**Threads of Hope**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/4178565](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4178565).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Dragon Age: Inquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Female Mage Inquisitor/Cullen Rutherford, Cullen Rutherford/Female Mage Trevelyan, Cullen Rutherford/Female Trevelyan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Cullen Rutherford, Kilastra Trevelyan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Cullen's POV, Eventual Smut, Slow Burn, Angst, Misunderstandings, Sexual Frustration, Chaptered, with art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary**

Cullen starts to dream about her, and that is when he knows he's screwed.

The relationship between Inquisitor Trevelyan and Cullen Rutherford told through Cullen's POV. The story alternates to DA:I in some areas but broadly similar.
This is my first lengthy contribution to the DA fanfic scene and I'm quite nervous! I haven't written in a few years properly, so please excuse me but the Cullen romance inspired me so much I just had to write something!

His dreams are changing.

When Cullen was a boy and sticks were swords for his young mind there was plenty of colour in his world, there was a vibrancy to it that came with the innocence of childhood. That came with the imagination and naivety of being young and sheltered - of believing in a cause greater than your own. When he finally convinced the adults that he belonged to the Templar Order, outfitted in his padded blues and armoured greys, he thought there was nothing that he could not do.

The events at Kirkwall shattered that existence, too long had he clung to a poor imitation of duty and it had cost him. It had brought down the world of colours and his mind shuttered to his feelings, guilt enveloped him whole and for a while he was only darkness, tinged with red, glowing brightly at the corners of his mind. His dreams consisted only of nightmares, battling demons in the Fade of rage and fear, reliving those moments, the scrape of metal against skin, the rough stone against his knees as he screamed.

There are nights he wakes screaming - hands over his head thinking he is back there, bruised and broken. It takes time to come back to where he really is, takes time for his eyes to adjust the darkened room and to notice there are no shackles on his wrists.

Those nights he will work furiously, pen to paper, maps spread out over his entire office - driving away all other thoughts until his fingers are stained with ink and his eyes blur with the effort of reading by candlelight.

Only then does he sleep – an hour or two, the night sliding into dawn, and he rises with the sun streaming over his eyes and thinks: today is a new day, today will be better. Because what else can he do?

The Inquisition gives him purpose, a purpose he has not felt in years – a calling, though he is reluctant to call it that, still remembers the last time he placed his trust so deeply on an order. His
world used to be rules and ranks and he is still trying to fit the broken threads together into something whole. When Cassandra had asked him to lead the Inquisition armies he had seen a bright, thread of hope and followed it, and now –

- his dreams are changing.

He starts to dream about her, and that is when he really knows he’s done for because his dreams have never been a place of comfort.

Cullen wakes, sheets tangled around his legs, hands gripping the mattress and it takes a few seconds to orientate himself. The moon is bright through the roughly patched ceiling and the layer of sweat on his body begins to cool quickly. He feels his heart rate begin to settle but his erection is still uncomfortably demanding his attention, flush against his stomach.

Flashes of the dream come back to him, smooth skin and hazel eyes and his hands grazing the underside of her breasts, sliding to her waist as he thrusts inside her.

Cullen groans, and runs his hands through his hair exasperated.

"Fuck," he mutters, with feeling.

When he meets her in the War Room that morning, he finds it hard to look at her. His mind supplying unhelpful images, he can't stop thinking about her in that way, about whether she would make those desperate, mewly noises he imagined or whether she'd moan and sigh and call his name. It is all entirely inappropriate thinking and for maker's sake, he needs to pull himself together.

In Haven it had all been so much simpler, she’d been away most of the time and he’d been able to think of her simply as the Herald of Andraste - a tool to be used for the good of the Inquisition, a means to an end. The contact they had had in Haven had always been so formal, so guarded: war room chats, going over reports and those few times she had dropped in on him training recruits.

The first time she'd done that, it had taken him a while to notice she was even there, he'd been in the middle of demonstrating the correct angle to hold a shield to deflect magical attacks to the new recruits. They were young and inexperienced, but most of them eager to be doing something – but they weren’t soldiers, not yet.

"Mages have a great deal of arsenal at their disposal and are dangerous opponents. It may seem trivial, but this correct positioning will save your life one day."

His men had stiffened slightly at his words, and when he turned he’d seen the source of their discomfort. She was there, the Herald of Andraste, standing in the doorway observing him, leaning against the wall. It looked like she was just about to head out on a mission as she was fully decked in armour; strips of cloth and leather binding her figure. He noticed that she liked to remain as free as possible and eschewed the usual mage robes he had seen those wearing at the Circle. Her head had been tilted to one side as she observed him, curious, arms crossed over her chest.

"Ah, Herald," he coughed, "Welcome. These are the new batch of recruits."
His recruits saluted awkwardly. He’d have to get them to practice that too.

She had smiled at them and stepped forward, pushing off from the wall with one hand. With a small movement, a crackle of lightning began to float around her fingertips, bright and dangerous.

"Would a demonstration be helpful?"

*Maker take him*, every single instinct in him had stood on edge and his grip had tightened on his shield, but he couldn’t back down from *that*. So he had hunched his back, lifted his shield and met her challenge.

"Please," he said, gesturing for her to begin.

He saw her stance shift, shift her weight to ground herself and the almost imperceptible grind of her heel and swing of her hips. That was what gave her away, he should probably warn her of that.

She flung an arc of lightning towards him and he heard the recruits gasp; they’d probably never been so close to real magic before. But Cullen was a trained Templar, *ex-Templar*, and the muscle memory did not leave you quickly. Twisting his body slightly he brought his shield down to protect the exposed areas she’d been aiming for and deflected the lightning back to her. She reacted quickly, bringing up a barrier with a flourish of her hand upwards, simultaneously letting forth another burst of lightning from her free hand. Cullen deflected once more, aiming the spell at the ground that caused a mountain of dust to rise. Cullen used this distraction to get in closer, moving into the cloud of dust. If he had had his sword, he would’ve performed a shield bash and gone in for a swipe. From here he could see her defensive crouch, arms raised, body tense – she looked so deadly, something raced straight through him.

She seemed surprised to see him so close but to his surprise, she just grinned. Her lips were full and slightly parted as she breathed a bit more heavily. He had been transfixed.

She had let herself loose from her crouch and laughed, immediately relaxing again.

"Excellent work, Commander. I can see these recruits are in good hands."

With some difficulty, he had let himself relax, shaking his head to get the dust out of his eyes.

"Thank you for your input," he said, "It helps for them to see what they need to be fighting against."

The smile left her face and he wondered what he had said to shut her down so quickly. She just nodded to him.

"I better be going."

She gestured towards the sparring ring as she was leaving, talking over her shoulder.

"Useful little trick, you might have to teach me sometime."

He had watched her walk away, probably longer than necessary still wondering what to make of her, before turning back to the recruits.

Life had continued in Haven after that incident much as before, she was constantly needed by others – to help close rifts, to negotiate treaties, to give her opinion. He was one of the culprits, and it was
odd how easily everyone at Haven seemed to accept her as a natural figurehead. Even Cassandra was warming to her.

He would see her return from missions with blood spattered armour and obviously tired, but she'd laugh at something Varric said, smile as Iron Bull subtly helped her keep her feet and Cassandra would look at her out of the corner of her eyes, pensive – grudgingly admiring. Cullen noticed these moments and they stirred something in him; he just wasn't quite sure what.

He would hear about her from his troops – dashes of conversation as he passed.

_I heard she healed him with just a wave of her hand. I heard she can kill a man without even moving. She saved that little boy down the well – I don't care what people say about mages, she's stepping up and that's all that matters._

The growing number of recruits under his command was a testament to her character, and yet she seemed to constantly elude him. She was not what he expected her to be, they knew she was a mage, they knew she had at one point been at the Circle in the free marches but even Leliana could not track her whereabouts after she turned nineteen and the lack of information was suspicious. Whenever he tried to track her down he always seemed to arrive a few moments too late – “_oh she just left ser, helped me fix up my bags._” “ _she's usually with the blacksmith at this time, giving him some new tricks_” “ _she was here earlier, but she mentioned something about a new alchemy recipe?_”

Every person had pointed him in a different direction; this woman seemed to be in a hundred different places at once. He had circled back on himself, mystified.

“Leliana – do you know where the Herald is?”

Leliana was bent over her table, tracing circles into the wood with her dagger as she traced invisible lines over the map with her other hand.

“Hm? Wasn’t she with that alchemist? I’ve heard she’s managed to upgrade quite a few of our potions – I have no idea how she _knows_ these things.”

It was always when he was least expecting it that she actually showed up. So the next opportunity he had got to know her better had been after she had returned from a mission unconscious, the news had reached him through messengers minutes after her arrival in Cassandra’s arms, leaving a trail of blood towards the alchemist's hut.

She had remained unconscious for another two days; they were not expecting her to wake for another two more when Cullen looked up to see her framed by the door of the training area once more. She looked pale, bandages covered her entire torso and her arms were heavily bruised, she wore a light robe over her injuries, presumably unable to bear the weight of her full armour.

"Templars are a right bunch of bastards,” she said, wincing as she walked up to him. He tried to suppress a smile and failed, it was good to see her up again.

"Yes, I've heard of that reputation," he said, and he saw her steel herself for the next words.

"I need you to teach me, what they know. What we met out there - these red Templars are different, they are stronger and they know how to get under me and my crew. And I can't afford any weaknesses right now."

Cullen’s eyebrows had risen sharply, disbelief overriding any other feeling he might have. She
continued to fidget under his gaze, but she did not leave. What she was asking, what she was suggesting was a breakdown of everything he had known, a total lowering of walls between mages and Templars that had never happened before in the history of the Chantry.

“And you think this is a good idea?” he asked, and Kilastra had smiled sadly.

“I’m not in the habit of trusting Templars—”

“Ex-Templar,” Cullen corrected her, he had had to do that a great deal recently, there were many who still wanted to refer to him by his old title, but there was a reason he joined the Inquisition and it wasn’t just to re-build an order that clearly didn’t work.

“- but I’m asking, please. We need your help.”

There was a part of him that strongly disagreed to that plan, which bristled at the idea of helping someone he had previously sworn to keep under control, of handing over information that could undermine the Templar order. But he had looked at her, really looked at her standing in front of him: defiant, scared, and determined. He had seen the lengths she went to for the Inquisition, he’d seen the easy way she had won the respect of her companions, and he felt the way she was beginning to get under his skin. He also had noticed the way she was struggling to hold herself and the vivid, purple bruising on her collarbone had made something stir within him, something he had thought long dead. He had joined the Inquisition for a reason, he reminded himself and perhaps this was part of it.

"Come back in three days."

--

They hadn’t got a chance then to start training because a bloody dragon attacked Haven, sending them scattered to the mountains and fighting for their lives. He had managed to catch her eye as she had twirled to face the roaring beast, hands sparking already and she smiled at him, a little sad, a little lost and it took all of him not to run to her and protect her. But he knew he had a duty to the people of Haven, and besides, she was already on her attackers – a force of fire and lightning.

That long, long night of not knowing where she was or what had happened to her, of seeing the avalanche cover the town they had been building had almost thrown Cullen into despair.

He had kept thinking - if they had had time to train together, would it have made a difference?

When they had found her again, shivering and ice-cold, curled in on herself, the faint green light from the mark on her hand illuminating her tired face– he had vowed he would find the time. He would see her through this whole ordeal alive and well whatever it cost him.

It was after they settled in Skyhold that the dreams had started, so different from before, and he knows for certain; all the noble intentions of wanting to help her save the world have fallen to the wayside.

The first night he wakes, fisting his cock beneath the sheets, back arching in pleasure as he imagines her laid out on his bed, fingers between her legs – he knows he is in over his head. A wave of guilt crashes over him and he huffs a dark laugh into the empty air. He thought he’d had enough guilt on his hands and he almost misses the nightmares.

At least those he knew what to do with.
This new…situation was troubling. He thinks he can control it though, like so many things before and that it will pass – like so many things before.

"Commander?"

Her voice cuts through his thoughts and it takes everything in him not to startle, he has been staring at the little metal marker on the map for maker knows how long. She is waiting expectantly for his answer.

"A little distracted today, are we?" Leliana breaks in, she runs a finger along the wooden table they use to spread out their maps and pretends to find dust between her fingers. She grins at him from beneath the cowl that seems a permanent fixture framing her face and he swears that woman can read his thoughts sometimes.

"Sorry," he says, rubbing the back of neck in embarrassment, a nervous habit he does not know how to quench, “long night of reports, what was the question?"

Kilastra nods once, a little affirmative mmm at the back of her throat to acknowledge their tiredness, she is appreciative of the long hours she knows everyone keeps.

“I need you to send some soldiers to fix the bridge in the Western Approach, Darkspawn are becoming more and more of a nuisance there and I want to shut it down as soon as I can – but the builders need protection. Do you have any men ready to go?”

Cullen has a mental map of where each of his squadrons are, they are still too few at the moment to deal with everything the Inquisition is trying to tackle so the forces are spread out over Ferelden and Orlais.

"I have men that could be there in two days, help build the bridge in three."

"Yes," she says, adding a please as an afterthought, she taps the area on the map with two fingers, "I will be heading back out there in a few days, so that fits perfectly."

Cullen starts preparing the letter in his head as Josephine begins to brief Kilastra on some diplomatic incidence that requires her input. Kilastra is leaning heavily on the table, she is still recovering from her near-death experience with the avalanche and he can see that she is favouring her right side.

"Do I really have to care about what noble whatever his face wants?" he hears Kilastra ask, she is pinching the bridge of her nose – a sign he has realised means that the meeting will come to a close soon.

“Kilastra, how can you say such a thing? You know as well as I that without support from the nobility the Inquisition would not last long.” Josephine shakes her head at the Inquisitor, her gold earrings jingling with the movement.

“You, of all people, know –“ she begins but Kilastra cuts her off.

“Fine, fine. Send a token then to – what was it?”

“Sir Telredon.”

Kilastra makes a face.

“He is awful.” She mutters, turning away from the table. “Well, I will leave it to you. For now, I
must go prepare for our next outing.”

Josephine smiles, satisfied, writing something down on her board. The candle attached to its tip has burned low, red drops of wax stiffening on the side. They must have been here longer than anticipated.

Cullen manages to catch up with Kilastra as she leaves the war room, matching his strides to hers.

"Inquisitor, when you have a moment?” he asks.

She looks at him out of the corner of her eye, a small frown creasing her brow.

“I really think we should start going on a first-name basis, don’t you?” She says, and he cannot be sure whether her tone is playful or not. He hadn’t really thought about it before, but he’s been using her title as a way of keeping distance; it’s been easier this way.

"I was thinking that we might start up that training you mentioned, you know, before.”

She looks slightly taken aback, but pleased and he can tell from the little bounce in her step as she stops walking to face him that she’s genuinely excited, with hands on her hips she regards him a little suspiciously.

"I thought you might try get out of that.”

He imagines her surrounded by Templars, the red glow of the lyrium crystals growing from their bodies lighting up her face as she prepares to meet them, and he remembers her when they found her in the snow, the feeling that had gripped his chest when he had seen the mountain fall.

"I did too, but recent events have, uh, made me see the benefits outweigh any issues I may have.”

“Okay!” she says, excitedly, counting something imaginary on her fingers, “I have some time – this evening? I’m sorry, I know it’s late but –”

“There’s always something to do?” He interrupts her, well aware of the demands placed on them all.

She huffs out a breath, thankful for his understanding.

“Yes, exactly.”

“This evening is fine, I’ll meet you after sundown.”

Chapter End Notes

There is now art for this chapter! You can go [here](#) to see it.

I also commissioned a tarot style image for this fic from feylen on tumblr, the image is [here](#).
Chapter 2

Cullen realises he is nervous. He wonders if he is even capable of fighting properly against a mage anymore, it has been months since he stopped taking the lyrium and he still feels deadened sometimes, numb to the outside world. The days where he would spend hours just staring at the bottle in his hands are gone, but will he be fast enough, strong enough, capable of giving the Inquisition and her what they need?

He has been waiting already for what feels like an age; the candlelight gives the area a strange, flickering light that casts shadows on the walls from the training dummies. To calm himself he is going through the motions he was taught when he was young. Motions that he has done thousands of times before, letting himself settle into the rhythm, feels the blood warm his muscles and allows himself to get lost in the movement. When she finally arrives, apologies falling from her lips, he is sufficiently warmed up and has discarded his cloak, the red of it vivid against the haystacks.

“I’m sorry, I got waylaid by Vivienne and then I had to visit the herbalist and –“

He holds up a hand, stopping her. She ceases talking almost immediately, he sees her lips quirk upwards about to smile, but perhaps he has imagined it as she just looks attentively at him, a question in the way she tilts her head.

“You are here now. Shall we begin?"

Kilastra squares her shoulders and nods.

“Ready.”

She is a wonderful student: attentive, eager to learn and not scared of getting hurt. He actually starts to enjoy himself with her, forgetting that she is a mage. He forgets about everything that was circling through his mind, the anxiety, and the rules and soon everything comes back so naturally.

"Aren’t you supposed to let your student win sometimes?" she says, throwing another punch.

He turns the blow aside deftly with his forearm and swivels to a better defensive position. He laughs.

"What would that teach you?"

He knows she is trying to distract him, and he wishes it wasn’t working so well. He sees her twist, that hip movement again and he knows he’s not in a position to move away quickly enough. She is within his space in a moment; taps him lightly on the cheek and grins triumphantly.

“Ha! Now you are dead!”

He had insisted that to begin with they wouldn’t use any magic or weapons, he wouldn’t carry a shield either. He’d made it clear that first she would have to learn how Templars learned to fight before they even picked up a sword and shield. It would help her be able to predict their movements, understand the way they thought about a fight. What he didn’t take into account was that it meant that often she was disarmingly close. He spends the sessions spinning away from her, careful not to cross any boundaries.
The training continues whenever they have the time, they fit it in between missions and researching how to kill an apparently immortal darkspawn. He’s beginning to treasure these moments they get together, he even starts to look forward to them, subconsciously tapping his fingers against his desk as he strains his ears to hear for the horn that sounds her arrival back at Skyhold. There is a simplicity to it that he sorely misses in the midst of all the current chaos.

It should be so complicated. An ex-Templar and a mage in a sparring ring together, it should be fraught with tension and secrecy, but he finds he is more and more himself with her. Kilastra is also dropping her guard, she laughs more readily and he sees it in the way she holds herself around him and it makes his heart pound.

“Come on, old man,” she grins, twirling just out of his reach and beckoning him to her. A crooked smile on her lips.

“Old man?” Cullen huffs, “Can an old man do this?”

He pushes off from his back foot, slides forward and angles his body just so, and she lets out a surprised yelp as he knocks her off her balance and she falls forward onto him.

“Now you are dead,” he says triumphant, his shield hand round her waist and sword hand touching just at the base of her ribs.

Disarmingly close.

During the fight he will forget that his desire for her is still there, so close to the surface, he’ll forget he is not supposed to be getting close to her, forgets that she is the Inquisitor with a thousand burdens and a thousand others demanding her attention. But then there are moments, moments like this when she is so near, pressed flushed against him and he has the echo of his heartbeat pounding in his ears and the ghosting of her breath on his skin that it takes every ounce of self-control he has not to take her in his arms and kiss her. He pushes her away quickly, and she looks a little dazed.

“I, uh, I…I think we’ve done enough for today, don’t you?” he says, wanting to put some distance between them, wanting to control himself.

She blinks and it is as if she is readjusting to the real world, she looks outside at the dark night. Is she blushing? Or is he just wishing she was?

Cullen, you fool.

“Yes, you’re right,” she agrees readily and she picks up her staff from where it is resting against the wall. Her movements are quick and precise, almost military. Cullen turns to get his discarded cloak, of course she isn’t interested, she is the Inquisitor for maker’s sake. He is so lost in his own embarrassment of his feelings that he does not notice her hovering in the doorway, he meets her eyes and there is a question hanging between them, unspoken and mysterious. He expects her to say something but then she simply purses her lips together, her eyes flit downwards and she makes to go.

“Goodnight, Kilastra,” he says, filling the silence.

She pauses in her exit and looks at him oddly, her grip tightening on the frame of the door.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, feeling the sudden shift in atmosphere.

“Nothing, it’s just…that’s the first time you’ve used my name.”

Cullen doesn’t know what to say and knows it is wise to refrain from telling her that he has used her
name many times before in his dreams. He finds himself staring at feet and his cheeks darken at the thought, but before he has an opportunity to realise how long he has gone without speaking she says softly, “I like it.”

His gaze snaps up immediately but the doorway is empty. Her voice trails back to him, quiet and barely audible.

“Goodnight…Cullen.”

The sound of his name from her lips sounds foreign to him and he turns it over in his mind, repeating it over and over. The cadence of her voice, the softening of his name in her mouth and there is a new element to his dreams that night.

