Summary

Modern A/U. Cullen thought it was a typical traffic stop. He never could have known the woman he helped on the side of the road, the woman who insisted she knew him in high school, was in fact a secret agent. Kristen Trevelyn is hiding her job, her intentions, even her true name from him, but with each passing day she can’t hide her heart.

Notes

The cover was created by the magnificent and magnanimous @Space_aged.

Also, this one is going to be updated on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Sorry, but I need more time to edit it as I’m also working on another story and writing weird stuff on the side. You can hit me with fish to take out your vengeance.
It wasn't his job to stop, having been taken off traffic half a year prior, but Cullen was curious and parked his car. This wasn't considered a pleasant part of the city, most of the scum rising to the top whenever it rained. But it seemed beyond bold for a person to attempt to jack a vehicle in the middle of the day right next to King highway. He sat in the front seat of his patrol car watching as a woman kept pounding her fist against the front window.

If she was trying to steal it by patting the window to death, this would be one for the guys down at the station. Lazily, Cullen flipped on the sirens for a quick roll announcing he was there. While he slid out of his car, shined black shoes scuffing in the red dirt, the woman whipped her head over. She didn't run. Whether that was due to her being in trouble or a very stupid criminal was yet to be seen. Knocking a finger against his sternum instinctively, the body cam kicked on just as Cullen spoke, "Excuse me, Ma'am."

"Thank the Maker," she shouted, her hands pressed together to emphasize the prayer as she began to run towards him. Cullen froze, grinding his back leg into the dirt. He didn't reach for the pistol at his side, but he narrowed his eyes and placed a hand against the lawful blues circling his hip.

The civilian paused, her eyes darting towards the threatening movement a moment, before she focused fully upon him. Her face twisted not in fear, or concern of being caught, but a moment of reflection. She wasn't tall, perhaps medium height, and he'd put her at medium build as well. Cullen was no expert at women's sizing but she was in that 8 to 10 dress size range, the weight carrying more in her upper body than lower. Brown hair, the crown hidden away by a knit cap of ivory. On the whole, she was as remarkable and memorable as a plate of rice...except for the eyes.

At this range he couldn't make out the color, but the clarity was evident. They glimmered with a certainty that caused the officer of the law to pause and glance around as if he was intruding upon her space. That's...you're overreacting. He shook off the momentary lapse and found nothing more
than an average woman before him.

Taking a step towards her, Cullen unearthed the terrifying pad from his front pocket. "I noticed you were..."

"Cullen!" she shouted his name, snapping her fingers as if she just arrived at the answer to a puzzle.

He twisted in surprise, his eyes darting back and forth over the woman. From deep inside he ransacked his brain for how he could know her and vice versa. She was normal, as typical as any woman one would find at a local Zippy Foods on a Sunday afternoon, but there was no memory of him ever meeting her.

"Cullen...Rutherford, right? Honnleath High! We were in english together."

Honnleath. Maker, he hadn't thought of his hometown in years. The officer blushed, becoming more and more blisteringly aware that he had no recollection of her. And she was staring in anticipation. Crap. "I...I'm sorry. It..."

"Was a long time ago," she raced to fill in. "It's me, Kristen. Kristen Trevelyan." Her hand stuck out towards him while those certain eyes glimmered and a smile filled her round face. Cullen raced to tuck away the pad in order to take it. Even still, he kept eyeing her, trying to trudge up a single memory of this girl.

"You, um..."

"Look at you," she whistled through her teeth, "haven't changed a bit." He frowned a moment, feeling far less gawky than his teenage self ever was. Her eyes darted up to his scalp and she tacked on, "Except for the hair."

A small smile twinned with a blush erupted as he thumbed the waves where curls used to be. "Yes, I...I thought it best to look professional."

"Looks good," she muttered before casting her eyes down upon her own attire, "and I am a blighted mess. Isn't that always the way? Blast from your past shows up out of the blue while you look like cat barf."

"No," he shook his head, feeling more and more off kilter by the obvious faux pas of his forgetting a woman that seemed to know him, "You are..." The professional, calculating eye faded and for a brief glimmer the long-buried red blooded man arose to properly take her in. Her blouse's top buttons were popped apart, revealing a curl of blue lace to try and camouflage her cleavage. It would probably work for most, but from his greater height, he was able to look directly down into the mysterious chasm, which was not what he should be doing.

"You're fine," he tried to whip away the gibbering adolescent giggling about breasts and return to a state of professionalism. "Miss Trevelyan..."

"Hm?" Her eyes softened to that of a cinnamon bun so hot from the oven the icing melted off the side. *Blessed Maker, get a grip upon yourself. Your behavior is abhorrent.*

"What were you doing, precisely, with the vehicle?"

"Oh!" she slapped a hand into her forehead, "I locked my damn keys in the car. I read on the internet that if you hit the window in just the right spot you can fool it into rolling down." Her eyes gazed past him back at his patrol car, "That...that probably looked rather suspicious, huh?"
"A bit," he admitted with a sigh and bundled up the pad back into his front pocket. "May I...?"
Cullen asked while gesturing towards the car. It certainly wasn't a junker like he'd expect to find rattling around down here, but it wasn't high on the chop shop's list of parts either. "A Gen Charger?" he asked even while certain.

Kristen bobbed her head while waving towards the blue sedan. "Got it second hand...fairly recently too. Didn't need one when I lived back west in Val Royeaux."

There was no denying how his face scrunched up at the mention of Orlais, nor the city of backstabbing, "What in the Maker's name were you doing there?"

"I wonder that every night," she whispered to herself while shaking her head. It brought a small smile to Cullen's lips to find a shared sentiment. Not a surprise, if she was from Honnleath she grew up with farms and gravel roads, not overpasses and crammed-in apartments. Then again, most would probably wonder what someone like Cullen was doing in a city of three million himself. Maker knows he did.

Kristen knocked her knuckles against the driver's side window, "See, right there on my seat...visible but out of reach." She jabbed towards her keys, the ring only holding four along with a fluffy plush griffin. "I am putting you on a bungee cord, keys!" Kristen added at the pile of metal before running a hand over her weary forehead.

How long had she been stuck here before anyone thought to pull over and help? Then again, given this neighborhood perhaps it was best no one wanted to bother. "Seems you weren't planning on carjacking," Cullen admitted, "but that window rumor isn't true."

"Damn," she sighed, tipping her head to the side in exhaustion. "Guess you can't trust everything you read."

He snorted at the thought. "Next time just call for a locksmith."

"Yeah, about that..." with her bent finger, she jabbed towards the passenger side seat where her tan leather purse sat. "Phone's inside." Kristen said with a half hearted smile. She shrugged, but her lips began to crumple into what looked like tears. "Th...thanks for the advice, about the window. I'll, uh..."

He flinched, his own spine burning at the clear frustration and exhaustion in her voice. Perhaps he could call a locksmith for her, or... "Do you have a spare key for this vehicle?"

Her eyes lit up a moment and she nodded her head as if she hadn't thought of it, "Yes, back at my apartment. Which is..." For a moment she jabbed into the air, trying to trace the line of crumbling multi-story buildings. "Somewhere out there. Can you tell I haven't been here long?"

Wrapping her hands against her forehead, she hid her eyes away from him while she tried to burn all her frustration into the ground. "I really hate cities. There's too much at once, and you have to try and remember it and...whatever happened to navigating by landmarks."

Cullen smiled a moment, "Mrs. Odell's fat bull." That thing would stand in the middle of her field day or night, barely moving save to twitch its tail. Everyone knew that the turn onto the highway was right past it.

"Or the inverted chantry," Kristen laughed to herself, the tears seeming to have slowed as she thought back to their home.

He nodded at the memory of the chantry whose steeple one stormy day pitched off the roof and
impaled into the pub next door. Not having the money to repair either, in the pub it became a good luck charm while the chantry refused to speak of it. They said that if you touched the very tip of the impaled steeple you would get laid that very night. Damn near every boy would sneak into the pub's basement to try and find the thing.

His guilty eyes darted over to Kristen and he snapped at himself. *Why did you think of that old folktale now?*

"Well," she swiped at her eyes, "it was good seeing you again."

"I could call someone for you, someone to pick up your keys," he threw out quickly, worried about leaving her alone with no recourse and no easy way to get back home.

She shrugged and bit into her lip, "I'm afraid I don't know anyone. Except for my landlord, who I would rather not impress upon. I think he's from Par Vollen judging by the accent and tendency to throw things."

A wren -- with her piles of brunette hair tucked under the cap, moon face, and glittering eyes she reminded him of those impish songbirds. At some point a mother built a nest on a little outcropping beside the fire escape outside his bedroom window. He'd wake to hear the cheeps and chirps begging for food, tiny bodies clinging together when their mother was away. During a bad storm, Cullen draped one of his old coats above the nest to give them shelter. Foolish, nature wasn't kind, but it stung him with a bittersweet pride to watch when all the babies took flight.

"What if I take you to your apartment?" he said, incapable of not helping even if it wasn't his job.

Her lips dropped a moment and she glanced around. "That's so sweet, but I'm sure you're busy with bank robbers to catch and evil senators to expose..."

Cullen smiled, "My life is less exciting than tv makes it out to be." Those big, brown eyes darted from her locked off, unreachable car, back to his. When a smile flitted around her lips, so did one on his.

"All right," Kristen nodded. "I'd be grateful for a trip to my place."

"I assume you know the address at least?" he asked while walking her to his patrol car.

"Yep," she nodded, repeating the address to him as if she'd had it memorized before setting off on a grande adventure. Too bad those rarely included having your white steed locked up and you missing the key.

Cullen cracked open the driver's side door and began to slide in while she bobbed from the back to the front. "Um," Kristen waffled, "should I get in the back?"

His eyes darted towards the cordoned bench without doorhandles and hidden behind a thick screen to protect him. That was where he kept criminals, not tiny wrens. "No," he shook his head before reaching over to crack open the passenger side. "Sit up here, by me. I might need a bit of assistance with the directions."

"Okay," she chuckled while sliding in beside him, "but I don't know how much I can give. Holy crap, those are a lot of buttons," she whistled to herself while eyeing up the computer display. He twisted it back to give her more room. "Like a fancy spaceship from those old Tethras movies."

"I haven't seen them," Cullen mumbled while inputting her address. He had no idea where it was, but that was what GPS was for. This city was too Maker damn big.
"Really? Not even the one with the big blue guy and the little yellow one who have to fight against a green woman from a galaxy far far..." she paused in her thoughts to tap a finger to her chin, "Now that I say it aloud, it sounds like an artist's color wheel."

Cullen flexed his hands against the steering wheel after checking his mirrors and honestly signaling to pull out. He even kept to the speed limit, much to the consternation of all the traffic around him who, at the sight of a cop car, dropped five or more under. Maintaining law was paramount for all, not just those who arbitrarily pick and choose what to follow. Which is why you let a civilian... He needed to stop thinking in those terms. A not-cop into your front seat.

She wasn't touching anything she shouldn't. Her hands were both buried under her thighs as if Kristen was concerned about bumping something vital. It raised up her knees, causing the ruffled skirt to reveal more than a sliver of her pale skin above knee-high socks. Watch the road, not your passenger.

"I don't see many movies," Cullen coughed out. "None too recent. But I did catch the talking tree one."

"Entirely in rhyme," she whistled, "had to be hell on the writers."

"So..." Maker's breath, why was he terrible at this? It should be simple, speak a few words while driving, inquire about the weather or the news, yet his tongue was tacking to the roof of his mouth. Words tripped back and forth forming sentences that were pleasant and easy enough, but upon perusal he deemed them all too insipid or bland to voice. "What do you do?"

Kristen cracked an eyebrow up and shifted in her seat towards him. The movement tugged upon the locked in seat belt, which was digging into that lace cleavage shroud. Good thing Cullen was stopped at a red light, or he might have slammed the brakes in surprise at how her chest was framed. Seeming to be unaware by the slight panic in his brain, she sighed, "Government, boring stuff mostly. Paper pushing from here to there."

"Explains being in Val Royeaux," he whispered to himself while turning the car to the right. "That place seeps bureaucracy from its very pores."

"Like grave wax," she whispered to herself before her eyes darted over. "Which is...uh..."

"A waxy buildup upon dead bodies from the fat breaking down," Cullen answered. His voice was neutral, but as her mouth dropped open in surprise he smiled, "Sometimes even flat foots watch the Knowledge Channel."

"That's...here I thought I was the only macabre one who didn't wear all black and call myself DeathMistress Nightmoon."

"As far as you know," he shrugged. Blighted Andraste, did you just imply to a woman that you are a secret goth vampire? She's liable to leap from the window even with the car in motion.

Kristen tipped her head down, but her apple cheeks were besotted in a blush, "Were you always this funny? I swear in high school it was all..."

He didn't answer, both hands rending the leather of the steering wheel too and fro until it cracked. High school, when he had a plan. A foolish one built on dreams they sold to boys without the brainstems to understand what they signed up for. "I'm afraid I'm as serious as a heart attack, same as back then. What...what about you? Have you changed...?" He asked to switch the subject before realizing he was more or less asking her to explain who she was.
Shifting again in the seat, Kristen glanced over at him, "Can't remember me, can you?"

Mortification paled his cheeks and he scrunched into the neck of his uniform. After a moment of swallowing, he admitted, "No, I'm afraid not."

Instead of huffing or crossing her arms, she smiled, "That's normal. I was quiet, forgettable really. Not that much has changed since then. Boring girl in a boring job with a boring life."

"You..." It was hard to consider her boring, or even average, but she appeared to be your typical paper-pushing assistant out of V.R. scrabbling under a dozen different reps to shift one form to another. He'd have gone along with her assessment, maybe even agreed to make himself look better for failing to remember, but her eyes kept sticking with him. It was foolish how he wanted her to look at him again.

Turning to focus on the road and not the woman he picked up...Maker's breath no, not that. He was assisting. Cullen said, "Your job send you here or...?"

"No. Quit. Well, they reshuffled things internally which meant I was doing two people's work for one person's salary. So I walked out. Set out for anywhere that didn't have drink specials that daily switched to whatever headline was rocking Court-SPAN."

Cullen snorted at that. "A couple of country bumpkins wind up in the big city."

"A true mystery of the Maker. How about you?" she turned to him, those gimlet eyes honed to the side of his face. Perhaps she was looking at the scar, people were often staring while working up the courage to ask about it. "How'd you stick here of all places? Weren't you...?"

Off to fight. Damn near everyone in school knew it. Shit, the town. That was how small towns worked. They put it in the little bulletins for graduation -- everyone's plans after. Probably on the chanter's board too since everyone attended the chantry as well. He was so damn proud to put on a uniform, to serve the cause. To become one of many. To get help with his future that a large farming family could never provide.

"Yeah," he sputtered, "joined the Templars. For a time." Too long of a time.

Kristen didn't ask another question, just turned to gaze out at the world passing by. "Oh!" she cried, jabbing towards an apartment complex, "that's it."

"I hoped," Cullen muttered, "as that's where the GPS is pointing."

"Right, right. I should probably get one of those, at least until I learn the city." He glanced over again at her, confused beyond measure. She didn't look like some old biddy, but the way she reared back from technology was almost comical. At most she looked, well, his age. Probably a few years younger as he'd ridden his 30 plus years hard.

As Cullen pulled into a parking spot, she cracked open the door and was about to rush out. "Do you want to come up or...?"

"No," he blanched, "you can retrieve your spare set. I'll remain here. Make certain no one tries to steal the rims off the car as I do so. The poor wren waved and dashed off to the door. It didn't even require her to enter in a code to yank open the front door to the lobby. Very dangerous, especially in this day and age. Cullen shifted, feeling eyes from everywhere upon him.

He stuck his tongue in between the canine and molar while checking each mirror thrice. Still, the erratic beat in his heart wouldn't stop. He had to make certain his six was clear. Even waking up
the rearview cam didn't calm him. No one was there. No one was anywhere save the rush of traffic in the background. He knew it was fine. But his lying brain said otherwise.

Damn it.

"Here they are," the passenger door cracked open and Kristen plopped in beside him. She jangled her stripped down keys with little more than a fob and smiled wide. "Good thing I remembered to unpack those otherwise... You okay?"

"Yes," Cullen glared at his rearview mirror which he'd twisted so much in his panic that it was focused on the roof. Getting it into place, he began to back out to return her to her vehicle. "Merely wondering how you got into your apartment."

"Oh," she rolled her eyes and sighed. "Landlord was outside banging on a neighbor's door for some matter and let me in quick. I got lucky. Ignoring the fact I had to be rescued in the first place, I mean."

It was rather cute how she fiddled with the hem of her skirt as her sentence trailed off to nothing. She seemed as uncertain about this small talk issue as he did. In bouncing her knees back and forth, the hard fought for keys fell right in between her thighs. Which is not what you should be looking at, officer.

"How..." Cullen sputtered, "how did you wind up on the side of the road with your keys locked inside in the first place?"

"Maker's sake, this is...you're going to laugh at me. Because it's, I swear I lived in VR for three years, but you wouldn't know it from the way I acted." Her babble faded as if she had no intentions of telling him, but Cullen was more than curious now. His suspicions rose at her dodging and he glared over at her.

Kristen was wiping a hand against the back of her neck and staring out the window on the way back to her abandoned car. "I saw a dog. Skinny thing, scared. It scampered across the street and I thought...well, I thought I might be able to catch it."

"A dog?"

"Take it to the pound, or whatever they have here. But I guess it wasn't used to people and dug down under the fence to dash off along the viaduct," she shrugged but her cheeks were bright red at the confession. "Which is when I realized that I slammed my car door with my purse and everything else still inside."

She stopped to rescue a stray? That seemed...

Her burning brown eyes darted over to him and she gulped, "Like I said, idiotic. Country rube."

Cullen snickered a moment before pointing at himself, "Country rube." Signaling to the side of the road, despite the fact traffic was moving at a snail's pace with a cop around, Cullen drove right back to where he left off.

He moved to turn off the car and unlock it, when she said, "Thank you so much for this. I don't know what I would have done..."

"It's not a problem, Ma'am."

"Kristen."
He blushed a moment before nodding, "Kristen. Though, you should be more careful when chasing after stray dogs. This area is not safe."

"Noted. I wish I knew what was safe around here. In VR it was follow the suits, though there you'll get robbed blind behind your back instead of to your face."

"You, um..." he twisted in his seat, an idea bubbling in his brain. Offer to show her around. Invite her out. Get to know her better. Have her laugh at the thought, skitter away in terror. Pinch her face up in disgust and try to politely turn you down. "You go and get into your car. To make certain it still works. So the battery didn't drain. I'll follow, back to the apartment. To make certain you can get home safe."

Maker's breath, what are you doing?

He braced for a grimace but she smiled bright, "Okay." Dashing towards her abandoned charger, when she put the key into the lock and twisted it, Kristen turned and gave a huge thumbs up sign to him. Cullen smiled at her exuberance as the woman climbed into her driver's seat. No doubt well aware that a cop would be trailing her, she took her time following all the rules of the road to pull out and onto the highway back where they came.

Cullen followed suit, doing his best to rip his tattered self esteem to tiny pieces. Idiotic. What were you thinking? Were you ever thinking? Why even bother? For all you know she moved here to be with a boyfriend or...perhaps a girlfriend. She remembers you from high school, nothing more. Quick, pin all your romantic interests upon a woman from your past you stumbled upon for five minutes. That's healthy.

By the time he watched her swing around the building to pull into her designated spot, Cullen was snarling at himself for daring to let his hope out of the basement. The dark was where it belonged as it had for the past year. He expected the woman to wave a goodbye, but she hopped out of her car and dashed towards him.

Slipping into park, he unrolled his window and turned to her. A great smile stretched her cheeks as she asked, "Do you have a pen?"

Cullen blinked madly at that before fishing around in the console. One of the station's cheap ones to promote a safety day for children rattled in his fingers before he managed to pass it over. She flattened a sheet of paper to the hood of his car and began to write. "If you ever want to catch up about the good ol' days, or need to spend time with another country rube."

He shifted higher in his seat, when Kristen passed him a receipt from a gas station thirty miles out of town. Written on the back was a phone number. Her phone number. She gave him her phone number. Clicking the pen closed, she smiled, "Thanks again. It was so sweet what you did for me."

"No problem, Ma...Kristen."

Her teeth flashed as she bit into her bottom lip, "Oh, that's my cell which you can call whenever, or text, or... You know how phones work. Do you want the pen back too?"

Folding the receipt up tight and sliding it into the pocket with his wallet, Cullen waved a hand to her, "No, you can keep it."

"A souvenir of the time I locked myself out of my own car," she pronounced with a smile.

His radio kicked on, the dispatcher asking cars to converge on the south side of the district. Cullen eyed it up before sighing, "I have to go."
"Duty and all that," Kristen smiled wide before stepping back to give Cullen room to pull out.

With the borrowed pen clutched tight in her fingers, she stood up on the sidewalk, those glimmering eyes trailing him. Cullen leaned out his still down window. He opened his mouth to tell her he’d for sure call her, when doubt bit deep into the meat. Realizing he was looking like an idiot with his jaw hanging wide open and nothing coming out, he shouted instead, "You're welcome," before driving out of sight.

You're welcome. Blighted brilliant. *That will go over well, I'm certain.* Nothing more romantic than a jolly good 'you're welcome.' Even as he grumbled to himself, his eyes kept drifting up to the rearview mirror where the wren remained perched on the sidewalk trailing him with her determined eyes.

She watched him pull away, her head lifting higher to spy the car merge into traffic and vanish. The pictures didn't do him justice, though the images themselves were certainly accurate -- blonde hair, a proud jaw and strong chin that would remain handsome even as the flesh wore harder than it should at his age. But there was so much more underneath. He reminded her of a lake stilled from a winter freeze, but lurking below with just the smallest hint of provocation was a fire that could consume them all. It surprised her.

And it was nice to be surprised for once.

Dropping her hand into her pocket, Kristen flicked at the pen savoring the click and clack as she walked back to her abandoned car. She really should get some more life into the thing, and a bit of dirt to cut down on the shine. It was far too clean both inside and out to blend in. Maybe stop at a fast food place and toss the bag behind her seat?

She reached for the door handle when an arm lashed around her throat. Her eyes flew open wide when putrid breath ransacked her ear, "Gimme your purse."

By the reflection off the car's roof she could see the man attempting to rob her. Five foot eight, trying to disguise his pasty skin, too small of features on a ham sized face, and jagged sideburns under a pulled hood. She shifted, turning her head backwards, when something round and metallic jabbed right into her spine.

"I wasn't planning on asking again," he hissed. "Money. Now!"

Did Cullen spot this? Was he still in the area or had he fully moved on? She tensed up, trying to look to the sides of her vision. The burglar was getting testy, and rather antsy about how long she was taking.

"I'll fucking shoot you, lady!" he hissed.

No one in the back alley parking lot. No one stomping out to their car or back to their apartment. No one would see her.

Good.

With a slow hand she reached inside her pocket, jangling the spare set of keys to draw the man's attention. The arm around her neck tightened a bit, but the gun barrel slipped to the side. Increasing
the trembling, she unearthed the keys and then...Oh no! Dropped them on the pavement.

"For fuck's..." The burglar hissed to himself. Instinctively, he leaned over to fish them up. When the barrel slipped away from her back, Kristen whipped her hand up. Fingers locked in tight, arm certain, she drove the pen deep into the asshole's neck.

His scream erupted out of both the mouth and his new throat hole, followed by the sucking sound of warm blood bubbling into the trachea. Rather than let him fall back from her, she grabbed onto his hand and ripped the gun free. Piece of shit .22, no doubt bought off the back of a truck.

"Ffuuck!" he tried to scream at her, a fist moving to swat at the woman while his fingers cradled the wound with a pen still jammed inside.

"I'd save your remaining breath if I were you," she sighed while eyeing up the gun. No serial numbers, shock of shocks there. Still. "I do not need this today."

His eyes crossed in terror as she drew the barrel right to the middle of his temple. "Pppp..." he was trying to beg, as if he wasn't about to shoot a random woman in the kidneys and leave her for dead for a few credit cards.

"Do you have any idea how loud a gun is?" she sighed. "How it'd send everyone running here?"

With the barrel ready to deliver a death shot through his brains, she grabbed onto the pen and yanked it out. Blood erupted out of his neck, most of it sloshing off the side and pooling on the filthy pavement. The robber's eyes rolled back, his knees buckling as far too much of that rather important juice of life washed down his pants.

Kicking a foot into his body, she sighed, "Great, now I have a mess to clean up." Hurling the stolen gun into the car, she grabbed onto her phone and quickly scrolled through the contact list.

It took a few rings, the other end always too busy to bother answering. In the mean time, she cranked open the trunk of the car and snatched up a gallon of water and bleach. Dousing the pavement as best she could, when the jolly voice on the other end answered, Kristen sighed.

"Yeah, Bodhan? I need to bring in a bag of scrap for disposal. How big?" she glanced down at the body crumpled in on itself. "Give me a minute."

Pocketing her phone, she bent over and hefted the dead weight across her shoulders. Without pause, she hurled it into the trunk of the car conveniently covered in black trash bags. It's best to be prepared.

Kristen moved to reach for her phone when she spotted blood clinging to her hands. After wiping it against the dead man's pants, she fished out her phone, "About two hundred and twenty pounds."

Barely glancing at the man who thought she'd be easy prey, she plopped the puny gun on top of him, and slammed the lid of the trunk. "Yeah, yeah, I'll need that too," she agreed with the usual retinue of clean up before glancing in the mirror. Blood streaked down the side of the blouse she specifically bought because it was just dowdy enough to be approachable but with a few missing top buttons to invite attention. Sighing at the loss, she added, "And tell me you have a change of clothes on scene."
With a heavy sigh, he tugged off the padlock and rustled around in his personal locker. There was probably a joke in there about a cop needing to rely on a piece of steel in a room filled with other cops, but... The concept of brotherhood rusted to a dingy red in his past. Call on the Maker, but lock the back door.

After hanging up the empty holster and belt, Cullen moved to unbutton his work blues, when his hand glanced across the front pocket. Right, he forgot about the damn pad. Tugging it free, he plopped it onto the bench behind him when his eyes caught the scrap of white tucked inside reams of unwritten tickets. Two days since he stumbled across the woman by the side of the road. He thought about calling Kristen, practically giddy for the first few hours, but as time wore on it grew heavy with impossibility.

What would be the point? To reminisce? As if he wanted to talk about how his life turned out with anyone who knew him when he was nothing more than one of the Rutherfords. No. No, it was foolish. It was doubtful she even cared to hear from him again. No doubt she'd already put him from her mind, a happenstance to mention to friends and nothing more.

He moved to snatch up the receipt and finally toss it away, when another hand beat him to it. "That my pad?" the gravelly voice belonging to the hand asked as he twisted it around to his face.

"Ah, yeah," Cullen reached behind his neck, trying to find anything to do with his hand while the receipt was wrested from his grasp.

Officer Samson pursed his lips a bit while looking over the numbers, "Got quite a few there, Rutherford."

"I tried."
"Nah," the more grizzled man smiled and shook his head, "it's great. Thanks for the assist, this damn leg..." He jerked his chin towards the braced up ankle that would flare up often. "You got lucky, ya know," he chuckled while yanking open his locker and fishing inside, "Three tours in the Templars and all you walk away with is that little face gash. Me?"

With an experienced hand, Samson threw three pills into his mouth and swallowed them dry. He winced at the end before puckering his nose. "I get to limp every day for the rest of my life. What a reward. They should put it on a poster. Serve your country. Become a real man. Learn how to buy special shoes that can fit over a brace."

Cullen smiled at the thought, turning back to his civvies. He didn't serve with Samson, but the fact they were in the same branch was enough for the pair to bond quickly. Even after he was promoted off the street beat, he'd still chip in to help Samson when he could. It wasn't much of a bother, not as if he had a real life to get back to.

"Let's see," Samson mused, standing unconcerned in nothing but a towel tucked against him. "Fifth avenue speeding. 65 no less. Brazen."

"They usually are," Cullen sighed while sliding into his t-shirt. Before he hung up his work shirt on the hook, he took a quick sniff. Nah, it was good for another day at least.

Samson heard the jangle of the closing locker and glanced up from the pad, "Got big plans tonight, Rutherford?"

"Uh, sure." Go home, microwave the first thing he yanked out of the freezer, and dig through a backlog of schlocky tv shows about home repair. His damn sister got him onto it, Mia more interested in the buying ones while he gravitated towards watching contractors muck things up. It was nice to watch someone else flounder for an hour or so.

Samson smiled, "Well, have...hello. What's this?" Damn it! The man tugged out the receipt and turned it around in his fingers. Cullen tried to shake off the blush on his cheeks, sneering in order to cling to any stratum he could find.

"Stopped out by the frostbacks for a fill up and...a cherry chai latte?" Samson finished reading and arched an eyebrow at him. "Funny, you always struck me more as a decaffeinated tea guy myself."

"Ha," Cullen spat out, his hand lashing through the air, "give it here."

"In a second, it seems there's a series of numbers back here. Not lotto numbers. Not a gate code. Could it be...?"

"Yes, fine, it's a phone number," he growled, regretting not tossing it into the garbage can a day ago. Somehow the cursed thing kept on him for two changes of clothes.

"From...?" Samson was clearly enjoying this chance to toy with him.

"A woman, someone from high school who's new in town that I stumbled upon. She...she asked me to show her around."

"So," he rifled the receipt through the air drawing Cullen's eye right to it. "Did you?"

"No," Cullen insisted.

"Why not?"
"I...I rather doubt that she'd, I mean that she'd have any interest in..." his voice fell to the floor while he glared at the shoes he forgot to change.

Samson clicked his tongue and sighed, "She gave you her number. Not a much bigger sign a woman can give, short of her unzipping your fly right then and there."

He snapped his head up and glared but Samson was rolling his eyes at Cullen's obvious discomfort. After busying himself with changing out the towel for pants, Samson glanced over. "How long ago was it?"

"Two days."

The man who seemed to think himself the spreader of love smiled, "Plenty of time to make amends. Take her somewhere nice...and dark. And loaded in alcohol. Boom, off go the pants."

Cullen glared at a poster on the wall telling them about the five steps to properly file on the ancient computer system.

Samson scooted a bit closer and deposited the purloined receipt in his fingers. Cullen didn't even realize he took it until the man left. Every blue, fading number taunted him. Do it. Call her. Or crumple us, throw us into the trash, or a toilet. What's the point of trying if you know you'll fail?

"She cute?" Samson asked while buffeting up his hair with the towel. From between the folds of terry cloth, he peeked out, "Or is that why you're waffling? Dog face but you want to be polite?"

"No, she's..." She was cute in a sort of snuggled up by the fire while wearing large sweaters kind of way. And she'd been easy to talk to in the car, as easy as one can be when they had their keys locked away from them. But there was something else, something that kept sticking in the back of his mind making it hard for him to forget that chance encounter. Running down the pavement, plucking at a keyboard, laying flat in bed -- her eyes kept floating through his mind.

"She's cute, and adorable."

"Kittens in baskets of yarn are adorable," Samson sighed. "What you need is a woman you take one look at and ache to fuck her until she can't walk straight."

Cullen flinched at the vulgarity, but in the back of his mind struck up an image of lace covered cleavage. Maker's breath, that chasm looked warm and inviting, his fingers begging to plumb its depths. No, he shook his head to try and purge the thoughts. He'd been waffling because he knew how it would go, how it always went. They gave in to a date, maybe two, but sitting in silence because he ran out of things to say killed the mood dead. Cullen abandoned the thought of dating months ago and had been...not happy, but less growly at least.

"Is this about the witch?" Samson asked, causing Cullen to shudder.

"No, it's not...her. I've, I haven't done a lot of dating." Ever. It wasn't his strong suit.

"Ya know ya got to get out there. Dig around a bit. There's some fine options in this city, who are all begging to get handcuffed by an officer of the law." He jabbed a finger at the receipt, "Try your 'adorable' one. Get your feet wet, then other parts. Shake off the cobwebs. Once you're seen with someone, no matter how plain, all the hot ones will come a running."

"She's not..." Cullen began before Samson waved at him and slipped out the door. With a sigh, he stared down at the numbers. Fairly normal digits, he recognized the VR area code right away having had to make too many calls to try and get paperwork through. Just put them into your phone.
He fished it out, waking the screen away from an image of a lake by sunset. The number pad taunted him. Go ahead, tap them in, have her stumble in confusion on the other end then insist she's washing her hair that night. Or that she has to stay in. Or learn she was really with someone else the whole time. How could he even think she might have a passing interest?

No. His fist crumpled around the receipt which he then flinched at. Smoothing it out, he quickly tapped in the first five numbers without pause. At the sixth he froze, his finger dangling above the phone that was patiently waiting for him to make up his damn mind.

Do it. Don't do it. What's the worst that could happen? This city was huge, even if she laughed in his face the chances of him ever running into her again were minimal. And there you go assuming the worst. Because it always is.

Biting into his lip, Cullen moved to touch onto the next number when he glanced up at the sound of a dozen other lockers opening and closing. This was not the place to call a girl, especially when he feared he would strike out instantly. Grabbing up his fading jacket, he worked out the door towards the back parking lot. The entire way, Cullen kept a lightning tight focus on his phone. It kept waiting for the next number in the special sequence and was getting a bit angry that he ignored it. Two reminders that the number wasn't complete flashed over top, Cullen darting them away.

With his back bent against a concrete retaining wall, Cullen jabbed in the last part. He had to shut his eyes to will his finger over the green phone button. With a plunge, he damned himself and held the phone to his ear. It rang twice, Cullen crushing his face tighter. What if it went to voicemail?

"Hello?"

"Is!" he shouted, his voice pitched too high. Shaking it off, he brought it down to ask, "Is this Kristen?"

"Yeah," she sounded like she was smiling but there was an odd noise in the background, like a chainsaw gargling.

"This is Officer Rutherford. I assisted you when you locked your keys in the car on..."

A gentle laugh broke through his technical jargon, "I remember. I don't tend to lock my keys in that often."

"Right, right." Great start, accuse her of being sloppy. Cullen wrapped a hand over his forehead as much to try and wick away the flop sweat as to assure himself he wasn't about to spontaneously combust. "I was calling about, wondering if you would like me to..."

The grating sound of metal gnashing into metal finally bit into him and he sneered, "What is that noise?"

"Oh sorry, I'm near a construction crew. They probably won't stop if I ask nice. Let me just..." her voice faded but he could hear what sounded like the phone bouncing up and down against a shirt. "Better?" she asked, the background transformed to a soft whine of machinery in the distance.

"Much," he smiled at the thought, before remembering he had yet to ask her a damn thing. What was he supposed to say? Hi, I want to take you somewhere. Somewhere nice. Not too nice, there's way too expensive nice here. But, ya know, a place with people doing things and food. Maybe drink. Blighted Maker. "Would you...like me to show you around town?"
His entire body cringed at how pathetic that sounded. She'd laugh. She'd tell him that she was busy. She'd turn him down less gently and flat out say she wasn't interested.

"That sounds wonderful," Kristen laughed and Cullen's entire body unwound. She said yes? Blessed Andraste, she agreed. "When and where?"

Shit. He'd been so certain that she'd turn him down he hadn't even thought of a time or a place. Crap, crap, crap, crap. What would he do... "Tuesday, 8, at Mulligan's Pub." He spat out the first thing he could think of.

"Tuesday huh? Okay," Kristen said and Cullen winced. It was on his mind because he had the next two days off after. Now, instead of planning to get some errands done he could be fretting about a date then licking his wounds. Who goes out on a Tuesday to a bar? Hard drinkers. That'll look sparkling to her.

"Do you, do you need directions? It's located at..."

"Corner of a hundred and seventieth and Mistral. Hey, that's walking distance to me, I think," Kristen didn't dampen for a moment while the question hung in the air of how quickly she figured it out. "GPS, and pirating some wifi off of a coffee shop," she said before a slapping sound echoed over the phone. "Or was I not supposed to admit to borrowing wifi to a cop?"

"I'll...let you off with a warning," Cullen said, barely able to stop the swell of music in his heart.

"Good, so, see you at Mulligans on Tuesday," her voice sang out.

"Goodbye," Cullen intoned.

"Bye," she cheerily called out once more before the line fell dead.

She said yes. He had a date. He had a date in two days time. Shit. What was he supposed to do? Or...did he have to wear something fancy? Did he even own anything fancy? Mulligans wasn't known for having a black tie requirement, but it might be good to try and gussy up a bit.

Cullen made it a step down towards his truck when he froze. He offered to show her around the town. He didn't say a damn thing about it being a date. "Ah shit."

This was stupid.

Pointless.

Beyond reason.

He was best remaining at home, slumped over in the arm chair and trying to get to the end of the last season of Fatal Wars before the next premiered. That was a far better use of his time than, than...

"Blighted hell, what was I thinking?" Cullen moaned while reverberating his forehead against the mirror. The edges remained fogged up from a far too hot shower where he thought to try and burn some sense into himself. When that didn't work, he begrudgingly began to get ready for this maybe date. Maybe it was just friends, barely even that. Not as if he could remember her.
Which bugged him so much he actually logged onto his old Battalion account and did some hunting. Sure enough there was a Kristen Trevelyan who was friends with a few of the old classmates he willingly agreed to link up with before realizing that he didn't like anyone in his past knowing about his current life. Her profile was minimal, the last address pointing her back towards Val Royeaux, and a handful of pictures. Also no mention of a relationship one way or the other.

He'd find it odd, but Cullen's gave away nothing save his name, a single picture half bleached out by the sun, a mention he was in the police force, and a few re-shares of dog pictures. Anything more seemed too much work to bother with. Maybe she was of the same mind and preferred to keep herself to herself.

Which would make her accepting a date with the first fool to bump into her rather out of character. It wasn't a date. It was what he said, showing a woman around.

He snatched up the grey t-shirt and tugged that down over his head, destroying his half assed attempts at combing his hair. It was clean, but not fancy. Last thing he wanted was to show up over dressed with aspirations of anything romantic and watch her eyes fall as she realized the truth. But what if it was a date?

If he arrived at the pub in nothing but a t-shirt and jeans, she'd probably consider him sloppy or inattentive. That wouldn't make a good first impression either. "Blighted void, why is this so hard?" he cursed to himself while glaring back at the eyes of the whining man in the mirror.

Yanking up his clean red and gold flannel, without patches on the elbows or grease stains embedded into the fibers, he tugged the button-up over his arms and tried that look on. It was relaxed, to most it'd seem as if he was stopping by to check on the game or snag a pint. Tuck it in? Cullen jammed the hems deep into his dark washed jeans, suddenly aware that he had a hole on his black briefs.

At that thought he snickered. As if that'd matter. This always ends with an awkward, "Yeah, so I'll call you later maybe." Followed up with crickets. It'd been... He dug into the back of his neck to try and chew the cramp away. A long time, he settled on. He knew the number but didn't want to think it, already embarrassed by how he wadded himself up into a safe nest and refused to come out.

Right. Okay. He could work with the somewhat cobbled together man in the mirror. The tucked in shirt said 'I tried' while it wasn't anything too fancy to send her scampering for the door. And, if he got in and she was dressed in a pair of yoga pants then he could slip off to the bathroom and untuck it. Good friends, easy way to let it all go. Not a problem at all.

"I'm such an idiot," he whispered, watching the scar he could have had fixed shift in the harsh bathroom light. After the shower it glowed like the red light of a brothel. One of many scars across his body, not that, again, anyone would be checking tonight.

He glanced down at his watch, the silver frame wrapped around a traditional clock face of onyx. 7:30. Probably best to head out in case traffic's bad. And if he's too early, circle the block a few times. That wouldn't be weird. Cullen moved to flip off the light, when he caught an old amber bottle sitting beside his half downed bottle of mouthwash.

Before the naysayer in his head put up a fight, he snatched up the bottle and gave a quick splash of cologne against his neck. He winced a moment, not remembering what it was or even where he got it from. Twisting the aging paper label around, he read 'Oakmoss and Elderberry.'

"Sounds like a terrible drink for the gluten free crowd," he grumbled to himself. Accepting that it was time to face his doom, he grabbed his keys, checked to make certain he moved over his wallet,
and headed towards the pub.

To drown out the voice insisting he turn around home, call Kristen, and feign an illness, he played whatever music he could find as loud as possible. In the old speakers, the radio hissed while a storm moved through. The thought of jamming in an MP3 made him laugh as he glanced over at the old cassette deck crammed in his truck's dashboard. Even that was a hard sell to get his father to agree to. A fancy compact disc player was out of the question.

The streets were quieting, a late storm leaving the pavement black as the river of death but also still. Most anyone who had anywhere to be was already there, leaving the desperate and lonely to wander through the red and green lights. By the time he pulled into a parking spot at the rear of the pub, he tipped his head back and felt a headache burrowing into his skull.

Samson laughed when he found out that Cullen was going on a maybe-date. Only he could make it that difficult for no good reason. Cullen was concerned he'd be fumbling through the whole night, uncertain if he should make any attempt at a move until learning at the end he was completely wrong. The advice Samson gave: if she's in jeans and a t-shirt, you're screwed. If she's in those tight jeans and tighter blouse, you're good to go.

"What if she's in a skirt?"

"Depends on the length. Past her knees, she wants you to help her raise a barn."

"And above?"

That bastard grinned like no tomorrow, "You're liable to get screwed."

Then he sent him on his way with a loving pat to the head. Because it's all so simple. Well, at least he wasn't wandering into the tenth teeth-grating date based upon a picture and a pithy one liner from his phone. After the last great blowup, Mia swore to stay out of his love life forever. Which was probably why he'd been suckered to his couch for the past three months. It wasn't happy, but it was peaceful.

His watch beeped, a gentle chime from ages past. Eight o'clock. Moment of truth. Sighing, he yanked on the car door's handle and began the long walk to the pub. Mulligans embraced its namesake, the sign decked out with four playing cards: a two of clubs, a five of spades, a three of diamonds, and a seven of hearts. One of the worst hands to be dealt, and an auspicious sign to begin things.

Grabbing onto the door handle, he rolled his head around once, thought of rushing back home, then tugged on it to walk inside. Moment of truth.
It wasn't a terrible bar. In truth, she was anticipating a real hole in the wall given the neighborhood but was surprised to find the place well lit and rather busy. Everyone was dressed in their red and golds for a match, which was winding down. That left a great mass of drunk fans stumbling around tables covered in used chicken wing baskets and empty beer bottles.

Kristen was quick to take the first table she could, gathering up the remains of the party that was celebrating a win on their way out the door. Judging by the tvs in back, there'd be another crowd walking in in a half hour or so. The influx and outflow of people shrouded in the garb of their teams was proving to be a colorful distraction. She took the time to adjust her clothes and take a breath. In running a hand over her hair, her eyes were drawn up to a mirror positioned in the corner.

Instinctively, she scoped out the place making a hard note where everyone stood close or far from potential blindspots. It seemed unlikely anyone here would be on the hunt for her, having left the choice of where to drink fully up to someone else, but there was no reason to get sloppy. When the door cracked open and a blonde head sheepishly stuck through, it suddenly struck her to check her makeup.

Too late.

Cullen Rutherford eyed up the edges of the bar as if he hadn't been inside one in a decade. Work by its very definition was work, often requiring unwelcome sacrifices, but in this matter she considered herself very fortunate. Maker, watching his arms tug against the constricting flannel alone would be enough to hold her attentions. Luckily, there was far better attached to the package.

Sliding to the edge of the booth, Kristen waved a hand. "Over here!" she called in her soft voice. It took a moment to drop upon the man's head. He looked as if he already resigned himself to her not appearing. It wasn't until his scrubbed and shaven face swung over that those amber eyes lit up.
She considered herself a sucker for the dour type, the man that would grimace even in the middle of puppies wrestling with kittens, but as his lips slid upward, inwardly Kristen sighed. His was a smile that blushed against his features, lifting the world weary brow and dangling cheeks until he looked a good ten years younger and far lighter in the soul. That was certainly worth a second or third look.

Dipping his head a moment, a hand brushed against the back of his neck as Cullen strode over towards the booth. Kristen smiled up at him, her head craned back to watch as his eyes darted around the place a bit, before dropping down to her cleavage. She'd hoped for it, having chosen a sweetheart neckline with black straps that were at most an inch wide, but it was so intense for a moment her spine trembled.

"You found the place," he spoke, already back to the uncertain man she anticipated stumbling through the door. Rather than keep staring at her chest, he was far too focused on her eyes. Hm. Maybe this would be harder than she thought.

"I did," Kristen smiled. "And I thought to claim a booth. This bar is rather popular," she whispered as he slid across from her, the seat squeaking as only vinyl can.

"Yeah, I...I didn't expect that."

"Oh? Don't come here often?"

"Not particularly," Cullen admitted, eyes glancing around the place as if he'd never been inside. "But, I'd heard it was good. Better than most in the area and thought that...it seemed an acceptable starting place."

He was adorable. The dossier never mentioned how bumblingly adorable he was, focusing more on the concrete stats of work and past accomplishments. They needed to get more women to work on compiling those. Absently, Kristen reached over for a menu card stacked on the table, but in doing so her hand happened to glance across Cullen's forearm. His eyes bit into her movement, that intense 'make you wet your panties' stare watching for the brief moment she let herself touch him. And then it was over.

"Hm," she mused, twisting around the card as if she hadn't already looked it up online. "Are you hungry?"

"Uh," he waffled back and forth on his haunches, which were also top notch judging by the cut of his pants. Jeans could hide flaws well, but if you knew what to look for, they could also amplify the finer qualities. "Not particularly."

"Me neither," Kristen laughed while dropping the card back in place.

Cullen chuckled too, clearly looking as if he sat on a flaming hot tack. He couldn't cease fidgeting, seeming to be terrified that she'd stand up and walk out at any second. "How...how are you settling in?"

Rolling her eyes, she sighed, "Given that I've lost half my furniture between here and Val Royeaux, just got internet hooked up about two hours before, and found a dead mouse in my bathtub I'd say...it's going pretty well." She smiled at the end, causing his eyes to bulge a moment. "Moving's a pain in the ass no matter what."

"Too true. Not that I have a lot of experience with..." his words trailed off as he watched a waitress approach their table.
She was dressed like the queen of hearts if the royal woman fell on hard times and had to take up hooking on the side. Kristen felt a pang of sympathy for the girl having to put on such an outlandish costume every night just to earn her $2.50 an hour. That didn't stop the woman from cranking her ruby red lips wide in a blinding smile, "Are you ready to order?"

"I'd like a whiskey sour," Kristen said first and watched the woman write it down before the waitress glanced over at Cullen.

"What do you have on tap?" After going through a surprisingly robust selection he picked the most down to earth IPA and seemed to collapse after such a decision.

"Oh," the waitress said before turning away, "do you want me to start a tab?"

At that the poor man sat up higher, his eyebrows practically huddling under his hairline. Kristen waved to the woman, "We'll see how the night goes."

The waitress smiled, probably not understanding what the big deal was and trundled off to put in their orders. No doubt her whiskey sour would be half water in a place this devoted to theme, but she was hoping for such an event. Being truly drunk on the clock was frowned upon no matter what.

The door opened and it drew Kristen's eye right to it. Three men of the college and bro variety stumbled in, their arms nearly akimbo as they fought for dominance at the bar. They began to heckle any and all in their way, not particularly caring who as long as it got them attention.

A mirthless chuckling drew her away and she stared at her companion. "The big city, is it all you imagined?"

"It's got a few charms," Kristen shrugged, then she lifted the edge of her pink lips, "One, at least." It was hard to say if he caught her intentions; the man was always looking flustered. "But," she leaned back, an arm sliding along the top of the booth, "the decor is far more appealing than VR."

"Really?" he winced, "That playing card wallpaper's liable to cause internal bleeding."

Kristen chuckled at how certain he said that, "It's nice to be out and not have to rub elbows with a dozen men in suits, and another dozen women in suit dresses."

"Right, VR, all the politics money can buy." His eyes glimmered despite the harsh red and blue light of the bar. She found herself scooting closer, wanting to bathe in them.

"It's exhausting, knowing the first thing out of anyone you meet's mouth will be who they work for and their chances of being re-elected. It's like if chickens had the vote, one giant pecking contest with pricey booze and cheap cologne."

"Sounds like hell," he laughed. Their waitress stopped by and dropped off the drinks. Kristen glanced up, watching her bend over a bit so the low cut corset showed off practically everything but her nipples. When the woman unloaded the beer, Cullen only looked over for a moment. He said his thanks, but gave no other slathering reaction. Curiouser and curiouser. They couldn't have possibly gotten his alignment wrong, right? That was step one in these matters.

Kristen bought some time while trying to reassess her plan by stirring the tiny straw around.

"Dating is not for the faint of heart in VR. Nor anyone with a heart. Actually, I think they make you check it the moment you cross city lines."

He laughed at the thought, happy to talk shit about politics because everyone did. Tipping back the
beer, he took a draught and smiled. Was that stick finally working its way out? "This city's not much better way I hear it. Instead of pompous senator aides you get bankers bragging about the size of their accounts."

"Or incredibly helpful policemen," Kristen said simply with a shrug. She curled her lips around the tiny straw, giving a little suck before looking right up into his eyes.

The blush was practically a grade seven fever. He sat back further from the table but didn't stop staring down at her. Come on, this should be simple.

"You, uh," Cullen's focus faded and he whipped around, "you didn't happen to have anyone waiting for you here? I mean, to, uh, to help settle in or look forward to meeting?"

Kristen failed to shake off her sneer. Why wasn't he already taking the bait? Luckily, she could hide it under a look of confusion. "No. Just me. A bit of an adventure I suppose to set off all alone."

"Right, just, sometimes people move to be closer to loved ones. Or, they, ya know, have to leave one behind. Or so I've been told."

Sweet bloody Maker! Was he concerned she was already spoken for? That was...sweet. Surprising. And making her steady heart flip up and down a moment. "No," she felt a blush rising that for once wasn't an act, "Nope, just me. Been that way for a...a while now. What about you?"

Cullen snorted and jabbed the lip of his beer back at himself, "Me?"

"There must be someone in your life. Perhaps a busty blonde who works at a tanning salon?" she threw out, causing him to curl his nose up. "Or an athletic redheaded lawyer?"

"It's bad enough I have to talk to any lawyers at my job, the idea of stumbling home to one is..." the growl slowed as he sheepishly glanced up at her. "Why do you think I'd...that there must be someone?"

Kristen shrugged, "You're, um...ya know," she glared down at her drink that was more ice than whiskey, "Handsome. And kind enough to help stupid women stuck at the side of the road."

A hand wrapped around her fingers clinging to the glass. "You're not stupid," he whispered as if she really thought that. As if she needed to have her self esteem boosted.

"Ah," Andraste's bones, that damn blush returned a moment. "So, surely someone's got to have taken advantage of that. You know, if there is a Maker they would have."

Cullen winced a moment, "I was married but it...didn't work out."

Kristen waited for the long story about a crazy cheating ex, but he fell silent while swirling his beer around in his fingers. Those haunting amber eyes shut tight while he moaned, "I'm afraid I'm not very good at, uh, putting myself out there."

"Was the divorce recent?" she asked.

"Finalized six months ago," he shrugged, "but even before then. It never should have gotten that far, one of those cases where it seemed easier to file the paperwork than breakup so later down the line it's far harder. We'd been apart nearly a year before we called it quits. Two separate lives, two lonely people."
There was more lurking under there, she could taste it. But he looked less like a man who wanted to unravel all of his pain sweater onto her and more someone that needed a warm body -- whether it was for a hug or better depended on her. Kristen trailed her hand up and down Cullen's arm, her teeth nibbling on her bottom lip, "I haven't been on a date in two years."

"I've been on those edates that everyone does now, but a real one, meeting someone, getting to know them...five years or more," he admitted as if it was a huge weight. She smiled, her palm cupping against his arm. He moved to pat her fingers, his eyes shining before they suddenly opened wide and he gasped, "Not that I think, I mean... Do you need another drink?"

She moved to nod, despite her glass remaining half full, when the door opened and silence fell upon the patrons. Two people entered the bar, their heads hidden by outlandish cowls coated in ornamental golden filagree, that ended in furs circling their throats.

Mages.

Fuck, she did not need this mess right now.

Unaware of the sudden drop in noise, or perhaps despite it, the pair of mages strode confidently towards the bar and placed in an order. Cullen twisted around, catching sight of what caused such a change in atmosphere, but he didn't say anything. No, that was all courtesy of the sports bros who were eyeing up the mages like lambs led to the slaughter.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" one shouted loudly at the two cowled men, then towards his friends, "Don't this place have a strict no robes policy?"

The friends both bobbed their heads as if it were the height of wisdom while the mages shrunk deeper inside their religious garb. They were both glancing over at the bartender who froze in place, no one else wanting to get into the middle of this. Kristen glared daggers at her drink, her nose twitching while tension sang in the air. It'd take nothing more than a spark to light the rising powder keg, but she was trapped by her role. Maybe if they...

"Hey," the biggest of the assholes was prodding a finger towards the mages, "hey, you toad fuckers. Aren't you supposed to be at home burning books?"

"Yeah," another bro snickered, "you don't drink. Everyone knows that."

The two mages who were being schooled about their own religion by the drunk men both shared a glance. It'd be best for everyone if they stepped out, maybe tried another bar. There were plenty around. Her knuckles were practically bulging against her drink from how tightly she gripped it. All of her hard won muscles hidden below a layer of padding locked tight, begging to be let loose. She didn't raise her head to glance across the table, fairly certain she knew what the small town cop's reaction would be.

"We're only trying to live our lives," the taller mage spoke up, "nothing more."

"After what you did in Kirkwall..." the biggest bro hissed, spittle flying off the side of his mouth, "you're lucky we don't skin you in the streets. Get the fuck out of here. This bar's only for Fereldens, go back to your shit hole of a country."

He began to advance upon the mage, beer-sweat stained hands lashing out to pluck up the holy collar and chuck them into the street, or worse. Probably worse knowing this lot. Kristen reached over towards her purse, when a voice shouted.

"That's enough!"
Her head snapped up to watch as Cullen leapt out of the booth to turn upon the pair of men about to come to a one sided brawl. "Step back now," he commanded with such clarity it punctured through the drunk's haze. The bro opened his hands and staggered back a step before his head snapped up.

"What? You gonna defend the rag heads? This ain't got nothing to do with you, so fuck off."

Cullen lashed a hand forward, snagging onto the drunk bro's fist and holding it safe. He roared at that, his blood shot eyes flailing open wide while he tried to squirm away. With all of the drunkard's attentions, Cullen flashed his badge before their eyes. The change was instantaneous; like sitting on a balloon their egos and chests deflated to nothing at a cop of all things ordering them to act civilized.

"Sit down, be quiet, drink your beer, and walk home," Cullen growled at all three while keeping a tight grip to the instigator's fist. "These men have the same right to be here as you do." The bros dropped their eyes like scolded school children, but they kept sneering at his hard logic as if it was a lie. Not caring, Cullen continued, "Unless you wish to be pulled in on disorderly conduct..."

The two back-up bros grumbled but slunk quickly to the barstools. It was the leader who hissed near Cullen, "You're a fucking gudg." But even as he made his bold claim and yanked his arm back, he too sat down and glared at nothing ahead of him.

Cullen stood watch a moment like a grade school teacher surveying children he caught brawling on the playground. But when no more words or fists appeared, he stomped back to the booth. He didn't look over at the men he stood up for, just glared at his beer while all the people around suddenly grew a lot more respectful about the cop in the room.

If there was really justice in the world, the mages would have taken a seat and enjoyed a beer or two on the house. Instead, both men -- realizing how close they came to not escaping unscathed -- dashed out the door before ordering. In the end, the assholes got what they wanted, even if they too were glowering into their drink for it.

"So..." Kristen whispered to herself while watching the man across from her glare through space itself. She wanted to compliment him on his style, on how he surprised her which was exceptionally rare, but he seemed angry at himself for having to voice the words. Amber eyes broke away from the empty bottle and she spotted a crack buried deep inside. A shaft of hope was leeching out of it, crying for anyone to stuff it back safely inside.

"I changed my mind," Kristen said. For a moment his eyes flickered down in defeat, when she smiled, "I think I am hungry. Wanna split an order of chili fries?"

Cullen's grateful gasp of a laugh brought one to her as well. They kept the conversation light while gorging on a plate of potatoes covered in meat and cheese. Midway through the appetizer, the drunk bros stumbled to their feet and left without saying anything to anyone. Though the leader paused right beside the back of their booth and whispered, "Gudgeon," under his breath at Cullen. The cop didn't even flinch or respond, no doubt having heard worse in his line of work.

Still, Kristen memorized the bros faces. No doubt they lived near here. It was good to keep tabs on potential riffraff, both for fear of future problems or as fodder.

"You, uh," Cullen paused in his gorging to look over at her side of the picked apart plate, "you like this?"

"Course. Be weird to order it and not like it."
"Right, sure, just..." his words faded as he swirled around the second beer of the night.

"Most girls out of VR are on some kind of weird ass diet based upon ancient clay tablet writings or what cavemen used as bedding?"

He cracked a smile and nodded before that hand swiped back against his neck. It wasn't so much a
tell as a massive beacon when he felt uncomfortable. "I can't keep up with what people can and
can't eat, shouldn't eat. Whichever."

Kristen picked up one of the fries nearly drowned in sauce, plopped it in her mouth, and licked off her fingers. "It may not be good for you, but it's tasty. Which is good enough."

The red blooded cop smiled, "My thoughts exactly." As if that was hard to guess. She dipped down to slurp up the last of her drink and mused internally. This was probably enough toying, why not get to the main event? Most of her 'dates' rarely lasted longer than an hour, but -- Maker take her -- she was enjoying this. How did a random farm boy ex-soldier turned cop wind up holding her fascination so?

Cullen, unaware of her thoughts, was piling up the mess of napkins onto the plate. He looked about to wave towards the waitress to order another, when Kristen lashed her fingers out to cup his.

When he turned in confusion, she smiled wickedly, "Wanna get out of here?"

"Yes," the hungry smile mirrored her own, until he blinked, "I, I still have to show you other parts of the area."

Right. She sighed, slipping back into the booth. Calm down already. There's no reason to go rushing things, take your time before squeezing the trigger. But as he stood up to try and get the check from the waitress, Kristen's eyes darted down the taut muscles straining under his grey t-shirt and red flannel before landing on his ass. Maker's breath. She squirmed at the thought of what all that bare flesh looked like, better yet felt like under her thighs.

By the time the waitress dropped off the bill, Kristen instinctively fished out her wallet. Cullen's eyes drooped at the move, his fingers frozen near his back pocket. Shit. Regroup, rethink. Smiling, she yanked out a twenty and placed it on the table. "I get the tip and you take care of the rest?"

The smile that tugged his tantalizing lip scar up caused her to suck in a breath. Cullen nodded his head, seeming to have that sudden burst of anxiety evaporate in an instant. While he counted out the change, Kristen inspected her purse. In particular, she made certain the hidden compartment was locked up tight and the tech inside remained out of anyone's questing view.

"Ready?" he asked, already standing up.

Gathering her hands under her, she slid along the booth until she stood up on her heels. The black dress with a crimson under layer ruffled by the a/c's breeze. Very blatantly, Cullen's eyes traveled across her curved hips and down to her raised up and bare legs. He snorted to himself as if he just struck a great realization. Reaching forward, Kristen wrapped her arm around his and smiled.

"Let's go."
So she's in a dress. Not that that means anything, necessarily. She was wearing a skirt when he met her. Maybe she liked dresses instead of pants. Could be a VR thing she picked up. Maker, it was a nice dress though.

Cullen's fashion knowledge ranked somewhere between his technical skill on how to perform open heart surgery and the rankings of the last five winning contestants on 'Lipstick that Pig.' He knew it was a dress, judging by how it was one piece of fabric that ended in not pants. He knew it was black with some red on the bottom parts because he wasn't color blind. And he knew the cut of the neck made his cheeks burn if he let his eyes drop too far down.

Maker's breath, it'd been too long since he'd seen a pair of breasts in the flesh. Or thighs, stomach, sometimes even elbows. The thought of anything else he wanted to run his fingers across or inside made him stumble down the sidewalk.

Kristen fell silent beside him. They walked not hand in hand, but close enough sometimes her shoulder would bump into his side. It surprised him how bony it felt compared to the softness of her body. She turned, those beguiling eyes framed by some black makeup across the lids batting a moment.

"Sorry, did I...?"

"It's not a problem," he smiled, surprised to find he wished she'd stumble into him more. "Don't tell me, clumsy?"

