned helplessly when she rose to her feet, took a step towards him, her nipples brushing against his chest. But she pressed no closer, instead she took her pointer finger, scratched its long nail under his jaw, scraping from earlobe to chin tilting his head back as though she were inspecting him.

His scar bisected his body in one long deep red slash. It had healed completely, but this was the remainder, a reminder of what he had gone through and survived. She kissed him the length of it. Hip to shoulder, pausing just over his heart to press the deepest of kisses there. Light little things she punctuated with soft moans of desire that made Cullen’s blood boil.

She saw his heart pounding through the wine colored scar across it. His knuckles were white and his cock was flushed almost a violent violet.

But rather than release him, she pushed him that much further. She placed a fingertip at the top of his head, applied the barest pressure, and almost howled at the ease with which he understood her and fell gracefully back to his knees.

"Seek absolution, sinner."

Evelyn spread her legs wide revealing her wet wondrous treasure.

"Pray." She commanded.

He obeyed.

**

She woke in the darkest hour of the night, those last few hours of total blackness before the first rays of sunlight broke across the horizon. She could claim more time to sleep if she wished, but the moment her eyes opened, she knew all rest was lost to her.

Sparing herself a bit of self-indulgence, she carefully extracted herself from the bed and grabbed trousers, boots, and Cullen’s cloak, immediately comforted by its red softness.

Minutes later, Evelyn arrived at that spot on the battlements, the one where they kissed so long ago. She gazed out over the crenellations, running her fingers over the stone, rough texture leaving indents in the pads of her fingers.

“Can’t sleep?”

“You’re supposed to be the one sleeping. Do you have some magic powers that allow you to sense me?”

“What can I say?” his white cotton shift fluttered in the breeze, billowing open the untied laces at his neck showing the deep wine of the scar across his chest. He never flinched from her when she touched or kissed it. Almost like he was proud of it, or at least not afraid of it. Lions have scars too, he said when she asked him. At least yours do.

“They call me the Lion of Ferelden, why? I don’t know, I’ve spent more time in the Marches than I have here. But I have a nose for you, my lady. I’d be better named the Mabari of Ferelden.”

He saw her smile in the dark. “Nah, you’re a poor…”

Her life was knocked from her body, pulled out forcibly. Her speech arrested mid-sentence and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. She fell stricken, like the flame of a candle suddenly puffed out.
In the space of half a heartbeat she was gone, a thick river of blood streaming from both nostrils. Cullen screamed her name loud enough to eclipse the boom of the breach restored. Thick, citadel sized chunks of rocks rose in the air aided by green magic that swirled and pulsed with the anchor on her hand. Tendrils of fel magic sparked up her arm no longer stopping at her elbow or her shoulder. Instead they snaked up her neck and across her chest and down her torso like a swarming cancer loosed upon her entire body; malignant and fatal.

Corypheus.

He was here.

She came back to consciousness with a start, a flame touched to fuel. Her head swam, like her brain sat in a bowl of water, sloshing around with every shake of her head. The green energy subsided, sucked back up into the anchor, but it left a tingling numbing sensation in all the places it touched.

"Maker's breath are you alright?"

She tipped two fingers to her nose and felt the blood there, it came away tacky and bright red. The Chantry bell in her mind tolled the hour. Midnight.

Her time, the snatched joy, the tender moments, the stolen laughter, was up.

The doors across Skyhold opened, its residents pouring out to gaze and gape at the sky. They murmured, they screamed, they prayed.

Leliana appeared, dressed in an amalgam of bedclothes and armor. From Cullen’s arms, face covered in blood, the Inquisitor hardened her heart to its doom and shouted.

“War Room. Now!”

**

All of them assembled, gathered around the war table in perfect quiet. Cullen spoke first.

"Inquisitor, we have no forces to send with you, we must wait for them to return from the Arbor Wilds."

"I don't have that kinda time Commander. I must go now before it's too late.

“It’s time to finish this. And I…” She counted the faces.

Her entire circle snapped their eyes to her and she smiled, the cold determination of her face replaced with a warm smile.

"My friends," she bowed. It was a Marcher bow with her right hand fisted over her heart and her left hand folded behind her back. She bowed to them like so many had bowed to her before.

"Thank you. I am proud to have called each and every one of you friend. There is only one more fight left. One more and this will all be over. Please, give me one more fight."

"Inquisitor," Cullen responded, his eyes shining. "We will give you everything."
Chapter End Notes

Catch the reference and win absolutely nothing.

Personal h/c that Solas might harbor the tiniest of crushes on Vivienne. Its purely for the hate!sex ok. Not that either would. Oh leave me be.

Here on out, the chapters will be short.
He broke across her like a wave cresting over a beachhead. Swept her up and carried her away, catching her in the riptide of his passion. They had been given four hours between now and the end of the world, would that he could use them all to tell her with every ounce of his body, soul, heart, and mind: you will come back.

He tried. Oh, did he try.