- 

Cullen likes Skyhold. He enjoys its broken edges, its fragmented corners. He likes that a breeze will whistle through its corridors and that sunlight filters through its halls.

He particularly likes that there are still deserted areas, disused and most importantly, private. There is such a one behind the Skyhold gardens, from his seat he can hear the low murmur of voices as the gardeners tend to the herbs but he is shielded from view.

He tips his head back to let the sunlight warm his face. A crumpled report is in his hand and knows that a response is needed, but he can’t bring himself to write it. He has been going over what to say for the past hour, scratching out sentences constantly. All those people they lost at Haven, they’ve only just finally counted the tally and been able to identify them. So many good men and women lost.

*I am so sorry to inform you* –

Cullen looks up at the sound of hurried footsteps and is surprised to see Kilastra, she jumps swiftly behind the pillar and flattens her back against it. Her eyes widen as she catches sight of Cullen and she places a finger to her lips.

He hears Vivienne’s voice as she passes – *where on earth did that girl get to* – and he stifles a laugh. After another minute Kilastra sighs with relief and relaxes against the pillar, she seems to suddenly remember that Cullen is there.

"I'm sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt you."

"No, no uh - come in?"

He feels instantly foolish, inviting her into an open garden that she *owns.*

She does not say anything on it though and instead steps sheepishly into the sunlight towards the bench.

“Why thank you.”

Cullen does not know what to say, surprised at how different it feels when they are not sparring. He feels like an idiot staring at her with his hands uselessly held at his side, still clutching the damn letter he has to write.

"I'm just -” she starts, gesturing to the archway where Vivienne had passed.
"Escaping?" he offers and is rewarded with a grin. Kilastra tucks a strand of her behind her ear as she seats herself next to him.

"It is pretty obvious, isn’t it?"

He leans back against the stone cold wall, marvels at a laugh that escapes him; unsure he was capable of it today.

"Only because I’m doing the same thing."

She points to the letter in his hand, “anything I can help with?”

He smoothes the creases out from the letter, sees those first words and sighs. He knows he shouldn’t involve her in this, knows that she probably already has too much to deal with already, but her eyes are kind and curious and he finds himself talking without meaning to.

“I need to write to the families. Of those we lost.”

“Oh,” she says, and then she sits straight, pushes back her shoulders like she does before a fight and takes the letter from his hand.

“We better get started. Who is this one for?”

They work through the list, Cullen calls out names and they draft the letter together. When he calls out the next name - Jordan, the alchemist at Haven - she suddenly retreats in on herself and Cullen’s heart stutters at the look on her face. It is something so raw he almost feels like he should look away. Everything seems to slide together; the long hours she would spend at the alchemist’s hut, always taking him herbs she had picked on her travels, always insisting he was the one to tend to her when she was hurt. He stops himself reaching to her.

Inquisitor and already in love, he thinks, don’t go down that path.

“Do you want to write something?” he asks, quietly. Kilastra continues staring at her hands but the look on her face is gone, replaced with steely resolve.

“I’m not sure that is wise,” she says slowly, but still she stays. She stays with him for the better part of the afternoon helping him finish all the letters, she traces her fingers over the names of the ones they lost and she offers details for him to include. He learns a great deal about her then, that she walked among the soldiers, that she knew their stories, that even the cook greeted her by name.

When he goes to sleep that night, he tells himself he must not dream about her. He tells himself that he will not interfere, but the Fade is not so easily manipulated and Cullen dreams of her hands tracing over hundreds of names tattooed into his skin.

Chapter End Notes

There is now a comic by Triaelf9 for this chapter, you can go here to read it :)
Chapter 3

The following months seem to be an endless stream of chores, nobles bickering over rightful ownership, slowly and steadily re-taking fortresses, training new recruits and finding supplies to keep everyone with working weapons and food. He barely sees Kilastra and he finds his thoughts wandering to her often.

He gets news, of course, of her achievements. He gets the official report first, factual and to the point, usually sent by the closest messenger. A few days after he receives her letter with more details, details of what she thinks it means and of how she might want to proceed. She starts to pepper these reports with other messages - she found an injured white deer, they helped a couple meet up again in the mountains and so forth. They are his favourite parts; he gets little glimpses into her life.

When he first started dreaming about her, his impulse had been to limit their interaction. Then ever since finding out about the alchemist he has tried to distance himself even further, rescheduling training sessions, limiting talking to war room agenda. But he finds himself missing her intensely and his traitorous body takes him often to where she is and she always seems to look up when he enters. When she meets his eyes and beckons him over he finds himself lingering by her side, a hand that stays too long over hers, perhaps he stands a bit too close and maker he knows he's torturing himself. This past week she has been away and his mind has wandered more than it should, not less. He knows she is coming back today, knows it from the letter she sent to him – the one he still has in his pocket, childish really, but it makes him feel calmer. When the horn sounds announcing their arrival he resists the urge to go meet them in the courtyard. He could pretend he was checking on the recruits but he had done that two hours ago. He forces his attention back to the new maps in front of him. He has had scouts sending back more detailed sketches. The maps they had were pitiful and if they were to gain any advantage in this war then they needed to know where they were going and what was out there.

He doesn't want any surprises.

He is just contemplating again on how best excuse his presence wherever Kilastra might be when he hears cheers coming from outside his window. The sound draws him away from his desk and he can see her standing next to Iron Bull who is holding what appears to be a giant talon.

News of the dragon being killed travels quickly around the barracks and everyone uses it as an opportunity to celebrate, tavern doors thrown wide open to the mountain air. Cullen watches Kilastra receive congratulations, a pat on the shoulder here, a salute there. She passes by all her people and the way they look at her. Maker. This is why they chose her to lead the Inquisition. They need her, they all need her.

Cullen knocks his fist against the side of the window, frustrated. She is not his to hoard, she is not his to want for his own selfish desires. She is the Inquisitor, and he must keep remembering that. Cullen shuts the windows and returns to his work.
By the time he is able to join the festivities it is dark, the fires are roaring, the sound of drunken laughter fills every part of the castle and the air is crisp as he walks to the main tavern. His footsteps fall heavy on the cobbled streets and not for the first time he wonders if he should really be a part of this.

The tavern is filled with people, practically heaving with the crowd. Cullen sees his soldiers knocking back drinks, couples kissing enthusiastically in corners and various games of Wicked Grace unfolding in different pockets of the tavern. He is not sure how to proceed; there are always certain drawbacks of being the Commander. He does not want to impose his presence on any under his command, worried they may not be able to fully relax in a time it is so desperately needed.

He drinks in the atmosphere a moment longer, the warmth driving the cold air from his skin as he faces the entrance. He breathes in deeply the scent of hops and sweat and melted snow before turning to go.

"Commander!" someone shouts, and he turns to see Dorian waving him over. Kilastra is sitting by the fireplace, playing some sort of complicated hand game with Sera who keeps readjusting her fingers into bizarre shapes. Cullen waves and shakes his head to indicate his retreat, but Dorian is persistent.

"Oh come on, come join us! We promise we’ll be gentle!"

Kilastra turns to look at him at Dorian’s shout but Sera barks at her for her attention. Why not, he thinks, grateful to have an opportunity to mingle. He knows that neither Dorian nor any of Kilastra’s party will stand to attention around him. He sits next to Dorian, who has pulled out a chair for him and stretches his legs out. He mutters his thanks as Varric passes him a drink, the cold brew leaving a welcome warm buzz at the back of his throat.

"Welcome to the party, Curly." Varric says, taking a swig of his own beer.

Kilastra keeps looking over at him and she manages to catch his eye and grin a greeting. He points to her hands in question and she just shrugs in response, quickly looking back at the game before Sera can tell her off again.

Varric has already begun telling one of his stories and he lets the noise wash over him. The merriment is nice, necessary even. He knows the constant stressors of war take its toll. It's good for everyone to remember what they are fighting for, that they are all here for the same thing, fighting for the right to live their lives - for moments like these.

As the drink fuzzes his senses he can't help but keep looking over at Kilastra. She is laughing at something Sera has said, her head thrown back exposing the long, line of her throat lit up by firelight. The hair of her braid is coming loose, and it curls at the base of her neck. She has divested herself of her coat, revealing a low-cut top underneath and he finds his eyes drawn to the curve of her breasts. The room suddenly feels too hot and he shifts uncomfortably in his seat, quickly looking away.
"Quite a sight." Varric says.

"What?" Cullen says, a bit too sharply and he knows he is going red in the face.

Varric spreads his hands wide, "all this, of course." he smiles and lifts his eyebrows, teasing.

"Yes. Quite."

"It's good to see her enjoying herself. There's not much of that on the job," Varric continues, smiling fondly at Kilastra as she breaks down in a fit of giggles as Sera seems to have lost quite petulantly.

Cullen must be drunk already because the words tumble out of him without thought.

"Especially after Haven, it is not easy losing a loved one."

"A what?"

"Jordan - the alchemist, were they not...together?"

Varric’s eyebrows knot together in confusion.

"Whatever gave you that idea? No, he was the first person she met that treated her like a real person - not like some religious figurehead or evil pestilence. I think she had a soft spot for him because he swore at her, really."

“Oh I just – she seemed to take the news of his passing particularly badly.”

"Ah,” Varric says, realisation dawning on his face. “We passed by his hometown and Kilastra had to explain to his partner what happened, the woman blamed her entirely, I thought she was going to kill her - it wasn't easy for her."

He knows he shouldn't be smiling so he tries to school his features into a semblance of normality, but the news that Kilastra had not fallen in love with the alchemist is a thought that warms him. He feels the relief wash over him and Varric is looking at him like he can read the look on his face too well.

"Another round?" Cullen says, quickly getting up and going to the bar, trying to get away from his
far too obvious feelings. He takes a moment to compose himself, taking a deep steadying breath. Does the fact that she hadn’t been with Jordan change anything for them? She hardly seemed interested in him anyway and there was still the fact that she was the Inquisitor. It didn’t change the fact that he was supposed to be more in control here. He was supposed to be responsible. What kind of life could he give her anyway - a recovering lyrium addict with no noble title was hardly an attractive dating prospect. He was letting alcohol and one small change cloud his judgement.

*Get a hold of yourself, man.*

But as he waits to be served he can’t help but glance over his shoulder again at Kilastra who has joined the rest of the table. Her cheeks are flushed making the sweep of freckles across her nose stand out more clearly now.

*Maker she does look beautiful when she laughs.*

He returns to the table carrying four bottles of wine and Sera whoops her appreciation.

"Well, well - let's see what our Commander here is capable of," Varric teases.

"I'd like to see that," Kilastra says and slides her glass forward across the table to be filled.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur, he recalls the warm press of Kilastra's thigh against his own beneath the table, the bitter burn at the back of his throat as Dorian dared him to take another shot and the grainy texture of the table beneath his fingertips as he fought to keep his hands to himself.

He does not know what time it is when Cullen finds himself being escorted to his room, feet dragging across the floor. He has no idea how they manage to get him up to his bed, but his head hits the pillow and it feels like home.

"Is that a hole in the ceiling?" Dorian asks, shocked and amused at the same time.

"Best not ask." Varric laughs, and as he listens to their retreating voices and starts to drift into sleep he realises, with a shock, that he has made friends.
Chapter 4

These latest chapters have been shorter, but we're leading up to longer ones! Thank you to everyone who has left kudos and commented so far, it really means a great deal to me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Cullen decided to stop taking Lyrium, he had no idea really what that would mean. He thought he did, he thought he knew what would happen – he’d seen and felt withdrawal before, he knew the way it wracked your body and cried out for another hit.

The sing-song desire in his blood ebbs and flows, but it is not even that that truly bothers him; it is the lack of control. The constant distraction at the back of his mind, the pull of his old life – he can cope with the nightmares and occasional shakes, but when it is the dark days and it is his mind that wanders, that is what he hates the most.

He still remembers it – the first time, the first time that drop of liquid lyrium hit his tongue, the glass cool against his lips, and when the lyrium had entered his blood and he had felt like he was on fire, burning from the inside out with strength and heat and everything had seemed so much brighter.

That is over now, he reminds himself, and his hands are shaking as he picks up the next report and the edges of his vision are blurry. He tries to struggle through it, knowing that it is the lyrium withdrawal talking but he already knows that today will be a bad day.

It is on these days that he is at his weakest. He finds excuses to spend more time with her, gives her unnecessary updates, schedules impromptu training sessions whenever she has the time. He finds excuses to go walk along the battlements just for a chance to catch a glimpse of her and maker, does he feel like an idiot.

He has wrestled with the decision for weeks now, ever since they started training together. He has been unsure whether he wants her to know or not. Before he had always made excuse, it wasn’t the right time, he had it under control, Cassandra knew and that was enough. But he knows that that is all they are – excuses. If he wants her to really know, wants her to truly accept him for what he is then he must tell her, for the good of the Inquisition.

There was always something holding him back, he imagines her face when he tells her over and over again and each time it is different – disgust, fear, pity. He is not sure he can take that. Not from her.

It seems that all the fretting was for nothing as in the end as the decision is taken out of his hands when she finds him, shaking and vulnerable in his office, bottles of smashed lyrium at his feet, the glass winking in the candlelight.

He tells her everything then, feels like she needs to know, he has been selfish not telling her – wanting to keep her close, not wanting to be sent away. She is silent throughout his story; she sits on the edge of the desk, ankles crossed, palms pressed into the wood to support herself.

When Cullen finishes, he feels bare and raw and he’s ashamed to look at her, scared of what he’ll see.
in her eyes. His throat hurts.

“How long?” she asks, still not moving from her position.

“Months now, since I joined the Inquisition.”

She gets up slowly and approaches him, he sees her feet first and they slot neatly between his own. She places a finger under his chin and lifts his gaze to meet hers. The action is gentle and it is that that makes him look, caught up in her kindness.

“I trust you.”

It can’t be that simple.

“I should be at my best, I want to be able to give everything to the Inquisition,” he continues, wanting her to understand.

“Don’t take it.”

Her voice is resolute and she reaches behind him to snap close the lid of the box of lyrium as she says it. She pushes it aside, never taking her eyes off him.

He doesn’t recognise his own voice when he next speaks.

“You will take me as a shell of a man?”

That voice surely does not belong to him, so resigned, so desperate, so pleading.

“That is not what I see,” she says. Her next words are slow and carefully picked. He sees her turn them over in her mind before she speaks. She is so close, but she never takes her eyes off him and she steadies his face in her hands, making sure he does not look away.

“It takes a great deal of bravery to be vulnerable,” she says, her hand drops back to her side and she looks away briefly. She steps back a little out of his space, her thighs bump against the back of the table as she takes a seat on it once more, not taking mind of his inks and papers littering the surface.

“I haven’t exactly been the most forthcoming either,” she starts slowly, she chews her bottom lip nervously before continuing, “I know you all had to accept me since I’m the only one capable of closing the rifts.” Cullen opens his mouth to argue, but she holds up a hand to silence him, her look tells him she is grateful that he would try but she knows the truth of the matter.

“But you’ve all placed your trust in me anyway, and you should know more about me - what happened at the Circle.”

Cullen remembers Leliana’s frustration at the lack of information surrounding Kilastra before she turned up, magically appearing out of that first Rift.

She tells him of her escape of the Circle, of the Templars there that overstepped boundaries and as she does so Cullen isn’t so sure he’ll make it through her telling. It brings back memories of broken chains and scraped knees and he sees his darkness mirrored in her face. It is haunting and familiar and he is inexplicably drawn to it. The tightness in words, the anger that simmers below the surface - he knows that all too well.

She describes killing them in a matter of fact tone, face devoid of any emotion but he sees the way her fingers twitch against the tabletop. He sees the way her shoulder tense and he wants to reach out
to her, but he knows from experience that there is no comfort for those kind of memories.

“They were not all cruel, but enough were and it took me so long to act. If only I had done something sooner then maybe I could have saved...“ she stops and shakes her head trying to dislodge the memory. She looks at him and smiles sadly, he wants to ask save who but knows that is a story for another time, that maybe one day he will tell her of what happened to him and maybe when that day comes they can find salvation in each others mistakes, bringing to light all that darkness. The green glow of the mark on her hands brings him out of his thoughts and she is still talking, rubbing her palm thoughtfully.

“What I’m trying to say is that we all make mistakes, it’s how we choose to deal with them that defines us.”

“What did you do after?” he asks, genuinely curious. He imagines her frightened and alone, he imagines her fighting for her life, he imagines her hunted and it makes something in him growl. He wants to protect her, he wants to fight for her and never let her feel that way again. He starts to wonder why she had to learn to fight so well, why she knows how to make medical potions and why she can stitch herself up without help after a fight. He thinks how long has it been since she let anyone else protect her?

She tells him of her time living as an apostate, steering clear of darker details. She tells him of learning tidbits from dalish clans and travelling troupes. He learn’t that she could sing, that she would spend nights in taverns in exchange for her songs but she could never stay in one place for too long. She tells him of her feelings when they first set up the Inquisition.

The hours slide past with the sound of her voice and through it all Cullen realises something - the way she talks about the Inquisition, her companions, the softness and the ferocity behind her words - Cullen realises it is how he feels. This sense of belonging, this sense of finally having a home and a purpose. There is a fondness in her voice that Cullen aches to hear. It is the same way he feels when he walks through the halls of Skyhold, when he enters the training barracks and his men snap to salute him. It is the way he feels when Kilastra smiles at him from across the war table and when Varric calls him “curly” even though he pretends to hate it.

“I don’t want to keep running,” she says and she rests a hand softly on his arm looking him in the eye, “and I really don’t want to find a new Commander.”

Cullen smiles at her, grateful, and she suddenly gives a little "oh" of realisation, having just thought of something. She unties the scarf that is around her neck and digs beneath the layers; Cullen is perplexed until she pulls out a small bottle that is on a leather cord.

She presses the bottle into his hand, her expression serious as she wraps her fingers around his, squeezing gently she says, "I trust you."

The glass is still warm from her skin and Cullen looks at what she has given him. It is her phylactery, her name scrawled on the side, the tip of the K lost beneath the wax seal.

“Kilastra – this is –“

“I trust you,” she repeats and then steps back to give him space. Cullen is speechless. As the door closes behind her, he can still feel the lingering touch of her fingers on his skin, the absolute belief in her voice as she spoke to him. Her phylactery lies in his hands and he stares at it in awe. With this he could always track her, he could betray her to any Templar, if this was in the wrong hands - he shudders at the thought.
As he stares at the cracked lyrium bottles at his feet his hands shake for a different reason, a new realisation, slow like rain drops sliding into one another on the windowsill.

He thinks he may be falling in love with her.

After everything that has happened, after what she told him, after – *maker*, of course this would happen. After what she just told him she probably would never want anything to do with a Templar, even an ex-Templar, romantically.

He starts to pick up the pieces of the broken lyrium bottle and decides *but he will be worthy of her trust*.

Chapter End Notes

We now have art for one of these scenes from the wonderful allenvoooreef from tumblr. It is so gorgeous, thank you :)

The image is [here](https://example.com).
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

The beginning of this chapter is nsfw, so I've bumped the rating up to explicit!

He is drinking lyrium. *Maker it is good* and how he has missed it.
The fire in his veins, that cool liquid at the back of his throat and he is hard from the pleasure of it. His erection straining against the fabric of his trousers and then Kilastra is there and she is pulling him out from his briefs, tugging them down so that his cock slaps against his abdomen. Her hands are circling his balls, stroking their underside and jolts of pleasure run down his legs. He doesn't think he can stand. Her tongue is pink and wet and swirling around the tip of him, he twitches with anticipation and she grins up at him. Her eyes red. He thinks, *no this is not right*, but her lips are around his cock now and she is swallowing him whole and *Maker take him he is not strong enough to resist this*. He tangles his hands in her hair and tries not to buck helplessly into the warm, wet heat.

But then there is nothing and he is clutching only string, and a broken bottle hangs at the bottom of it. There is something dripping on to the floor and he follows the *drip, drip, drip*. There are letters inscribed in the broken pieces of glass at his feet and he does not need to read them to know it is her name.

*Kilastra*

There is something curling around his feet, cold and sharp against his skin and suddenly the lyrium feels too hot in his body and he is *burning, burning, burning* -

Cullen straightens in bed, panting wildly, trying to draw in lungfuls of breath. It is the guilt that hits him first, dark and solid like a punch in the chest and it takes a while to dissipate. Slowly his vision goes back to normal, his heart rate eases and he runs his hands through his sweat-slicked hair.

His eye catches on the phylactery that Kilastra gave him, he turns it over in his hands as he lets himself calm down. He traces the letters over and over, slow and methodical.

He realises that he never asked her how she got it, he had been so surprised at having been given it at all that it hadn't seemed important at the time. There were so many things he still didn't know about her, and he thinks he is in love with her.