"No, not usually, but these heels are..." she paused and jabbed a finger towards the back. Balanced upon one leg that was already extended on the toes, she daintily lifted her right leg until she could get a grip on the shoe. Definitely not clumsy he thought while his libido offered up a few more crass remarks about what to do with her stretch.
"Damn thing broke off awhile ago," she said while thumbing the stripped sole. "Haven't had time to fix it."

With the grace of an acrobat, she returned her foot to the sidewalk and continued walking. They made it a few blocks away from the pub, Cullen already having pointed out a useful pharmacy and a potential bank if she needed one. At that Kristen chuckled and asked, "Do cops know where all the banks in the city are? You know, to stop the masked robbers." She folded her hands together to form a gun and made a few pew pew noises.

Cullen laughed, "Only if the caped crusaders are busy saving the day in another galaxy." The second the words left his mouth he grimaced at the juvenile...could it even be called a joke, but those gimlet eyes were smiling at him. They barely seemed to stop since he...interceded in the bar.

"I'm not sure what else to show you," he admitted, coming to a stop beside a traffic light. Cars whizzed on past, most no doubt going beyond the speed limit because they had no idea a cop was standing right there.

She stood taller on her shoes, her brown hair -- let down in waves similar to his -- wafting against his arm. So stretched, she nearly made it to his chin. "Hm? Oh, a grocery store. That would be really useful. I can't seem to find any hint of...what?"

Cullen couldn't hide a laugh at her certainty and sincerity. She really believed they'd stumble across a vast Zippy Foods in the middle of a run-down borough. "Well, there's not a lot here."

"Oh..." the woman deflated a moment, waffling on her toes.

"But I know a bodega that can handle practically all your needs at all hours of the night."

Her smile warmed his gut even with the cold rain glistening in puddles around them. She made no mention of her naked shoulders, or the bare legs that had to be shivering. Maybe he should have offered her a coat...which he didn't wear. His shirt? That would probably be awkward to watch him strip down to...no, no shirt. No reason to assume that just because she's in a dress anything would occur tonight.

Because this was nice. Seeing the dusty, cramped city through fresh eyes wiped away some of the darkness clinging to his grumpy soul. Her eyes went wide when they heard the bells of an ice cream truck at 9 at night on a Tuesday. Kristen practically broke into a run to find it belonged to a taco place that set up shop inside and didn't bother to change the bell. They passed a few other people on their way to and from the bars, most huddled under umbrellas or clinging to each other for warmth.

He kinda wished she was cold just so he'd have a good excuse to hold her arm again. Those glimmering eyes turned, along with a waft of her perfume as she murmured, "Can't place me yet, can you?"

"I..." he blushed, having been focused on what it'd feel like to wrap his arms around her and not where she fit in his past, but it seemed better to go along with her thoughts. "Nope. Sorry."

"I'm used to it," her smile didn't waver, but it had to sting to be considered forgettable by the world. "I tended to blend in with the walls in school, brown hair, beige paint, like camo really. All the other girls were wearing midriff shirts, and plaid miniskirts, and pigtails. I was more of a..." she paused in her thoughts to crumple her nose, "a denim overalls kinda girl. Which sounds Maker awful now that I say it aloud."
Cullen winced at the half memory of the fashion of their youth, but there was something to that look. One strap off, a tank top cut as deep as that dress...yeah, he'd be incapable of not looking at her. Certainly of not staring like a starving dog.

"I was," he shook his head, "rather unimpressive too." Gangly without being svelte. He wasn't fat either, but half of his features came in before his face thought to make room. And the acne certainly didn't help.

"Nonsense," Kristen jabbed her shoulder into him, "you were on the track team after all."

"You remember that?" he gasped. Cullen wasn't about to set any records, but he liked the freedom running gifted him, the pounding of blood through his body, and the control it required to keep going until he crossed the finish line. It'd been some time since he last tied on his sneakers and hit the road.

By the sparkle of neon lights rebounding in cleansing rainwater, he watched her bite into her lip and shrug, "Yeah, a little. I mean it's the track team."

"I thought girls only cared about the football team."

"They didn't wear the tiny shorts," she muttered to herself when her eyes suddenly bulged and she glanced up at him in shock. "Uh, I mean..."

His hand whipped to his neck, the blush contagious as Cullen tried to guzzle in air. Those had been tiny shorts. "You, um...do you run?" he threw out fast, searching for any way to change the subject.

Kristen paused, a hand digging into her hip as if she wasn't expecting that question. Her entire frame shifted, almost as if it walled itself off. For a moment her eyes darted over him, seeming to wait for a response, but he had none. "From time to time, when I have the opportunity. The move's thrown off my schedule."

"There's a park a few klicks, er...miles to the east. Can get busy during the day, but if you go around pre-dawn the light off the lake is..." He paused in pointing out the sight to notice she was drifting closer to him. Her lips glistened as she absently wet them, those beguiling eyes sizing him up and seeming to appreciate what she saw.

Cullen's tongue lolled in his mouth, his breath buffeting as he whispered, "Pretty." Ah, fucking Maker. "The lake, I mean, it's pretty with ducks and...other things."

You're a disgrace to the people you share a gender with, Rutherford. He was acting like a scared child, scampering away in an instant, but she didn't seem to back down at his cowardice. Kristen tipped her head to the side, those mahogany waves shifting off her bare shoulder as she eyed him up.

It had to be his imagination that she was lifting higher on her toes. A great rumble rolled in the distance, or perhaps inside Cullen's chest as his brain connected the dots and came up with the conclusion that a woman was attempting to kiss him. And you ate chili fries before?

Well, so did she.

That doesn't effect girls.

Really?

How the shit should I know? I've been out of this game for years.
Warm fingers dug into his shoulder, steadying the woman who was already at the fullness of her reach. Cullen cupped a hand under her arm and began to bend down.

Wet, glistening lips parted, her eyes shut tight as he moved towards her. A water drop landed against her cheek, her eyelids shifting in surprise. Cullen froze when he felt one ping against his head. Two more danced against her cheek, the crystal focus highlighting the soft skin that he just missed out on touching.

Kristen's eyes flew open wide and she gasped just as the downpour began. "Blighted void!" she gasped, hands trying to tent over her head. This was no rain but a flood jabbed out of the clouds to drum against their heads. Cullen tried to stare up at the sky, but his eyes were blotted out in an instant.

"What do we do?" she shouted, her hair already flattening in the rain.

"Run!" Cullen commanded. Turning on his heel, he chased back towards the row of remaining lights that would offer some kind of shelter. He wanted to chastise himself for this latest mess, but he was too busy trying to keep from splattering into all the puddles and staining her dress. Despite being in heels, Kristen kept up beside him.

They made it across the street, the entire block washed to onyx in the rain, when she stumbled a moment. "Damn heel!" she cursed at her shoe as she stopped. Cullen sensed the change and hovered over her, using his body as a shield against the rain while she bent down and yanked off both of her shoes. With them well in hand, she glanced up at him hovering right above her.

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

He guided the girl in bare feet around an alley, both of them pounding into the pavement as they ran for it. This one wound up winding straight towards the parking lot behind the pub. Well, there was one possibility. Twisting his head around, he took off straight for his truck. At least that had a roof and the potential for a heater.

Gripping onto Kristen's wrist, Cullen kept a tight watch on her while they bobbed and weaved around the maze of cars. SUVs in the dozens, a few high end sedans, and some of the glistening gigantic trucks all blocked off the view of his prize. It wasn't until he spotted it trapped between two soccer mom SUVs that it struck Cullen how much his only truck looked like a piece of shit. Which was what he was leading the pretty girl to. Great way to win her over.

Too bad he didn't have a plan B.

"Is that yours?" Kristen shouted, her voice pinging with the raindrops.

"Yeah," his voice fell dead, dreading the look as she sized up the long in the tooth truck that was barely taller than most average cars now. Still, he hefted up the old keys and inserted them into the lock. Cullen yanked open the door and scurried inside to manually pull up the passenger side lock. He lost sight of Kristen as she rounded around the bed. Should he have gotten out? Opened the door for her?

That was what gentlemen...

"Holy shit," she cracked open the door without a thought and launched herself inside. The waterlogged purse and shoes both hit the floor as she drew her hands back through her hair. "That was...does it always rain like that here?"

As she turned to face him by the glow of a fading dome light, Cullen's tongue stuck in his mouth.
The rain stripped nearly all of her makeup off, leaving her looking as fresh as hand churned cream. Either the cold or the running drew an innocent blush to her cheeks. Cullen's eyes trailed down the ends of her flattened hair to spy that the cold did nothing innocent to her breasts. In an instant, his brain formed a view of what her naked chest looked like based upon the nipples prodding up through her suckered on dress.

Blighted Maker. He spun in place, hands wringing out the steering wheel. "No," he shook his head to try and think, "not often. Least, I don't think so. I've never been caught in a storm like that. Here, anyway..." He was talking to stall for time, to cover up for the fact he had no plan now. What in the world came next?

She rubbed her hands against her bare shoulders that were now not only cold but also wet. Right. She had to be freezing. Inserting his keys in, Cullen clucked to himself, "I'll get the heater running, should dry us up quick..."

The trustworthy but geriatric truck gunned a bit before catching. Lights lit up along the dashboard, some of them older than him. He yanked on the heat he installed himself in high school, when a voice blared out of the speakers.

"...Every knight needs a girl,
A dream to hold on to,
Lips to press next to,
A body to fall into
Won't you be mine...?"

Dear Andraste! He crumbled at the wailing reverberating out of his speakers, while Kristen raised an eyebrow and looked over. Lashing forward, Cullen yanked the radio dial to anywhere. Static crackled for a moment, someone screaming about how to refinance your mortgage, before he paused.

"...Just received news of a fourth body found along the Drakon river. Like the others it too was burned of all flesh--"

Cullen snapped off the radio and tumbled back into his seat. From Maker-awful love songs to burnt corpses, oh and dragging her into a rainstorm. He was a real pro at dating, as she could no doubt tell. Glaring out the windshield, watching the bounce of rain pinging off the rusted hood, Cullen kept whipping himself for things beyond his control. He was so far gone, it wasn't until her hand shifted higher up his arm that he realized Kristen was touching him.

Twisting his head towards her, he found those dazzling eyes burning directly into his. She stared at him as if...as if she couldn't see anyone else. As if she'd never seen anyone else. Soft pink lips glistened with fresh rain, parting like she yearned for a drink. Cullen dove towards her, his mouth puckering up just before it plunged against hers. Warmth erupted down his spine, the woman melting from his kiss. He let go of the arguing in his brain to fall into this moment. Fingers lifted off his arm to thread around his hair, gently guiding him deeper into her trap.

He was greedy to fall into it, their first kiss turning hotter than he'd ever have expected. Kristen tipped her head, her tongue darting up and down his scar before she tugged his bottom lip deep into hers. The nibble was little more than a whisper, but it broke down a wall inside Cullen and a moan escaped from his throat.
Sliding back as if to catch her breath, those dazzling eyes darted up to his. The bliss of touching her dilated his pupils so much he had to blink a moment. As she focused into view, her cheeks bright from a flush and cleavage beaded in droplets, there was no denying how badly he wanted to take this further.

How in the Maker's name did he do that?

"You're so..." he mumbled, his tongue clogging in his mouth as the words all stuck together, "pradortty."

"Pradortty?" her eyebrow lifted in surprise, but a smile stretched across her lips. The ones that tasted of hunger and the thrill of the run.

"I, uh..." Cullen absently wiped the back of his neck.

"Is that some kind of word only you people in Sky City use?"

"Ye...yes," he sputtered out. "It means, it means a very beautiful woman."

The blush burned brighter on her cheeks and she turned to stare at the dashboard, "Oh. Well, you're handsome."

Cullen chuckled at her catching him, but with a grateful nod said, "Thank you."

Her sparkling eyes darted around the truck, seeming to take in the state of it before landing upon the clutch. "This is a stick? You can drive a stick?"

"Sure," he shrugged, "I'm from the country. Who couldn't back in Honnleath?"

"Right, right, just...surprised to see one here in the city," she smiled. "Isn't it hell on stop and go traffic."

"Not if you're good," Cullen said without thought before wincing. "Did you never learn?" It seemed odd to the man who cut his teeth on tractors, but not everyone was a farmer. There had to be townies in a town after all.

"A little," Kristen admitted, "but I'm happy with my automatic. When I don't lock myself out anyway."

"Until a helpful policeman comes along," Cullen said as if he had nothing to do with it. She smiled sweetly at him, but silence threaded through the cab. Only the bounce of rain thudding into the metal over their heads filled the air. All the unsaid words grew thicker than the humidity, both people staring at each other not knowing what to do next.

He could take her back into the bar. To talk more. Or have another drink. It was getting kinda late. Maybe he should offer to take her home. Or that they wait out the rain here. She could snuggle up next to him and...

"Cullen?" Kristen whispered, her eyes darting up to him, "do you want to get coffee?"

"Uh...sure," he spat out, his brain trying to rack up what place would be open this late aside from a fast food joint.

Her ravenous smile nearly knocked him over, when she shrugged, "I'd say we could go back to my place but I'm all out of filters, and grounds, and a coffee maker."

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his knee and worried their way up the wet jeans clinging to his thigh. He blinked at her, his brain jarring apart as it tried to piece together what she was asking. Or telling him. Saying that she wanted.

Sweet Maker.

The moment it dawned on him, the dome light fell dark, mercifully blanketing away the blush charring his entire face. "Uh," Cullen cracked open the door to lift up the light, before glancing over at her. "Yeah, that'd be, we can head to my apartment..."

She giggled a moment, whether at the thought or because of his bumbling he couldn't say. While Cullen got the truck started, Kristen fumbled for the seatbelt. When it drew down right in between her breasts, he gave a small eep from deep in the pits of his soul. Eyes drawn to the spread of her breasts, when he popped the clutch the entire truck jerked forward and he cursed to himself.

The trip back to his apartment was fraught with little by way of distraction, leaving Cullen to sit at red lights and do his damndest to not wonder what it was like to skirt his hands under her skirt, or feel her thighs clenching into his sides. Unaware of the libidinous thoughts, Kristen kept rubbing the bare skin of her legs, no doubt to warm them up. Maker, what he wouldn't give to be the one warming them.

"This is it," he explained on the long walk down the hallway. It was a middling building, not the most decrepit by any standards, but not one that came with its own footman and onsite gym. The fact his neighbors remained out of his business and the bugs were kept to a minimum was all Cullen really needed.

Her sparkling eyes kept focused on him as she walked on her squishy wet heels, her purse clutched safe in her hands. Cullen watched the swish of her dress a moment, drawn to the hips buried below before he remembered he needed to get his damn keys out. Wincing at the folly, he jabbed through the huge ring, suddenly unable to remember what he could managed even after a twelve hour shift.

"Ah," after trying the key to lockup, and a storage shed he owned, he finally got the right one in there and cranked it open. "Here it is," he waved inside and reached towards the wall to turn on a switch.

The old fan over the living room lit up, casting a bit of light into his very humble abode. Kristen stepped past, her warm body sliding closer as she smiled to eye up his one bedroom apartment. At the kitchen table, she dropped her purse and stared into the living room with the cramped two seater couch and a tv across from it. Beside was a cheap ass student desk holding up an old computer tower and monitor.

"Here," Cullen dashed inside after, barely remembering to close and lock his damn front door. "Here's the kitchen," he flicked on the light over a small smattering of counters, a tiny range, and a fridge that was a foot shorter than him. "It's not much, but I think I've got the coffee maker stored in..."

Arms wrapped around behind him, the hands flattening against his fluttering stomach. Hot breath darted against his neck, lifting the hairs, "I wasn't really interested in coffee."

Spinning in place, when Cullen caught sight of her, Kristen launched up on her toes to devour him. It was so sudden, he stumbled back into the counter, his wet ass splatting against the dishwasher. Not caring about the countertop digging into his spine, he cupped his hungry hands against her waist while she sucked upon his lips. Maker's breath, she tasted divine -- her heat warming the cold embers of his gut.
Roused by her enthusiasm, Cullen broke from her lips to plant a kiss to her jawline. Kristen's hands guided around his back, her head tilting to the side to encourage him onward. Lightly, he scraped his teeth while sucking on her rain kissed skin and traveling ever lower. The woman in his arms started to pant, her eyes shut tight as he nipped his way down the side of her neck.

"Maker's sake," she squirmed while extending her neck longer, her hands both digging into his hair to keep his head in place.

Dropping off her neck, Cullen's tongue dipped out and lapped a taste of the rainwater off her collarbone. Squealing at the move, Kirsten's hands drew down his back, her nails trying to scratch through the sopping two layers of his shirts. Maker, he wanted to feel them on his flesh.

With a gentle kiss, he pressed his lips upon the top of her breast. She moaned at the attention, her eyes shut tight while she buffeted his hair back and forth. Enjoying himself beyond imagination, Cullen kissed away the last of the raindrops until his tongue dipped down inside that taunting cleavage. Blighted Maker. It'd been so long since he tasted anything so warm and soft, to dip further, to try and take all of it in was...

Kristen shifted below him and he stepped back, afraid that he'd pushed too far or done something unwanted. But when he rose up to stare into her beguiling eyes, she smirked. There was no coquettish ingenue smile, no playing coy for the hopes he'd take the lead. Lifting her chest higher, she reached behind her back. Cullen hung uncertain of what she was trying to accomplish, until the sides of her dress began to bend towards him.

Only the zipper and his impatient panting filled the air as she finished and delicately graced her hands to her shoulders to tug down the dress' straps. He wished he could claim that he behaved with cool clarity, but as the dress hit the floor so did Cullen's jaw. Maker's breath, he was undone by the full flesh bulging over her black bra. The cups cut so low an edge of her nipples were visible, adding more data to his mental picture of her naked.

Kristen placed a hand to her hip, drawing his eye down to her panties. The same ebony night as her bra, cut low across her...uh, lower part, they had an extra strap higher up on the hip. Unlike in all the airbrushed media that had been his source of naked women in awhile, the white flesh between the two slightly bulged. Deep inside his animal brain, he ached to run his lips over it. To nibble on the soft skin prodding out from her panties, and lick his tongue around the strap.

He swallowed hard, struggling to look anywhere beyond the nearly naked body right before him. A hand lifting towards his face drew him away and she smiled. But there was a concern cut inside. "Well..." she shrugged, "uh, there's this," a hand gestured towards her nakedness, "or actually drinking coffee."

"Fuck me," Cullen gasped, hands wrapping around her waist. Sweet Maker, the skin was as soft as silk, her muscles flexing as she followed suit. How were women so soft and elegant to touch? With lips pressed together in devouring kisses, Kristen grabbed onto the edge of his flannel and tugged it off his shoulders. She was so determined to get it off him, her hands skinned back towards the cuffs to yank it off his wrist.

With a small laugh at her gentle force, Cullen broke away to finish the job himself. His old, red flannel date shirt landed with a thud on the counter, while her eyes drew across his chest. They looked as if they were sweeping the entire area for defects, her tongue pinched in between her teeth. A niggling fear that she'd turn around and run struck him, and he was barely even naked. Blighted hell, should he do something? Say something to...

A palm cupped right against his pec, soothing away his worry as her fingers clenched and teased
the muscle, before the second joined on the other side. Kristen teetered up on her toes, aiming for a kiss, while her fingers trailed down his soaking wet t-shirt. They dipped into his stomach, rounding against the handful of muscles too many donuts hadn't obliterated yet. At the hem, she dug in tight, her fingers tugging back and forth as if she really wanted to rid the scrap of fabric between their skin.

Cullen broke from her lips, his eyes screwed up while he breathed to assure himself. It'd been a long time since anyone saw him naked. What if...? Leaning near her ear, he whispered, "Take it off."

She whipped his shirt off over his head in an instant, the grey flashing before his eyes before it too hit the floor beside her dress. The fear tried to return to him, but the half naked woman standing in his kitchen swept her hungry hands over every square inch of his naked chest while her lips panted into his. She bathed at the fine golden hair stretching across his pecs, her fingers knotting around it and giving a small tug that threw butane onto the flame in his veins.

Instinctively, Cullen began to trail backwards away from the knives and fire of the kitchen. The entire time, Kristen remained locked in his arms, his hands trailing the curve of her waist while his tips dipped down under the waistband of her panties.

Mid-living room, his hands slid up to find the back of her bra. She was driving him mad, her soft stomach pressing tight against the growing bulge in his rain soaked jeans, her tongue lapping around with his, all while he tried to remember how this went. Flattening him back against the wall, the woman leaped higher on her feet. He snatched one hand under her ass, keeping her pinned tight to him. With his palm, he kneaded into the cheek barely covered by her tiny underwear.

Fucking void did he want to see it naked. All of her naked. Right now.

Snarling at himself, he bunched a fist around the clasp of her bra and tugged both ends together. It must have worked as the elastic gave way and it began to slide off her skin when he let go. Kristen hopped down, her ass sadly leaving his questing hands, but she drew off her bra making it all worth it. Impish eyes darted up at him, but Cullen was only vaguely aware of them as he stared dead center at her breasts. Both nipples were a rosy tan, one more aroused than the other. He drew the tips of his fingers up the side of her breast, lightly trailing the firm flesh as it swelled to a full cup.

Kristen's lips parted, her eyes shutting and head lolling back as he softly swerved his finger against her nipple. A moan broke from those tempting lips, and he cupped his entire hand around her breast. It was a tight fit, the tender and pillowy flesh prodding over the top of his thumb. And he always thought he had large hands.

Blighted Maker, he gasped inside while adding his hand to the other. She twisted in his grip, her breath scattering like a drumroll as she knocked her pointed nipples against his palms. "That feels..." Kristen whispered, a moan of satisfaction finishing for her.

It'd been a long time since he was a high schooler fumbling around to second base in the flatbed of a truck. But watching her skin flush and her lips suckle the air while he teased her breasts brought back the thrill of that first little dip into sex. He could almost hear the crickets chirping in the fields, smell the cornstalks trampled under tires.

Fingers broke him from his thoughts, her hands digging into the waistband of his jeans. Cullen sucked in a gulp as the flat of her hand curled first down his hip, then swung front and center. She had to feel his bulge, even buried under thick denim. But what would she think? Too thin? Too small? Too...
"Blighted void," he moaned, lost in the tug of himself against the fabric and her hungry hands. Kristen smirked, both hands lancing onto his belt. She tugged the leather strap, working it apart fast, and moved on to unzipping his jeans before he had a chance to think.

Cullen staggered backwards into his bedroom, only the blue light from his charging pad casting against them. She kept close, her fingers dancing up and down his waist, but he was the one to bite the bullet. Worrying the wet jeans off his ass, Cullen groaned when they stuck on his thighs. He had no choice but to sit down on his bed, struggling to get the damn things off him. Along the way, he wrenched off his shoes and socks. Women hated that stuff. Socks. During sex. They were probably okay with socks other times. Maybe.

You're stalling. You're bent over because there's no way she can see your crotch in this position. No way she can...

Hands ruffled in his hair, tugging Cullen's head up until his worried eyes met hers. Nothing but unmitigated hunger burned inside of them. She inched closer to him, Kristen planting a knee onto the bed, then another.

Cullen tumbled backwards, scrabbling to get fully onto the bed while she continued to trail above him. Maker's breath, those thick, soft thighs clenched against his sides while his chin nearly bounced against her swaying pair. His tongue gave a quick lap along her nipples, trying to will her breast in deeper, but she kept walking him backwards until his head bumped into the wadded up pillow.

At that she paused, her taunting lips dangling above his. He swept his famishing fingers against her arms, well aware of how her breasts pressed and expanded across his trembling chest. When her eyes beamed into his, Cullen gasped at the laser focus glimmering even in this low light. She was a woman who'd brook no failure, forge on until the bitter end, and was staring at his face as if she'd been aching for him for a long time.

With a quirk of her lips, she pressed a kiss to his, her tongue roughing up the few missed hairs in his scruff before she sat up. In doing so, her ass caressed right over his erection. Sweet Maker, the heat from her body pressing into his crotch drove him wilder.

Cullen sat up fast, catching her by surprise. Her eyes opened wide a moment as he snatched onto the strings of her panties. He was about to yank them down, when concern wiggled into the rampaging lust. Maker's breath. Was that right? Should he...? A hand landed on his shoulder, then another. Kristen wiggled herself higher above him and she smiled wickedly with a wink.

He placed a kiss to her stomach, his fingers worrying the first string of the panties back and forth like testing fishing line. Above him, her arms wrapped around the crown of his head, her breasts crushing into his forehead. Slowly, he worked his way down, lips pressing and tongue sucking her skin until he reached that soft line of tender flesh.

Her hips rolled under his fingers, Kristen trying to balance herself while the man below made it hard. But that only drove him wilder, watching her skin bulge out as the string dug in tighter. Drawing a comforting hand up the side of her thigh, Cullen's lips suckered against the sliver of skin. It tasted better than he could have imagined, his teeth skimming against the top.

"Maker's blighted hell," she gasped in ecstasy, her fingernails digging up and down his back.

Like a giddy fool, Cullen lapped up the panties hems with his tongue and began to tug them down using his teeth. He didn't manage far, maybe an inch or two, but a glimpse of her trimmed pubic hair and a shadow of what rested deep within were enough to set him off. Hooking a finger over
the top of her panties, he yanked them down to make enough room. Ecstatic, he began sliding a finger back and forth through her lower lips. The strong outer ones shifted further apart as she widened her stance, and when he touched those satiny inner ones Kristen shuddered.

By the void was she wet, his finger slipping deeper into that merciful void than he intended. He tried to inch back, but the woman above him leaned closer, pulling him further into herself. Her warm breath wafted near his ear as she whispered, "Please tell me you have protection."

"Uh," his brain struggled to conjure up the answer because it knew that requiring condoms could only mean one thing. "Ye...yeah," Cullen began to crawl back up his bed, leaving the beautiful nearly naked woman alone. He flipped away to fumble around in the end table drawer by his headboard. Good thing it was dark so she couldn't see any of the really incriminating stuff. When a small packet of four landed in his fingers, he sat up to prove that there were condoms.

They were good to go. To...to have-- Blighted hell, he was thirty three years old. He should be able to think it at least.

Kristen smiled while eyeing up the sampling, before she blinked a moment then sighed. "Afraid they're long expired," she said while turning over the foil wrappers to show a date that passed a good ten months ago. Fuck. Actually, no fuck. The back of his head slapped to the bed in defeat even as the silver packet that betrayed him lay scattered upon his chest.

"Give me a minute," she said, the woman scurrying off him. Cullen was sad to see her go, but watching her breasts sway while she walked was almost enough to make up for the loss. So she knows how pathetic you are out of the gate. Great going. Good job. Would she slip on her dress, dash back home in the rain and delete his number? Awkwardly lay beside him, then rush out the door by dawn's light? Try to...

"Ah..." her voice caused him to sit up. With purse in hand, she was digging inside until she fished out an unopened box of condoms. "Here," Kristen crowed while dropping them into Cullen's shocked hand, "pick out whatever you like. I got the sampler pack."

She...she bought a box before tonight? Or did she always carry them around in the off chance...? Maker's blighted sake, stop looking a gift horse in the mouth. Barely bothering to read the labels, Cullen selected one with crimson packaging. He twisted the little latex donut around in his fingers hoping he could still remember how to put it on, when she coughed above him.

A sly smile curled up her cheeks, one shoulder lifted to the side. Knotting both hands around her panties, she tugged them down until the tiny black pair landed on his floor. There was a naked woman in his bedroom. A naked woman who was crawling across his bed, her eyes devouring him. At his underwear, she paused and smiled.

"Your turn," she yanked so fast, Cullen didn't have time to blink or worry. His boxer briefs vanished off the end of his toes to join hers on the floor. Slowly, she worked her way back towards him, her hands worrying the muscles of his thighs. Cullen was drawn to not only the hunger in her eyes but the sway of her breasts with each climb forward towards his erection.

Touch it. Or don't touch it. Don't be scared of it. Don't hate me.

Warm wind wafted against the head of his cock, her breath whispering out of those soft lips and stirring him harder just as her tongue circled around the full crown. Maker's balls. He shifted in place, fingers digging tighter into the condom while he lavished in the wet feel of her mouth pressing kisses against his cock. The heat of her tongue coiled around him, her fingers curling up around his balls. Gently, she swirled his jewels back and forth while her mouth parted up and down.
the head of his cock.

He wanted to go deeper, to thrust as far as possible, but his entire spine was jelly. Never before had Cullen felt so weak while also so deep into exquisite joy. Laying there in an endless bliss sounded like the perfect torment for his soul.

No. He blinked the thought away. The index finger of his hand that was clinging to the condom curled against Kirsten's jaw. She broke from her ministrations, Cullen shuddering at the drop off of spine melting pleasure but he was set. When those sharp eyes cut into his, he whispered, "I want inside of you. As deep as...as I can fit."

He winced at his pathetic dirty talk but Kristen grinned madly. Picking up the condom he'd been clutching like a talisman, she ripped it open and made quick work of sheathing him safely. She even remembered to pinch off the top, a fact Cullen forgot about until watching her do it.

Thank the Maker someone here knew what they were doing. He laughed at himself while she drew herself higher up his body. Should he take charge? Flip her on her back or...?

Those bountiful breasts skirted right across his chest, her nipples bounding against him and causing her lips to part. Both of his hands wrapped around the sides of her breasts, massaging her firm flesh with a tender care. Below him, he could feel her hips sliding into place, her legs parting wide as a wet heat wafted against his cock. She waited, her face an inch or two from his while he gave a little tug on her nipples.

"Blighted hell," she cried, encouraging Cullen to tug harder. Kristen shifted on her thighs, bending him and the bed this way and that to her whims. Maker, he could watch her gasp and writhe in pleasure all night. He was about to reach towards her clit, when her eyes snapped open.

Her lips plunged to his lips, while her hips dropped down onto him. "Damn!" he cried against her mouth as his cock bore right inside of her. She chuckled a moment at the reaction, Cullen's eyes screwed up tight as he savored the feel of being inside a woman. The heat. The wetness. The satiny slide of every internal cushion that rocked his cock.

"We're not done yet," she smiled, her hips rising as she began to thrust onto him. Blessed Andraste! He kept kissing her lips while she pushed him further and further along the edge. Those beguiling hips swirled against him, practically corkscrewing with his cock as she increased the pace.

A whimper began in the back of Cullen's throat, the shock of how far this evening managed to reach striking hard and fast. He couldn't believe it was happening, he couldn't believe it could end so soon. Kristen rose from his lips, her hands digging into the bed as she sat at a 90 degree angle off him. Her head tipped back as she seemed to be losing herself in pleasure. Those tempting breasts bobbed just out of reach, Cullen lost in the undulation only such a magnificent pair were capable of.

At least he could keep a grip onto her hips, worrying the padding back and forth as he tried to dig into the thrusts shattering him apart. Suddenly Kristen's lips parted and she gasped, "Cullen."

He frowned at that. That wasn't a real orgasm. Not even getting close. You should be so incoherent you were babbling in tongues, not shouting out a person's name on command. Cullen scrunched tighter into his stomach and lashed onto the back of her ass. At the move, Kristen's eyes opened wide in shock. She watched as he adjusted his body until he could dip a finger right in between their bodies and began to vibrate against her clit.

"Hold still," he ordered, swirling around the hood. She did as told, her thrusting paused as she
clenched onto him, but a patch of red splotches began to break out across her chest. Kristen's lips hung slack and the breath in her throat kept catching as if she couldn't take them in fast enough.

Cullen dipped his finger lower a moment, circling right over the pearl proper. At that move she spat out, "Fuckin' chicken." There was the incoherency he hoped for. Slipping from the full of the clit up to the hood and back, he rolled his finger into the right rhythm while watching her. Teeth bit down into her lip, her hands clenching tight to the bed while her eyes rolled into the back of her skull.

On cue, Kirsten's hips began to rock again. Maker's sake, the burn growing in his gut was even stronger than he remembered, but she looked beyond reproach now. Her thighs trembled and her nose crinkled inward. The thrusting increased dramatically, Cullen having to dig his free hand into her ass to hang on. The sight of her so close to coming was doing him in.

Suddenly, her entire body froze, the sway of her hips anchored tight and her jaw falling slack. "Blighted void of the summer," she cursed as goosebumps rose all along her skin. With his finger against her clit he felt it tremble, her vagina clenching tight to his cock as if it wanted to drag him inside of herself for an eternity.

She savored in the pleasure flooding her body, fists pounding into the bed while her hips swirled around him. Fuck! He couldn't escape the heat building along his spine. Cullen dug his fingers into her hips, the flesh bulging from his tight grip, and began to thrust into her. His drive, his hunger, his need increased the tempo, Kristen quick to catch up and match it until...

Stars sparkled against the sides of his eyes as he collapsed onto the bed, breaths jammed inside his babbling throat. Her still trembling vagina clenched tighter against his spurting cock, driving home the feel of his cum spilling into the latex. Blighted hell. He gasped, struggling to see after he felt his entire being be inverted and scrubbed clean.

A nest of ransacked brown hair nuzzled against the side of his chest, Kristen curling up beside him. Her lips pressed a few kisses to his chest, her hand cuddling her tighter against his side. "That was...pardon my Orlesian, fucking amazing."

He smiled, glancing down at the beautiful woman perched upon his naked skin. It was obvious in her glowing eyes he'd surprised her with that move. And he was coming to realize he really loved surprising her. What? That's foolish. You barely know her. Swallowing down the thought, Cullen tipped his head back onto his pillow while gripping to the last vestiges of his cum filling the condom.

"Yes," he whispered for once not to the empty darkness, "it was."
Were Maker honest birds chirping outside the window?

Kristen struggled to open an eye and peered not through dingy glass, nor the wide open emptiness of a pre-bought apartment, or even the thick bars of an underground bunker. Cracked open blinds revealed a trio of tiny brown birds squatting on the sill, their beaks cracked open as if they expected a free handout. Not liable to happen. She moved to stuff the pillow over her head, when the smell struck her.

Man. Thick with sweat from a hard day's work, a spiciness that few saw, and an even more hidden sweet note. She buried her nose deeper into the pillow taking in a deep sniff to remind herself for a moment of where she was and who she was. Hm... Was that oakmoss? Funny. He struck her as a 'scrub down with lava soap and a pumice stone' type.

Her hand stretched lazily over the empty bed to find no one there. Blighted void, she groaned finally picking her head up to assess the surroundings. How late was it? She fished into her purse hunting out her phone.

6:30 AM. That's not so bad. And he's already up? Maybe he had to take a piss, or was trying to screw up the courage to kick the wanton woman out of his apartment. She tried to smile at the calculating thought, but it melted into a frown. You enjoyed yourself last night.

Of course, that was all part of the plan.

A leg shaking orgasm was in the plan?

Shaking off the lingering questions, she spotted a new message from last night.

'You online yet? --H'
It was a bitch relying on burner phones so much. Numbers meant nothing, names doubly so, so an initial was all she had to go on and leave behind. Kristen drew her fingers against the secret pocket, bouncing the hidden bug up and down a moment. She'd planned to slip out of bed in the middle of the night and plant it. She'd also not planned to have him rouse from her movement, pepper her neck in kisses, and then tear through another of her condoms.

Twice in one night and he was up around dawn? Shit. Did she get assigned to a robot or something?

No matter. There was plenty of time to slip it in with a distraction or two. With a practiced swipe she responded to H, 'Not yet. Long game. -- I'

Silencing her phone lest H's demands that she get her ass moving distract her, Kristen slipped it into her purse and began to haul up to her feet. In stretching, she spotted a round bruise rising up on her hip. I'm far too old for a hickey, she groaned even while brushing her fingers over the tender area and smiling.

She found her underwear where she tossed them, though his briefs were long gone. Slipping them on quick, it struck her that her dress was still out in the kitchen. And she had to have clothes on for the next part of the plan.

Men were, on the whole, fickle creatures easily swayed by the whims of their peers. Behind closed doors many preferred scoopfuls of flesh to hard bones but they dare never admit that in front of an audience. Best to keep their more gluttonous desires a secret while dating the pretty, skinny woman. The lie really helped cement their place in the pecking order of masculinity.

It was a simple fact, one that people like her relied upon to get in and get out fast. Kristen reached haphazardly into his closet and unearthed an old t-shirt. Once grey, the hems were frayed to strings and the shoulders took on a slight yellowing. But it slipped so far down her body to cover her ass, though her breasts warped the golem in the middle of hurling a football that was printed on the front. It looked like the poor creature was about to throw the ball at its own face courtesy of her décolletage.

Smile. Say the easy words. Let his eyes dart around as he realized he let an unacceptable woman in his bed, then give him a handy excuse for her to leave. She dipped her hand down to her purse and palmed the bug. After she has to check something online quick. Then, he need never think about her again.

Simple. Easy. A job anyone could handle. So why did every step down the hardwood hallway feel like she was walking on nails? Don't act maudlin. It's one man, you're here to save millions. Focus on those instead.

Painting a smile on, she dug her hand through her hair while easing out towards the kitchen. At the sound of her great yawn, the officer she hauled off to bed spun away from his kitchen counter. Her jaw nearly hit the floor at the smile rising upon his lips.

"Morning," Cullen waved cheerily. He forwent putting on a shirt, revealing that tantalizing chest by dawn's light to her hungry eyes. As she stepped closer towards the table, Kristen realized he'd skipped pants as well, only slipping on the underwear she'd ripped off earlier. Maker take her, but he looked good in crimson.

The man ruffled through his golden waves, his biceps flexing from the stretch. She had to sit on her hands to keep from launching up to touch them. To dig her nails in and pull him back from the bed they just emerged out of. If there was a Maker, no woman would let a man like that ever leave
Cullen's amber eyes blinked against the light streaming through the bay window in his living room. "Did, uh, did you sleep well?"

She nodded her head, waiting for the brush off, for him to tell her "Last night was fun, so maybe I'll call you later." Why was it taking so damn long? "I was surprised," Kristen chattered, "I never sleep."

"Away from your own bed?" he asked while turning back to rifle in his cupboards. There was a lot of plastic inside, not that a 30 something bachelor struck her as the type to have fine china.

"Anywhere," she confessed without thought before wincing. That dug too deep into the truth and he was sure to notice. Fishing hands paused, that sweetly handsome face turning over to her. Kristen shrugged, "Insomnia. It's a real nightmare, funny enough."

Cullen nodded as if she spoke some deep truth instead of babble, "Indeed, I..." He pulled out two bowls and placed both upon the counter. A tinge of red rose upon his cheeks while he glared down at the blue and green plastic, "I'm surprised how out of it I was too."

Shifting in the kitchen chair, Kristen pulled her legs up under her. A chill wafted around the floorboards, drawing her to conserve her body heat. "You ever try that warm milk stuff? I can't stand it, unless it's in hot cocoa...and with a few shots of baileys."

He laughed at her assessment, those taut shoulders shaking while he gathered up a few boxes from inside a cupboard. Carting his haul over to the table, Cullen spread out the bowls and cereal -- one a bran flake with ancient grains mixed in, the other extruded ghosts and marshmallows that could turn your milk green. That was...surprising, and a bit confusing.

"Sorry, I...I don't have much by way of breakfast. It's this, or an old protein bar, or some potentially moldy bagels. I think." Maker take her but the way he apologized for something so minor made her heart twist around in a pitter patter gasp. She wanted to tug him to her lips for it, but instead she grabbed onto the ghost marshmallow box and selected a bowl.

"So," Kristen smiled while extruded wheat bits bounded against the plastic, "did you get the whistle?"

"Hm?" his eyebrows shot up, Cullen standing cautiously over his table as if he feared he had to jump to get something better for her.

Spinning the box around, she pointed to the front, "Says a free whistle inside of every box to... 'Help scare away spooks and ghoulies.' Sounds useful."

"Ah, that, I think it fell out awhile ago. I..." he folded his ass down on the chair and picked the grown up cereal, "When I was at the store there was a promotion and I thought, ya know, why not save a few bucks..."

His explanation faded as Kristen swiped up a ghost marshmallow and wiggled it around in the air. "Just admit it," she smiled, "you love these things. It's okay. Everybody does." To emphasize her point, she popped it into her mouth and bit down on the rush of sugar. After their long night it actually did taste kinda nice, her body more depleted than she anticipated.

The scar on his lip lifted along with a blush burning across his forehead and cheeks. "You found me out," he confessed. With nimble fingers, Kristen fished out a second marshmallow. Leaning towards him, she pressed the glob of sugar against his lips. His tongue rolled out, curling around
her finger in a lascivious lick before tugging the candy cereal into his mouth.

Maker's breath. She whipped her head down to her bowl to try and disguise the blush she didn't intend to have happen. You're flirting with him? Why are you doing that? Get out of here already. Move on to stage two. Forget that...

That a sexy, nearly naked man who defends mages in bars brought her to trembling knees in bed, then made her breakfast the next morning. Sure. Easy thing to forget. At least it would be on his side.

"So," she spoke, her voice flat to hide away the regret wafting in it, "milk? I'd love to see if it really turns green."

"About that," he squinted his face up in concern.

"Cheese?"

"Yeah."

She laughed at how earnest he was about the whole thing. "That's okay. This way it won't get soggy," Kristen mused while digging a spoon into her dry cereal.

Cullen grumbled a moment into his bowl as if he should have anticipated that a woman he never expected to meet would pull him into his apartment, fuck his brains out, then hang around for breakfast. "I...I have bread. Though, I can't really make toast because I don't have a toaster."

"Sure you can," she leapt to her feet, feeling oddly giddy as her past self overlapped with this persona. "Give me a minute." Kristen returned to his bedroom, and to her surprise Cullen followed. Was he worried she was about to start stealing things? Or maybe refuse to leave. That had to be high on a man's fears. What if that woman I screwed never leaves?! Ahh! Tales to tell around the campfire.

At his closet, she shuffled around the empty hooks until she found what she needed -- a wire hanger with no felt or other flammable bits on it. "This should work great," she smiled wide, Cullen's eyes shrouding in confusion.

"What, what should?"

She already began to grab onto the middle to warp it, before pausing and guilty eyes turning up to him, "Uh, do you mind if I...I have to bend it out of shape in order to..."

"No," Cullen folded his arms and slid back, "I'm curious where this is going. Go ahead."

Smiling at the minute scrap of trust, Kristen tugged the hanger part into a wide circle creating a stand. The hook she yanked up then tipped down to an incline. "See," she pointed at it as if it all made sense. The half naked man shook his head no, seeming to grow more concerned she was out of her mind.

With a shake of her head, she guided him back to the kitchen where their cereal continued to not get cold, or hot, or do much of anything. At the stove, she flipped a burner onto low and placed the hanger just outside of the range. Frowning, she bent the inclined hook a little bit deeper.

"Okay, pass me a slice of bread."

"Just one?" he asked while undoing the handmade knot he put in the bag.
"Yeah, unless you have other hangers I can warp," she chuckled. It all had to make sense to him by now. Uncertain fingers dropped the bread into her hands and she carefully rested the slice upon the hook. It looked as if it was reclining right above a tanning bed, the red light of the open burner slowly browning the outside.

Kristen stepped back, "It'll take a minute or two, then you have to flip it to get both sides. Boom, toast. No toaster necessary."

"How in the Maker's name did you know how to do that?"

Scabby knees, frozen toes, windows covered in yellow newspaper, screams that never stopped howling beyond the walls. A lighter in her tiny hands, the 'child's safety' long since broken off while she tried to flame a can of beans for food. There was no lunch, no dinner -- you ate when you had food. Time of day didn't matter.

"Camping," Kristen flinched before pulling on a full smile, the past leeching out of her system. "You make due when camping."

That deceptively handsome head drifted closer to hers. She hadn't thought too much of him in picture form, those amber eyes hidden behind silver shades, his descended cheekbones emphasized by the scowl. But in person, with the light casting off his strong nose, and the stubble already percolating against the proud jaw, he could snatch a breath from her without trying. Cullen seemed to sense the change, his eyes shifting over to dance against her humble features before taking a quick dip down to her breasts.

He'd already seen them naked once before. What was the point of staring now?

"You're, um..." his tongue drew against the thin upper lip, skirting up a touch at the scar. He swallowed, dunking his adams apple a moment, "I mean that..."

Spinning at the waist, Kristen hooked a hand against his cheek and pulled his stammering lips to hers. So much for slinking out before he could remember her. What's one more kiss? The rapid thoughts faded quickly at the fire building in her spine, his nose nuzzling against her cheek before he pulled away. A flush decorated his cheeks and the nervous hand tried to fluff his ransacked hair.

Cullen opened his lips, about to say something, when his face crinkled. She smelled it too, burning. Ah shit. Forgetting everything she knew, Kristen picked up the hot bread and flipped it over. Black char coated the now up facing half and she groaned while turning down the burner. "Damn," she cursed, before hissing at her fingers. They weren't burnt badly, but they stung like grabbing onto a hot plate fast.

Blowing onto them to try and wipe away the pain, Kristen paused as Cullen picked up both of her hands inside of his. He pulled her slightly red fingers to his lips and placed a whisper of a kiss against each one. Sweet Andraste, you have to be kidding me. At the final pinkie, his amber eyes lifted from below dusky brows. "Better?"

All Kristen could do was nod dumbly. It stopped hurting by the time he got to the third finger but there was no way she was going to tell him to stop. Shit. That was... You can't take him back to bed. You know the rules.

But, for fuck's sake, who could blame her for it?

She moved to wrap her hands around the back of his neck, when an alarm cut in between them. Cullen whipped down to his wrist, oddly wearing a watch of all things. Grimacing, he pressed the
button to silence the beeping. "Sorry about that," he muttered, but it was enough to remind Kristen of her job here.

"No, I...shit, you probably have to get to work. And here I am burning bread in your kitchen. It..." she cranked off the burner, the half murdered toast left leaning on the hanger. Her cheeks flushed at the regret she had to leave behind.

"Actually," he wrung around the back of his naked neck and smiled, "I have the day off. Today and tomorrow."

"So that's why the date on Tuesday," she tipped her head. She'd wondered, but certainly not enough to ask lest it fluster him. For the first 24 hours after meeting him she feared he hadn't taken the bait at all.

"Yeah," he blushed brighter than a neon sign, "But, uh, if you have to go anywhere..."

He didn't want her leave. He wasn't going to kick her out after a meal of dry cereal. Maker save her, he wanted her to stay longer.

That's bad.

Kristen smiled, "No, I'd love to..."

A phone rang out from the distance. Her eyes darted over to her purse but it couldn't be that. Stumbling, Cullen wandered back towards where his jeans dried in a crumpled heap. She was focused on her own, getting a good idea she knew what it was about, but still took the time to watch his ass as he walked away. Bless whoever invented boxer briefs and their asscheek cradling capabilities. Maker's sake, she did not dig her nails into those buns enough.

While he fumbled with his phone and answered the harried call, Kristen smoothly lifted up her phone. Sure enough there was a text. 'Get down here ASAP. --F' Followed by an address, no doubt to some run down warehouse on the other side of town. That was his style. Trying to not look as if she was listening in, Kristen twisted her head as she got the back half of Cullen's conversation.

"Yeah, yes, I can be there in thirty," he nodded his head to thin air, his shoulders thrown back and chest stuck out while no doubt talking to a superior. After he hung up, his eyes drifted over to the half naked woman standing in his kitchen. Sheepishness returned in an instant, obliterating the proud stance.

"That was work, seems there was a body found," he flinched as if it wasn't polite to discuss murders around ladies, "and I have to go in."

She smiled as brightly as possible, "These things happen. Work's...work. I'll just get dressed quick and head on out."

"What? Walk back in those shoes?" he jabbed towards her heels that were piled up by the front door. "No, I can drive you. I will drive you, otherwise I'll worry the whole..." Cullen shook off his thoughts. "Let me take a quick shower and we can head out."

Kristen nodded, her head skirting towards the floor. She may have put on the damsel in distress front a bit too strong, but it'd get her to her car faster. Probably. While Cullen vanished into his bathroom, the sound of falling water quickly filling the air in the tiny apartment, Kristen eyed up the computer on the desk. It'd take nothing more than a few minutes for her to get into it, to finish what she came here to do.
Her fingers reached towards her purse, fumbling for the bug and a pen drive. Then again. She didn't want to show up on the job reeking of sex and a man's musky scent. There was always later. Best to play it safe and all.

Padding towards the bathroom, she barely had to push on the door for it to open. Frosted glass obscured most of the lines of Cullen's naked body, giving her the myopic view as water coursed against his skin. Yanking off the old t-shirt, Kristen dropped it onto the floor and slipped into the shower.

A few hot water droplets landed upon her cheek before Cullen spun, his hands wadded up in his hair, confusion rising. With one hand skirting against his hot back, scooping along the shoulder muscle, Kristen smiled, "I thought I could use a shower too."

He dipped his head a moment into the water before turning a soggy smile back to her. One hand slipping around the back of her waist, Cullen guided her into the stream to share.
She wanted to circle the building a few times to make certain she wasn't followed, but judging by how often her phone rattled on the passenger seat he wasn't in a waiting mood. Cullen barely pulled back onto the highway before Kristen slipped into her tactical gear complete with pistol harness digging into her shoulder blades. A tweed jacket disguised it, though a well trained eye would notice the bulky kevlar under her dark grey turtleneck.

Shaking off the concern that eyes were on her, a fear that never seemed to vanish, she snatched up her phone and walked towards the waterfront. While on most cities it'd be picturesque boardwalks with quaint shops selling hand-pulled water taffy and clowns doing caricatures of children, this was a half rotted fish carcass on a sandbar. Freight crates, rusted and pitted from the elements, lay about the crisscross of concrete buildings like elephants that crawled to their graveyard of bones. Rather macabre thought for a warehouse district there. It was probably due to the influence of her contact.

Kristen kept a hand wrapped around her phone in the off chance it started to vibrate again, while the other hung loose and ready to spring into action. Her softened heels barely made a dent against the gravel speckled roads as she inched towards the building he sent her. Before she had a chance to wonder if he was inside, she caught a flash of white hair in the late morning sun.

Dressed in a drab grey t-shirt bearing the emblem of a band from 20 years ago it was easy to think the man was in his 40s with that dreaded mid-life crisis in swing. But he covered over it all with a silver and black hoodie, his tented jeans practically falling off skinny hip bones. That confused the age greatly, leaving most people to scratch their heads. It certainly didn't help that while his skin was roughed from age and wear, his chin was spotless of scruff and the eyes were gigantic like a child's and greener than a soul.
At the sound of her arriving, his head tipped up, the hood falling away to reveal he'd cut his hair
recently. To the point more was out of his face, at least. "You're here," he grunted at Kristen who
pursed her lips.

"Hello to you too."

"What took so long?" he growled instead, skipping over her greeting with his typical aplomb. The
sneer terrified the right people; Kristen barely even registered it anymore.

"Working," she said with her eyes burning into his.

Fenris' lip lifted higher, but not in a smile. No, never a smile. The smirk glinted the light upon his
canine, making her wonder once again why he chose that name. Fenris. Wolf. It was hard to think
he found it funny, the limits of his humor seeming to stretch to a single guffaw from a pratfall
before the deathly serious face slammed into place. But there had to be a reason. He didn't strike
her as the type to spot it on the underside of a coffeecup and run with it.

"That so? How many water coolers did you squat beside this morning?" he asked, twisting back
and forth on his toes.

"Ha," she laughed once. "Heard about the body dump last night. One of yours, I assume."

Fenris scratched against his nose and shrugged. "Surprised it took the police that long to find it
after it was dumped over 12 hours. I suppose I expect too much from such a simple minded force."

Her eyes narrowed at that boast. Fenris could be a pain in the ass on a bad day, but he wasn't prone
to feats of bragging. If for no other reason beyond the cloak of humility, also because it'd eat up his
word count for the day. Shaking off the thought, Kristen asked, "What have you brought me to see
then?"

Stubbing out the dogend he kept perched in his lip, Fenris watched the embers scatter around the
ground before he jerked his shaggy white hair towards the door. "You first."

Kristen sighed, but stepped near him, "I already checked the perimeter."

"Sure, sure," he nodded, those haunting green eyes shifting through the shadows. He never
believed anyone. Granted, neither did she. Sliding under a pile of dented sheet mail, Kristen
stepped into a warehouse that screamed 'This is where I hide the bodies.'

Old conveyer belts stacked on top of each other circled around the walls, sharp objects and what
looked like a few drill presses left to rot beside them. No wonder Fenris liked hanging out here.
Add in a few turrets, some more metal gating, and he'd be right at home. Kristen paused, watching
as he closed the makeshift door behind to seal them in. She expected Fenris to jab towards
whatever his prize was, but the man paused.

Tension bulged in the air, growing more pronounced like a water bladder about to burst. She
moved to cross her arms, when Fenris finally spoke, "Surprised you're not in heels." Those blinding
green eyes bit up to hers and he stared into her soul, "Or a dress."

"Don't start this," she rolled her eyes, already regretting...well, everything.

He flexed his top lip a moment but the snarl faded, "You smell like a man."

She blinked in the lowlight, tempted to sniff her clothing but no, she'd showered the sex off. While
"Uh huh," he tapped his foot on the ground thrice in thought, "H says you're not online yet."

"Blighted damn scouts always acting as if... Things aren't A to B in the field. You can't just go in guns blazing or it'll all fall apart. You know that," she jabbed a finger towards his chest, but the man smiled wistfully.

While Fenris certainly had the brooding, starkly handsome look to pull people in, he also failed spectacularly at managing to be approachable. There was a fine line between being mysterious yet available, and their little wolf regularly pissed all over it. And, Maker knows, the tattoos across his chin, up his hands, and all around the body didn't help in the forgetting part of the equation.

"What's taking you so long this time? Not as if you're trying to seduce an enemy of the state to give up secrets," he was trying to rile her up. Or he was actually angry. Andraste's tits, he shouldn't even care.

"If you think it's so easy, you seduce him and tap into the police systems."

Fenris smirked to himself, "Rather doubt he'd go for my type."

"Look, I'll get to it. I just need one more go. You and your damn summons threw my timing off. I was all ready to plant it and skip out of there when the call came in," she was explaining herself to him. Why the fuck was she doing that? He had his job, she hers. They didn't answer to each other, only the lead. "So, show me whatever you were up to already."

Kristen braced for the man to sneer, but he shrugged and his eyes vanished below the swipe of silver white bangs. Taking the lead, Fenris led her towards the back room of the factory. That had to be what this once was, long since rotted to nothing as all the old manufacturing jobs were shipped off across the sea. The air stank of death and the encroaching disease that rotted through society instead of the body. As they approached a packing crate, she eyed up the massive door that was locked in place with a padlock.

He followed her eyes and sighed, "Might want to prepare yourself."

"I've seen far worse," she assured him while folding her arms together.

Fenris snickered at the thought, but then his eyes swung over to her stone face and the attitude withered. Instead, he seemed almost sympathetic to their shared life -- what little it would intersect. Scrabbling up a ladder, Fenris yanked off the first two locks at the top of the crate, then slid down to grab onto the last. "Here we go," he announced while the sound of whinging metal cracked the air.

With all his strength, which was a surprising amount in such a ropey body, he tugged the massive door out just far enough for the pair to walk inside. Kristen stepped in carefully, using her phone as a flashlight. Soft white light glanced against the rusted red floor of the crate. She eased in a bit more, until she heard the rattle of chains and a growl from the recesses of time itself.

Whipping her phone up, she came eye to eye with the creature they'd been dispatched to hunt. Only seeing it in pictures and surveillance video did not prepare her for the monstrosity before her. The skin was red, not as if it were burned, but cherry red and solid looking. If someone told her the thing squatting inside the cargo crate was carved out of a mountain of rubies she'd believe them. The jawline was swamped by red spikes, the mouth little more than teeth as the lips seemed to have fused into the gums. Arms that thinned to the point of bones extended like an orangutan's off armored shoulders. The chest practically pulsed in the low light, tatters of a shirt clinging to the literal cleavage that formed what could have been muscle. But under it all, the rocky red flesh, the
pulsing spikes growing out of the creature's back, were eyes -- intelligent human eyes.

"Blighted Maker," she cursed to herself.

"I warned you," Fenris shrugged as if it was all no big deal. As if he'd seen every horror in this world twice over and didn't care.

"And you caught this thing?" Kristen spun back to him, the obvious question of how hanging in the air.

"Not before it ripped two people in half with its bare hands."

"Fucking hell," she cursed, watching the creature twist from below the chains Fenris managed to wrap around it. "Why didn't you stop it?"

He glared at her, "I tried. They're right, it's a person under there. One of the lab techs I'd been trailing for a few weeks. But..." Fenris fell silent a moment, his eyes churning through a dozen hidden thoughts, "There was no hint before. No signs it'd change. One moment he was normal, walking down the street, the next...he turned into that."

Both glanced down at the red crystal shaking in rage at the end of its leash. "Didn't have time to do more than contain it. Which..." Fenris dug into the side of his neck drawing Kristen's eyes to the flayed apart flesh he'd kept hidden under his hood.

"Maker's breath," she gasped, reaching over to tend to it, "you're hurt."

He shied away from her touch, not surprising, but those green eyes sized her up again. Always wondering about people, always testing to see what it would take to shove them away permanently. That was Fenris. "I've had worse," he muttered and Kristen snorted.

"Like Jader."

"I hate clowns," he growled deep in that gravely pit of a voice. She should be removed from it, but for a moment Kristen shuddered. Whether it was from the shared memory or how sonorous his voice was, she couldn't say.

"The people it killed?" she asked, turning to Fenris.

"Had to dump them. There wasn't time to do a proper cleanup."

"You know, if you just called the Knacker Man..." she explained, but Fenris snarled. He wasn't a fan of Bodhan for reasons she never fully caught. In truth, she probably wasn't even supposed to know that much about her colleague. Preferences created shared moments, moments created bonds, and bonds could be abused or ripped in half. Best to let it be his problem, you have enough of your own.

"Any new orders?" she asked, waffling on her toes while eyeing up the creature. No doubt a wet lab would be ecstatic to vivisect one that's alive. All they'd stumbled across so far were the dead, whom they'd have to burn to cinders to hide all of the rocks that grew off their skin. It was macabre, filthy work that fell onto Fenris' shoulders.

His spiky hair twisted a moment, "No. Haven't told 'em yet. Thought maybe..." He glanced over at her and Kristen froze solid.

Not again. They couldn't... There was a serial killer, for a time assumed to be someone who snuck
into the mage resistance, but found to be your regular quack. He'd been sewing various body parts onto living people and found it hilarious. Kicking them onto the street and watching them stumble for a few hours of living hell. The agency didn't have time to deal with it, not after Kirkwall fell, so they sent in Kristen and Fenris. It was tight quarters, long nights, and...far too much contact for two agents to have together.

"We should tell L," she said, locking away the past where it belonged.

Fenris backed down immediately from his thought, but the gravel in his voice increased tenfold. "M will want to know too."

"What's M doing on this?" Their bosses boss was involved? Shit. The man shrugged as if it was no skin off his nose either way. She wondered sometimes what pulled him into this life. Even despite their falling so far together, they never broke the cardinal rule and revealed their true backstories to each other. Still...

No one became a ghost unless they had nothing to go home to and no reason to look back.

"Fine," she stamped her heel down, trying to bring back a semblance of order to her brain. "I'll call L, personally. Maybe take a few..."

Her thoughts froze as she watched the red rock creature lash forward. The chains pulled taut, rattling in the run, but at the back of the crate she could hear the metal straining in agony. "Fenris," she whispered, her hand sliding into her coat, "please tell me you have that secured."

"An elephant couldn't break out of it," he assured her, but his eyes weren't leaving the monster. She gripped onto the plastic and leather handle of her pistol, wishing she'd brought a damn hunting rifle instead. Though, eyeing up the hide, doubtful anything more than an elephant gun would get through.

Kristen jerked her head back, about to tell Fenris they should lock it back up when a pling broke through the air. Both turned towards the menace as it roared into the night. She steadied her hand, the gun's barrel honing in on a target, when Fenris ran right in front of her.

"We need it alive," he shouted, a cattle prod extending out of his pocket. Her eyes shot open wide as he opened it up to a heart stopping amount of voltage. And he was waving it around inside of a metal crate. Great.

The red rock creature bellowed and ran for the one that captured it. Fenris dodged the first attack easily, his head dropping down as the massive fists flung through the air and smashed into the side of the crate. It dented a foot out, while the agent jammed his cattle prod right into the creature's armpit. Unlike in all those cartoons and movies, sparks don't usually shoot across a person when they're tazed. They just twitch and fall limp. But whatever coated this thing's body began to sizzle, smoke pouring out of the fissures cut inside the living rock.