He saw the doubt in her eyes when he found her in her chambers. The cold resignation, the fear. He didn't speak when he closed the distance between them; he offered her no words of comfort because words were useless now, they wasted time.

And time was a precious thing, slipping through fingers like the finest sand, already blown mostly away. Two years of time, gone. Two years of laughter, and heartbreak, joy, and anger, all summed up in her single glance of longing, one that wished there was more sand, more time.

She held him, knowing he knew everything she wished him to understand. He already felt in his bones, to his very marrow, how much she loved him. Her hands were on his chest, feeling the steady pulse of his heart, she tapped her fingers in time along with it, memorizing its cadence. She would know him utterly now, empty herself and beg to be filled up with him.

And he knew his lady, he knew what she sought without asking.

So he summoned his soul in his smile, gathered all his affection in a kiss, and crashed against her, a mighty wave of love, washing all her doubt away. He filled in her cracks, clearing away her fear and replacing it with his surety.

You will come back to me.

He dragged her under, pulling her down onto the bed, and drowned her in his kisses. He filled her lungs with his breath, her ears buzzed with his whispered worships.

I love you

I love you

I love you

He kissed her, hot and wet, leaving no part of her uncovered, not even her back. Once he removed every stitch from her, he flipped her to her stomach and laid kisses all the way down the curve of her spine. His lips, unspeaking, sang to her of his love.

His tongue slid down the length of her body, paying tribute all along the way. He laved the hardened buds of her nipples so thoroughly he thought she might come from the attentions; no doubt aided by the presence of his fingers moving in lazy, unhurried circles around her sopping center. He cherished every moan, her every sound, for today was a quiet day. He swallowed them down, took sustenance from them, and greedily sought to pull more from her. With his mouth around her neck,
Around her breasts,

Around her belly,

Around her dripping core,

He ate well.

Evelyn floated away on currents of ecstasy, unable to hold a thought save for her desire for more. And he never denied her, fulfilling all her pleas until her toes hurt from curling and her voice grew hoarse from all her shouting.

He rolled himself within her, only then did his desperation overtake him. Being with her now, like this, might be the final time he could enjoy such divinity, such perfection. He willed the fire in his veins to cool so he could hold on just a little longer.

One more stroke, one more thrust, one more kiss to the scar across his chest so sweet he might die. One more scratch up his back, one more lick against his throat where the line of his stubble met the smooth flesh of his neck. He needed one more lung full of her sweet smelling hair oil, he needed one more arch of her back against him, one more yell of his name as he made her explode into starlight.

She pressed her forehead to his as they rippled together, eyes locked and glowing in the candlelight.

“Cullen.”

She sighed his name, and he broke apart, losing himself within her.

“Evelyn.” He breathed, voice sounding like distant waves on sand.

**

She didn't sleep for very long because, honestly, how could she? She woke smoothly, tucked firmly within Cullen's arms, his chin resting on her head, their legs tangled and nigh inextricable from each other. Earth and Sun pressed so tight, not even light could get between. Two bodies, two hearts, one bed, and one emotion. Where one ended, the other began, seamless, as though the Maker made them that way.

Evelyn teased herself away, pulling gently unwilling to startle Cullen awake just yet. Her anchored hand came away last, it had been wedged between them, fingers splayed over where his scar crossed his heart. Her own heart gave a painful lurch, gutting her so badly she bent in half as she realized this would be the last time their naked skin would touch.

The last time his sunlight would strike against her earth and she would feel his warmth no more. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, and buried her face in her hands breathing, just breathing, hoping the steady inhale and exhale would quell her racing heart.

'Maker, please, don’t let me die.'

He felt the minute she pulled away from him and opened weary eyes to the sight of her hunched over the side of the bed. Cullen reached for her, his fingertips counting the ridges of her spine.

"Are you alright?"
"No."

Evelyn heard the rustling of bedclothes, felt the mattress lift as he exited the bed. Her sunlight came around and knelt before her, taking her hands within his own.

"You're cold." It was spring, she slept with her balcony open to the Frostbacks' wind carrying with it the scent of mountain flowers and melting ice. Cullen rubbed his hands over hers, brought them to his lips and kissed them, blowing hot air over them. She warmed instantly. He knew she hated the cold.

The sound of raucous cheering interrupted the silence of their sanctuary. The Chargers were singing, Krem's voice carrying highest above the others.

"THE BULL AND THE MA-GI-STER FAIR!"

"I am NOT a magister and I am also NOT fair!" Dorian shouted back laughing.

A smile stole across Evelyn's face as she listened.

"Maker's breath, they better not be drunk." Cullen cursed.

"Dorian knows better and Bull fights the same drunk or sober."

They listened as the Chargers finished their song, laughing quietly at some of the more risqué passages.

When the song ended, wordlessly, Evelyn rose and began to pull on her small clothes and leathers armoring herself, preparing for victory and death.

Cullen re-dressed as well and when she reached for her leg greaves he stopped her, hand closing delicately around her wrist.