*Ridiculous*, he chides himself.

It is still deep night but Cullen knows he won't be able to sleep again. His feet hit the cold floor as he reaches for his clothes, folded neatly by his bedside.

*Habits are hard to break*, he thinks, a cold smile on his face. The Templars were adamant about keeping up appearances, tidiness seemed to go hand in hand with all the rules of the order. There were so many ways that the Order ingrained itself into your life, forming then over many years. He tries to remind himself to be patient, to be strong, it will take time to unlearn years of conditioning.

The phylactery feels cold to the touch as he holds it gently as he walks. His feet are taking him
somewhere even though the thought is only half-formed in his head. It builds as he enters the forge and stokes the fire to life.

No-one else is awake at this hour except the guards on duty that patrol the battlements. It is peaceful and Cullen loses himself in the burning embers, in the hiss and pop of air releasing from the molten metal he keeps at arm length, watching the material coalesce into something new. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to work a forge anymore, it seems like an age since his father used to stand over him, gently instructing.

It feels good to be doing something with his hands, something besides paperwork and destruction. The sun is just beginning to rise when he is finished. It is crude work but it will do, the metal case envelops the phylactery entirely and he threads a cord around the loop he made to hold it. He slips the cord over his head and tucks the phylactery into his shirt, the metal is warm against his skin still cooling. The effect is soothing.

He does not bother heating the water in his bath, knowing he will have to somehow stay awake for the rest of the day. The cold helps scrape away the heat of the forge and the sweat on his skin. Every now and again he will find himself mesmerised by the heavy metal bumping against his skin. It will serve as a good reminder.

His mind flutters briefly to his dream again - Kilastra's lips, her breasts, her slender waist...he wills his thoughts elsewhere, resolutely refusing to touch himself.

She trusts him, and he will remain professional even if it kills him. Right now she does not need a doting fool. She needs someone reliable to run her army. So he dresses, gathers his reports and heads to the war room. The first rays of sunlight light his path.

He is the first one there, which is unusual, as Josephine is typically there to greet him. The reason for her uncharacteristic delay becomes immediately clear as she enters looking flustered with Kilastra on her heels.

"The intel is sound and you must attend, how else will we be able to stop this madness?"
"I just don't see how attending a ball is necessary, a posting would achieve the same thing."
"Well that is absurd, we're not sure who the assassin is - how will you react quickly enough?"
"Josephine it's been a long time since -"

They suddenly seem to notice Cullen is there, and Kilastra cuts herself off mid-sentence. She looks tired and frustrated, and she quickly looks at the floor away from his gaze. He waves at them awkwardly, frustrated with the sudden change of attitude. She spoke so freely to him last night, why does this morning feel so stilted?

"Good morning," he says.

Josephine continues as if she hasn't heard him.

"It comes back in an instant, I assure you. Ah Leiliana please explain to Kilastra the importance of her actually being there."

"In fact - we all have to be there."

Kilastra's gaze snaps up to Cullen's before she turns to Leiliana quickly.
"You will all come with me?" Her voice is careful and Cullen curses for not having seen it before. She doesn't want to avoid the ball because she believes it is a frivolity or beneath her. She is scared. He sees it now in the clench of her jaw, the curve of her shoulders and the nervous tapping of her fingers against her thigh. She has been out of noble circles since her family sent her away, spent years evading Templars and now they are asking her to parade herself in front of the very people that rejected her in the first place.

"We shall all be with you," he replies. His voice is low and steady, the type of voice he uses to calm his new recruits, "and I shall have men stationed at every corner. You can also, of course, bring whoever you see fit, we would never send you in alone."

Josephine catches on quickly, glancing between the two of them.

"Well it would be improper to go without an entourage."

Whether Leliana knew that Kilastra would react this way, or whether she really did intend for them all to go anyway is irrelevant at this stage, but she drives her point home.

"Most importantly we need eyes and ears everywhere. If an assassination truly did take place in the Winter Palace it would be turmoil," she looks at Kilastra from under the hood of her cloak, and grins devilishly, "and we do not need more of that."

The Winter Palace is majestic, a glorious architectural masterpiece of Orlesian tradition. People say it is a gem, a historical landmark to showcase the glamour and extravagance of Orlais.

Cullen is unimpressed.

The over-polished marble looks cold and unyielding, he can see at least a dozen totally indefensible positions from where he is standing alone and it makes him nervous. There are too many areas for an assassin to hide, and not just behind the elaborate masks favoured by the Orlesians at these events.

He hates these outfits and he hates the subterfuge. This is why they have Josephine who is a natural in this environment; if it wasn’t for Kilastra he’d have tried to find a way to not be involved in this masquerade. He feels out of place, awkward at the chit-chat that goes on amongst the nobility.

A small gaggle of noblewomen have encircled him, they are fiercely beautiful and intelligent and he finds he does not care a thing for what they are saying. He feels trapped amongst their voices, their clawing hands with painted nails, squabbling over him like he is fresh meat. He forces himself to smile. He really does hate these things.

The sound of the large double doors opening thankfully draws everyone’s attention and he hears her name called out to the crowd – the arrival of the Inquisitor. Finally, someone who can save him from this boredom. He turns with the others to see her, ready to give her any encouragement but for a moment is struck dumb.

Her hair is loose from her usual braid, something he has never seen before, and it rests just past her bare shoulders. The dress she wears is black and silken, flowing and structured all at once and it hugs her curves beautifully. He knows he is staring but he cannot stop, the dress is laced with silver silk that makes it look as if lightning was trapped within the folds. How fitting.

She looks up and catches his eye, her grin is dazzling and she permits a little wave. He excuses himself from the group he is with and makes his way towards her.
“Does it bore you to have to attend this?” He asks as he approaches, gesturing to the hall and the elaborately dressed guests.

She looks around the hall, scanning the area. She ponders the question seriously, despite the fact he meant it only as conversation starter.

“Not really. I’ve sort of always loved balls. My parents used to hold them when I was little, and I’d love running between the dresses. People wore the most ridiculous shoes.”

She is smiling at the memory but a shadow flies across her face and the moment is gone.

“That was before the Circle, of course.”

“Well you look…”

“Positively ravishing,” interrupts Dorian, gliding into the conversation.

Captivating, was what he was thinking, but he allows the moment to pass, silently grateful he is able to not make a fool of himself like a stuttering schoolboy.

“Hardly practical, though.” Dorian says, and is rewarded with a grin from Kilastra.

She lifts her skirt up and reveals the practical boots underneath, she winks at Dorian before allowing them to drop. Cullen envies the ease with which they interact.

“Don’t worry, Dorian. I can still run if I need to.”

“Oh good, because I’m sick of having to take care of you,” Dorian jokes, “now if you’ll excuse me, I haven’t been to a good ball in ages.”

As soon as Dorian leaves Kilastra seems suddenly paralysed with indecision, she is twisting her hands together and unconsciously taking a step back away from the crowds.

Cullen gently places a hand on the small of her back and shields her from the doors and the crowd with his body.

He leans in close and whispers, “is this all okay?”

He makes a charade of nodding politely, as if Kilastra is telling him an interesting story, keen not to let the rumour mills get any material.

When Kilastra stiffens slightly beneath his touch he thinks he has misread the situation, but Kilastra turns to look at him and her expression softens. Her shoulders relax and she breathes out slowly.

“I can cope.”

Then it is as if their small world bursts, she steps back away from his hand on her waist and grins broadly, fixing the expression on her face.

“I need to go save the empire and all that but save me a dance?”

It is said so casually, so without thinking that Cullen almost doesn’t respond. The automatic response would be no, of course, he is an awful dancer, but he realizes she is still standing in front of him and she is looking so...well she could ask him to do anything right now.

“Of course,” he finds himself saying.
She curtsies her leave, and he bows back to her, still smiling.

“For now, I have an assassin to catch,” she says and spins on her feet, giving him a backward wave as she goes.

She is gone for many hours, and Cullen only sees her in glimpses, dancing in the main hall with a tall, blonde woman, a brief glimpse of her disappearing behind a corner, and was that her climbing a trellis – in a dress?

It is maddening pretending to be interested in what the people in front of him are saying, but he forces himself to try be as charming as he can be.

Cullen gets a brief respite when he ventures outside to the garden under the pretence of needing fresh air. Dorian catches his eye and wanders over, Cullen is not sure how he managed to extricate himself from his previous conversation so quickly – the talent cultivated from the many years amongst Tevinter nobility, no doubt.

“How are you finding the festivities, Commander?”

Cullen rolls his eyes and Dorian laughs loudly, a quick bark of a laugh before settling his arms on the banister next to him.

“Nerve-wrecking. I have soldiers on standby, I’m constantly looking over my shoulder for a potential assassin and worst of all I have to wear this ridiculous outfit.”

“You didn’t seem to mind so much when our dear Inquisitor was talking to you earlier?”

Something at the back of Cullen’s mind freezes and he feels his tongue go numb and heavy in his mouth. He manages to come out with a strange, inarticulate sound that could be a question and Dorian just raises his eyebrows at him.

“I see,” Dorian says, and he looks out at the detailed garden below, deliberately not meeting Cullen’s gaze, “she is not so different from you or me, no matter how much she pretends to be.”

The man might as well be talking in code in so far as Cullen is concerned.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Dorian gives a frustrated sigh that is barely audible and mutters under his breath.

“It seems you are just as oblivious as she is. Excellent. This should go splendidly.”

He raises his voice again as he points back towards the fray, “I believe I better go check on Kilastra, you never know when she might need back-up.”

He gives Cullen a wink before disappearing into the crowd, seamlessly blending in as he sends a smile one way and then the next. Cullen gives one final glance at the quiet, night sky before resigning himself to another few hours of drudgery.

As it turns out, he is spared the many hours by the arrival of Kilastra in the middle of the hall flanked by the Empress, the Duke and an Elven woman who he remembers reading about, she must be the spy. The three leaders are speaking, talking about a common goal, a shared partnership for the future stability of the Empire. Kilastra is quiet behind them, trying to remain unobtrusive but he knows that she has orchestrated the entire affair. He knows the quiet power that she is wielding as she shifts her gaze from one leader to the next and nods to them in turn.
He loses her briefly in the ensuing flurry of activity as after the announcement the music roars to life once more and the place seems to teem with dancers. Eventually he finds her, alone, on a balcony. She is leaning against the banister, skirts ruffled by the wind as she gazes at the moon.

At the sound of his footsteps she turns to face him and seems relieved when she realises who it is.

On a whim he bows low to her, offering his hand, trying to remember court courtesies Jospehine briefed him on before the ball, “my Lady.”

She looks positively delighted, grinning from ear to ear, and places her hand gently in his, performing a mid-curtsey.

“My Lord,” she says, mock seriously and as she lifts out of the curtsey he tugs on her hand and pulls her into position, letting his free hand drop to her waist while he holds the other at shoulder height. She gasps softly, and the sound goes straight to his groin, he begins to think that perhaps this was not the best idea.

“I’m a terrible dancer, you know,” he says, trying to distract himself.

She laughs as they step to the side together, following the rhythm of the music.

“Have you forgotten that I train with you, Cullen? I know you can move.”

His name on her lips is so startlingly intimate in this moment that he doesn’t know how to respond. They follow the music for a few more moments in silence and he is surprised at how easily it comes to him, perhaps it is just because he is with her, it is almost as if they are back in the training room together.

“You know…” she says, and he slows the pace with the song, swaying from side to side. She is looking up at him and he can see past the curve of her nose, her full lips lit by moonlight and it nearly distracts him from the fact that she is speaking.

“Know what?” he asks, prompting her gently.

“It’s fun, pretending to be a normal girl again, even if just for a moment.”

She lays her head on his shoulder, her next words are barely a whisper.

“Thank you.”

He allows himself this moment, this moment of weakness – holds her close to him, he lets himself pretend they are just two people, meeting at a ball, sharing a first dance. Tomorrow he’ll be better, tomorrow he’ll go back to being the Commander and she will go back to being the Inquisitor.

But for tonight, they can dance.
Chapter 6

Thank you to everyone who has been leaving kudos and comments so far, I really appreciate the interest and your feedback!

It has been a month since the ball and a semblance of political stability has returned to Thedas, civilians seem more at ease than before and Cullen prays that they do not hear about the wardens. The disappearance of the wardens had been worrying them for weeks, and even the arrival of Hawke seemed to spell more trouble than assurance. Cullen remembers the incident at Kirkwall all too vividly and finds it hard to dissociate those memories from Hawke, no matter how hard he tries.

The have been trying to track the remaining Wardens ever since the incident in the Western Approach and the lack of any success has left him on edge.

So it is that Cullen wakes with a sense of foreboding deep in his gut. He knows this feeling, bone-deep and weary. It is like the hint of rain before a storm or the instinctive bracing of muscles before a fall. It is like the sensation of insects crawling on your skin and it makes him extremely uncomfortable.

"Has anyone heard from Kilastra?" he asks Leliana, who shakes her head gravely.

"The last was two days ago."

He doesn’t like the way she says that.

"You feel it too?" Leliana asks tentatively, and Cullen can only nod in response.

"I'll send out crows."

He tries to distract himself from it but the soldiers are jittery from his nerves so he thinks it best if he retires to his office, where he can hopefully stop his mood infecting others. The words on the papers slip through his head though, dancing between distractions.

It is late at night when his anticipation is broken, there is a crash at his door and Cullen wakes with a sword in his hand and feet on the ground. He is startled to see Sera’s face on the other side of his table where he had fallen asleep in the chair. He opens his mouth to speak but Sera cuts him off.

"Quiet. She said don't let them see me like this, so we had to bring her in all sneaky like."

Sera gestures behind herself and when Cullen peers around her slender form it is Cassandra's face that he sees first. Her expression is stricken, the light drained from her face and she is holding Kilastra in her arms. Dorian is cradling Kilastra's head, fiercely protective, green magic lacing from his fingertips.

"She needs help," Cassandra manages, voice hoarse. She is trembling with fatigue or fear, he does not know what but it rattles him to the very core.
"Get a healer," he growls and Sera scampers at his tone, lightning quick.

They lie Kilastra on his table, Dorian still murmuring under his breath and not leaving her side. Papers and inks scatter to the floor as they make room. Cullen bundles his cloak beneath her head. Maker who did this to her.

"What happened?" Cullen asks. He tracks the bruises across her neck, the fingerprint marks dark against her skin. Her face is pale, blood is dripping from her fingertips onto the floor - sluggish and slow as Dorian does his best to quell the damage.

It is Cassandra who answers him.

"We got there just in time. We should have never let her go alone."

"She was buying supplies, how were we supposed to know?" Dorian says, though his tone implies he is mad at himself regardless.

"What happened?" he repeats, harsher. He doesn’t know how to control this horrible feeling inside him. It is vindictive and angry, drowning out the terrible fear of seeing her so hurt.

“She was ambushed,” Cassandra starts, and she pauses, reluctant to continue but Cullen’s stare prompts her to finish, “…by Templars. Cullen, I think they were from the Free Marches.”

Cullen’s hands convulse as he tries to control the rage that suddenly bursts through him. He is spared from replying as Sera enters the room dragging a sleep-addled healer in her wake who immediately snaps to attention when she sees what is happening. To her credit the look of shock lasts only a moment before she is professional and sharp. She eases Dorian aside who is reluctant to move but gives finally when Cassandra gently pulls on his arm.

"I need space," she orders, pointedly looking at Cullen who without realising it has been inching closer and closer. He snaps back an outstretched hand, unaware that he was reaching for Kilastra’s hand.

“Is she -"

“She’ll live. If you give me space.”

They shuffle outside; Dorian collapses immediately against the wall, a sigh escaping his lips. Cullen dismisses the soldiers on duty. The whole of Skyhold will know about this tomorrow, but he’s hoping they can at least keep the knowledge of the extent of her injuries to a minimum. Don’t let them see me like this, she had said and so he will make sure that her wishes are adhered to. Cullen finds his hands subconsciously drifting to the phylactery hidden beneath his shirt, the weight of it against his skin comforts him.

It is a few hours still before Kilastra can be transferred to the healing tents. They try to give her as much privacy as possible as she is settled into a cot, blankets draped over her. They are all hovering and Cullen knows there is nothing they can do at this point but he is reluctant to leave.

“The best thing for her now is sleep. And the same for all of you. Go! I shall watch over her.”

The next morning he wasn’t the only one that wanted to visit her. They were able to keep most people away with guards stationed at the tent, but Sera is a highly capable rogue and she is sitting by her bedside when Cullen enters.
He doesn’t bother to feign surprise and just takes a seat next to her.

“It’s not bleedin’ fair is it?” Sera says, stroking Kilastra’s hair. Kilastra’s cheeks have a bit more colour in them, it makes the tightness round his heart ease slightly. Sera is still methodically stroking her hair, playing with strands between her fingers. There is a stillness to her, a quiet rage that would scare Cullen if he didn’t know what it was directed at. He knows what Sera is capable of, knows what she can do with her network of ‘friends’. He finds it doesn’t bother him as much as it should.

“No. It isn’t,” he says. Sera doesn’t look at up him, but her fingers curl in Kilastra’s hair. She forces herself to loosen them and gets up quickly.

“I gotta run a few errands,” she says and Cullen has no energy in him to protest, no desire to. She takes his silence as consent and casts a fond look at Kilastra’s sleeping form before she goes.

“Just help her stay still for a few days, yeah? Use that pretty mouth of yours.”

Cullen colours immediately, his face hot with the implications of her words.

“What?” he manages to sputter out, eyes wide. Sera takes one look at his face and grins.

“Oh ew gross no, I mean talk to her right? You’re supposed to be good at that.” She is teasing him, but there is a seriousness behind her words, she wants him to get something and Cullen wishes she’d be a bit more direct with him. He senses that this is some sort of test, and he does not want to fail.

“I’ll try.”

That afternoon he walks back to the healing tents, a box tucked under his arm, slightly apprehensive of his strategy. He becomes even more unsure as he nears the tent and hears Kilastra’s voice raised. At least that means she is awake.

“I’m totally fine, I can barely feel it.”

“Oh rreally -” came the healers response, a strong starkhaven accent rolling the r, “and I suppose that wee spot of blood there right below your ribcage is from yesterday?”

The guards salute him as he passes and he enters to see Kilastra looking exasperated at a growing bloodstain on her bandages.

“Maker’s breath, why won’t it stop?” She lets her hands fall to her side as the healer approaches her with fresh bandages and a poultice.

“Maybe because you keep trying to escape every three seconds.”

“What is this I hear about escaping?” Cullen asks and Kilastra has the decency to look slightly ashamed.

“Don’t worry, Talia has a very watchful eye.” Kilastra jabs her thumb in the direction of the healer who is unravelling the bandages around her waist. Cullen turns sharply at the last moment, cheeks burning as the final bandage comes free.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, clutching tightly the box that he is holding, “I’ll come back later.” The sound of Kilastra laughing halts his escape but it does not stop the blush rising to his ears.

“No need Cullen, Talia will be done in a moment.”
“Aye ser, you might try to convince her not to move for a while.”

The strong smell of the poultice fills the air, it is bitter and sharp and stings his eyes.

“Do you bring news?” Kilastra asks. Cullen hears the snip of scissors as the bandages are cut and bound in place, he only deems it safe to turn around when Talia taps him lightly on the arm as she passes him.

“Remember, stay still!” Talia yells as she exits the tent, carrying her equipment to another tent nearby. Kilastra sticks her tongue out at her retreating form and Cullen bites back a laugh.

“That’s not very mature.”

“I want to at least be able to visit the war room,” she says, sinking back into the pillows on her bed. She holds herself gingerly, despite all the bravado, and her bruises are still stark against her skin.

“Well you can’t.” Cullen responds as he sets the box he has brought down on the little table near her makeshift bed. He drags a chair into position and takes a seat, opening the box.

“Has everyone decided to stop following my orders today?” Kilastra asks, sulky, but he has caught her attention and she is watching him curiously.

“I thought you didn’t like being in charge,” Cullen says, remembering all the objections at the beginning of the inquisition. Kilastra huffs but her sulkiness seems to leave her, she sighs and opens her palms wide in defeat.

“I deserved that. Sorry, I just don’t like sitting still for so long, it doesn’t feel right.”

“You’re not sitting still, you are playing chess.”

Cullen gestures at the box between them that once opened reveals the checkered board and its players. He begins to lay out the pieces.

“When I was younger my sister used to beat me constantly. I’d get so frustrated. So I practiced and practiced and the first time I won. Ha, the look on Mia’s face. It was worth all the hours.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister?”

“I have two. And one brother.”

“You never said.”

“You never asked.”

She leans forward again, once more ignoring her injuries and points an accusing finger at him.

“Well that’s unfair - friends tell each other these kind of things. It’s normal!”