It was horrific, as if the once person was being cooked alive inside its own flesh. She cursed internally while Fenris drove the prod in deeper, but the monster wasn't dropping. It wasn't hissing in pain, it wasn't even trembling. Very clearly, it wrenched its still chained up fists out of the wall and swung both towards Fenris.

"Look out!" Kristen screamed. The man was quick, sliding his prod away and trying to dodge, but those fists slamming towards him were too fast to flee from. Something must have struck as Fenris tumbled towards the back of the crate where the monster broke out from.
The monster didn't go after Fenris to finish the job. It turned towards the only woman blocking off its exit. If it got past her, who knows how many people it'd kill. How many innocents would suffer. Locking her hand in under the butt of the gun, Kristen steadied her arms while aiming at the creature. That many volts didn't even make a dent in it? Could she shoot it in the knee to take it down?

Something human must have remained as it eyed up the gun and read it as a potential threat. Hundreds of years evolving with these murderous tools and deep down inside our little lizard brains we still know barrel pointed at your head, you pause. She didn't shake, but kept a locked in stance aimed right at the monster. "Fenris?" Kristen shouted towards the back. "Can you get up?"

"Yes," he growled, shuffling from behind.

Thank the Maker. She tried to shake away the thought the moment it struck, but there was no denying it. All they had to do was get the monster towards the back and then lock off this crate. Maybe drop another in front of the door for safe keeping.

Metal bit through the air, the bastard grabbing onto the broken chain and whipping it at her. Pain slammed into Kirsten's left side and she bounded into the crate's wall. "Fuck!" escaped out of her lips along with the air that'd been in her lungs. She crumbled into the edge, struggling to get in a breath while the monster advanced on her.

Screwing up her eyes, she tried to turn to face it -- red light streaming out of the gaps of its macabre grin -- when smoke erupted out of the back of the creature. Fenris jammed the cattle prod in deeper into the monster's knees, but whatever it was supposed to do only seemed to be pissing it off. Spinning away from Kristen, the red rock swiped its fists towards the man. He had nowhere to run, he was pinned in place, and for all his strength and skill, he couldn't hope to best this monster.

She had no choice. Taking one step forward, Kristen lined the barrel of the gun right next to the creature's temple, and fired. Trapped inside of a tight, metal space, her ears all but hemorrhaged in pain from the gunshot. A massive ringing reverberating through every cell in her body accompanied the sight of the creature crumpling to its knees before finally falling backwards onto the ground and not getting up. That close of range, she'd have expected to find grey matter splattered onto the wall, but there was no blood. It looked as if the deepest the bullet could manage was into the skull.

Blighted Andraste, what the fuck were they dealing with?

As the ringing began to fade in her ears, she glanced over at Fenris who managed to struggle to his feet on his own. He glanced down at the dead monster and only sighed, "Damn it. They needed one alive."

"Sorry," she shrugged before wincing as pain racketed up her body. That shook away the man who was growling to himself at having to catch another one. Instead, curious but concerned green eyes whipped right to her. Lifting up her sweater, she spotted red welts where the chain smashed into her.

"Are you okay?" Fenris asked, his feet stumbling around the dead pile of rocks.

Kristen foolishly tapped into the welt, then hissed, "That's gonna bruise. Fuck." When her eyes swung away from her injury, they fell right into the wolf's greens not even an inch away. "But I'm okay, nothing broken. You..." She took in the blood speckled on Fenris' jawline where the spiked knuckles tore his flesh, "You need help."
"It's fine," he waved it away without even looking at his cheek. Men. She could bandage him up, clean his wounds. No doubt there were more on his chest as well. A fight to capture that creature had to have bruised and battered him. But that would be...unwise.

Instead, Kristen kicked a foot into the monster, "How in the fuck's sake did you catch that thing in the first place?"

Fenris shrugged, "A wall fell on it."

He was so ho-hum about it all, she laughed. It shouldn't be funny, they were facing a monster that could rip through chains and survive a wall to the cranium. But not a bullet. They weren't invulnerable. That was helpful too, even if it wasn't alive anymore. His eyes darted across her body, always seeming to settle upon the wound to her side, while he said, "I best start cleaning this up. And wait for L to find another target to try again."

Kristen reached a hand over to pat him on the shoulder, "I'm sorry, Fenris." A respite broke across his features, as if the dour man let hope into his eyes. But then his nose flared and he scowled instead.

"It's my job," he said, shaking off her sympathy like water from his back.

Sighing, but not surprised, she stomped out of the metal crate. A strange smell tinged the air. The gun powder she expected, but this one reminded her of quarries when drills would dig deep into limestone and dust fill the air. After letting her pistol cool enough, she holstered it against her body and cracked her neck. It was going to be a long meeting courtesy of this fiasco, no doubt.

Behind her, she heard Fenris yanking the door back in place to hide away a dead monstrosity from any vagrants wandering about. After the second lock popped into place, he turned his shaggy head over his shoulder towards her. "Don't you have a job to do too?"

"L's been rather stingy about information as of late," Kristen sighed. That was the agency, we'll give you just enough info that if you get in trouble it's your ass on the line and not ours.

Fenris dug through his pockets until he fished out a lighter. He flipped the catch a few times, his eyes trailing the flames, before he thought to bring a cigarette near it. "Gonna see him again?"

Blighted hell. "If that's still part of the mission, yes," she sighed. Why was this bothering him? There'd been others since... There were always jobs. Had he never known about her part in prior missions or...or was he worried he was losing what he never had?

After taking a long drag and contemplatively swirling the yellow smoke around his head, Fenris whispered in his gravel voice, "What if he doesn't call you again?"

That doesn't seem likely. Kristen thought back to the humble breakfast he attempted, the burnt toast, his lips pressed to her fingers, and the shower where they both helped each other soap up far more than was necessary.

"You pride yourself on being forgettable after all," he was chewing on his cigarette, practically mulching it in his teeth while trying to bite down on the anger. "Maybe you're so good, a second try won't happen."

"Then I'll break in, or we'll pick a second target. It's not up to me," she shrieked at him, beyond weary with the accusations. She wasn't berating him for failing to properly secure the creature, and that nearly got them both killed. All her sleeping with a contact did was...not a fucking thing to him.
"Just," Fenris tugged out his half masticated cigarette and eyed up the destruction he caused without a thought, "be careful." He dropped it onto the dirt floor and stubbed it out. Kristen's eyes tried to meet his, but he wouldn't look up. They'd been watched for sometime, both aware that the agency knew they grew too close, and doing what was necessary to not give in again.

Why in the hell was he obliterating all that hard work now?

Fenris smiled with his canine teeth, "For all you know, he could be the leak."

She was tired of arguing. Kristen sighed and waved her hand at Fenris. "I have to head home, change, dress this..." How in the hell was she going to explain a massive bruise to Cullen?

Why do you think there'd be a reason to explain it?

Damn it! The wolf got into her head.

Shaking it away, she shouted to the man while leaving, "I'll call L and take her wrath on my head. You had a bad enough night."

It had to be her imagination, but behind her she thought she heard him grumble, "You don't know the half of it."

Fenris could be correct. She'd been prepared to vanish into the morning light as all good one night stands did. It was no skin off her nose, there were plenty of people across the world whose bed she'd slipped in and out of without thought. Maybe the phone call he had was a fake. He got up early and had one of his buddies put it in to give him an excuse to get rid of her.

If so, that was pretty damn smart. She had to give him that at least.

You're not happy.

She was fine.

You wish he'd be different.

There was the job. Veering away from the mission was dangerous and foolhardy. The last thing she wanted was to become embroiled in any drama.

You want him to be different.

Slamming her car door, Kristen dug her hands against her steering wheel and stared out at the city's blood encrusted horizon. Sometimes she wondered why the agency let them keep the Maker given hearts inside their chests. Seemed like cutting them out and jamming in a clock would work much smoother for all involved.
I fully forgot to include a gif of Fenris smoking that Space_aged drew. My brain is mush. Maybe I'll add it to another chapter too.
They already moved the body by the time Cullen arrived on scene. He hustled through a growing crowd in order to stand beside a circle of his fellow officers, all of whom were gazing behind silver lenses into an unimpressed sun. Some of the forensic team were working around the area, taking measurements and pictures, while the grunts job was to keep the public out of the way.

As this was a market square with one of those tiny pastry shops people lined up miles for at 6 am right across the way that was proving to be a pain in the ass. "Excuse me, Ma'am, you can't walk this way. Crime scene. Sir, this is cordoned off. You'll have to take a different route." He'd repeated those same words so often his throat began to feel raw.

What a way to spend his day off, being berated by the upper middle class because they can't get themselves a donut with frosted breakfast cereal deep fried inside. Still, it could have begun a lot worse.

Maker's breath, he had no idea that she'd slip into the shower with him. They'd been pressed for time, but in such tight quarters it was impossible for him to not caress a thigh, or cling tight to her stomach while drenching his head. It was so startlingly intimate the thought drew a giddiness to his gut. Sex was, okay rather intimate, but to share that space and trust the other person while cleaning off felt... He didn't know, but it was nice. A normalcy that he apparently missed without realizing.

"Rutherford," a voice called from the edges. He whipped his head over to spot Samson trudging along the circle of cops. "What the shit? They pulled you in too?"

"It must have been awful," Cullen said by way of little explanation.

"You didn't see it?" Samson's eyebrows shot up in shock, his strained eyes red at the edges. "Blood fucking everywhere. Like some bastard dipped a brush in it and tried to paint the square. They were ripped in half. Someone found part of the intestines wrapped around an umbrella stand."
Cullen winced at the description, rather grateful he didn't have to add that image to his bulging mental file. He squinted a moment and eyed up Samson, "If you saw the bodies, where have you been?"

Folding his arms across his chest, Samson clucked his tongue, "Who do you think they sent to find the rest of the intestine?"

"Any luck?"

"Nah, best guess is a dog ate 'em. Hope it's a dog anyway. The other option is...fucked up beyond belief." The hardened vet shivered at the thought whether it be accidental or purposeful cannibalism. "First it's burned corpses dropping on us like presents from the viscera fairy, now this shit. I knew the city was crap, but if I wanted this hell I'd have stayed in Kirkwall."

Cullen's eyes dulled to a milky film as he tried to not think about Kirkwall. There was barely a moment's rest in those days as it seemed like half the city exploded around itself. The bombings lasted for a week, everyone scrabbling to get to safety, no breaks where you were certain you could sleep for more than an hour, and no one able to hunt out potential devices and take them out. It was fucked up on all sides, and for more reasons than the government would ever admit to.

"So," Samson jabbed a finger into Cullen's shoulder, shaking him from dark memories. "Wasn't it your big date last night?"

"Uh," he tried to swallow the smile while glancing down at the sidewalk, "yeah."

"And..." Samson waved his hand around a bit for emphasis, trying to draw blood from a stone. A blush rose upon Cullen's cheeks, but he didn't think it polite to offer up any details. "Well," Samson huffed, "it had to be a cramp for you to rush into work the morning after."

"Not really," Cullen said, as if that was all he'd give out. The older man turned away, about to accept no more was coming. "Before I came in this morning, I dropped her off back at her place."

There was no denying the sly smile playing with Cullen's lips.

Samson whipped back and chuckled, "Look at that, Captain Rutherford's finally climbing back on that horse and giving it a good hard ride. How was it?"

Better than he could have ever dreamed. He'd had a few one and done's lately, most of it fumbling to find a rhythm that matched and ending disappointed on both sides. Being with Kristen was...it was as if she could read his thoughts before he had them. Maybe she was just that observant, or...fuck, maybe taking the time off taught him how to pay some damn attention again. He had no idea, but he'd been grinning like a hyena the entire car ride from her place into work.

"Good," was all he spat out instead of his internal monologue. "Real good."

"A real poet you are," Samson snickered. "So, got any pics of her?"

"Um," he scrunched up his nose, tipping his head away from the rising sun. "No?" Was he supposed to? They'd only gone on one date.

"Really? Figured she'd have taken a couple selfies with you, tagged 'em 'Future Mrs. Rutherford' and set her dating status to engaged."

"Screw you," Cullen laughed even as his jaw gritted at the thought. "She's not...it wasn't like that."

"You going the 'I got mine, no reason to dip back into that well' route?"
"No!" he thundered, his shoulders rising at the assumption.

"Then you already set up another date?"

Cullen blinked, his chest deflating in an instant. "Um, no. We didn't really have a chance with the call..."

"Uh huh," Samson said with a sly wink. He glanced his hand against Cullen's shoulder in a false camaraderie, then turned and began to walk away, "Don't worry Rutherford, your secret playboy lifestyle is safe with me."

Digging his heel into the cement Cullen hissed at himself. Surely he would call her again. He wanted to. He'd had foolish hopes that she might even stay long enough into the morning they could slip back to bed. For sex, certainly, but to have her lay upon his chest, to grace her soft hair across his naked skin as she took in deep breaths. But she hadn't said a word about another date, nor another meeting. They didn't even kiss goodbye, Kristen jumping out of his truck as she dashed to her door in her dress, heels in hand. She did wave at him.

Or was that a 'That was fun, but I never want to do that again' wave? You're overthinking this shit. Just... Don't get clingy. Don't try to smother her. He raised up on his back to glare at the sun. Let her decide what came next. Yeah. That was the wise move. Despite Samson's assumptions, he got a very different read on Kristen. While she was forward with Cullen, something in the back of his mind told him she wasn't hunting for a man to slot into her life.

"Rutherford? Get over here."

He turned at the voice to spy a woman into her mid-40s with short black hair. Always dressed in the police blues, hers were starched and pressed as if she took the time each morning to devote to them. Walking quickly over, he tipped his head. "Yes, Captain Pentaghast?"

Her eyes cut through him as if he was made of jello, but that was a typical day for the Captain. She never really loosened up, the only person in the middle of a holiday party to stand rod straight and make a garish sweater covered in pom poms look like armor. "Isn't this your day off?"

"Yeah," he shrugged, "but they called me in."

"For fuck's sake. Did dispatch...? The damn giggle headed buffoon. Get out of here. Go home. The union would have my head if they found out about this. And the budget sure as shit won't support overtime." She cursed to herself and whatever spiteful god gave her such idiots to suffer.

"It's not a big deal," he said with a sigh. Moving a few numbers around wasn't outside the norm for him. Take an afternoon off to make up for coming in now. Easy. And the square was a mess. Three hours since they found the bodies and they were finally starting to let a few people through to their place of business. It'd take a day before anything could get back to normal.

"No, no," the Captain shook her head. "There's rules. Besides," her hard eyes drifted around the bloodstains on the cement speed bumps, "more mutilated bodies dumped into the streets without any probable cause? We're gonna need all hands on deck for awhile."

A chill lifted the hairs on the back of his neck, Cullen squinting to try and get a sense of what he missed out on. He'd been around for one of the burned corpses, trying to help lift flesh that charred and glued itself to the road into baggies for the forensics guys. It took five showers before he could stop smelling burnt human fat dug into his nose. Somehow he'd always thought this place as rather safe for a city.
Sure, people are assholes. That went with the territory, but it could be worse. There were no bombed out buildings, starving masses wandering the streets, sewage openly seeping into the only drinking water. It could be a lot worse.

"Head home," Captain Pentaghast slapped him on the back, startling Cullen out of his state, "get some sleep. We're gonna have a lot of long nights ahead of us."

Sighing at how little he seemed to be able to offer anymore, Cullen nodded his head and began to slink back towards a line of cop cars. There'd be someone about to head back to the station, if only for a drop off or pick up. Or he could walk. It was a rather nice day, aside from the double homicide and blood spritzed sidewalk. In stepping around the barricade he caught Samson's eyes, the man laughing as he pointed towards Cullen's hair.

His hand drew up towards the back that was still messed up, when Samson clearly mouthed, "Playboy." Trying to not snarl at the implications, Cullen slumped against the line of patrol cars and waited. If the Captain was ordering him home, someone would be along soon enough.

Few at the station even knew he'd once been married, never mind divorced. Samson only learned when Cullen stumbled into work bleary eyed from trying to read through the fine print on a letter out of her lawyer. And maybe still a bit hungover. He could feel the stigma wrapped around his body like barbed wire: divorcee, failure. The relationship's death had been mourned...shit, nearly a year ago, but the stink of him being unable to live up to his potential rattled his bones for months.

His parents were married for nearly thirty years, barely a cross word between them. And he? He couldn't last longer than eighteen months, six of which were him living alone in a shit heap of an apartment with milk crates for furniture. All his damn siblings were married off too, none of them able to offer up much by way of help for the floundering, recently divorced man.

Though Mia would get cross whenever he whined and shout, "Stop carrying on like you're the first person to ever sign some papers. This ain't the dark ages. You don't have to leap onto a pyre or face shunning from the village."

Mia. She'd no doubt know more about Kristen and her family. Older than Cullen, sure, but Mia had a way of prodding into everyone's problems and everyone's secrets back in Honnleath. He should call her...

The phone fumbled in his fingers as he stared down at the plastic screen. Call his sister, have her wonder why her taciturn brother is suddenly so interested in some girl from high school. All without him knowing if any of it mattered. Mia would talk his ear off for it, demanding he do this or that in order to land a woman he'd only spent one night with.

One glorious night.

Maker take him, but she was adorable by dawn's light. Cullen lay motionless on his back in bed, doing his best to not listen to his heart thundering inside the back of his skull. The silence was growing too loud and he had to get free, when a tiny snort erupted out of her nose. She lay curled on her side nearly the whole night, her hands tucked tight under her head to cushion it. Without those burning eyes shredding apart whatever armor he thought he had, she looked...tender. And happy.

Swallowing down the remnants of pride in his marrow, he thumbed through his phone and found her number. Texting a message quickly, he pressed send before reading it over -- terrified that he'd chicken out at the last second. While the blue message waited to be read, he smiled to himself. Cullen knew what he wasn't, and -- he prayed -- for once he knew what he wanted.
Kristen collapsed into the apartment. It was always striking how much room a few hundred square feet could be without furniture getting in the way. A mass of electronic guts sat upon a folding table she put in the kitchen, though the only chair she had was sitting in the hall under the ceiling she cut into. Reaching for the switch, harsh light burned from a bare bulb in the empty kitchen as she yanked off her shirt. It was hard to lift up kevlar without taking the entire damn thing off.

When the armored turtle neck struck the floor hard, she gritted her teeth. Neighbors. *There are people around who might wonder why you're throwing metal shit on the floor. And then they might see that off the rack burglar alarm whose guts you have spread across the table.* Another matter she needed to finish with soon.

Tipping her head down to spy her naked stomach, she hissed at the massive black and blue bruise rising up on her skin. In general, she had a thick hide that could withstand a lot. But that creature swung so hard, if the kevlar hadn't born some of the brunt she might be scooping up her intestines right now. That thought sobered her a minute.

She'd been in scrapes before. No one in the agency hadn't. Even if you were a lowly pencil pusher, at some point shit went pear shaped and you had to defend yourself. Staring into that monster's eyes, feeling its inhuman breath draw in the same oxygen as her opened a pit the size of the abyssal plain in her gut. Whatever was going on wasn't a simple matter of taking down a crazed bomber before he blew up a stadium. Or even infiltrating a terrorist group and, like a careful game of jenga, assassinating the one piece that sent the entire thing crumbling.

This was a game changer in every sense of the word. If they didn't contain it, if they didn't stop it and whoever was behind it...the world would never be the same.

No pressure or anything.

Kristen hissed as she pressed into the bruise. It was stupid, she knew there was pain and she should take some aspirin to dull it, but she did it again. Three times. Three digs in to remind herself that next time she should fucking dodge it. Or she wouldn't be able to get up again.

As her vision stopped swimming and she sucked in a breath, she rooted around in the narrow freezer for ice. *Which you don't have. Because this was a minor stop.* The plan, what little she'd been told, had been for her to tap into the police messaging and email system, then she'd vanish. Which didn't necessitate much of a place for her to live. There wasn't even a bed, just a blow up mattress which she had to pump up with her own lungs.

The wound at her side hissed to remind her it didn't suddenly vanish. With a quick hand, she latched onto a philips head screwdriver and stabbed at the massive build up of frost ringing around the freezer. Her palm filled with homemade snow, she plunged the icy concoction to her naked skin and sighed.

Which was right when she heard the phone go off. There were a good dozen in her possession, burner phones scattered around the place in case something went wrong, not including the one in her purse. This wasn't any of them. Stomping towards the bedroom where light streamed through the slit in the blinds, Kristen yanked off a bit of baseboard from behind the door to reveal a gash
she made in the wall.

Inside, a gigantic black phone rattled in anger, the song unchangeable. The phone itself weighed easily three pounds, it had to be twenty+ years old, and was completely unhackable and untraceable. It also meant that her boss was calling, never a good sign.

Cracking open the flip part at the bottom, Kristen had to press the accept button -- a literal button she pushed in -- to answer. "It's I," she said, the heavy phone tucked under her hair as she stared at the wall.

"Standby for connection," the robot intoned while a few buzzing and clicking noises broke. She wondered sometimes if there was a literal switchboard from those old days that they had a gussied up roomba running. It wouldn't surprise her. The agency could cling to outdated technology harder than a geriatric grandfather.

"Report," the voice hissed into her ear and she winced. Fuck. It was Josie, who reported directly to L. They weren't fooling around with this.

"I'm afraid there's been a problem," she said, stalling to try and find a way to phrase their colossal fuck up in such a way it sounded like a win. "The creature that was captured by agent F...is dead."

"How?"

_I shot him in the fucking head before he ripped me in half._ "Gunshot to the temple. Dead on. No exit wound."

"I see," Josie sighed on her end, the sound of clacking sounds filling the silence as she was typing 'Fail' in big letters. No doubt underlining it too. "And what were you doing near the creature in the first place? That was not a parameter of your mission. Did agent F invite you...?"

Kristen winced, the implications ringing inside that Antivan accent. She wondered sometimes why Josie didn't vanish it from her speech, but maybe she couldn't. Maybe that's why she was always working the desk instead. "No," she lied, "I was curious about what we were working with and asked to see myself."

"Then shot it dead before our scientists could take a look." She snarled at Kristen for such a rookie mistake, but at least she seemed to be buying the lie. It shouldn't cost Fenris anything for her failure.

"It ripped through its chains; it was about to escape. I had no choice," Kristen sighed, doing her best to not exasperate at the woman. She was exhausted, partially deaf still, and in pain. Right now all she wanted was to crawl onto her blowup mattress and sleep away some of it.

"That shall be discussed with Agent F. He should have prepared better..."

She snorted at that. There was no way he was told what they were dealing with, and considering the inhuman strength she'd have considered his tactics overkill before it ripped the shackles out of the wall.

"What of the police tap? Has that been accomplished?"

"No," she admitted. Just a bang up day all around.

"You made contact?"
The agency's euphemism for sex was such a running gag nearly everyone used it outside of mission parameters. *I caught Henry and George 'making first and second contact' in the closet.* Not the time to poke fun. You're in trouble. "Yes, but..."

On the other end, the clacking froze. Josie seemed to be waiting for the best excuse Kristen could come up with. "I'm afraid the man is a light sleeper and I was nearly caught slipping out of bed to plant it. Rather than risk revealing myself, I...refrained from planting it."

"Good," the woman surmised quickly. It happened more often than they liked to admit. Seducing the enemy never worked. Seducing someone who could get you information sort of did, if you were quick and clever. But that required knowing when to apply pressure and when to step away. It was as much an art form as a science. "How many times did you make contact?"

Kristen wet her lips, aware of the forms being filled out. She could lie. Say she faked falling back to sleep in the middle of the night, but... "Two. To act as a distraction."

The fingers typed in how she put her body on the line twice for Maker and country. Not that it was hard for her to do. Underneath the man was almost as nice as on top of -- his lips panting against hers while those hard hips thrust his cock deeper inside.

"I assume in the morning you were wrested from his place before any more attempts could be made?" Josie asked, shattering apart Kristen's filthy memory.

"Yes," she said quickly. It came so fast she could almost convince herself it was true. He shoved her out the door because he had other problems to get to. She only accepted the message from Fenris because she wasn't wanted elsewhere. It made far more sense logically.

More typing resumed, Josie going through the complicated forms. Glancing down at her side, Kristen realized all the snow she ice-picked off was now a small puddle soaking into the bedroom carpet.

"Agent I," Josephine said, whipping Kristen to attention. She had to look a fool doing it in just a bra and black jeans inside an empty bedroom. "Your mission has changed."

She expected that. One go was usually all anyone was trusted with when it came to the seduce and run. Another and they'd remember you, wonder about you. It was best for all to cut ties hard and fast.

Maker, what would a quickie be like with him? Her spine digging into a brick wall, hands cuffed behind his head while he...

"Agent I?"

"Understood," she said, trying to shake away the unwanted thoughts. There was a job to do.

"You're to inseminate into society for the next few weeks, perhaps a month or more."

Kristen blinked madly. She expected extraction, perhaps to be put on monster chasing duty with Fenris. Not with, but in parallel to. Insemination was practically unheard of, especially with no prep work. "Ma'am?" she stuttered at a loss for words.

"I know, we feared this might be necessary but hoped..." Josie paused a moment, her line falling silent as she must have pulled her hands off the ever clacking keyboard. "These creatures, crags as we're calling them--"
"Crags? Maker's breath, they always did lack for imagination down at HQ.

"They're proving a greater potential threat than first imagined. And, some of the powers that be seem to think you can handle working in public more. I will have a courier arrive with your new legitimate job, a resume, the dossier for your character, and a stipend to populate your place with real furniture for the time being."

"Will I be changing identity?" She circled her fingers not against her chain-induced bruise, but the smaller more intimate one on her hip. 

"No. This one you're using now will suffice. You shall be infiltrating the head office of DW enterprises."

"My target?"

"Why, that illusive billionaire capitalist himself...Solas."

Kristen whistled through her teeth at the thought. Solas. If there was a last name, no one ever heard it. The man rocketed up the capitalist ladder fast and hard, seeming to have appeared out of nowhere a decade or so back. He kept so much to himself none of his personal or private life was known -- not even in their spy network. To look upon the reedy body buried under a wolf grey suit a size too large for him, Kristen imagined the man was either as bland as a raw potato or into wearing adult diapers for kicks. Whichever secret he kept, it was always tight to his chest. But, perhaps most surprising of all, he was a mage. Not just a mage, but a strong practicing one who didn't shy away from what he was.

And it was her job to spy upon that. To watch that. To learn...

"We have reason to believe that DW enterprises is tied intimately with these crags. Your job is to find the proof."

Blighted Maker. Not only trail the CEO, but dig up evidence of some secret lab experimenting on people to turn them into monsters. This was sounding more and more like a comic book.

"You'll not be alone. There are others already implanted in the office. And, I imagine F is around somewhere still trying to capture one for study. M is dead set on that."

Kristen snorted a moment to herself. This was a lot to put on her shoulders, and right after she killed their only chance at a vivisection? Were they giving her just enough rope or did L finally trust her after what happened in Ostwick?

In the distance of her echoey apartment she heard a small trill erupt from the phone in her purse -- the one that belonged to the growing life of Ms. Trevelyan. Right. Her other job. "What of the police tap?" she asked, seeming to shake Josie from another thought. "Should I continue to attempt it?"

"Hm? It is not a priority," Josie said, "But if you can finagle an opening, take it. The leak may lead us to Solas' dealings."

"Understood," Kristen nodded her head with the phone. 

"Inquisitor," Josie said to her, "hold back the darkness." With that sign off phrase, and agency motto, the line fell dead leaving Kristen holding a massive lump of plastic to her ear. After returning the phone to its hiding place, she stepped out towards the vast living room. Her feet flexed in the carpet, for the first time noticing how it bunched from age. She hadn't cared when she
thought she'd only be at this place for at most a week. Now?

Time to create a proper home for Kristen.

Her eyes drifted over to the ripped apart wires and her purse sitting beside them. Fishing out the modern phone, she smiled at the text message waiting for her.

_Cullen: Had a great time last night._

They didn't tell her she couldn't speak to him again. The rules stipulated one contact, but that was for information gathering. This was different. They didn't insist she cut herself off immediately before her cover was blown. And, Kristen could always use a friend in the new town she was about to begin work in.

Brushing her fingers over the keypad she smiled to herself while sending a text back.

_Kristen: Me too._

And you mean it, don't you? This isn't a ploy anymore. You want to see him again for reasons beyond swiping his passwords. Her lips dipped down into a frown at the thoughts badgering her head.

It didn't matter what she wanted, appearing with Cullen would serve the cover. Her enjoying it would only make it that more believable.

With that certainty overriding the warnings wafting out of her gut, her eyes opened wide when the phone trembled in her hands. Smiling to herself, she began to text back and forth with the man she ached to see again.
Running

The road pounded against her feet, her head held level with the pink horizon as sunlight tried to find a path through the nooks and crannies between skyscrapers. Her arms sliced through the air as she turned left, the pace of her run steady as a metronome. People glanced up in surprise as if they'd never seen a woman before. The comments began as they usually did, "Hey. Baby. Fuck me." When she ran on past without acknowledging them they mutated to, "Fat ass. Cunt. Fuck you." While there were earbuds in, an obvious white line curling down towards her phone tucked tight in the front breast pocket, she didn't have anything turned on.

It was never wise to cut off any senses, even if she'd have preferred the sound of donkeys braying to the men rolling around in the toxic muck of masculinity. Kristen glanced behind her shoulder to spot one of men in a suit flipping her off before he turned to berate a street corner barista. Do they even know why they do it? Do they even care?

She languidly turned back to face ahead of her, when a flash of red erupted in front of her eyes. Without thought, she whipped her entire spine backwards, her sight filling not with a red arm covered in unholy rock but a beam that was more orange in retrospect. "Shit," a man stuttered as he got a look at what nearly happened and shook in surprise. Kristen had already moved beyond the threat, her heart calming to assure her it wasn't one of the monsters. "Didn't see you there, lady."

With barely a shrug she lifted herself upright and continued on the run. But the man wasn't finished, "Be careful!" He had to yell at her because she didn't perform right. Maybe she should have. Blend in, form a bit of a reputation to bank on for later. But that new 'job' didn't start for a couple days and right now Kristen didn't feel like playing the game.

Didn't want to demure, to dull her sharpened instincts, to apologize profusely for existing. She just wanted to run.

Okay, she sighed while glancing down at her weaving chest, maybe wear three sports bras next
time. That pain was familiar, if not incredibly annoying at times, but the one burning in her side was giving her trouble. As she paused at a light, cars reviving from their morning stupor with a heady jerk before ratcheting on, Kristen lightly thumbed the bruise. A massive burst of pain was the fruit of her efforts. Right. Stupid.

It was a bad move all around. She should have noted the chain, expected it to swipe her. You're getting sloppy. Too much time flitting around in intelligence. Maybe she should join a gym.

She thought about her necessary lifting routine and sighed. Join two gyms, one as Ms. Trevelyan who does pilates, or hot yoga, or whatever class was available to tone. The other would have to be under cover of nightfall and maybe prone to illegal activities on the side. There wasn't a person in the agency who hadn't cracked a skull or two at an underground fighting ring. That was practically their version of a holiday party.

When the light changed, she picked up her speed while running across the street not really heading anywhere but needing to go somewhere. Her eyes were drawn to a spark of green breaking up the grey landscape. For all her work dragging her to cities across the world, she came to despise the constant monochromatic scape of grey on grey. Letting her instincts take the lead, Kristen jogged towards the patch of green that began to grow in size.

Through a gated fence ran others -- sprinters, she'd guess, by the giraffe like limbs and how they'd use up all their speed without saving any behind. There was no guard at the door, the entrance left open for any. With a shrug, she turned her path inside to follow a winding path of gold and red bricks. At first her eyes skirted past what looked like writing on the ground, certain it was graffiti, but at the third she finally took in that it was a whole sentence.

"Dane, the mighty werewolf, snapped his jaws at the attackers."

They told a story? That was...rather clever, and a good incentive to finish a lap. Drawn in, Kristen barely paid attention to the rest of her surroundings in this calm oasis complete with oak trees for children to climb, and a lake with paddling swans calling to their young. Her eyes were all on the tale. Midway, she ran into two other women who were enjoying a more leisurely jog. Arms practically akimbo they nearly took up the entire well sized walkway.

"On your left," Kristen called while slipping on past. A pair of steely eyes whipped back in shock as if no woman should ever dare pass them. As she pulled back in front hunting for the next stone, she heard the pair of chattering jays caw loudly.

"There ought to be a law keeping people like that from wearing leggings."

"I don't know how her thighs don't catch on fire."

She could explain about the wondrous invention of body glide gel, instead Kristen kicked it into higher gear growing more weary of people with each step. It seemed a strange choice at times. Her life was not hers, she'd abandon anything that one would consider a life, her personal freedom to devote herself to preserving people. To saving them.

And she damn near despised every person she ever had to suffer. She could fake it, when necessary, but there was a reason she didn't work long term in the field. A person could be kind, caring, selfless, but people... People were animals through and through.

Careful, she laughed to herself, or they're liable to stick you back in a bunker for six months with that thought.
"Hey!" a voice called from behind her. She sighed inwardly, having hoped that the park atmosphere would reduce the number of catcallers. Shaking it off, Kristen tried to increase her gait, but her side was having none of that.

"Wait," whoever needed her attention this moment wasn't giving up for anything. She could slip away, maybe into the grass proper or...? "Kristen."

At that her heels skidded to a slow and she pivoted her head back. Bounding down the path came Cullen, his hair curlier than she'd seen even in the rain. He was dressed in a pair of basketball shorts and a red tank top which had sweat lines curving around the muscles of his chest. Maker's breath, those damn arms. They were in full display as he jogged to her, the biceps practically popping like biscuits in the oven.

You should have eaten breakfast before coming on this.

He skidded to a halt on a brick telling the part about Dane's betrayal, a hand ruffling through his hair and mopping back the sweaty curls. "Hey," he said softly, before eyeing up her ears and grimacing.

Shit, she still had the earbuds in. Tugging them both out and tucking the ends into the top of her shirt, she smiled, "Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"Didn't expect to see you here," he said as if he'd been working up a speech in his head the second he saw her. How long had he been watching her? And you didn't see him? What the void is wrong with you? Watch your damn sights.

"You talked the place up so much I thought I had to see it for myself," she smiled brighter at him as the sun was beginning to crest through the trees. "So, you run here often?"

He dug a hand against the side of his waist, pulling the thin fabric of the tank top tighter to his skin. Andraste save her, but she could see the highlights of his abs waiting in anticipation for hands to caress them. "When I can," Cullen confessed as if it was a great secret. They hadn't spoken since yesterday morning but they'd been texting throughout the day.

And into the night. It'd be pathetic if...it did give her a bit of a break from her real life.

"Been a long time since I was at my track day levels," he sighed as if she was upset he couldn't do a mile in whatever he had before.

She pursed her lips and jabbed a finger down, "Your shorts are longer now too."

"Ah," Cullen bent down as if he had to make certain he put them on, "well, for that I'm grateful."

"I'm not," slipped out fast, her heart feeding her tongue lines before her brain could scan them. Damn it.

His cheeks lit red and he bounced on his heels. "Ha, well, so...am I bothering you?" He seemed to be finally eyeing up that she too was in running gear, a lot of it stretched tight to her body. She hated dealing with wind rustling against jacket flaps. "I just wanted to say hi. And if you needed to get back to your run I can..."

Kristen smiled at the sincerity in his voice. She wrapped a hand around his fumbling fingers and laced hers around them. "No, I think a cool down period is called for."

"Right, don't want to cramp up," he said with a goofy grin before grimacing at the doctoral advice.
"I...you slept well?"

That was his last text to her, Sleep well. Then an emoji of a pirate for some reason. She suspected that he either had a very warped sense of humor or had no idea how to use them. For a minute Kristen stared at those two words (and a tiny, yellow bearded face with an eyepatch) in pain. Such a simple thing, background for most people really, but no one had ever said it to her before in any form. She didn't know how to process it. And he was asking again.

"Yes," she lied. In truth, she'd been up one half of the night planning deliveries to the apartment, and the other brushing up on DW enterprises and Solas. For being on the cover of a lot of fortune magazines, the man was a ghost. It unnerved her the way a bird would feel staring into a mirror. "Ah, what about you?"

Cullen shrugged, the pair of them strolling hand in hand down the side of the walkway. "Well enough," he said it simply before blanching and shaking his head towards the horizon. Hiding something. But something small. Or at least not too dangerous.

"Right," she snapped her fingers as a distraction from the bulging tension, "you had the day off. Sorry, just wondered what would push a man to get up at 6 in the morning and run around outside."

"Maybe the same thing that got you to do it?" he smiled at her and her stomach inverted itself.

"Yeah," Kristen smiled. Freedom. To hone the body for the next fight. To feel blood surging through a heart that's good as dead for how little she uses it. To break out of the invisible cage for just a moment. Turning towards him, her hand scooped along his jaw. The scruff etched into her fingers, drawing a soft purr to the back of her throat. Maker, she wanted to feel that rough up her inner thighs.

Out of the periphery, she spotted them. The two fashion critics were jogging past, and both were practically googly eyed at the fit and attractive cop clinging to someone who should never leave the house without wearing a refrigerator box to hide her body. Kristen's eyes trailed them a minute, her lips lifting in a smirk before she turned and planted a long, slow, toe curling kiss on Cullen's lips.

Maybe the women saw it. Maybe they shouted 'Well, I never' before walking past. She had no damn idea, because the second her lips touched his, he dug his hand behind her head and cradled her closer to his face. Pretty much all that training about watching her surroundings evaporated as his tongue drifted over her bottom lip and he tugged on her ponytail. By the void, she shifted, her strapped down chest pressing deep into his.

Her adrenaline had been piqued but steady on the run. Now, with a man who smelled of testosterone and endurance roughing around in her hair, the spike of hormones surged through her. She wanted to drag him back home in her arms herself. Cullen seemed to read the same, his other hand breaking from their innocent hold in order to...

"Gah!" she hissed against his mouth, his fingers gripping right to her bruise.

Those amber eyes flew open in an instant, concern warping his fine features. "What is it? Did I hurt you?"

"Sorry, sorry, no, I..." Fuck. What the hell are you going to tell him? She'd hoped to play it cool for a bit, keep it all on the data plan so to speak, and maybe risk another meeting after the damn thing healed away. "I hurt myself, earlier."
His eyes hooded as he glanced down towards the tender side her hands barricaded. Kristen winced, "Not like on purpose. It was an accident. There's this...ironing board in my apartment. Not very big but old, heavy. Swings out of the wall, well supposed to. I got close and it, uh, fell hard. Right onto here."

That was the dumbest explanation you could think of. Maybe walking into a door would have worked. He's either going to think you are as clumsy as a romance novel heroine or are in a secret abusive relationship. Somehow the truth was the most outlandish of the options available to her.

Cullen pursed his lips, eyes darting around her shielded side then back to her face. "Something like that sounds dangerous. Your landlord should really fix it before it happens again."

"Yeah, sure," she winced at the man leaping right to solving the problem that didn't exist. "I'll bring it up at some point. Lots of, you know, unpacking and all."

Her attempts to dance away the imbecilic lie faded as his palm cupped against her cheek. "Are you okay?" Cullen breathed, amber eyes wafting like a candle of concern. Why was he behaving as if it was a life or death issue? It was one bruise. Not even a cracked rib or a torn off limb. She'd faced far worse in her life with little more than a gruff 'heal or else' for sympathy.

Kristen's eyes closed and she leaned tighter into the warmth of his hand. It's nice, isn't it? Sticking inside of someone for even a breath. Blinking madly at the dangerous thought sloshing around in her gut, she stepped to the side, her skin sliding away from his.

To cover for the blunder, she began to bounce back and forth on her legs as if she needed to begin jogging again. "It's not a problem. I'll just leave it down until I can get it locked off or maybe tie a rope around it."

"Sure," he winced, the man who looked as if he wanted to storm into people's lives to solve every problem fading at her stubbornness. "That would, it'd probably work out. I..."

His mouth faded, the lips drooping while words vanished into the ether as they both ran out of things to say to each other. Her out of fear of divulging too much. Him because, well, he seemed uncertain of what to do.

And so are you.

Shit. She'd never done the second day-after dance before. The ramping up awkwardness drew her mind back to Fenris stumbling down the hallway after their mission. They didn't say a damn thing about how that foolish thing between them was over, they didn't have to. But they both stood in silence for a minute, glaring through each other.

"I don't know about you," Kristen babbled quickly, "but being all sweaty from a run while standing near someone so...uh, hot, is probably top ten of my worst nightmares."

He cracked a smile a moment, his cheeks burning at the compliment, while those eyes dazzled against hers. "You look lovely," Cullen mused to himself.

Yeah, and I want to drag you behind some bushes myself, but getting caught for public nudity would put me in a shit ton of trouble. So... "I should probably finish this up," she explained while twisting her ponytail down the path. But her lips couldn't stop smiling. She didn't want them to stop.

"It's a full two miles to lap the park," he explained to her as if that was quite a bit for her.
"Ah, got it," Kristen nodded while dancing back and forth on her feet. She already got in around five miles earlier. Her steps took her away from Cullen, but she kept turning back to him. "Thanks for pointing this out," she waved around the park, "it's beautiful."

He smiled and waved to say she was welcome.

"I'll...I'll see you later," she declared before finally flipping back to face the road ahead. She didn't want to watch his eyes light up, or his hand dig into the back of his neck. Another glance at his body would tug her right off her path. Head held high, eyes focused to a crystal glare, Kristen ran on.
The first knock came with her hair swaddled in a towel. Shit. Kristen yanked it off her damp hair, her eyes swinging around the tiny apartment. Who the hell could it be? Maybe the delivery guys dropping off her cheap ass bookcases? If so, they were an hour early.

She glanced down at the shirt she threw on quickly after the shower to wash away her run's sweat and any lingering emotions. The marigold color gave her natural pallor such a waxy glare she looked half dead in it. A massive screen print advertised for an aid concert at the Temple of Ash from four years ago. Kristen herself never attended the thing. In fact, she was probably in Minrathous at the time, but it was a good find at the thrift store. So much of her identity's backstories were often cobbled together by pieces of some else's castoffs.

Her fingers reached for the leggings she left laying on the bed, when her heart walloped in her chest. A stupid twinge of pain struck her pride. What did those women matter? She could kill them both with just her pinkie and a bic lighter. Still... All that strength, all that cold certainty, all that distance bred into her bones, and yet a cross look could scrape to the marrow.

A second knock broke louder on her door and she sighed. "Hold on a second!" Skipping the pants, Kristen dashed to her summoning in just the shirt and a pair of panties. There were a few bras scattered around in the bedroom, all of which she didn't feel like strapping on while resting at
She moved to inspect the peephole, when she froze. There was no reason for anyone at the agency to stop by. No one she made an appointment with at this very moment. It could be a trap, and what better time to shoot a person than through the door while they’re trying to spot their own death?

Twisting around the laptop on her card table, she toggled through a few different cameras scattered around various perimeters until landing on the peephole. Which was when her jaw cracked to the floor. A hand was the most visible object, digging deep into wavy golden hair. No doubt it'd been combed out of the curls after he too took a shower post run.

Closing her eyes tight, Kristen tried to hold her breath. He knows you're in here, you shouted. Foolish. No choice. Even while trying to gird herself, she couldn't stop a tiny twist in her heart. She gave no incentive or hint that he should visit, yet that man was standing outside her door for whatever reason. It was almost...romantic. Was that romantic? Maker's breath, read more books on the subject or you'll never be let out into the field again.

After sliding the damp hair out of her eyes, she undid the bolt on her door and yanked it open. "Cullen," she gasped, the shock not entirely fabricated. He'd traded that billowy tank top for the same red flannel she'd ripped off him earlier. That brought forth a few thigh clenching memories.

His hand stopped rummaging in his hair, amber eyes glancing back towards her as he waved it. She couldn't stop the smile from sliding onto her face at how goofy he looked. "What are you...?"

Kristen began to ask when her eyes slid down to find a red box rattling at his side.

With a shrug, Cullen hefted up the toolbox he brought to her apartment. "I thought that I might try my hand at fixing your ironing board."

Shit.

She blinked madly, her cheeks turning red in what she hoped read as embarrassment or maybe lust instead of panic. "Ah," the words rattled around in Kristen's head as she ran through every damn incriminating thing left in her apartment. It'd been one day since she started the transition, and anyone with half a clue would catch on that something was off.

Fuck.

"You said that it was something for you to fix later, but then I worried that you might need to put it up, and it could fall again. Hurt...you again." The endless concern in his eyes snapped Kristen into focus. He came, heart and toolbox in hand, to beg for a chance to protect her?

"Come in," she smiled, sliding back to give him entrance. The smile washed away a panic knitted in his eyebrows as Cullen dashed inside. While Kristen closed the door, she let the cop get a good look at her half finished place.

"You, uh, you have a table," he said while jerking his head towards the flimsy piece of metal keeping her laptop up.

"And a chair," she tried to offer up, fingers digging into the back of the folding chair to make it not seem so pathetic. In doing so, her arms just happened to squish together her freed breasts. Cullen's eyes broke from the appliance-less kitchen and barely there living room right to her chest.

"Uh..." his tongue lolled a moment, eyes blinking madly before he shook it all away. Rattling the toolbox once more for good measure, he asked, "The ironing board?"
"This way," she said while doing her best to not panic. Kristen took the lead, it being her tiny place and all. It also let the man sweep his eyes down the microsized green boyshorts inching up her ass. Maker, she was bad at this stuff, but a bit of distraction was all she had.

And you like the way he looks at you.

Shit, who wouldn't? He stared at her the way a starving man eyes up a fresh apple pie. No doubt there were dreams of taking a good hard bite into a round cheek or two. The fantasy drew goosebumps up her arm, his breath washing over her skin just before...

"You have a washer and dryer?"

Kristen shook off the dream as soon as it came. "Yeah," she waved towards the only conciliation she insisted upon. Furniture could be mostly thrift and scavenged, appliances minimal, but she needed a washer and dryer. She didn't have time to keep trekking back and forth to a laundromat and people were less likely to ask about blood stains in her apartment.

At the moment the dryer was rolling through a stack of clothing in order to get rid of both the thrift store perfume of dust and incense, as well as that chemical new clothing smell. She needed her wardrobe to appear worn in and fast. "Lucky me, the old tenant left them here. Who am I to argue?"

He watched the rather newer appliances work through the cycle, the dryer thumping a bit as her mass of pants probably wadded together. Cullen turned to the side, and sighed, "This must be the board."

Kristen smiled painfully as he inched the ironing board up and down a moment. Secreted in a back closet designed to hide the washer and dryer behind an accordion door, the ironing board looked as if it had been screwed into the wall rather quickly. When Cullen released his grip it landed with a satisfying thud.

"Hm," he dug a hand against the grit of his chin while inspecting the top latching mechanism. Kristen did her best to not be conspicuous while sliding further away. Maker, what she wouldn't give for half of those gadgets the movies invented. A knock out gun would be wonderful, or amnesia spray.

"Ah," Cullen crowed, "I think I know what did it."

Blessed Andraste, she sighed while he dug his head into the toolbox and began to lay out a various array of screwdrivers and wrenches. "I'm surprised it got you with the washer and dryer in the way?"

"Me too," she gasped out. "Didn't think a thing of trying to clean back here," Kristen raised up on her toes and began to reach back behind the washer. In doing so, the shirt lifted high on her back, her breasts pooling against the cool metal of the washer. With a slow turn of her head, her eyes glittered in the ones sizing up her body.

A wrench collapsed onto the tile floor, Cullen shaken out of his stupor when the blush rampaged up. "Next thing I know," she continued to explain, "bam, right against me."

In turning away from the washer, her body brushed so close to his she could almost feel it. That magical distance where contact seems so inevitable your brain supplies all the wondrous sensations of managing it. But she held that final few centimeters back and shrugged.

"Sounds..." he was fiddling with a socket wrench, twisting the socket back and forth in his fingers,
"painful. Uh, if I can get this fixed up then you shouldn't have to worry about that happening again."

She smiled in gratitude and slipped back to sit against the dryer. Its heat soaked up her bones as she watched Cullen begin to unscrew a pile of old bolts out of the wall. "I hope I wouldn't have to clean back behind there for a long while anyway."

Careful to lay each screw and bolt out as he undid them, Cullen got to work quickly sizing up the damage. "I never knew one should clean behind the washer or dryer."

"Worried I'm a terrible neat freak? That I shriek at the sight of dirt?"

Glancing back a moment, when those amber eyes fell onto hers, he sighed, "Perhaps."

"Well, just between us, when those amber eyes fell onto hers, he sighed, "Perhaps."

"Well, just between us, I happen to enjoy getting rather dirty under the right circumstances."

"Ah," no tools clattered to the ground this time. Instead a smirk lifted up that scar and she wanted to lap her tongue around it. Kristen had to settle for folding her hands across her chest while the man who came to her door unbidden continued to fix her place.

Was that what people dating did? Maker take her, but most of her knowledge was honestly born out of media. She never had someone bring her a can of chicken soup before, or buy a pack of chocolates because he saw them, or hold her hand in the rain. Sex she understood. That was...not always easy, but the mechanics were rather straightforward. This with hungry looks, and dry mouths, and sweaty palms was confounding, distracting, delightful.

"There we go," Cullen mused while rising up to his feet. He pushed on the ironing board until it rose up to the wall and stayed put.

"Wow," Kristen crowed in surprise. "It's not falling down."

"See here," he pointed to the top, "it couldn't snap back up because a spring was missing." Which she removed an hour earlier herself in the off chance anyone else wondered about her bruise.

Kristen leaned closer, a hand digging into Cullen's shoulder as she peered directly at the ironing board. After a breath, she nodded, "Uh huh," and her eyes swung over. There was no hiding his hunger at this distance, his strong hands practically itching to hurl down his tools and fill them with her. Made sense, a bit of handiwork for sex.

"Well, um," Cullen stumbled back a moment, fingers quickly yanking up screwdrivers and returning them to the box. "That should serve you for a time. But if it doesn't hold it might be best to take it down and get one you unfold yourself. To...to be safe."

He stood there, toolbox dangling at the side as if he really did just come over for that one little problem. Trucked clear, well, not clear across town. Clear across the borough, walked into the apartment of a woman he barely knew, and screwed in her ironing board. She should let him leave. Thank him profusely for his assistance, but get him out quick before he had time to wonder why she was still sleeping on a blowup mattress over a week at her new place.

That's what she should do.

Kristen drew her fingers up the side of Cullen's arm, trailing the dip and swell of the muscles that raced to her unnecessary rescue, before bundling into the shoulder of his shirt. With barely a yank, she tugged him to her lips. Their mouths bounced off each other a moment, struggling to find the right starting point, but when they did...
A loud bang broke from the floor and she looked down quickly to find his toolbox clattered onto the tile. Cullen stared as well, his cheeks pinking at the foolish move and a hand ruffling towards the back of his neck. Grabbing onto it, Kristen guided his palm away from his awkward tic right to her breast.

"Blessed Maker," he moaned, his forehead skirting against hers while those fingers... Andraste save her, those fingers would be her undoing. He tucked in tight, scooping against the edge of her breast into the armpit and trailing down. Forming a shelf under her breast with his palm, Cullen curled his other hand back to cup her ass.

She broke from the kiss to press deeper against him, her lips darting near his ear. At first the touch was soft and sweet, cradling her from behind. But when he began to increase the pressure a bit, she lapped her tongue against his earlobe and squirmed. "Harder," she begged in a whisper.

It seemed to take a moment to filter through his brain, the man more gentle giant than pillaging crusader. She clung to him, uncertain if he'd... "Blighted hell!"

The pinch was deep into her asscheek, his nails scraping against the skin under her panties. For a moment those amber eyes whipped towards her face in concern and she smiled wickedly, "Do it again."

A smile lifted that succulent scar up higher and the man ignored her breasts in order to grab both hands on her ass. The pinches were slow coming, often followed up by tender caressing while she'd be either kissing his lips or panting in an exquisite torture against him. Maker, she wanted to feel his teeth biting down next. Or a quick slap of a... Bit slower there. No reason to scare him off.

Cullen buried his face into her neck, his nose breathing in the shirt while his lips pressed kisses to her clavicle and his teeth nibbled on her skin. A whimper started up in her throat, the origins of which began sometime when she ran into him in the park. She knew she was wet in the shower, hoping the cold water would calm her blood. Now it all came roaring back because that libido couldn't be put in a corner.

His fingers stopped their pinching and flattened against her ass. She drew his face up to stare into those eyes that were aching for more, for her. Burying her lips into his, when a grunt of focus erupted below that adams apple, Kristen was lifted into the air. She gasped in surprise while he hefted her up and placed her on top of the thumping dryer.

Extra heat clung to her naked legs and rose up to join with the one increasing inside of her. She wiggled back and forth to try and savor it, becoming more aware of how raring to go she was. Cullen's fingers drifted back to her breasts, less teasing the nipples and more promising them a house in the country with a white picket fence. By the void. He was too good at that. Far too good. Someone had been training him, on a monastery in a remote mountaintop. Nipple monks.

She wanted to feel his lips on them, have his teeth graze against the tips before trying to swallow her breast whole. When his hands moved towards the hem of her shirt and started to lift, she twisted away and instantly yanked it back down. "Uh," she blinked at the move, shame rising up her stomach at how he looked so shocked and concerned at her sudden betrayal. "I...I don't want you to see me with, ya know, big ugly bruise all over there."

Because it's twice the size of what I lied could have caused it. And ugly. Very ugly.

"I think you're beautiful," he whispered, as if that was the problem.

Shit. What if he insisted? Maybe he'd be so lust mad he wouldn't notice? Boobs could be a good
distraction, naked ones doubly so, so...

"We don't have to do anything more," Cullen added, causing her jaw to drop. "Not if you're in
pain."

_Uh no. No, you are fucking me now. Especially after you said that._

Kristen lashed her hands out and grabbed onto his shirt. She tugged him closer, his hips knocking
so tight into hers she felt the bulge in his jeans glance against her hot labia. "I want to beg for you
to never stop pounding into me," she pleaded into his ear.

"That," he licked his tongue against his lips as if they suddenly dried out, "can be arranged." Cullen
shifted closer, his hands resuming their loving canvas of her body while she began to unbutton his
shirt. Andraste’s mercy, after this she was guaranteed to have a thing for flannel.

Midway down his chest, she felt him pause and look a question at her. Kristen lay her hand upon
the tuft of golden chest hair peeking out of the edges and sighed, "Not like you have a bruise to
hide."

His forehead brushed against the side of hers, a small chuckle erupting from those satiating lips. "I
suppose not," he admitted before beginning to disrobe himself. When the shirt landed somewhere
near his toolbox, Kristen yelped to herself. By the dark glow of a kitchen and then an even darker
bedroom she'd seen hints of what was under there, a flash of pale skin or curve where muscle
bulged below. Now, with the unforgiving laundry room fluorescent highlighting everything in its
wake it was impossible to look away.

She wasn't the kind to go for the no body fat, eats only egg whites for breakfast, noon, and dinner,
can't stop talking about Crossfit types. It was obvious that Cullen enjoyed exercising, those strong
muscles that'd no doubt wrestle criminals to the ground on display. But they were cushioned and
sanctified by a layer of fluff. Not much, just a little around his stomach and on the sides that she
wanted to dig her fingernails into. To lay her head against his pillowy pecs and follow that treasure
trail of hair down under his pants.

"Is," his voice threw her from her lusty fugue. "Is that..." he couldn't get the rest out, a hand digging
into his hair as if he had no idea that the man was beyond handsome. Beyond built for everything
she wanted. Beyond perfect.

Kristen wrinkled her nose at that thought popping into her head, but threw it away just as quickly.
Wiggling her hips back and forth, she yanked off her panties as an answer. As they fell to the
ground, landing right on top of the toolbox, she bunched her knees up a bit, dug her heels into the
dryer, and opened her thighs.

That little peek was enough to cause Cullen's jaw to descend, his eyes bulging as if he'd never seen
anything of its like in a long time. Shrugging, even as her cheeks lit up from embarrassment pride,
she waved her finger at him. "Your turn."

He didn't undo his pants but leapt forward to her. One hand slipped back around her waist, while
the other massaged into her calf and began to work up. She tried to focus on kissing him, on rolling
her tongue with his, but all her attention was on that hand kneading into her calf, then thigh. Like a
well practiced move, Cullen swung the palm of his hand under her ass -- slightly tickling the
uppermost thigh crease -- before a finger circled around the outside of her labia.

Instinctively, Kristen bit down on his lip. Not too hard, but she flinched at the move. Cullen
seemed to understand and, instead of rearing back or checking for blood, he plunged one finger
deep inside of her. "Maker's breath," he gasped into her mouth, "how are you so wet?"

"Special talent," Kristen grinned wickedly. Her fingers circled down his stomach, sure enough dancing through the golden fields before landing upon the waistband and digging in. Without being able to see it, she undid his belt and button on the jeans. As the zipper tugged down, she felt his cock slide into her hungry palm. It rested there a moment, happy to be tenting up Cullen's underwear, but clearly hoping to see more of this big, wide world.

"Protection?" he whispered in her ear and she froze.

In truth, she had two kinds of birth control inside her. Both a copper IUD and the use of pills to keep all those pesky menstruations out of the way of work. But it was always good to play it safe with contacts, both in the event they are carrying who knew what and because you wouldn't see them again. "It's uh..." she began, trying to remember where she tossed that barely touched box of condoms thinking she'd never need them again.

His lips spread a smile against her cheek and he reached towards his back pocket. While cracking open his wallet, Kristen watched in confusion. Was he going to give her money to run down to the store? When he tugged a square foil wrapper out of it, she sighed. Right. That made some sense.

"Came prepared, did you?" she asked while brushing her lips against his jawline. She couldn't entirely blame him. He did come over to fix something of hers, it wasn't a complete shock they'd wind up naked.

Cullen shrugged, "Thought to update the stocks again and have a backup just in case." He paused, both hands fumbling around with the condom as if he had no idea how to get into it. Was he feeling shame? Or regret at thinking ahead?

"Well," Kristen smiled while plucking up the condom, "I am one lucky girl." She broke it open while Cullen worried down the last of those pesky clothes in the way. As she guided sheathing latex onto engorging cock, he cupped a hand around her jaw and kissed her long and hard. Maker, may the fuck be the same.

Sliding her legs along his hips, she savored in the glide of his cock right against her lips. Just the hint of it right there, ready to plunge deep was driving her mad. Cullen glanced down a moment, getting a feel for the distance, when he suddenly whipped his head up and those amber eyes burned in hers. She shuddered at the base of her spine from a look in them she could scarcely understand.

"Sweet Maker," she gasped as he thrust himself inside of her. Shallow at first, Cullen grabbed onto her calves and hefted them higher. That gave him better access, his cock sliding deeper until it glanced against her g-spot. Or what she assumed was the g-spot. It made her tongue spark and eyes roll into the back of her head so it was a something spot.

"Do it," Kristen ordered.

Fuck me. The thrusts began slow, as if he was trying to make a penis based map of her vag. But as she dug her heels tighter into his spine and pulled him closer, Cullen got the hint. Those amber candles shut tight as he sucked in a breath, his cock digging deeper and deeper to electrify her. A small twinge of pain erupted on her side, but Kristen shook it off. She could ride out a bit of pain in order to keep riding this fun.

"Tell me how you want it," slipped from his lips. He didn't slow a moment in his thrusts, but his eyes burned in hers.
"Harder," she commanded.

"Granted." Her ass began to knock back against the dryer, the warm tremors from below nothing compared to what was ratcheting up her body. By the void! She inched higher up, her breasts bobbing as the thrusting drilled into her. Suddenly, Cullen's hands slipped off her legs and slammed into the dryer beside her.

She jumped at the sound, but it drew his cock so deep she wanted to scream in ecstasy. Too bad her side was also being pulverized by his body. But, that body was doing amazing things to hers. She could handle it. Ignore the pain spidering up the side of your torso, focus only on the heat pooling in your loins and making its way up your stomach. Not a problem, not a problem at...

"Wait," she gasped, her vision growing spotty for once not due to a world bending orgasm. He froze in an instant even as sweat beaded up on his brow. "Sorry," Kristen winced, knowing how badly this would go. "I...my bruise is..."

Tipping her head towards it, Cullen followed suit before wincing. A shaking hand ran back through his hair as he slid himself out of her, "Maker's breath, I'm so sorry for..."

She wasn't listening to his unnecessary apology, her eyes were all on that cock. It looked a good inch greater in diameter than when it slipped inside of her. Be a shame to watch it wither away without getting a proper finish. Kristen slid off the dryer, Cullen stepping back to give her room. But she didn't rise to her feet, instead she dropped to her knees.