"Let me."

Piece by piece, Cullen dressed her for battle. He knelt before her, ghosting his hands chastely down her thighs and calves. He pulled the laces on her boot tight, eyelet by eyelet. He did the same for the other boot.

He went about her body methodically. As he was buckling one of her greaves, he placed a kiss to the back of her knee, then on the other leg he kissed the side of her calf before clamping the leg plate tight around it.

As he armored her in metal, he armored her in his love.

She remained silent, and kept her eyes on him the entire time, memorizing the flecks of gold and amber in each eye, remembering the twists and curls of his hair as he dressed her. She pressed this vision into her memory, held it in her mind, made a rubbing of it in her brain to call upon it as she died. She wanted his gold to be in her eyes as she died.

Because she knew, from the impossible pain in her left hand, she was dying today.

Cullen helped her into her leather coat and reached for her vambraces and gloves.

"Wait."

Evelyn pulled his coin from her pocket. It came attached to two leather cords. He reached for it,
intending to slip it over her head, to have it fall around her neck.

"It doesn't go there."

"Show me."

Evelyn took the coin in the harness she had Dagna fashion for her. One of the leather thongs looped around her right wrist like a bracelet while the other leather thong pulled and curled tightly around her middle and ring finger. The result made the coin rest perfectly in the palm of her right hand--the hand that fired her bow.

"Every shot is lucky now." She winked. *And I get to hold you in my arms at the end.*

Cullen's heart swelled, breaking against the confines of his ribs. He kissed that lucky palm, and kissed the palm of her anchored hand, uncaring of the magic that glowed there and tingled on his lips.

Her vambraces and gorget were donned last. Before he slipped on the left vambrace, he kissed the inside of her forearm. Before he fastened the gorget tight around her chest, he kissed her heart. Upon setting the last buckle, he took her face in his hands, thumbs sliding against the scars her father put there. He kissed them one by one, then he kissed her mouth.

He reached into the pocket of his pants, fingers searching for the box, the promise of something greater waiting for her when she returned. But his fingers grasped nothing but lint and emptiness, and a cold dread settled upon him.

Undaunted, he simply held her tighter, grip on the borderline of pain.

"Come back to me. That's an order."

"Yes Ser. I will." She replied, desperately trying to make herself believe it.

Chapter End Notes

Final battle hastens.

Tomorrow.
They heaped blessings and prayers upon her as she walked the courtyard to Skyhold's gate.

“Bless you Inquisitor.”

“Maker guide you, Herald.”

“Andraste protect you.”

Cold comfort, but comfort still.

The sky churned grey and green, every pulse of the breach reflected in her hand, reflected also in her heart. It hurt, unlike any previous pain, but she had gotten damn good at hiding it after all this time.

Her friends waited for her, every last one of them dressed for battle.

The Commander gave his speech, rallied his troops, prepared them to fight and win. She listened, burning the cadence of his voice upon her brain to remember later. She would absorb all she could in these last minutes, take everything of him with her to last while she waited for him in the Fade.

She didn't say goodbye because she never said goodbye. Just like at Haven, before she stared down the lyrium dragon and her greatest fear made flesh and bone, she told him “I will see you again.”

She spoke that to him now to comfort him, make him believe the lie of her returning. It wasn't a lie, not wholly, just the whole 'seeing him again part' would be removed by a number (a long number she prayed) of years.

There weren't many affairs to handle, her only true possession was going to be in her hands for the entire fight. Her bow, Assan's bow, was coming with her to the Fade. They would know to bury her with it.

She thought about Gareth and Susanna. Alexia and Masan. She guessed her mother and father wouldn’t shed too many tears for her, more for their loss of a bargaining chip rather than the loss of her life. Her sister-in-law and nephew, though, would be left protection-less in a world without her.

“Commander.”

Cullen snapped to. “Yes Inquisitor.”

“If something happens to me.”

“Nothing will, remember? You will see me again.”

“Right...but listen, in case...I want you tell my father what happened. Say whatever you like I don't
“Evelyn, don’t…”

“Just. Listen.” She chided gently. “Alexia and Masan, if you can, please, get them out of Ostwick and somewhere safe. Can you do that for me, Commander?”

She used his title on purpose, this wasn't a request of a lover, this was an order from the Inquisitor.

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

She placed her final kiss upon his cheek, breathed him in one last time then, with a shudder, she pulled away.

One last nod to Cassandra.

One last smile for Sera and Josie.

One last hug for Cole and Leliana.

One last handshake for Blackwall.

One last laugh with Varric.

One last pair of elven words traded with Solas.

One last fistbump for Iron Bull.

One last embrace for Dorian, for Vivienne too.

One last powerful vault onto Jackson's back, she whispered in Dalish to her hart asking him for one last ride.

One last shout for luck, just the way Assan had taught her, boiling up from the tips of her toes and radiating to the tips of her hair. Her vines shook with her scream.

And with her cry, she summoned war.