“Just like you are so forthcoming with your stories?”

“Ah. Well.”

She looks down at her hands, silence settling between them.

"What happened?" Cullen asks gently and Kilastra's expression is dark.
"They found me. The Templars from my Circle. I don't know why I thought they wouldn't. My name is all over Thedas by now."

She sighs, frustrated.

“I just thought -” she trails off, her thoughts unfinished. Cullen thinks of his flashbacks, of the trembling in his hands sometimes and the glow of the red lyrium from Kirkwall that haunts his dreams. He thinks of the spray of sea salt on his face as he crossed the ocean, his hands gripping the side of the boat and thinking a new start.

“That you would get a clean slate once you got away.”

She doesn’t seem surprised by his addition, instead she just smiles at him, grateful for his understanding. Something passes between them, bright and quick, and Cullen’s heart beats a little faster at the way she looks at him.

“Yes.”

Her hands drifts unconsciously to the marks on her neck, but she drops them back down again as soon as she realises what she is doing.

“Your turn,” Cullen says, gesturing to the board. She looks at it as if she had forgotten it existed, but then she furrows her brows and hums briefly as she ponders the pieces on the board.

A healer comes in every now and again to check on them, but leaves at a nod from Cullen. They play for a while in quiet companionship. Cullen sees that Kilastra is sorely out of practice so he moderates his moves. Eventually Kilastra puts him into checkmate and he sits back, pretending to be upset.

“Yes!” she yells, throwing her hands up into the air forgetting about her injury, she lets out a gasp of pain and doubles over. Cullen is by her side in an instant, holding her up.

“Oops,” she says, “I may have got a bit too over excited there.”

“Well you were lucky, next time it won’t be so easy.” He teases as he gently helps her lean back on the bed. The forward movement has him leaning over her and the phylactery slips out from his shirt, it dangles between them. Her eyes fall on it and she flicks her gaze up to Cullen, surprise clearly written on her face. Cullen hastily tucks it back out of view and sits back embarrassed. A terribly awkward silence follows and Cullen can’t bear to be in it, he feels like he should explain himself, give some sort of reason as to why he’s carrying her phylactery around his neck but he’s not sure he can do that right now.

“How did you get it back?” he asks.

She looks at him out of the corner of her eyes quickly before looking back down at her hands. She winces slightly as she shifts position.

“Do you really want to know?”

He nods, not trusting his voice because maybe he doesn’t want to know, maybe he shouldn’t know.

“There was a Templar, a young girl. She had just joined and I don’t think she had any idea of what was going on in the Circle– not at that point anyway. We…we became friends.”

Kilastra rubs at her wrists nervously. Cullen starts to wonder what it would be like to tell her his
story, to let her into the damaged corners of his mind. He waits patiently for her to continue.

“I was so stupid, it didn’t even occur to me that she could be in trouble? I was so focussed on us versus them that I just didn’t see the signs. When she came to me to talk about running away - that’s when I should have realised, but I was just so excited about chance for me to escape that I didn’t think about why she might want to. I was very selfish then.”

“You were young and scared.”

“That is generous, but I was just self-absorbed. She knew as well as I did that I’d be tracked down immediately if I didn’t take my phylactery with me, so she was the one that got it for me. She risked everything and I didn’t even notice that she was hurting. The things they did to her-”

She shakes her head in disgust.

“You couldn’t have known,” Cullen says. He knew that mages were not given freedom, he knew that many found the constant presence of the Templars oppressive but he had no idea that in some Circles it ran deeper, that it even permeated the Templar ranks. He should have, the story of his life - that he should have known better, that he should have suspected sooner. Here he is telling Kilastra not to blame herself when in fact he knows exactly how she feels. He knows exactly the kind of special torment hindsight can bring.

“So she was the one that got it for me and helped me escape. She said she would join me the next day. But they found out and they punished her for it. By the time I found out, it was too late. They killed her, Cullen. All because she wouldn’t tell them where I was, and because in my eagerness to escape I didn’t think it through. In my selfishness, I didn’t try and protect my first true friend. I thought that as a Templar she would be safe, I thought they wouldn’t touch her…”

“She made a choice, Kilastra.”

“She could have got out so easily without me. She could have transferred, she could have run away - she didn’t need to risk so much.”

She gestures to where her phylactery is hidden beneath Cullen’s shirt.

“I carried it with me to remind me not to make the same mistakes.”

He raises his hand and covers the area where it is, feels the press of the metal against his skin. He draws it out and offers it without thinking.

“Do you want it back?”

“Oh,” she blushes deeply and Cullen feels as if he has made some kind of error in asking her this, “no, no it is a freely given gift. Unless you want to give it back?”

“No,” he says quickly, wanting to back track instinctively pulling his hand back and cradling the little bottle close to his chest, “it is the best gift anyone has ever given me.”

Kilastra’s laughter is warm and joyous at Cullen’s reaction. He would be embarrassed but he just never wants it to stop. However it has been proven to him time and again that these moments are the hardest to hold onto. Just as he is thinking that he hopes this never ends, there is the sound of the tent flaps opening and the colour drains from Kilastra’s face as she looks up to see who it is.

Leliana is standing at the entrance, her expression dark and troubled..
“There is news,” Leliana says, and she looks like this is the last thing she wants to deliver right now.

“I’m sorry to do this to you Kilastra, I know you need to rest –“

“Don’t apologise, what is it?”

“We know where the Wardens are and we think they’re going to try complete the ritual soon. We have to get to Fort Adamant.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This is a big one! And things are finally progressing between these two!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The push on Fort Adamant is not a simple undertaking; they have been trying to subtly move a battalion of soldiers with trebuchets through forests and deserts, which is no easy task. Kilastra and her team have been scouting ahead, clearing the way but it is slow moving nonetheless, especially with Kilastra’s injuries still healing. Cassandra and Iron Bull have taken to rotating what Bull calls “inquisitor-sitting” where they do their best to avoid her getting into trouble. From what Cullen can tell, it mostly involves directing her to less dangerous things as the others go and clear the area before she gets there. He thinks Kilastra must see what is going on because her mood continues to sour as the days go by, and she looks ready to murder someone when Sera comes back to camp with a deep cut across her cheek.

It has been a while since Cullen spent a significant amount of time outside of Skyhold since the Inquisition began. It feels good to be among his men, to be sharing the risks. When he was in the Templar order, part of what drew him to it was the purpose. At the beginning, at least, it was clear what needed to be done.

Sometimes he gets so lost behind the maps and papers strewn across his desk that it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. To think of men in numbers and positioning. Not here – not out in the open, protecting his people. The sun is beginning to set, a soft orange glow filtering through the forest leaves to dapple the ground beneath. It feels good to use his muscles on something other than a training dummy, he helps set up the tents each night and rolls his shoulders the next day relishing in the small ache from a good day’s work. In Skyhold when he walks past groups of soldiers they tend to stop talking, stand to attention and all the other things that denotes respect. He knows it is a necessary aspect of the chain of command, but it can feel isolating. Out here, there is not as much ceremony, and he will often take off his usual armour to assist with whatever needs doing, it lends some anonymity for short moments. It is refreshing.

The chattering of soldiers around him is white noise as he places another peg into the ground, a hard hit and it is driven home, taking the coil of rope with it into the earth. Snatches of conversation float past him as he works.

do you think we’ll make it / the inquisitor will protect us / when is dinner / I will follow her to my death gladly

The last jolts him out of his mechanical work, he twists his head side to side to see if he can catch who said it but he is met with a sea of faces. It’s not that he’s surprised, he has known for months now that Kilastra inspires the soldiers. He knows she leads by example, that ever since she came back injured the army has made it’s own scout parties so as to cover more ground. They don’t want her to get hurt again, but they understand that she does - for them. He just never thought that he’d be somewhere again where they had a leader they could actually trust. The thought is new and shocking.

He smiles, picks up his discarded armour and sets out to find her. She is sitting alone by her tent,
coaxing a fire into life with her hands. The marks on her neck are barely noticeable now, having faded into light yellow bruises. He is glad she no longer has to be reminded of it so visibly. The fire crackles and spits after her attention and she leans back to admire it, swaying her feet to the flickering light. He takes a seat next to her.

“Didn’t expect to see you in camp.”

She throws her hands up in the air, clearly exasperated and jabs a thumb in the direction of the forest. He presumes that is where Dorian and the others have gone.

“They are coddling me,” she says, and then adopts a high falsetto that Cullen has no idea who she is trying to imitate, “just a routine sweep, you stay here, we promise we’ll call you if a rift shows up. Some friends they are.”

“They are helping you rest.”

“I am fine.”

Cullen jabs out quickly, he means to touch her injured area to show her she still hurts but maybe she has healed faster than he expected because the next thing he knows is that his fingers are caught in hers. She squeezes them slightly and sends a slight electric shock running through him. He yelps in surprise and she grins at him.

“See?”

Cullen tries to rub the shock out of his fingers as she releases him.

“You know they are just trying to help you.”

“I know, I just wish people would let me help them. That’s sort of what I’m supposed to do!”

“Kilastra you are helping them.”

She looks at him disbelievingly, indicating her current seated position.

“I’m confused as to how you think this is seen as helping.”

Cullen reaches over to add another log to the fire. She can be so oblivious. He wonders if she even knows the things the Inquisition army says about her, if she has any clue as to the depth of dedication and admiration she commands from her soldiers. He looks her squarely in the eye.

“Every day that you keep the title of Inquisitor, every time you close a rift, every time you come back to us. It shows everyone that we can win.”

She is looking at him wide-eyed, and a little hopeful. There is something in the way she asks her next question that has his heart beating faster and his mouth dry.

“Come back to us?”

He swallows.

“To Skyhold,” he says, his tongue feels heavy and his palms are sweating but he thinks *maker’s breath, be a man,* “to me.”

A sharp intake of breath, small and maybe even barely noticeable if he hadn’t been looking directly at her and perhaps he’s overstepped his boundaries so he talks to fill the silence, hopes that she will
take it as a general caring of her wellbeing rather than an admission of something more.

“It makes me a little jealous actually, the way they troops morale rises when you’re back. It’s a very useful skill.”

He smiles at her and hopes it doesn’t look fake, that it doesn’t look like he is trying to conceal his panic.

“You don’t even know the effect you have on people do you?” she says.

It is his turn now to be confused. She sighs into her hands and he thinks he may have missed something important here in that exhale of breath. He thinks he should be able to decipher the meaning behind the way her shoulders curve inwards, the way she turns to face him, one hand on her cheek and shaking her head. He is woefully ill-equipped for this and she doesn’t give him any time to try and remedy the situation.

“I want to go over the initial attack again, I think we should adjust the angle of attack. I’m not sure we’re going to be able to make it round the sides. A few could scale up easily, but they would be immediately overwhelmed once inside. I think we should focus everything on the front gate, and then filter out quickly from there on.”

He wants to backtrack, wants to go back to the conversation from before and ask what effect, what people, do I have an effect on you but the moment is gone. The tactics are slipping to the front of his mind and he stares at the crude drawing she has traced in the dust beneath their feet with her fingers.

“My soldiers can get you in, we can batter the main gate and that should give you the opening you need. Then we’ll need to secure the battlements, that is when we can send forces to the sides. Once that is done, I can hold the position.”

He runs his hands over the drawings, erasing the scratchings.

"That should give you time to do what you need to do.”

The first break through the main gate is mayhem. There is rubble everywhere, and dust rises from each pile making it hard to see what is going on. Flame erupting in various corners distracts his attention, so he isn't sure what he's supposed to focus on. His muscle memory kicks in as he blocks the first swing of a sword against him, making sure to position his shields against potential archers.

He sees Kilastra fighting out of the corner of his eye, she had gone in just in front of him as the gate had fallen, right into the thick of it. She’s using techniques he taught her to get behind the shields of her opponents. If he wasn’t busy fighting for his life he’d have stopped and admired her, but he’s got plenty to deal with in front of him. He spins, bashing forward his shield to set his attacker off balance and brings his sword down between its ribs. As he straightens he sees something that makes his blood freeze. Kilastra is holding her staff up, fending off an attack from a red Templar and behind her is a rage demon, its sharp claws outstretched. Cullen doesn't think he'll get there in time, but he tries to anyway, allowing a glancing blow to his elbow so that he gain an extra second.

But just has takes the first step, Iron Bull is there, barrelling into the rage demon with a mighty roar and slamming it backwards. Kilastra barely acknowledges it, instead she lets the red Templar push her backwards until she is back to back with Bull and uses his body to leap forward, an enchanted blade materialising in her hand as she strikes down and slices the Templar in half. As she lands on her feet, she stays in a crouch, placing a fire mine at her feet as Sera shoots three well-placed arrows
over her. Dorian has seen the fire mine and he is already directing his opponent towards it, pushing him back with ice lances from his staff. Their movements are effortless. Born from months on the battlefield together and it is magnificent.

He so often forgets that she has this entire life outside of Skyhold, outside of him and their training sessions. An arrow whistles past his ear, snapping him out of his reverie.

“Watch yourself, yeah?” Sera says, putting away her bow and bringing out two sharpened daggers before moving on to the next demon. She is a blur as she passes him.

Kilastra appears next to him, and he feels his skin tingle with the barrier she places round him with a wave of her hand.

“Can you hold the line?” she asks, her breathing ragged.

“Do you need to ask?” He responds, and she claps a hand on his shoulder in response.

“To the courtyard!” she shouts, her crew follow her immediately through the break in the enemy lines. As they disappear round the corner Cullen settles himself in for a long fight. He prays to Andraste that this will all be worth it.

The next hour is a blur, he is exhausted, mentally and physically. His troops are barely holding on. He gets news that the Inquisitor and her team have reached the courtyard and are speaking to the Grey Wardens. They have taken over major choke points in the fort and Cullen believes they can hold it – they can give her the time that she needs. He knows he should stay on the barrack walls, he knows he should oversee everything here, but he has to know she is alright. He gives his orders to the messenger, knowing that it will relay around the battlements, and heads to the courtyard. He surveys the damage as he goes, shaking his head, so many good men.

The roar of a dragon blasts through the air, echoes through him as the barracks vibrate with it. He breaks into a run and rounds the corner to see Kilastra, staff at the ready, watching as the leader of the Grey Wardens, Commander Clarel, stands down the dragon. The dragon rears back on its hind legs, the muscles bunching in its neck as it prepares to strike.

He watches helpless as Clarel’s body falls from the creature’s mouth, blood erupting from puncture wounds across her body. He is moving towards them, not even looking at where he is placing his feet, he needs to get to them, he needs to help. He sees Clarel raise her hand, magic stirring -

The crash is terrifying, the sickly green light of the Rift illuminates the grounds in a sudden burst of light and then there is a deathly silence, right before the building begins to break.

The ground beneath his feet shakes and Kilastra is just a step away. She has noticed him now and is reaching out to him, running away from where the dragon has fallen, taking out the supports of the fort with it. He is so close. He could reach her and save her, he knows he could. If he could just grab her hand he could get her to safety. The stones shift beneath him. A crack splinters down the rock they are standing on. They are running out of time. They look up at each other at the same moment, and in that split second he sees the determination on her face and just knows.

He knows what she's done before he feels it, before he sees the rocks crumble from beneath her feet, before he feels the blast of the shockwave send him back. He knows what that outstretched hand means, fingers splayed open wide. His back hits the rubble, the pain radiates sharply across his shoulders and the breath knocks out of him. He wants to call her name but he can’t.

His final image is of her falling backwards into the abyss, hand still reaching and his name is on her
lips.

He still can't breathe.

Words come to him through a fog, hazy and slippery and his mind can't seem to find a purchase on them. Is that Cassandra dragging him upwards?

"Cullen!"

_No. She can't - of all the stupid things to do - to save him._

"Cullen, we need to move."

Yes it is Cassandra, she is tugging at his arm and he is letting her carry him away, away from where she fell, away from where the rest of the castle was crumbling.

As he stumbles after Cassandra, ignoring the pieces of rocks whistling past his ears his only thoughts are of lyrium. Maybe if he had been taking it – if he was stronger, better, faster - maybe none of this would have happened. He would be the one that had fallen and she would be safe.

Curse her, why did she save _him_?

The fort is a mess, walls are crumbling and the soldiers are in uproar. They see that the Wardens are still alive but their Inquisitor is missing, presumed dead. Fights will start to break out soon.

"I don't believe it, Andraste sent her to us she wouldn't take her."

He hears prayers as he passes, those begging Andraste to preserve them and bring those they love back to them. He is leaning heavily on Cassandra for support. _What use are prayers now_, he thinks.

"She must be alive." Cassandra says, vehemently sure. She says it like a mantra, like someone who is trying to convince themselves.

"I saw her fall-" he chokes out, and his throat closes in on itself at those words. As he relives that moment in his mind.

His thoughts go into a frenzied madness, looping on her dropping from sight, the tips of her fingers visible above the rocks as she reaches out to him. His knees give way beneath him and Cassandra stumbles under his weight as he drops without warning. When the avalanche had covered Haven and he had watched the buildings crumble beneath the weight of it, he had still hoped. He had still believed that she would return to them. Now the rocks were still crashing into the place he saw her fall, he does not know how to hope.

"Commander!" He hears the shouts.

"Not now." he growls, though he knows he needs to take control, he needs to stop any in-fighting, he needs to give his men orders. He needs to do so many things and now he must do them without her, later he will mourn, later he may have time to make sense of this madness.

"Commander!"

He hears that there are cheers coming from the main square. He does not know how to translate that sound. How can there be cheering? How can there be cheering when she is no longer with them?

"Commander!" The call is more insistent now, and he feels Cassandra’s hand tighten on his shoulder. Her grip strong and sure.
"What?" he growls, turning to glare at the messenger who has the most ridiculous grin on his face.

"She's alive."

- He rounds the corner in a daze, unsure of everything. He saw her fall.

He sees her. She is standing, bruised and bleeding and covered in green slime, but she is standing there, her head tipped back to look at Dorian who stands before her. Dorian is saying “you have to stop doing this, the surprise factor is wearing off,” and she laughs at him as he glares at her.

She is alive.

None of it makes sense. He hears snippets of explanations - they went into the fade, stroud is gone, the divine justinia set them free - but they are all white noise to the burning in his mind. There is a roar building inside of him. Cullen has to clench his hands behind his back. He has to stop himself from running to her, from grabbing her and shaking her – from everything he wants to do. He sees her scan the crowd, looking for familiar faces before she is ushered away by a worried looking Cassandra and he does not see her again until they are back in Skyhold. He spends the journey home mulling over everything, replaying all the different scenarios in his head of what could have happened. The story of her time in the Fade filters out slowly, what felt like only seconds to them was an hour in the Fade, but there is one overriding thought that he keeps coming back to.

She saved him.

That is all that goes through his mind in that moment, repeating endlessly on a loop and he isn’t sure what it is he is feeling. Relief, anger, frustration, joy. It is all building inside him and there is no greater understanding that he has reached even as they arrive at Skyhold. Then before he even knows what he is doing his feet are taking him to her door, passing Skyhold’s statues standing proud and tall. His anger is simmering just below the surface as he climbs the steps into her room.

She looks up sharply, her hands clutched to her chest. She sighs when she sees him and he can’t decipher that peculiar look of relief and sadness that shows on her face.

"Not now, Cullen," she says, “I don't think I can talk about it yet."

"I didn't come here for that, I came here to have you explain your reckless disregard for your own life," he replies, and the shock on her face would be funny at any other time.

"What?"

"Did you not think what it would do to the Inquisition if you died? Did you not think what it would do to me, to all of us?"

"To you?" She asks surprised but he is so caught up in his tirade that he doesn't even notice. He is relentless and he knows it, but the journey back has been cruel to him, his thoughts mocking him and he doesn't think he can keep them to himself any longer.

"I could have saved you and you chose the abyss instead. You are insufferable!" he continues and he has never shouted at her before.

He can tell she is furious at him but he can’t bring himself to care because there is a part of him that is still so scared, so scared of losing her and she doesn’t seem to understand how to take care of herself, and so many people depend on her but he needs her too and he just doesn’t know how to say it.
“You are irresponsible,” he continues, pacing the room, letting the anger build.

“Cullen – “ she says, voice low and dangerous and she is standing now, her stance defensive but he still can’t stop himself.

“- and you are reckless! I have never seen someone so careless – “ he whirls to face her and sees that she is standing looking up at him defiantly, hands clenched into fists at her side. Good, he wants her to get angry, wants her to push back because maybe then she’ll finally understand.

“You pushed me away!” he says finally, his shoulders are still bruised from when he landed on the rubble behind him, slamming against the wall, the fresh despair of seeing her fall over that ledge out of his reach is still scraping his nerves.

“Stop!” she shouts, stamping her foot, the air around her crackling with energy.