"What are...?" he asked as if he had no idea what a blow job was.

Curling her palm under his balls, she let both of them sway back and forth in her hand while gently tugging on the skin. The soft hair wafted against her lifelines and Cullen gulped in more air. He had to have been so close before she called it off. With a large O, she circled her finger and thumb around the base of his cock. Large enough it barely glanced against the skin pulsing for more, she shrunk up her grip until nestling it tight, right under the head.

Ignoring the latex smell and taste, she lapped her tongue around the crown taking extra care to give a little bit of special attention to the frenulum. A hand dug into her shoulder, gripping tighter to steady himself while he tipped his head back. Kristen smiled a moment to herself before she opened her mouth wide and plunged him deep. Okay, it was a little hard to ignore the chemical taste, but feeling him quiver was worth it. Her tongue swiveled in a back and forth pattern, curling its way back up towards the head while her hand went the opposite direction.

Clearly not expecting such a double whammy, Cullen was gasping for air and muttering something under his breath. It almost sounded like "please." Probably enough torturing there, I. Best finish him off. Tucking her teeth in safely behind her lips, she plunged as deep as she could. Her hand made up the rest of that stretch, both locked together as they began the necessary friction up and down his cock.

It shuddered a moment, or maybe the man holding tight to her did. She increased the motion, her grip and lips locking in tighter until...

"Blighted void," Cullen cursed above her as his wet cum splattered into the tip of the condom. Kristen held on a bit longer, her lips forming a softer kiss goodbye before she popped off and landed on her ass.

Maker's breath, that was always hell on the knees. She moved to try and rub away the red marks the linoleum dug into her skin, when a voice rumbled above her. "How do you...? I don't even, I
can't..." Cullen's praise or damnation froze as he began to work the condom off. Tying it up, he held onto the little baggie, his eyes quickly turning uncertain.

"Here," she hefted a hand out to him and he happily helped her up. "I do have a trashcan, at least." She moved to take it away, but Cullen locked a hand around the side of her waist and pulled her in for a kiss. No doubt she tasted of latex and herself now, but he didn't seem to care. His tongue swirled around with hers, his fingers kneading into her asscheek but the pain that erupted in her side pretty much made that orgasm dead on arrival.

Well, there's always next time.

After dropping off the proof she let herself make another contact, she turned to find him still standing naked with his underwear and pants around his ankles. It was so damn adorable, honestly. Hot too. That was an ass you could bounce a bolt off.

"You, um," he gulped, his eyes looking slightly frosted over from the sex. "Your bruise?"

"It's okay," she lied, back to gritting her teeth. "Just a, bodies being bodies."

"Your body is..." Whatever he was going to say he swallowed down fast as he realized he was still naked. While grabbing up his pants, he noticed her underwear and tossed them to her.

"Such a gentleman," Kristen didn't entirely joke. It was a shame most gentlemen weren't like him.

After buttoning his jeans and trying to stuff his still happy at the world cock into place, Cullen sighed, "I try, at least."

She didn't know why, but she swept across the floor and wrapped her arms around him in a side hug. Maybe it was the defeat in his voice, or the lingering effects of a burst of oxytocin, or just wanting to be normal for a moment. Kristen buried her head into his chest, lost in the smell of him while he began to comb through her hair.

"Thank you," she said. His fingers paused a moment, head cocking in confusion. "For coming here." For remembering me. "And fixing the evil ironing board."

"I don't know that it's evil," Cullen mused before he buried his face into her cheek, "just a miscreant who needs to be scared straight."

She could stay like this for an eternity.

No, you can't.

Why not?

You know you. Your life is action, constant movement, never settling, never staying in place, and saving the damn world. Staying means others suffer. Others watch their parents burn before their eyes.

Damn.

Sliding out of the hug, Kristen smiled. "That was...wonderful, but if I'm keeping you from anything important."

He parted a finger down her mussed up hair, sliding the tendril back to where it belonged, "Not particularly. What of you? I'm certain you are busy with other matters." Now he glanced around at
her empty apartment, no doubt wondering what was taking a woman so long to move in.

"Yes," she sighed, well aware of the looming schedule about to fill her days.

"When does that job of yours start? Which, I'm sorry I forgot what it was."

Kristen smiled, she hadn't told him because there had been no new job. "In two days, at DW enterprises."

"That's...fancy," his tone shifted subtly as if he wasn't certain what to make of that.

"Not really. More paper to push, less politicians to deal with, more business pricks in fancy suits."

Cullen chuckled, his hands sliding back around to hug her. Just a bit longer here. It's so warm and safe. Safe? Did she ever really know what safe was? "Well, I wish you the best of luck dealing with such pricks."

*I rather enjoyed dealing with yours*, she thought to herself. Her eyes darted around the place. There was a lot to set up yet. Not just in the pseudo-apartment but in building bugs to slip around the office. Still...

"Hey," Kristen looked up at him, "I have a delivery crew coming in an hour, but want to get some food quick?"

She knew that even if this mission ended in disaster or triumph, even if she walked away and her existence faded as quickly from Cullen's memory as it did everyone else, there was one burning fact: all her life she would never forget that smile. "Yes," he placed a quick kiss to her forehead, "I'd love to."
He'd been putting off this appointment for far too long. Cullen shifted on the chair, fingers impotently jabbing at his phone without looking at it. A handful of magazines lay stretched out on the table in front of him, most looking like they hadn't been touched in months. Maybe even years. Buried below the gossip rags and home decorating that amounted to "make everything blinding white then never live inside of it" was an old Dragon Racers magazine. Meant for kids, it was stuffed full of games and treasure hunts, but the front cover always had this fat dragon with wheels instead of arms and legs.

No idea what pushed him to reach for it, but Cullen let his phone settle into his lap while he hovered near the child's entertainment. "Mr. Rutherford?"

He sat up instantly, his guilty eyes whipping towards the receptionist sitting primly behind a swooping desk. When the errant hand began to move towards the nape of his neck, Cullen gulped. That was the surest way to tell her he was up to something.

"He'll see you now," she said instead, her soft eyes crinkling on the side as if she wanted to laugh at him but knew this wasn't the time or place.

Nodding, Cullen rose out of his chair. He had the presence of mind to bring a change of shirt for this, but forgot pants. It felt strange to have one half of the uniform clinging to him, the belt lighter than usual without his typical gear to drag it down. Almost as if this was business instead of personal, far more personal than he liked.

This won't get any easier if you wait. Sucking in a breath, he turned the doorknob and walked straight into an easy going office. Cullen hadn't been in many in order to properly compare, but they all had that 'I am trying to make you feel at peace' screamed into your skull decor. However, while the paints were neutral and the lines soft, there was an underlying richness that wasn't strictly necessary. No doubt that small statue of orbs in the corner was both real and worth more than his
Cullen patted his fingers together while filling the doorway like a slasher monster. Perched at the mahogany desk, his appointment was busy scratching something down with an elegant jerk of his hand. He always wore these complicated outfits, even a sweater in the dead of winter would come with buckles or beading. It made Cullen itch instinctively just thinking about it.

"Ah," he finished whatever he was working on and lifted his head. The finger clinging to a pen circled over the thin, curled mustache as he smiled, "Please, have a seat."

So much for running away. "Doctor Pavus," he began while sliding into the padded chair that so many others had picked and worried at.

"As I have said numerous times before, and fear I shall need to continue insisting, call me Dorian."

The man wanted to be friendly, as if this was a good time for Cullen. As if he enjoyed shredding apart his mind for someone else. He sighed, when the soft sound of a door closing whipped his head back. Cullen forgot to shut it on his way in, necessitating someone else to. The receptionist maybe.

"Still on alert? You're safe here," Pavus smiled while folding his hands across the desk.

"I'm fine," Cullen grumbled out, wishing he didn't have to be here. Some days he prayed for such an intervention but short of the Maker granting him divine peace that seemed unlikely.

"If that were true, I doubt you'd have come to me," Dorian pulled out the notebook full of Cullen's secrets and began to jot a few things down. Terrified of doors now? perhaps. "How has your work been keeping you? Life bustling back and forth in the blue and blacks must be exciting?"

He was mocking him. He was always mocking in that sort of lighthearted 'No, no, you misunderstand. When I called your mother a whore I was only implying that with her Maker-gifted looks she could make a lot of coin.' Cullen had been to a few psychiatrists over the years, some of the gruff almost tough love variety, others far too touchy feely for his taste. Doctor Pavus was no doubt an infuriating man to suffer in a personal circle, but he could drag things out of the dark recesses of Cullen's mind that needed to be burned.

The fact he was the only psychiatrist in a fifty mile radius that his healthcare plan covered more or less doomed him to this fate. Drumming his fingernails on the chair's armrest, Cullen stumbled to find an answer. 'It's fine' never got him far. "Not as busy as we feared," he answered instead.

"Oh yes, those murders. Ghastly beyond belief. To burn to death in such a fashion, it must be horrific to suffer."

Cullen shook his head negative, his teeth biting into his lip while he stared through space.

"You're saying it's not horrific?" the pen froze, Dorian finding his answer curious.

"No," Cullen lifted his eyes, "only that they weren't burned to death. The bodies were burned after they were killed, no doubt to try and hide the evidence."

"Ah," he smiled under his mustache and resumed writing. Sometimes Cullen wondered what went down there. Pavus offered to show him once, as a sort of trust building bs, but Cullen refused. In truth, he feared more if people would see in him what he knew was already buried deep inside.

"Have there been any lapses while at work? Triggers to set you off?"
Cullen shook his head. It'd been a relatively easy couple of months since he last sat in this office giving the same report. He never would have come in the first place if not for the union. We'll happily accept veterans but... That but came with a few strings, ones a crafty man could weasel out of and he'd tried for a year or two. Then along came Captain Cassandra, and she insisted that he keep himself in tip top shape in all forms. No matter how infuriating of a workout it required.

"Good, good," Dorian folded his hands on the desk and looked right into his eyes. "What about at night?"

Cullen sneered. Day wasn't so hard for him, oddly enough. There could be sounds, some smells but the people around him helped to keep him grounded to the here and now. It was when he was alone in the darkness that the past threatened to swallow him whole.

"A few times," he confessed, wincing at each failure. He'd wake out of a living nightmare to find his hands clenched as if they were covered in blood, and his heart pounding. His entire body believed that it had to flee, to save him from the looming nothing in his apartment. Even sleeping with a light on didn't stop it, couldn't pierce through that week of eternal darkness.

A hand landed on his shoulder and Cullen jumped in the chair. Fuck, he hadn't even seen Dorian move. Those oddly grey-green eyes were staring deeper into his as if trying to pierce through all the flesh to find the withered chunks of his soul. Maybe chop them off in the hopes something new would bud off.

"Have you been doing the exercises during an attack?" Doctor Pavus asked.

"Yes," Cullen said softly. Sort of.

That damn doctor caught on instantly, "By yes I assume you mean you attempt them, then burn out." Dorian pinched into his nose a moment, bumping up the stylish oval reading glasses he kept perched there. "I understand that this is a long and difficult process, and you are a stubborn man."

Cullen sneered at that, but Dorian only snickered.

"Try and find me a friend or family member who wouldn't agree? Trust in it. Give yourself some leeway and credit on occasion. A little failure now and then isn't the end of the world. And if you need another script for..."

"No," Cullen insisted, his head snapping up fast. He despised being on that pill, even as everyone else in the industry raved about its effects on those coming back from the war. It warped himself into a-a brick, a brick in a sock that would club anything in its way. A cold, heartless bludgeon.

"Fair enough," Dorian drifted back. That was the other reason Cullen suffered Dr. Pavus, out of them all he was the only one to agree that taking him off it was for the best. Though the aftershocks still shuddered his body from time to time. "I ask that you keep up the exercises as we discussed. If they grow worse we may have to look into a group class, yes yes, I already know how you despise the idea. It might still do you good to commune with others for a minute or two outside of work."

Knowing that was the send off, Cullen rose to his legs. In general that was a rather easy session, and he didn't even have to talk about...

"Oh, right," Pavus said, causing Cullen to pause, "I nearly forgot to ask about your personal life."

Shit. "What of it?" he growled to hide his trepidation.
"With you, is there one?"

"Yes. Sometimes. I go out with friends to watch a game." Ask him. Tell him. It was why you finally made the damn appointment in the first place. Cullen's head twisted to the side and he sighed, "There is also a woman."

Dorian perked up instantly at that, his mustache climbing higher along with the smile. "A woman in your life? For how long?"

"A month or so," Cullen grumbled as if he didn't know it down to the day like some pimply high schooler. Because that's what you feel like around her, back to that stripped clean young man before life smothered you in moldy rags.

"She's...she's someone from my hometown who moved here recently and," he swallowed, trying to find any way to turn his mush of thoughts into something coherent. And I love watching her eyes burn into mine, her fingers sliding along a ketchup packet before tearing off the end, a little giggle she gives whenever her feet are touched.

Pavus shifted a moment, his head tipped down, "Have you two had...intimate relations?"

He snorted, tossing his head back at the absurdity, but Cullen couldn't deny a burn rising on his cheeks. He was an adult, had been for quite awhile. Doing adult things shouldn't be beyond the norm. "Why? I rather doubt that that would trigger my... What does it matter?"

His grey eyes narrowed a moment on him, "Has she remained the entire night?"

And there it was. Your big problem, your great lie you were trying to hide like wet sheets torn off the bed in the morning. Cullen nodded, winced, and admitted, "A few times." Six. Six times she'd curled her body against his as if he was the only other person in the world.

"You know what I'm going to ask next," Pavus said, his head tipping to the side so that floppy hair of his shifted.

Cullen took a slow breath, his eyes screwing up tight. "Yeah, it happened. I had them when she was in the bed with me."

"Does she know?"

"No!" Cullen gasped before trying to walk it back to a whispered, "No, I haven't told her. I would wake early, usually before dawn and...ya know," Pass it off as him making breakfast, maybe working out a bit. Anything but the truth, that he couldn't sleep for fear of the monsters lurking under his brain.

Dorian unfolded his arms and stepped closer. For a moment Cullen locked tight, afraid he might try to hug him, but the doctor only patted him on the shoulder. "You shall have to tell her before there's an incident that she has a front ring seat to."

"Right, sure," because that's an easy one to talk about. Hey, I know we've only been seeing each other for a month, but I'm fucked up. My brain. Yeah, soldier stuff. Some bad soldier shit. But, don't worry. That doesn't mean I'm going to grab a gun and shoot you up. More tremble in the corner for awhile and bite my nails down to nothing.

So sexy there, Rutherford. She's certain to run out the door before putting her pants on.

"You are concerned?" Dorian asked, his groomed eyebrow denting upward like a pyramid.
"Because the relationship is new or..." His words dangled a moment, Dorian's eyes shifting over him as he swung his hands back and forth.

The door is right there. You could dash out, tell the Captain you did your time, got a little happy face sticker for effort and all that. He felt trapped, as if the tasteful rug turned to quicksand and gobbled up his feet. Cullen closed his eyes and did his best to not listen to the anxiety banging on his brain. It didn't much matter how far he ran, the damn doctor knew too much.

Dorian slid over to his desk and began to rummage around in a drawer. His voice percolated above the movements in that clinically untouchable way, "While I can appreciate your trepidation given past experiences..."

At that Cullen snorted. Everything in here was his past experiences.

Sensing his patient's growing restlessness, Dorian whipped his head up and stared directly at Cullen. "You are not in the same space you were during your marriage. You've worked hard to reach your current summit and should congratulate yourself more for it."

He couldn't really blame her for running. In truth, he often wondered why she stayed as long as she did. There were lots of better men out there for her that didn't come with a train-car sized level of baggage.

"But," Dorian continued, trying to drag Cullen out of his stupor. He lay a pamphlet into his patient's hands. 'How To Talk About the Warning Signs of PTSD' For the love of the Maker... "It would be in your best interest to tell this woman something. The longer you keep a secret in a relationship the more likely it is to explode when revealed."

He knew that. Knew a lot of things that he would run across thedas to avoid. Cullen glared down at the stock-photo image of a man in a lab coat talking to a seated woman dressed in a sweater vest. They made it look all sterilized and easy. As if combating an episode only required a little tap of the fingers, or maybe a gentle hug. As if weeks or months of work couldn't be undone in a second if he watched the wrong movie or walked into the wrong room. As if anyone would put up with that.

"I'll think about it," Cullen said noncommittally. He slipped the pamphlet into his back pocket, making plans to toss it in the trash once he got outside the office. Last thing he needed was bringing it back to the station.

"Good," Doctor Pavus twitched his nose, shifting his reading glasses up a bit before he smiled, "is there anything else weighing upon you that you wished to discuss?"

"No," he shook his head, well aware that the time was ticking to an end quickly. These fifteen minute sessions were pretty much worthless. Dorian didn't obviously glance to a clock on the wall, but Cullen could feel him shifting gears for the next nutcase brought to his door.

"Then I shall see you at your next appointment, Cullen," he smiled while sliding back to his desk. Pen in hand, he slid from a perch on the edge to jot down more notes on Cullen's file. Scraping his fingernails against the palm lines a moment, Cullen trudged towards the door. He was supposed to meet Kristen tonight, nothing fancy, no big date or the like. Nothing huge to live up to. Maybe...maybe it was time to tell her everything wrong with him.

"Oh," Dorian lifted his head, Cullen freezing in the opened door to look back, "And I do hope you can take the time to properly enjoy yourself with the lady. Sex can do wonders for the self esteem."
Growling under his breath for the man laying it out like that in such derogatory fashion, Cullen slammed the door on his way out.
She was already despising being a red blooded, average citizen who woke up every day bleary eyed, crammed onto a subway downtown, bustled about at a job that a barely trained labrador could handle, then stumbled home after dark only to do it all again. Kristen had no idea what full backstory they came up with to fill out her resume, but her experience with office life topped off at her running through empty ones just before a floor gave out. The idea that there was a serious row occurring between wall slots because someone refused to clean out the microwave confounded her. It was obviously Gary, anyone could tell by the stench of chili on his breath and stains on his cuffs.

Blend in. You're supposed to be invisible here. She sneered while prodding at the keyboard and watching a series of numbers jerk back and forth. Forget Gary, what she truly wished was to rip out this ancient operating system and feed it to a volcano. For two days, she'd had to reboot her computer every damn fifteen minutes, but her complaining got her nothing more than a shrug. Maybe the company cared about her getting this data in as much as she did.

"To the void with you!" she shouted while slamming a palm against the desk. It hit harder than she meant, sending ripples through the wood until a stack of folders tumbled onto the floor. Damn it. Kristen slid off her chair, aware that more eyes than usual were trying to peek in on her little island. While grabbing up a pile of empty folders that she could probably send back that way and no one would notice, she heard footsteps approach.

"What's the problem?"

Her head cracked back fast, eyes traveling up towards a very familiar face. Freckles and blonde-red hair framed inquisitive hazel eyes. H had taken her disguise up a tick by dredging the bottom half of her hair in blue dye. She was also dressed in one of those ironic t-shirts where the joke is that someone combined two nerdy things that had nothing to do with each other. This one involved an old soda can that could fly.
"What are you...?" Kristen began while staggering to her feet.

"Doing here?" Harding tipped her head to the side, the blue ends of her hair skirting against her shoulder. "IT sent me to take a crack at your computer."

Kristen nodded her head, quickly catching on as she stepped back to give the woman room. They did say there were others working this beat. Not a big surprise to find H among them, but it'd be nice if she could be told anything. For the past month Kristen behaved as if there was no agency. She received no contact, no instructions, just the order to blend. It wouldn't be so infuriating if her very reason for being here in the first place was MIA.

"There we go," Harding announced while sliding back from the creaking computer tower. "Should work better now. Name's Lacy, by the way."

"Kristen," she said fast, her eyes darting around the room to see if anyone cared. Big surprise, none were looking her way. Though, she was happy to see something other than a screen of death flashing upon her monitor for once.

Harding stumbled to her feet and wiped at her knees, "You know there's this coffee house not too far from here. Down at the corner across the street."

"Ah, I see."

The IT girl swiped a bit of grease off her nose and smiled, "Just saying you look like someone who could use a break."

Kristen nodded that she understood. While Lacy vanished back to the bowels of the building where they kept the IT group, she sat at her desk, silently plucking at the keyboard. After giving it a half hour, she stumbled to her feet and glanced towards her supposed supervisor.

"Mr. Segritt, I need to step outside for a quick call."

He waved a hand at her, unimpressed. In truth, she need not even bother with that much of an excuse. It was unlikely he'd notice she was missing unless he stared directly at her desk. Even then, a well placed coat could obfuscate her exit. She didn't stick to anyone.

By the time Kristen wandered near the door of the coffee shop, she spotted a grey light beam glancing off blue tips and turned towards one of the tables. Positioned near enough to the street so that anything they said could be drowned out by the never ending traffic, Harding had her back to the wall and both eyes in every direction. That left I with the unfortunate choice to put her back to the action or sit right beside H as if this was a cozy meeting.

"Well, well," Harding placed down whatever foamed over drink she got, some of the cinnamon speckled concoction clinging to her top lip. "Didn't think you'd be making it down in time."

"What are you doing here?" she asked again. The tremor in her voice evaporated without the looming corporate drudge hanging off her neck.

Harding snickered and sat up while Kristen took a seat catty-corner. It didn't give her the best view, but she could see some of the city reflected in the window. Inside was warm browns and the pseudo-comforting smell of caffeine in all its forms. Out here the grey world sloshed through the last of the autumn rains, people huddled into coats and scarves while rushing past to get anywhere else.

"You think this would all be a one woman show, I?"
"No," she grumbled to herself because she had done solo missions in the past, "but given the fact that our mysterious mark is still out of the country, stapling you into place seems rather overzealous."

"They have a plan," Harding sighed, far more willing to accept the orders from L blindly. "Besides, word is he's going to return soon and something's up."

Kristen narrowed her eyes and glared at the reflection. Above her the emblem DW Enterprises shone through the misting greys like a white beacon of hope. All she could get out of her month of training and listening to sexual harassment videos was that the company moved money around. That would describe every single business in this city. The to whom and where was always of interest, but she'd seen no hint of a secret hidden laboratory, nor of DW shuffling off funds to finance the 'Turn People Into Rock Creatures' project.

"We ready to move?" Inquisitor demanded, shifting on her chair.

Harding snorted, "Hardly. But I thought I should make contact, establish it anyway."

"Are there others in the building?" Kristen asked, then winced at how that looked. She should be the lead on this, but she didn't even know who all was involved.

Once again dodging, Harding shrugged, "Some. How many cameras did you get me inside?"

"Ten."

"That's it? You've had a blighted month."

"And I'm trying to be inconspicuous. I got all of them planted in the high traffic zones in the parts of the building someone like me would be allowed to go. When we have a reason I'll hop on up to the higher floors and see what I can do."

Harding chuckled, "Reason? We wouldn't be here if there wasn't a reason, but...fine, fine." She held her hand up and bowed her head, "You know your cover best."

It was an excuse they used often. I have to do this for the sake of my cover. I must purchase this lest people grow suspicious. I should bed him or else... No one would push too hard when put to it because they didn't want their own sins dredged up.

"Think you can get to the top floor?" Harding whispered suddenly and Kristen turned to look over her shoulder.

"Of course." It was an observation deck with a few piddly waterfalls, and plants, and murals -- open to the public to walk around and gaze at the grandeur money could buy. "Anyone can get up there."

"Not that one," Harding shook her head slowly. "There's another, heavily fortified, complete with secret elevator. I got a quick look at the plans that we mere mortals aren't supposed to know about."

At that Kristen pursed her lips and stared harder. With a great mass of floors it was hard to tell which was level 99 and which 100, but it was possible that another was hidden above the false skylights in the arboretum. If so, she suddenly had a bit more respect for this Solas. All of her research could only dig up that he was a recluse billionaire, the type likely to be visited by three spirits every winter solstice. But a secret top floor took planning, and a serious assumption that you needed to keep out those who could easily break-in in the future.
"I'll look into it," she said, her eyes gleaming with the challenge.

"Well," Harding sighed, "whenever you get the chance. It's the waiting game now. I hate this stage -- sit on your ass half the day, grit your teeth when people tell you to get them a donut, then try to not shoot them later when the raid happens."

Kristen nodded in complete agreement. She knew that gathering information was vital, it was best to go in as prepared as possible and not the fantasy of one man, one gun, a fuck ton of bullets, and prayer. But they weren't trained for sitting, none of them were. If left to pace around inside their proverbial crate too long, the lions grew restless fast.

At first Harding smiled, but that turned into a snicker, "Though, you got yourself a nice bit of distraction on the side."

Kristen blinked madly, her mouth drying as she raced to hide it all away, "What?"

Digging out her phone, Harding scrolled through a few screens before arriving on the social media site for Kristen Trevelyan that she in fact set up. Her finger pointed towards a picture of Cullen struggling to get a straw through the lid of a cup. Half of Kristen's shoulder was visible, as if she couldn't stop laughing while the poor grumbling man attacked his drinkware with everything inside of him.

"It's part of the cover story," she hissed instantly. "I couldn't easily dodge an old high school friend while remaining in the neighborhood. Especially one that he patrols."

"Sure, sure," Harding switched off her phone and dropped it safely in a pocket on her hip, "but he's easy on the eyes."

"I hadn't considered," Kristen was trying to walk back from this. She'd posted the images on purpose, well aware that companies look at social media sites as much as anything else. The last thing she wanted to seem was what she really was, a ghost. She just didn't want anyone to think twice about why she was nuzzled so close to the other man in the photo.

"F has," Harding whistled a moment and Kristen sneered.

"What did he say now?"

"You know F. Growl. Grunt. 'This is a mistake.' Stomp off and slam a door somewhere. But he was the one to point it out to me."

Kristen snickered at the thought, "You're not religiously checking on the profiles you created?"

"Please, I have my own crap to take care of. I think I've made a small country's worth of fake ids over the years and don't have time to keep track of them all." Her laughing faded a moment and she stared across the table at the nondescript woman trying to blend in with the rain. "Inquisitor," she whispered, "do you know how much fire you're playing with?"

Of course she did. She was baptized in it, bathed in more explosions than a single human should see in their lifetime. It was a job. Jobs came, jobs went. Growing attached was idiotic. Her hand dipped down to her purse and the phone inside where she kept that picture of Cullen and another two more, including one where they were kissing.

"I mean," Harding continued to speak, "F is scary when he stubs his toe, but jealous..."

She whipped her head up fast. "He is not jealous. He is..." she faded, barely aware of what she was
anymore. Hurting. They all were hurting. Broken pieces of a dirty and scuffed window. The shattered glass that sliced through the enemies without end but could never be touched by naked hands.

There you go, putting thoughts into others heads. No doubt Fenris is fine, only upset that you get to spend your days in a well heated and lit office while he prowls the damp dark alleys for monsters.

Kristen tipped her head and with finality said, "He's angry."

At that Harding snorted, "When isn't he? Fine, fine. Just a quick house call here, expect Solas to show up in two to five days. Yeah, I don't know why the schedule's so wonky. He seems to appear whenever he feels and changes plans on a dime. Always watching his back, no doubt." While Harding moved to gather up her stuff, Kristen began to walk towards the door of the coffee shop. It wouldn't look good if she trucked all the way down here without getting something.

"Hey," Harding spun in her seat and eyed her up, "if you're still banging the cop, why haven't you gotten me into the police server yet?"

Kristen swallowed hard. Her heart screamed out a reason while her brain another. The two were in constant argument about it whenever she was on the job, whether the fake one or real. But the moment she stepped into his arms, the heart won out each time. With a shrug, she smiled at Harding before slipping inside, "Keep forgetting."
"Hello, handsome," she smiled up at him while leaning in for a kiss. Cullen scooped a hand around her shoulder as if to protect her from the backswing of the door while Kristen walked into his place. Her purse plummeted onto the kitchen table and with both hands freed, she turned to properly swoop them around the man so fresh from the shower he smelled of hot soap. She wanted to bury her nose in his neck and breathe it in, but her stomach answered for her instead.

His eyes darted down to the grumbling a moment, before landing back in hers, "I'm guessing you're hungry."

"Tiny bit," she laughed, pinching her forefinger and thumb together for emphasis.

"Well, I've shown you all the places I know around here," he began, nudging a foot around the kitchen rug. It was odd for the bachelor pad to have such a thing. Maybe a donation to make the place a bit more homey?

Kristen pinched her nose and shook her head, "I don't really want to go out." People were watching her, people who needed to mind their damn business. Besides... She bent over a minute to rub into her exhausted calves, her feet grateful to be out of the oppressive shoes of the gilded working class. It wasn't until her neck hairs rose that she realized Cullen was watching her bend. He looked both surprised at her being able to accomplish such a thing, and rather ecstatic to watch.

Average, remember. You're nothing special.

"We could stay in," he was ruffling through his hair, scattering the last of the water droplets onto the shoulders of a hunter green henley. Maker's breath, was there any man who couldn't pull off a henley? They seemed to be designed to bring out the best in the male form.
Catching on that she was staring at something other than food, Cullen blushed a bit, "Order delivery. There's a lot of menus in that drawer there, or use Wilhelm."

Kristen wrinkled her nose at the app. Not that it wasn't useful when one was starving, but that it was as secure as hanging all your tax documents out the window to let them dry. How many times had they traced a pineapple, ham, and anchovy pizza only to burst in and take out their assailant in hiding? Shit, a potential's food preferences were listed on every data sheet next to height and weight. It tended to serve a lot better than eye color.

Whoever put down brown for Cullen's didn't stare deep enough into those amber fields of wheat. Shaking off the thoughts that kept circling around back to food, Kristen slipped out of her running shoes and padded into the kitchen. It was rather clean, save a pile of wrappers on a counter. But the stove barely looked touched, the burners black as onyx.

Digging into the cupboards, she started to search for potential sustenance. "I'd rather make something instead," she mused to herself. The first cupboard revealed boxes and boxes of pot noodles. Bachelor. Leaning over to the second, she found a few cups of the same damn instant noodle in salty broth water. Seriously?

"Is this all you have?" she asked while dangling a bag that insisted it tasted just like a gyro. She rather doubted that fact.

"Um..." Cullen was blushing, his head cranked back to the ceiling.

Returning the lying pack of freeze dried pasta to the cupboard, she sighed, "No cooking oil? No spices? Not even a can of soup in case you get sick?"

By the third unearthing of a few protein bars that looked barely touched and more of the magic noodle now with shrimp flavor, she gave up hope on stumbling across any basics and moved to the fridge. "That," Cullen whispered from his exile outside the kitchen, "I haven't had much time to restock..."

His words faded as she cracked open the fridge door. Smoke and dust should have poured out as this was no doubt a long sealed tomb, only recently unearthed in the century since its burial. Something very green and fuzzy that could have either once been an avocado or the head of a vengeful puppet rested front and center to Kristen's eyesight. Shaking off the tremble of it leaching forward and infecting her, she dug into the meat & veg drawers -- both empty save a half gone pack of hot dogs and something brown. Whatever that something brown was, it no doubt required a level 4 decontamination before it could be burned and then buried deep in the ground.

She began to reach for the freezer up top, when Cullen wrapped a hand around her waist. His face skimmed against her hair and she turned a caustic eye on him. He winced and sighed, "You're not going to find anything of worth up there either, I'm afraid."

"How can man live on pot noodles alone?"

"If you add a bit of hot sauce it really helps," he offered an explanation of a diet that would shame most college students. At least he had a few of the fancier microbrews in his fridge, that had to offer something of a vegetable portion by way of the barley. Maybe.

"You need to learn how to cook," she assessed instantly.

He blanched a moment and shifted on his heels, "Probably, I guess. I just never seemed to have the aptitude."
"If someone can figure out how to operate a car, they can catch on to the few basics of adding heat to water," she folded her arms, having no concept of why this was difficult. Cooking was a necessity beyond the field. This was surviving. Humans ate, humans found processed and burned flesh tasted better than raw. Humans learned to cook. Why wouldn't he pick up such a skill in his 30+ years of existing?

Her unrelenting insistence seemed to be wearing a bit thin, Cullen's lips flattening. Shit. What'd she do now? Boss a man around. That's frowned upon, probably. Stop walking into this like there's an obvious chain of command and you're at the top.

Smiling, she drew her fingers up through his hair and playfully wound one around a curl, "How about we try takeout instead?"

The glare didn't entirely vanish, but he softened as his arms wrapped around her body. "Okay," he whispered against her cheek before pressing a kiss to it. Kristen twisted her lips, impatient to catch a taste of him before he slipped away. "But now we have to decide what to get."

"Crap."

With one foot under her and the other lagging on the floor, Kristen rooted around in the bag that was quickly turning out to have nothing but napkins in it. Their plates lay scattered around them, some on the floor, others on the tables beside the couch. But the coveted one lay directly between them, a golden and crispy temptation sitting primly in the middle of the plate.

"Damn, that's the last one," she announced, her eyes darting over the final falafel, before wandering up to Cullen.

He clearly hungered for it too, but she could see the calculations running. "You should take it," he said. "You're a guest and all."

Hm. It was tempting. This was some of the best she'd had since Starkhaven, the only good thing to come out of Starkhaven in fact. But, the longing gliding around the edge of his eyes nearly did her in. How long since he'd had any food from the Free Marches? Or any food that didn't require a half a cup of water and a microwave?

"Tell ya what," she placed her elbow into the couch cushion and wiggled her fingers, "how about I arm wrestle you for it?"

"Arm..." Cullen scoffed, "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" she dug in deeper to try and entice him, causing the plate to slide a bit and bump into her arm. "You don't think a girl will fight for her supper?"

"This isn't..." He sighed, a hand wafting over his curls and a blush rising on his cheeks. With a shrug, he laughed and planted his own elbow on the other side of the plate. "All right, I guess."

Their trophy watched from below as both combatants clasped hands together. It was probably the most foolish place to do this, the couch sinking deeper as they had to adjust to keep level by scrunching down. Kristen kept it cool, putting a bit of force in her push while Cullen... The man was a blighted rock. He wouldn't push down at her, he just sat there like a wall. An impenetrable,
unbreakable wall.

His eyes darted over to hers, and she watched the confusion fade to slight enjoyment. They danced around her face, no doubt entertained with her clenched jaw as she struggled against a hurricane, then down her shirt. It was growing less subtle every time, a fact Kristen reveled in.

"I'm not sure how this ends," Cullen mused, his warm fingers digging into hers. She glanced over at him and fell right into his bicep. Even with the rather giving arms of his shirt, the muscle strained against the cotton, stretching the embedded pattern until it looked like deadly diamonds.

"With your arm bent over," Kristen said, her eyebrow and lip raised to back up such a boast.

"Oh?" he chuckled, when she began to increase her pressure. It'd been little more than an old man swinging a sack before. Now the strain was growing. The smile fell as he glanced down at their conjoined hands to find his was tipping towards him. She couldn't possibly hope to beat him, he started with too much muscle mass, but she trained for endurance. It was bred into her.

His worried eyes darted over towards her bicep, which was pumping a familiar burn into her system. That meant progress. That meant you were one step closer to victory. That meant...you're acting as if he's an enemy or a challenge. This isn't the agency, I. Back off. Let go.

Lashing out with her other hand, she scooped up the falafel and stuck it in his mouth. It was the opposite of a sexy food move, but Cullen blinked in surprise and the pressure between them evaporated into thin air. He bit down on the glorious fried chickpeas, crumbs scattering like sand onto the carpet, before bundling the rest in a palm and passing it to her.

"It only seems fair," he explained while she scarfed it down fast. "I admit, I am surprised that you like Marcher food."

"Oh?" she cracked an eyebrow. She'd been surprised that he agreed to eat it given his service and subsequent problems in Kirkwall. Not that she could voice those concerns as he had yet to tell 'Kristen' about his military time at all.

"Just, farm girl, not a lot of Marcher falafel stands in Honnleath," Cullen explained as if it were a puzzle he was trying to hammer in.

Kristen smiled, her brain whirring through a dozen options before landing fast. It was barely a breath between his question and her answer, not even a long enough pause to raise suspicions. "All my time living in VR. You either get used to all manner of ethnic takeout or...live on pizza for three years."

His smile hefted up the scar, always drawing her eyes to those lips. There wasn't anything particularly memorable about them in general. Rather average for a man of his background and age, but when he pressed them against her it left a tingle racing through her heart. A heat and tenderness cushioned them while they kissed and whispered against her skin. To look at they were boring, to touch them was divine which made turning away from them damn near impossible.

And you're staring at his face instead of talking. She turned towards the television he placed on an old computer cart across the way. After a few minutes of background news they'd let fill in the gaps of silence while they ate, Kristen wrinkled her nose. "I see Mayor de Fer is on a tear again."

"She does what she thinks is right for the city," Cullen said diplomatically.
She cocked an eye towards the man. "Who'd think a mage mayor would be the one calling for the
greatest restrictions on her very people? It's..." Unsurprising. In order to rise to the top, you can
either form a chain of hands guiding everyone to join you. Or you crush everyone else under heel
below you. Guess which was faster.

"Shit," Kristen whistled to herself, fully forgetting she wasn't alone, "I'm shocked the city even
elected a mage mayor not four years after..." Fuck. Damn it, you know his dossier. What are you
doing bringing that up? She winced again. Keeping in character should be second nature to her, but
in these quiet moments without the rush of people around them, she felt almost like herself around
him. And that was dangerous, that would ruin everything.

Cullen was gathering up the mess of food quietly, giving off clear warning signs that he did not
want to talk about any of this. Damn it, look at what you did? Reaching over, Kristen rubbed a
hand against his knee. He didn't pause in his impromptu cleaning until she climbed her palm all the
way up his thigh. As the litter scattered from his fingers, he turned over just as she planted a kiss
on those taunting lips.

A warm hand burrowed into the back of her hair, tugging on the downed brown waves until she
opened her mouth to gasp and let in his tongue. The garlic taste didn't bother her as she had the
same, both burrowing tighter into each other while his hands started to move towards her waist.
Cullen managed to untuck the half of her blouse she left stuck into her skirt before he abandoned
that to cup her face.

Kristen pressed him deeper into the couch, her body twisting to try and follow the larger man's fall.
As she was about to slide a leg over his hip, she heard a dulcet man in the distance say, "Many
believe that Solas will in fact be challenging Mayor de Fer in the next election." It was the Solas
that caused her to freeze and whip her head towards the screen. Was he back in town already? It
was unlike Harding to get it that wrong, but this man was like trying to nail pudding to a wall.
And you stopped kissing Cullen in order to stare at the tv. Shit. A blush burned on her cheeks and
she scattered off of him to the other side of the couch. "Sorry, sorry about..." Her brain could offer
up no lie. She could lie her way out of a dragon's den but for this there was nothing.

"Hearing your boss' name will do that," he smiled, a hand reaching back to smooth his hair. She
noticed the fingers were trembling a little. "I can kill the tv, or we could watch something on
Bonzo."

Kristen mentally narrowed her eyes while nodding to his request. While the soothing blue and
green screen for the online subscription network clicked on, she watched him. He was obviously
all for ripping her shirt off a moment ago, but now it was clear to every body language reading
neuron in her brain that he did not want to get physical. Was it the mage issue again? Or the fact
she 'worked' for a gabillionaire recluse who she'd yet to lay eyes on? Though, when she would,
there'd be less tripping and falling into his arms, more him tripping and falling onto her blade.

"Cullen..." she scooted closer as he swung his legs onto the floor and gripped tight to his knees. He
was pawing through the menuscreen as fast as possible, but at her voice paused and wary eyes
 glanced over. With a slow hand, she lifted his arm, placed it over her shoulder, and snuggled under
it onto his chest. "A movie sounds lovely."

"Right," he gasped as if the man had been drowning. Scrolling through the options, he began to
read off a few. Most sounded rather simpering but not unappealing, though the Bonzo algorithm
kept insisting they watch its latest critically acclaimed war drama. The last thing she wanted now
was to be confronted by the sound of bullets (albeit very quiet, movied up bullets) or blood. Quiet.
Calm.
"Stop!" she cried, her eyes darting to the screen. Cullen glanced down at her, before slowly scrolling back through the options. It couldn't be. Not after all this time.

Sweet Maker, it is!

He must have recognized the light shining in her eyes, because he landed on the right one and read the title aloud. "The Final Griffin. Isn't that a kids movie?"

"I adored this as a child," she smiled, more of the real light inside of her escaping out of the shell.

"Really?" he inspected the synopsis then frowned, "It's rather old."

"My...my grandmother would put it on to keep me busy and I'd watch it over, and over, and over. It was..." She blanched at realizing she wanted to tell him it was how she learned to speak his language. Blushing at nearly ruining everything for a puppet griffin in a movie from fifty years ago, she tipped her head down and shrugged, "It was my obsession as a kid. I wore out the tape so bad and..." Kristen sighed, her eyes misting over a minute at the thought, "I never thought I'd see it again."

"Well," he pushed a button on the remote and the screen faded to black, "that's a good reason to watch it."

"Really?" she turned to him, a squeal rising in her voice. Maker's breath, get a grip there, I.

That heartbreaking smile flitted against his lips and he cuddled her closer. After placing a kiss to her forehead, he whispered, "Yes."

"It's not that childish. There's a bog of doom that, I don't want to give anything away..."

Snuggled under his arm, a hand flush to his taut but full stomach, she fell into a blast from her childhood when all the blood was really tempa paint and the good guys got to go home. No doubt to Cullen's annoyance, they barely made it past the title screen before Kristen began to mouth along to the narration.

"Once the mighty griffins commanded the skies, their wings said to blanket the sun. Until, one day, they began to vanish without warning or explanation. Each faded from view, the memory of griffins flying through the clouds slipping out of time itself. All except for one. Hidden deep within the forests there stood the final griffin..."

It wasn't until thirty minutes in, when the main character finally meets the fabled griffin lost in the darkness that Cullen whispered, "You really do know all of this."

"Yeah," she sighed to herself, before gulping a moment. There was no possibility where this would be construed as normal. To torment a man to a child's movie on a date and recite along with it. She spent so much of her rare free time doing whatever she wanted the idea of including another in it felt alien.

"Look," she pushed out from under his arm, a hand rummaging around her downed hair while glancing up at him, "you, uh, we don't have to watch all of this. It was fun to remember something from so long ago, but it's..." Her breath whistled through her teeth as she watched the emotional reunion of protagonist and griffin after one nearly fell from a cliff. "Childish."

A happy ending -- so simple, so easy. It scarcely seemed possible anymore. Warm fingers drifted against her cheek, and Kristen turned it to fall into his eyes darkened by the old movie on the screen. "I don't mind," Cullen smiled. "The story's been interesting so far, lots of old fashioned
special effects you don't see anymore, and you seem to love it."

She did. Scooting closer to lay her head flush to his chest, Kristen bundled both arms around him and breathed in deep. She was enjoying this too much. But what was so wrong about that? The world was often a terrible place, who could damn her for wanting an oasis from it all?

They fell silent for another plot point, until she began to speak as if to her old self rather than to the man in the room, "My grandmother was the one to introduce me to it, play it all the time as much to keep me entertained as anything. I..." Lay under a bedspring half melted into the wall, fingers jammed in ears singing the song to herself so she wouldn't look up, she wouldn't watch fire char across her father's face. "I probably drove her nuts about it."

"That's kinda cute," he smiled, lips pressing to her forehead. His hands curled up and down her arms, rubbing her blouse until the friction threatened to catch the polyester on fire. That can't be normal. Something must be on his mind. Something he's been girding himself to speak of all night, judging by how he cut off the potential of sex. Does he fear pregnancy? That seems a reach.

Fear of commitment? She'd heard talk of that, but never seen it up close. Perhaps he was also being razzed by his fellows in the station about the pictures and would wish her to cease. That made some sense. At the far back of her brain trilled the fear that she may have been caught, but that seemed the least likely of all. If there were any thoughts of her being not who she claimed, he would have begun before dinner certainly.

"Cullen?" she whispered and he glanced down, his eyes wide with whatever was consuming his mind. "You're starting to burn through my shirt."

"Oh Maker," he launched his hand off her and dug it through his hair. "Sorry, sorry about that. I...I was thinking." The sentence ended there, the guilty hand trapped at the nape of his neck while he stared down at his lap.

She sat in place watching him, uncertain what to do. Asking him point blank would probably be considered rude. Cullen took in a cleansing breath, his eyes closed as he began, "Kristen, there's..." It froze instantly, the man shaking his head before turning to her, "There's something I've been wanting to tell you about for awhile."

When he fell silent again, she tried to prompt him with an, "Okay?"

"It's that I..." Cullen patted his hands together before curling both to his face. "I'm..." Whatever he was struggling to pry out seemed to be requiring his full force. She glanced a hand against his back, trying to rub away what was surely a massive knot.

His lips twisted up at that, and he turned to look into her eyes. "I haven't been seeing anyone else since we started dating," escaped quickly from his mouth.

Yes, I know. That was why you were chosen.

"All right," she said, having no concept of what he wanted for an answer.

"And...I don't want to see anyone else either," he continued, his knuckles softly bumping into her outer thigh while he shifted on the couch.

So what? That seemed a minor thing to tell her. He was free to do as he wished as far as she was concerned. Not as if she was lead on a mission and he was an underling. Why bother bringing it up with her?
"Um," Cullen winced, the knuckles ceasing to knock while his fingers danced upon the couch like startled spiders. "Do you... I mean, maybe you want to keep your options open." He faded instantly, the light in his eyes dimming and hope fleeing from his cheeks. What in the Maker's name was she missing?

Flipping away from her to stare at the screen, he grumbled, "I shouldn't have brought it up, it's only been a month."

He did not wish to see other people. Why should she care? Her options were considered open?

Oh blighted Maker! Of course.

Read a book on this shit, already.

"Cullen," she gasped as if someone punched her in the stomach, "I'm... sorry, my mind is exhausted from work and the train and. It took me a moment to..." Stop apologizing for it, that only drags out your obvious and strange ignorance. "Yes," she smiled, "I-I mean I don't want to see anyone else either. Not that I have been with anyone else, what with work and you pretty much taking up all my time."

"Really?" he turned to her as if she gave him a holy blessing, his eyes shining at her agreeing that there was no one else who caught her eye. "I admit I haven't done this whole, uh, locking it down part in a long time. And I thought that--"

Leaping over the small couch wasteland between them, Kristen silenced his stuttering with her lips. His teeth knocked against hers a moment before he caught on that she was trying to kiss him. Once that reached his brain, those tempting lips soothed and puckered against hers just how she craved.

"You're doing just fine," she smiled at him before plucking free another kiss. His hand cupped against her waist, trailing the hip and her skirt that was bunching up on the couch.

"I wouldn't go that far," Cullen mused, his forehead resting against hers. "But I'm glad, elated really that you agree with me to..."

"Shh..." she placed a finger to his lips, silencing him. His hand slipped further down her hip, landing upon the exposed section of thigh. Once it realized it found warm, supple flesh his fingers dug in. "Let's enjoy it," she smiled, putting more of her bodyweight upon him.

Cullen twisted on the couch to meet and catch her. His leg slid over the cushions and Kristen began to inch closer on her knees until she straddled him. All the while, her lips kept kissing against his, sucking the bottom one in before flickering her tongue to trace the scar. Cullen matched her hunger, his tongue sliding into her famished mouth to waft the wet heat into hers. He was already ramping up the wet heat in between her legs.

The hand holding onto her thigh slid under her skirt and made the quick climb to cup under her ass. Meanwhile, the other found its way right to her breast. He curved it with her flesh, the edge of his hand bumping her underwire tighter to her ribs. That wouldn't do. Kristen leaned up a moment, his one hand falling off her chest while the other remained safe on her ass. With a quirk to her lips, and her eyes staring right into his, she began to undo the buttons on her blouse.

Which was when the beeper in her purse decided to blare itself awake. She winced at the noise, wishing she'd imagined it, her fingers hovering over the next button. But the blighted thing went off again.

"Sorry," she whispered while hopping off of him and digging it out.
The cryptic message read, "Get here now. Movement sighted. --F"

Friendly as always. No doubt he was closing in on another potential subject and thought backup might prove useful. Unsurprising, given...

Her real life thoughts faded as she glanced over at the man left partially spread eagle on the couch. Judging by the bulge trapped down his jeans, he'd been more than ready to go. And you have to walk away from that right now.

"Problems?" Cullen asked, his hands remaining where he left them as if he hoped she could easily wipe it away and return.

"Yeah," Kristen winced. "Work. Sounds like the boss is coming in, the big one I mean, and they're calling us all in to do extra filing stuff. I'm so sorry."

"Hey," he rolled off the couch to his feet and walked towards her. A hand wrapped around her waist, one that she wished would rip off her blouse and bra. Instead, it settled on her back as Cullen tucked her into a hug, "that's work for you. Can't be helped."

Dropping the incriminating beeper into her purse, she wrapped both her arms around him and tried to envelope herself. Sure enough, she could feel his excitement prodding into her, but it was going to have to spend the night alone with a bottle of lotion or the like. Damn. "You're sweet," she smiled while mentally berating herself. If you'd turned off the movie you could have fucked him and headed in by now.

Cullen tugged her higher for a soft kiss on her lips that wanted so much harder. "Not as if I won't see you again. It's a minor sacrifice to make."

Sighing, she slid out of his warm embrace and began to shuffle all her crap back into her purse. Kristen pecked one last kiss to his cheek before she strapped on her shoes and dashed towards the door.

"Should I..." Cullen jabbed back at the tv, "save the rest of the movie for later."

"No, I know it all by heart. You can watch it if you like. I'll see you later," she called with a quick wave. She was heading into potentially open combat with monsters that could barely be killed save a point blank shot to the skull. Who knew if she'd be seeing anyone later.

Before Kristen closed the door, she heard Cullen call out, "Okay...girlfriend."

Chapter End Notes

Bonus guys! It's Cullen and his love of pot noodles by Space_aged.
The Docks

By the time she pulled up to the docks rocking against the rising storm, it was nearing midnight. Kristen hadn't bothered with the headlights for the trip into the harbor, letting the night camouflage her car. But as she watched a hooded body sliding out towards her she wanted to blast the high beams at him. If he was his usual surly self, she might just to get back at dragging her out here.

His tattooed hand knocked against the car window. No doubt it would have startled her, if she hadn't been expecting him. Given how her phone kept shaking with a new text every five minutes on the drive it wasn't that surprising. Rolling down the window by hand, Kristen began to lean out, when he grumbled from the depths of his hood, "Follow me."

She took a quick stock of where she parked her dark, forgettable car and trudged into the rain. The coat stuck tighter to her as the rains increased tenfold. And you left a gorgeous man's bed for this, willingly. She could have turned down Fenris, most probably did. People said he had a habit of requesting aid, then said aid arriving only to find he'd already finished the job. Though, she couldn't remember a time when that ever happened with her.

"Did you bring weaponry?"

"No, I thought I might pop in unarmed," she rolled her eyes which was unwise as the rain plummeted into both.

Fenris snorted. It could have been a laugh, it could have been him bridling. She could never tell with him. Both walked quickly but didn't run through a maze of buildings built over the hefty docks. No doubt massive yachts rested safely inside while the lesser millionaires were left to hunker down tethered to the docks out in the sea. He walked fast, his sight never waverering even as the storm beat upon their heads.

Water sloshed its way directly down her jeans, the runoff dredging up her boots and soaking past
the leather into her socks. She could feel each sucking splatting sound as she walked, her feet already pruning inside all that leather. It was like she was marinating inside her own juices. Ugh. Fenris paused, his white head whipping up as he glanced back and forth through the maze of nautical wear. Inching a finger, he pointed before dashing for below a sheetmetal overhang.

She was quick on his heels, her feet landing hard in a puddle before she too snuck under the overhang. The Inquisitor yanked back her coat’s hood and sighed at the mess, but it was Fenris who spoke first. "You took so long I feared it'd be too late."

"Is this when you tell me what's going on?"

"No time," he jabbed that damn finger at a ladder. "Climb, then I'll show you."

Climb an aluminum ladder in the middle of a thunderstorm. Well, the chances of getting struck by lightning were what? Better or worse than being bitten by a shark? Twice? She tried to put the thought out of her head as she scrambled higher up the ladder. Below she heard Fenris hook his hands on and begin to follow. No doubt he had a wonderful view of her ass, tucked tight behind ballistic leggings and a pair of black jeans. The leggings had a habit of curling ones ass like a jelly roll, but they cut down on bleeding trauma.

Once at the roof, she climbed onto the denting sheetmetal and spotted what he'd no doubt planned - an open window. Without glancing back at the man, the Inquisitor dashed towards the cracked apart glass to finally get out of the rain. Darkness, save a few red emergency lights circling the floor, flooded her vision. She tried to wring back her hood, when a hand bumped right smack into her chest.

"What are you doing?" she hissed in a whisper while stepping back.

"Sorry," Fenris stumbled inside, his cheeks actually looking red instead of the usual aloof tan, "I didn't...it wasn't on...I thought you'd move further inside."

"I don't know where we're going. Nor why for that matter. Want to explain?" So help him, if this was a wild goose chase just so he could pin her down and have 'a talk' she could rip him in half.

Closing the window but leaving it unlatched, Fenris kept abreast of her breasts while sliding towards the edge of the two story warehouse. Gripping onto the landing, he pointed down, "See those crates."

"Don't tell me there's another crag inside."

He shook his head negative, "They came in through the port yesterday from out of the country, but customs was told to ignore them."

"DW?" she asked while falling in beside him.

"Officially no," he shrugged, before a green eye glanced over to her, "But their shipping was financed by one of Solas' personal dummy corporations. Of which he has many."

She whistled under her breath. This could be the break they need. Shit, this could be everything they need. "Do you think it's the lab?"

"Lab?"

"I have combed through every inch of financial data, and unless DW has a secret money vault somewhere, I can't figure out where they're hiding the capital to pay for a laboratory. Those things
are not cheap and boards tend to get antsy when the boss takes a couple hundred million for 'petty cash."

Fenris drifted closer to her a bit, the warehouse rocking along with the dock it was upon. No doubt those huge doors could be thrown open and ships let in to unload illegal cargo. At the moment they looked locked shut tight, but who knew how long they had. They should move quickly...

"You smell like rubber," Fenris whispered a moment before he slid back.

Her eyes narrowed on him, "What?"

Massive green eyes, burning with both the intent to wound while wounded themselves, blinked at her, "No wonder you were late. The shower to wash his scent off of you must have taken some time."

"Ugh," Kristen snarled at his insinuations, "Stop smelling me."

"You found it charming once."

"For the love of the Maker, Fenris, we have..."

Lights snapped open sounding like a banshee taking in a breath before unleashing her scream. Flood lights rose along the bottom edge of the floating dock warehouse. The Inquisitor snatched onto Fenris' collar and dragged him back towards a pile of crates out of the light. She need not bother telling him to remain quiet, he knew his job. That was the perk of working with professionals, trust in them to do what they needed to.

Her fingers reached in to touch the butt of her gun, when a mass of men in black suits walked into the warehouse. "Bodyguards?" she mouthed at Fenris, who shrugged. But there was no bald, shining head wandering in the middle of them. Whatever Mr. Solas was up to, he didn't seem to feel the need to inspect his cargo himself. Instead, the suited men were all gathered around the crate in question. They spoke a moment to each other before the tallest stepped towards the crate. Vanishing from view, all they could hear was the scrape of metal upon metal as someone was clearly opening the door. Fenris and the Inquisitor both peeked closer out of their little sniper nest. No doubt all of the men would vanish inside first to check the contents, make certain things were up to speed, then lock it back up for the night. That was when they could strike, they just had to be patient.

The metal whined, the hinges complaining after a trip in salty waters, as the door fell open. She expected the men to begin climbing inside, but a strange fog crept along the bottom of the ground. Pink as ham slime, the mist grew thicker until it obscured the men's shoes and legs. They didn't run from it, but stood stock still as if they expected such a thing to occur.

"What is going on?" she mouthed to Fenris.

He narrowed his eyes, peering to look closer, when they suddenly fell open wide. "Fuck," he cursed causing Kristen to shake. In all their time together, she'd never heard Fenris curse, at least that wasn't in Tevene.

"Wha...?" She swung her head and watched as the pink fog drew up the men's bodies and into their airways, they began to twist and seize. Expensive suits ripped to tatters when massive rock erupted off of their skin. Pointed ends slammed deep into the ground, dragging the men closer to the fog as it filled their bodies.
"Holy..." Inquisitor swore to herself before whipping her eyes over at the other man who was breathing madly while watching men mutilate themselves into monsters. Shit. She slapped a hand over his mouth. Green eyes bit into hers before she too covered her own mouth.

It took a moment for Fenris before he nodded. If this was airborne, if this could turn living, breathing, normal humans into those twisted creatures called crags then what chance did they have to stop it? Groans and cries of agony broke below them, Fenris' wide eyes narrowing to pinpricks while he glared at the macabre tableau.

Blood splattered on the wooden planks, tattered scraps of skin purged along with the cotton of the suits when the rock burst free. Maybe they got lucky. Maybe the monsters couldn't rise right after their transformation. Which just left how to contain them all before they did gain the ability.

She was about to suggest as such, when pulsing red lights began to undulate within the pink fog. The sound of dragging a concrete block over pavement echoed inside the tin warehouse, blocking out even the pounding of the rain. One by one, the monstrous crags began to rise to their feet. Five in total stood where their shed skin lay.

But...there'd been far more who entered. Did it not affect everyone? The other men lay on the docks not moving, but they seemed to be breathing at least. Would the crags attack them directly? Blighted hell, there were far too many variables.

Risking contamination, she tucked her hand off her mouth and whispered, "We have to call for backup."

Fenris wasn't listening, his eyes whipping back and forth around the monsters he'd been tracking for weeks. The numbers were not on their side. They had to get out of here, and fast or else... Silver flashed against the light of the Inquisitor's phone, her brain barely registering it before a massive hole from his 9mm erupted in the dock. Ten mad and hungry eyes whipped right up to whoever caused it.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she shrieked even while arming herself.

"Seeing if they can swim," he mused, firing another two rounds. The supports were cracking fast, sending some of the crags backwards, but another two were rising up to their full height. Could they see through this darkness? Did whatever twisted form they take give them something horrifying like infrared sight? Whatever was doing it, one clearly looked right at Fenris and drew back its arm.

Damn it!

He wouldn't stop firing at the docks as if that was the only solution. For all he knew they were excellent swimmers, or they didn't require oxygen anymore. They were beyond normal now. Turning in place, Kristen braced her folded fist on the wooden railing and fired not at the ground but against the shoulder of the first advancing creature.

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It twisted from the attack, the bullet striking its target, but no blood burst from the hole. A dark burn of gunpowder coated the red rock of its skin, which the creature turned to look at. She could be wrong at this distance, but it almost seemed to be as horrified by the lack of damage as she was.

"Forget your mad plan," she ordered. This cursed place was too well built. "Aim for the heads." She tried to follow suit, but head shots with a pistol were not as easy as some assumed. Down below, the creatures were advancing fast. One, slightly stockier than the rest, paused a moment and she caught it perfectly.

Holding her breath tight in her lungs, she locked in her arm and fired. The bullet whizzed through
the air with proper aim, struck right into the middle of the cranium, and pinged off as if she was firing a bb. "Okay," she groaned while glancing askance at her not so trusty firearm, "next time we bring something bigger. What are you doing?"

He wouldn't stop firing at the dock, Fenris reaching his limit and having to reload fast. She reached over to grab onto his arm, but he was locked in place. "We have to run. Now!"

"They cannot get up here," he said with certainty before firing again. The docks were creaking in anger, massive holes erupting below the feet of men who had to have gained a good fifty extra pounds with their fresh armor. Still, the damn thing held together.

She darted her eyes around the place. There had to be a proper support beam, one large enough to both prop up the roof and tethered to the docks. Ah ha! She lifted her hand, about to point, when red flashed through the air. Barely twisting her head in time to follow the blur, she watched in horror as one of the crag's points flew off its body, cut apart the air, and dug right up into Fenris' bicep.

A rock spike, three inches thick, pulsed from inside Fenris' muscle as his gun began to droop. Blood dribbled from the wound and he gasped in agony. Shit! Was it infecting him? The crags all grinned manically, one of the skinnier ones breaking into a run.

No, no, no. She cursed, one hand slipping around Fenris' waist. His hot blood dribbled against her chest and down her arm, warming up the chill in her bones in the most macabre way. Please, do not tell me they can jump.

Sure enough, that's what the creature was doing. Bending its knees deep, it launched off the deck, its body rising a good thirty feet into the air without thought. Fenris, despite bleeding all over the place, shoved off of her in order to stick his body in the way. As if he could protect her for more than a millisecond from this unrelenting power.