One last time.

**

Dashing over felled rock and blighted stone, she galloped at the head of her party, anchor flashing sharply in time with the beat of her heart. The pulsing only intensified as she grew closer to the gates of the temple. In the distance, she heard the roaring scream of the lyrium dragon and prayed Morrigan hadn't boasted about her ability to match the monster.

Jackson stumbled, tripping over the mangled bodies of her soldiers who lay twisted and ruined, ripped apart by Corypheus' magic and his own lyrium blighted hands. His voice boomed above the malevolent thunder of the churning breach.

“I am Corypheus I shall deliver you from this lie in which you linger, bow before your new God and be spared!”

“Never!” One of the soldier's shouted.
“So be it.”

Evil red energy consumed all, air flashing, burning, and pushing her soldiers back until they crashed into stone walls and fell silent. Green energy pulsed right behind it, the tiniest rifts in the Fade appeared, summoning a demon with every little rent in the Veil. The demons bore down upon her remaining soldiers, ripping them apart before the Inquisitor appeared, hart screaming, hooves catching and crushing the closet demon to her. Evelyn vaulted off Jackson, firing arrows at the foes remaining.

“I knew you would come.” The abomination sneered, bowing with a mocking flourish.

“It ends here Corypheus.” She kept the steel in her voice this time. She wavered at Haven, he would not see her succumb to fear this time.

“And so it shall.”

Red lightning rent the sky and the earth, sundering rock and stone, lifting it into the air separating her and her companions from the rest of her Circle.

Cullen, on a battlefield below with the rear guard screamed, scrambling after the ascending rock but it was too late and they were far from reach.

“You have been most successful in foiling my plans but let us not forget what you are: A thief in the wrong place at the wrong time, an interloper, a gnat.

We shall prove here once and for all which of us is worthy of godhood.”

Corypheus boomed.

She brushed away his insult as though dirt off her shoulder. “I came here to stop you, you piece of shit! Nothing more.”

A deep growling rumbled, like the earth choking on blood. The lyrium dragon crested over the ruin of the temple wall, mouth open in a roar, so close Evelyn could count the fangs in its maw. She stepped back too late, knowing that if the thing chose to strike it would consume her, chew her into pieces.

It lunged.

She screamed.

She felt impact but it was only wind as another dragon crashed into the nightmare.

Morrigan.

The battle began in earnest, red lighting crackling in the air, stinging her every pore. Iron Bull unfurled his greataxe and charged while Vivienne and Dorian cast barriers and hurled spells of fire and corruption in turn.

Her red arrows smote, striking with fire and poison.

Demons appeared and swarmed them, she shouted for a regroup but none heard her. She leapt away, narrowly avoiding a wraith's armor tearing strike.

“You will fall as a warning to those who would oppose my divine will.”
“Can it you semen drenched darkspawn leavings!” Evelyn shouted, earning her a cheerful laugh from Vivienne.

“Ma'am's laughing!” Bull bellowed, avoiding Corypheus's claw. “Now I really know it's the end of the world.”

“Shut up and hit harder amatus!” Dorian screamed.

“Ain't that what I always do kadan?”

Evelyn couldn't help herself, she laughed, heart—if only for a moment—lightened.

She was grateful to a Maker in whom she had her doubts, that she had the privilege to feel a family's embrace if only for a little while.

Corypheus screamed and disappeared, reanimating further away and high out of reach. Evelyn led the charge up the steps toward him, angling for a better shot.

“Look at you,” Her enemy taunted, “A disgusting mudskinned ape unfit to even walk upright.”

Malignant beams of blood red magic poured forth from his hands, burning and shocking any tender flesh in its path. Evelyn and Iron Bull fell victim to such a blast before Vivienne's cool magic eased the sting and slowed the blood.

“Careful darling careful!” Vivienne's voice carried a desperate edge, one laced by fear and worry.

The battle rejoined as the dragons clashed in the sky, bodies meeting with such a boom the impact rattled the stones.

They struck, pierced, burned, and balmed. She fired arrow after arrow, arms straining from the weight of her bow.

Iron Bull's foot was pierced by a spike of red lyrium. He roared causing Dorian to drop his attentions to the wraith attacking him, earning him a red stripe across the back. Vivienne, as was her way, tried to stay as far from the melee as possible, preferring that her blades be the ones to get up close, but sheer exhaustion was overwhelming her and draining her mana dry.

“Inquisitor! I...I cannot...”

Evelyn sprinted towards Vivienne's position, picked up the woman, and poured a mana potion down her throat. "You can and you will."

Once the woman was on her feet, she noticed Corypheus disappeared.

Violent screams tore the sky, the battle between dragons concluded. Morrigan toppled to the ground and stilled while the nightmare dragon--in some ways more terrifying than Corypheus himself, loomed before them, mouth open and bloodied, ready to consume more.

Iron Bull only laughed. "Boss, Other Boss still owes me a dragon hunt! But I'll take my teeth now!"