“What?” he insists, “I could have helped you, you are too important –“

“I couldn’t lose you!” The admission bursts out of her, and as she says it he sees the desperation in her eyes that so closely matches his own. He is struck dumb at the thought, unsure if this means what he thinks it means. The heat goes out of the argument, he sees her deflate at his shocked silence. She takes a step back, away from him, and runs her hands over her face, rubbing her eyes.

“I’m sorry, I tried so hard to stay away, I thought I could,” she continues looking at the floor and just sighs, “but you were so –“

He steps towards her, closing the gap between them and she looks up at him suddenly vulnerable and Cullen has never seen her like this before, his heart surges at the hope he feels.

“So?” he prompts, needing to hear it, needing to be sure.

She does not move and she does not take her eyes off his.

“Captivating.”

That one word lances through him and it makes his body move without thinking, he is cradling her head in his hands and he cannot believe he is doing this. He cannot believe how much of a fool he has been, if she had feelings for him all this time. Maker. His entire body is tense; every muscle on edge and it feels as if time has slowed around them. The memories flood back to him all in a different light - her shocked gasp at the camp, her flushed cheeks in training, the way she looked when he offered to give her back her phylactery. How could he be so blind?

“We have been so very stupid,” he says, his thumb brushing her cheek and she looks at him hopefully, slightly broken - nervous, happy, confused all at once.

“We have?”

“Yes.”

Her breath hitches as he leans in, she parts her lips subconsciously and the air between them is electric, he can feel her breath ghosting his lips, their noses brush and she still has not moved except for a nervous reflex of her hands – as if she was going to reach for him.

“Commander!” the voice cuts through the moment, and Kilastra jumps away from him at the sound, startled, a deep blush suffusing her cheeks.
“An urgent message for you, ser.”

Cullen rounds on the messenger, practically growling, fury in his eyes. How did they always find him?

The messenger finally looks up from the sheet he is carrying and can tell he has interrupted something. The slow, horrified realisation dawns on his face as he looks between the Commander and the Inquisitor, his mouth drops open and he basically falls over himself trying to get out of the room.

“I…I’ll leave it outside,” he says hastily backpedalling out as Cullen stalks towards him.

Cullen shuts the door behind the retreating figure, probably a bit too forcefully and turns back to see Kilastra rubbing her hands together in frustration.

“You should get that,” she says, and begins to try walk past him to the door to open it. “I’ll come find you later? To talk?” she asks, one hand already on the handle.

“I think not.” Cullen says, and he pulls her towards him. She gives a muffled cry of surprise as their bodies come together, but he does not give her time to think – he has waited too long for this moment, has dreamed of it so many times and if she feels the same way - well, he is not wasting any more time. He kisses her softly at first, lips pressing against hers and when she tilts her head back and parts her lips - that is all the invitation he needs.

He presses her against the door, trapping her with his body and her hips surge to meet his. Maker, she is brilliant. She has threaded her fingers through his hair and as he attempts to pull back to give her a bit more space she tugs him straight back to her, kissing him fiercely.

The break apart, breathless.

“I guess you really have to get that message now, it could be important,” she says, her hands still curled into his shirt.

“Right,” he says, a little dazed. She is biting her bottom lip and smiling at him, and he thinks she is so adorable in this moment that all he wants to do is kiss her again.

“Right,” she repeats, uncurling her hands from his shirt and stepping back.

“Later then?” she asks, and the hope in her voice constricts his chest. It is a funny feeling, warm and happy and painful all at the same time.

“Later,” he promises, reluctant to leave. Now that they have started this, now that he knows he can, he doesn’t want to let it go.

He turns back to see her still watching him, and she bites her lip and in a moment closes the distance between them once more to press a quick kiss on his lips before he has time to react. She pushes him out smiling and closes the door, a dark blush spreading over her cheeks. He spends the next few minutes smiling stupidly at the floor, leaning against the door and replaying the picture in his head.

Later.

Chapter End Notes
There is now a comic by siriusdraws for this chapter. It is utterly beautiful! You can read it [here](#), if you want to really visualise it!
Chapter 8

The rest of the afternoon is not nearly quite so pleasant. He is distracted, for obvious reasons. His mind keeps replaying the feel of her lips against his, her waist beneath his hands, the way she bucked her hips into his as he pressed her against the door. It is maddening. It seems there are a thousand things to do when all he wants is to go to her room and act out every dream he has had since meeting her. Instead he has to deal with a constant stream of reports detailing supply routes and a worrying increase in ambushes on some of their camps.

The hours drag on and he is forced to light candles, the flames making the writing dance and twist before his eyes. He is interrupted by a knock on the door, he doesn’t even look up as he allows them to enter - expecting another courier with yet another item to deal with.

“What working late?”

Cullen looks up to see Kilastra holding a tray in her hand, there is steam gently rising from a bowl placed on it. She balances it carefully as she walks towards him. He can smell beef stew and as she lays it down in front of him he can see a buttered roll and some freshly sliced strawberries on the side.

He smiles brightly at her, his mood immediately lifted.

“You made this?” he asks, setting aside his work to draw the tray closer. It is then he notices another bowl, ready to be filled sitting neatly next to his.

Kilastra blushes and takes a seat opposite him.

“I only picked it up, the kitchen staff did all the work - I thought we could, you know, eat together?”

Like a date, goes the unspoken segment at the end and Cullen wonders how it is that they have gone from kissing against her door to asking each other to spend time together nervously. He fills the bowl with stew and hands it to her.

“Well...thank you for delaying your own dinner to come eat with me.”

She takes the offered bowl and settles further into the chair, holding onto the bowl as if it was a cup. She draws it closer to her chest and wraps her hands around it, breathing in the scent deeply.

“There is nothing like home-cooked food after a long time away.”

“Yes.”

oh Maker, why can’t he seem to talk, nothing has changed, she’s still the same person from before...from before the kiss. Don’t think about that now.

They eat in silence for a while, each occasionally complimenting the quality of the food and making appreciative noises. He doesn’t know why his brain doesn’t seem to be offering any other topics of conversation, seemingly stuck on the lack of conversation rather than being helpful.

“What is it you’re working on?” she asks and he almost sighs with relief, this he knows how to talk about.

“I’m trying to reroute supply chains, they are being subjected to more and more ambushes recently
and I want to figure out a way to minimise damage and protect the troops. We don’t have more men to spare to protect the trade channels, so what I’m trying is this.”

He traces a line across the map spread out across from him, following the current main road.

“Currently we have supplies going through this one route, if we splinter out the cargo into smaller, less used roads then they will attract less attention and we can alternate the routes. That way there is no fixed schedule and it should be much harder to plan an attack. The question is which routes are actually safe and will splintering into smaller groups actually leave our soldiers more vulnerable to attack?”

Kilastra peers with interest over the table, she sets her stew down and follows his hand with hers, tapping a fork in the road.

“Are these where most of the ambushes are taking place?”

He startles.

“Yes, exactly - how did you know?”

She shrugs, “it’s easy, that is where I would do it. There’s a hill here that isn’t marked on the map. Good vantage point, then it goes around a corner where there is poor visibility for those on the road. Perfect ambush spot.”

“Right.”

“If you set up a presence here, it might help - but I think splintering the routes will be more effective in the long run.”

Cullen reaches over to mark the spot she is talking about before he forgets, just as Kilastra finds another route.

“Ah, here, it’s totally overgrown but there is a path you could use.”

His fingers brush against hers and Kilastra looks up sharply from the map they were tracing, she makes to pull away but he catches her hand in his, keeping her there. Her initial fight or flight panic instinct melts away and she blushes, thoroughly embarrassed as she stares at their hands.

“We’re not very good at this, are we?” he says, stroking her hand with his thumb. She leans a little closer, deciding that she can actually look up at him.

“I want to be though,” she says, hopeful and vulnerable and maker he just wants to be near her all the time. He squeezes her hand.

“Me too.”

Emboldened by the fact she hasn’t run away yet Cullen leans across the table, he makes his movements slow, he wants to give her time to pull away if she wants. Kilastra surprises him by placing her palm on his cheek and pulling him towards her. This kiss is deliberate. It is so different from the frenzied kiss of earlier where he had pressed her against the door. This kiss is chosen, thoughtful and as they break apart they have matching smiles on their faces.

“Well that’s a start.”

Kilastra tries to stifle a yawn as she clears their bowls, settling them on the tray near the door.
Someone will come take it away in the morning and when he expects her to make her excuses and go to sleep, instead she sits back down again and picks up one of the reports on his desk.

“You have had a very trying day, maybe you should sleep?”

“No, no, I want to help.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you went through the Fade and back.”

She stops, hands frozen in mid-air. _Too soon, Cullen, too soon._ He starts to think about how to apologise, cursing himself for his callousness, but her voice interrupts his nervous thoughts.

“When you put it that way...I am rather tired, can I-” she stops herself mid-question.

“What?” Cullen asks, relieved that his previous statement didn’t actually offend her.

“It’s just...the fade, well, I get nightmares and I...can I stay here tonight?”

_Maker’s breath_, the tremulous fear in her voice makes him want nothing more than to say yes but his mind is racing. What if he wakes her up with one of his own nightmares, screaming at nothing? What if he mistakes her for someone else if he wakes? It has been an age since he last shared a bed with someone and he is not sure he trusts himself anymore. He doesn’t want to frighten her so early on. Clearly he hasn’t responded fast enough because Kilastra backtracks quickly and she makes to head for the door.

“Sorry, it was a stupid thing to ask.”

He grabs her arm to pull her gently back towards him. It is a clumsy action, too forceful and not at all what he would have liked to portray but he doesn’t want her to retreat. He wants to show her that he means it, that she doesn’t need to run away from him. He can do this. He can try, for her.

“Of course you can stay.”

_I know all about nightmares_

He follows her up the ladder, calling up to her as she climbs over the edge.

“I’m sorry my room is a bit of a mess.”

Kilastra giggles, the sound of it is pure and simple. It relaxes him. _You are just two people, in the middle of a crazy, crazy war._

“There is a hole in the ceiling.”

“Yes, that too.”

She settles herself on the bed, moving gingerly at first whether because of uncertainty or injuries he isn’t sure. She reminds him of a cat somehow, even more so in the way that she immediately settles once she has decided on a spot.

He drags a blanket over her, and she catches his hand in hers.

“Stay a little?” she asks, but it sounds more like an order than a question and Cullen responds in multiple ways to the tone in her voice.

_Maker, there is no way he can say no to that_, so he climbs into bed and fits himself beside her. It is
new and familiar all at once, the way she lifts her head to accommodate his arm, the way his knees slot between her legs and her body curves into his. It feels like they have done this hundreds of times before as she sighs happily, letting herself relax and Cullen breathes in deeply, his heart pounding.

“Thank you, I just don’t really want to be alone right now.”

The moonlight dances on a patch on the ground where it streams in through the ceiling, he focuses on its cold, bright light. Anything to distract from the heat he is feeling, from the warmth of her body so close to his.

“Anything you need,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against her neck. She shivers in response.

“Anything?”

“Anything,” he says with such strong conviction it even surprises him. She laughs softly and interlaces their fingers together. She shifts a little and the way her body rubs against his is torturously wonderful. Her hair tickles his nose but he doesn’t want to move.

“For now this is good. Good night, Cullen.”

Her voice is warm and sleepy, it wraps over him, unfolding in the moonlit room.

“Goodnight,” he echoes, planting a soft kiss to the bare skin of her neck. He doesn’t know if he is imagining it but he swears he feels her smile. Despite the fact he didn’t think it were possible, he falls asleep and does not dream.
Cullen wakes up with a crick in his neck, a slightly dead arm and Kilastra snoozing peacefully on his chest. Her breath creates little clouds of mist in the air. He really needs to fix that hole in the roof. That can be done later, always later - after the war. He tries to remember if he woke up at all in the night, but nothing comes back to him. He feels...relaxed. It is an odd sensation.

He studies the freckles on Kilastra’s face, some of them cluster together claiming the strip of skin over the bridge of her nose, and he marvels at how he got here. The stress and intensity of the battle at Adamant seems miles away, that heart-dropping moment when Kilastra had disappeared from his view - when he had thought he’d lost her forever. It makes his chest tighten with fear momentarily, but she is here now, sleeping in his bed and in his arms. His shoulders still ache from the battle, he has some healing wounds across his arms, bruises from the bite of his shield into his skin - but he is alive, and so is she.

She blinks her eyes open and looks up at him, perhaps sensing his gaze on her. A slow smile spreads across her face as she realises where she is.

“No nightmares?” Cullen asks, he can feel his cheeks warming at the thought that she has just caught him staring at her while she sleeps, but her warm, happy smile eases his anxiety.

“No nightmares,” she confirms and Cullen is relieved, she needs all the sleep she can get at the moment.

She tilts her head back and places a soft kiss on his jaw, as if it is the most natural thing in the world, as if they have woken up together like this hundreds of times before. It blindsides him, leaving a smile plastered stupidly to his face. In an instant she seems to realise what she has done and it wakes her fully, he can see the change happen before his eyes. A slight crease in her brow, a blush blooming across her cheeks and she drops her gaze away from him. She notices the sunlight cascading over them, her fingers spread reflexively trying to maximise the heat that touches her.

“How long has the sun been up?” she asks, glancing around the room that is filled with light.

“How long.”

She props herself up on her elbow. Her hair is loosened from her braids and strands fall around her neck at bizarre angles, it gives the impression of a newborn bird still shedding fluff. He hasn’t seen it down since the ball and without thinking he reaches out to touch it. It is a strange impulse that is met with puzzlement by Kilastra.

“It looks nice down,” he offers by way of explanation, though really he’s not so sure what drove him.

“It gets in the way in a fight,” she says, but she starts to work her fingers through the knots in the braids, unravelling each one until dark locks of hair tumble from their confines and settle around her
shoulders, some longer strands curl around her collarbone. They did not change out of their clothes and her shirt is ruffled, it sticks out from beneath her leather bodice. Some of the buttons have popped open and he can see the curve of her breast, the dark fabric underneath, the smooth skin. He swallows...hard.

“It looks nice up too,” he finds himself babbling, “you always look nice.”

He says it because it’s true, because he doesn’t know how else to describe the way she looks to him. The way a heat builds in his chest when he sees her in the sparring ring, when she rolls her sleeves up, when she slings her cloak over her shoulder. He’s captivated by all of it. Nice doesn’t cover it but he’s not sure how else to describe the way this makes him feel. How can he put into words the way he aches when her cheeks are pink from his attention, when he sees the brightness in her eyes, the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes in and out, the surprising intimacy of seeing her with her hair loose and her clothes rumpled? He has a sudden flashback to one of his dreams - her arched underneath him as he supports her waist with his hand, fingers splayed out - his tongue leaving a trail between her breasts-

He runs a hand through his hair self-consciously, suddenly acutely aware of his every movement. She smiles at him sadly, rubbing at the mark on her palm. He thinks, why the sad smile, but it is gone in an instant. She looks at him thoughtfully for a second and then she is climbing onto him. Cullen leans back, startled, but quickly adjusts to make room for her body.

“I’m a mess,” she sighs, as she threads her fingers through his hair and settles into him, her thighs heavy on his. He wants to ask her about that smile, about that tone of voice, he wants to know more but right now he can’t think of anything else because she is on top of him. He can feel the curve of her ass and his hands itch to follow it. He keeps them firmly planted by his sides for now, urging his body to stay under control.

“Can I kiss you?” Cullen asks, because it isn’t the only thing he’s thinking about doing to her but it feels important to ask somehow and he feels he’s made the right choice when Kilastra tilts back her head and laughs. It is free and joyous and when her gaze meets his once more she smiles so genuinely that it makes him wonder why the hell he didn’t kiss her earlier. She kisses him longingly, her lips pressed tight against his.

“Thanks for saying I looked nice,” she says, following her words with another quick kiss.

“Do compliments always lead to this? Because I have many more. I think you’re very kind, and your fighting is brilliant and don’t even get me started on your herbalism,” he says, half-joking. She shakes her head at him, but she is smiling - a real smile.

“Cullen - shut up and kiss me.”

He grins.

“Gladly.”

So he does, tilting her head back with his eagerness. He releases the restrictions on his hands and they immediately go to cup her behind. He cradles her against him, rocking forward with his hips. She feels amazing to his touch, far better than dreams that were always vague and hazy. Maker what a body. He tentatively slips a hand between her thighs and when she surges into the palm of his hand he takes that as a good sign. Exploratory fingers skate across her hip bone and he slips under the seams of her clothes, stroking softly, marvelling that she is allowing him to do this.

“Oh,” she exclaims softly, an exhalation, barely a sound. He presses into the folds of her, sliding his
fingers over her opening and the dampness there sends blood straight to his groin. He is painfull
hard in an instant.

“Cullen,” she moans and the sound of his name from her lips makes him moan too. He never thought
that would be a turn-on, but the way she says it - the breathlessness, the need. It feels like a
homecoming. He hears bells in the distance, their bright tone echoing across the courtyard, but they
are a faded thing at the back of his mind. He knows there is something he should be remembering
but he is lost in this heat and wetness and desire.

“Oh no, is that - “ she lets out a moan, digging her fingers into him as he seems to circle his fingers in
exactly the right spot. He files that information away for the future.

“We will be late! Cullen we need to go - they will wonder.”

The bells continue tolling. Josephine and Leliana will be walking the halls, making their way to the
war room. They will get there first and they will smile and greet one another despite their tiredness.
They will see what tasks there are to tackle that day: what letters have come in, what rumours are
circling, what trade routes are still open and so forth. It is neverending. People speak of war and
battles as these moments of glory, as moments of anguish and adrenaline. No-one writes poems
about the endless drudgery of war.

“Let them”, he growls as he kisses her neck, not stopping his fingers. He wants to have this moment,
he has earned it, why can’t they just have some peace just for once.

“They’ll suspect something,” she says as she reluctantly tries to extricate herself, her hips still grind
down on his hand but the push of her hands against his shoulders is firm. Cullen finally hears the
tone in her voice and the bells still ringing in the background. He leans back, using his hands to hold
himself up, giving her the space to scoot back.

“You don’t want them to know,” he says, and it is not a question, it is a fact. He is suddenly
incredibly angry, angry at Corypheus, angry at his weakness, angry at everything. She pauses,
shocked.

“Oh no, not like that! I want to -” she makes an abortive reach towards him, her hands reaching
before curling back in towards her chest.

“I want this. I want this so, so much.”

Her voice is steady and strong in her conviction. She reaches a hand between them, lays her hand
palm up against the bedsheets. Cullen sighs, his anger gone in an instant, recognising the futility of
the emotion. He meets her hand in the middle, rests his palm on top of hers. She closes her fingers
around his.

“This thing that I feel for you, it is so good and I am scared that they will use you against me.”

Ah, he thinks, she really was born for war.

Her grip tightens.

“I can’t be the reason you are hurt. I don’t want to give them that kind of ammunition.”

“I understand,” he says, gently squeezing her hand in return.

She lingers a little longer, maybe she wants to say something else but Cullen does understand. If they
took him from her, if they held her captive and they demanded something of him - he’s not sure he’d
be able to pick the greater good.

“I’ll go first,” she says and she slides herself off the bed. She hurriedly adjusts her clothes and braids her hair with practised ease as she heads towards the ladder. She turns to smile at him, and then with one graceful movement she has flung herself off the ledge, catching the ladder with one hand and sliding down it. He hears a soft thump as she lands.

He gives himself some time to breathe, running his hands through his hair. He can still remember how wet she was when he touched her. He sighs and places his hands on his thighs - his erection is not going down at all.

It takes the hundredth press-up for it to finally go down.

“Thank the Maker,” he says, tightening his belt.

He walks into the war room later than usual, the others are already gathered there discussing today’s topics. Kilastra snaps her gaze up to look at him, she looks worried but still manages to give him a smile.

“Sorry I'm late,” Cullen says, he adjusts the fur of his cloak nervously, afraid it is painfully obvious what he has just been doing.

“Better late than never!” Josephine says, far too strained and far too perky. He scans the room to find the source of her discomfort and sees it in the corner of the room, gazing out of the stained glass windows.

Morrigan.

He frowns, this will not be good news.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your patience!

It is not an easy discussion; words pulled this way and that, opinions battled against each other. Cullen feels the rough slide of war table beneath his fingers as he leans into it heavily. His mind is whirring at Morrigan’s news - at this next chance to end the war. Kilastra looks tired, all the joy and shy kisses gone from this morning. Her cheeks are flushed with anger instead and her lips drawn tight together as she listens to Morrigan explain that she wants to leave at once, that they must go to the Temple of Mythal if they want to gain any advantage against Corypheus. Kilastra balls her hand into a fist.

"We have only just returned - there are so many injured, so many more that have joined us, they need training, they need help – we can't rush this!"