Damn it! Locking her hand on his shoulder, the Inquisitor aimed her gun up into the air. She had to get this right and she had to wait for the creature to fall into sights. Too far away and it'd bounce right off. But close, point blank and maybe... There was one chance and one chance only. A red skull, the hair shredded in clumps along with its clothing, broke into the air. Her eyes tried to trail the maniacal teeth framed by bleeding red gums and the eyes turned to slits from the rock armor, but her brain focused only on pulling the trigger.

The bullet sliced through the air and burrowed deep into the eye socket, or where an eye socket should be. Blood and ocular fluid spurted from the impact and when the creature collapsed onto the upper floor they stood on, its shoulder and head bore the fall -- never to rise.

"Good shot," Fenris whispered.

Lucky shot, she thought, her entire face wan with terror. Down below, the other four began to hoot and holler as they realized their fellow monster was taken out. Their only hope was escape. With one bullet left in the chamber, she pointed towards the sturdy support beam and fired. The bullet ate a good chunk from the wood, the roof shuddering at the attack, but it wasn't quite ready to go. That would require more weight, which was when they needed to get the fuck out of there.

Wrapping her arm around Fenris, she hauled him towards the window they entered. The monsters were staring around at the building teetering close to the end, the soul shaking howl curdling her blood. Ignore it. The Inquisitor lashed her steel tipped boot out and shattered the window. Dragging herself and Fenris backwards out onto the roof, she watched as the crags began to jump onto the platform.
With each addition, the roof and its barely held together support creaked and groaned. Eyes that burned like fire stared at her, but she wouldn't stop for anything. Twisting into the rain, the Inquisitor began to break into a run with Fenris' body slapping into hers. She heard another massive whomph as the last of the monsters leapt up with its fellows, followed by wood snapping in half.

The entire building slipped under their feet, nearly throwing both to their knees. "How...?" Fenris gasped, his hot blood still pouring from the wound.

She glanced towards the ladder, but there was no time. The roof was collapsing and fast. Inside, she heard the upper floor, bulging from so many creatures, finally collapse. And when that hit the bottom dock, so too went Fenris' attempts at destroying it. That was the last straw.

Through the sheeting rain she watched as the building itself began to implode, tiles and shattered wood collapsing towards the water. Locking her arm tight around him, the Inquisitor ran for the edge. Dark waters lapped below, but there was no choice. "We jump!" she shouted while kicking off the edge with her feet.

Cold air whipped past her, almost in an attempt to soothe away the pains before the concrete slab of choppy water struck her legs. The Inquisitor plummeted deep into the black seas, salt water trying to gush into her open mouth. She slammed it closed and reached for the man who fell near her. It was impossible to see anything in this darkness, but he had to be here. With his arm impaled it was unlikely he could fight to the surface and... She felt a warm spot in the water.

Gulping down the rise of bile, she followed the trail of blood leeching from Fenris' wound. When her hand glanced against his, she dug tighter into his stupid hoodie and began to swim them both to the surface. In the darkness, she barely knew she breached until the chill of the wind struck her face hard. Guzzling in air, she whipped her head over to him and shouted, "Still with me?"

"Yes," he groaned, "but no idea how much longer."

Together they both paddled quickly to the docks, the Inquisitor rising from the briny deep first before offering a hand to the injured man. By a lone buoy, its white light casting in a halo from the storm, she could see how much of Fenris' skin turned pale as snow. He must be losing blood badly.

The stubborn fool rose to his feet, but she yanked him down to sit on the damn dock. He snarled, "We have to get out of here before they..."

"You're going to die on your damn feet," she hissed, working off her belt. With quick skill, she wrapped it around his elbow and cinched as tight as possible to create a ligature. There were holes all around the leather for this very purpose, the Inquisitor trying to cut off the blood supply to his arm. But she had to work fast to get him real aid, or else he could lose the limb entirely.

"Come on," she helped him to his feet and ran towards her car. Despite being injured, Fenris kept close to her heel. He, in his continually stubborn way, refused to turn from their objective.

"What of the crags?"

"If you think you can catch one, be my guest!" she flapped a hand towards the inky darkness. "For all we know," her fingers dug into her pocket to find the damn key fob, "they're at the bottom of the ocean by now."

Fenris growled, unhappy with losing his prey, but he turned towards the driver side of the car and moved to lift the handle. She shoved her ass into the door before he opened it and eyed him up,
"What are you doing?"

"Driving," he huffed.

"By the void you are. You're losing blood, you're liable to pass out soon and kill us both. Get in the fucking backseat," she cranked open the door like a vengeful chauffeur and shoved him towards it, "sit down, and stuff that bullshit masculinity for a minute."

Falling into the driver's seat, she stared through the rearview mirror to watch as Fenris fumbled into place. He lost a lot of blood, and there was some spike that grew out of a man's body jammed in his arm. The dark bags under his eyes grew as deep as the great lakes. His tattoos that normally glowed white against his tan skin looked like sallow wax from how pale he turned. Don't you fucking die on me.

"Buckle up," she said. Green eyes glared at her through the mirror, but he reached with his working arm towards the side and drew the belt down across his lap.

"This seems..." Fenris began when she cranked the car on and drove her foot down on the accelerator. The black and blue charger burst out of the back of the harbor, rolling over the shattered remains of the warehouse while she kept one eye on the road and the other on the dying man in her backseat.

He was shaking, no doubt cold from losing so much blood. The Inquisitor fumbled for the heat, cranking it as high as it would go. On a middling sedan, that wasn't much to those in the back. *Hang on,* she mouthed while digging her hand into the steering wheel. A glint of green shimmered in the mirror before a blaring blue and red filled her windshield instead.

"It appears someone thought to phone the police," Fenris said, as droll as ever despite knocking near death.

Their sirens roared from a street past, an entire row clearly aiming right for the harbor where a warehouse just imploded. Fuck, they were going to muck about in all the good data and ruin what a wet team could find. Fenris inched closer off his seat, a hand flexing into the padding behind her.

"Do you think they would accept 'It was swamp gas' as an explanation?"

Gritting her teeth, she watched as the first of the cop cars swarmed through the gate -- the only way in and out of the harbor. The Inquisitor slammed on the brakes, watching the never ending line of squad cars driving madly for the warehouse. She could sneak her car back, hide in amongst the wreckage until...until Fenris was as good as dead.

How strong was that fence, anyway?

Cranking the car into drive, she whipped the wheel and turned to the right. Fenris noticed, "Is there a plan beyond wait and die?"

"Yep," she pursed her lips, watching the buildings whip past. She couldn't puncture her way through too close to the gate or they'd be on her ass instantly. She needed to get to...there! "Hold on," Kristen shouted, all her muscles cranking the car straight on at a pile of crates. Behind, she heard Fenris shrink back into his seat, knowing when to go limp. All her focus was on the shipping cargo someone foolishly left dangling down like a ramp.

The front bumper scraped against it, but she managed to get the first two tires onto the blue bin. Shoving her foot down, she shouted for the car to accelerate while holding the wheel steady. Up they rose, even as the cargo bin began to bend and dent from so much weight. They weren't
designed to hold up a squealing car, that much was certain.

Suddenly, the car shifted to the side, the Inquisitor's left arm smashing into the window as the front tire slipped off the edge. She bit into her lip while yanking on the wheel. Steady. Steady. Still the car climbed until the fence was just about visible. A little more.

The crate shuddered under them, the sound of metal squealing and rivets popping like corn on the fire. Just one more... Slamming both feet down on the accelerator, the car shot right over the fence, its abused wheels spinning helplessly in the air. For the second time that night, both the Inquisitor and Fenris went weightless as they hung in preparation for the mighty slam.

Fuck!

The whole car nearly collapsed on itself, the chassis shaking like a wet dog, but when the wheels hit they kept going forward. Right towards a building. "Shit, shit, shit!" she screamed, twisting on the wheel and praying to the Maker the brakes still worked. Smoke erupted off the squealing tires, nearly blanketing them in burnt rubber right before the bumper of the car collided into the brick backend of a townhouse.

"Sweet blood of Andraste," she cursed, heaving a sigh of relief. After swallowing down the thrum in her heart, she glanced in the mirror, "You okay back there?"

Fenris fell to the seats in the drop and hadn't risen back up. Perhaps it was swaddling his arm? Or he couldn't sit up. A craggy voice called out, "I am."

Which was when a few sirens chirped right behind her. You have got to be kidding me! Fenris grumbled, "It appears we have been spotted."

"Not for long," she gave a quick thanks to whoever decided to build the Charger like a tank for middle class college students. Whipping the car back into motion, she drove it down the back line of sidewalks that skirted near the harbor. Blue and red lights whirred in her mirror, but she paid it no heed. She was too busy dodging bike racks and massive street art sculpture while driving right along the walking waterfront. Sparks shot out of the side as she scraped the side mirror off on a building.

No slowing down. No stopping. No rethinking it.

They were right on her ass and she only had one choice.

Driving down her foot, the Charger hurled itself right towards a massive cement blockade put up to keep cars from doing what she was. Just a little more. The cops were having a tougher go down the narrow paths, their wider cars drifting closer to the docks. But they weren't about to give up pursuit. Certainly not while the assailant seemed about to plow her car smack dab into a cement wall.

A green light in the distance flashed to her right side and the Inquisitor yanked the wheel hard to the right. The entire car swerved like it was spinning on grease, more rubber burning into the cement. Her bumper glanced into the cement pylon, shaking both of them, but the Inquisitor kept a tight hold. Once the car righted itself, she slammed on the accelerator and rocketed down the road at 80 mph.

She blew through a red light, eyeing up the empty streets at 2 in the morning, when she heard the definite sounds of a cop car's siren dopplerling as it zoomed closer, smashed deep into a cement pylon, and whizzed to a tinny end. Twisting the car fast, she turned down two new streets, barely
caring where she was going until the sirens faded in the distance.

"You broke the line of sight," a voice whispered from the backseat.

She couldn't tell if it was a comment or question. "Yeah, now to get you to a hospital. Hopefully before this car explodes."

That part was surprisingly easy, what with nearly half the force currently chasing after a ghost car or trying to figure out what happened at the docks. Fenris fell silent behind her while she tried to remember how much blood a body could lose before it was curtains. There was a lot in the water. Too much.

Normally, a city in the midst of late night fading to early morning was her preferred state. The lights shifted with none waiting for them, stuck in their duty and uncaring about the woman who ignored them all. Silence filled the streets and sidewalks that never knew a breath of a break by day. But all she could hear thundering in her ears was her heart shouting 'Don't. You. Die.'

She hunted through the rearview mirror, trying to catch a glimmer of green eyes, but it was only her dark blue seats stained with a streak of crimson. Shit. When the Inquisitor looked up she realized she blew past the entrance to the emergency room. Not giving a shit about the car or anything else tonight, she twisted the wheel and drove right over the meticulous landscaping. Wheels that bit against metal cargo crate chewed up grass while the Charger drew up on the curb. The drop down created a groan from the backseat and she sighed.

Not dead yet, anyway. There was still time.

An ambulance sat near the entrance, but the Inquisitor stopped the car just before the lit awning. There was something she still had to do. Turning it off and stepping out to the cold pavement she moved to grab onto the backseat's door handle but took a breath. Don't be dead. She was so tired of dead.

Fenris lay crumpled on the seat, his face mashed into the cushions no one ever sat upon. The arm that stopped bleeding from her belt dangled down until his bent wrist crested against the food bags she threw back there. "Fenris," she whispered, but he didn't move. Closing her eyes, she said instead, "Erastis," and he stirred instantly.

Groaning rolled in his throat, but his eyes tried to focus on her face as she lifted up the dying arm. A word he taught her when they were doing their best to act as if the agency could be separated from them, walled off and forgotten. "I'm sorry," she gestured towards the potential evidence and giant national secret that no one in the hospital could ever see. "I have to..."

Green eyes burned in hers, but he nodded his head. It was impossible to remove the agency from their bodies, their minds. It was woven into every cell, absorbed deep into each neuron. Even if they whispered foolish things to each other in the dark, it didn't change a thing. Nothing would.

With one hand latched to his cold, clammy elbow, the Inquisitor grabbed onto the red crag's spike. She took a deep breath, watching Fenris hold his precious few breaths before yanking fast. It suckered out of his body, the deadly thing falling into a Gulp 'N' Go bag, which she stuffed under the backseat for safe keeping. Fenris barely screamed, his throat bobbing in agony but his body too drained to find the words.

She tugged him up to his feet, her muscles straining to keep Fenris upright while they walked together towards the hospital. Warmth and salvation rested within the bright lights beyond. But before they passed through the giant glass doors gaping open at their shadows, she heard him
whisper, "Vhenan" as his chin plummeted to his chest. No more sounds rose from Fenris.

Covered in blood and seawater, Kristen Trevelyan limped into the emergency room with a dying man on her arm and shouted, "Help! He needs a doctor's help right now!"
Cullen clung to the dashboard when Samson took a hard right, trailing after a line of cars on their way to the disturbance. He fiddled with the undone buttons on his shirt Cullen barely managed to get notched before heading out the door. The call came fast, ordering everyone in as there was some major going's on down at the harbor. Some feared it might be a bomb threat, the phone call garbled, but they sent in the scrubs first as a stopgap measure. If they found anything dangerous, then the guys with the real hardware would takeover.

"Hope I didn't have to pull you off anything fun," Samson chuckled, his voice rolling through his gravely throat. "It's shit when they make you yank on the blues and leave you stuck with blue balls."

Cullen winced, finally in the proper uniform he should have left the house in. "It wasn't like that," he insisted despite the driver whistling to himself. In truth, he'd watched more of Kirsten's movie, wondering if he shouldn't be doing a bit of browsing and work while it went on. Then the call came in and he raced out the door. More or less exactly how he didn't want the night to go.

Ahead of them, the harbor rocked back and forth against the swell of waves in the crashing storm. Weird how many they pulled in for this, damn near ten cars already in the line up. Maybe more coming later to help contain the scene. And all they got was a vague warning call too. People on edge after the last mage bombing? It was a few weeks back and a few countries over, but anything was possible in this world.

The dashboard radio cracked open just as their car began to slow behind the line turning through the gate. "Suspicious car spotted attempting to flee the scene. Appears to be a dark blue or black Charger."

Kristen? Cullen sat up higher, his head whipping through the inky night rain. Nothing out there but the occasional flash of lightning that would light up the clouds. No. It couldn't be her. What would
she be doing here? Downtown was the opposite side of the city. Chargers were rather average. There could certainly be others of the same color in the city. Still, they should pursue, just to make certain.

"First three cars are in pursuit," the radio continued to dole out orders, "Rest are to follow to the rendezvous point beside Dock 14."

Cullen whiffled his lips while falling back into the seat. He watched the line of cars twist off to chase down whoever was trying to make a break deeper into the harbor. Not smart, there was nowhere to go but into the ocean. Samson glanced at him and ticked his head, "Wondering what's ahead?"

Rubbing into his forehead, Cullen groaned, "I just pray it's not a middle aged woman pissed about some teenagers that like to gather in a rundown building in order to shoot the breeze."

The laugh shuddered Samson's bony shoulders, "Fuck, that was a mess. Worst part, she knew someone who knew someone so even slapping her with an 'abusing the police' charge didn't stick. The richies in this city."

Through the rearview mirror Cullen could see the skyscrapers of the powerful piercing the night's sky. Their lights burned through any storm, never tiring, never ending. About the only real gains anyone could make in this world rested inside the steel anthills, as all the honest work eroded away until it fell into the ocean.

"So," Samson's eye darted over to him, "you tell her yet?"

He should have. He had every intention to tell her everything about his condition, about how he did his best to mitigate it, how it was getting better. Then she turned towards him, the light of that old grainy movie softening her features like an angel and he panicked. The thought of her walking out that door and never looking back filled him with such a terrified pain, Cullen clung to the first thing he could think of.

It was true, he didn't want to see anyone else because it was hard enough for him to deal with one person. But he hated that he was lying by omission to her. She deserved to know the truth, even if it would end things instantly. Cullen turned to the driver as their car twisted to the left, bracken rolling under the wheels.

"Suspicious car has jumped the fence. I repeat the blue Charger has jumped the fence," a harried voice called over the radio.

Dispatch clicked on fast, "Jumped the fence? That thing's eighteen feet tall."

"It drove up a cargo bin and...jumped."

Cullen's eyes bulged at the thought, his head turning to Samson who cackled. "Bet ya $20 they had fuck all to do with this and the driver's high as a kite right now. Panicked at the sirens, slammed on the accelerator, saw a bridge and took it."

"Where is the vehicle now?" dispatch continued, a slight whine in the operator's voice as if she couldn't believe any of this.

"Driving down the walking thoroughfare for Wharflandia. In pursuit."

Silence clicked over again, the cars no doubt quick on the heels of this magical getaway car. "Can Chargers even handle that kind of a fall?" Samson asked.
Cullen shrugged, "Depends on the year. Though that thing's gotta be bottomed out so bad half of it's scraping up the pavement." That couldn't be Kristen. To imagine the woman he met pleading for her window to smack open driving a car with that much finesse? No. His mind was just trying to look for any excuse to forgive himself.

"Hey, I think I see Barris up ahead," Samson called, his spotted finger pointing towards a man in a neon yellow vest. Rain splattered against the tightly shaved black hair, leaving streaks of brown skin that glistened in the unforgiving headlights.

His hand lifted to cut through the dark clouds, and Barris directed them towards the outer edge of a number of cars. Samson was quick to throw it into park and Cullen sighed. Fumbling with the flashlight in his pocket, he looked once over at the man he shared a ride with and gritted his teeth. "Into the rain..."

Samson sighed and nodded, but before he slipped out, said, "Bet you were hoping for something much hotter and wet tonight."

Cold drizzle permeated every hair on Cullen's body the second he stepped out of the car. He shivered instinctively, well aware that it was going to take a long time for him to dry off and warm up again after a few hours in this. Weaving his flashlight halo back and forth over the ground, he was able to notice a lot of debris here. The harbor wasn't exactly known to be spotless, but it was strange to find so many shattered and broken boards left on the ground.

"Rutherford!" Barris shouted, his head tipping up at the sight of Cullen. "You too, Samson," he continued to wave both over while guiding more cars deeper in.

"Can't believe they pulled you in, Barris. Aren't you on homicide now?" Cullen asked while sliding up next to the man who he only knew through the veterans placement program. Barris was sociable, smart, and kind. It didn't take him long to form a vast network and rise to the top.

"Yeah," Samson cracked his neck a moment, "back down in the dregs with the rest of us. What is this shit anyway? Can't it wait until morning?"

"I don't know about that, Sir," Barris said, his back ramrod straight as he dragged his body light behind him towards the ocean. Whitecaps crested high on the waves slamming into the docks and rattling their footing. At first, that was what Cullen assumed Barris was pointing out, until the light drifted down to an imploded building.

"Holy shit," Samson cursed while Cullen kept it internal. "What the fuck happened?"

"That's what we're here to determine. An entire warehouse just collapsed into the waves."

"Survivors?" Cullen asked, his head tipping up to watch some of the shredded sheetmetal drifting on the waves. What could tear that in half so easily? It didn't look like a bomb, there were no burn marks nor did it smell right. No gunpowder in the air, not even a hint of blood or burnt wood, just seawater and fish.

"Hard to imagine many would have been at a warehouse in the dead of night, but why blow it up unless someone was around?" Barris surmised quickly.

"Meth lab," Samson declared fast. "Blew up under them. Gonna find rotted teeth stuck to door frames in there." At both Barris and Cullen's glare Samson shrugged, "What? Occam's razor here. What else could explode a building in the middle of nowhere?"

All three men began to inch towards the wreckage, their boots crunching tenderly upon salt
encrusted boards that must have made up the docks. Cullen kept a close eye for any nails while wondering when he last had a tetanus booster. "Where are the other cars heading?" he asked.

"Further down," Barris waved towards where he sent them. "Got to check on the high class yachts and cargo to make certain nothing was stolen."

"Course," Samson sneered, "that's the priority, shit instead of people."

Cullen whistled under his breath as they stepped towards the building. It was completely flattened. He'd never seen anything like this, even a tornado would leave something behind. A pipe, or a toilet. It looked as if the walls just up and collapsed, taking everything down with it. "I rather doubt we're going to find any survivors," he sighed while nudging into a strip of sheetmetal and twisting it up.

Crimson stained along the edge, already washing away in the rain. "Think I found blood here," he said.

"Bag it and tag it," Barris said without thought, causing both of the beat cops to stare hard at him. He blushed and stammered, "Sorry, habit. Blood means there was a body."

Samson whistled, "Meth lab," but kept prodding into the wreckage. They turned up a lot of soggy boards, flipping them out onto land. There were a couple more pieces of sheetmetal stained with blood, but it was impossible to keep the rain off the evidence. To keep the rain out of anywhere. His asscrack was a damn water feature at this point.

Whipping the light out, Cullen trailed the line of the docks. Did a machine run into this? Maybe that magical car that could jump fences? It was possible, but... He watched the debris begin to slide out from under Samson and ran forward fast to grab his arm. "Hey, what are you...?" Samson asked, when the supposed dry land he'd been on suddenly dropped down under the choppy cold waves.

Eyes widening, Samson scurried back towards the solid docks. "Fuck. I hate the water. Have I told you I hate water? It never ends well for me."

"Well," Barris paused beside Cullen, their three lights circling the debris hole covered in black seawater, "I suppose the next step is up to a dive team."

"No way anyone could have survived that," Samson declared, his head already shifting back towards their dry car.

A piece of sheetmetal bobbed to the surface, no doubt from a wave lifting it off the bottom. Cullen watched it a moment, when something that looked like a head poked out from below. No. That couldn't be... Swinging his flashlight over, he landed upon a man shaped shadow climbing out of the water.

"Sweet Maker, someone's in the ocean!" Cullen shouted, watching the survivor swim himself to safety. He dug a foot onto the wreckage, scrambling to rise up through the black night.

"We need blankets, fast. Anything to warm him up and dry him off. Are there any of those heat packets in the..." Cullen's orders died as he turned away from glaring at the trunk of the car to stare at his fellow officers. They should be rushing to aid, but instead were frozen in place. "Barris, Samson. What is the matter?"

Samson lashed a hand over, grabbed onto Cullen's chin and forcibly twisted his head to face the ocean. "That," he whispered while lifting his light. It was no man that emerged from the sea,
though it walked upright and used both arms and legs. What almost looked like granite bulged off the shoulders and stomach below the creature's shredded suit. Spikes protruded from the elbows and off the knees, as if it would impale fish to eat for later. But most disturbing of all, this thing was red. Not sunburnt red, but red as a glowing ruby. Red as fresh blood.

"Okay," Cullen gulped, blinking like mad against the rain. "He's injured. It's someone that was caught in the explosion and survived by the concussive blast blowing him into the water."

"Captain," Samson turned to him, dropping his old title in the templars, "How many bodies have you pulled out of bombed out buildings?" Cullen winced, unwilling to voice the number. "Any of 'em ever look like that?!"

The creature, or mutilated survivor, or whatever paused as it got its footing. It wasn't whimpering in pain, didn't cry for help or mercy, but was twisting its head back and forth at the three cops in curiosity.

No. And he thought he'd seen the depths of how twisted the human body could become and still keep someone painfully alive.

With one heavy step, the creature shuffled closer and every man fumbled for a weapon. "Stand still," Barris ordered, the first to point his gun. Cullen was quick behind, balancing it against his flashlight. "We will not harm you, but we need you to tell us your name. What happened here."

Eyes that glowed like the heart of a volcano whipped back and forth across the three while the creature from the sea weighed its options. Slowly, a rumbling snigger rolled out of its mouth. "Harm me?" it laughed, "How will you stop me?"

Barris shifted, making it doubly obvious that he was armed. "I said stand down or I will shoot."

That caused the creature to blink, its head lifting higher as it eyed them up. If it would lay down on its stomach then they could look into aiding it. Those growths had to be incredibly painful. Cullen wanted to speak but his tongue was frozen in his mouth at the monster's eyes cutting through him. The stone lips slid up, revealing teeth pulsing with a heartbeat.

"No." Launching forward, the creature broke into a run. Gunfire erupted into the wet night, blinding light flashing before Cullen's eyes as Barris pumped four rounds into the man coming right for him. Cullen blinked fast to clear the glare, expecting to find the survivor laying on the ground bleeding, but the man or monster paused right at the edge of the dock and tipped his head to the side.

"That all ya got?" it crowed while lashing a hand forward and grabbing onto Barris' still smoking gun. It should have burned his hand to a cinder, but the monster held on tight and ripped it free. Barris let go, his gun flying off with a splash into the watery wreckage. There was no time for the man to scamper back as this monster lashed onto his shoulder and began to yank. The officer's eyes bulged in both panic and pain, his fists pounding relentlessly into the creature. Blood dribbled off his knuckles, already smashed and the skin broken, after two hits. What was this thing?

"Samson!" Cullen shouted, losing sight of the man as the red monster eclipsed him. Ungodly screams erupted from Barris as the creature continued to tug as if it...as if it intended to rip his body in half. It sniggered at the pain it inflicted, a tongue lashing out to lap up the rainwater.

Damn it. Steading his aim with the flashlight hand, Cullen fired twice at the creature. The first pinged right off his shoulder, but the second got near the skull and clipped what still looked like a
human ear. That caused the monster to roar in agony, pepto-pink blood spurting from the wound.

It opened its arms, Barris plummeting to the ground and striking hard. One hand wrapped around the ear, trying to stop the blood while those red eyes burned into Cullen a threat. He wounded the monster. He'd pay first.

Focus on this abomination, don't...don't think about the last time. Cullen scrunched his nose up, his eyes narrowing to block out the vision attempting to crowd out the imminent danger. The monster's lips lifted and it laboriously yanked its hand off the ear and a pointed tongue lapped its own blood from its palm. Sweet Maker, what is this monstrosity?

"Well, copper," it laughed, "time to see if you bleed blue."

Cullen fired dead center mass at the monster not even ten paces away, but the bullet ricocheted off. How the hell did they stop this thing? Laughing as if he tickled him, the creature stepped closer. He should run, step back and...and leave Barris open. No, he had to find the weak still human skin below. Shifting his aim around, Cullen shot at a knee.

One of the red spikes cracked off and landed on the ground, but no blood dribbled from the wound. To his horror, fresh rock began to grow off the old wound, as twisted as a deer's antler until it ended in a sharp point. He whipped around firing at the face. One glanced off the cheek, another got near the mouth but not close enough to shatter the teeth.

Walking, bulletproof monsters. That's what the fuck this was. One bullet left. He gulped deep and shifted his aim around. The monster could have lashed out by now, but it was watching him. It knew it was safe, that nothing could hurt it. It enjoyed the hunt and watching hope die in its victims eyes. Just like Uldred and his sycophants.

A feral scream erupted out of Cullen's throat and he took his final aim right at that soulless eye. With the slick rain and his heart pounding hard, his hand slipped up, but the bullet managed to strike something human inside that horror. It ripped off the eyelid, blood gushing from the now unsealable hole as a clear liquid goo dripped out of the socket.

Shrieking in agony, the monster cupped a hand to his eye then lashed a hand forward. Cullen's spent gun tumbled to the ground and far from reach. He was about to run away, when the arm dug into his side and pinched deep.

"AAH!" Cullen screamed, fingers as sharp as knives slicing through his flesh. With barely a grunt the monster heaved Cullen up through the air, both arms pinning the man tight to its unflinching chest.

"Look at it," the creature hissed. "Look at what you did before I rip you in half!" A dark, crimson void stared into Cullen's unblinking soul -- the eyeball shredded to nothing but a drained husk that dangled off its cord. He wanted to vomit at the sight, but the hands wrapped around his waist were too tight and beginning to pull.

Fuck! His skin stretched like wet tissue, the muscles straining in an instant to try and keep his body together while this unholy thing used the strength of a gorilla against tendons and flesh. Breath fled from his lungs, Cullen unable to do anything but helplessly flail in agony.

"Captain!" a voice shouted, momentarily startling both the dying man and the monster. Cullen turned his head to spot Samson holding something silver. "Catch!" he shouted and tossed it like a javelin at the pair.
The monster could do nothing but watch as Cullen lashed out fast, praying his fingers would make the grab. Even numb from the cold and slick in the rain, he managed to slap both around a screwdriver? What the void was he supposed to do with that?

Pressure increased again, the vertebrae in his spine popping like bubblewrap. Cullen splayed a hand against the creature's cheek, a finger digging into the dent his bullet made, when he glanced into the eyeless socket. Yes. Yanking his arm back, he jammed the screwdriver blade deep into the skull.

Roaring at the attack, the monster stopped ripping Cullen's body apart. Its hands dropped him, but he managed to hook a foot onto the knee spikes and hang on. Gripping onto the handle, Cullen jammed the screwdriver in deeper. He heard what sounded like bone cracking below.

The monster dug his massive, blood stained hand onto Cullen's bicep. With that much raw power it could have easily wrenched his arm off, but Cullen kept a tight grip to the screwdriver and the monster helped to dig the blade around into its own brain. As the grey matter turned to screwdriver tartar, the creature's hand fell dead. It began to tip to the side, no leg racing to catch it as both abomination and bloodied cop crashed into the sheetmetal.

Still, Cullen kept gouging into the eye, making fucking certain it wasn't going to get back up. After a minute of mutilating a corpse, he staggered away, the screwdriver still impaled inside the brain. He was shaking from the tips of his soggy hair down to his toes, eyes honed in on the monster that could barely be killed.

"What the fuck is that?" Samson gasped, jogging up to him. He kept his gun trained on the monster just in case. "That thing took on a good ten rounds and kept going!" He was repeating the scene to himself, needing to ask if what he saw was real. Numbly Cullen nodded.

"We...we have to call it in."

"Ain't a Maker damn person going to believe it," Samson insisted.

He nudged his foot into the creature's corpse, "They will when they see all the bullet holes." A groan broke from the ground, and Cullen whipped his head over, "Barris?"

"I'm okay," the man insisted, even as he rested on all fours while trying to rise off the ground. "Head's aching."

"You might have a concussion," Cullen insisted, his terror snapping away behind a wall. He could have died tonight, but he didn't. He had to cling to the didn't or he may lay down on the ground with Barris and never get up. "I'll call for an ambulance. Samson, watch that...thing."

"Aye aye," the man said, unable to take his eyes off it.

Cullen moved towards the car, when he paused and had to ask, "Where did you get a screwdriver from?"

"Found a box of tools just over there. It was that or a box cutter," Samson jabbed at a red toolbox that must have been blown about in the explosion. Damn. If that hadn't have been there...Cullen found himself feeling rather unlucky in how Maker blessed he was.

Cracking open the car, he slipped into the driver side and moved to reach for the radio when dispatch crackled alive, "Car is gone. Repeat. We've lost the blue Charger. No visible plates, but be on the look out for a heavily damaged Charger with what appeared to be a brunette driver, potentially petite." His heart stuck in his throat again. Brunette driver? Short? How in the Maker's
name could Kristen have anything to do with this horrific nightmare?

Forget your damn personal life, there's a man with potential brain damage under your watch. He tried to shake off the fear, but Cullen couldn't stop pawing at his phone even as he called dispatch to ask for an ambulance and request more backup. His finger hung over the button to call Kristen, ask if she was in a car chase, or if she really was downtown in one of those big buildings plugging away at a computer. Unaware of the horrors stalking their streets.

Rain sleeted through the headlights, wiping away the pink blood he gouged out of a monster's eyeball. Cullen closed his eyes and tried to find the courage to push the button to connect.
Nowhere else smelled like hospitals -- astringents and body fluids all dampened down by an almost glue-like chemical smell. Nowhere else looked like hospitals, the burning retina lights that'd blind you in the bathroom contrasted with dark corners where you're certain souls of the recently dead waited to be collected. Nowhere else sounded like hospitals, the silence always banging on your skull louder than a jet engine.

Kristen fiddled with a pen she had in her pocket, constantly unscrewing the end, yanking out the ink and then putting it back together. She'd been at it for an hour now, since she wandered into the waiting chair across the room they dropped Fenris off in. If she'd been smart and brought all her IDs she could have barreled in to demand someone explain his condition to an FBI agent. Instead, she was the kindly samaritan who happened upon a man with a mysterious hole in his arm. Anything more would ruin their already flimsy cover, Fenris being tagged a John Doe and given the bare minimum of coverage until he was awake.

And there was no way they'd tell her when that occurred because she was nothing to him. Nothing to no one. She winced at that, then drew her hand back to realize she jammed the pen into her thigh. It stuck tight to the ballistic weave, but to anyone passing must have appeared as if she pierced herself.

"Agent," a voice grumbled from her left. Wrapping a hand around the pen, she yanked fast to hide her folly and stumbled to her feet. Three feet of beard greeted her first, before she adjusted her vision higher to find the eyes hidden below.

"Blackwall," she sighed, surprisingly happy to see a gruff face.

He took the time to put on a suit, which on his whole mountain man exterior looked more like a gussied up transient on one of those makeover shows. But Blackwall lifted his spine higher and folded his arms behind his back. Out of everyone in the agency, he was the only person she knew
the birth name of. Though, that was an agonizing couple of months they were all happy to forget happened.

"I take it the agency finally listened to my report and sent someone," she said while digging a hand into her neck. After two hours in a plastic chair it refused to crack. She had to be very careful with her words, phoning in from outside the hospital grounds, but they got the gist of it. Now, in the hospital, with nurses and unknown patients slipping by they would talk in nothing but double speak.

"We did, and we have a few questions," Blackwall said.

"You could knock me over a feather with that surprise."

"The main one being what you were doing at that location in the first place. Not even Agent F was ordered to attend such a meeting."

She snorted, not surprised by that news, but exhausted from it. Everyone knew Fenris did what Fenris wanted. He was less a member of the agency more a wolf they managed to collar. But keep him chained up too long in one place and he was as liable to bite a friendly hand as a foe. So they let him off the lead often, and she gladly went along with it too.

"You'll have to ask him," she said, jerking her head towards the shut door. "Though, that's assuming he's capable of talking. They won't tell me a Maker damn thing."

Blackwall narrowed his eyes a moment, the harsh light really emphasizing all the baggage he carried both under them and in his soul. After a sigh, he shook his head and tipped it along with the massive beard, "He has pulled through surgery. As I hear it, in no small part to the helpful stranger also donating a pint of her blood."

She gritted her teeth, her hand scooping against her elbow where the cotton ball and bright blue tape still remained. It was a simple matter. She knew Fenris was type B positive, that she couldn't tell them she knew that, and that she was a universal donor. Easy math really.

"Your little stunt has made the news," Blackwall continued to read her the riot act as best he could. From him it felt more like a landslide under your feet. You're not sure how bad it will be until there are mountains falling on your head.

"Unsurprising given the level of police activity," she said with a shrug before blinking, "The car?"

"Has already been replaced in the parking lot, and yes, they made certain to move over your purse. Here are the keys," he passed the fob over which meant the real ones to start the car were tucked safely inside, "Took them a bit to find the artifact and get it to the lab."

"I did what I could," she shrugged, her fingers flipping up and down the phone she lifted off of Fenris. There was no reason she couldn't have run out to the car she drove out to the middle of the parking lot and let die to retrieve her purse and other shit. Not as if her being in the same hospital as the man in surgery could help him, but... It didn't feel right to prioritize something so meaningless.

"As to the matter of your hardware," Blackwall continued and she sighed.

"Tossed it. Fine," she tacked on at his pursed lips, "broke it down, then tossed it. Doesn't matter, I'll need better for next time."

"Better?"
"Bigger anyway," she shook her head trying to think of how stupid it would be if she started carrying a desert eagle around in her purse. Thing was pointless in combat but this wasn't normal anymore. Surely something that size would crack through the armor.

Kristen stuck her chest out, her head held high, when the long night and her own missing pint of blood caught up with her. As she began to tip to the side, it was Blackwall's hand that caught her. She blinked in surprise, used to the man being as personable as a screen door. But there was a kindness drifting in his eyes, perhaps even a touch of sympathy for the night she had.

"You should head home, Agent," he declared without thought. She snorted at it and instantly shook her head no. She was fine, and there was too much to deal with anyway.

"That isn't a suggestion," Blackwall grumbled and the Inquisitor winced. Right. She wasn't in the lead anymore. She couldn't tell him to back off and let her do what was necessary. Fucking Ostwick. Would that stain ever leave?

"Fine," Kristen threw up her hands, before staring out the windows where the creep of dawn turned the indigo night into a rosy sunrise. "But I'm due at work soon."

"Harding has finagled an excuse for you. Get yourself cleaned up," Blackwall said while leaning closer to her ear. "Wash the blood off," he pointed down her side and chest which was stained an unholy crimson, "and go to sleep. We'll need you fresh soon enough. You and Agent F are the only two to take on these monsters so far and survive."

She nodded her head a moment before narrowing her eyes. "Survive?" she asked. That meant that other people had confronted the crags. As far as she knew it'd been all at a distance.

Blackwall pursed his lips and said no more. He clearly wasn't supposed to let that little bit slip to her. The danger of working in the agency, everyone was a secretive bastard but everyone was also trained to ferret secrets out. Nothing stayed hidden for long.

Glancing once into the room, Kristen sighed. "Here," she dug into her pocket and unearthed the wallet she also swiped off of Fenris. "He's got the Alfonso ID on him, so go with that."

Blackwall nodded, his eyes reading through what little there was about the man he was no doubt going to barge in on as if Fenris was a criminal. That was the easiest way to get information from a startled nurse. Kristen cupped her hand to her elbow, a finger flicking at the cotton ball. "Can I...just sit in and watch you talk to him? Make certain that he's...?"

She felt him scowl before turning to find it buried under the beard. "That isn't really smart right now."

"Right, just..." Kristen yanked out an old napkin from the Klutzy Khicken and dug out the pen she kept field stripping.

"F, for the love of the Maker, stay in the damn hospital as long as the doctors tell you to. I don't need to wear your ashes."

She didn't sign it, just folded up the napkin and passed it to Blackwall. His eyes drifted down it and he wadded the note in his fist. Who knew if he'd pass it on. The agency wasn't exactly third grade study hall, but she needed to at least try. Turning back once to grab up the coat she stripped off hours ago, Kristen gave a curt nod to Blackwall and stumbled down the hallway. Behind her she could hear Agent Reign slamming his meaty fist into the door and demanding he speak with the victim of a terrible crime.
By the time Kristen got to the car, an exact same Charger in a midnight blue -- though this one was far shinier than before -- she wanted to curl up into a ball and die. Her night was the most epic of disasters, but they did learn a few things. One, these things could be created by an airborne gas. Two, it didn't affect everyone -- at least not right away. And three, go for the eyes.

She fumbled for the key hidden inside the owner's manual in the glovebox and jammed it blindly for the ignition. Maybe she should take a nap here. Curl up in the backseat for a quick forty, then head into the hospital. Tie up her hair, slam on a suit coat and she could bs her way in as another FBI agent that has to talk to Fenris. Piss off the agency. Have Blackwall tattle on her to L. Probably get M involved again.

The car turned on like a dream, unlike the poor one she drove to death. No doubt it was being crushed into a cube and incinerated at this very moment. She wiped a hand over her face, feeling the blood crust off her skin and tumble down like crimson snow. An idea struck her and she tugged her purse closer. Ten percent battery life. Still clinging in there too? Not a bad little phone.

Missed calls?

Cracking it open she noticed the same number over and over again, five times in total and starting around 3 in the morning. Cullen. He didn't leave a voicemail or send a text, just the harried calls to her cell. Shit. Was he watching the news?

Trying to not wince at how badly she could have already fucked this up, Kristen dialed his cell and pulled the car out into traffic. It rang four, then five times. She expected it to go to voicemail, no doubt he was working or preparing to head in, when a weary voice said, "Hello?"

"Hi," she tried to sound chipper but it came off strained, "uh, it's me and..."

"Kristen?" he sounded shocked to hear her voice. Did he not even look at his phone before answering it? "Where are you?"

"On the freeway, somewhere between I-65 and..."

"Is your car with you?"

"Yeeah?" she drug the answering question out, "Figured that with it being the middle of the night I could get a parking spot close to the building. Only had to hoof it a little bit, so not the dumbest choice and no waiting for the train. Why?"

He knew. The cops at least spotted that she was driving a blue Charger, no plates though. She wasn't stupid enough to go on a mission with those left on. But it was enough to sound some alarms in Cullen's head. Fuck. Maker damn it all!

She dug her fingers into the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white in her anger. Anywhere else and she'd cut her loses, any other time she'd vanish, any other man and she'd...fade. "Cullen?" she gulped, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, sighing on his end, "Just, thought I saw something...never mind."

He sounded exhausted. No, there was more under there. His voice cracked on the edge as if he was clinging to a cliff by his fingernails. Her heart leapt into her throat at the idea and she pressed the phone tighter to her ear while slowing down the car, "I'm just swinging back into the borough. Was going to pick up some breakfast, maybe donuts. If you'd like I could bring a few for you at home or the station...?"
Do you need me? Maker's breath. Her eyes darted up to the rearview mirror to spot the blood that stained damn near every inch of her body. There was no way in thedas she could explain that to him, to anyone. She should head home to wash away the evidence. Yet...that voice struck her to the core.

"No," he gasped out a moment. "No, I'm fine now."

"Are you sure?" He sure as shit didn't sound fine. Blessed Andraste, she was tired of worrying about men tonight.

"Yeah, yes, I'm sure you're tired from your long night."

You don't know the half of it. She yawned rather convincingly into the phone, "Staring at a computer screen moving one number to a new column is just so...damn...zzzzz."

"Kristen? Are you okay!" he panicked.

"Yeah, sorry, just a joke."

He tucked in a sigh and forced out a laugh, "Right, an obvious one at that. I only, with you driving. Forget it."

"Are you okay?" she bit her lip, already knowing the answer even while bracing herself to hear him say it.

Cullen chose the lie, "Yeah. Tired. Long night which I'll tell you about some other time. You...you have a good sleep."

"You too. And Cullen," she said before he hung up.

It was obvious he had the phone away from his ear before he turned back to say, "Yes?"

"I'm sorry I left you last night," she confessed to him, needing someone to hear it.

"It's okay," he absolved her without knowing about the sin. "See you later."

"Bye."

Her phone tumbled to the passenger seat, and Kristen narrowed her eyes against the road. You can't keep doing this. Bullshit, I survived. And Fenris almost didn't. You were on a knife's edge. That's life. Fuck. Fuck it all!

Fumbling for an escape she flipped on the radio, but it was set to default still. Instead of hisses and pops, a man -- no doubt with a head like a ham and features that were half the size they should be -- was railing fire and brimstone. In this case it was against the Orlesians and their handling of the bombing, but it could just as easily have been against the mages. It probably was only fancied up a bit.

Talk radio often made her laugh. People who lived in fancy houses that never faced an ounce of adversity save their avocado going brown too fast, insisting the world was shit. If she ripped off the wool they were swaddled in for just a second, a micro-one at that, this bloviating asshole would never sleep again. Fumbling for the dial, the machine-gun like fire of the host's voice faded and what sounded like a news bulletin interrupted.

"We have received news that after the reported explosion in one of his dock's warehouse, none
other than Solas himself will be hosting a press conference near the harbor in question. Some are saying that..."

Solas. If not for this mad man and the monsters he was cooking up in his lab, Fenris wouldn't be in the hospital. She wouldn't be covered in his blood. Kristen wrung her hands against the steering wheel. The smart thing would be to head home. Get some sleep. It was her orders.

Her eyes darted into the rearview mirror and she made a quick exit. No more dancing around and playing coy shadows, she had to see this megalomaniac monster in person. To look into his eyes and see if nothing but darkness resided inside. It was time to confront the boss.

Gas stations whipped past fast, but there was a smaller retail store embedded into a strip mall she spotted and turned the car into. Leaving the new/old car parked up front, Kristen hauled her purse close and stepped into the slight perfume cloud of retail hell. A bell jangled over her, which she glared at. How long had her head been pounding? She didn't even notice through the other aches filling her body.

Shaking it off, Kristen eyed up the smaller sample sizes at the front of the store. There wasn't much here for offerings, but she spotted what looked like polyester in the back. That had to be her size, buried deep in the dark zone of the store. Yanking up a shirt cut like a poncho bred with a box, she fished around towards the pants. Thank the Maker leggings were in season again or she'd be shit out of luck at most box stores in the big cities. There were some stupid rhinestones that formed a flower embedded on the side, but she didn't care.

All she needed was clothing without blood on it, the design and matronly cut didn't matter. At the counter, Kristen dropped the merchandise. The boy working it barely bothered to turn to her, until she asked, "Do you have any wet wipes?"

"Why in the hell would...?" Now he looked up, his eyes going wide at the gore stuck to her face and down her arm. Maybe she should have cleaned some of it off before stepping inside. "N-n-no. No wet wipes. Just clothes."

"Fine," she grumbled, fishing out a twenty for the cheap, thin, artificial fabrics.

"That'll be $45.37," the man intoned, his fingers folding on the counter. He seemed to think the strange woman covered in blood wouldn't be able to make the difference as he clung tight to the shirt and pants.

She sneered and laid out a fifty. "Keep the change," she snorted, rolling the purchased clothing into her hands.

"Uh," he seemed terrified to touch the money as if she might have leprosy or something. "Do you want a bag?"

"No," she shook her head and stomped towards the bathroom. Once inside, Kristen checked to see the two stalls were empty, and bolted the door.

Like ripping the peel off an onion, she shed her work gear but didn't hurl it into the trash. Even with all of Fenris' blood and any that sprayed off the monster, she'd no doubt need it later. Kevlar was damn expensive and a pain in the ass to hand wash where no one could see. How many truck stop bathrooms had she spot treated in?

By the harsh light of the sterile bathroom she glared at her body. Tender areas were turning to potential bruises already, but it was the swipe of blood that seeped its way through her clothes and
streaked down her side she was most concerned with. Kristen reached for a wad of paper towels, only to find there was no dispenser on the wall. All they had were those dryers that blew bacteria everywhere.

Great. Half naked, she stomped into a stall and dug her fingers under the clasp that held the toilet paper dispenser closed. With a fast yank, she ripped the metal lock off, and freed a roll for her personal use.

"Um, ma'am..." a voice shouted from the counter outside.

"Everything's fine," she called cheerily while wadding a mass of tissue thin toilet paper into her fist and running it under the water. Slowly, she scraped away the blood clinging to her cheek and down her arm. When the wad dissolved in her fingers, she'd throw the red stained clump into the garbage and start again. Washing off the streak on her chest, she closed her eyes.

Hot breath burned down her neck, a hand just about to latch onto her throat and squeeze tight enough to pop her eyeballs. A laugh. A cold one she'd never forget. Nor would he forget the gun in her pocket. Even with the rapport of a bullet ringing in the air, she couldn't hear anything but that breath in the dark.

"Damn it," the Inquisitor dug her hand into the porcelain sink, the edge embedding into her palm. She didn't have time for that crap, for anything. The press conference began in an hour and she had to be ready.

After checking to make certain there was no blood on the back of her head or legs, she dressed in the cheap clothing. The leggings were cut so thin there was a good chance she'd wear a hole in the thighs just from walking to her car. While the tunic, if that was what it was meant to be, managed to be too loose on her chest, causing her breasts to look like a pair of cantaloupes she was attempting to sneak out of a grocery store. Yet, it was also too tight to her stomach, gripping to the roll and digging into her belly button.

"This is the ugliest thing I have ever worn," she assessed. Pulling her hair up into a quick ponytail, the last thing Kristen did was unstick the blue tape and cotton ball wound around her elbow. Into the trash rested all proof that she was caught in some horrible accident. Doubtful a random janitor would look twice at it. Bundling her old clothing into her hands, she walked head held high out of the store.

The guy working the counter didn't call out to wish her a good morning; he was already regretting her visit no doubt. Not that she had any intention of ever coming again. After secreting her old clothing under the mat in the trunk, Kristen got behind the wheel and flexed her fingers. Solas had a lot to answer for and this little PR stunt of his was going to backfire terribly.

Digging her sunglasses out of the purse, she slipped them onto her nose, and turned to drive into the sun and back into the heart of the city.
Confrontation

The harbor was the difference of rain-soaked night versus shining, police-tape filled day. Even Kristen could scarcely believe it was but a few hours earlier that she was running for her life from five murderous crags. Though judging by the pile of orange cones circling where her car took down the fence, it was hard to forget as well. She snuck into the back of a press caravan, looking like one of those PAs who dashed about getting things for the talent as long as she didn't look up.

Cameras and reporters in sharp blazers crowded around a platform someone raised up off the ground so the master of ceremonies could literally gaze down upon them. She was surprised at how thin a figure Solas cut when he stepped out of his limo in a simple, but well made grey suit. The rich being skinny was not a shock, though the men tended to gain a few around the midsection and laugh it away as gravitas with age. But this man looked hungry, his cheekbones practically bulging out from the tight flesh. It gave his entire face an elongated look, almost like a wolf stalking the steel forest for prey.

Kristen couldn't deny a shiver as his eyes shifted around the crowd and landed for a brief second upon her. There was far too much intelligence resting inside of them for her to feel comfortable. Though, nothing he could say or do would evaporate the rage in her gut. That moment when she slammed into the hospital and wondered if Fenris yet drew breath pounded on repeat in her memory. The dread of not knowing, the fear of finding the truth, she hated it. Hated people who made her cower in terror, and Solas would know that soon enough.

That she promised as she watched him go through the motions of insisting to his stockholders that everything was fine. "I am not yet certain what could have caused one of my warehouses to implode in such a fashion, but I assure you DW Enterprises and myself are more than happy to work fully with the law to come to a satisfying conclusion."

The man paused, taking a breath deep into his lungs. Kristen snorted a moment as the sunlight caught against his shiny head. They were right, he did look like an egg. A dangerous egg.
"Mr. Solas," a woman waved her hand, trying to get his attention. He turned a slow eye towards her and tipped that dimpled chin. "Given recent events in Orlais, do you not think that this might have been the work of mage bombers?"

He bristled a moment, his worn lips lifting in a sneer. Or a growl. It vanished quickly, so fast it was doubtful the cameras caught enough for people to dwell on, but Kristen did. He doesn't seem to like being associated with the mage terrorists. Plenty of reasons why, but that was the most visceral and honest response she'd seen in the middle of this twenty minute press conference.

"Madam," Solas began, "if there is any clear indication of foul play, mage related or otherwise, I am certain that the local police will get to the bottom of it."

"But...given your recent interview in the Denerim Gazette where you claimed that 'The rebels are fighting a losing game. If they stopped for a moment and looked around, they might realize their only hope for change is not with a bomb but a vote.' Do you not worry that they might be targeting you personally?"

Solas chuckled a moment as if his pompous words meant anything. If a business man was to bring about world peace it would come in plastic packaging, cost $100 a month, and be built by qunari hands for 7 cents an hour. "If the rebels do intend to target me, then I say they have terrible aim as I was not anywhere near the harbor at the time in question."

That seemed to shut up the news crew, who were all pawing through to find their soundbites and whip up an article. It was Kristen who merged through the lines to wind up front and center. Her arms crossed over her chest, she shouted up at the businessman, "Where were you last night?"

Solas ceased speaking with one of the bodyguards on his arm, a blonde woman who could have been passed off as an assistant were it not for the obvious gun bulge under her coat. He jerked his pointed chin and those haunting eyes landed square on Kristen, "Do you mind if I ask who you are?"

"A concerned citizen of this city," she spat back, not about to give an inch.

His lips lifted in a grin and he drew a tongue over the sharp teeth, "I see. Well, since you are curious, I was in fact arriving at home after a journey abroad. The moment I received the news about what occurred here I naturally had to see for myself how much damage had been done. Thankfully, they tell me there has been no life lost in this accident."

That last part he aimed right at her, his eyes burning. He knew. He knew what happened, what they weren't telling a soul. No one would believe inhuman rock monsters, so it's a bomb, or the storm, or any number of logical excuses. The media could grow fat on the lie, but he was telling her he knew. Looking right into her eyes to say 'We're on the same playing field.'

Kristen blinked a moment and the blonde woman shuffled to the mike, "That's all for now. Mr. Solas is very busy. If you wish to inquire more from him, please go through his publicist." Both of the bodyguards began to hustle the gabillionaire towards the car waiting for him. Along the way, the egg tipped his head to the people, but before he slipped into the opened seat he glanced back at the lone woman in an ugly poncho shirt who hadn't moved a muscle.

This isn't over. And you haven't won a damn thing.

While she fumed in her head, the only reason all the reporters showed up out here got into his fancy car and was driven off to another big meeting to decide the fates of hundreds, maybe even thousands of people he'd never met. This was so stupid. You didn't just tip your hand, you all but
A glove in his face. Then again, what were the chances that he'd recognize her as one of hundreds of grunts working in one of his dozens of office buildings?

Shit, what were the chances he'd remember her face in an hour? Shaking her head, she turned to walk away from the mess when a hand landed on her shoulder. The Inquisitor lashed a hand out, grabbing onto the invading elbow and about to flip whoever was touching her, when she looked up into amber eyes. Her entire body went slack as she stared up into Cullen's face.

"Hi," he said with a shrug, before wincing. There were no obvious marks on his cheek save the purple bags under the eyes, but his body was covered by the uniform. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"Ah," Kristen waffled on her toes while the camera and news began to pack up. She could say the same for him because she didn't plan for this at all. "I heard about the press conference on the radio and thought I should head on over. See what happened that has everyone all abuzz at the coffee shop." Absently, she began to pluck at the Maker awful garments. Before, she didn't care that her body looked like a bag of garbage forced and beaten with a stick to approximate a woman's form. Now, she despised to think he had to look at it.

Her fidgeting must have drawn Cullen's attention as his eyes drifted down her body. "You weren't wearing that last night, were you?"

"No, no, it's...I figured if they were dragging us in, there was no reason to look presentable or nice, so I picked the comfiest thing I owned." She threw on a smile as if that could possibly be true and Cullen nodded along.

"I'm a little surprised you're here too," Kristen continued while beginning to walk towards her car. "Isn't your precinct way on the other side of town."

He winced at that, or he was wincing while he walked. Yes, there was obvious pain in his strides and lead in his arms. Maker's breath, what happened to him here? "They called a lot of us in, fear of a bomb threat and all."

There sure were a lot of cops real fast on the scene, almost as if they amassed long before the container was even opened. Did someone send in the cavalry in anticipation of what could happen or...? Her cheeks paled at the thought rising in her brain. Were the police meant to be fodder to test the strength and power of these crags? Blessed Andraste, did he fight one?

"Cullen?" she gasped out, her breath catching at the end. He turned from gazing at the ground, curiosity and concern at her stricken tone obvious. "Are you...you're limping a bit."

"Oh, that," he glanced down at his legs and placed a hand to his hip while trying to stretch. "It's...it's a long story. Nothing too bad, just a bit of soreness that'll wear off in a couple days."

He tried to wave it all away, but she could see it now. Scrapes where the rock burned against his skin, his hands sore from clutching too tight to a useless weapon. Kristen bore the same on her body. He fought a crag, he fought one and survived. Maybe even killed it. Shit. Every brush she had with one, she'd only gotten by by the skin of her teeth. If he'd been one inch off one way or the other...

Launching forward, Kristen wrapped her hands around Cullen and buried her face into his chest. He went rigid a moment, his head pivoting around at the audience while she clung tight. "Hey..." Cullen began, his fingers picking up her hair, long since fallen flat. "I'm, I'm okay."
"I know," she whispered, tears bubbling in her eyes. This was stupid, to cry on his chest like a scared child, but after the long night of waiting to hear if someone was dead or alive, she couldn't stand to think there'd been another out there. Another in the same predicament without her even knowing it. 

"I just...I don't know what's wrong with me," she swiped at her eyes and began to slide back when Cullen, ignoring that he was in uniform and on the job, ensnared her tighter with his arms. His nose burrowed into her hair that had to smell of the harbor, or disinfectant, or blood. Stupid, I. But he didn't respond to the scent, just took a long deep breath with her in his arms. "I'm glad you're here. More than I thought I'd be."

"Me too," she nodded, not wanting to step back. But there was work to be done for both of them. "Cullen, I..." she wanted to warn him, to tell him to keep as far away from whatever this was as possible. To not probe into Solas' connections because this was a man without remorse. But if she did, he'd know she was here. That she was not what she claimed to be. And that might put him in even worse danger. 

Sighing, she nuzzled her cheek against his chest, "I should head home and get some sleep."

"You do look tired," he whispered before blanching, "Not that I think you look bad, only...worn from such a long night of..."

Kristen reached a hand up to cup his cheek, "You look pretty worn yourself."

"That does not surprise me," he sighed, the man leaning back from her grip. Before he could escape, she drew her fingers behind his jaw and pulled him to her. The kiss was little more than a quick peck, lips tight and the skin cracked after a long night in an arid hospital, but she needed it. And from the way he cupped his hand behind her back to hold her against his lips, he did too.

"Right," she winced, sliding away, "I should do what I said I was going to..." Kristen began to walk back from him, when his fingers lanced through hers.

"Allow me to walk you to your car."

"Are you sure?" she asked, blinking against the sun glinting off the soulless windows of the buildings. "It's a bit of a hike. Since I don't have a fancy press badge and all..."

He went quiet a moment and nodded. Sticking out her arm, she smiled, "Who am I to turn down a police escort? It's like I'm my own funeral... Which is really weird to say, forget I did."

As they slid out of the harbor, the two fell silent. The cops were slow to inspect press badges and IDs, leaving a line of honking news vans that had to make the deadline. She worried how Fenris was getting on. Knowing that man he'd already hurled a bed pan across the room in an attempt to break out. Perhaps Blackwall let him, he wasn't exactly a firm hand when it came to telling people no. More likely to grumble to himself behind your back afterwards about how stupid something was. 

Harding. She needed to get in contact with Harding, outside of the office job. An old bar, an old shit bar. The chances of those being bugged were nigh on nil because even spies had standards. If they were already at the testing stage of their monsters, it couldn't be long until it was time to launch
them on a real target. The Inquisitor needed a name, an idea, a face, and fast.

"You've gone quiet," Cullen whispered, his arm locked around hers.

Kristen winced, all the planning fading out of her brain as she glanced over at him. "Yeah, sorry, just...thinking." About this world, about someone else trying to tear it to shreds for his own gains, about how it can endanger you, and that in finishing it, in saving it, I'm unlikely to ever see your face again.

"Been a long enough night to warrant a lot of thinking," Cullen mused. She tipped her head in agreement, the man having no idea how right he really was. Turning a corner, she walked him down a back alley rather near where she ripped apart a pile of patio furniture in a quest to escape the cops.

"Here's my car," she said while reaching up for the roof to pat a hand against the shiny paint.

Cullen blinked in surprise, eyeing it up from bumper to bumper. "It's...it's intact."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Just," he shook his head and sighed, "surprised how much nicer it looks. Did you wash it recently?"

Kristen winced a bit at the 'Fresh off a car lot' shine to the car. "Driving in the rain without anyone to splash all the muddy puddles back onto it, I guess."

His far too handsome face nodded as if that made sense. It was obvious he was swallowing down her lies and finding something didn't agree with him, but when he looked over a smile was all he beamed at her. "Drive safe, if you feel tired don't be ashamed to pull over and get a ride."

Kristen smiled at his concern. She'd once driven a cement truck across country lines after being awake for 45 hours. This was nothing. Sliding a hand around his waist, she dug her fingers into the sharp cloth of the uniform and pulled him to her for another kiss.

Without the audience of news vans or any other police standing around, she took her time, her eyes shut so tight she could see stars. His bottom lip slid in between hers and she gently nipped it before stepping back with a sigh. "Thanks, for seeing me safely back to my car."

"It's...no problem," Cullen said while watching her crack open the driver's side door and climb inside.

Before she pulled out, she rolled down the window and leaned towards him. "I'll text you later, after I get some sleep."

He hung into the top of the car, his head drifting closer a moment as he sighed, "Sounds good."

Kristen gave a quick grip to his fingers before beginning the arduous task of breaking out of a parallel park. Onto the road, just before turning towards the traffic and her way on the interstate, she gave another wave. Cullen returned it softly, his fingers lifting off his crossed arms.

You're going to hate saying goodbye.

But he'd hate her more for knowing the truth.
For three days he slept like the dead, nothing but emptiness filling his brain while he tried to slide away from memories of the monster that rose out of the ocean. But the endless bliss of nothing wouldn't last forever. It never did.