The qunari's gleeful cackle bounced off the stones as he charged, axe aiming for the teeth in the dragon's mouth.

"Amatus!" Dorian shouted, consuming another mana potion. The mage dropped a barrier on his lover before the beast's giant claw could tear him in half. "I'm going to kill you if the dragon
"Shut up and fight!" Vivienne roared. She summoned blades cutting the demon's flesh as exquisitely as if she were an armor wearing knight herself.

Her poison arrows did nothing, and the demon's hide was too strong for her heart's strike to pierce. Evelyn could only chip away at the creature's hide and hope their endurance would outmatch the demon's own. The minutes stretched on and on into time incalculable and all four of them earned every bite, tear, and claw that marked them. Vivienne fell twice, exerting everything into her magic to keep the rest of them alive. Twice Evelyn raised her from the dirt.

Iron Bull never allowed Dorian to succumb to the dragon's strike, taking every tail swipe meant for the mage.

"Boss!" He cried, blood choking up his call. "We can't keep this up!"

She was running low on stamina, lower on arrows and her daggers would not be enough to end this fight. But from her many hunts of many creatures she could tell the beast grew tired. Its swings were less powerful, its blasts reaching shorter and shorter distances.

"It's dying, it's tired. Gimmie one more. Please!"

Bull roared, Dorian shouted, Vivienne screamed, Evelyn howled. Together they pushed against the nightmare with every last ounce of their strength as the creature reared on its hind legs, sweeping its wings, sucking them in closer for a swipe that would end them all at once.

"Amatus!"

"Dorian! No!"

"Inquisitor!"

Instead of resisting against the dragon's pull she stepped into it, letting the wind carry her closer to the dragon's mouth and well within his reach. The damned thing opened wide and Evelyn felt the same fear trickle through her that paralyzed her at Adamant.

But with luck in every shot, she had no cause to fear.

With a roar, she reached for an arrow, aimed and fired it.

It struck the dragon in the eye, so deep only the fletching was visible from the wound.

The Nightmare, in the throes of death, swung its great tail hitting her entire party before all of them, dragon and dragon slayer, fell into the dirt.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be up 12:30 edt.
Gold

Evelyn woke first, rising to her feet as she heard her companions twist and moan under their no doubt painful yet mostly benign injuries. The dragon itself lay still, mouth open and great wide tongue lolling out of its mouth. She took her dagger and cut the largest fang she could reach. She placed it on Iron Bull's chest whispering to him, "I think he likes hunting now. Take him with you, but don’t let him get hurt. Tell him he still pulls his bow too short and to keep both eyes open when he aims. Take care of yourself okay? Take care of your Chargers."

Dorian breathed steadily despite the obvious broken rib. Careful not to wake him as she didn't want him following after her, she blew him a kiss whispering quietly, "Te valde amo ac semper amabo, fratoro. My Tevene is better than you thought, ass."

Vivienne lay further off from the rest, face in the dirt. She rolled her friend over and propped her unconscious body on a rock. "I'll..." Evelyn began to cry. "You shouldn't lay in the dirt Viv. You're too pretty to lay in the dirt." She kissed her forehead and rose from her.

Red lightning shuddered within the dragon's form, an orb of magic flew from it and came to rest at the highest rampart of the temple. Corypheus emerged from the magic, staggered but whole. He beckoned.

She counted the arrows in her quiver finding nowhere near enough but it will have to do.

She left them behind, and laid down an explosive arrow that upset the unsteady rocks, blocking the path ensuring no followers.

Her heartbeats could be numbered now and each one pulsed more painfully than the last in time with the thunderous pulse of the anchor.

"Let it end here! Let the skies boil, let the world be rent asunder."

Damn she wished he'd shut up.

The Breach expanded, swirling and churning, echoing the pulse in her anchor and in her heart. Grown large, if left unchecked it would swallow the world.

"No." She said softly to herself, nocked an arrow, aimed it at Corypheus, and fired.

The arrow sang, aiming straight for his neck, but Corypheus swiped it away as though swatting a fly. Bolts of magic burst forth from him, ripping up the ground in a line to where she stood. Evelyn rolled, coming to rest on her knees. She fired, and this time the shot stuck.

Corypheus screamed but did not fall, sending another arc of malignant magic her way that she was too slow to dodge.

They traded screams and attacks, back and forth, over and over, they struck and were struck. But no wound Corypheus inflicted hurt worse than the anchor.

Her arrows dwindled down to two.

"I will not yet fall!" He exploded, another pulse of magic stealing the breath from her and knocking her senseless. The Orb, the one Solas mentioned to her years ago now, hovered above him a red orbiting star.
"Not like this!" Corypheus whined. "I have walked the halls of the Golden City. I have crossed the ages."

Her entire body trembled as she staggered back to her feat. Pain tore across her, made it impossible to keep breathing. As he manipulated the Orb, she felt him, clawing at her mind and her body, ripping her apart from the inside out.