"Time is what we do not have,” Morrigan counters, and Cullen cannot tell whether she means it, whether there is an underlying ambition beneath her words. He senses a rushed impatience and does not know exactly where its origins lie.

“I will not ask them to go again, not so soon.”

“This is folly, can you not see that this is a golden opportunity? What if he reaches the temple first?”

“If we go unprepared we may as well be handing ourselves over on a silver platter!”

Kilastra is shouting now and a spark of electricity crackles past her fingertips. It leaves a singe mark against the floor. Morrigan purses her lips in disapproval as Kilastra wipes her hands over her eyes. She sighs. It is a desperate, sad sound. He wants to comfort her but he knows that is not what she needs right now. Luckily he is not the only person who wants to fight in her corner. Leliana steps forward.

“I can send my spies to slow down his movements, give us some time to prepare.”

“Thank you,” Kilastra says, relief clear in her voice. “If we have time to rebuild, if we are to face him, I want to do it properly - I want to have a fighting chance.”

Morrigan looks like she is going to argue some more, but instead she sighs and raises her hands in defeat.

“Fine! Have it your way. I shall monitor the situation, but I think this is a mistake.”

Kilastra frowns at her retreating figure before returning a thoughtful gaze on the rest of her advisors.

“We have a lot of work to do.”

Even though Kilastra had insisted on giving the army time to rest she seems reluctant to do the same
for herself, Cullen notices. Not a moment after she has given some input into preparation and training plans she is making her way to the stable. The others are with her already, though how they knew they had to leave he has no idea. He has barely a moment to catch up to her, and of course it wouldn’t be a moment alone.

“Inquisitor!” he calls. She turns mid-step and swivels to face him, a short nod of her head signals to the others to head forward. Sera purses her lips and frowns. She glances between the two of them a few times, her head swiveling back and forth. She smiles a little smile and rubs her nose in an attempt to cover the expression before grabbing Bull by the arm to drag him away.

“Commander?” Kilastra responds, her feet planted and hands on her hips. She’s in combat mode already. Conscious of the many eyes upon them, Cullen tries to aim for subtle. He wants to tell her to stay a while longer, to work out what they have with him, to be careful out there - but he can’t say any of these things. It is fruitless to even try.

“How long will you be gone this time?”

She softens slightly, her stance changing, opening up to him.

“I can’t say,” she gestures to her bags already saddled to her horse. The various encampments set up around Thedas have proved invaluable in providing supplies when they are out in the field, but it means they are no longer restricted with their time away from Skyhold.

“Yes, I understand. Well, good travels.”

“I have papers and pens,” Kilastra blurts out suddenly. She mimes writing on her hand and something inside him melts. This anxious, dark thing that had been growing the entire time they were in that meeting.

“I will watch out for your ravens and I will...train your army.”

He takes a step closer, closer than he should have maybe because her breath hitches, and she curls her fingers into the palms of her hands. A small movement, but he knows that sign. He responds by duly folding his hands together behind his back. Restraint, he reminds himself.

“We will be prepared.”

Kilastra smiles at him, duty momentarily forgotten.

“I know we will. I trust you.”

He wants to reach out to her, to kiss her goodbye. He feels himself swaying forward, leaning -

“Oi!” Sera yells.

She is riding Kilastra’s horse towards them, sitting at the front of the saddle. Her bright checkered leggings seeming out of place against the dark brown of the horse’s neck. “Ain’t nobody gonna save themselves.”

The spell is broken and the noise of hundreds of other people floods back into his awareness. He takes a sudden step back, flustered and notices that Kilastra is similarly taken aback. She takes Sera’s hand and hauls herself up on the horse, taking her place behind Sera in the saddle. As they take off, she mimes writing again and Cullen huffs a laugh. The gates of Skyhold close behind them with the loud grating sounds of chains and bolts.
Back to war it is then.

- 

Kilastra has been gone one week. It is only one week and already he is irritable. It is with a dark cloud hanging over his head that he heads out of the office. He vainly tries to smile at the guards posted at his door, but if anything they look more afraid. He will have to find time to retire to the garden later, that always seems to ease his mind. The smell of earth, the therapeutic planting of seeds – it is healing somehow. He has often thought that the injured should all spend time helping out in the garden, maybe he’ll suggest that next time he comes across Vivienne. He knows she would be able to sort it out.

The training yard is heaving with new recruits. They are mostly products of war-ravaged towns with nowhere else to go. He sees the mix of emotions in the crowd: the fear, the anger...the hope. Cullen allows a moment to revel in the sensation of pride that spreads through him, the pride of what they have all built here before he must get down to work.

Someone spots him entering the area and calls out for the recruits to line up. There is a rushed scrambling, the inexperienced looking to the veterans for what to do. It isn’t too long before they are lined up, facing him. Expectant.

He still can’t believe they want to listen to him.

"The person standing next to you is your family now," he starts and everyone begins to glance uncertainly at their neighbor. "You will rely on them to have your back, to clean dishes, to make meals, to provide first aid and to run you ragged."

He shifts, walking down the line. He wants everyone to have seen his face up close at least once.

"There will come a time when you are consumed by fear. There is no shame in that, but I want you to remember the person next to you, memorise their face - because that is what is going to pull you out."

There are more uncertain glances; some nervous laughter floats into the air.

"Introduce yourselves," he orders, gesturing towards the first line of recruits. He knows this bit is just as important as the training he will put them through, they are nervous and scared and if he can't break through that first layer of distrust then they might as well leave now.

He has picked out a few especially talented recruits. The ones he think could go further, the ones he needs to run the other groups - leaders.

There is Thea - a young, blonde girl that reminds him of his sister. She is curly-haired and all excited nerves, she tenses her jaw when trying to stay still and she has this twinkle in her eye that Cullen knows he has to watch out for. Next is Clem, a burly ex-horse man. His eyes are coal black with the skin to match, and his hands work magic with blades.

"You sure you haven't done this before?" Cullen asks, impressed at his skill. Clem shrugs, maybe unwilling to share his previous history. That’s fine by him, the past is the past here.

"Thea!" He shouts and sees in the corner of his eye someone pop to attention. "Pair up with Clem."

Clem looks like he's about to argue, his mouth opening momentarily, but he seems to think better of it and goes to follow orders.
The next few weeks are filled with this: endless drills and hours where his throat becomes sore from constantly shouting orders. The only interruptions are her letters.

He absent-mindedly thumbs the one in his pocket. It is creased from his re-reading, beginning to wear at the edges. He blushes as he recalls the words, a warm heat reddening his neck.

*I think about you often. I think especially about your hands…*

A yelp from one corner snaps him out of his reverie; he shakes his head to clear his thoughts and stalks over to where the sound came from. It is two female recruits; one is glaring angrily from where she has fallen on the floor.

“You did that on purpose!”

“Of course I did that on purpose! It’s training, remember?”

He shuts down the argument by raising his hands between them. The girl on the floor is clutching her side.

“You,” he gestures to the girl still standing, “Remember not to leave yourself open after landing a hit.”

He turns back to the redhead on the floor.

“This is training for a real battle and you are going to get hurt one way or another. Defense is the most important thing. That is what your shield is for. Are you hurt?”

He kneels beside her and she lifts the hem of her shirt. There is a dark bruise forming quickly and a small scratch oozing blood, but it looks like she’ll be fine.

“Report to the healer’s tents.”

“I’m fairly new and don’t know where they are, could you take me?”

“Right. This way. Everyone can have a short break.”

There is a grumbled sound of relief that washes through the training ground as Cullen exits, a happy clatter of people laying down their swords and shields. The redhead by his side, he thinks he remembers her name as Clara, is still clutching her side but she does not seem to be limping. He remembers the fact that she said she was new, so he points things out as they walk.

“Will I be able to get back to training this afternoon?”

“Don’t worry, it’s small – nothing the healers can’t fix quickly”

“If it’s small, maybe you could take care of it for me? In my quarters?”

Cullen does a comical double take, stopping short and shaking his head, unsure he heard properly. He notices for the first time that she is standing incredibly close. She is looking up at him with bright blue eyes and she rests a hand lightly on his chest, boldly. He stares at it dumbfounded. He is unused to this attention and totally unsure as to how to handle it.

“I’d rather the healers do their job. Here they are.”

“The offer is open anytime.”
Maker help him.

Cullen frowns slightly before turning away. As he walks back to his office in his tower he pays more attention. Eyes follow him as he goes.

Ever since those dreams had started he has been oblivious. His thoughts are filled with Kilastra, his dreams are filled with Kilastra, even his daylight working hours are filled with how to make her Inquisition better – it has blinded him. Bizarrely the realization of this new attention just makes him miss her more, his mind races back to when they were alone in his room. When he had his fingers inside her. The way she moaned his name.

You are an idiot, he tells himself.

With an exasperated sigh he slams the door of his office behind him and sits down. His erection is straining against his briefs.

Just this once, he thinks, releasing himself. His cock is hard and heavy in his hands.

The first stroke feels like frustration and release simultaneously.

He leans his head back and thinks of Kilastra, of the words in her letters, of the way her backside felt as he cupped it in his hands.

Just this once.

- 

It was supposed to be routine.

A few more weeks had passed with little but letters and fantasies to satisfy him.

The recruits were getting restless, frustrated with the drudgery of drills and he agreed with them. His dreams were getting more vivid and in turn he was getting more distracted. So he thought it would be a good idea to get them out into the real world.

It was supposed to be an initial field test. A small team for a small skirmish battle, something the Inquisition soldiers are supposed to handle with ease. It was a team of two veterans, and two new recruits. Normally Cullen did not attend these things, but he was getting just as restless cooped up in Skyhold. Plus, he had a vested interest in Clem and Thea. He was planning on putting them in charge of a battalion down the line.

So they had set out in the early hours of the morning, ready to tackle the report of a small group of bandits hassling the local town.

It was supposed to be routine – so when Cullen feels the blast of heat at his back and the sickly green light of the rift he is slow to react.

“Get down!” he yells, just in time to see a lance of green magic arc over his head. He spins, shield brought up to his neck and takes stock of the situation. There are five demons but he proudly notes that Cleo has already engaged one. Thea has already positioned herself at his back. They make a good team.

He jumps forward, sliding his sword from its sheath. The sound it makes as it releases brings him courage. There is half a breath where he tries to draw on his Lyrium resources but he shoves that thought aside as quickly as it arrives.
Two demons drive at him, coming from both sides.

*That’s good - focus on me.*

Cullen tries to keep his stance loose, his training tells him to goad them into an attack. He does not want to lose ground or be the first to strike. He has to be able to control this encounter as much as possible. He forces himself to think of them as a unit instead of separate entities even though the sudden spike of fear he feels is telling him to look only at the demon in front of him. He has to assume they will attack as one; otherwise he will never make it out of here alive.

The waiting seems to payoff as the first demon lunges for him, claws outstretched, allowing him to duck out the way and land a quick jab to its arm. He settles into the dance.

He can’t get close enough to cause any real damage; instead he must satisfy himself by keeping them occupied and keeping himself alive. He hopes he is buying time for the others to deal with their opponents.

In what feels like longer, but is probably only minutes the demon that was circling him on his right loses interest in his game and seems to decide that Clem is a more interesting quarry. Cullen curses as he sees Clem’s back to his - totally vulnerable. He sees his opening as the demon turns towards Clem, and has less than a second to react.

He takes the risk, leaving his side exposed as he lunges. The sword sinks deep into the creature’s flesh and there is a tearing sound as he brings it back, black blood spurting forth from the creature’s flesh before it collapses to the floor. Clem looks up, eyes wide, finally aware of the danger he was in.

It is in that instant that Cullen feels the claws rip at his sides. He pirouettes to the side, spinning away from the attacker’s claws but he stumbles, his feet too tired to carry him from danger even with all the adrenaline in his system. The grass is wet with dew as he turns himself over, trying to face the sky, trying to get back up – but suddenly his vision is blocked. There are three demons left, they cannot all survive this.

His arms are pinned, the force of the demon bearing down on his wrists holding him in place. Its fangs are bared, dripping venom onto his armour where it sizzles against the metal.

“Retreat!” he yells, desperate. They need to escape while there is a distraction.

*I’m so sorry, Kilastra.*

He closes his eyes, wanting to close out the view of his impending death and instead think of her - her smile, her laughter, the determined set of her shoulders. At least, he thinks, they had some time together.

“Cullen!”

His eyes snap open in time to see the demon ripped off him, the sudden weight lifting from his wrists. Kilastra is there in blood-spattered armour. Her staff is embedded in the chest of the demon that was on top of him, its tip visible on the other side, crackling with energy. The expression on her face is terrifying.

She is ruthless in the battlefield, a cold efficiency and emotional detachment he does not see elsewhere. She casually kicks the demon off her staff, wrenching it out of its chest as she lets it fall to the floor before moving on to her next quarry. Her face is blank, executing flawlessly strike after strike. It makes his blood run cold.
"Dorian!" She yells, not taking her eyes off her opponent. He is there quickly, substituting her position, fully taking control to finish off the final demon. Kilastra braces herself as she raises her marked hand to the rift. A few moments later, the rift is gone. An eerie silence follows and Cullen manages to get himself to his feet. He notices that Thea and Clem are doing the same having been knocked back by the blast of the rift closing. Iron Bull is helping the other soldiers to their feet.

Kilastra stumbles slightly as she turns; he sees a brief moment of exhaustion cross her features. Dorian is by her side quickly, steadying her by the elbow. She looks up at him and their eyes meet. He has never seen her look so relieved.

She looses herself from Dorian’s hands and gets into Cullen’s space instead. She reaches out to him subconsciously before snatching back her hands to her side.

“Are you okay?” she asks, unable to keep a slight tremble out of her voice.

Oh maker he could kiss her, he wants to kiss her. Instead he summons every ounce of self restraint he has, which somehow isn’t enough because he settles for brushing his fingers lightly against the back of her hand.

“I’m okay.”

She leans into his touch for a moment before breaking away.

“We will go ahead to make sure the way is clear – wait a few minutes and then follow closely.”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Before she goes she turns back to him.

“I will be staying home tonight,” she says, voice low, the words are quiet enough that only he hears her. Her tone is intentionally neutral but the look in her eyes shoots straight through him.

“I’ll be there,” he responds.

As he follows in their wake he hears Thea talking to Clem.

“Did you see that? She was amazing.”

Cullen smiles.

Amazing, indeed.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The news of the rift so close to Skyhold is already spreading through the stronghold. It seems Kilastra’s involvement is becoming more and more glorified and Cullen hears snatches of conversation floating past the healer’s tents concerning his part. Apparently, he is a regular white knight and the thought of that makes Cullen chuckle darkly because he feels anything but. He feels like a fool, not checking the area properly, letting themselves get blindsided by a rift - he could have killed them all. He was supposed to protect. Wasn’t that the whole point of this? He clenches his fists involuntarily.

You should have seen her, her staff went right through it and then it exploded / the commander took on two demons by himself / I heard that Dorian froze one and then broke it in half!

Cullen remembers once more how Kilastra had appeared out of nowhere. He can’t help but see that look in her eyes as she had shoved the demon off - so cold, so emotionless. What was this war doing to her? To them all? He shudders to think of what would happen if Corypheus were to win.

Cullen inhales sharply as the healer prods either side of his wound, checking for infection.

“What the hell were you thinking taking on two demons by yourself?” the healer asks, firmly applying the final bandages to his chest, tutting as she goes.

“Kilas- the Inquisitor, is she okay?”

“Aye, she came in for a quick patch job, nothing major – just bruises mostly but she’s still healing from previous wounds. That woman never lets anyone take care of her properly, I swear I would tie her to this bed if I could.”

Cullen grins despite himself, though he can feel the adrenaline leaving his system, the slow exhaustion post-battle that settles deep into his muscles. He knows he has to sleep to take off the worst of it, but he can’t do that until he has seen her.

That look she had given him as she had walked away and the tone full of promise, he wonders if he imagined it. She will probably be anxious after that battle, and with the rift so close...there were many things to ponder tonight. Once he was released from the healers, Cullen went where she was least likely to be as he never really had any luck finding her when he actually went looking for her.

He is let into her quarters before she has got back, despite her insistence that she would be in Skyhold. It feels strange to be here, without her, unsure of whether he has her permission. He suddenly realizes how little time he has actually spent outside of his office and the training grounds lately. He thought about the last time he was here, after he thought he had watched her die. That startling anger, the way she confessed her feelings to him ...”you were so captivating”. He shivers, a pleasant feeling running through him. He feels like they have come so far already from that time.

The bandages around his chest are a little tight, and he looks around for somewhere to sit. His healing is so much slower now without Lyrium. No matter how long it has been without it, he seems to always forget, his muscle memory expecting so much more from him. He seats himself at her desk and lets his gaze run over the assortment of items there. He sees a sheaf of letters, his own writing peeking out from exposed corners, and a smattering of items: a wooden figurine of a hart, an old
cookie nibbled at the edges, some herbs in pots under alcohol. The rest of the room is sparse, with odd bits of luxury: the bathtub in the centre of the room, the opulent bed sheets and the fur rug in front of the fireplace. There are no other personal details except for these at her desk. Unwittingly, his hand drifts to the phylactery around his neck - she has been running for so long. No wonder she has no idea how to settle, no idea how to build a home. Cullen's fingers tighten around the phylactery as he thinks of all that has been taken from her. Even though he thinks himself a poor substitute, he vows to help her learn again, to try harder himself.

Kilastra’s voice breaks him out of his thoughts, coming from the doorway.

“They need to be oiled at the joints, and there is a small tear on the left thigh. I’m sorry to ask again but do you think you can get it done by tomorrow?”

“Yes, Ser. Of course.”

The sound of armour being passed hands reaches his ears before the door clicks shut. She must know he is here. Right?

He realises he has never seen her without at least some armour covering her body. The closest he had got was when she was in his bed, shirt unbuttoned, laces trailing, her leather corset still bound to her waist...but this - this is completely different. She is wearing just her undershirt; her hair is out of its usual braid, loose around her shoulders. She looks so...vulnerable.

Her right shoulder is bare as the shirt slips to one side, her thighs exposed and he can not help tracking the long length of her legs with his eyes. She finally realises that he is there as Cullen coughs to grab her attention, feeling awkward.

“Cullen,” she says, her mouth forming a little o in surprise.

“I was let in,” he says, unsure of what to say now that he is here.

"You're injured," she says, “shouldn’t you be with the healers? I was going to come by and check...” Her voice trails off as she looks him over, checking for signs of where he is hurt.

"I went to the healers' tent, they bandaged me up. It shouldn't take too long to heal," Cullen says.

"Let me see?"

He stiffens at her request.

"Let me see," she repeats, an order in her words. Cullen stays unmoving, reluctant to let her see the extent of his injuries. He knows she will blame herself, but she does not back down, staying in front of him with her arms crossed, waiting.

"It is quite bad," he says finally.

He sees the tension in her body, the strong measure of control. She is so unused to delegating, so prepared to shoulder everything alone. His injury is an affront to her planning; an affront to her careful guarded nature and it bothers her. He is surprised at how good he is at reading her now, at how he can see the line of her back and know he has to ease this conversation out of her. She is still looking at him now, expectant, so sure that he is going to follow her order. Maker take him, she is right. He is unable to defy her.

He begins to undress, painfully aware of every movement. Time seems to slow down to sensations
and noises. The rustle of clothing as it slides off his shoulders, the click of a belt as he unbuckles the straps keeping his fighting leathers in place. He is bare from the waist up before her, the bloodied bandages stark red against his pale skin. The colour drains from her face but she steps forward, so close, her fingers hovering above the injuries. He feels himself tense, his arms heavy by his sides as she reaches a hand towards his muscled chest. Her phylactery that hangs around his neck is suddenly a tangible weight. She can’t help but look at it, her gaze drawn from his injury momentarily.

"I'm so sorry, Cullen," she says. Her fingertips rest lightly on his chest. It feels electric. Her looking down at him, her thighs spread to accommodate his legs - bare legged, her lips pursed together in saddened disapproval at what has happened to him. Cullen feels arousal flush through him at that touch, as well as a sudden wave of anger.

"I am not your responsibility," he says, rising up in his seat to meet her lips and pulling her body towards his. Her lips are still pursed with unhappiness at his statement, but it does not take long before she softens beneath his attention.

“You are a bit,” she says, between kisses.

“Just as you are mine,” Cullen responds and Kilastra stills for just a moment. Then she is moving again, kissing him with a sort of desperation he has not seen in her before. Her hands grip his shoulders, her hips rock against his ever so slightly, she is trying to keep in control, trying not to hurt him, but there is no mistaking that signal of where this could lead.

“Thank the maker you are okay,” she says against his lips as he runs his hands over her body, following the curve of her back, suddenly out of his control. The feeling escalates so fast, shooting straight to his groin, having her so pliant to his touch, knowing that she wants him.