It began as it usually did, in the darkest hours of the morning with his head caving in. At least that was how it felt, like his skull suddenly thinned to the strength of wet paper and he could feel the scalp denting in on his brain. It'd fall further inward, dragging his brow and ear into it as well, melting his face like sugar in the rain, while Cullen struggled to keep a grip onto his hair.

He'd wake with tufts of it clumped inside his fingers, his heart pounding in his teeth. Sometimes the darkness would fade away. The light of his phone, or an old clock would comfort him. Now, the abyss surrounded him on all sides. He curled tighter into his gut, hands on his ears to try and stymie out the deafening silence.

For two weeks there was nothing. No light. No sound. No one. Just the unending darkness as he lay prostrated on the ground, his broken legs stretched out behind him. They shattered them on a lark, right before hurling him into the darkness and not looking back. No one came to the cell.

No one turned on a light.

There wasn't even the scurry of rats to accompany him. Only the never ending thump of his heart pounding like a washing machine through his weakening body.

His hands lashed out, feeling for the shattered tibia prodding out of his skin. It was and wasn't there. His fingers could only find naked flesh, scarred but healed, but his mind would not stop remembering that touch. How he'd prod at it to remind himself that he wasn't dead and already in
the void. The pain proof that this torture wasn't finished yet.

Light. He needed light. He had to have light to-to see something. Anything. Cullen moved to get
out of bed, only to have his leg collapse under him. He rolled with it, his side smacking into the
floor. A carpet he put beside to catch him helped to soften the regular blow. Creeping like a child
on his hands and knees, he padded towards the switch that had to be by the door.

You can leave. This isn't a prison. You're not trapped. It's safe. He sucked in a breath while
reaching up for the light. His index fingers wrapped around the small piece of plastic, embedding
the corner edges deeper into his flesh to remind himself it was real. This was real, the other horror
was not happening now. It was in the past. Remember, you got out of the pit. You were rescued by
the Warden platoon.

Cullen flipped it up and he blinked a moment. His eyes strained in the hissing 100 watts above him,
but his brain couldn't see through the darkness. Fuck. It hadn't been this bad in years.

His hand wrapped around his chest, trying to dig into the sternum as if that would lift it off his
heart. It felt as if all of his ribs were being pushed inward, threatening to snap like twigs and impale
his heart like a cocktail sausage. Blood. So damn much blood. On his legs, cracked and dry on his
fingers, seeping into his mouth.

This wasn't enough. He needed more. Rising to unsteady legs, Cullen dashed out the open door of
his bedroom and down the hallway. "You're better than this," he whispered to himself, hands
fumbling through the glow of the electronics to find the remote. When the TV burst to life, an old
black and white movie was playing, the soothing glow washing over him.

"You're strong," he said, his entire body trembling as if a massive ghost walked through him.

He prodded at the remote, trying to switch through channels to find anything brighter, shinier. The
opposite of darkness. "You can handle anything you put your mind to."

Cullen moved to jab at the remote once more, only to have it crumble out of his hands and land on
the floor. "Damn it," he cursed, the mantras therapy tried to teach him shattering in his head.

"You're worthless. You're pathetic. You're...you're not fit to exist," he cried while falling to a knee.
"Look at you," he taunted himself even while picking up the lost remote, "blubbering over what?
The dark? Who's scared of the dark?"

Pointing the remote at the tv, he flipped it to a different input and the screen went dark. In the cold
reflection he saw his face, stricken white in terror and red tears building in his eyes. Beyond
redemption. Beyond hope.

There was only one last thing Cullen could do. He cracked open the entertainment stand and pulled
out a grey box with a black controller dangling off the end. It was a few years past its prime, he
only owned one game, and someone gave it to him on a whim. Cullen felt silly the first time he
picked it up, assuming it was meant for children and the like. But when he would wake in chills
and fear in the middle of the night, sitting in the living room with the glow of the kitchen lights
baking into him, he'd play this silly game for hours.

He knew it all by heart, barely pausing as he flew through the menu screens to land upon his
preferred vehicle -- a red dragon with tiny wings on both the front and back. Selecting it, Cullen
waited for the cartoon colored world to wash over him as it loaded the first race.

Cotton Candy Villa. The pinkest and fluffiest of them all. Focusing on the twists and turns,
knowing he could do it inside and out, turned his fritzing brain away from the memories burning inside his heart. Even with a tear dribbling down his cheek he could still see the road, flipping his little dragon to roar a burst of fire at that damn mushroom car. It always cheated.

Into that he poured all his focus, unwilling to let his mind scamper back to the darkness. Unfortunately, he didn't hear the feet padding on the floor, or see the shadow of a body standing and watching him until it was too late. "Cullen?" a weary voice whispered from beyond the sanctified glow of the television.

He whipped his head away and gulped. Kristen stood in silhouette, her body naked as she tried to dig sleep out of her eye. Because she stayed over. Because you thought you'd be fine to see her.

No. Fuck. No. Damn it!

"Are you...playing a game?" she asked while easing far enough into the living room to peer at the tv. "At three in the morning?"

"It's..." he gnashed his teeth together, his skin prickling at the brine of lies he'd soaked in. "I'm, it's not what it, sort of, um..." He had nothing, no explanation for his actions. Turning away from her, he focused only on the racetrack, his fingers still working the buttons on the controller without his brain.

Kristen blinked, her hands crossed over her breasts as she stared down at him. He expected a scolding, feeling more childish with every moment as cartoon sound effects rang out from the tv. Her voice softened to a whisper as she pleaded, "Is something wrong?"

Closing his eyes, Cullen let go of the controller. He heard his little dragon crash into a wall and burst into a ball of glittery flame but he didn't care. Air refused to get into his lungs, all of it clogging in his throat as he tried to scrape up an answer. An explanation. He was so damn tired of wearing this secret -- like a hidden tattoo that if anyone saw they'd instantly judge him for getting. As if he had a choice in the matter.

"I have PTSD," he gasped out fast, his eyes shut tight while he whipped everything off his chest. "From my time in the templars. It comes and goes, usually at night. That's when it, when it gets really bad. Crushing, so I... The darkness, it sounds so stupid to say, but I can't stand the dark. There was a time when--"

He slammed his mouth shut with that. Speaking about it, even thinking about his two weeks in the void would bring months of nightmares back. He never wanted to talk about it, to think about it, to keep going back to that awful place ever again.

"So I...I play this stupid game. It's loud to combat the silence, and-and colorful to go against the darkness. And..." Cullen crumbled, his head crashing to his chest.

She hadn't said a word, nor moved. Just stood there taking in his words as he spat them out. That damn pamphlet. He'd read it once. What did it say? Some stat about... Cullen dug a hand against his forehead but couldn't surface an answer.

Yanking it away, he glanced up at the silhouette in the darkness and gulped, "I'm not, it doesn't mean I'll get violent. I don't, anyway. Or hear voices. I just...I need to be in light for awhile, and sound, and to-to not..."

To not fear that everything in his world was crumbling like sand on the high tide around him. To feel carpet under his feet and not frozen cement. To touch his legs and remind himself that they
weren't shattered. To dig his fingernails into his remaining sanity and wrap it around his brain like a blanket.

It sounded like a monumental thing to ask of anyone. Taking in a shuddering breath, he glanced up at her. Lips pursed, she seemed to be thinking hard. Her head bobbed a bit before her eyes lifted and landed upon him.

"Okay," was all she said before turning on her heel and marching back to the bedroom.

Cullen swallowed as he felt a brick fall off the wall. No doubt she was dressing quickly, checking her purse and...and maybe calling someone to make certain he didn't hurt her. Didn't try to follow her, or keep her here. To extricate herself as soon as possible from this broken tin soldier and find a real life. A normal life.

His heart ached, as if a flaming red rock was slapped into his chest instead. Even if he knew the outcome of his actions, the inevitability of it all, he wished that just once it could be different. That she'd...that she wouldn't be scared of him.

Feet padding down the hall drew Cullen to look up. He expected to see her in the skirt and blouse she wore from work, but only his old grey henley swaddled her chest and arms. Her bottom was left bereft of pants as she crested a blanket over her shoulders like a cape. "Wha...?" Cullen began.

"Sorry, but your living room is freezing," she said with a shrug and, against all common sense, plopped onto the floor beside him. With a care, she wrapped the blanket around both of their legs, Cullen still dumbstruck at her not bolting. "So, do you have another controller or...?"

"You..." he blinked madly in the harsh light of the game, "you're not." Cullen buried the thought deep and scrunched his nose up, "Um, no, nope. Sorry. Just the one."

"That's okay. We can work together," she picked up part of the controller with her left hand and slid the right around the back of him in order to tuck herself against his chest. Her warmth overpowered his trembling body, Cullen's heart leaping to try and fall flush with hers.

"Hm," Kristen mused to herself while sliding the vehicle selection cursor up and down. "There's a lot here."

"I've...gotten most of them unlocked," he said haphazardly, then winced at his bragging about playing so much of a child's game. His brain was still tumbling around the fact that she didn't run. That she was pouting her lip while swaddled in his clothing, her warm eyes digging deep into the options as her shoulder and thigh pressed into his clammy skin.

"What about this one?" she landed on that cursed mushroom car and Cullen growled. Kristen laughed a moment, "Not a good choice? I usually pick them off pizzas anyway."

Did she not care? Was she not terrified that he might...she knew he had access to weaponry, it was his job. It was why anyone at his job knowing the full truth would ostracize him. Unaware of the tormented inner hate still churning inside Cullen's brain, Kristen snuggled her cheek against his arm and peered up.

"How about this green lizard one?"

"The emerald dragon," he recited. "A bit harder to handle, but it can reach higher speeds than most of all the other cars."

Her smile warmed him and she nodded, "Right, okay. Let's do that one." She pressed accept then
blinked a moment at the flashing lights. While the screen shifted to load, Kristen hefted up the
controller and asked, "What button does what?"

Cullen prodded at it, explaining what was the brake, the accelerate, the boost, the power launcher.
It wasn't until he got to the two sticks that she blinked coldly. "This controls the direction of the car
and this the camera."

"Why would you need to control the camera? Does the car take pictures?"

"Well, there are others on the track, and they...they sort of shoot things at you."

"Bullets?"

"More like pizza boxes, or soda cans, a hamster wheel."

"Garbage? Cars that look like dragons and other random things throw garbage at me," she was
blinking in the low light while staring at the tv, but after a moment shrugged. "I'll handle the
camera bit, you do the track part."

It was silly, and rather difficult to navigate, but Cullen slid his thumb against the stick and tried to
take over the main buttons. Before their car even got off the line, Kristen accidentally switched the
aspect ratio twice. Her little cries of "Damn it!" and "Not again" made him laugh a moment.

When they got going, it was relatively smooth sailing, Cullen's muscle memory taking over for him
as his eyes kept darting over to her. She was leaning to the right or left to follow the curve of the
track, as if she was in the car herself. As if this was all perfectly normal.

"Why aren't you running?" he whispered. He meant it to be to himself, but Kristen pawed at a few
of the controls. Their little car lobbed eggs in all directions before she stumbled across the pause
button.

"Cullen," she shifted in her seat, a hand cupping along his jaw. "I'm not scared of you."

"Maybe you should be," he winced, "Or, worried."

"I'm still not," her words were soft as a stream of water as she twirled to fully face him. "You're not
a bad person. You're...in pain, and that's okay." She flinched and shook her head, "I'm not making
any sense."

"People rarely do at 3 in the morning," he tried to chuckle, to play it all off as a laugh. To convince
himself that this was a minor setback instead of his life, and would forever be just that.

"If you want me to talk to you, when I'm over, or need to call during an episode," she began before
biting her lip and almost glancing away in guilt. It was a lot to offer out of nowhere. He was about
to insist it didn't matter, when she shook her head, "Then do it. Okay? Or, if you just need to play a
racing game, maybe crank up some house music, or run around singing show tunes at the top of
your lungs...that's okay too."

Such a generous offer, he didn't feel as if he deserved it, but when she cupped his cheeks and
pulled his forehead to hers, he nodded. "All right." It was impossible to turn her down now. Kristen
smiled a moment, before her face scrunched up and a massive yawn broke.

"If I'm...you should get back to sleep. To rest up before tomorrow and..."

"Actually, I'd rather stay up a bit longer with you. Got to see where this game is going. You're
Chuckling, he turned towards the tv a moment, before his eyes darted to her limply holding the controller. Wrapping an arm around her and digging into his shirt on her waist, Cullen tugged her to sit in his lap. When her back crushed to his chest, he buried his nose into her hair and breathed deep. "How about you take a quick turn around the track without me?"

Kristen unearthed the controller that fell between their legs and stared at the buttons. She didn't move to unpause it, her legs bowing out while Cullen wrapped his hands tighter around her soft stomach. "I..." she whispered, the words jagged, "there's something about me, something you should know. A secret."

"Hm?" he sat up at the seriousness in her tone, accidentally pulling her back with him.

She circled a finger around the controller's edge before laughing once and turning back, "I'm Makerawful at racing games."

"That's okay," Cullen smiled while she tucked safely into him. As the game restarted, her car falling behind before she revved the pixelated engine, he whispered, "I like you regardless."

Kristen's head fell a moment, her eyes skirting along the floor but at the sound of the mushroom revving past, her vision honed in on the screen. She was doing rather good for not being very good at it, at least keeping on par with the rest. Cullen was about to compliment her when she reached the leaping platform. Rather than hit it square, she jutted her little green dragon off the side and went careening into the lake of soda.

"Told you," she laughed as the car respawned to begin again.

"Are there any games you are good at?"

"Fighting ones," she said, her tone serious as she focused on lining up the shot this time.

While Kristen massaged the controller to her whims, he clung tight to her. His legs enveloped around the outside of hers, cold toes burying under her calves. She smelled of a floral-like shampoo, which he'd breathe in deep off his pillows every morning after she stayed over. And the heat, the never ending warmth off of her body drove straight into his heart to ward away the darkness. Cullen took a full breath, his chest light as a feather.

You're good.

You deserve happiness.

You are happy.

Chapter End Notes

Dwarves in Space 3: Free Radicals is dropping July 12th.
But you can get an Advanced Reader Copy for free right now from Booksprout!
I've had a few shitacular days lately. I wish I had a happy chapter with rainbows and kittens to share instead, but oh well.

Kristen tugged the knit cap further down her forehead to disguise the bug in her ear. Well aware that her captive audience was incapable of answering save a vague mmhm, or uh-uh, Harding was in full on talkative mode. She never got that way during the rarest of downtimes, or even at the company picnic (which was always held underground without any daylight or grass, but they did get hot dogs). Only when an agent was wearing a wire and about to walk into enemy territory did Harding find it fun to yak their ear off.

"Are you in position?" the bug in her ear yammered.

She sighed while leaning back in the elevator as if she'd finished with the weariest and longest of days. A few heads turned to glance back at the woman dressed in a far more high class dress than Trevelyan would wear. This high up in the air she knew she needed to look the part or there'd be a lot of pointed questions. Dress fancy enough and you could almost talk your way out of murder.

Two of the heads in the elevator belonged to what had to be tourists, both wearing 'I Hold Sky City In My Heart' t-shirts, which could be purchased at damn near every corner in midtown. The last was outfitted in a full triple breasted suit. When he got into the elevator Kristen's eyes lit up, though she only kept watch from the side. Strange for someone to be that fancied up and heading to a skyscraper garden unless there was to be a meeting.
Anywhere else she'd guess mob boss posturing and potentially a gun in his briefcase. But the pinched look under round glasses, the papery thin skin, and the buffed fingernails told her accountant. So a different sort of mob boss posturing, only in this case to the great lord of them all - money.

"I take it that's a no," the fly said. "Shit, I'll make sure to add slow elevator to the list." A few typing sounds echoed over the line, Harding either doing just that or handling one of a dozen other side projects. "Getting any signal yet?"

Kristen let her fingers slip into her purse without removing the hand sized grey box. There wasn't much to her end, just three lights up on the top -- red, green, and yellow. At the moment none of them were lit up. "Hmm," she mused to herself aloud while crossing her arms.

"Another no. Well, get to the tip top and I'll guide you around."

Harding was surprisingly gung-ho about Kristen's plan. Not that the techie was prone to slacking off on her job, no one in the agency could afford to be lazy. Just that Harding thought it sounded a bit balmy when she first floated it. But they had nothing else to go on, and apparently headquarters was buzzing.

She wished she knew what they were buzzing about, the damn switchboard deciding she still needed to remain in the dark. "Hold on a second, Ink," the bug said, "got a text from... Ah. Seems F is out and about, no doubt growling at adorable Girl Rangers trying to sell him cookies."

Good. Kristen blinked a moment, trying to stay in character. It wasn't always easy to shake away a limp or remember to hold her head at various angles and she could manage to remain as Kristen through most tests, but just hearing Fenris' name threw her off. She felt her spine straighten and stance widen automatically as if a fight were about to break out. Maker's breath, was that the only time she was ever around him -- just before the shit hit the fan?

Actually, thinking back on the few missions she had worked with Fenris, that was a far assessment. It was a wonder they didn't break out into sympathetic bruises upon seeing each other.

"So," Harding whispered in her ear as if anyone else could hear them, "Blackwall told me you were the one to take F to the hospital. Even got a pint of your blood sloshing around in his heart. That's rather romantic."

Kristen coughed loudly, trying to hide the snarl that erupted from her throat. It was not romance, it was survival. Their lifestyle could ill afford anything of that nature. Happiness too, come to think of it.

"I always wondered, I mean the whole glaring at anything under the sun, tight body, tendency to whip ten feet across the ground as if there's a rocket shoved up his ass. That's kinda hot, but I get the feeling the presentation doesn't necessarily match the skill."

What in the void was she getting at?

"Everyone knows you and F got too close for your own good." Shit. Now? "How was it?" Kristen fell dead silent, her fingers digging into her coat. She glared down at them as a distraction and noticed the dirt dug under the bed. She should have thought to paint them. Red nail lacquer could hide any bruises that were hard to explain.

"Come on, give me something. You didn't go back so, not exactly a ringing endorsement, but there had to be something to make it worth it. The whole agency was in an uproar when word hit."
Maker's breath. Kristen shut her eyes trying to not remember that real walk of shame. Three days in a decontaminant cell, being drilled over and over about what precisely occurred. Then, when they seemed satisfied that she capitulated enough, being led past the two way mirror that looked in on Fenris.

She'd been resolute in doing the right thing, in trying to save face for them both, until she spotted his head lolling to the side. Those eyes that had burned through the world itself were matte and lifeless. He picked at the table while cuffs jangled on the hard plastic. He meant what he said to her, and she didn't realize it until it was too late.

Regrets didn't have any place inside the agency. Mistakes could be learned from, but regrets only lingered and slowed a person down. After their foolish choice, Fenris became a perfect soldier -- gladly leaping into the fray without thought for himself. She...tried to move on, to shore up her certainty. The agency watched him and not her. After all, she was the Inquisitor. But then Ostwick happened and her long dead heart started to thump inside her cold chest.

The elevator finally bonged and the doors parted to reveal a small, green oasis in a field of glass. White sky circled like a blank canvas around pots of plants from what looked like all corners of thedas. Twisted trees, exotic orchids, grasses out of Rivain, and -- for some reason -- a few boxes of nothing but elfroot. It was a bit more surprising to find an herb up here in a skyscraper garden, but perhaps the boss liked it. Who could say?

Kristen watched the tourists dash out into the hot house air of the garden. Their first stop was the water feature, a lovely little fountain with a stream of bright blue liquid dribbling from a wolf's mouth. The statue stood nearly ten feet tall, its mouth large enough to fit a human head inside, but it didn't look scary. If anything it reminded her more of a dog about to drop a ball in its owners lap.

She glanced over at the accountant, but he waved her on, "Please. Ladies first."

It was the clothes he saw, not the woman inside. Amazing how much that was all it often took to blend in. The rich looked for accessories, tasteful but expensive. The poor, the state of the clothing. It could appear well made, but it had to be old and worn hard. Only the middle class would trip Kristen up the hardest, seeming to be uncertain which either echelon dressed or behaved like. Having scrounged most of her young life in dresses made out of old flour sacks and bedsheets, she preferred being passed off as rich.

Smiling at the accountant, who was no doubt waiting for a man in a black suit with a pistol at his side to escort him somewhere safe, Kristen eased out onto the garden veranda. Her eyes darted down to the radar box and she flipped it on.

"Hello!" Harding whistled. "Maker's breath, this is picking up nearly two floors down. Here I expected better steel shielding. I wouldn't want to be caught up there in the middle of a big storm, FYI."

She hadn't planned on being around much longer.

"Can you get more scans? It's not pointing up much."

Kristen stepped over towards a plant with red leaves and circled a finger over it. Smiling, she mumbled, "Mm hmm," as an answer to Harding.

"Ma'am," a woman dressed in a very uniform blouse leaned over to her, "please don't touch the flora."
"Sorry," she said while digging into her purse and shuffling the grey box around. The top scanning part rose and she pushed it up against the back wall, hopefully it was piercing through the floors to find and map all of Solas' secrets. There were no plans or layouts for what was up there, and she had to know before she made any next move.

"Okay, good. Now give a little walk around like you're really into plants. This thing takes forever to make a full map."

Wonderful. Kristen tried to crack off the grit in her jaw as she paced towards the first window. Far below her was the street cramming full with people as rush hour swung into play, but she focused outward on the ocean. It looked so close from here, as if she could reach forward and pluck it up in her palm.

She should ask Harding about running the numbers on the cargo Fenris found. No doubt she already did, but didn't feel like telling Kristen. Probably wasn't even supposed to tell the Inquisitor the way the agency was acting. Was this all about Ostwick? The silence was so thick on her end, it seemed as if someone was almost trying to get her killed.

No. That's foolish. Besides, if the agency wanted her dead she wouldn't even know it. Just turn down an alley and meet with a bullet. No one would even know she was dead, because no one would know she existed.

"What about that cop toy of yours?" the bug resumed talking and Kristen practically leapt out of her shoes.

"Huh," she said as if recognizing a landmark out across the vast grey landscape, but Harding got the message.

"What's he like in bed? You keep going back to play so..."

Her eyes flashed open wide, Kristen resting her forehead against the cool glass in order to try and wipe away a touch of the burn. Harding wasn't stupid. No one she worked with was stupid and she knew it, but she didn't want any of them to know it. They're spies, figuring shit out is what we do. Of course they all know. But then if the agency didn't want her to do it, they'd stop her. Say something. Give her a damn order beyond wait.

"He's not as pretty as F. Taller, but that's not everything," Harding scoffed with assuredness. "And those big green eyes, perfect for getting lost in."

Amber wasn't anything to sneeze at either. Certainly not the way they'd soften at the edges when he'd look over at her as if he was always surprised to find her there. Middle of dinner. Sitting on the couch watching a movie. Right after sex. A sudden flush of wonder that Kristen didn't up and vanish on him.

She wanted to snuggle closer to him in those moments. Assure him that she wasn't an illusion, she wasn't a trick of his mind, or about to bolt out the door. But that was Kristen talking, the mask who could let herself fall for a roughed up cop from a small farm out east. The Inquisitor wasn't afforded the luxury of assurances, not to other people and never for herself.

"Then again," the voice in her ear pulled Kristen back to the here and now, "it's hard to deny the ex-templar's ass."

Kristen snapped up tight, her entire spine going rigid. How in the hell did she know that?

"Gonna say anything?" Harding continued, "Maybe wonder if I've already hacked my way into his
apartment since you can't be arsed to steal a few measly passwords?"

Calm down, there are people here. People who will wonder why you're glaring murder through the air. And why are you doing that? It's not as if...Maker's balls, did she think she had some claim to the man? No, it -- nonsense. She merely wanted to afford him his privacy. That was all.

Something everyone had a right to, except her.

"Who was the one to put together the social media aspect on him, I?" Harding continued with a laugh, "No idea who took those pictures of him in a tiny pair of swim trunks but Maker bless her." Blighted hell. Of course. You're acting paranoid, as if half the people you know are out to get you. Which, funny enough, made her sound more like F.

He only believed in the agency as far as he could agree with it. Sometimes she wondered why they put up with someone whose loyalty seemed to swing with the wind, but the leaders had a reason for all they did. In the end, he did always return, even if he was a bit more bruised and exhausted from the escape.

"Move to the left, it's done with this area. Nothing too exciting up top. Maybe a closet, or possibly a place to store some security. Have to run the specs on the power output."

Kristen nodded her head and began to lazily drift towards the fountain. The tourists already abandoned it in order to stare out across the horizon, but the accountant remained. He had a tight grip to the briefcase but stood lock still, his eyes gazing at nothing. Odd. She began to slide towards the back area of the statue, eyeing up the etchings into the wolf's fur.

It almost looked like writing, a strange old form she couldn't read. Kristen moved to take a step closer, when Harding called, "Wait a second. There's something behind a wall. Turn to your left."

She shifted and Harding cursed, "No, the other left. Right. Whatever."

Shrugging, Kristen did her best to inch backwards until she rested right up to the wall. As if she was stretching, she raised her arms and let her purse, and the device, bounce right up against the drywall. "Scanning," Harding uselessly told her. It had been doing that since she got off the elevator.

"Wow," Harding whispered, "this is...wait, that can't be right. Not unless--"

"Hello," a voice drowned out Harding's ecstatic whispering and Kristen winnowed her vision away from nothing onto a bald head shining under the false skylights above them.

Solas was flanked by the same blonde bodyguard, his lanky arms tucked tight into the billowy suit jacket as he eyed her up. "Miss..." He looked about to say something before smiling without mirth, "I'm afraid I did not catch your name at the press conference."

Kristen blinked hard a moment; he remembered her? How? She was practically in a disguise for her. She wasn't more than a blip in his day nearly a week back. And he's looking at you, wanting an answer.

"Trevelyan," she said, placing a hand to her chest and trying to lay the purse flat against the wall. Harding was yammering something in her ear but she couldn't make a damn inch of it out through the blood pounding in her ears. She was not supposed to engage the enemy, not face to face like this. If HQ knew about her stunt at the press conference they'd probably shout at her about that one too.
Solas tipped his smooth head a moment, "Trevelyan, is that not a Free Marcher name? Surprising to find this far south."

"We get around," she said with a shrug.

"Indeed you do. It is quite amazing how often one can find your people popping up in the most unlikely of places."

Shit. Shit. Shit. He knew. He didn't just know someone was on to him, he knew she was part of the someone on to him. How in the void could he know that? No one knew about the agency, which was how they preferred it. This changed everything.

She needed to get in contact with L. No, with M herself. They needed to regroup, to determine the best way to proceed with a highly dangerous target. To...

"Did you find all your satisfactory answers at the docks?" Solas asked, his chin pivoting like a bird's.

Kristen clenched tighter to her purse, dragging the scanning device away from the wall. Chatter erupted in her ear, but she ignored it. Regardless of how angry Harding was, she needed a way to hide the rage percolating inside of her. This bastard sicced monsters on the world, was going to try and kill the cops he no doubt called there. Could have killed Cullen. Nearly did in Fenris.

A smile slotted onto Kristen's lips as she took one step forward, her heel clopping hard on the floor, "It's never good to be satisfied, makes one grow complacent."

Solas didn't flinch, only chewed through her words before saying, "A fascinating stance to take. Certainly one that does not provide much downtime in your day to day life. But there is a point to be found within that thought."

She sneered at his patronizing her, as if she was a student toddling up to a master begging for a pat on the head.

"If we allow ourselves to grow complacent," Solas continued, "the handler slips blinders over our eyes and we never see the danger until it is too late."

Was Harding getting this? Maker's breath, Kristen hoped so because a part of her feared her rage was inventing the whole thing. She'd need someone to corroborate her story, and how she had to be the one to put a bullet in that smug, shiny dome.

"I always keep both eyes open, lest I stumble," she said, then internally sneered at herself. This damn cat & mouse game was exhausting and superfluous. What was the point in pretending if he could just fire her on the spot?

But Solas cracked a small smile and gazed back towards the skyline, "Be wary, one wrong step and it is a rather hard fall."

He reached his hand out to her, and the polite part of her brain took it. Surprisingly, it was warm and not clammy like a reptile. "Please, partake of the gardens as long as you wish, Ms. Trevelyan. I hope I shall see you again, perhaps at one of the many charity functions I will be attending."

The bastard was goading her on now, challenging her to take him on in public. As his fingers slipped off of hers, Solas clipped towards the accountant who looked relieved to have anything else to do. The Inquisitor clung tighter to her purse, making certain no one could see the device inside. Even if they did find it, they'd have no idea of what it could do.
"Hey, Ink...hello, you in there?"

She finally honed in on the voice begging for her attention. With an eye to the billionaire who had no more use for her, Kristen waltzed into the elevator and closed the door. It wasn't until she was a few floors down that she risked speaking aloud.

"What is it, H?"

"Finally, I thought I was going to have to shout myself hoarse."

"Before someone gets on this elevator, and we have to wait until I can hide in the bathroom..." Maker, sometimes the only way to make these conversations work was by her pretending to be crying during the whole thing. It did keep people away at least.

"We got him, we got it."

"It? What it?" Far as she knew, all she got was a closet and some bit of wall.

"The elevator, the secret one to his floor. Someone must have been running it at just the right moment because I've got the damn passcode."

Ha. The entire time he was threatening her, Harding was finding a hole through his fortress walls. "How long until we can move?"

"You know the rules," Harding sighed as if the Inquisitor was going to head to her car, grab a gun, and storm the place herself. "I'll send in the info, HQ will draw up a plan, and we go from there."

That will take another couple of weeks easy, maybe more. The agency didn't make a move until it had every duck in a row. Absently, Kristen drew her fingers up and down her arms. She itched to have this over with, to put that bastard in the ground and move beyond the horror of bullet proof monsters.

When you do, you'll have to walk away from him too. Would she even say goodbye? What could she say? Some stupid lie she'd concoct to try and convince him 'It's me (and the fact I'm a secret spy whose mission is over) and not you.' Maybe he'd even believe it, she was good at lying. An ache opened up in her stomach and she dug the pads of her hand into her midsection.

"Hey, I?"

"Tell L..." she lifted her head, watching her reflection in the metal polish on the elevator door, "I'm going to be the one to put Solas down."

"Can do," Harding said, "Got all I need. Gonna go dark now. H out."

Kristen reached under her cap to pluck the bug free and dropped it into her purse. Switching off the grey box, she hid both under her phone. In jostling things, she swiped awake the touchscreen revealing that picture of Cullen fighting with a straw. She smiled at the pout in his lip and the determination on his brow.

I'll finish off Solas, I'll protect the world from these monsters, and I'll be the one to decide when I'm ready to walk away.
Kristen tightened the ponytail while she walked into the closed off fencing room. It was a rare find to stumble upon a gym that offered such an area to train in, for enough money, but that was the plus to being back in a huge city. If you wanted it you could find it, hence why her kind was often called to these places. She reached for her gloves while eyeing up the foil options on the rack.

“Good evening, Jerome,” she said to the other body in the room. The head was hidden under a typical mask, obscuring the face with enough padding and fencing it reminded her of the nameless, faceless foes cut down by the thousands in a space western movie.

“What do you suggest we try today? My arm’s still a little sore from…” Kristen’s barely there banter died as she finally looked at Jerome. Shorter than normal, almost by half a foot, and the body looked more hourglass than usual. Not easy to tell below the protective armor, but whoever slipped that on wanted it to be noticed.

“Choose an epee,” a lilting orlesian accent floated out of the mask causing the gloves to tumble out of Kristen’s hand, “and attack me.”

L? What in Andraste’s blood was she doing here? Scrabbling, the Inquisitor tugged up her lost equipment and picked up the first foil on the rack. Too thin for her preferred style, but she dare not waste L’s time by picking another.

She never left the HQ, not unless there was a dire emergency that required all hands on deck. The Inquisitor glanced around the room, expecting to find a dozen guards stationed just beyond sight, but it seemed as if the second-in-command came alone. By the void, what was going on?

“Any day now, Inquisitor,” L tipped her hidden head to the side and she slotted into position. Her epee glimmered like silver by moonlight as she extended it perfectly. Kristen scrabbled to slip the mask on, her vision narrowing down to just the opponent before her.
With a steady focus, she lifted her foil in her right hand and tried to take a breath. L attacked fast, never waiting for a signal. She hit when she wanted, but the Inquisitor expected that. Parrying both thrusts away from touching her, the Inquisitor let only the sound of foils bounding off each other fill the air.

“Ask what is no doubt boiling over in your mind,” L broke the imposed silence. She was being forceful with her attacks but practically televising them. It took nothing for the Inquisitor to bounce each one away, while she refused to press the advantage.

Trying to ignore the line of sweat already beading down her shoulders, the Inquisitor said, “Why are you here?”

“To talk,” L said.

She scoffed at the simple answer. “I do have a phone. Rather a lot of them.”

“This is not the sort of conversation one wants to have recorded, nor do I think you want anyone else to overhear it.”

The Inquisitor gulped. So that was why despite it being 8 at night, there was no one in the changing room. The entire gym seemed eerily silent, but she’d chalked it up to thirsty Thursdays. Foolish. You should have known it wasn’t normal and acted accordingly. If it’d been an enemy… Though, who’s to say this wouldn’t end just as bad as if it were an enemy.

Another bounce of metal upon metal struck the air, the Inquisitor’s focus slipping while she tried to dig through the possibilities of what L wanted. It was only by pure luck she managed to deflect the last attack. The force of nature that was the second-in-command wouldn’t let up for anything, her attacks never tiring though the pattern continued the same. Almost as if she wanted the Inquisitor to strike back at her.

“You came to talk, so,” she said instead, unwilling to take such obvious bait, “talk.”

“We are growing concerned about your progress,” L intoned as if the Inquisitor slipped into a performance review.

She couldn’t stop the scoff and toss of her head at such nonsense. “I’d say I’m doing quite well at the moment. H is working on data to…”

“Not about Solas and the rock monsters. Your progress to overcome what happened at Ostwick.”

The Inquisitor sneered under her face-obscuring mask, her arm swinging wide and nearly sending the balled off tip of her epee directly into L’s arm. The woman was quick to dodge, but she could sense the surprise from across the room even as I stewed. Ostwick would forever be the millstone tied around her neck. One bad decision and she went from nearly running every single operation to being a pawn. Fuck, Harding knew more than her on this job. The techie. Fenris even. And they never trusted him with more than enough rope.

“Do you want me on my knees pleading for clemency once again?” the Inquisitor growled. “Am I to never move past it?”

L paused a moment, her foil vibrating in the air from its last strike. She could feel those crystal ice eyes staring at her from under the mask. What was in them? Pity? Sympathy? Disgust? Ostwick was a mistake, she knew it, she admitted to it the moment it became apparent. There’d been others over the years as well. No one was perfect, and why couldn’t they just move on? Why drag this out forever over her?
“Two people died because of your decision,” L said slowly and the Inquisitor winced. She knew, and L knew she knew. It had to be her who slipped the obituaries of the two murdered students into her locker when the full severity hit. They wouldn’t even let her take the bastard down after that, refusing to give in to vengeance.

Right. Which was why they sent Fenris to put down the murderous mage. Because he was known for his great love of them. No vengeance there at all.

“I would take it back if I could,” the Inquisitor sighed, feeling more exhausted from this conversation than she would running five miles.

“That I know, that is not my concern. It’s what drove you in the first place to show misplaced sympathy and disobey a direct order that has me concerned.”

Kristen winced. No, not Kristen, not even the Inquisitor. The fourteen-year-old girl found scrabbling over piles of bombed out sheetrock crumbled in tighter to herself. No one in the agency knew her past, it was obliterated and erased the moment an agent was chosen. No one except the fresh faced agent who stumbled across her in the middle of a war zone.

It was why she could never strike at L, never go against her wishes, or even question her orders. If not for that moment of kindness to a complete stranger, the Inquisitor knew she’d be dead. Just another tic in an ever growing list of those killed by the state in an ethnic cleansing of mage on mage violence. Few cared, the other countries only stepping in when the murders started spilling across their borders.

“Where lies your heart?” L asked, rattling the Inquisitor back to the present.

“In the mission,” she recited without thought.

“You fled the field despite dangerous enemies potentially left in play,” L resumed her attack, this time striking against I’s padding. The first skid into her side, the next dug into the padding on her thigh, but she could barely feel it.

There was no other option. If she’d stayed, if she’d tried to assess the situation properly, Fenris very well could have died. They might have both died, it wasn’t as if she had her arsenal with her at the time. But…

Kristen shut her eyes tight. The police were not saying much about what happened at the harbor, official investigation and all. But Harding cracked it, at least enough for her to piece together that one of those bullet proof crags survived the ocean drowning and nearly killed Cullen. He wouldn’t say a thing about it, just put on that doleful smile and went about his business. And if he hadn’t jammed a screwdriver into its brain, he’d be dead. Another one lost because she chose to go left instead of right.

“I understand that you and agent Fenris have a tendency to work well together,” L said as diplomatically as she got. Maybe all that time with Josie was paying off.

Kristen snorted. That wasn’t why she tried to save him. Not now. Maybe not even back then. She just couldn’t let him die. Why did they have such trouble with what should be a simple concept? They’d all been there, they’d all sat helpless while someone died in front of their eyes. It was practically a baptism into this life.

“And that you two have a bond that will sometimes help to assist the mission. My concerns lie in you breaking orders to serve that bond and not the mission.”
“Fenris is…” she scrunched her nose up as if she smelled something awful, “he’s nothing to me. No more than any other agent.”

“I see,” the woman paused, her foil extended parallel with her body while she eyed up the Inquisitor. There were no hugs in the agency, no one to pat your back and tell you to buck up. You got over it, or you were dumped. That was how it worked. They didn’t have time to play nice.

But after she was walked past Fenris in the interrogation room, it wasn’t an empty bed in a concrete cell the Inquisitor stepped into. L had stood there, a bottle of wine in hand, and the two of them drank it silently until the final drop was gone. No mention of her fall from grace was ever made again. Not until Ostwick.

Not until that damn seed started to sprout.

“If you are so concerned about my actions in the field,” the Inquisitor hissed, “then give me the kill code already. I will be done with Solas, and you can bundle me back up into the underground for safe keeping.”

L drew her gloved hand up her epee blade, watching the play of light off the polished shine. “I worry about you. Despite my better judgment, even knowing full well how brief our candles are in this world, I cannot cease. Your heart is heavy, and I can sympathize with a need to lash out.”

The Inquisitor narrowed her eyes. Her heart was heavy? What did she or anyone else know of her heart? It was bombed out long ago. Charred to ash in her chest. There was never any heart to wear down in the first place. Snarling, she lashed forward, taking her first chance to attack L.

To all sides, it looked as if her opponent was paying no attention and would be destroyed. But L’s foil slashed out fast, slamming into the Inquisitor’s so hard the epee was ripped out of her fingers. It landed with a sad plop on the ground, the Inquisitor staring long and hard at it.

“Pick it up,” L said. “And begin again.”

What was the point? She’d simply disarm her again, or keep up the attack that she couldn’t hope to stop. Drive her to the edge and wait until the very second she was about to fall. Reaching up, the Inquisitor cracked open the mask, allowing herself to look properly at the woman.

While the mask landed beside the fallen blade, she stared hard at L. For over ten years of her life, L had been the biggest and most powerful woman she knew. She commanded armies, could sneak her way into and out of locked vaults without tripping a single alarm. Breathed this world without a thought.

She was why the Inquisitor came back. Because the idea of disappointing her burned harder even than the fear that there was nothing else in the world for her. For either of them.

“You’ve rigged this entire thing,” the Inquisitor said.

“I did not design the rules of fencing.”

“Why keep me in the dark? Why am I not allowed half the equipment I should have at my disposal? Why am I not given priority to reports from Harding or even Fenris?” She’d been behaving, smiling at the shit being shoveled in her face and called chocolate, but she was growing tired of it. Contrition could only support one for so long. This wasn’t a test anymore, it was as if they wanted her to fail.

L’s masked head swung around the room a moment and she sighed, “M is the one in charge of your
mission, not me. Nor would I wish to be given the things I’ve been hearing about your performance.” She wanted to roll her eyes, but L’s blade lashed through the air and drew the epee against the Inquisitor’s throat.

The little metal ball bounced into her skin, causing the woman to gulp as L said, “This is it, I. You know it. No more second chances. It’s amazing you had one, truth be told.”

“Fenris got one.”

“No he didn’t. He never had a chance to begin with and you know it. Even if you hadn’t have turned…” L’s words faded as the Inquisitor winced. It was a once kind cut that grew to fester with time. “People were watching him. People are always watching him. He’s on a very long leash that only he is unaware of.”

She pursed her lips thinking upon the man. No, he knew about the leash. And, no doubt, he also knew that if he tugged on it hard enough he could pull whoever held it with him.

The ball bearing slid away from nicking her, and L leaned in closer, “Stop going off the books. Stop acting as if you are above procedure. Stop antagonizing the man we are investigating.”

“But these things he made, they could murder hundreds, maybe even thousands.”

“There is always death on the line. In scales immeasurable. Which is why I need you to get your head and heart in line. I need you back at my side, Inquisitor.”

She knew she’d been good at her job, but the pleading from L threw her. It sounded more than personal, almost as if L was afraid of something. Someone? Someone stepping on her toes? What was going on at HQ?

“Fine,” she stepped back a touch and bowed her head, “I will sit on my hands like a good agent and wait for further instructions.”

L sighed at her agreeing with a grump, but nodded her head. “There is always another mission. And we need to be prepared for them all.”

The mission. Swear fealty to it, no god, no country, no love, no life — only a stapled document inside a blue folder. That was her everything and for ten years it’d been enough. It was enough. It would be enough for many more to come.

It had to be. What else was there?

“Your little interludes with that police officer,” L said, causing Kristen to blush. Had she been reading her thoughts? No. Only held back the most damning evidence for last. “Finish it. Get the passcodes, then cease seeing him. It is becoming too volatile.”

Walk away. Turn your back on the one good thing in a never ending cascade of failures. She dug her fingers into her stomach, feeling it churn like she dropped a brick inside. It was for the best. What other option was there? Tell Cullen who she was? Or wait until he read about an unidentified corpse in the news.

Dumbly, Kristen nodded her head. What else could she do but agree with her mentor? Still, her heart felt heavier than before, its beats slowing as if it pumped ice water instead of blood. She hefted up her foil and mask, trundling both to the back bench.

Maker, how was she going to do it? She hadn’t come up with a good lie yet, a reason for him to
want to walk away. It should be easy, something horrible she did or said that no one could come back from. But whenever the opportunity arouse, she’d back down instantly. She’d been killing people since she was 13, but the idea of hurting him, of pricking at his insecurities, or making him flinch tore up her soul.

You have to be cruel to be kind. It’s what you were trained for.

“Can I ask you something?” L’s voice floated up from behind, reminding her that she wasn’t alone yet.

Kristen glanced back and waited for the question. “After Ostwick, after the demotion and reprimand…why didn’t you change your name?”

Shutting her eyes, she answered, “I didn’t think you’d let me, Leliana.”

L chuckled once, “You’re right, I wouldn’t. Rest up and ice your arm. You’re favoring it in a fight.”

The Inquisitor glanced over at the old bruise and she grimaced. How many times had L said the same thing to her? Picked up the snot nosed kid, brushed off the blood, and told her to hide her injuries lest someone take advantage of them. Bury the pain deep, so deep even you stop seeing it.

Blinking away the tears, Kristen smiled, “I will.”
When he opened the door, the last thing Cullen expected was to have a handful of shopping bags thrust at him. He had to scamper quickly to keep the load from tumbling to the ground, fingers digging tight into the thin plastic. One bag hung low, surprising him by how it bulged.

“Um…” he whispered, concerned that he accidentally opened his door to someone who was making a delivery and got the wrong apartment.

Gloved fingers skirted over his stubble and he looked up from the grocery bags into Kristen’s eyes. She tugged him down to her level for a quick kiss before sliding into his apartment and unwinding the scarf. Cullen watched her toss off her coat and other cold gear, most of it piling up on his kitchen table as he didn’t have a coat rack. There was still no explanation for why he was holding a bunch of heavy bags.

“What…what’s this for?” he finally asked, wondering if he should put something in the fridge for her. Maybe she needed to store it quick before returning home?

Tucking the scarf into a small inside pocket, she turned, placed a hand onto her hip, and smiled, “You.” Kristen reached over and excised the first bag on his hand, probably the lightest of the load. With a high chin she marched into his kitchen and flipped on the lights. “It is high time you learn how to cook.”

“Uh…” Cullen followed after, watching as she dug out a box of pasta to place on the counter. Curious, he peered into the tops of his bags to find a bunch of cans and some kind of cheese. When he glanced away from the groceries, his tongue stuck to the top of his mouth.

Kristen was bent full over, trying to dig through his puny collection of pots and pans. Her dress was short enough the long stretch inched the hem up high. Like a moth to its blissful doom, his eyes burned into the half moon in view. As all good things must end, she stood up, a pot of some
sort in her hands.

When she glanced over her shoulder, Cullen realized the weight of the situation and gulped, “I’m…I don’t know if that’s such a wise idea.”

“Nonsense,” she waved him closer and picked another bag off his fingers — the heavy one filled with cans. Laying each out on the counter, she twisted around what looked like a bunch of tomatoes.

“I’ve never really done cooking, any cooking. Okay, a bit in the templars, but that was…” The cardboard mulch taste of the MREs flooded Cullen’s throat a moment and he sneered.

Kristen’s hands gripped onto his straining forearms. She looked focused on the task, until her fingers pulsed into the muscle and a blush rose. Shaking it off quickly, she smiled, “Anyone can do this. Anyone should be able to do this. Ten-year-olds can make this.”

Well, when she put it like that… Heaving up the final bag onto the counter, Cullen stood back to watch her pull out the last of the necessary ingredients for whatever lesson she had planned. Maker’s breath, this was madness. Some days he’d forget to add water to his pot noodles and catch the entire thing on fire. Trusting him to make a meal was beyond understanding.

But, he couldn’t turn her down either. Not after all she brought to his door. Or the way her eyes seemed to sparkle at the thought. Just, give it a go. When it fails, there’s always pizza.

Cullen cupped his free hand around her waist and she nuzzled her head back against him. The scent of strawberry champagne drifted off her locks. Rather fancy for a shampoo, but she was in what looked like a very nice dress. It fit.

“What are we…what am I making?”

“Pasta,” she announced, her hands extended over the pile of ingredients.

“Oh, okay.” He had done that before, on occasion when he was feeling ambitious. “Just dump the sauce onto the noodles…”

“No,” her champagne scented hair buffeted up his chest as she shook her head wildly, “no cheap, purchased sauce. Maker’s breath, this is easy to do at home. Here, all you need are some tomatoes.”

“In cans?” he reached over to inspect the first one and scrunched his nose up. Didn’t homemade require expensive ingredients like free range produce or cage free herbs and spices?

“It’s practically winter,” Kristen scoffed while pulling the can out and placing it in her line up. “These are better than anything shipped in by truck from the far north. Trust me.”

“I’m trying, but you seem to be under the impression I can cook.”

Her scoffing laugh was adorable and she turned in his arms to look right into his eyes. Sliding those gentle hands up to his cheeks and back around his neck, she tugged his lips to hers. Warmth flooded through his gut, Cullen tightening his hold to her waist. Visions of him plucking her up and carting her into his bedroom dug hooks into his brain. *Forget all this cooking nonsense, give her the only thing you’re good at.*

He was about to suggest such a thing, when she broke the kiss, grabbed up two of the plastic bags holding produce and asked, “Which do you wish to dice up, the onion or the garlic?”
Numbly, Cullen reached over and picked up the smaller bag. “So I am to do this?”

“Yes,” she sighed, already cracking open the bag for the onion while leaving him with the lone garlic head. “Knives?”

That he did have, Mia insisting he required a good set of chef’s knives for all the not cooking he did. Cullen jabbed at the drawer and when Kristen opened it she whistled. Her hand wrapped around the handle as if she was born wielding it. Leaning over, Cullen selected the first knife he could.

“Oh,” she caught his elbow to hold him tight and smiled, “that is a paring knife.”

“Not the right choice?” he winced while dropping it into her hand.

“Well, you can try, I guess. No reason you couldn’t use piano wire to dice up garlic, but it might take you awhile. Here, try this one.” She selected a rather heavy and long knife out of the drawer. And here he thought he’d seem to be trying to over compensate by picking the biggest blade.

Kristen busied herself at the blue cutting board that was shaped like a pig. As she sliced the knife quickly through the onion, halving it, the toned muscles in her arms stood out in relief. It was enough to fully distract Cullen, who was holding his knife like an imbecile and about to drop it onto his foot. Shaking it away, he turned his back to her in order to begin chopping up the garlic head.

Okay. One didn’t cut the entire thing. He knew that. There were bulbs or something that you pulled off.

“How much?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder to watch her slicing the onion into slivers. It was so fast and elegant he thought he tripped into the middle of an infomercial for a fancy knife made out of volcanic steel.

“Most recipes call for one bulb,” Kristen said with a shrug.

Right, one bulb. He could probably handle that. Scraping one out and laying it against the smaller cutting board meant for cocktails and bars that social people had, Cullen began to put the blade to it. “You look nice,” he said to her while trying to focus on the garlic.

“Oh?” she seemed genuinely surprised by his compliment, not as if she was trying to humbly downplay it.

“The dress, it’s very…” Distracting. So very distracting. He had to keep his eyes honed on the blade’s edge and his fingers because his mind was no help. It wanted to know what the soft crinkle of the fabric felt like against her breasts, or to feel the skirt lay flat against his forearms as he caressed her thighs and back to her ass. “Nice.”

The sound of her knife being laid out was followed by Kristen saying, “I forgot I was wearing this. Came right from work, well, to the grocery store then here.”

Cullen frowned, “You wore that to work?” It struck him more as a cocktail dress, one worn on fancy dates in order to impress. Not that this was fancy, and he was only in his usual shirt and jeans. Still…

A hand curled against the small of his back and he froze the knife before it cut through anything vital and filled with blood. Her warm breath caressed against his neck and she said, “Performance review. Thought I should look nice, but was running low on nice things. I really need to find a good
dry cleaners.”

“He turned away from his dicing to watch her shrug. “Corporate. Why do things that make sense when we have charts, and programs, and macros to tell us what to do?”

Cullen chuckled at how much sense that nonsense made. It was a testament to her will that she could remain in such an environment. Then again, she was in politics for years. Maybe the nightmare of corporate was nothing compared to that.

Kristen roughed up his cheek before she peered over at his cutting board. “Ah,” she blinked a moment, before smiling in pity.

“What?” Cullen whipped his head down at the pile of diced garlic. “Did I not cut it enough?”

“No, your knife skills are not bad all things considered. It’s just…” she delicately reached out to pluck a bulb out of the head. Rubbing it fast between her palms, she slid off a skin to reveal the naked flesh below. “You have to remove the paper first.”

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen sighed, massaging a hand into his forehead. She was quick to grab onto it and place the bulb she freed into his palm. “Like I said, I’m hopeless.”

“It’s an honest mistake, everyone has them. But I doubt you’ll do it again, so…” She turned to scrape away his pile of garlic mashed into the papery skin and said, “Oh, yes, when a recipe or in this case me, says a bulb of garlic usually use three or four instead.”

“Why not just say that instead?”

“I have no idea. Tradition maybe?” Her damn smile was blinding but he turned away and focused on dicing apart the naked garlic lest they wind up spending the night in the emergency room instead. Would she go with? Sit in the waiting area with him the whole time? Hold his hand while he gritted his teeth and tried to insist it was fine?

They hadn’t been dating that long. It seemed like a lot to expect of someone he only was with for a few months. But… Cullen glanced over his shoulder to watch the woman in a little black dress scoop onion peel into her hand in order to drop it into a compost bag. His heart told him that she’d sit by his bedside until morning and he wasn’t sure why it was so certain.

“Oil?” she piped up suddenly, causing him to shake away the cozy thoughts of settling down.

“There’s a pint in the little locker I have for the parking gar… You mean cooking oil, don’t you,” Cullen stuttered, his cheeks lighting up.

“Motor oil can be a bit too grungy for pasta. Comes out rather mealy,” she barely batted an eye at his slip.

Wincing, he tried to think if he ever once got it in his head to purchase some kind of cooking oil. “I’m…I don’t know.”

“Please tell me you have butter,” she clasped her hands together as if praying to the Maker for any hope.

Cullen nodded, “Yes, in the fridge drawer there. For pancakes and such.”
While Kristen fished it out of the old, crinkly wrappers, she sighed, “So you don’t have olive oil, but you make your own pancakes.”

“I like pancakes,” he shrugged, while hoping she didn’t check the freezer for the truth. It’d been a few years since he tried pouring his own. Which, he should make her some. Maybe ones with strawberries and cream, to circle around her mouth with. “Done with this,” Cullen proclaimed while lifting the garlic up as if it was the holy fire of Andraste.

Kristen smiled, “Good. Now, first you should heat your pot. This is rather small for what I’d normally use, but we’ll have to make due.”

Heat the pot? Grab a lighter or…? The confusion must have been evident as she blushed a moment. “Sorry, I’m…I meant turn the burner on to around medium.” Before he had a chance she cranked it herself. “Then you add the, usually oil, but in this case butter.”

Kristen moved to cut off a few tablespoons with a butterknife. Before dropping it in she whispered, “Sorry Nana.” The butter squatted on the bottom of the metal pot, waiting for the stove’s heat to spread it around. Kristen grabbed onto his shoulders and positioned Cullen to take over in front of the pot. When she put a spatula in his hand, he glared at it for a moment before beginning to stir the butter pat around.

“Should I…is that okay?”

“It’ll melt the butter faster,” she shrugged at his panic. One of her hands slid around the back of his waist as she rested her chin upon his shoulder. “You’re doing fine. Once that’s melted, dump in the onion and garlic. It needs to get browned up a bit, for five minutes or so. And keep stirring.”

Cullen did as commanded, a fact he knew he succeeded at. Some might say he was too good at following orders, until he suddenly wasn’t. When all of those glances away, ignoring his gut, and turning a blind eye caught up to him in one go. If only he’d pried more, paid better attention, been a better man then…

Her fingers that’d been coyly cupped to his stomach dipped ever slightly lower and back. The heel of her palm rested upon his hip, while her circling fingers drifted much closer to the part of him that’d somewhat awoken when she bent over. At the thought of her nearly glancing over it, it was ready for full attention.

“Ohay,” she purred in his ear, her eyes always on the pot that for now smelled of onions. “Now to add the…”

Cullen blinked, but when the next step didn’t come he turned to find Kristen staring down at her dress. She blushed a bit and asked, “You wouldn’t by any chance happen to have an apron?”

As he shook his head no she sighed loudly, “Pasta sauce can, well, make a big burping mess sometimes and…” Her hands both landed upon her chest by way of trying to explain but all he noticed was how well they framed her breasts.

Wincing, Cullen pulled himself back to focus on the sauce. “Cover. Right. You need, um, there’s a shirt in my room. On the closet floor. An old button up with a few tears and paint stains. That should protect your dress.”

Her smile warmed his heart as she dashed off to retrieve it. While he enjoyed the joy he caused, he was going to miss being able to see her neckline and figure in the dress. Then again, Cullen turned to the onions which were starting to look a bit blacker than brown. Maybe if she was covered he
could get himself to pay attention.

“Should I…? What do I do next?”

“Sorry,” her voice shouted through the thin wall, “crack open the tomatoes to add them.”

Uncertain what to do with the spatula, Cullen left it in the pot where it began to slide downward. It didn’t take him long to open the cans of stewed tomatoes, dumping both in easily. The onions hissed and popped like an angry snake that just spotted an invader.

“Er,” he called loudly, “Is it supposed to do that?”

“Do what?” her voice didn’t shout but spoke softly. Cullen glanced away from the vengeful pot, even if he feared it might go for his eyes, and his jaw plunged through the floor. Bare legs crossed one in front of the other while Kristen finished clasping the button near the top of her cleavage. Rather than slide his shirt on over her dress she’d taken it entirely off. Her breasts were tugging the shirt apart, leaving a little key hole gap between buttons that left him questioning his own name. The ends of his button-up skirted over her hips, almost playfully piling up and leaving him with an even better view of her entire bottom half.

Maker, how he wanted to worry his palms on her calves and run his teeth against her thighs. She tipped her head to the side, seeming to be pleased with his reaction. Kristen folded her hands together right under her breasts. Which was when Cullen realized that the shadow under the pocket was in fact her nipple. She was braless too. A woman was standing in his kitchen wearing just his thin old shirt and he was stuck with a spatula in hand.

“Did you add the tomatoes?” she asked while padding closer.

Cullen nodded dumbly, uncertain if he could speak.

First she inspected the pot, smiling at his ability to master an easy task, before she looked over at the line of cans. “Oh, you don’t want to forget the tomato paste. Here,” Kristen passed over what looked like a can that’d be in a child’s play set.

After getting it open, Cullen moved to try and dump the concoction into the pot same as the other tomatoes, but it stuck tight inside its metal coffin. “Damn it,” he muttered to himself, slapping into the bottom but the cursed thing refused to budge.

A slight laugh drew him away and a spoon appeared into view. “Try this,” she whispered, releasing the utensil into his mitts while her hand scooped up against his cheek. No doubt she felt the burning blush from his stupendous blunder, but Kristen made no mention. Instead, she pressed herself tighter against his arm while Cullen dug in deep to fish out the wad of tomato goo.

As it filled the pot, he stirred the red mass around and nodded his head. It was looking a lot like pasta sauces he’d seen. “What’s next?” he asked, fascinated by the sudden change. Where once had been nothing more than an old onion and bit of garlic, food was now appearing.

“Spices,” she mused. “Don’t worry, I bought a blend. Something told me you wouldn’t have any.” Kristen slid in close to Cullen while less sprinkling and more dumping a massive pile of green herbs into the tomato mixture. “Funny, I could guess that, but not the missing olive oil.”

“Why are you doing this?” he whispered, lost in the absolute peace on her face. She seemed so damn happy to be teaching him how to cook, when it’d probably be easier to train a bear to do it.

Kristen’s soft eyes darted over to him and she flinched, “I…I think everyone should know how to
cook. And, and I wanted to… I like the idea of leaving something good behind.”

He stared deeper into the red abyss, watching a few tomato bubbles rise. Leaving something good behind was a hard task to accomplish. How often did he convince himself that was what he was doing in the templars? In serving his country, his people? How strange it was to find the same uncertain but hungry need in another who didn’t serve.

Cullen was about to ask her, when she laughed, “Plus, the idea of you eating nothing but pot noodles day in and day out was just too sad. I couldn’t let you suffer so.”

Scoffing, he nudged his shoulder into hers, “I do eat other foods. There is the occasional vegetable in my diet. And I have been known to grill up a steak or two.”

“Really?” she folded her knuckles into her chin and planted an elbow onto the formica countertop. The hooded eyes that were sparkling in mischief, her red stained lips, and the strain of her cleavage against his shirt drove Cullen to drop the spatula. Kristen sat up at the move, but he cut off her next step in the recipe with his mouth.

Tugging apart her lips in his hunger, Cullen wafted his tongue upon hers while his hands cupped those beguiling hips. Kristen’s head tipped to the side, her nose bounding into his as she rose up higher. Her hands dug deep into his hair, pulling him against her nearly naked body while both gladly fell deeper into the kiss.

His palm circled up her waist, trailing the outer scoop of her ribs and aiming for her breast. Blorp erupted in the kitchen and both broke from their ardor to glance down at the pot incensed about being ignored. She giggled, her lips brushing against his cheek and roughing up the stubble.

“I’m afraid you’re not quite finished. Any chance of an old bottle of wine around?” she asked slowly and Cullen shook his head negative even while clinging tight to her.

“Bachelors,” Kristen sighed and sadly she eased out of his arms to pad towards his fridge. At least he could stare down at her legs while she cracked open the door and peeked inside. “Hm…” she danced back and forth on her tiptoes, the swing of her hips urging him to reach over, grab onto her ass and cart her off to bed. Or the table. Or while she kept a tight grip to the fridge door.

“How about this?” she interrupted his libido’s takeover, an amber bottle waving near his face. Cullen blinked in confusion and she added, “Can I use it for the sauce?”

“Yes, sure, um go ahead.”

With a quick lap of her tongue over her lips, she darted over, beer in hand. Cullen moved to fish out a bottle opener, when Kristen placed the lip right on the counter, gave a quick slap, and the top popped right off. “Wow,” he gasped, “I’ve never seen that work in real life.”

She took a quick swig before dumping some into the pot, “Somehow I rarely wind up in places with bottle openers. It’s become a bit of a running gag in my life.”