Evelyn let go, she released her control of the anchor, her will that suppressed it now let it flow free. Green lighting tore up her skin and her eyes, the power of the anchor surged within her, filling her veins, pain and power mixing into one.

"Dumat! Ancient ones I beseech you!

"If you exist, if you ever truly existed, aid me now!"

He glowed red. He embodied the blood and death of the red lyrium that suffused him.

She embodied the very power of the Fade itself.

With a crush of her hand, the Orb flew from his grasp to hers taking every last bit of his magic with it. Holding the Orb made her body revolt in agony, overloaded with power she was never meant to contain. With a great howl she pushed that power up and out, sending it to the Breach in the sky.

Releasing it was a burden released from her body, she felt lighter, weaker. The Orb took something from her, and it took too much. Her soul went up into the sky, healing it, restoring it. With a cry for luck she had undone everything.

Corypheus fell to his knees, shocked mute by the sight of this unworthy thing wielding the Orb with far greater power and precision than he ever dreamed was possible.

“No.”

The magic within her detonated, tendrils of magic leaking from her, bleeding the life from her with every heartbeat. Brutal, bone shuddering, world ending pain radiated in all the places she still had feeling. But she reached for her last arrow, determined to finish this fight. The magic sparked, jumping from left hand to right, enveloping her arrow, empowering it, suffusing it with the same magic that sealed rifts, imbuing it with the power of the Fade.

"You wanted into the Fade? Go then!"

Love blessed luck fired with the missile and smote her enemy dead. The magic of the anchor pulled with the arc of the shot taking with it whatever was left of her sealing the Breach did not steal. It struck Corypheus in the face, red feathers twisting in the hot winds. The magic consumed him, her enemy disintegrated and deformed. He disappeared, swallowed up by the magic he sought to control. Unwritten from existence, he vanished. Corypheus flaked away like ashes carried away on the wind.

And he took with him the breath from her lungs, the beat from her heart, and the thoughts from her mind.

She crashed hard into the dirt as the foundations of the battleground settled back into their rightful places.

Evelyn lay unmoving.
Dying.

And it hurt.

She wanted the comfort of his name, to feel the breath of it pass her lips but it was too late, she could no longer breathe.

And the last thing she saw as she gazed upwards and unfocused was the light of the sun break across a healed sky.

And like his eyes and his hair and his soul and his smile and his love,

It was gold.

**

They struggled against those toppled rocks, screaming and shouting, urging one another to keep trying as the battle raged on above them. They heard her screaming, shouting curses at her enemy. They heard the rippling explosion of the Breach, they saw the sky quiet, they saw the sun return.

Cullen and her Inquisition found the trio digging their way through. With their combined effort, they broke through the obstruction and split up, hoping to cover more ground in their search, hoping to find their Inquisitor alive.

But Solas knew she was gone when he found her, the cracked remnants of the Orb lying at her feet.

"Da´..da´len.” He choked on his grief. “I am so sorry."

"It was never supposed to happen this way.” He placed an unfelt kiss to her brow. “It was…I was going…. It was never supposed to… Oh, Evelyn I am so sorry.”

She was his friend, well and true. Something he had not had in ages and ages and ages more. And his foolishness and selfishness, his pride, destroyed the one good thing he’d had in a long while. Solas’s old heart broke, and broke further still to think of what this will do to the rest of his friends. Another sin to throw upon his pile of them, but somehow this one weighed a little heavier than he thought.

“Evelyn!”

Cullen calling.

He could not afford to linger but it felt wrong to leave her like this. The elf who was so much more, stooped to pry the green-glowing bow from her hands and cross them over her heart in reverent rest. But he felt a hand stop him, Cole’s, his face a mask of sadness.

“Don't make her let it go. She wanted to hold it, to hold him.”

Guilt crushed him and he let go of her cool hands to lay them back on the stone. Solas rose to leave, he was not supposed to be seen.

“I'm sorry, Cole, but with your gift, I fear you might see the path that I must now walk in solitude forever. This fate is mine alone. Indeed, I would not wish it on an enemy, much less someone that I once cared for. Though you reach out in compassion, I must now insist that you forget. Remember this at the last…tell them I am sorry.”

The elf and his memory disappeared.
Cole, startled by the momentary feeling of blankness, rested his gaze on his friend. The one he could not help because whatever her pain was before, she didn’t hurt now. The rest would be here soon. Cole lifted Evelyn’s head into his lap, he closed her sightless eyes.

And cried.
“Maker, guide my steps, lead me toward…”

Cullen heard a soft sobbing and his prayers, not for better but for worse, were answered.

Sound was torn from him and all the world settled into Silence. Cullen felt like he was drowning, water over and above his head, all noise filtered through the sluggish beat of his heart dying in his chest. His legs moved without direction, carrying him toward them, and he did not know he still had the strength to continue walking.

He still felt pain though, and felt it when his knees crashed into the rocks.

But he didn’t moan or cry out, he couldn’t. He was rendered mute.