His body doesn't want to stop her, he is so hard, and he is aching to be with her but along with the arousal comes waves of pain and exhaustion. Despite his desires he braces his hands against her arms, "Stop" he chokes out reluctantly. She immediately stops, frozen, a look of intense guilt on her face.

"Have I gone too far?" she says, quickly backing away from him. The loss of contact feels appalling, and the look of confusion on Kilastra's face is worse, she keeps looking at his chest, her gaze flicking between his injuries and his face.

This won’t do.

"No no, I want..." he pulls her back into him, her body falling flush against his, a twinge of pain ripples through him but he makes sure instead that she feels how hard he is pressed against her. The line of his erection is visible through his trousers, straining against the fabric. He knows she can feel it.

“I want all of it, Kilastra."

He knows his voice is laden with desire and, for once, he lets himself be open. He wants her to see how much he wants her. He sees the responding flush on her cheeks as she realises, the softening of her body against his, the small smile that plays at the corner of her mouth.

"You have no idea how much. It's just...when I bed you, I want to be able to move properly, I want to be able to do everything I have dreamed of doing. I want to be able to do it right."

Kilastra settles herself onto him, a cushion of air between them as she leans back to look at him. She is also allowing herself to be open; her expression is earnest and genuine, relief and desire. There is
none of that coldness he saw on the battlefield. This is the Kilastra he knows, this woman who wants
to do right by her army, this woman who wants to save the world, this woman who is scared and
strong and who, against all reason, cares for him.

“Is there a way of doing it right?” She asks, and that question almost breaks him. What has she been
through?

“For me there is,” he says.

There is a pause. A happy, trusting smile breaks across her features. She is realising something and
though Cullen doesn’t know what it is, he feels her trust him, as if it was a tangible thing. The link
between them strengthens and as she relaxes in his arms, letting him take some of her weight, it
makes him feel like the strongest man alive.

“I look forward to it then,” she says, eyes bright with excitement and something else he can’t
describe.

“For now,” he says, as Kilastra slides off his lap and passes him his shirt, “let us ease each other’s
other burdens – what is on your mind?”

She sneaks a peek at his groin as she watches him put on his shirt, she suddenly seems so shy that
Cullen can’t help laughing.

“It will go down, don’t worry.”

Kilastra blushes deeply and opens her mouth to defend herself, but she also starts to laugh. It is a soft
and carefree laugh that seems to surprise her.

“Come on, talk to me, I know you are worried.”

Kilastra sinks down onto the end of her bed, she is still wearing so little and Cullen forces himself to
look away from her bare legs, bringing all his self-discipline into play.

“Is it that obvious?” She asks, her fingers tightening on the covers of the bed.

“Well it’s an easy guess considering everything that is going on,” he says.

She takes a deep breath in and rushes out her next words, clearly worried about his judgement.

“Morrigan took me through the Eluvian.”

Cullen tries to mask his initial reaction of repulsion and fear. What was Morrigan thinking taking her
through after what happened to Kilastra in Adamant, and without warning anyone?

Kilastra continues speaking, oblivious of his internal monologue.

“It felt like going into the Fade, and I’m worried Cullen. I’m worried about what Corypheus could
do if he gets his hands on it, it’s an old and powerful place…if he tears down the Veil…”

Cullen feels the shift between them, the professional side coming out. His stance switches
subconsciously. He rests his elbows on his thighs as he leans forward, listening and thinking.

“You think that is his aim?”

“I think that will bring him the most power, yes, but honestly I have no idea.”
She mimics his posture, leaning forward - elbows on her thighs, getting into the discussion.

“I went to some old contacts,” she says, avoiding looking at him as she says it. Is she ashamed to be checking outside of the inquisition? Is she worried that he will sell her contacts out? The thought unsettles him, but then he remembers the phylactery that still hangs around his neck. The metal is warmed by his skin and he knows he has her trust.

“They are not sure where the rest of the Eluvians are, but these things are steeped in ancient elven mythology - I’m not sure anyone knows exactly how they work. Even Solas was unable to give me a clear answer.”

“So you’re saying we have no idea what we are dealing with?”

“Only a vague one. Though I do know we can’t let Corypheus get there first. Josephine has already dispatched the letters to our allies, we cannot assume they will come but – “

“They will come, Kilastra.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because this is a cause worth fighting for. You have made it very hard to ignore. Kilastra, we fight for you. For the Inquisition. There is no finer cause.”

Her back straightens at his words, but a small sigh escapes her as she still doubts, despite all the things they have achieved.

“I hope you are right” she says, “We need all the help we can get. I think this is the right step, if we can get there before him - we could have a real advantage. I’m going to tell the others tomorrow morning that we have to mobilise. I’m sorry it’s not much time. I want to leave the day after tomorrow.”

A checklist of to do items runs through his head as he thinks of everything that needs to be organised for that to be possible: the supplies, the weapons, the number of tents needed, which troops can be recalled from what areas.

“Cullen?” Kilastra asks, cutting through his thought process. He must have gone quiet for too long.

“I will make it work. You have my full support at the war table.”

He stands finally and walks over to her; she looks small seated on the edge of the bed in front of him. Small and tired. From this angle she has to tilt her head up to look at him. He is overtaken by a sudden impulse to take her in his arms again, to try and stop time so they can have more of it together.

“Can you come with me somewhere before we leave Skyhold?” he asks.

Her response is immediate.

“Of course, where do you want to go?”

“Tomorrow night, come find me in my office when you are ready to go.”
“Mysterious,” she teases.

“I happen to have some tricks up my sleeve, Inquisitor.”

He leans down to kiss her and she lifts up from the bed slightly to meet him, pressing her hands down on the bed to lift up. The kiss is warm and soft, full of promise.

“Hmm, of that I have no doubt, Commander.”

When Cullen steps out of her room later, he has a much lighter step. Even on the brink of battle, even with the threat of Corypheus looming over them - they have a plan, they have hope, and Cullen has a plan of his own he wants to execute.

Chapter End Notes

You have all been so remarkably patient and encouraging. Thank you so much :) The rest of the story will continue to come...slowly....but surely!
Chapter 12

The war room meeting is over. The meeting where Kilastra had announced that they were going to try cut Corypheus off to the Eluvian, her palms heavy on the war table as her advisors had listened intently. She had looked calm, confident even, praising them for their work and laying out the plan. Morrigan had stood behind her, arms crossed, smiling at her decision. Cullen still didn’t fully trust her involvement, but if Kilastra wanted her on board then he wasn’t going to turn away the help. Kilastra had relayed her orders now: it was his duty to carry them out.

As they walk out, Kilastra walks by his side companionably.

“I’m going to be scouting ahead most of the time, but I’ll make sure to come back to camp each evening. How are the healer teams working out?”

“They are learning, mixing the magic users and non-magic users was a good idea, it has made everyone far more...tolerant.”

He is always anxious about this topic, he has not forgotten that Kilastra escaped her own Circle, that even though he is no longer a Templar, he was. However, when he looks at her out of the corner of his eye, he doesn’t notice any visible change in her demeanor.

“Do you think there will be problems when we mobilise?” Kilastra asks.

“Truthfully, there may be some small spats but nothing big. They are learning well from one another.”

Kilastra smiles at him, “just like we did.”

His expression softens, unable to hide the affection he feels for her.

“Yes, just like we did.”

He hears Leliana clear her throat and Kilastra also startles. He’d completely forgotten her and Josephine were still there.

“Inquisitor,” Leliana starts, “I just have a few more matters I need you to look at in my study.”

“Right,” Kilastra says, “Lead the way. Josie - I shall meet you before the evening meal to discuss contingency plans for Skyhold and Cullen, uh, I shall see you later.”

“Understood, Inquisitor,” Cullen replies, hoping he does not look too red in the face, though the small smile that Josephine gives him as she brushes past him to get to her desk leads him to believe he is not very good at subtlety. Cullen sighs, dragging a hand over his face.

“How long have you both known?” he asks when Kilastra and Leliana are out of earshot.

Josephine picks up her quill as if Cullen hasn’t said anything,

“Known what, my dear?”

“Urgh, nevermind,” Cullen responds, turning to leave.

“For what it’s worth,” Josephine starts, her eyes still down on her desk, “I only want what is best for her, you know.”
“Me too,” Cullen says.

“I know. That’s precisely my point,” she says, “Now go on, we have a lot to get done.”

Cullen walks through the main hall on the way to his office, there is less chatter than usual, a hushed sort of reverent quiet has fallen over the place. He passes through Sola’s rotunda, where he hears Dorian’s voice admonishing someone for the way they were packing his books and nods a greeting to Solas who is also busy packing away his belongings.

“You shall be joining us in the field, Commander?” Solas asks, just as Cullen reaches the door.

“We all will,” Cullen responds. He hasn’t had extensive interaction with Solas. The elf tended to keep to himself, he was quiet but outspoken on his opinion and had made it very clear how he felt about Cullen’s involvement with Templars. However he felt though, Kilastra often took him on expeditions, and he had proved invaluable in providing information on the Fade.

“That is good,” Solas says mysteriously, returning to his bag where he slips a glowing tablet into his pack.

The soft sunlight of morning bathes Cullen as he steps onto the ramparts, choosing to think no further on Solas’ words. The noise that was missing from the main hall hits him as the messengers are running the news around Skyhold, and people are scurrying back and forth receiving shipments and loading carts. Cullen leans against the stone, overtaken by what they have achieved. After Haven, he has not stopped to think, has not dared to expect and yet...here he is. They have not only created an army but a home also. Cullen finds he is reluctant to leave Skyhold, everything is familiar here.

Jim clears his throat next to him, announcing his presence. Cullen sighs; this too is familiar, broken from his moment of tranquility.

“Report.”

“Well, ser, we have sent messengers and missives to the available battalions. Rylen has responded that he should be able to meet us at the rendezvous point without any foreseeable problems.”

“That’s good. Anything else?”

“Will you be needing your own tent, ser or...uh sharing?”

“What?” Cullen asks, bewildered. It has always been standard for the Commander to have his own tent; he imagined he’d be bunking in the makeshift war room as they went.

“Uh, your own tent, ser, shall we pack it with your horse?”

“Yes. Actually, I shall be taking my horse out tonight, can you make sure she is prepped?”

Jim offers him a salute and leaves. That short moment of reflection on the ramparts seems to be the only time of respite he gets until sundown. Requisition officers are asking him to sign off on last-minute orders, the healing tents are being dismantled so healers are demanding space for those still injured, those entrusted with the supply line are already worried about shortages and so on. He has his head buried in logistics until a serving boy brings him two cloth bundles to his desk.

“What is this?” Cullen asks, reaching over to the bundles. He unwraps the cloth to find some bread, hard cheese, and cured meats.

“Leliana told me to drop these off, ser. She also gives you this note.”
The serving boy is young, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he hands over a folded piece of paper. The note reads: *she is in the stables.*

“How did -” Cullen begins to ask, but the serving boy has already left, errand completed. No doubt eager to get to his dinner. Cullen sighs, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment - so much for secrecy. Does he wear a sign on his back that he doesn’t see that says ‘*I am in love with the Inquisitor*’? He shakes his head loose of the thoughts of work, knowing he has done what he needs to do for today and after knotting together the bundles of food; he heads off to find Kilastra.

He finds her in the stables, just as Leliana had said. She is grooming her mount, running her fingers through its mane and whispering something in a language he does not understand. She looks peaceful, her fingers nimble as she begins to braid her mount’s mane, still talking as she goes. She seems to sense his presence because she looks up at him and smiles.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Cullen says, gesturing towards her mount.

“It’s just a little ritual I have,” she finishes the braid and pats the horse’s mane, “Dante has got me through lots of sticky situations.”

“Oh,” Cullen says, moving closer and resting a hand on the horse’s neck as well, warm beneath his touch and velvet soft, “Thank you, Dante.”

Kilastra looks fondly at the horse and produces an apple from her pocket to feed to him.

“Would you be ready to go somewhere with me?” Cullen asks, “It’s a little far, but if you wouldn’t mind?”

“I said yes last time didn’t I?” she teases him but she is already reaching for a saddle to prepare Dante, “I need something a bit more normal.”

The ride is pleasant and they talk easily, about tactics, about Skyhold’s inhabitants and when the scenery starts to become familiar, Cullen is almost surprised to find they have arrived, he expected it to take longer. The lake is the same as he remembers, glistening in the moonlight and reflecting the stars. They tie the horses up and take the packs of hard cheese and bread they had brought with them and lay them out on the pier.

She is at ease eating on the floor, born from the many months of camping and Cullen almost laughs at the difference. He settles himself awkwardly beside her, feeling the stiffness in his hips from sitting at a desk. Here he is bringing her to one of his childhood haunts, and she feels more at home than he does, dangling her feet over the edge of the pier, inviting him to join her.

He slips off his shoes and places them next to hers, and then he joins her placing his feet in the water.

“It’s freezing,” he says and Kilastra smiles at him.

“Yes, it is!”

“Sometimes you are quite mad,” Cullen says, smiling back at her as she takes his hand in hers and swings her feet happily. He has to admit though, it does feel quite nice; the lake is clear and cold and fresh. His skin is turning white under the water, but it feels *real* and something he remembers from before everything happened at Kirkwall. Cullen feels like he can breathe again.

“This is a beautiful lake,” she says.

“I think so too,” Cullen says, looking at Kilastra here in this place makes him *feel* so strongly, an
overwhelming happiness that bubbles over him. It is a dangerous feeling, he has not felt like this...since before Kirkwall. He never thought he would feel like this again.

Cullen takes a deep breath. *Just like you practiced.*

“I wanted to bring you here, away from danger, even if only for a moment.”

Kilastra tilts her head questioningly, turning her gaze from the lake to his.

“Did you come here often?”

“Yes, I had siblings who were very, very loud.” Cullen smiles to himself as he remembers how Brandon used to chase him around the garden, how Mia would shout at the two of them to include her and how little Rosalie would launch herself at Brandon’s leg’s to slow him down for Cullen.

“I loved them very much, but sometimes I needed some space to clear my head. This was that space.”

Kilastra beams at him.

“Thank you for sharing this with me”

“There is something else I want to share with you,” Cullen fishes in his pocket, pretending as if he hasn’t checked his pocket a thousand times over the course of the evening to make sure his gift was still there.

“The last time I was here, it was the night before I left for Templar training, my brother gave me this,” he opens up his palm, the coin his brother gave him nestled neatly in his palm, glinting silver in the moonlight. Kilastra peers into his hand, curious.

“It was just something he had in his pocket, but he said it was for luck. Templars are not supposed to have these things, our *faith* is supposed to see us through, but I took it anyway.”

“I can understand that,” Kilastra says. Cullen remembers the little trinkets in her room; hidden away in a corner, ready to be picked up again when on the move.

Cullen always thought he was very good at following rules, but now he wonders whether this was also a lie he told himself. He takes her hand and drops the coin into her open palm, meeting her gaze as he folds her hands over it - an echo of a memory in his mind.

“I want you to have it. We don’t know what you’ll face before the end of all this. It can’t hurt to have a bit of extra luck.”

Kilastra takes it from him very seriously, she removes a piece of string from her pocket, the same one that used to hold her phylactery and winds it around the coin before tying it around her neck, with one hand pressing the coin into her chest she reaches out the other hand and places it over Cullen’s chest where the phylactery is hidden beneath his shirt.

“I shall keep it safe,” she says. He can feel his heart beat in his chest; it is sure and quick.

“I know it’s foolish, but I’m glad,” he says.

Kilastra kisses him, her hands wrapping around his face as she pulls him close. It is a warm and happy kiss. She ends up in his lap, the drip of lake water from her toes lands on his legs and he finds he does not care.
“It’s not foolish. Though you know as well as anyone that I can’t promise my own safety,” she says and Cullen’s heart hitches in his chest at her words even though he knows the truth of them, “but I can promise one thing with absolute certainty.”

“Yes?” Cullen asks.

“I want to come back to you.”

_Oh, Kilastra, I love you_, he thinks helplessly - unable to defend his damaged heart. He can feel the sensation taking hold of him and he can do nothing but kiss her. He can do nothing against this feeling writhing through him, that has been growing for so long, so he threads his fingers in her hair and pulls her close to him, kissing her so fiercely that Kilastra gasps in surprise.

This happiness is frightening and, for the first time unrelated to Lyrium, his hands shake all the way back to Skyhold.
A drip from the collected humidity falls from the treetop above and lands on Cullen’s forehead. The air is thick with moisture and Cullen feels his hair sticking to his skin despite having divested his helmet ages ago. He focuses on placing one foot in front of the other. The mud squelches beneath his boots, a sticky slurp releasing it as he drags his leg up again.

They’ve been marching for well over a week and the little luxuries of Skyhold seem a distant memory. He has been washing in rivers and his clothes seem to have a permanent layer of mud. Cullen never thought himself prone to indulgences, but he is desperate for a bar of soap.

Adding to his irritation is the fact that Cullen has not been able to spend any time alone with Kilastra since they started moving. She has been constantly scouting ahead, taking her small team with her during the day and then in the evening they are constantly surrounded by people. He thought Skyhold was bad for finding a moment of privacy, but the more he has to spend time in her presence and be unable to touch her makes him realise how many wonderful, private corners there were in Skyhold compared to an open camp. He is mad at himself for not taking advantage of them more earlier. He knows it is partially wanting to maintain privacy, partially the urgency of the situation, really he knows there are a hundred reasons why they have no time alone together, but he is starting to take it a bit personally. He never believed himself to be a jealous man but he finds he is jealous of her time spent away from him and with others.

When she is at camp, she is often in the war room with all the advisors or out talking to soldiers, weaving her way through the crowds. For someone who complained so much about being a figurehead, she has taken to it naturally, knowing when she needs to be seen and when she needs to offer advice intuitively. The rest of the time she is camped away from the main area, preferring to provide a protective front in case of any rifts opening. He understands, he really does understand, it makes complete logistical, military sense. She will often try dart back to speak to him, but then Josephine will appear with an important message or someone will need him to deal with something.

They have got by on fleeting glances and occasionally managing to hold hands, small reassuring gestures that only serve to ignite his desire further. It is driving him slightly mad.

Cullen shakes his head, spraying droplets of sweat around him. His helmet bumps against his thigh as he walks, tied to his chest plate with a leather cord. He collects himself, mentally pulling himself together. They have been marching as fast as they can, trying to beat Corypheus to this Temple that Morrigan talked about and the mood is more than tense as they get closer and closer but it is slow moving.

The Temple of Mythal is through jungled canopies and ancient elven ruins, each step had to be calculated so as to avoid incurring the wrath of any ancient magic in the area. Ever since they had entered the Wilds, Cullen had to grudgingly admit that having Morrigan for navigating this terrifying forest was incredibly useful. Twice already she had disarmed traps that would have torn his soldiers in half had they crossed the barriers.

The soldiers are well trained, so there are no longer scuffles breaking out between units and they listen to his orders, but Cullen knows this feeling well. They need a reprieve of some sort if tensions are not to give way to further frustrations and acting out amongst them.

A ripple of excitement moves through the crowd and Cullen looks up to see Cassandra coming towards him.
“We have found a place to set up a base camp, Morrigan says we are close. Come.”

The speed of movement increases as the troops get excited for a meal. Cullen rounds the corner and sees what was bringing the fresh incentive to everyone. There is a clear river that runs near flattened ground, and behind it rises a structure he has not seen before. There are large pillars standing tall around a lowered area that has steps going down into it. Despite the cracks and vines growing around it, it looks remarkably whole compared to other structures they had come across and rather beautiful. He sees Solas gazing at it with interest and Kilastra joins him by his side where he notices them conferring quietly. A statue of a wolf sitting on its haunches watches over them, surrounded by overgrown vines that have taken over its paws. The sight of Kilastra standing under the statue’s giant muzzle makes him oddly uncomfortable.

The Inquisition makes quick work of clearing the area, felling trees for firewood, setting up tents, placing flag markers into the ground. It takes about an hour to get the basics all in place. They have finally reached an area that can act as a base, where they can settle in further while they wait for their allies to join them. Cassandra joins him as he is setting up the main tent for the main war room, driving pegs into the ground. He has discarded his armour beside him and Cassandra gives a huff of disapproval when she sees it stacked near him.

“It is hot,” he says, grumpily, following her gaze.

“It is dangerous,” she replies, standing close to him like a bodyguard. Her own armour glints silver in the sunlight, as if to prove a point.

“I am not a complete fool,” he says, standing up.

“Not a complete fool,” she concedes, “a partial one, maybe,” she says but while her tone is playful she shifts on her feet, looking uncomfortable.

“What?” he asks, slightly nervous now, thinking she has bad news.

“Have you...how have you been with, well, without…” Cassandra makes a noise of disgust at herself, “…have you been without Lyrium?”