“You need a keychain one, then it’s always with you,” he said, the stirring spoon back in his fingers. She slid up and placed the bottle in his fingers.

“That’s pretty good, a bit hoppy but…”

Cullen tossed back enough until only a quarter was left. Like a gentlemen, he let her finish off the rest. Her cheeks burned red at the thought as she swirled the beer around in her hands. Closing her eyes, Kristen tipped it back high. The move elongated her neck and despite being the one in charge
of cooking, Cullen dipped down fast and placed a succulent kiss to her throat.

When she finished the beer, the bottle left on the counter without thought, her eyes burned into him and a hand skirted around his back, but Cullen was back to all business. He too could play the torture game from time to time. Languidly stirring the sauce in one hand, he reached over to the box of pasta.

“Do we have to boil it in something or…?”

“Not yet,” she chuckled while rescuing it from his clumsy mitts. “Be happy I got the dried stuff and am not making you pull them by hand.”

He blinked madly at the thought. “You…you can pull noodles?”

Her eyes darted to the ground and her voice grew heavy, “My Nana, she believed in tradition so that was our noodles. Hand stretched with flour positively everywhere. It…it was like snow. They’d be dangling off hooks around the old…” Her words trailed off as she slid back to the counter. Moving as if her body was weightless, she dashed up to sit near the empty cans. It gave Cullen a view of his old shirt barely eclipsing her panties.

“Is, uh,” he coughed, trying to will himself to focus away from the temptation, “Is that what you’re teaching me? Her secret family recipe?”

“No,” Kristen giggled and he began to deflate. The idea that she’d trust him with something so precious as a grandmother’s recipe would… Would what? Mean something?

Unaware of his sudden downturn, she smiled, “Her recipes take days to get right, and also access to a butcher.”

“A butcher?”

“Not a lot of cow brains one can easily come across in grocery stores.”

Cullen laughed while swiveling the spatula around, “Believe it or not, I’ve had cow brains before. Also liver, stomach, tongue, and heart.”

Her head pivoted in surprise, her legs crossed at the knee as she watched him. Aware of the audience, he turned to her and smiled, “My father did not believe in wasting food. ‘There are starving children in the third world,’ he’d grumble if we’d shiver at our tripe.”

“Ah,” she nodded at what was no doubt a familiar sentiment, but her eyes were duller. “Yes, starving people elsewhere.” It was so soft, Cullen turned from the pot to her in confusion. Kristen was staring at the mass of tomatoes, or — more likely — through them. It was clear something was running through her mind, but she didn’t seem to be wish to speak it.

Should he ask? Prod her? That didn’t seem polite. Maybe she didn’t want to talk about it, or would later. Or it wasn’t even for him. Maker’s breath, you’re over thinking all of this again.

“Oh,” she called a hand thudding into her forehead as she slipped off the counter. “I forgot the sugar.”

“Sugar?” Cullen puckered his face at the thought. “On pasta?”

“Yes,” like a determined burglar, she rummaged quickly through his cabinets. Cullen could have told her right where his small bag was, but he was afforded a full view of her ass and her breasts
jangling while she dug for it.

“Ah ha!” she cried in excitement while plucking free a white bag. “Always add sugar, any recipe that does not call for it is some horrible abomination cooked up by witches.” It was adorable how certain she said that while dropping a spoonful into the pot.

Cullen watched it with a careful eye, the white granules dissolving into the red abyss. After he stirred it for a bit, Kristen dipped the spoon in. Her lips took a small glance of a taste and she smiled, “Sugar cuts down the acid from all the tomatoes. Vital. Never forget.”

Her finger wagged at him as if this was a matter of life and death. Or that he needed to pass a cooking challenge in order to survive. Grabbing onto her hand, Cullen smiled, “I won’t.”

“Here,” she drew a finger over the spoon in order to coat it in the tomato sauce. With all the nimbleness he came to expect, she placed it right to his lips. Less than carefully, Cullen wrapped his tongue around her finger. Coiling with it while pursing his lips tighter, he tried to focus on the flavors and not her mouth hanging open or how her free hand was pressing against her chest.

“That is…good,” he declared. “Better than any sauce I’ve bought.”

“See,” she smiled, tossing the spoon into the sink. “It’s easy. Anyone can do it.”

He laughed a moment, then brushed his tomato stained lips to her cheek, “I should learn to trust you.” Cullen moved in for a kiss, but Kristen seemed to lock in place. Rather than turn to meet him, he had to settle for placing a small red pucker on her cheek.

“What?” he coughed out while returning to his pot, “What’s next? The pasta? Or do I need to add another ingredient…?”

Tossing away whatever caught her a moment, she took the spatula out of his fingers and placed it down. “Now,” she smiled while covering the pot with its lid and turning the heat down low, “it needs time. About an hour to simmer.”

“An hour?” Cullen gasped, shaking his head at that new twist. “What if I’m hungry now?”

The woman tempting him shrugged, her shoulder pulling down the wide neckline. His eyes trailed down the exposed collarbone, following the line of the shirt above her skin until it tragically coupled with the other side and hid away her body. “Order pizza before?” Kristen threw out, her eyes staring past the kitchen.

“Hm…” Cullen mused, his hands that no longer needed to dice or stir sauce, free to slide along her waist. He rested the edge of his palms up against her hips, gently gliding up and down the turn of the bone and meat below. “What if…” he whispered, his lips nuzzling against her neck, “I don’t want pizza?”

A gentle moan broke in her throat and her hands landed on his back. Nails skittered against the skin, driving Cullen to press the kisses deeper and deeper down her stretched neck. “Sushi?” she mumbled.

“Nope,” he whispered, his teeth scraping against the tender flesh right above her breasts. Kristen whimpered, her body sliding closer against his. She hooked her leg outside of his and began to lightly grind on his thigh. Sweet Maker.

Cullen could take no more. Dropping both hands under her ass, he cupped deep into the delectable cheeks. Kristen’s panting froze and she wiggled her head around to look him right in the eye. As a
wicked grin lifted on her lips, he dug in tight and pinched. She yelped, the grin rising higher. Locking her arms around the back of his head, she scooted closer to give him better range.

Gently, he curled his palm against the cotton panties, the lacy edge of them folding into his lifelines. His fingers pulsed under her ass, dancing into the crease where it became thigh and she hefted herself higher. Hot breath whispered into his ear, “Again.”

Twisting his hands fast, Cullen pinched deep into the meat. Kristen swung her head back so fast, she nearly collided with the cabinet above. He winced from the near miss, worried about her beaming herself, but she was too busy humming in her throat to notice.

Right. He glanced over his shoulder. There was a much better answer. Flexing his palms over her ass, Cullen hefted Kristen up into his arms. She laughed a moment, her eyebrows bending in confusion. Before she could ask what he was doing, his lips bounded into hers, the heat that’d flooded his entire lower half lashing out to fill hers. She squirmed up higher in his grip, his palm locking against his jaw as she raked her tongue over his mass of stubble. At the dent in his chin, she skirted her teeth inward, causing stars to burn in Cullen’s vision.

Such a tiny spot on his body, but when she did that he felt as if his heart was going to explode. With his arms full of her, he crashed about the kitchen like a drunk bear. A ravenous roar rumbled in his gut, begging for more. Happy to provide, her head twisted back and forth as she began to nip and nibble against his chin.

*Sweet Andraste!* His legs were shaking, and he had to get her somewhere safe before he dropped her on the floor. Stumbling against the chairs, one tipped over and landed with an unceremonious crash, but Cullen didn’t give a shit. He eased Kristen onto the table, his hands sliding away from her ass and down her thighs.

She looked down a moment to see where she wound up, which was when Cullen bent over. Starting at her knee, he’d press first a whisper kiss to her soft skin, then a rasp of his tongue, before tucking a crease of her flesh into his teeth and biting down.

“Oh fuck!” Kristen groaned, her grasping hands reaching out for his hair. As Cullen moved upward, repeating the steps to drive her wild, she’d tug on him for encouragement. Her outer thighs began to tremble, goosebumps lifting before he even had a chance to bite down.

Cullen pressed a wet kiss right on top, his hands framing her leg, before he blew warm air over the skin. Bucking on the table, Kristen shifted so hard another chair bit the dust. *Sweet Maker,* how he wanted her. His stomach growled but not for food. No, these orders were all coming from much further south.

Working towards her inner thigh, his bites softened though her reaction did not. Kristen stretched back on her elbows, her legs fanning out to give him all the access he wanted. He glanced up quick to see her eyes were shut in ecstasy and a big grin on her face. She was loving it.

Leading with his tongue, Cullen sucked his way closer towards the line of blue cotton that thwarted him the entire night. Her whimpering slowed him a moment and he moved to slide back, when one of her hands grabbed onto his head. She tugged him back towards her sparkling skin and Cullen laughed at the insistence. Maker, she was strong when she wanted to be.

And how badly she wanted his touch was enflaming him.

At the lacy elastic edge of her panties, Cullen drew his teeth upon them and tugged. He could barely press a kiss before they slipped and snapped back into place. Above him, he felt her laugh a
moment at the move and failure. Cullen glanced up and was drawn into her untethered breasts tumbling in her laughter.

It was such a perfect view that he fully forgot he snapped her on accident, until she whispered, “Do you want me to take them off?” Kristen hooked her fingers into the sides of her panties, but Cullen shook his head.

They had an hour after all. No reason to not take his time.

Settling onto his knees, he began to unbutton the bottom of the shirt she borrowed. Her fingers kneaded back and forth in his hair, coaxing the waves back into curls while he pressed a kiss against her round stomach. Right above him, he felt her breasts pass. The bottom cupfuls both drifted against the back of his hands while he wrestled with his own buttons, and Maker how he wanted to grab both. Kristen wiggled in place, waiting for his hands to work up and undo one of the buttons straining from her far more ample chest.

But he didn’t. Drawing both palms down her warm stomach, Cullen scooted closer to the table. His hands circled around the outside of her thighs, guiding her legs to rest upon his shoulders as he pressed a kiss right to the top of her panties. A great gulp broke above him, her fingers pulsing against his scalp as if she feared to do anything to distract him.

As if she could.

Nuzzling deep, Cullen’s nose pushed against her panties and slipped inward. The scent of her more than eager for his touch and the moisture wicking up from within erupted the hunger from simmer to boil. Ravenous fingers wrapped around the hips of her underwear and yanked them down. Cullen had to dip his head to get them out of the way and down to her knees. And when he looked up, he too gulped in anticipation.

His famished tongue led him straight to her vulva, lapping along the buffet on display unable to decide upon any of the options. The longer of her lips invited his kisses, Cullen sucking it into his mouth but keeping his teeth tucked safely away. She tasted tangy, but he rather doubted any amount of sugar would sweeten it away — which was what he liked. The woman who stormed into his life, clung on despite his myriad of issues, and insisted he finally learn how to cook didn’t strike him as the sweet and obedient type.

“Sweet fucking Maker,” Kristen gasped above him and he smiled against her lips. Her cursing during sex was one hell of a turn on too.

Happy to take his time, Cullen lapped slowly against her clitoris using, of all things, the morse code alphabet. A dot dot line dash, especially when he drew his tongue up the entire hood of her clit before stamping one quick dot up top caused the panting to begin. Kristen shoveled air into her mouth, her fingers flat on his shoulders while she strained to stretch her thighs wide. She wanted him so badly, the strain was starting to show as the muscles in her legs trembled.

His fingers, which had been kneading into her thighs to keep them in place began to slide first under her ass. Cullen gave a quick pinch while he licked a message against her clit. That sent Kristen reeling, the panting switching to a moaning.

“Andraste’s...shit,” Kristen mumbled, her hands pawing at his shoulders with her pads as if to keep herself from clawing down.

Slowly, he drew his fingers up from her ass, barely sliding along the crack in order to glance over her lips. Kristen rocked her hips on his tongue, tugging him in tighter, when Cullen thrust two
fingers inside.

Instantly her moaning became a never ending plea. “Please, shit, please, oh please…” she begged while he bounced the tips of his fingers deeper into her, the twists and turns of her vagina guiding him right towards whatever made her eyes bug out. “Don’t stop!”

Happy to obey, his tongue lapped its dots and dashes to synchronize with the thrusts of his fingers. Maker! Her thighs started to close around his head; the shaking as she bucked from the pleasure flowing through her caused Cullen to nearly gasp. All he could hear was a muffled order, her fingers swiping at his shoulders when suddenly, both hands dug in deep and her entire body snapped rigid around him.

Her heels slid up, flexing into his collarbone as Kristen wound up tight into a ball before collapsing back onto the table. “Fuuuuck…” she whispered to herself, a hand pawing at her face as he rose up off his knees to watch her rolling around in her orgasm.

A great grin stretched her cheeks, her tongue darting in and out as if she could scarcely catch a breath after all of that. “Just…damn.” Her eyes honed in on his and Cullen bent over, his lips still not satiated. This time she greedily wrapped around him, her arms enveloping his head to keep him against her mouth while her still shaking legs knotted back around his waist.

Cullen felt his cock siding up against his jeans, growing more and more impatient at the heat it knew was just beyond reach. Maker’s breath, how he wanted her. In every damn way. Forever.

Wait. What?

Forever?

Her arms tugged Cullen’s head to the side, distracting him from the sudden gear shift in his brain. Hot breath whispered in his ear, “Fuck me. Hard.”

Andraste, yes. Please.

Cupping both palms around her breasts, Cullen teased out her nipples while lost in the fullness she entrusted to him. Kristen kept kissing him even as she began to unbutton the shirt herself. Quickly, it fell off her breasts, revealing both of the bountiful pair looking so very happy to see him. In their happenstance disrobing, one button remained stuck, the shirt tucking under her chest and lifting them higher.

He wanted to suck on them, to pinch her nipples tight. To tie her up to the door and… A wave of warning bucked up through his groin and he tried to shake away all the dirty thoughts at once. It didn’t matter what he wanted, what he needed was inside of her. Now.

Staggering back, Cullen hefted off his shirt and dropped his jeans in record time. The clothing landed in a pile, Cullen giving a quick glance down at his cock and he blinked in surprise. He couldn’t remember the last time it looked that hard. Kristen was eyeing it up too, her greedy hands curling under his balls and fingers parting up and down the shaft.

Sweet Maker himself! The incessant need pressing into the back of Cullen’s skull caused him to buck his hips once. That was enough to send him gasping, Kristen’s thumb landing right in the perfect sweet spot on the crown.

“P…please,” he begged, his forehead crashing into hers.

She didn’t smirk, didn’t continue to torture him. Wrapping her legs around his waist, Kristen
hooked her hands around his elbows and she began to lay back upon the table. Feeling like he was floating on a cloud, Cullen followed with her. His palms skirted over her breasts flattening out against her chest, while his cock trembled right beside all that he licked up.

Her leg lifted slightly and Cullen slipped in, just the tip welcomed into the warm abyss of eternity. *Maker’s breath.* His fingers flexed against her thighs while he tipped his head to the ceiling. Prayers dribbled from his lips when he felt her looking at him. As he glanced down, he found himself worried to find any question or fault on her face. Her eyes glimmered the same as when he first saw her on the side of the road, the certainty of what she wanted knocking right into his skull.

Ripping off all the fear, Cullen let the hunger inside of him free. His hips thrust deep, sending his cock spiraling into oblivion. Kristen’s head wrenched back, her mouth cursing again, but he couldn’t understand it. The all consuming need took over, his thrusting increasing in tempo while heat wrapped itself from the bottom of his heels up to his shoulders. Sweat and a bright blush both bloomed over his chest, Cullen somehow growing aware of every hair on his body. As if he could tap into every cell and fill it all with this unending pleasure.

Please. Don’t stop.

Bucking hard, he cried out incoherently as the orgasm won out over his willpower. The peak ripped through him, his cock pumping away all of its last, while Cullen tried to hang on to the final thrums before it all drained away. The change hit him so hard, he stumbled, an elbow slamming into the table. Hands wrapped around him, keeping him safe.

He looked up into her warm brown eyes and began to laugh at the absurdity of her having to save him from himself. “Careful there,” Kristen whispered before nuzzling her lips against his neck. Together, they hauled his naked ass onto the table and she slid into his arms.

Maker, he was making such a mess all over the place.

And there’s a naked woman in your arms. Focus on that instead.

“Mmm,” she mumbled against him. “If I knew that was going to happen, I’d have brought over a recipe booklet on the first week.”

Cullen chuckled a moment at the thought. Placing a kiss into her hair, he breathed in the same champagne scent, though now he could smell himself in there. The more down-to-earth musk muted the champagne twang. “Well, it’s not every day a woman has me make her dinner.”

Against his chest, he could feel her smile too, her fingers circling all the naked skin and playing with his chest hair. Blessed Andraste, this felt good. Wonderful really. Exactly what he needed.

Kristen’s fingers paused a moment and she seemed to be hanging in limbo. Just before Cullen was about to ask, she said, “You deserve it. To…” she looked up and her eyes fractured into a million thoughts. He’d never before wished to be more of a mind reader, every thought inside of her flitting away fast as she seemed to slam down upon them. “To be able to cook at home. To have good food. Is all.”

“That’s sweet,” he said, bundling her tighter to himself. She must be cold as her body started to shake. “Maybe next time I’ll cook you up something all by myself.”

“Yes,” her voice drifted low, “that would be nice.”

It’d only been a few months, but it was growing harder and harder for Cullen to remember his life without her. And, in truth, he didn’t want to.
“So,” he whispered into her ear, Kristen lifting her head from off his chest, “is it time to eat yet?”

She swung her sight back towards the clock on the cable box and groaned, “About ten minutes.”

“That’s not so bad a wait, maybe get in a shower…” he began to cuddle her, when she shook her head.

“No, I just realized, the pasta part takes a good 20-30 minutes. And we should have started it before.” She winced and shrugged just before her stomach growled in hunger.

Cullen laughed, pressing a kiss to her lips. “We can always order pizza.”
Never before had she felt the weight in her hand. All of their jump drives were little more than ounce, designed to be hidden fast on the body should the need arise. Barely larger than a thumbnail, she tried to not imagine the small glint of silver dragging down her palm until it buried into the carpet.

Tortured streetlights crackled against the windows courtesy of the late autumn spiderwebs drawn from one pane to another. It gave the illusion that the glass was cracked and about to shatter, leading to the high winds of the cityscape that’d suck everyone down to a cement splatter. The Inquisitor shifted on her toes, hating that she had to be here, that that had to be here.

Padding silently over the carpet, she eyed up Cullen’s computer. All of the USB ports were on the tower down below. It’d take nothing for her to sneak it in. The man was blissfully asleep, his soul satiated from the heavy meal. He didn’t even twitch when she slid out of bed.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she flipped the drive around and jammed it straight in. There was no light that lit up, as that could give everything away, nor did she have to rouse the computer. Right now their little infection was racing through his hard drive, telling it to bundle up all the information it could to pass on to Harding.

To let her walk away once and for all.

A shaft of light beamed right across the way before evaporating. She stared against the dark pane to try and find it, but in the city’s inky night all she could see was herself. The lipstick was long smudged off, her rouge buffeted away, but the eyeshadow remained. It sparkled like the night sky far from all the unending lights of the city.

She never should have attended that party. What was HQ even thinking? Solas was clearly taunting her, he wanted her there watching him and they gave in. Put on your best dress, stand around
making small talk with other stuffed shirt business tycoons who need a tax ride off, and never let the egg out of your sight. Those were the orders, and she did as told.

She always did as told.

For the first hour, she pretended to guzzle back champagne, overheard no less than three moderate embezzlement crimes, and kept meeting the cold eye of the man who wanted to destroy the world. She wished she could ask him what he was doing, why he was making those monsters. They didn’t seem to be controllable, so what was the point?

There was no hint of Solas having any ties to the military, any military. In fact, she’d almost say he was anti-war profiteering looking at the various charities he did support. But no, the stance, the steady head, the tight grip — he knew battle and he had no intentions of ever walking away from one. So why? What was his endgame? What did he even want?

She could have puzzled it out for hours while trailing him. Perhaps even making a move that before Ostwick the agency would have called bold instead of idiotic. But then her phone buzzed and she dared to check it. It was nothing much from Cullen. A simple question if she was doing anything important.

And in that moment she decided she didn’t want to have a damn thing to do with standing in a cordoned off museum drinking champagne. Kristen wished she could say what pushed her to pull into the smaller grocery store’s parking lot. Maker knew she got a few funny looks shoving a shopping cart around while wearing a cocktail dress, but the idea refused to leave her brain.

She had to step away, but she didn’t have to vanish without leaving something behind. Just one good thing for him to remember her by.

Checking the time, she blinked. The drive was finished. In leaning over to fish it free, she accidentally bounced into the mouse and woke his old computer. She expected a lock screen to appear asking for a password, but it slid right into the desktop. Sweet Andraste, he was too trusting. But you already knew that.

She moved to put the screen back to sleep, when her eyes finally focused on the wallpaper. It was her, laughing wildly at Cullen and his straw debacle. She remembered him taking a picture, but assumed it got forgotten. Vanished into the ether of a never ending data supply. Not that he’d keep it, put it somewhere he’d often look.

Remember.

Damn it. Kristen stumbled into the chair, her head falling into her hands. Tears began to build up on her palms, foolish things she should have shed years ago but kept forgetting. There was never time to mourn.

There was only the mission.

“You okay?”

She wiped her face fast, smearing the last of the glittering eyeshadow against the back of her hand. Blinking in the low light, Kristen turned to face down Cullen having caught her in the act. He stumbled closer, the fractured light bronzing his naked chest. Her tongue stuck in her mouth, wanting to confess everything, put him in mortal danger. Send not only Solas but potentially the agency itself after him.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked in a soft voice, a hand rubbing into her shoulders.
Her plan crumbled in an instant and she nodded her head softly, “Yeah. Just a bit wired still.” Kristen reached over to draw her hand up and down the one clinging to hers.

“We did eat rather late,” he shrugged as if that was her biggest issue, indigestion.

Though, perhaps it was. All these years, all the barely chewed and swallowed thoughts, fears, and hopes were rising up her gullet to haunt her. On every other contact, every other job, she didn’t even blink at the idea of abandoning the people involved. The world didn’t stop turning to hellfire and she needed to be out there doing, not trapped in some living room sobbing.

*Why was this so different? Why was he different?*

“Cullen,” her voice lifted, the Inquisitor’s timbre rising from the soft thrush of Kristen. He sensed the change instantly, his groggy eyes honing in on her, and his shoulders falling back into position.

Tell him. Don’t just vanish out that door. Give him something. A reason, a good one why this can’t be. Why this could never be. Why you’re a horrible monster who led him on because for a few months it was fun to play house. To act as if you were normal, or deserved to be normal.

Never again lean upon his shoulder while watching the news together. Never curl back his hair behind his ears. Never wake up in the middle of the night to hold him. Never lay your head in his lap as dread fills your stomach. Never kiss him in the rain.

“Yes?” he prompted, Kristen having fallen deathly silent. Concerned, he dropped to a knee to look into her eyes. Did he see the old tears in them? Not the ones she just wiped away, but the ancient ones shed when her world was an endless landslide?

A smile lifted her cheek, “Want to spend the whole day together tomorrow? Just you and me, here, doing nothing more than laying around watching terrible movies?”

“Um,” Cullen blinked in surprise at the sudden change. “Sure, we can. I mean, I’d love to. Though you don’t…you didn’t bring any other clothes with you.”

Kristen rose out of the chair, her fingers sliding back along his neck as she pulled herself tight to him. He happily hugged back, locking her in safe, “Who needs clothes when I have you?”

The laugh and gulp reverberated over top each other, and he nuzzled his face tighter into her hair.

“All right, but you might get a bit cold in this drafty living room.”

“Then you’ll have to warm me up,” she smiled, pulling back to gaze into his amber eyes. Cullen’s heartfelt tug drew her lips right to his, Kristen unable to step away. Her heart made the decision for her even as her brain knew it would be a disaster.

She didn’t care. Wolves couldn’t drag her away from him now.

Kristen whistled under her breath as she slotted the key into her apartment lock. She moved to turn the deadbolt, when her eyes caught the fallen strip of tape. Shit. Someone was in her apartment.

Digging into her purse, she locked a hand around the gun. The stupid song kept on her lips, while her eyes hardened. Twisting the knob slowly, she lashed out and kicked the door hard. If anyone
was behind, they’d have shouted from it smacking them in the face. With her purse extended outward, Kristen strode in fast, her eyes whipping around all the potential hiding places.

A hand lashed onto her arm and she swung the purse plus gun to the side, her finger sliding along the trigger when a flash of white struck her. “Fenris?” she stuttered in shock. Still, the man shoved her forearm away lest she accidentally wing him.

“What…?” Her heart thrummed erratically in her chest as she slunk back — Fenris releasing her in an instant. Knocking back on the safety, she eased her fingers out of her purse. “What in Andraste’s name are you doing here?”

He was never supposed to be here. None of them were. Who knew who was watching Kristen Trevelyan’s known address. Stopping by, being seen anywhere near put them all at risk, especially now that Solas knew far more than he should.

The man drew a hand over his forehead, his yellowed fingernails scraping against the white tattoos as he sighed. She softened a moment, feeling heartened to see him again even if it was grossly incompetent. “How’s the arm?” she asked, looking right where the wound was. He’d covered it under a leather jacket, stained as was all of Fenris’ clothing, with a hole worn into the elbow.

His haunting eyes darted to it too before he growled, “Fine. But,” the tone softened, along with his body. He relaxed from the about to pounce stance into a fragile whimper, “thank you for asking.”

Nodding her head, she tossed her purse onto the table. “Why are you here? Did M send you? Or L?”

He shook his head no, causing her to purse her lips. She didn’t need this, her noose tightening every damn day. If they found out that Fenris snuck into her apartment for any reason they’d…

“I was worried,” he whispered, his eyes shut tight, “about you.”

“Me?” she scoffed. “All I do is file paperwork and sometimes stand around drinking watered down champagne.”

His fingers lashed out to grab hers. A chunk of skin had been sliced off of the pad on his left hand. It never grew back, the flesh hardening to a thick callus. Fenris absently drew that scar back and forth over top her hands as he sighed, “There’s things, stuff that…”

He let go suddenly, his eyes whipping around in surprise at even touching her. Digging around in the back of his black jeans, Fenris fished out a phone and pressed that into her hand instead. “Watch, you need to see this.”

“See what?” she twisted the phone around and watched as a grainy video started up. It was in black & white, clearly security cam footage, but it seemed to be filmed inside a throne room. One decked out in the finest of tacky golden decor. At first nothing happened, Kristen pursing her lips at his wasting her time, when a bald head stepped into the view.

“Solas,” she hissed.

“Wait, there’s more.”

A handful of men appeared on the other side, little more than black blurs until they paused and the camera fixated on them. They appeared to be dressed in long robes of some sort, with… She stumbled back, her fingers knotting up in pain. Long robes of crimson and black, with four buttons up the left side and a patch…a patch bearing the symbol for their elder god.
She tried to wrap her arms around herself, fingernails digging into her skin, but the sound jarred her teeth. Boots in numbers unending, stomping up and down the main street. Worst of all, neighbors and once friends all waving flags while cheering them on as they invaded their home. Like the chickens putting out a welcoming banner for the butcher.

Fenris tugged his phone back and watched the footage, “They didn’t want you to know what we’re dealing with. M in particular, given that it’s rather obvious Solas had some sort of dealing with the Free Marcher State. He’s kept it quiet officially, but in this footage he gave a relic of some unknown origin to Cory…”

“Don’t fucking say his name!” she howled at Fenris, causing the man to skitter back a moment. His wide eyes darted towards her purse as if she might grab it in a moment of insanity and begin firing. But she folded tighter into herself, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“I’m sorry, Vhenan,” he whispered, a hand skirting along the outer edge of her arm. He shouldn’t know. No one should know. But after Ostwick, after… She didn’t tell him everything, but she told him enough. When she didn’t shrug him off, Fenris let his other hand drift over her. It was a strange sort of hug, the man standing far enough back another person could slide in between them, but it felt dangerously intimate nonetheless. Don’t cry on his shoulder. Don’t turn to him. Don’t drag him down to your mess. He had enough to deal with.

“Why?” she whispered.

“No one is certain what Solas’ dealings were with the warlord,” Fenris was kind enough to avoid the name. “But Harding has a theory about why he’s creating the crags. With the airborne virus, all he need do is distribute it into various towns and cities within the remaining unaffiliated states of the Free Marches.”

And once it takes, half of the mages will turn into monsters, and happily murder the rest. It’d be a ghost town, free for him to roll through and take whatever he wanted. Did he even want anything save to be worshipped as some kind of god of death? The never ending broadcasts rattled through her dreams. She could hear them still if she let the radio on the car fall to static. It unnerved her how, if she didn’t actively fight it, she could almost believe the propaganda of her childhood.

Shaking her head, she sucked in a sniffle, “No, I mean why didn’t M want me to know?”

At that Fenris gulped, his eyes looking weaker by the setting sun cresting through her windows, “She is concerned you would take matters into your own hands.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

He blinked at that, his mouth falling agog, before Fenris sighed. A simple nod was all he gave, because he need not elaborate. She knew him well enough to know that they’d be moping Solas’ intestines off the wall if Fenris was in her place. If he wasn’t still tied up by his leash.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her hands still locked around his elbows in this strange hug, “for telling me. For thinking I could…for risking it.”

“Gladly,” his voice wafted over her and for a moment she shivered. They shouldn’t be this close, not now, not ever. Trying to appear as nonchalant as possible, she staggered back from him.

Fenris’ hands hung in the air, as if he expected her to step back in, but while she wrapped her arms around herself, he dropped them. Pinching into her eyes, she sighed, “How long until we get the
“order?”

“No idea, but they’re working on it.”

“You’ve seen the plans?” She’d been told nothing, as always.

He tipped his head, “A few. Keeping it all real close to the chest. Probably worried about a spy catching wind.”

Made sense. If Solas had caught on to her involvement with the agency then there was a good chance someone was feeding the man information. Anyone could be bought, anyone could be turned.

“You should go,” she said quickly, causing Fenris to whip his head up. “So nothing tags you here, in case…” Her eyes burned into his, both of them mouthing ‘they’re always watching.’

He nodded slowly, the shaggy hair falling into his eyes. While Fenris dug into the pouch pocket on his hoodie and extracted a cigarette pack, he shuffled towards the door. She was about to ask if he knew how to get out without being seen, but if anyone could manage it was Fenris.

At the door, with a cigarette dangling limply against his lips, he paused. One hand pressed to the handle, he turned to glance back at her, “Did you finish it?” From her look of confusion, he added, “with the cop.”

“Yeah,” she said fast, “Harding’s got the data, so… All done.”

“Good,” he smiled weekly. “I was…they were getting worried.” Fenris fell silent a moment, breath whistling out of his nose before he added, “About the leak in the station, if it might fall back on you. Are you safe here? Will he find you, come after you? Call you?”

What an odd thing to worry about. She tried to not snort at the misplaced concern, but it was rather strange to think of Cullen being a danger compared to her. “No, no, I’ll never hear from him again.” As far as the agency was concerned. It was rather easy for her to program in a different number for herself into his phone. One to a phone that no one else knew about.

“I’m glad to hear,” his green eyes burned into hers like the purging flame of Andraste and she felt her stomach open up. “This will be over soon,” Fenris summed up and he yanked open the door to leave. “Thank the Maker.”

“Yeah,” she nodded, watching him vanish down the hallway. “Thank the Maker.”

Her intestines twisted into a knot at the second lie she’d ever told Fenris. The first she swore to herself was for his own good, to protect him. This… Could she ever cease playing with fire?

_Jader._ They’d been on the hunt for the blighted serial killer for three weeks. It was tight quarters, far too tight for two people who despised each other, and dangerously close for two people who got on really well. Most days she couldn’t even remember who started the flirting. Maybe it was her in a pique of boredom. Maybe it was him, testing to see if she was as open to the idea as he was.
She knew better, he knew better, but they didn’t care. It should have been a one time thing. So they fucked, who cared? No one needed to know. No one would have if it’d just been sex.

Fenris stood framed against the window, the moonlight striking his naked body until it glowed blue and white. As there were almost no streetlights in this part of Jader it was all her eyes could focus on, his taut body bathed in starlight. The sight took her breath away as she lay stretched in the bed they soiled. They never should have shared like that.

“You’re quiet,” she whispered, rolling over. “Though that’s hardly anything new.” She moved to find her clothing, to slot it back on and return to the professionals they were. That she’d always been until he grabbed her hand and pinned her against a wall.

The mane of white shifted in the pale moon glow, Fenris’ head tumbling down as he started at his feet. “Do you regret it?”

Fuck, she didn’t expect to weigh that question now. Let the afterglow fade a bit before the penance began. Lapping her lips, she raked her fingers over her forehead and sighed, “No.”

“I don’t either,” he whispered, before his green eyes winnowed down on her. “And I don’t know why.”

“You want to?”

“I should, but I don’t. Don’t care if I’m punished for it, even.”

She slid out of bed, her bare feet risking whatever horrific parasite rotted on the floor to walk quickly over to him. “We don’t need to be punished, they…there’s no reason to tell anyone. It’s not as if it interfered with the mission.”

Fenris stepped away from the all seeing window and back into the sanctified shadows. Her arms moved to reach for him, but she stumbled a moment, uncertain how to comfort him. If it were a cover then it’d be easy. A hug, a kiss, a pat on the back. She’d never been this stripped of everything before, left with just her raw self and no way of knowing what to do next.

It seemed as if Fenris felt the same. His fingers skirted against her wrist and up her forearm, before locking around her biceps. That was where he paused, on the cusp of a hug as he gasped, “I’m tired.”

“Not surprising after…”

Her attempt at levity died at the weight in his eyes. His hand wandered off her arm to cup her cheek, the move so tender from him her breath caught in her throat. “Inquisitor,” he whispered before frowning. “Do you never tire of that title?”

“It’s my name.”

“It’s your job, all your job, nothing more, nothing less. There is no person there, only…only the work.”

Only the mission.

She shook her head, trying to stumble away to a safe distance, but Fenris’ fingers locked in tight. It’d take nothing for her to throw him off her, to flip him backwards, and she doubted he’d even fight it. But the burn in his eyes told her to stay put, their breath washing over each other in this tiny room.
“It’s who I am,” she said slowly.

He looked about to argue, to shake his head no and stomp, but the breath fled out of his lungs and he sagged a moment. “But is that all there is?”

What in the Maker’s name was he getting at? He knew same as she did, same as the rest of them what was at stake. What was always at stake. They hardly had time to sit around pondering where they fit in the world. If they fit anywhere in the world. If they could ever belong in the blighted place they kept saving.

“Fen…” she cupped his cheek, her fingers trailing the swoop of tattoos back to his ear. The name burned into his soul faded on her tongue. It used to be enough, but now it didn’t feel right.

That’s the sex talking. Those cursed hormones warping your mind. It’s why the agency keeps you from growing too cozy. Focus on what matters.

Unaware of her internal 180, Fenris snuggled into her arms. His hangdog head pressed into her shoulder as he pulled himself against her. It reminded her of the baby monkeys who’d cling to their mothers while swinging through the vines at zoos. Almost as if he wanted another birth, another childhood, a second chance at all of this.

“This isn’t enough,” he stated so concretely she flinched. How long had he been running those words over in his head? How long had he wanted to tell her that?

His green eyes pierced through hers and he sighed, “We deserve more than this…this life of shadows. Of placeholder names, of no home, no roots, no…” Fenris circled his hand along her hip, gently kneading into the skin as he whispered, “No love.”

There will be no attachments. This is not a rule to break you, to turn you into emotionless killing machines. It is to protect your heart. What we do here requires sacrifices, often without warning. To grow attached is to grow heavy, to let your heart risk rot and decay. Forget it ever existed, focus only on the tasks before you. Your duty, your love, your god is the mission.

She’d reveled in that for so long. To not feel, to not let herself think for a moment of how much pain was chained up and locked away in her past? It was freedom. While walking the bombed out streets of her childhood, feeling the cold glare of death from old neighbors, she was never allowed to forget. But within the safe confines of the agency it began to evaporate from her memory. Soon nothing of her old life would remain, and she was excited for that rebirth.

Did the others not feel the same? She’d worked with Fenris before and he’d always been as honed to an edge as the focused fourteen year old scooped into the agency on angel’s wings. What changed? How could he be questioning it now?

“What happened?” she whispered while picking up his white hair.

The man snorted, never one to delve too deep into his inner thoughts. It was something she admired in him, preferred to those that felt as if bathing everyone in their opinions was a worthwhile endeavor. “Nothing,” Fenris stamped, “Nothing happened.”

“Was it Izzy?” she gulped, well aware how close the two could be, sometimes to Fenris’ consternation. She wasn’t jealous, she had no right to be jealous, nor would it look good for the Inquisitor to care. But your stomach’s growling in something other than hunger.

“Don’t you ever want to find a home?” he turned on her, the question she asked trampled in the dirt. “To settle, properly. To finally…live.”
“This is living, it’s living for others. To save others, to save everyone.”

“Everyone,” Fenris sneered. “Including those who’d chain my people up? Who’d burn them alive and fill their skulls with lead because they’re not mages?!” His eyes flamed with the passion that wasn’t supposed to be there, that she took advantage of. That the entire agency took advantage of.

“We don’t decide who lives and who dies. We’re not the Maker,” she tried to shrug off his hands, but they sucker on tight.

Fenris snorted, “How can you say that with a straight face? Kirkwall, right this moment. Do you not know what’s happening there?”

“Of course I do, I watch all the damn news.” Her heart was beating rapidly, not wanting to talk about this. Not wanting to talk about any of it ever. It wasn’t her job to weigh the merits of one political side to another. She wasn’t in charge, she just followed orders.

“Mages, doing what mages always do,” he stomped his bare foot, clearly wanting to pace, but he wouldn’t stop holding her either. Did he fear that she’d run? That she’d grab a weapon or incapacitate him? “Innocent people are burning in the streets right now and where are we?”

“The agency has a reason,” she tried to insist, but Fenris was having none of it.

“You know why. The same reason they keep both of us locked far away whenever a mage terrorist begins a new rampage.”

He thought she was like him. Born under the iron fist of a mage regime, having nothing to do with their thoughts, their beliefs, and slowly drained of all rights then life. It was close, but so far off. She never had the heart to tell him the truth, knowing the anger, the absolute hatred for mages, would forever tarnish her in his eyes.

“Why even bother with their rules? With their never ending crush to our…our souls,” Fenris whispered, his head falling down. She blinked in surprise to find a waft of religion in his words. “If we can’t help, why remain?”

They were helping. There was a serial killer to stop. There were other problems in this world beyond mages. Problems they could stop. Issues that only those trained to spot and fix without interference from any slow to act government body could handle.

“I don’t wish to do this anymore,” Fenris sighed. His head lifted, and the wave of greens peeked from below his black brows. “And I don’t want to do it alone.”

“What?” she gasped.

“Inquis…” Fenris began before shaking his head. Closing his eyes tight, he whispered, “Vhenan. Yes, that is a much better fit.”

“Vhenan?” she repeated the unfamiliar word and Fenris laughed once.

“You are the only one I have left now, my original ripped away long ago.”

What in the Maker’s name was he talking about? She was his boss, sometimes a contact. They… okay, they were friendly on occasion, and really friendly on this one occasion. But that was it. Right?
“Fenris,” she said, trying to shake him out of this turn, but he flinched deeper into himself.

“No, not that either. No more of what they…” he extended his arms to look at the white stripes circling his sienna skin. “What they forever tagged me with.”

“I don’t know your old name,” she tried to cling to anything she had, even while she grew curious. If he hated the name Fenris why keep it once he joined the agency?

He snorted at that, and sighed, “Nor do I.” Silence dripped against the walls, each ping of the runoff from the aqueduct above ripping more of the wallpaper free. “Erastis,” he whispered softly. “Call me, Erastis. Forget, forget everything from before. Please.”

“You can’t be serious,” she tried one last time to talk him out of it. He wanted to leave the agency? That was impossible, unheard of, unthinkable. She didn’t want to lose him, the man was talented beyond belief and…it’d be a lot lonelier without him.

“Kirkwall is the perfect cover,” Fenris insisted, his naked body swirling around the tight room as he lay out a plan. It must have been in his head long before she ever once accidentally brushed up against him. “They are swamped with it, will be for months. Doubtful they’d send any to find us until…we vanish.”

“I…”

He paused, his hands gripping onto hers tight, “You are, your skills of blending are unmatched.”

“You need me.”

“No, I,” he shut his eyes tight, the deep breath dislodging his chest a moment, “I wish you to be by my side. To not have to…I’m tired of being alone. Of having nothing at my side, or inside.”

Agree with him. Take him somewhere safe, let him cool off for awhile. Work this out. And then you can contact the agency. They’ll know how to show him he’s making a huge mistake. Surely L would want him back. Maybe a little bit of penance, but this has to happen on occasion. People went rogue and returned to the fold.

He can’t mean all of this. He just needs time. Sometimes everyone needs a bit of time.

Lifting her lips in a worrisome grin, she noded, “Okay. I’ll, I’ll come with.”

Fenris gasped, a grateful smile filling his grim face, “I hoped you’d agree.” Leaping forward, he pinned her lips in a kiss. She stumbled back to the wall where all of this began, her eyes shut tight to return the affection. As her body molded to his, her brain was already leeching away and shrouding itself in protection.

It knew where it belonged. It knew that it wanted the anonymity of the agency. The endless void of nothingness that came with the job. To feel was to know pain. To love was to know sorrow. And she never wanted any of that ever again.

Breaking away from the kiss, she eyed up Fenris, “What do we do first?”

He had no idea that she got word to the agency before they even left the grungy checkpoint apartment. Fenris was good, the pair often slipping into and out of drainage ditches to avoid even a sliver of light. But the agency was better, a trio of agents stumbled upon them before they made it more than 48 hours out. He never learned of her betrayal, the agency thinking it best he keep one turncoat friend.
But she never noticed that before her failsafes slammed into place, before she could shore up her armor, Fenris planted a small seed inside of her brain. The doubt was small, barely an intelligible whisper, but it quickly began to grow until its roots took control of her heart. She wanted more inside of her chest than an empty cavity where her heart was once hollowed out.
“Officer Rutherford,” the Captain’s voice honed in over the brunt of hushed tones and right to Cullen. He slid out of the chair towards her position at the head of the room where she’d gone over the duties for the week. “And Samson,” she added, her head snapping towards the other man trying to sidle out.

“Yes ma’am?” he asked, blinking hard in the fluorescent light.

“We need to discuss a matter, the rest of you are dismissed.”

While everyone else in the precinct filed off to their tasks, Cullen and Samson stood shoulder to shoulder. The Captain cut a bit shorter than both of them, but something in her commanding tone made Cullen feel as if he was pulled up to the principal’s office. He shrunk deeper into his collar while Samson absently fiddled with a pen on the desk.

When the door closed, Captain Pentaghast leaned close, “This is in regards to what you observed at the harbor.”

Despite the body, despite the break to Barris’ arm, despite Cullen drenched in the pink blood, they were ordered to pretend nothing happened. Or, at least, keep it quiet while others investigated. Cullen assumed they’d pull in the feds, but there were no suits running around snatching up files. It was almost as if they entire thing faded to a whisper.

“You mean that unexplained swamp gas that could have killed us both?” Samson cut in, speaking up for them both.

The Captain pursed her lips, “Look, I’m as happy about this as you are, but there’s a lot of top
brass throwing their weight around. Go against it all now and we’re all likely to be tossed out on our ass.”

“I’d like to see them try it on you,” Samson snickered, and the Captain glared murder at him.

Cullen coughed, speaking up for the man, “What has changed? Is it Barris?”

“Detective Barris is recovered and already assigned to a new case. He is doing well, thanks to you,” she tipped her head to both Cullen and Samson. While he was happy to hear the news, Samson ruffled his lips in clear annoyance. There’d be no extra commendation for the pair rescuing a detective since no one was allowed to know about it. At least Cullen wasn’t so injured he’d have to cough up the medical costs to an unexplainable injury on the job. His insurance adored screwing him over when it came to the therapy bills already.

“No,” the Captain continued, “it seems we have a tag-along coming by.”

“Ah shit, a civilian?” Samson voiced for him, though Cullen felt the same.

“I thought you’d put your foot down on such matters?” They’d had a few skip on through before, ride-alongs and the like. Mostly reporters searching for a story to make them look bad. Sometimes movie producers who wanted the gritty truth to life as a cop. The latter never lasted more than a day upon learning of all the paperwork. Somehow filing wasn’t considered dramatic or sexy enough.

Captain Pentaghast curled her lip and stomped a heel into the ground, “I tried, but this one has connections. And has been a thorn in my side for years. All I’m driving at is if Varric Tethras corners you, turn and run. He has a habit of digging information out of people, and the last thing we need is a dime store novel writer learning about these…whatever occurred at the harbor.”

“Yes ma’am,” Cullen nodded deep, while Samson buffed a fingernail against his eyebrow.

“Tethras? Ain’t he the one behind those Dark Turn novels? Heard they were making a movie.”

The Captain shook her head, “I am incapable of caring what that man does. You have your orders, get to them.” It was she who cracked open the door and stomped out, no doubt already tired of dealing with these trivial matters.

Cullen spun back to gather up his lost notepad, when Samson snatched onto his arm. At the look, the man whistled, “Ain’t seen hide nor hair of you in…shit. A month?”

“It’s been a busy month,” he laughed, hefting up the line of work he had on his plate. “People seem to lose their minds as the days grow shorter.”

“Or when they get longer, or if the sun’s down, or if it’s up,” Samson said with a chuckle. “But seriously, where have you been hiding Rutherford? I could at least count on you to show up during trivia night at the Rusty Vial and trounce Janet and her crew. Your score’s growing cobwebs.”

“Like I said,” Cullen buried his smile in his gut, “I’ve been busy.” Every time Kristen came over, she’d all but build a nest of blankets on his couch, strip down to next to nothing and cuddle with him under the warmth. Often there’d be sex as well, but being together, sitting together in the glow of the tv was…it was nice. More than nice, perfect. For so long he thought getting back into dating required going places, being social, and sitting in impractical clothing while trying to not say anything stupid.

She…she just waltzed into his life and burrowed into his heart. Which was not something he
should ever tell her. Doubtful “I think of you as my heart worm” would take off as a romantic sentiment to put on a card.

A prickling sensation rose up Cullen’s arm and he whipped his head over at Samson. The man had the cockiest grin upon his face as he whistled, “You’ve found someone.”

“What? That’s not…” Cullen staggered back, not wishing to dredge up his personal life on the clock. Or ever. It was private for a reason.

“Right, that girl, the one you found. Rescued from the evil clutches of waiting for a tow truck. Is it her?”

Cullen gulped, shuffling his feet until the toes knocked into a table leg. Why was he keeping her a secret? If things progressed along, especially as far as he hoped, then he’d have to tell people. Want to tell people. Introduce her to people in his life. With a shrug, he said, “Yeah.”

“Look at that, the baby bird’s all grown up and found a new nest to play in. Did she let you poke your worm around in it?”

He sneered at the childish innuendo, even while his steps lightened, “Things are good.” Better than good. Amazing. It caught his breath how flexible and strong she was for being a random pencil pusher.

“Things meaning…” Samson curled his fist into an O. Before he could think to insert a finger into it, Cullen slapped both away. That made the man laugh, “So, into the kinky stuff then, huh?”

Yes. Which thrilled him more than he ever expected. Not that he was about to tell Samson. Either bit.

“Are you getting serious?”

That threw Cullen. Were they serious? How did one tell what was and wasn’t serious? Not as if there was a box to check or a declaration made. They were a couple, but did that count? “I think so. Yes, yeah we’re pretty serious.”

He expected another smile or rude gesture, but Samson whistled and clucked his tongue. “Bad move there Rutherford.” Cullen glared confusion at him, causing Samson to shrug, “Coupling up right before Satinalia. You’re gonna be doing that whole ‘what present do I get you that doesn’t make you blow your lid? Romantic? Practical? Both? Is it rude if I don’t invite you to the company party? Shit, how much of my family do you meet’ dance. Better to keep nice and friendly until the new year. Then you lock it in.”

Satinalia? He hadn’t even considered. It was still a month away, but he should get her something. Oh Maker…

“There, that face you’re pulling, if you’d waited to jump onto the ball and chain train you’d be in the clear. Now it’s all panic and shouts of ‘what do I get her?’”

“What do I get her?” he whipped to Samson who chuckled.

“How the fuck should I know?” the man shrugged while scooping up his paperwork and heading towards the door, “Ask another woman, they seem to come with all the cheat codes.”

That was no help. Who could Cullen ask? Most of the women he knew he worked for. And it seemed unwise to ask the barista or librarian what would be a good present for a woman he’d only
known a short time. Cullen may be rusty, but he could see giant danger signs in that idea.

“Good luck,” Samson called before he vanished out the door, “lover boy.”

Blessed Andraste. He scrubbed his cheeks, feeling the rough burn of the hair against his palms. Why didn’t he shave this morning?

Because you’re going to see her tonight, and you know she prefers the scratch of your face against her skin. She’d been by a lot more lately, often on work nights and even staying over. It was almost as if she didn’t want to be alone in her apartment.

Neither do you.

Cullen’s leg spasmed from outside vibrations and he dug into the deep pockets of his uniform pants. Swiping at his phone, he recognized his sister’s number. What in the Maker’s name was Mia doing calling him now? She knew he’d be working. Oh Andraste, did something happen?

Answering it fast, Cullen gasped out, “Mia, what is it?”

“Oh, Cullen, hi. So…”

“Is something wrong? Is it Branson?” the concern must have been obvious in his voice as his sister snorted.

“No, he’s fine. I, well, I didn’t actually expect you to pick up. Was going to leave a message on your voicemail.”

Cullen groaned. His sister had a strange aversion to texting which meant she’d prefer leaving her scolding voice lingering inside inboxes to go off in the ear like a bomb. And Maker take mercy upon him if he dared to ignore one for too long. That got a double scolding.

“Well, you have me so might as well spit out what I’ve done wrong this time.”

“Nothing,” she laughed at her end, “least not yet. Any chance you’re going to come home for the holidays?”

“Mi…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Work. You’re the only cop in the country who is never allowed vacation time. Not as if I haven’t seen my younger brother in… Shit, don’t make me do the math. It’s too depressing.”

Since his parents funeral. He’d been in bootcamp when it happened, the templars making a rare exception because they both died at once. Double funeral. It was the last time Cullen felt clean enough to look his family in the eye, before everything shattered in his brain.

“Mia…” he began, but she interrupted him again.

“Look, just put in to take time off. For me. For your nephews. You don’t have to come all the way out here, but it’d be nice to think you’re not holed up in a frozen office with a barely thawed tv dinner to celebrate.”

Satinalia was coming up fast. He could ask Kristen, invite her along. She didn’t know anyone in the city, and she was from Honnleath. It could be a home trip for both of them.

“Mia,” Cullen said, “stop, just blighted listen.” He could hear his sister’s forehead vein throbbing,
but she did shut up. “Can I bring someone with me?”

“Sure,” she spat out fast, her voice ecstatic, before it slipped into sly mode, “Someone meaning a work friend?”

“No…”

“Someone meaning a friend who’s more than friend?”

“Um,” Cullen gulped, a finger digging into his collar, “Yeah, she’s…she’s a lot more than a friend friend.”

“You son of a goat!” Mia cursed at him. “How long has this been going on? And if you say longer than a year, so help me…!”

“A couple months, more or less,” he tried to remember the date today and the rainy night when she hopped up into his truck and kissed him. It felt both as if it were ages ago and only a breath back.

His sister scoffed a moment; no doubt no answer save ‘I began dating her an hour ago’ would have been the right one. “Who is she? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. Or Branson. Or anyone.”

“I didn’t…” He didn’t want to ruin it, to pin all his hopes on her, tell everyone important to him about her, and then have it all get washed away. To limp away a failure once again.

“Start at the beginning, genius. What’s her name?”

“Kristen. Actually, she’s from our hometown.”

“Really? Tiny world,” Mia snickered, “Look at you, heading out to the big city and you wind up falling for someone out of Honnleath.”

“You probably knew her family, the Trevelyans.” Cullen couldn’t hide the excitement in his voice as the words erupted out of his throat. How long had he wanted to tell people about Kristen and why was he hiding from it? What was wrong with him?

“Sorry, the who?” Mia said, no doubt her line crackling from a bad connection.

“The Trevelyans, she’s Kristen Trevelyan. I…I don’t know her parents names, she never…”

The line fell fully dead for what felt a minute, Cullen’s heart pounding in his chest. Did Mia know something horrific about them? Were they convicted axe murderers or something?

“Look, Cul, I don’t know how to say this, but there were no Trevelyans in Honnleath or the farms around. Least not for a good fifty miles.”

No. That couldn’t be right. “She went to school with me. A couple grades back. But she…” She remembered his time on the track team, knew the school mascot, even laughed about the time an entire flock of sheep ran through the halls on a herding dog accident. Her parents had to be somewhere in Honnleath, Mia just didn’t have as great a memory as she claimed. That was all. Of course.

“I have no idea what you think you heard, or what this woman,” Mia’s voice spat that last word out. It was clear she was thinking of far less kind synonyms for Kristen, “told you. But there are no Trevelyans in Honnleath. Never have been, probably never would be. Cullen, that’s a Marcher name.”
Maker’s breath. The hand holding his phone dropped hard. Somewhere in the distance he could hear Mia shouting something, but the pounding of blood in his ears smothered it over. It was a Marcher name. He knew that. He’d…he ran into a lot of them when he was in the templars. Why the hell…?

Why would she lie about that?

What else was she keeping from him?

“Mi,” he hefted the phone back up, Cullen’s lip rising in a sneer. “I have to go.”

“Be careful, okay. I don’t need to hear that you—”

Whatever she was going to scold him with snapped away as he ended the call. To make certain she didn’t try again, Cullen shut off his phone. Snapping his eyes tight, he dug his fingers deep into the table. Anger bubbled in his veins, the dangerous kind that he knew far too easily could consume him.

But that he’d been taught to contain, to abate. What lurked even deeper inside, what could wash over and never leave him, was an unending despair. He had to know the truth, confront Kristen and…and see where his heart would fall.

Maker, give me the strength to endure.

He thought his anger had vanished by the time Cullen pulled up to her apartment. But when he caught sight of her, arms wrapped around a bag of groceries as she struggled through the parking lot, the fire redoubled in strength. Should he wait until they were in her apartment?

No. No, it was best to do it now and quickly.

Still dressed in his uniform, because his hands wouldn’t stop shaking long enough to work the buttons, Cullen stepped crisply over the splintered concrete towards her. She was juggling her purse around, trying to dig out a set of keys before she got to the first door.

“Troubles?” he asked by way of not startling her.

She didn’t even flinch at his sudden appearance, just twisted her head around and smiled. Funny. Did she ever jump around him? He couldn’t remember catching her off guard once even by mistake.

“I fear I was done in by a baking sale. As if I’ll go through a ten pound bag of flour in a month. Maybe if I make spaetzle,” she mused to herself while jostling the bag around.

He should help her, at least take the heavy groceries out of her hands, but… “Who are you?” slipped out of Cullen’s lips. Damn it. He’d had a speech planned, a way to work around to sliding it into a conversation. But his brain wouldn’t stop churning the thought over and over. If she wasn’t who she told him, then who in the Maker’s name was she?

“Uh, Kristen,” she jabbed a finger at herself before turning to glance behind as if he meant anyone else. “Some people call me Kristy on occasion, but not for very long.”
Sucking in a jagged breath, Cullen stared right into her eyes, “Who are you really?”

“You?” There was no flush of panic, not even a flicker of her eyelids. Only confusion flooded her face. “I don’t…what are you asking?”

“There was no Trevelyan family in Honnleath,” he thundered, clinging tight to his evidence. This wasn’t going how he imagined. She wasn’t backing away, or pleading out an explanation. Instead, she was staring at him as if he was the one to lose his mind.

“Checking up on me?” she hissed, her lips narrowing to a slit.

“Not on purpose,” he raced to explain before balking. Why was he feeling guilty? He’d done nothing wrong. “I was speaking to my sister about you, thought she might know your family but it turns out you had no family in Honnleath. Because there are no Trevelyans from my hometown.”

Her eyes flared open as she sucked in a breath. Pivoting her head around the parking lot, she whispered, “Do we have to talk about this here?”

“Yes,” he nodded, not about to back down now.

“Okay,” bending over, Kristen dropped the bag onto the cement to free up her hands. Banging her empty palms together a moment, she shrank deeper into herself. “I am Kristen Trevely, but I was raised in the Peterson house.”

“The Petersons?”

“Older couple, lived in a blue house with white trim everywhere. Never mowed the lawn until the city got involved,” she said with a shrug. Yes, he remembered them. George Peterson was in the same hunt club as his father.

“But they had no children, they only…” he whispered to himself, when the light dawned.

Kristen huddled tighter into her coat’s collar, the winter wind finally making it through Cullen’s anger to chill him. “Yeah,” she said in a whimper, “I was a foster kid. Same as the rest there.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he gasped out, that feeling of being a total heel rising up his gullet. It made sense. There were constantly kids in and out of the Peterson house, most lasted a few years at best before they were shipped on to somewhere else. No wonder he wouldn’t remember her if she was in that clan. People had a habit of not getting attached.

“I…” she rubbed a hand up and down her arm, her eyes burning into the sidewalk, “I don’t like to talk about it. Being…people get real judgy when you don’t have a family. Not a normal one, anyway. So…” Her head lifted and she stared right into his face, “Sorry. I should have told you the whole story from the beginning.”

Shit. What in the Maker’s name was wrong with him? Cullen’s eyes whipped around the parking lot, which was where he forced Kristen to bare her soul. Who knew how many random people were listening in right now. Bending over, he scooped the bag into his arms.

“We should, I can help you…inside. Where it’s warmer and people aren’t, you know.”

“Oh,” she nodded her head slowly while cracking open the door. Cullen walked glumly up the stairs and down the hall towards her apartment door. Behind him she trailed a few steps back, her feet shuffling. He gritted his teeth at the sound of pain echoing in her footfalls.
At her door, Kristen undid the piles of locks, grabbed up the bags and dashed to her tiny kitchen. Cullen sidled in, a hand roughing up his hair as he flinched. The winter afternoon light cut straight across the unshielded windows, beaming right into his eyes. Normally, he’d feel welcome here. Sit down on the couch, or scan around on the tv channels for something to watch.

Now, he shambled back and forth near the doorframe, uncertain if he should even shut it. She’d probably want to send him packing after his outburst. Take some time to reassess things. Maybe all the time.

Maker damn it. What had he done?

Kristen paused in holing away the groceries, her hand cupping a jar of cinnamon. “I didn’t want to lie to you,” she said, causing Cullen’s head to snap up.

“You didn’t,” he raced to insist, taking a daring step towards her.

She snorted at that, her eyes glancing over her shoulder as she turned her head, “A lie of omission is still a lie. People… I bounced through the foster system for a long time. There was no hope save aging out, and even then I had to scramble to prove I belonged anywhere.”

“Did you have no family?” he blinked, the farm boy having trouble wrapping his mind around the idea of no extended family coming in to help.

Shrugging, Kristen guided a hand around her stomach a moment. “Dead, killed off one by one until…” Her eyes lifted and he shuddered at the tears burning inside. “Until it was just me left.”

His body took over, Cullen stumbling forward towards her. Arms tugged her into his chest, her face pressing tight while he tried to envelope her safely. “I’m…” he tested his jaw against her hair, “I’m sorry.”

“My mother, she went first. Just…” her fingers dug tight into Cullen’s back, pulled her deeper as she barely breathed the words in her throat. “Then my grandmother. By day, of all things. Finally, my father. Fire—”

Kristen sputtered, her splayed mouth pressing so tight to him, Cullen felt her teeth skim against his skin. “It…it burned him…”

“Stop,” he gasped, “You don’t have to, to tell me. For the Maker’s sake.”

“I should,” Kristen sighed, “You deserve to know the truth. All of the truth.” Her tear stained voice froze a moment and she began to rock with Cullen wrapped around her. “All of it.”

Embracing her tighter, Cullen placed his lips to her forehead. It was burning as if she fell under a fever. No doubt due to all the emotional turmoil he kicked open like a hornet’s nest. “No, you don’t. It’s okay. It was… It must have been awful.”

“Why,” she swallowed hard, her hands positioning higher up his back, “why were you asking about me with your sister?”

“Oh, it’s…” Cullen winced. He accused her of being a liar, of not being who she claimed to be. Pulled from her this horrific memory of losing her family. Maker, he knew what that felt like.