Silent.

Every day, every single day he prayed for silence, prayed for the hissing to end and for his world to just be quiet for a change.

He’d take those prayers back now, for just the simple sound of her breathing. The hissing and the madness and the nightmares he would endure, just for the sound of her heartbeat.

He did not love her by first sight, but by first sound. The way she hollered and shouted, her noise swallowed up the cacophony of his agony.

And now she was quiet.

Sun shined. Birds sang, but he was numb, blind, and deaf to it.

Even Cole was quiet, his sobs softly sucking in hitched gasps before releasing them in even softer broken sighs.

“Did she hurt?” His voice cracked as he asked.

Cole wanted to lie, he felt it burning on his lips. But truth or lie would not ease his suffering and Evelyn taught him that the truth was always better, even if Leliana really thought those shoes made her look pretty.

“Yes.” Cole admitted. “But she was happy. Falling, falling, flying. Into golden light, rich and warm like the color of his hair and his eyes and his smiles. You are her gold and you make her fly.”

Cullen did not smile, but he felt a little peace. And Cole nodded, satisfied, at least this pain he could ease.

“Let me hold her.”

Cole shifted and moved, passing her stillness to her Commander and Cullen was gutted by how cold she was.

She hates…hated the cold.
Dorian and Bull found them next. Dorian gave a great anguished shout, alerting the others, they came running.

And they too, were shocked into silence. Unable to move or moan, unable to even express their disbelief.

But not Vivienne.

The Enchantress threw her staff to the ground and an unearthly inhuman screech tore loose from her throat.

Vivienne slid to them on her knees, further ruining half destroyed robes. "Get her out of the dirt! She is the Inquisitor! She should not lie in dirt! Get her out of the dirt!"

They told her once she would never carry a child in her body. Vivienne scoffed, mask of iron overlaying her grief, stating she had no need for children.

Not even Bastien’s.

But later in the quiet, she cried for children she’d never have and every time thereafter when she heard a child’s laughter, she grieved.

Evelyn made her not so sad, made that grief a little less. But now Vivienne wailed heavy cries that sounded like a mother clutching at the body of a lost child.

Cullen never liked her. He respected her because she was worthy of it, and tolerated her snobbery for Evelyn's sake because he understood just how much the older women meant to her, yet never once did his heart warm to her.

But as Vivienne gave her entire existence over to grief, in that moment Cullen loved her because she wailed her pain, shattering the quiet when all the rest of them could do was stand by in muted stillness.

She shrieked, her mouth remembering the Rivani prayers her mind chose to forget when she stepped foot on Orlesian soil.

And in the space between her screams, Cullen, with grim efficiency, planned the rest of his life. He would lay her on a bier of gold and braid the flowers in her hair himself because he so loved her hair. Her Commander would become her sentinel, her guard while the mourners passed by remaining silent and unmoving.

In his mind, he wrote the letter to her father, already knowing exactly what he meant to say.

Dear Bann Trevelyan,

It is with great regret that I inform you that your daughter, the Lady Evelyn Cecilia Renee Marie Trevelyan has died. She committed her life to defending Thedas and lost it saving us all. I offer my humblest sympathies for your loss.

Sincerest Condolences,
Commander Cullen Stanton Rutherford
She was meant for better men than both of us.

Cold and dispassionate, nothing less than that bastard deserved.
He would give away his necklace to her nephew. He would hand the token himself to the child with instruction to mother and son to run fast and far, just like she would want them to.

Then he would turn his face from the world and take no comfort in even its smallest joys. He would serve the Inquisition to his final breath, one he would not hasten or treat with reckless indifference. And when that breath shuddered and stopped, he would find her in the Fade and they’d start all over again.

**

“Templar. Please…” Vivienne’s cracked sob broke the dream apart around him, bringing him back to the reality of Evelyn’s cold body half in his arms, half on the ground. “She should not lie in dirt.”

The Commander nodded.

He kissed her forehead, breathing in the scent of her hair; oranges, spices, and flowers. She left a bottle behind on his nightstand. He would have to figure out how to make more.

With infinite tenderness he lifted her off the ground, raising her from the dirt, her head tucked into his neck, seamless even like this. When he moved, the bow in her grasp finally slipped free of slack and frigid fingers. He stooped to reach for it but the fatigue of war was too much for the poor thing. When it struck the ground, the bow broke apart, the silverite grip split, sundered from too much stress.

His gift, the first thing he ever gave her, shattered.

And green magic swirled.

It bloomed from the ground like a flower pushing up through fertile soil into sunlight. It twisted and snaked and crawled up cold fingertips, the tender grasp of a reaching hand. If the anchor’s power was a malignant cancer, this magic was its cure, a sweet caress of soothing deep green love the color the forest she adored.

The magic flashed across her body, fully enveloping her in warm green light that suddenly transformed to gold—the colors of a promise made long ago.

So that no matter what, some part of me can keep you free of hurt or harm.

They all saw her twitch in his arms.