Cullen is surprised; Cassandra has not approached him about this in weeks.

“Yes, of course,” he replies, “Why do you ask that?”

“It is just that you seem...less on edge lately. I worried…” She cuts herself off, “well needlessly it seems. If it is not Lyrium that has made you change, then that is good. Well done, Cullen.”

Cullen feels a rush of fondness for the Seeker, who stands before him so obviously concerned about his well being. Impulsively, he claps a hand on her shoulder.

“Thank you, Cassandra. I am well.”

Cassandra blushes and clears her throat.

“Good, good. I shall see you later then.”

Cullen picks up his discarded armour, shaking his head to himself, has the change been that noticeable? It’s been nearly a year now that he has not been taking Lyrium. It has been a few months since that meeting with Kilastra in his office. He is surprised to really put time on it but he has been less on edge. He has been sleeping without too much incident...he has begun to feel as normal as he could feel. He is buoyed by this unexpected realisation. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Solas
running his hands across the tiles on the floor of the sunken area he noticed earlier. Morrigan and Kilastra are with him. They are talking animatedly. He wants to share his latest revelation with her, but she seems busy.

Should he go over?

At that moment, as he is thinking, Kilastra looks up and catches his gaze. She smiles and excuses herself from the group. Her staff is still pinned to her back, her travel packs still hanging from her waist. It is clear she has only just returned from something.

“Inquisitor,” he greets her with a nod of his head, unable to keep the smile from his face.

“Cullen, this place is incredible,” she grins, reaching for him and he offers his hands without question. Her thumb swipes across his knuckles, he feels as if a bolt of electricity has just raced through him. “Solas and Morrigan think they can get it working again.”

“Get what working again?” Cullen asks, squeezing her hands in response as a greeting before allowing them to drop.

“Oh yes! The baths!”

She gestures towards the sunken area he had seen earlier.

“Solas says they are public baths from before, they were social spots apparently for travellers. They have these runes on them. Solas explains it better than I can, but we might be able to get them working again, for a rest...for everyone.”

“I was just going to suggest the same thing,” he said, “I think people are beginning to get a bit frustrated. We want them fully focused before we reach the Temple, while we wait for our allies to join us - I think it would help.”

His approval of her plan lit up her face.

“Solas says he might need another hour or so, but it is doable. I will see if I can help him.”

She reaches out and brushes her fingers lightly against his hand again.

“Could you organise shifts? To use the baths? They can fit around thirty or forty people at a time.”

“I will get Jim on it.”

“Great, I will tell you when they are ready to use.”

She turns to go and something inside him sinks, dark and heavy. Stop being such a coward, he tells himself.

“Kilastra?” he calls, before she rushes off again, she pauses mid-turn and tilts her head questioningly. He takes a step forward, so close, but still respectable - from the outside it would look normal. The Inquisitor and her Commander - discussing what the next best move for them would be.

“I want to kiss you,” he says, completely honest, his eyes trained on her face. Kilastra’s breath hitches and her eyes darken with lust. She leans forward and opens her mouth to respond -

“Inquisitor!” Solas calls, beckoning her over. Kilastra sighs, an apology written all over her face.

“Me too,” she replies quickly, before turning on her heel and making her way back to Solas. Cullen
watches her a moment longer, thinking about the way her expression changed as he spoke to her. At least the frustration wasn’t only happening on his end. He takes a deep breath before going to find Jim to draw up the bath-use schedule.

True to their word, Solas and Morrigan manage to get the baths up and running within the hour. It is old, clever magic - allowing a steady stream of water to enter the enclosed area, warmed and scented by the runes on the tiles.

Cullen is no stranger to the hustle and bustle of close quarters, the lack of modesty required in barracks and he remembers at the Circle in Kirkwall he would often oversee bathing times since no-one trusted the mages to be left unsupervised. So it is a familiar sight when he sees ex-Circle mages strip down with ease, used to having to bathe under the watch of the Templars. He allows the disquiet he feels from his history to ripple through him as he stands on the sidelines. He has placed himself in the final shifts and is helping oversee a smooth handling of the hundreds of people under his care. His soldiers are also stripping down, unashamedly excited to get into the clean, scented water.

The runes glow beneath the water, they are a light pink colour and he can’t help but feel a bit uneasy around them, but the lure of a good wash is too hard to resist. The water is warm, but not too hot, and a light scent of rose wraps around his senses.

When it is his turn, he is sharing the space with many soldiers and Varric and Dorian. He steps into the water gingerly, unsure yet what he will feel. Those around him are already melting into the water, letting their muscles go lax, smiles emerging on their faces. He walks further into the water himself, getting to waist level and feels some of the tension drain away from his legs.

“Nothing like some magic water to ease the soul,” Dorian says, fully submerged and closing his eyes with pleasure.

Cullen can’t help but agree as he scrubs away the dirt from the last few weeks. He feels eyes on him as he moves, cupping water between his hands and bringing it up to run over his shoulders. He flexes the muscles in his back subconsciously as he draws his shoulders forward in an effort to try hide himself and feels the skin draw tight over his scars, puckered and red, drawn taught by his movements. It brings back bad memories.

“Wrist shackled, knees pressed to the floor, blood leaking from his mouth as he screams…”

“Alright Curly, give a chance for the rest of us,” Varric jokes, interrupting his thoughts. The dwarf’s voice is warm and smooth and he lets memories of happier times sitting in the inn at Skyhold chase away the bad memories. Then he realises the content of Varric’s words and is shocked to notice that no-one is staring at his scars, they are staring at him. He feels a blush crawling up his chest and into his face and curses his pale skin for showing him up so easily.

“She is watching, by the way, even though she is pretending not to,” Varric says, mentioning it as if he was just talking about what was for dinner this evening.

Cullen doesn’t even bother pretending he doesn’t know what Varric is talking about. He has grown accustomed to the idea that those closest to Kilastra probably knows enough about them two given all the comments that have been coming his way.

“She is?” he asks, pleased.

“I don’t think she can stop herself.” Varric smiles, “You’ve got her good, Curly.”
He can’t help the smile that stretches his face. He tilts his head, trying to catch her out of the corner of his eye. When he sees her she is looking at him side on, trying to pretend she isn’t - her body angled away even as her gaze searches for him.

Their eyes meet and Cullen keeps his movements deliberate and slow, running his hands over his shoulders, flexing his arms and feeling his tired muscles respond. There is a tense heat in the air between them and his mouth suddenly goes dry as she continues to look at him, giving up all pretense now.

Then she slowly drags her gaze down the length of him before meeting his look once more and a devilish smile appears across her face.

Maker, what did he start

His heart is beating wildly, his cheeks flushed and he can feel himself stiffening below the water. Suddenly she looks away, startled and blushing deeply as Solas has touched her arm, drawing away her attention.

Cullen feels like a spell has been lifted and he huffs a laugh at her embarrassed face as she follows the line of where Solas seems to be pointing.

It is then that Cullen hears it. A horn sounding in the distance and it takes a moment for Cullen to realise what that sound means.

Their Allies were arriving.
Cullen dresses quickly, rushing to join the other advisors who are bound to be readying to meet their allies. Kilastra has gone on ahead already and he also doesn’t want to keep her waiting. There is one main avenue for arriving to the camp, they had cleared as much as possible of it as they came through themselves but there is still scattered debris around the path. He has to admit, though, as the avenue comes into view that it is rather majestic. Tall trees frame the pathway, providing a canopy of leaves overhead and the crumbled pillars add to the splendour rather than giving a sense of ruin. The Inquisition have lit lanterns along the path for their arrival, and the lights twinkle softly in the dusklight.

Orlesian, Ferelden, Free Marches - he saw all the people that they had been negotiating with, all flying under the united banner of the Inquisition. He feels immeasurably proud. All those errands, playing nice at balls, all that time spent fixing things, organising, negotiating...it all led to this.

Finally, he thinks.

He approaches where Kilastra and the advisors are standing. They have all instinctively left a place for him, and with pride he takes his place by her side. A sudden rush of fondness washes over him as Leliana and Josephine stand next to him as they watch the culmination of their work.

“They came!” Kilastra says, her voice bright and relief shining through. She still sounds surprised, even after everything she has done to get this to come to pass. He sees the soldiers whispering among themselves, eyes darting to the green light emanating from her hand. She has chosen to leave it uncovered for this occasion, her usual gloves tucked into a pocket.

“They came for you,” he says, voice low.

She turns to face him, her stance a little taller.

“For the Inquisition,” she says gently, her hand on his arm in a light touch. “You all did this,” she says, beaming at her advisors. She nods once, and he sees the transformation happen before him, her expression turning professional, her stance more powerful - and then she is turning to go greet the leaders of each faction who are waiting to take her lead.

“She has become much better at that,” Josephine says, a fond smile on her face.

“Thank you so much,” he hears Kilastra say, all the murmured conversation suddenly stops at the sound of her voice. They turn to her expectantly.

“Please, we will show you where to set up, and if you will join me in an hour in the war tent, we have much to discuss.”

Cullen never thought he’d see this, never thought he’d be a part of something like this. The leaders of every country in this crowded tent in the middle of the Arbor Wilds. There is posturing and silver tongued negotiations, but at the end of the day they have shown up to listen in a humid, musty tent.
where mud is halfway up the walls for the safety of their world.

He never thought he’d say he’d admired an Orlesian.

Leliana is finishing a brief of what they know about the area, the numbers of Corypheus’ army and the path they have planned to get to the temple.

“Our scouts have seen Corypheus heading to a temple ruin to the north, we need to clear a path to that temple so we can get whatever he is looking for before him.”

Kilastra leans over the map in the centre, her fingers tracing the route.

“Corypheus has proclaimed himself a god, and what he is looking for is meant to raise him to that status. We believe this temple could be the Temple of Mythal. We have to be careful in how we approach it. I shall be taking my elven expert and a team I trust so we can move quickly. I just need time and a way through.”

If the mention of a potential god-like power hidden in a temple frightens them, they do no let it show.

“We defer to your judgement, Inquisitor, however if a Temple is to be infiltrated - a Temple of a supposed ancient elven God no less - surely there may be more discoveries. We trust you shall share these with your allies.”

There is a murmuring of consent around the room and a shift in the air. He sees Kilastra’s jaw tense, her fists bundle. Cullen himself is furious, he should have known that the Game is still in play. They see so little about what is truly at stake. It is Josephine who answers, knowing that Kilastra will not be so polite in her response.

“We remember our allies, Ser. Our main goal is Corypheus, but any information gathered about the temple’s contents will be shared equally - after the threat posed to us is dealt with.”

“Exactly,” Kilastra smoothly agrees, pressing down her anger, “my goal is to neutralise Corypheus, I want no surprises in the night so we move at dawn. The Arbor Wilds is difficult enough to navigate as it is. We have cleared a way, but Corypheus’ army is large. Thank you for joining your forces with ours.”

They salute her, bowing their heads in respect.

“We fight for freedom from terror, Inquisitor. It is an honour to stand with you.”

The night air feels impossibly cool for the Arbor Wilds, but the curtain of the meeting tent falls away as he steps out into the night and it feels good to be out of that overcrowded room. Inquisitor soldiers are there immediately to escort everyone to their tents. He receives small nods of recognition from the people he’d picked for this role, and he inclines his head in return. Kilastra is the last to leave the tent, she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath of the outside air, refreshing even in its humidity.

“You should try get some sleep,” he tells her, aware of the hypocrisy as he does not think he’ll be able to settle down tonight.

She turns her gaze to him and gives him a small smile. She signals with a nod of her head for him to follow her, so he does.
She has become so casually comfortable with her influence, giving orders, being listened to. It is a far cry from the first days where she would look wide-eyed at those turning to her for advice. They walk in comfortable silence for a while, passing soldiers readying their packs for the night, lighting lanterns and speaking in hushed tones. The atmosphere in the camp is strangely convivial for what they are to do in the morning.

He sneaks a glance at Kilastra and sees she is deep in thought, she is rubbing the palm of her hand, her gaze off in the distance.

“We have a formidable force behind us,” Cullen says, though as the words leave his mouth there is a clench of something in his stomach. No matter how many people they have, no matter how much they prepare she still must face him and there will be people who will die. Perhaps his fatalistic attitude has rubbed off on her as when she turns to him, her look is sad but she doesn’t have time to say anything as they have arrived at his tent and she gestures for him to enter before her.

He obeys easily.

He does not know why, but there is a sudden tension in the air and it feels as if everything is zeroing in in slow motion. He feels the rough slide of the tent fabric against his hand as he pulls it open, he sees Kilastra pass through head down, the firelight from the lantern creating shadows on her face. It is over in a second, but Cullen can’t help but feel like something has changed in this moment - though he is not quite sure what.

As the tent door closes behind him, the fabric a heavy thud against the ground, Kilastra is already pouring herself some water. Cullen can’t help but notice that all that there is in the room is that small table with the water pitcher and the camp bed. His armour is stacked neatly in the corner, the lines of the linen are militantly straight and Kilastra stands in his tent, in the middle of his tidy looking-life, finally reflecting some of the chaos he feels. She is bright and dishevelled, she is alive and maker she makes him feel.

“Cullen, are you alright?” she asks.

He feels punched in the chest at the way she looks at him, but he is not about to say that.

“A decent bath for the first time in weeks and the arrival of our allies has put me in a good mood,” he says truthfully. The melancholy from earlier has dissipated he feels bizarrely hopeful in the face of it all. He is not quite sure what is happening to him.

Kilastra suddenly seems shy.

“You looked...you put on quite the show earlier,” she says, a blush suffusing her cheeks.

“You were watching me...” Cullen says, teasing and enjoying being the one to make her blush for once.

“I think half the camp was watching you,” she says, but her eyes are soft and warm.

“I only had eyes for you,” he replies easily, feeling a confidence he didn’t have earlier from her gaze and from the heat building in the tent.

“It was hard not to watch you,” she admits, walking closer.

She tentatively reaches her hands up and places them on his shoulders, he does not need further prompting to dip his head and kiss her. Her lips are plump and pliant beneath his and she hums a little noise of appreciation.
“Maker Kilastra, you have no idea, you are all I think about.”

“We are on the brink of something here Cullen, I don’t know how I know, but I just think tomorrow is going to be big and I don’t want to start something without telling you...without showing you…”

She cuts herself off, frustrated.

“This is much harder than I thought it was going to be,” she says.

“I love you,” Cullen blurts out, interrupting her, completely helpless against her earnest gaze and simple words. His admission shocks her, her eyes widen and there is something that looks a little bit like fear that crosses across her face.

“...or not so much harder, it seems. You stole my punchline,” she admonishes playfully, that fleeting emotion gone and Cullen finds himself looking down at her open gaze, her face lit up with joy.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you, but I didn’t know if it was fair.”

“Fair?”

“It seems a bit selfish, if I...don’t come back, but I wanted...I love you,” she finally says, whatever fear she felt earlier banished from her voice.

“Me too,” Cullen says grinning and then she is kissing him hungrily. There is a desperation to her touch and he wishes he could soothe it, but truthfully he feels it too. The desire to be closer, the fear of losing her - it drives him mad sometimes. Her fingers are tugging at his clothes, trying to thread her way in. Cullen gives in far too readily, as the heat of her body presses against his.

“Maybe we should wait-” he starts, trying to ignore the blood rushing to his groin and the way she makes these little hungry moans in between her kisses.

“Please Cullen, I need you, I need this…”

He is a weak man, he knows this isn’t how it should go, he wanted to have a room, a real bed, time. But maker he wants her so badly and what if she doesn’t come back to him tomorrow? What if she faces Corypheus and falls?

He runs his hands over the very realness of her. Their touches are desperate and clinging and ignite a fire underneath his skin.

So he continues to kiss her, he tilts her head back as he claims her lips and shifts so that he has a thigh between her legs, and she grinds against him appreciatively.

“This comes off,” she demands, tugging at his clothes, letting the cloak fall to the floor and he obliges, stepping back from her reluctantly to make some space. She sits back on the camp bed and watches him.

Her eyes drink him in as he shucks his clothing and he has never felt so vulnerable and so powerful as the desire shows so clearly on her face.

“You are something.” She says, her voice breathy and Cullen blushing, closing the gap between them quickly – he wants to be touching her, running his hands across her body. She yields easily to his touch, arching into him as he runs his hands over her waist, cupping her ass and he is so hard.

“Kilastra, I have been thinking about this so much,” he is babbling but he doesn’t care.
“Don’t stop talking,” she says, he looks at her surprised but she doesn’t seem to be embarrassed at all. She nips at his neck, “your voice. ”

Oh. Oh.

“Well that’s certainly interesting.”

When he slides inside her he makes this inarticulate sound that he might be embarrassed about later but maker, take him she is so wet for him and so tight and so – she rests a hand on his shoulders, signalling him to stay still a moment and he stops immediately, fighting the desire to buck his hips.

“Is this okay?” He asks, not wanting to hurt her and suddenly wondering if he has any idea what he is doing. She smiles at him and wiggles her hips, making herself more comfortable.

“Maker yes, this is – it’s great, I just, I just haven’t in awhile...and,” he can feel her relax beneath his hands, “just give me a second to get used to it.”

Cullen is normally not much of a talker, but remembering her previous comment of his voice he keeps up a constant stream of words. It clearly affects her as she writhes against him and she starts to ease herself up and down on the length of his cock.

“You have no idea how crazy you make me, how much I have thought about this,” he says, running his hands over her, wanting to feel everything at once.

“I need this, need you...” she says.

She needs this loss of control, just here, just for now - somewhere where she doesn't need to be in charge.

"Turn over," he orders her and she does, without question, kneeling on the camp bed and looking at him over her shoulder with a smile on her face. She looks exquisite, he runs his hands up her exposed thighs, pausing at the curve where her beautiful behind meets her leg. He wants to devour her, he wants to make her moan his name. She is a mess beneath his tongue and he loves it.

He turns her over, letting her settle back comfortably before returning his attention between her legs. He has not done this in a long time, but he tries to pay attention to the little signals her body is telling him - when she tenses, when she moans, when he feels her clench her hands on his shoulders.

“Cullen ,” she whines and he feels her body shudder, her fingers scrabbling in his hair as she comes undone. He grins at her happy smile.

"More,” she demands and Cullen is happy to oblige.

He thought it would be the feeling of entering her that would make him go over the edge, he thought that after all those dreams, just that would make him break. Instead, it’s the look on her face as he thrusts inside her. It is the total abandon she gives him, the look of pleasure as her eyes close and trusts him. He is doing this to her, he is giving her this pleasure - and that is what destroys him.

Her breath pants a pattern into the crook of his neck as he slides in and out of her, finding a heady, steady rhythm that pushes him closer and closer to the edge.

“Yes Cullen, yes, yes, yes . ”

He loses himself within her, his eyes closed as he focuses on the sensations of her nails scratching
into his skin, his cock buried deep inside her and maker it feels like he is taking lyrium again.

He is heady with it and she keeps on saying his name, like a prayer and he is not sure what he is saying but her name tumbles from his lips, whatever it is...it sounds like worship.

He remembers to pull out at the last second, amazed he has the capacity for thought and his legs are shaking as he comes onto the ground. The aftershocks of his orgasm ripple through him and he vaguely registers Kilastra having moved to kiss his neck, her hands snaking round his waist to hug him.

He kicks some dirt over the wet patch on the ground and turns to kiss Kilastra.

“You are…” he says, unable to finish because there is nothing he can say.

“You too,” she responds.

They lie tangled together, sweat cooling off their skin. He didn’t know he could feel like this, this calmness. Even with everything that was going on, he marvels at Kilastra in his arms, her hair is sticking to her forehead, and she has a smudge of dirt under her chin but it just seems to serve to make him love her more.

_Dangerous. So dangerous._

_And so very worth it._

Cullen thinks Kilastra may have fallen asleep, but then she runs her fingers across his chest, the sensation makes him shiver. Kilastra sighs.

“I should really stay in my tent, in case people come looking for, you know, the Inquisitor.”

“I could come with you?” he offers and it makes her smile. Ten points to Cullen.

“People may come looking for you too, Commander.”

“Yes, well we are terribly important.”

Kilastra laughs and gets up to get dressed. Cullen props himself up on his elbow to watch her.

“I could get used to this, you know.”

Once she is fully clothed, she sits on the edge of the bed to kiss him, it feels like a luxuriously long kiss but with none of the desperation of before. He sinks into it.

“I think I might already be used to it,” she says, threading their fingers together.

“I’ll be here,” Cullen says, giving her hand a squeeze. He can sense the responsibility settling on her like a dark cloud, her smile does not come as easily as it did before.

“See you tomorrow,” she says giving him a fond smile before she slips out into the night.

“Tomorrow,” Cullen says to her retreating figure. The word feels like a promise, heavy and real in the air.

_Tomorrow._
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!