They all saw her stretch and yawn.

But only he heard and felt a word whispered into the hollow of his throat as sound, blessed and sweet, returned to his world.

“Cullen…?”

Chapter End Notes

A birthday gift for me, a birthday gift for you.
But you can come yell at me personally at mirabai0821.tumblr.com
Evelyn didn’t remember anything that happened to her ‘while she was out’ as Dorian put it, unwilling to acknowledge that for a few world ending minutes Lady Evelyn Cecilia Renee Marie Trevelyan was dead and gone. She fell asleep, dreaming of him, and woke with him on her lips. As far as she knew, the time that passed was the blink of an eye and she was unsure she was even ‘gone’ in the first place.

“I mean how can I just…and then come back? I was probably just unconscious. You were always a terrible healer.”

Dorian made a face of genuine hurt. “Well you don’t have to rub it in.”

Soon, that memory supplanted any other memory of the time. They thought she was gone, but she wasn’t really gone. Yeah…that’s what happened. Wait, what were we talking about again?

Cole smiled from the shadows, he knew it was wrong to take away the memory they all shared. But it was better this way.

**

Her new bow she made with her own hands, constructing it from the shattered remnants of the old one, working with the Elven Sentinals to bond the red cherry wood splinters with yew heartwood sturdy and gold. A magnificent piece, crafted in the elven way as though Assan Lavellan had made it with her own hand.

The Inquisition stopped for two weeks and mostly they just slept, wrapped together, bonded and fused like the splinters of her old bow and her new one, come together to form one whole. Solas never came back, and she never knew why he left. She suspected Cole knew something about it, but she didn’t press the matter, mind too far tired to consider anything outside the four walls of her chamber—a place he didn’t allow her to leave for at least one of those two weeks.

The mark….

Still hurt.

Not as violent or oppressive as it had before. But it smarted like a bee sting in an inconvenient place. Though she could tell, not quite understanding how, but she somehow knew it was diminished…lessened…or perhaps sleeping—waiting for the right moment to reawaken and grant her great power or swallow her up.

Not that that Cullen Rutherford was ever going to allow her to be swallowed up.

He stood at the bottom of the stone steps leading up to the battlements. She was gazing out, hands
idly tracing the stone, lost in some memory he wasn’t quite ready to interrupt yet.

There was a letter from Mia in his pocket, simple and short, it said “Go for it,” and nothing else. In his other pocket rested a ring, far superior than the one he lost.

Cullen never found the ring he bought in Val Royeaux. And honestly, it didn’t matter anymore.

He had to swear Dagna to secrecy, and even then, he wasn’t sure the giddy arcanist would be able to keep in confidence. The rings he had now were the fruits of their combined labors, constructed of the discarded silverite slivers from her old bow. The metal had been curiously and inexplicably scorched, causing the rings to shimmer green and then gold if you twisted them the right way in the right light.

He was nervous, guts twisting up in coils and knots doubling back and folding over again and again until he thought he might faint from the anxiety. Since her parents’ arrival at Skyhold, he knew this was what he wanted. Her, B, Evelyn, to be his wife, his companion, his friend for the rest of his days.

She’s life, his life, beautiful, wonderful thrumming life. Her skin was the earth that rooted him, her hair was the rain that nourished him. Her soul is the touch that strengthened him. And her sound is the beat of his heart in his own chest.

She was a riot of color, texture, and sound.

And he wanted her.

For the rest of his life and any life that came thereafter.

His first steps were shaky, but they gained surety as he approached. She heard him walking, the clank of his armor unmistakable. Her Commander, her gold. With him, she was a wealthy woman, rich in all ways.

Evelyn smiled at him, waiting expectantly because it looked like he had something to say.

Cullen cleared his throat and uttered the sounds she fell in love with so long ago.

“My lady…”

THE END

Well you can end the story here if you like. The bards certainly do.

_At war’s end with heal’ed sky_
_She gave him life_
_He made her fly_
_A love that was to never die_
_The Huntress and Her Lion_

Yet think back to what was said. Think back to the very beginning.

If you remember nothing else throughout this tale, remember---
I must offer humblest thanks to all those sweet enough to leave comments and encouragements and even curses. They made sure I kept going on this behemoth of a thing. I've never written something so large to completion and by and large that has to do with you guys keeping me going. So thank you.

If you wish, you can leave B and Cullen here and let them go on to have the happily ever after I know some of you want them to have. You needn't read anything after this and their story ends well.

But if you fuckers think this is over...you got another thing coming.

Take a hop over here http://mirabai0821.tumblr.com/post/127244296293/bold-in-deed-sneak-peak

for a sneak peak at their next adventure Bold in Deed, part 2 of the Heraldry Series. It'll be a good while before that story gets posted as I'd like to have most of it written before I start posting it. So in the meantime, check me out on tumblr, send me asks or prompts to fill in your fix for B, Cullen, and the rest. Thank you. Couldn't have done this with out you.

Me

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!