There was no chance she’d want to have anything to do with him now.

“Cullen?” she lifted her eyes up, the glittering browns honing in on him.
“She was inviting me to Satinalia dinner and I thought about taking you too.”

Her mouth dropped open, the eyes turning inward fast, “Oh.”

“But, I mean, since you don’t have any family in Honnleath. None that…none you’d call family, then it’s. Forget it. Forget I even…”

Her body slipped away from his, fingers breaking from the sanctity of the hug. Cullen stepped back, knowing that it was the right thing to do, even though his heart begged him not to. There was no good excuse for what he did. Why did he overreact so? Why did he leap right to the worst assumption?

When warmth bloomed over his cheek, his eyes snapped open and right into her smiling face. It looked worn raw, her cheeks ruddy and eyes blinking fast in the light. But she was smiling at him. “It sounds lovely.”

“It is, I mean, I haven’t been in years but Mia’s pretty big into holidays. Thinks she has to be the…the glue to hold the family together since our parents…” Cullen’s chin dropped but he cupped her hand tighter to his cheek. Don’t leave. Just, please stay here for a moment.

“You lost yours too?” she said softly. He nodded, his voice drowned in sorrow. “I suspected as such. Call it orphan sense.”

Cullen snickered at the thought. “The blight. It swept through, got them both within a week of each other.”

“Blessed Andraste,” she gasped, as if he suffered worse than her. He was eighteen when it happened, practically on his way overseas when the phone call came.

“Haven’t been back home since. Except to pick up the truck. That was what dad left me, and this watch,” he extended his arm to reveal the new to his father’s old. It was the last big purchase his dad made, the old man ecstatic about it despite people already moving on to using their phones. Called it his retirement watch because cattle and corn didn’t tend to give them after fifty years of service.

Kristen’s arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him to her instead of the other way around. Her hand slid off his cheek, leaving it cool. But she began to rifle through his hair while whispering, “No wonder your truck is so reliable. It’s keeping watch over you.”

“I should not have accused you…” Cullen gasped, but she cut him off.

“It’s okay. I’m not mad,” she couldn’t stop fussing with his curls but Cullen was confused. Did his blubbering stop her from hurling him out of her apartment? Was she waiting for it to stop before she removed him from her life?

“Why? Why aren’t you?”

She shrugged, her hands falling to land before her, “I have a habit of keeping my past where it lay. Forgetting it ever happened, the bad…and the good. Maybe it’s, maybe I want to talk about it again. Stop running from it.”

“Kristen…” he caught her cheeks in his palms, fingers tugging her up to his face. Her smile was struggling to catch, but as he pressed her lips to his it began to brighten from the kiss. You don’t want to lose her, no matter how hard this could get.
He swallowed at the thought bobbing around in his gut and tried to shake it away, but it lingered there. It felt like ages since he met someone worth fighting for. And she was just supposed to be his getting out there, learning how to get his feet wet. The Maker played him for the fool.

“Are you…” her eyes darted down his uniform, “still on the clock?”

“No,” he grimaced, a hand roughing back to his neck before he smiled pathetically, “Just didn’t change. But I’m, I can uh head home. If you have things planned.”

“Stay,” she grabbed onto his hand, Cullen sliding the other into her grip. Tugging him into the kitchen, she smiled wider, “I can teach you how to make spaetzle. My grandmother’s best. And maybe talk a bit more about stuff.”

Nuzzling his nose into her cheek, Cullen took a deep breath. She smelled of the sea and leather, her fragrance collection constantly in rotation. Shaking off the thought, he mused, “I’d love nothing more.”

Chapter End Notes

As you can probably all guess I have abandoned the hell out of Tumblr. A horde who adore ripping apart anyone that doesn't bow to them have started tracking me all across the internet. They refuse to leave me alone, deny that they're harassing and bullying me even as they doxx and flood me with their vitriol, so sorry, but it's gone.

Sorry for everyone else who has to be ripped apart by these piranhas. Clearly, once they're done with me they'll move on to someone else. People like that are never happy unless they're hurting others.
The blowhard was carrying on as if every word out of his mouth could have some impact upon the world. She kept nodding absently as her cover boss sprayed an array of business speak while jabbing at her falling numbers. It wasn’t entirely Kristen’s fault, the damn program she created to do most of the boring work ran into a bug. Which was why it filed the business expenses of all the higher ups into a memo and sent it to everyone in the company. Only seemed fair for all the grunts see what rich snot’s son was getting up to on the company dime.

“You’re lucky you’re not out on your ass!” Segritt continued his rant. “Are you even listening to me, Karen?”

She tried correcting him once, then remembered she couldn’t give a shit. “Yes, sir. Out on my ass.”

His weak lip lifted to try and form a sneer, but he jabbed a finger out to the cubicle farm. “Get back to work and try to not fuck it up this time. You got a guardian angel looking out for you, best not to test its limits.”

A guardian angel with a bald head. The minute Solas spotted her and didn’t have Kristen Trevelyan hurled from the building, she knew she was safe. He wanted her here, close. Maybe he liked the idea of someone highly trained in the agency forced to toil in the drudgery of data crunching. Megalomania and sociopathy were well tied to the upper crust after all.

No one looked up at her, the various coworkers keeping their heads securely in place. Save a welcoming cookie in the break room when she first arrived not a soul talked to her. It was doubtful most even remembered her. Out of all her months stuck in this city, only two people kept Kristen in mind and one she planned to put a bullet in.

As she approached the cramped desk, her eyes darted to a manilla folder sitting on the keyboard. Her heart caught in her throat and she let her fingers waft over top of it a moment. To everyone
passing it probably looked like a bit of work, but she knew that crease, the crisp color to the folder. They never looked dogged or aged because they were never reused.

This was it, the plan.

Not caring about Segritt or anyone else watching, Kristen tucked the folder under her arm, gathered up her things and stepped out of the building. The doormen and security barely even glanced at her leaving work a few hours early. She walked down the street, randomly turning down new blocks while the folder bulged under her arm. It couldn’t weigh more than a few ounces, but the importance of it tingled against her tricep.

Outside of a little pasta place, she leaned against the metal banisters to keep the tables pinned in, and tugged out the folder. There were schematics of the building, far more detailed than what Harding first showed her. An items list she’d have to scrounge up, shouldn’t be a problem. Assumptions on a time scale, all normal. Suggested trajectory on how best to kill Solas. A bit unnecessary, but they seemed to be wanting to cross all their T’s this go around. She flipped over the anatomy drawing complete with layout of his office, and froze.

Nothing. That was it, the final page. She shook a moment, rifling back through the dozen papers that laid out in excruciating detail how she would get in, avoid any security, and take out Solas. All that was missing was the extraction plan.

Because there isn’t one. This was why they let her back after Ostwick. She was to be the sacrificial lamb, to give her meager life in service of the world.

Should she scream? Cry at the unfairness of her number being up? She could run, certainly. Even now, the Inquisitor had quite a few tricks up her sleeve. Her ability to vanish was without precedent.

The folder’s edge thudded into her palm. Tap, tap, tap, like the slowing beat of a heart.

If she walked away, Solas would continue on his mad plan. More of those monsters would walk the streets. Eventually, the agency would try again, but who knew how many could die in the interim. It had to be now, it had to be her.

She had to die.

“You win,” she whispered, lifting her head to the unforgiving sun. It’d carry on without her, rising and setting over seven billion people who’d never even know of her sacrifice. Never even know she existed. Never care…

Closing her eyes, Kristen smiled to herself. She was to wait by her phone until the Kill Code came through. But if this was to be her last night, she refused to sit through it alone.

“Hey…” Cullen answered the door with a sweet smile. Leaping forward, Kristen greedily planted her lips onto his. It was no nice greeting, her force sent him stumbling backwards from the hallway. Hungry hands scooped up around his waist, down his chest, back up to his shoulders — all while her lips and tongue melded with his.

Cullen slipped back, a breath panting in his throat as he looked at her in surprise. “Hello?” he
asked, his amber eyes in shock at her forcefulness.

She smiled, then pivoted her foot backwards to kick the door closed. It landed hard, the tremors rattling up the wall. Concerned, Cullen trailed it, as if he feared something might fall, but she grabbed onto his chin and tugged him back to her. This time, when she fell back to kissing him, his hands roamed too, around her waist, toying with the waistband of her leggings. Skirting under her breasts, he molded the cups of her bra up against her nipples.

Dragging her fingers behind, she managed under his shirt. At first, she scraped the nails over his skin, Cullen’s tongue panting against hers. Maker, she wanted more. She wanted…to live. Even if it was just for an hour, to really live. Certain in her hunger, she dug her hands straight under his jeans and cupped that hard ass.

His lips rolled away from hers while climbing to her ear, “Is it my turn?”

To elucidate, he drifted his palm over her butt cheek. No pinching yet, no light slapping, just a calm swirl to get her excited. She wanted that. She wanted to rip all his clothes off right here. She wanted to go hard and fast until her brains rattled to goo.

She wanted to take it slow. To hold his hands while they kissed tenderly. To spoon, Cullen panting in her ear as he thrust from behind, his hands free to caress every inch of her.

She wanted both, everything, but that wasn’t an option anymore. Just this one time. The last time. To fully be herself.

“I want to chain you up and climb you like a tree,” she lashed out, her eyes burning with hunger.

His hand slid higher off her ass and she worried for a moment that he might back off. Might not want for her to take charge. How often had she played the damsel? To turn around and be the dragon would…

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen cupped his hand around the back of hers and guided it to his belt, “yes.”

Kissing with everything inside of her, Kristen managed to shove the far larger man back towards his bedroom. She wasn’t playing anymore, well…not pretending. She was certainly happy to play, at least. Somewhere between the tiny hallway and his bedroom, his shirt hit the floor. Her foot snagged against it, sending it rolling across the carpet, but she barely noticed.

Her hands were too busy sculpting his body one last time. Brushing the tips of her fingers through the sandy chest hair over his pecs, when she moved towards the thicker waves above his sternum she gripped. The tug was light, just a taste, but Cullen’s eyes bulged as he gasped in her mouth.

Good reaction? Bad? Kristen let her hand still, even as she felt his erection thickening through his jeans against her stomach. “That…” he blushed a moment, his eyelids fluttering as he tried to figure out if he liked it or not. Maybe he hated it, maybe he ached for it. Either way, it was doubtful he was ready and she'd never find out.

“You said something about, um…” now he danced on his toes, the excitement growing in his voice, “chaining me up?”

The tip of her lips lifted in a smirk and, with both hands placed to his bare chest, she gave a hard shove. Cullen tumbled backwards onto his bed, a cautious laugh rumbling in his throat. Kristen scurried on top of him, her knees bending into the bed as she reached behind to the back of her pants.
Fishing out a glint of silver, she snatched up his wrist and locked it up tight in the metal hook. Thinner than normal handcuffs, they were much easier to carry on a person in the event one needed to say secure a risk but not deem it worth killing them. Cullen turned to watch his extended arm caught in the old hardware of his job. When he turned back to her, the absolute glee in his eyes brought a smile to her face.

The man tried to lift up, his lips aiming for hers, but she was in charge now. Scurrying faster, Cullen using his free arm as leverage to follow, she dragged the man further and further up his bed. Metal bars for a headboard, who did that anymore? Unless, you were secretly hoping to be tied up to it.

Around one of the smaller black iron bars, she wrapped the cuffs before snagging his free hand and trapping him tight. The cuffs weren’t in any danger of cutting off his circulation, but he couldn’t slip them either. The cop was fully under her control, and judging by the burn in his amber eyes he was very much into the idea.

Cullen jangled the cuffs, testing them against the headboard. It caused the entire bed to shudder, which made her smile. Yes, tug. Struggling was the best part about it. He moved to try and sit up far enough to kiss her, but Kristen slid off the bed. Slightly perturbed, Cullen fell back to his pillow watching as she stepped towards the foot of the bed.

With his eyes burning over her body, imprinting every inch of the forgettable woman, she started to undo her blouse buttons. One by one, they shuffled apart, Cullen knocking the cuffs around while she kept herself away from his touch. Made him watch and nothing more. Her shirt slipped to the ground, the man’s all consuming sight trailing the fall before he honed right in on her nearly naked chest.

Slowly, Kristen cupped her hands against that which he could not touch. She squished her breasts together to amplify the cleavage and her captive squealed. Brushing over her stomach, she unbuttoned her trousers and slid them off. Hm, she stepped back into her modest heels after losing the pants, thinking it might be fun.

By the unforgiving glow of an overhead light, she stood dressed in the same black bra and underwear from their first night together. When he was just a job, when she thought she’d never see him again and cared little one way or another. It seemed a fitting cap to this short story of her life.

“Turn…” Cullen gasped like a parched man in the desert, “turn around.”

Trying to not blush at the thought, Kristen slowly sauntered in a circle, treading all over her shed clothing. Not that it mattered. They’d be worn once more, and never again.

“Sweet Maker,” Cullen moaned as she paused with her back to him and gave a little shake, “you’re killing me.”

Kristen whipped her head over her shoulder, darted her tongue against her teeth and whispered, “You have no idea.”

The man began to laugh while tugging on the inescapable bonds. It was obvious how badly he wanted to touch her, to rip the last stitch of clothing off of her and drive her wild. Right. He still had to lose his damn pants.

Pawing over the bed like a cat, her breasts nearly tumbling over the low cut bodice of the bra, Kristen curled her way towards him. Cullen strained his neck, watching as her body skinned
against his — in particular her boobs which she pressed into the fine tuft of chest hair. For a moment, she paused, languidly laying against him as if she could nap here. Torture the poor man for a half hour while she slept upon his body.

No. As tempting as that might be, there was far better ahead.

Unhitching the belt, she wriggled his pants off, his buckle clinking and clacking all the way. It was a bit harder to get pants off a man already laying down, but judging by the gasping going on from his end, he was enjoying the sight of her chest as she struggled. Once both pants lay in a pile, their legs knotted together on the floor, Kristen eyed up the obvious bulge tenting up the final scrap of clothing left on him.

Cullen glanced down at his own cock, as if to make certain it was really there and really ready. Or perhaps he was concerned she didn’t know that part came off too. One step at a time.

Crawling back onto the bed, Kristen stretched over his body and gave into the temptation of his lips. The kisses burned through her heart, brighter than butane as each dripped down her spine and towards the growing wet spot between her legs. Cullen’s tongue darted over her teeth before letting her get a proper taste of him. A long, delectable lap of the uncertain but intriguing man.

Even with her knees pinning tight to his hips, he lifted his bare legs in order to draw one up against her inner thigh. It couldn’t have been more than an accident, but when his shin glanced directly between her legs the wetness building in her panties swiped right across her lips. Kristen gasped in shock, her hips moving of their own accord as they wanted more. She wanted more.

For a breath, she let her hips dip downward, knowing what waited for her tucked safely inside the underwear. But no. Be steady. This isn’t over yet.

Cullen’s kisses slipped to her jawline and down her chest as she reached past him. At first he was happy to kiss and lick her breast, but when he heard the drawer open, he craned his head back.

“What are you…?”

“Trust me,” she soothed while rooting around in the nightstand. Slipping past the usual for a bachelor of his age — some of the old condoms they need not bother with, a stroker, and a cock ring — she found what she wanted. When Kristen pulled back from him, his worried eyes honed in on her until she extended the blue bottle.

“Oh,” Cullen smiled, “lube. Right. There wasn’t anything else that…?”

Catching on to the concern in his voice, though Maker he was the tamest one she’d ever seen, Kristen bent over to whisper in his ear, “You have no idea how badly I want to fuck you.”

“That’s because I’m chained up,” his eyes rolled back towards his hands and the delectable stretch to his arms.

She smiled, her teeth nibbling onto her lip as she wiggled her nose. “Let me show you.” Dribbling a good coating of the lube onto her index finger and middle one, Kristen made a loud show of closing the bottle, catching his eye, and skirting her fingers under her panties. When she touched herself — a whisper of a swirl over the hood — she threw her head back, but the moan came from below her.

While she teased herself, fluttering her clit back and forth with a twist of her fingers, Cullen began to buck under her. His stomach would rise up, jostling into her wrist which would send her fingers flying off in a new random direction. The change was enough, she’d sputter in surprise and delight,
causing him to pant as well.

The handcuffs rattled like a storm door in the wind. He ached to rip them apart and touch her, to caress what was just beyond his reach, but she wouldn’t let him. Though, she did enjoy leaning her ass back just enough to glide against his erection.

“M-m-maker,” Cullen blubbered, his eyes tight for a moment as her breath drew more shallow. Blessed Andraste, she’d never favored her own hand so much before. She risked a finger dipping inside of herself, her own lube merging with the store bought. Her plan hadn’t involved her cumming right on top of him, but shit this felt good.

“Pull it,” he begged, his voice cracking from the strain. Kristen paused in surprise, her eyes questioning exactly what he meant. “My…uh, hair, again. While you, you know.”

Well well. Bucking her hips back and forth against her trembling fingers, Kristen reached forward, got a good knot of chest hair, and pulled. The man attached to it gasped in shock and she felt his cock dance behind her. Poor thing was begging for attention and she could hardly blame it.

After giving another tug of his hair, a bit softer, Kristen flipped her hands around. She made a show of it, waiting for Cullen to note that the one coated in her own wetness was sliding under the waistband of his underwear. When her fingers circled along the crown like turning a radio knob, he threw his head back deep into the pillow.

“Dear…fucking,” whatever he was cursing faded as she began to slowly pump up and down his shaft. She tried to ignore the head, wanting to prolong his torture while her free hand slipped back under her panties.

She’d been close before, but watching the man tug on his restraints, and a blush burn under the chest hair, her body rampaged right up that cliff like a determined Sisyphus. “Shit,” Kristen hissed to herself, her straining thighs starting to tremble. The cock in her hand hardened tighter as she squeezed a pulse against it.

One more swirl over her clit and the explosion came. Her entire body rocked with the throb echoing out of her vagina, which she pulsed back against the penis in her fist. “Fuuuuck,” Kristen groaned, her head flopping forward to her chest. It was not supposed to hit that hard, or fast.

But watching the man with his arms stretched high over his head, his muscles trembling to try and break himself free, and his cock ensconced in her hand — she lost control. And she wanted more.

Kristen unearthed her hand that’d been taunting him and dug both into the mattress. She guzzled in air to make certain she didn’t grow light headed and tip over. Above her, she heard Cullen whisper, “I want to touch you with everything inside of me.”

Maker, but she wanted him to as well. To hold her, to tell her that…that everything would be okay, as cheesy as it sounded. But it wouldn’t. And you know that. You knew it the moment you met, you just never thought it’d hurt.

Summoning the imaginary woman who wasn’t facing a death sentence, Kristen lifted her head and smiled, “I plan to fuck your brains out.”

With as much ladylike dexterity as she had, Kristen yanked off her panties and tossed them onto Cullen’s chest. His eyes bulged a moment at the image, no doubt the smell of her unending arousal filling his nose. Sauntering around a bit while half naked, she grabbed onto his underwear and tugged the boxer briefs down. Rather than bother all the way off, she left them around his knees —
essentially cuffing his legs tighter together as well.

His adams apple pivoted in his throat, Cullen gulping at the image of her straddling his stomach. Kristen kept herself up high, her knees flexing into his hips and across the tuft of blonde fluff that formed the start of his pubic hair. A whimper reverberated in his mouth, Cullen’s eyes shut tight while he kept flexing his hands as if he wished to fill them with something warm and soft.

Smiling at the thought, she slid her ass lower and cupped his cock in her fingers. With a slow swirl, she dipped and twirled it back and forth over her saturated vagina. Cullen watched in finger clenching agony, the throb of his knob pulsing as it begged to be let loose. There was no denying that she wanted that too.

Kristen took a deep breath — this was it, the final fuck. Sliding her thighs apart, she guided his cock right into the edge of her lips and thrust down. Sweet blood of Andraste! He slipped so deep inside so fast, her entire lower half quivered. It wanted so much more, and so much faster, but this was supposed to be a tease to the edge.

Closing her eyes, she began to rotate her hips, the swivel moving counter clockwise as she worked her way back up. Counter cockwise, come to think of it. A few moans were all that pierced the darkness, Kristen honing in on the pleasure once again flooding her system. It was softer than before, like a gentle rain to the typhoon of the first orgasm, but it turned her entire body to warm jelly.

The clink of chains drew her eyes open, and she watched Cullen with his head tipped backwards into the pillow, his entire body stretched higher in order to meet her. His thrusts were bouncing against her, the man’s legs turning rigid as he fought to keep hanging on.

“Take it off,” his ragged voice gasped. Amber eyes burned into her chest, then up to her face. Slowly, she drew her fingers against the edge of the bra, the question lingering in her look. His head bobbed madly that that was what he wanted more than anything.

Smiling, Kristen undid the clasp and, as if moving through molasses, she tugged the straps down off her shoulders. She coyly let her hand and forearm slide over her nipples to obscure them, while the other dropped the bra onto the floor. That had his full attention, both from his eyes and his cock. The latter bucked deeper inside of her, and Kristen shook.

Her hands splayed out on his chest, giving Cullen a full view of her tumbling free breasts. The picture sent shockwaves trembling up his chest and right to his salivating lips. Growling in the back of her throat, Kristen started to thrust again. Her speed increased faster than any of the swirling, her breasts bounding freely from the action.

Maker, it felt good, but it could be better.

Spreading her legs a bit apart, she tipped backwards. Her hands gripped tight to his calves for support as she flashed him the full sight of her vagina taking him on. That position pushed his cock right up against all the best hot buttons. Together they moaned, Kristen rocking her body faster and faster. Even with the rising strain in her arms and thighs, she felt none of it as the glow burst from inside.

It enveloped her, strangling out any of the darkness and leaving her giddy in its wake. She flexed with the pulses in her vagina, gripping tighter to his cock. Cullen began to thrash with his arms, jangling the chains back and forth when, suddenly, he pulled both as far as possible. His biceps flexed hard, the veins practically bulging free as his body turned to stone.
Kristen was about to ask if he was okay, when a “Maker’s breath,” slipped from his lips and it grew much warmer inside of her. His orgasm must have knocked him for a loop as he kept bucking his hips into her, a few curses bursting from his parted lips. By the time he finished flexing, it felt as if five minutes of his coming passed, Kristen given a front row seat to the entire proceedings.

“That…” Cullen gasped, his curls fully smooshed from the rolling, sweat percolating all over his fresh skin. “That was amazing. I never…”

Smoothly, Kristen slid off of him and cuddled right against the unopposed chest. Cullen moved to put his arm around her, when the handcuffs once again clinked. Both looked up and sighed.

“Please tell me you have the key, and not that you locked it in your car.”

They shared a quick laugh at that and she reached over towards the end table. In truth, she never had the key for those cuffs having had them used on her once for other reasons. But they were damn easy to pick. It was a small wire she picked up and quickly undid both while Cullen had her breasts dangling in his face. Not that he seemed to mind much.

As the cuffs fell away, he took a moment to try to rub away the wear on his wrist before locking both around around her. “Mmm,” he moaned while hugging her tight. “Maker, I don’t know what came over you, but…”

Kristen frowned against his warm skin knowing what came next. “But I want to do it again.” Too bad there could never be an again. She had this one chance, this one moment to savor something all her own before doing her duty. She should leave, wait by the door for the call and prepare.

“I owe you ten pasta dinners now,” he laughed, the smile never leaving his face.

Her fingers skirted over the stubbled on his cheek. “I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.”

“Handcuff me and ride me like a bronto?” Cullen summarized, an eyebrow raising.

“Make you happy,” she said, the last of the mask cracking away. For the first time she was naked before him, whatever falsities she wore as Kristen stripped clean away. She was her, and nothing more.

His lips brushed over her forehead, Cullen sensing something was off, but it was also obvious he had no idea how to go about asking. Instead he said, “You have, you…Maker, you always have. It’s…” Curling his arms tighter around her, he whispered, “I’m so glad I stopped that day.”

She should leave. Gather up her things. Give him one last kiss before the end. Kristen snuggled tighter into his embrace and whispered, “So am I.”

She remained well into the night and the next day. They did nothing special, but it was 14 hours she’d never forget. The feel of his body slumbering while it enveloped hers, the calm that swaddled his face while they watched some home improvement show and cuddled, the touch of his hand against hers.

Now, he slumbered in her lap. Cullen looked exhausted, no doubt he’d had an episode recently and needed a nap. He didn’t want to put her out, but she didn’t mind. She wanted him to feel safe in her arms. What started as a way to rest his eyes turned into a full on nap. Happily, she’d watched him
in the silence, sliding his curls back and forth. It was a lovely pastoral image guaranteed to be pulverized apart.

Kristen twisted the phone towards her. The only thing texted to her, the last message she’d ever get glaring in innocuous letters. “KCG.” Kill Code Go. It was time.

Time for her to walk out of his door and leave not just Kristen but her own life behind.

“Cullen,” she whispered to thin air, her hand curling back and forth through his hair. He weighed upon her thighs but it was a reassuring pressure, like those anxiety blankets. “I’m not who I claimed to be. I’m a spy, well, a secret agent more. I do things to keep people alive. And I was never supposed to fall for you. I wish I hadn’t now, because…”

Her weary eyes wafted towards the window. Out there was a street filling with people on their way to work. For them it was another day, for her it was the last. “I always wondered what it’d feel like to die. How badly did it hurt? Or, once you knew it was coming, did you just go numb? Did the pain cease reaching your brain because there was no point to it? The body was lost so…”

She’d prayed that was how it went, for her father’s sake at least. No doubt for her mother’s and grandmother’s as well, even though she didn’t witness those first hand. A prayer that death was a movement from the light to darkness. It should have been just that for her. No attachments, no regrets, only the mission.

“I’m sorry, that I have to… I wish you all the best, not that that means anything now. And I am sorry, that I pulled you in, that I didn’t walk away to spare your feelings. That you fell for me.” Her lips quivered and a traitorous tear dribbled off her cheek. “That I fell for you. But I have to go now.”

Gently, she lifted his head off her. Rather than let him slump to the couch and risk a crick in his neck, she slipped a pillow under him. One day some woman will meet you, and she will be the luckiest damn woman in the world. Sadly, that was never to be me. Kristen risked waking him one last time by pressing her lips to his forehead.

Why was she being so foolhardy? Did she want to get caught? To have him question her leaving? To make her remain?

It didn’t matter, as he remained firmly entrenched in his dreams. She would pass out of his life as seamlessly as she entered it.

Gathering up her purse and coat, she moved to slip out the door when she spotted one of the takeout menus left on the table. It was from the pizza place they wound up after he helped “fix” her iron problem. A sort of second date for them, a real first date for her.

Her fingers dug through her purse until she unearthed a pen. In the margins of the menu she began to write, “Cullen, I…”

What could she say? “Cullen, I have to leave you. I wish I could explain why, but know that it has nothing to do with you.”

“Cullen, I’m with a secret agency who’s sent me on a suicide mission. If not for having to save the world and spending my life to do it, I would never leave your arms.”

Squeezing her eyes tight, she wrote something out fast. Laying the menu back on the table where he’d hopefully see it, she slipped out the door. For a brief moment, her eyes glanced around the room from the kitchen counter where he first got a look at her naked body, back to the gaming
console where they sat for hours trying to beat back his darkness, and to the couch where he slept.

A final tear for the life she pretended to have tumbled from her eye as Kristen turned on her heel and walked out of his life. The last words she left to him were, “Cullen, I had something come up. Didn’t want to wake you. XOXO, Kristen.”
There was always thunderous music for these moments in the movies, when the hero stands before the unassailable mountain, scrunches her hat on tighter, and grips onto the first rock. No music trailed the Inquisitor, her ears empty save the bug beeping indiscriminately in the background. Harding was on tap to handle any easily hackable security, but it was doubtful she could do much.

No one could do much to help her. She had to scale up to the impenetrable top floor and end Solas once and for all. Swallowing, Kristen tugged her ponytail tighter and slid in through the doors she’d pretended were a job for two months. “Ma’am, you can check your…”

The doorman’s eyes glazed over at her lack of a coat. She was in her real work clothes, a grey turtleneck bulging from the bulletproof kevlar below. Her pants were swaddled in the same ballistics fiber and the boots looked like she could crush a man’s skull if she had to. Swung over her shoulders was a backpack that would send the man into fits if he had a peek inside.

“Um, never mind,” he muttered, turning back to the real job of greeting the high rollers who came in through the gilded entrance. While the rank and file would slip to the freight elevators on the left, the VIPs were allowed to enjoy plush carpet and marble pillars on the right.

She needed neither. The plans were thorough, walk straight to the back and there it was — Solas’ personal elevator. The one that passed every floor until it reached his barricaded oasis in the clouds. The one she had to break into.

“H, I’m approaching now,” she said aloud. A woman in a fur stole twisted towards her, confused at the strange woman talking to herself, but the Inquisitor barely looked over. The glare of certainty inside her eyes caused the woman to shrink and hustle into her elevator. No one was going to fuck with the Inquisitor today. Not if she had any say in it.

Her boots clipped over the marble, potentially leaving scuffs for someone to clean up later.
Though, the board and building manager were going to have much bigger problems by the time she was through. It didn’t look like much compared to the banks of elevators, recessed into the wall, the paint matched the textured stucco so it’d blend in. The only thing that gave it away, was the two armed men standing guard right next to it.

Pausing, the Inquisitor eyed them up. “Problems?” H read, as she’d be tracking her position for the entire mission. Make it a bit easier to pick up her body and dispose of it before anyone asked too many questions. Don’t think about that. Your end doesn’t matter, only the mission.

“How many?”

The Inquisitor snapped her fingers twice. It’d take her little effort to physically take them down. Whether with weapons or fists, as they wouldn’t be expecting it, but she needed to be stealthy. If anyone caught her early, they’d lock Solas away somewhere safe in a panic room.

One of the guard’s bored eyes wandered over to her. Perhaps he caught a glimmer of something familiar, or he was aware enough to recognize the set in her shoulders, but he straightened up. He reached over to his partner, about to smack into his arm, when the walkie talkies at their sides blared awake.

“Report of an alarm on floor thirty seven. All available hands are to investigate.”

“Damn it,” one of them moaned and the pair hustled off towards the freight elevators, shoving through the few workers trickling out early.

The Inquisitor waited until the doors closed on them before she smiled, “Well done, H. I didn’t even recognize your voice.”

“That wasn’t me. I just tripped a false alarm and then a few more. Figure if half the building’s lit up due to a ‘power surge’ that’ll keep everyone busy.”

She snickered at how simple it was. People didn’t tend to think their little world could end at any second. Security was a falsehood that humans needed lest everyone fall into a gibbering pile of piss. But it was a lie, as surely as anything else peddled in infomercials late at night. Death came from anywhere, and everywhere, and thinking you had control over it only doomed you to an ironic end.

“I’m guessing you can take it from here,” Harding announced over the line.

Nodding, despite no one watching her, the Inquisitor fished out a small radio frequency device. Harding had been fiddling with it for weeks, having to get it to just the right pule of numbers otherwise the system might lock down tight. Who knew what kind of failsafes a man paranoid enough to have a secret top floor would use.

Shoving the green button in, the Inquisitor twisted the diode towards the elevator and waited. There was no fancy light, no bong to tell her it was working. She was about to shut it off and switch to plan B, when the doors parted. Locking an arm tight to her bag, she ran full bore into the private elevator and slammed the door shut.

Trapped inside, the Inquisitor took a moment to look around at what a billionaire would put inside his personal elevator. There was a bench, a rather nice one with leather seats and thick padding. A small tv blared the financial news from across the way, but…that was it. There were no pointless fountains, be they of water, chocolate, or molten gold. A peacock didn’t jabber back and forth. No cigarette girls dressed in frilled panties and exposed cleavage lingered in the back.
She’d seen nicer elevators in hotels. What in the world was this man? Every time she thought she got a good grasp, it slipped through her fingers — a fact that was becoming increasingly maddening for a woman called the Inquisitor. Not the time, focus.

Sizing up the elevator, she locked the bag tight to her back. With arms dangling down, she patted twice into her thighs then leapt. First, one foot onto the bench, then the other kicking off the side of the door. That propelled her into the air, where her fingers dug tight into the emergency escape hatch. While her legs dangled below her, a good three feet off the ground, she smashed the hatch back with her fist.

The sound of it echoing inside a metallic cave reverberated from the endless hollow above her. Her arms flexing, the Inquisitor hefted herself out of the elevator and onto the top of it. She gripped onto the cable, greasing her naked fingers, and kicked the hatch back into place.

Bouncing her chin to her chest, a light lifted up into the vast expanse of space above her. Hollow like a snapped bird femur, the wires to keep the elevator in place reminded her of the nervous system flayed out of a body. It’d take her hours to climb all of this, assuming she didn’t just slip and die from a misplaced handhold.

“Harding…” she said while watching the blackness.

“This part should be easy,” the bug cooed. The Inquisitor’s stomach dropped to her feet as the black box began to rise higher through the vast emptiness of space. She kept her hands far from the cables, but remained on her feet. While sitting would be more comfortable, she didn’t want to be caught unawares for anything.

Up, and up, and up. The climb was slow, as much to keep her from falling off as anything. Closing her eyes, she mentally drew a picture of the blueprints Harding managed to sonar up. Five steps, to the right. No doubt there’d be a guard beside the door. Plug him. Turn. Solas in is office. At the desk? He seemed a desk type. Second bullet for him. Then…

Would they even leave behind a body? Sometimes the agency would use their own dead for stagings. A car accident perhaps? Something quick and gruesome to disguise all the bullet holes likely to fill her corpse.

Or would she vanish back into the ether of her birth? Would he be left wondering what the hell happened to Kristen Trevelyan and no one else? A few weeks checking scanners, following leads, only to come to accept that she was either dead or didn’t want to be found? You should have told him, given him some kind of peace before…before you walked away.

“How’s it going?” Harding’s voice cut over the line, shaking away her maudlin turn.

“Fine. We past floor twenty five?”

“Just did, in fact.”

The Inquisitor smiled smugly, she could hear that god awful music blaring from the break room. Someone heard that music was a great motivator so they’d play nothing but upbeat top 40s all day long. When you’re barely coherent and just hunting for coffee the last thing you want to be told is put a smile on your face and dance to make it all better.

“So,” H spoke again, “now that you’re facing a…you know.” Suicide run. “Got anything you want to confess?”

She growled into her cheek, her head straining back as if she could spot anything other than the
empty darkness above. “Like what?”

“F, for starters.”

“You already know what occurred, everyone does,” she grumbled that last part to herself, the sin of what she did to save him burning deeper through her soul.

“The bare minimum. There was contact between agents Fenris and Inquisitor. I want details. The good stuff. Is he a bit more rough? Maybe prone to biting? Or spanking.”

She was facing the death of a man who could wipe out entire cities of mages, as well as her own untimely demise for trying, and all Harding could ask her about was a tryst she had years ago? “It was…fine.”

“Come on, give me something. That smolder, for the love of the Maker!”

Green eyes burning tried to take over her memory, but amber kept crowding them out. A bottomless anger at the assholes who harassed a couple of men just going for a drink. How his eyes went from a full bodied brown to vengeful honey in the span of her kissing him sweetly to hurling her onto the bed. How badly she didn’t want to walk away.

“Does…” the Inquisitor coughed a moment, trying to shake the tears out of her voice. Kristen was dead, she died the moment the folder appeared on her desk. Soon enough, the body that filled in for her would be gone as well. “Does Fenris know about this mission? All the details?”

“Um,” Harding drew her voice out telling the Inquisitor that he didn’t. No one told him she was to die, because they knew he wouldn’t let it happen. Well, what’s one more man to disappoint today? “For what it’s worth, I…you’re saving a lot of people.”

“I know.” There were always a lot of people.

“And, maybe it doesn’t seem fair now but—”

“Harding,” she interrupted, her hands bunching into fists, “Stop the peptalk, I’m already on the elevator. I do my duty, I follow the mission.”

The mission is my god. It is my devotion. It is my heart.

Her nails dug in tighter to scrape away the face that flashed from her final thought. It couldn’t be much longer now. She felt as if she’d been submerged inside a diving bell for an hour, only the woosh of the air flying past reminding her she wasn’t dead yet.

“Uh…” Harding’s voice woke her from her thoughts, and she felt the rising black box start to slow.

“H…”

“It’s not me. Crap, someone’s overriding…they’re cutting the power. Fuck, Inquisitor, they’re trying to take it back down!”

“Solas?” she gasped. Had he weaseled his way down some other way? If so, this may be much easier to pull off.

Harding fell silent a moment, the clicks and clacks of a mouse the only sound save the elevator switching to a drop. “Nope, not him. Those guards are prodding around like monkeys.”

Fuck. The Inquisitor dug into her pack and unearthed the last thing she wanted to have to use.
Donning the gloves that made her stick to surfaces like a spider, she aimed the grappling hook up and fired. It could take a few goes before it found anything to grip, especially firing blind like this. But when she tugged it back, it stuck.

Tight? Tight enough to hold her body?

Only one way to find out. “I’m leaping off,” she shouted. Locking the retractable cord in, the Inquisitor gave a quick run up and hopped off the falling elevator. Her arm swung out to stick tight to the wall, while the other notched around the gun.

“I?”

Her head dipped down to between her feet, watching as the elevator vanished back into the darkness from whence it came. “So far so good,” she said. “Now to begin climbing. H, do everything you can to keep Solas in his office and anyone from calling the damn elevator and squishing me like a bug.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” she called and the Inquisitor shuddered. It was the first time she’d been given an honorific since Ostwick. All it took was her being the walking dead to get it back.

Focus. You have a lot of climbing to do.

“Harding,” she asked aloud, noticing how much reverb her voice got in the metal coffin.

“Yeah?”

The Inquisitor knotted the rope around her belt, wishing she had more than two pitons to keep her safe should she fall. With a reach, she impaled herself higher, no doubt causing anyone near the wall to panic from the sound.

“What floor am I on?”

“Uh…seventy-three. Looks like you dropped a few.”

“Great,” she shuddered, trying to slip into marathon mode for this climb. Forget that death awaits you at the top, even forget how much you want to fill Solas’ head with lead. Only live for the routine, the ritual of climbing.

“Do you want me to call out when you get to a new floor or…”?

“Just, let me do this in peace,” Kristen sighed.

Each clang of the industrial suction cup, every pull of her muscles as she lifted her body that much further against gravity, let her mind fall further away. It wouldn’t offer much to her now, anyway. What remained for her to cling to? A few victories that no one outside of the agency knew of? She couldn’t even stop the march of the mage state, try as hard as she did. Barely seventeen and trapped in the middle of a bombed out...

“Uh, I…”

“What?” her voice hissed, weary of Harding’s interruptions.

“You’re there.”

The darkness that clouded her sight snapped away. She lifted her chest in order to raise the light and spotted the only door save the one way at the bottom of the shaft. This is it. The Inquisitor ran
fast up the slick metal and jammed a piton into the drywall above. It stuck enough that she felt safe to rustle around in her bag of tricks.

Her gun banged against her knuckles, reminding her how few shots she had. There wasn’t room for more than one backup clip, not that she’d have time to change it. Still… Slipping the gun into her holster, she stuck the clip into her boot and tried to ignore it banging against her anklebone. The pain didn’t matter, it’d all be over soon.

What she really wanted fell into her hands. The Inquisitor cracked apart a dislodging device to open the damn elevator door. It suckered tight to the metal and she was about to press the button, when she drew her hand back. “Harding, any idea how many are right behind this thing?”

“No clue, but you know how it goes.”

Best guess, three. Probably all armed. Solas knew this was coming, there was no way around it. She could climb her way in, but they’d mow her down in an instant before she’d even roll inside. Time for the distraction.

“I’m dropping it,” the Inquisitor said.

“Are you certain that’s…” Harding complained, but she ignored her.

With her teeth, she ripped out the pin, and released a slow grenade down the elevator shaft. It banged into the walls on its way through the darkness, the Inquisitor spitting the pin to follow. She was a good hundred stories up, there was no chance she’d feel anything of the contained blast. Still, she clung tight to her only handholds and waited.

“There it goes,” Harding cooed, “Damn, alarms all over the building are burning. People are getting up from their desks to evacuate. How much did you put in that thing?”

Enough. She lay her head against the door listening. “Push the fucking button!” a voice cut through the metal door.

“I am! Call Frank, see what the hell’s going on.”

“Frank says there was an explosion.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Here I thought the boss was a loon. This ain’t working. Now what?”

There was one other way out of the penthouse suite. Even when wanting his privacy Solas was no fool and set up a fire exit. Impossible to hack, it was also the place most heavily guarded. Both men were no doubt facing the long climb down a hundred stories worth of stairs. After some more cursing at their predicament, they slid away from the door.

She hung there, waiting to make certain no one else would come running. No doubt Solas was surrounded by his personal bodyguards, but that wouldn’t matter. She just needed one shot, close range. No one could escape that.

“Harding,” the Inquisitor pushed on the button, the metal door coming ajar. Working her fingers into the groove, she hauled it open. “I’m going in.”

“Okay, but be sure to…” Harding’s order faded to hisses and cracks as the Inquisitor stuck her head into this foreign world in the clouds.

Blighted Hell. It was a damn garden up here. Not like the contained pots and planters of the false
skyline, flowers, herbs, grasses all mixed together in a massive trough of dirt. The air was sticky with moisture and heat, causing her to regret wearing so much body armor. The lights were turned low, but like a setting sun instead of say red to match a warning. Perhaps part of an alarm protocol, though there didn’t seem to be a lot of people running around in terror up here.

Easing a foot into place, she squeezed through the gap and landed inside this rooftop garden. The Inquisitor whipped her head to the left, where the supposed security office was. No one was running out of it, there wasn’t even any sign of life inside. Still, better to be cautious.

With a roll of her arm, she tossed a smoke grenade in through the open door. A mist of white erupted, spraying all over the walls and filling the tiny room. She crouched, her pistol aimed to take out anyone who ran gasping, but none did. Almost as if everyone was told to take the day off. This was getting stranger by the minute.

Standing up, she whipped her head towards the only gilded door in the place. A water fountain circled above it, splashing into a pair of golden antlers before returning to feed the multitude of plants. Shit, was Solas some kind of eco terrorist too? Maybe he wanted to kill all mages in order to give the land back to plants.

Or you need to stop watching horrible movies.

The door was partially shut, the man’s name honestly painted on the glass. She couldn’t make out whatever was under it, the language foreign to her. That caused the Inquisitor to pause. She’d been trained in seventeen languages, was fluent in thirteen, and this was beyond recognizable to her. What in the hell was this man?

Dead. He will be dead, because of you. Get in there and finish this.

Sucking in a breath, the Inquisitor inched closer. She could hear no voices whispering inside, no feet shuffling around. No way to tell how many people were inside waiting for her. Only one way, go in blind and pray you hit your target.

Maker, if you’re listening, please make my aim true.

Her entire body locking tight, the Inquisitor snapped up to full attention. She kicked into the door and strode fast, her arms extended to plug the first sight of a shiny dome.

The entire place was empty.

“Fuck!” she cursed to herself. “Harding?” She jammed the bug in tighter as if that might help, but all she got back was more static. “Harding, can you hear me? He’s not here, he’s… We’re screwed no matter what.” I’m dead for nothing.

The gun in her fingers started to droop as she eyed up the desk. Carved to swerve with the room, the chair was turned to the side almost as if someone leapt out of it quickly. Her eyes darted up to the window but the reflection of the computer screen was black. Then again… She padded closer through the lush carpet and lay her fingers against the computer.

Warm. Someone was here very recently. Did they escape with the other guards down the fire exit? Dangerous, that would be right into the line of attack and potential terrorists. No right thinking bodyguard would… Her head turned, trailing the far too plush carpet. Would risk his charge in such a manner. The carpet was a hunter green, all the better to blend in with the rest of the forest, but if it was stepped over the strands lay flat enough to turn it more of an olive.

A line of olive trailed from the desk right towards the wall where a great mirror hung. She didn’t
get close, well aware that they could be two-way, but the Inquisitor narrowed her eyes at the thing. Panic room maybe? Hidden behind? She could fire off a shot, shatter the glass, maybe cut through the books.

And lose her only advantage.

Twisting her head back to the desk, the Inquisitor spotted something and an idea burrowed into her head. With the gun trained on the mirror, she picked up a random stone paperweight. It felt like a hefty softball in her palm as she weighed it carefully. Getting up a run as if she was doing shot-put, Kristen hurled the stone through the glass just as she leapt through the hole.

It broke on to the other side of the hidden room only to wind up inside of the hands of a bald man who smiled a moment at the woman training a gun on him. Solas cupped the paperweight carefully in his arms as if it was his child and he smiled, “I knew better than to underestimate you.”

She heard the click of guns trained on her from both sides but she didn’t bother looking. All her focus was trained on Solas, the man who’d murder every mage remaining in the Free Marches. The man she had to kill before she’d be free.

“Let me guess, Inquisitor,” he tipped his bald head to the side, those bitter eyes chewing her up, “you’ve come to kill me.”

Her arm locked tight in place, never wavering from its instant kill shot. Locked in right next to the trigger, her finger turned to stone as she eyed him up. “Yes.”

“And it doesn’t bother you that you in turn will be shot to pieces by mine?” Solas waved to the two people she finally let her peripheral vision take in. One was that blonde woman she remembered from the press conference.

Sneering, the Inquisitor honed in on him, “I don’t fear death.”

“No, you fear something else entirely — living.”

Maker’s balls. She tried to not roll her eyes lest he slip away when she was distracted, but it was hard. He intended to moralize her, now? Shoot him. Do what you were trained to do. Kill him. End this!

Every second you waste is another where he can give you the slip. You know that.

“Doubt is a dangerous thing in your game, is it not? They train it out of you, have you bleed the missions, never question for a moment the orders given to you. Take from you your life, so you have no regrets bargaining it away in exchange for a scrap of loyalty.”

“What would you know of loyalty, you monster!” she screamed. Both bodyguards stepped closer, but Solas raised a hand to hold them off. Stupid. Did he think he was getting out of here? After how many he’d already killed. How many he could kill.

“Loyalty can be a great weapon, but the question becomes who do you turn it onto. Your enemies, or your allies?” the egg wouldn’t cease his prattle. Aware that she was stuck in a cruel limbo, he placed the rock she hurled onto a shelf behind him and folded his hands together.

Pull the fucking trigger! Why aren’t you doing it? You’ve killed for less!

But she’d never lived for anything. Damn it.
“I hoped it’d be you who they sent, rather suspected given your past,” Solas continued to drone on, but she snapped at that.

“Whatever you know of my past is a lie,” she said, certain beyond measure. No one knew it save Leliana who saved her, and the scraps she whispered to Cullen.

“Oh,” he tipped his head to the side, “child of a mage?”

Her eyes flared open wide and she took a step towards him. For a brief moment, the certainty in the man’s face flickered. He’d been playing chess and wasn’t expecting one of the rooks to get tired and turn around to smack his hand. Still, she didn’t pull the trigger even as she rounded tighter on him. But she really wanted to slap his smug, bald head a few times.

“That is why you are here, why they chose you to kill me. A mage to kill a mage. A Marcher state mage, no less.”

“I have nothing to do with that…my family wasn’t even…” her hand lashed out to grab onto Solas’ shoulder and she placed the barrel of the gun right against his polished temple. It was so fast, his bodyguards didn’t have time to react. She was barely aware, her anger driving her to move beyond reason. To claim that she or her parents were in anyway affiliated with that devil made her see red. He murdered her entire family.

“The truth matters little to one who wants to set the world on fire.”

“What the fuck are you on about?” she was tired of his games. So tired she’d almost welcome a bullet aspirin at this point. At least it’d end her suffering.

Solas began to lean towards the desk, but she followed him with the gun. “Try to refrain from firing until I show you.” Spinning a pad around, he pressed play on a video he’d already cued up. Grainy black and white footage showed the docks, that exact dock that they shot up while fleeing from the crags. Only without the mysterious cargo inside.

Why was he showing her this? To damn himself faster? To drive her more angry? She was about to ask, when the door opened and a small form walked quickly onto screen. It was hard to tell at the distance, but it glanced around quickly before pausing to show her the shock of white hair tumbling onto his hoodie.

Fenris?

The figure turned back to wave to someone and together they pushed in the crate. The very one that leaked the red toxin to turn all those men into monsters. No. That…that couldn’t be. That made no fucking sense.

“What is this?” she hissed, driving the gun tighter to his temple.

“What it appears to be.”

“Video footage can be faked,” she clung to that fact, needing it to keep her going. Fenris knew what was in that crate, he put it in there.

“Tell me, if I am this criminal mastermind who has plans to whatever one does with those monsters, why would I have stores of such a dangerous chemical in a warehouse easily traced back to me?”

She sneered, “It wasn’t. Fenris, he…” He found it. He told her he found it. He was lying. The
whole time he was lying, keeping her in the dark to put her here. To drive her so angry she’d storm up here and plug Solas without a thought.

Fuck.

“You have reviewed all of my financial dealings, rather thoroughly I’d add. Anywhere in them do you see proof that I might have financed so much biological experimentation as to completely alter the human anatomy?”

No. And it kept bugging her how no one cared that she found nothing. Why keep her in place if not to suss that out? Why ignore her lack of evidence unless…they were keeping her busy. Distracted with red herrings while they moved everything in place.

“Why?” she hissed, her fingers digging tighter into his collarbone.

“Chaos. A Marcher mage kills a well respected, very rich, very known mage in his own office. How would the world react?”

War. No, not war. They’d rip the already shredded country to pieces in an instant. So many innocent mages, men and women, parents, children, people clinging to life because that was their home. They’d bulldoze them. She’d been used this entire time without her even knowing it.

“The crags,” she hissed to herself, trying to cling to any loophole to escape this mess. “Why them?”

“How should I know? I’ve been piecing it together as best I can myself.”

“That press conference, you did it to draw me out.”

Solas tipped his head at her catching on, “Your little agency had been sticking its claws into matters that it did not belong in. I was curious. Once they involved me, I knew it was time to turn my defense into an offense. You’re not as forgettable as you think, Inquisitor.”

Her heart thundered in her chest, her cheeks burning from the anger bubbling in her veins. Lied. They all lied to her, over and over. Had it been her whole life? Was she nothing more than a pawn to bring about the destruction of her homeland?

“The question I put to you now,” Solas folded his hands as if he had all the time in the world, “is what do you intend to do?”

Kill them all. Purge the agency. Find whoever started this. Fenris? How in the Maker’s light could he turn on her? How could he hurt her?

Because you hurt him first.

“Give me the video footage,” she said. Always prepared, Solas fished it out of his pocket and placed a jump drive in her fingers.

“There’s more than just the harbor video surveillance on there, though that should be enough. And people questioned why I prefer to have both obvious and hidden cameras. Damn near paid for itself, I say. Now, Inquisitor, will you kill me?”

She weighed it in her hand a moment before slipping the drive into her pocket and quietly drew back her gun. The shift of the bodyguards drew her attention to the guns both pointed at her from the side and she sighed. “They won’t stop even if I’m dead. They want you dead, they’ll make it happen. Only I can end this, flush out whoever…whoever’s behind it and put a stop to it.”
Solas folded his arms and a hint of a smile curled up his lips, “I hoped you’d say that. I’m afraid that it’s up to you to pull that part off.”

“I know,” she gulped, her eyes closed tight. It’d be easier if they shot her dead now. Taking on the entire agency by herself? This was beyond madness.

“My guards can let you pass, but…” the man paused, causing her eyes to snap onto him. “Do you think your agency didn’t come with a contingency plan in case you failed?”

The Inquisitor lifted her head higher, her mind flitting back through a decade and a half of training. Oh, there’d already be people in the building, stashed inside as common mail clerks, secretaries, baristas. That was why they didn’t want her to know the full extent of the plan. They assumed she’d go in blind on rage and not stop for a moment to think.

They were wrong.

“Get yourself to safety,” she said. “I’ll keep them busy.”

Solas snickered a moment, “One woman against countless numbers. This should be interesting.”

She didn’t have time for his double talk, Harding was crunching the numbers. They’d assume she’d be close to killing the man, or have already accomplished it. They’d be climbing up the elevator themselves to make certain both were dead. Turning on her heel, she paused, “Don’t call the police.”

“Oh?” the not-dead billionaire raised an eyebrow at that.

“They’ll get in the way, get hurt.”

He slipped the phone away from his ear and sighed, “As you wish. Shall we?” Now Solas pointed towards a hidden ladder that led to the roof, no doubt a helicopter parked up there. He’d been waiting for her, could have escaped at any time. Put his trust in her to save not only him, but herself.

Well, she tipped her head to the side and marched towards the only way down. It was up to the Inquisitor now.

No. No, she wasn’t that. Not anymore. Not if they were going to use her to destroy millions of people. She was… That was a problem for later. For now stay alive.

Kicking open the fire exit door, she began to jog down the unending staircase. Down and down it twirled, like the demented stairs of a witch’s tower. She never felt as if she was getting anywhere, the steps unending. This was no help. By the time she got anywhere close to the bottom, it’d be swarming with people and there’d be no chance of her escape.

There was a better solution, albeit a bit bonkers. Ripping open her bag, she unearthed the grappling clamps and locked it onto the railing. Kristen leapt up onto it and stared down into the abyss. Fuck, this is stupid. She had to time it right, and before she got too far or she’d rip her arm right off.

Well, now or never.

Stepping forward, her body launched into the air. Stairs whizzed past, climbing faster and faster. To her it looked as if the staircase itself was moving while she remained static. Focus, I. Count it out.
Kicking a foot into the banister, she hurled her body towards the wall. It bounced, a lot of the force ricocheting off her legs, ankles, and knees, but she could walk. Kristen began to laugh at the absurdity of it working. Shaking it away, she yanked off the unspooled rope in her grappling hook and inserted a new one. As she peered down into the unending void, she sighed.

Only three more changes in stock. Once more into the breech.

As she flew further down the staircase, the bug in her ear suddenly burst to life. “Conflicting reports. No idea if the targets are dead or not.”

Targets, as in two, as in both should be corpses. Kristen snarled at Harding’s cold matter of fact voice as she snatched onto the staircase and rolled to safety. “If either are spotted, shoot to kill.”

Well, so much for getting her a nice tea set for the Satinalia gift exchange. Kristen unhooked her grappling rope and moved to slot the next in, when a loud gunshot ripped through the air.

Fuck! Scattering back towards the wall, she slipped the grappling gun to her left hand and armed the right with the bullet variety. The bug in her ear blared alive, “Subject spotted on emergency stairwell.”

Not a voice she recognized off hand, but clearly with the agency. They’d positioned people here in the off chance the Inquisitor did what she did best, pulled off a miracle and tried to escape. Another shot whizzed near her face, the bullet burrowing into concrete. Dust scattered like snow into her hair as Kristen shrunk deeper against the wall. Below, the agent was rushing up to take her out, firing madly like a man who wasn’t low on ammo.

Damn it. She…

Dropping both guns into her pack, Kristen closed her eyes and listened to the steps skittering towards her. His shoes squeaked like grease as he ran up the stairs, bullets striking less and less closer to her while he got right below. Hopping backwards onto the banister like it was a balance beam, she crunched down to grab the wood, then swung her legs down.

One struck gold, bouncing into the man’s arm and throwing off his aim as she landed on the stairwell below. Spinning in place, Kristen punched hard into his jaw. The uncovered head snapped back, and she was quick to follow up with a kick to his knee. Groaning in agony, the man lashed his gun towards her, but she twisted to flow with him.

An unending smash of her elbow beat against his cheeks while she rammed her back against the man. When the pair struck hard into the wall, she grabbed for the gun. Bastard was trained well and wouldn’t give up even with the wind out of his sails. No matter. Yanking the hand up, Kristen grabbed onto the trigger and filled the upper concrete ceiling with lead. Dust scattered into their eyes, both blinking against the irritant as she kept it up until the trigger clicked with an empty chamber.

“You think you can win,” the man began, foolishly letting his hand slip off the empty gun. She kept it tight, and spun around, bashing the boiling hot metal into his cheek. That sent him skittering back, a scream erupting from his throat.

“Activity on the stairwell confirmed!” the traitorous voice buzzed in her ear. She wanted to yank it out and crush the damn bug, but it was better to know their movements.

Reaching blindly behind, Kristen searched for the butt of her gun. Her fingers clasped tight to a
handle and ripped it out of the pack as she aimed it at the problem. The end of her grappling hook jabbed at the man’s gut.

Damn it!

His eyes darted to it, still steaming in tears from the burn to his cheek, but at the pathetic sight of her trying to kill with a grappling hook he started to laugh.

“I can see her!” a voice echoed up the stairs.

Well, there was one way out. Jamming the grappling hook into the man’s jaw first, which caused his body to buckle, she secured it to the landing. Kristen was about to hop off the banister, when a hand snatched onto her ankle. She moved to kick him free, when he whipped up and clung to her arm.

Not about to give up her gun under any situation, she leapt towards the wall. The man tried to follow, but in doing so the rope twisted around his throat. His eyes bulged at realizing the predicament just as Kristen leapt downward. Hands scrabbled off of her, but she kept a tight grip to him. Stairs whipped past, the man clawing and scratching her her face. She barely blinked at the attack, too focused on what was coming up.

When the voices grew closer, she pivoted her body and clung to the strangulating man. “Fuck! Is that her?” The voices shouted fast, trying to draw their guns and aim, but the pair were falling far faster with the combined wight. She had to get off quickly or she’d break a leg.

“Sorry,” she said with a tip of her head. Swinging her body, she released the hook and jabbed both thumbs into his eyes. That was enough to cause the man to let go, allowing her to sail on freely. Kristen bounced into the wall, the wind knocked out of her, while the black and blue blur of her passenger/ride fell on past.

She leaned over the edge to watch as the grappling hook reached the end of the line, but he wasn’t counting the stair levels and forgot to grab onto it. His body twisted off the rope and continued to tumble until it’d strike impenetrable concrete many more stairs below. Gritting her teeth at the sound she imagined, Kristen ran a hand over her eyes. They were certainly going to know she was in here now. No way she could pop out on the first floor.

Wait a minute. Was that…?

Drawing closer to the wall, she ignored the shouts of anger from both far above and below. Terribly poppy music assaulted her ears and she smiled. The break room was right behind there. Good thing she always brought extra grenades. Rolling it around in the sticky tack, she embedded it tightly to the wall.

Chances of anyone being in the break room at quarter to five? Nil. She closed her eyes, finger on the pin and prayed she was right. Ripping it out, Kristen hauled ass over the banister and down to the staircase below. She scrunched tight into a ball and tucked her fingers into her ears.

The explosion shattered her world, rocking the entire stairwell as if an earthquake erupted below them. Bells rang in her ears, only the throb of her still beating heart filling in between the scream of the concussive blast. No doubt Harding picked up on that and was honing them in on her location.

Hauling ass up to the hole she ripped apart into the wall, Kristen yanked out her gun. Half of a fridge lay in shrapnel tatters across the yellow and blue laminate flooring. Two of the tables were burning, while a chair shattered into the microwave that always smelled of fish. If anything she did
them a favor.

As she walked through the hole and place a proximity grenade in the way for those about to follow, her hearing snapped in. Despite the massive explosion, bleats from the tiny radio continued to tell her to “Be happy, it’s always a new sunrise.” With a cruel smirk, she smashed the butt of her gun onto the radio, shattering away the song.

The entire agency was after her. Everything she’d ever known was a lie, and her only hope to survive was a Maker damn 9mm pistol with a backup clip. But she was alive, and that counted for everything.
Clinging tight to the seatbelt strapped over his chest, Cullen cursed to himself wondering how he once again wound up in the passenger seat. It wouldn’t be so bad if it was just Samson driving. The beat was light, sending them deeper into uptown than they usually went, though traffic was proving to be a nightmare. No, the real problem getting on his nerves kept up a constant chatter from behind the gate.

“Have you killed a lot of people in your day to day life?”

Maker’s breath, give me strength. Cullen glared out the window, but he felt Samson glance over a moment. They’d been trading answering the damn man’s questions, but Cullen had enough. He’d rather suffer from being ‘not a team player’ at this point.

“Not really. Though I work traffic. Not much call to plug someone who was going twenty over, ya know,” Samson babbled. He’d been doing that since the author was led to their car and entrusted to them. While Samson blathered, and wheedled for an autograph, Cullen’s only thought was surprise at how short the man was. Barely five feet, if that. And he seemed to be out of his mind, as despite the chill of winter, he wore a shirt that cut deep enough to display practically all his chest hair to the world.

“Mr. Tethras,” Samson began, causing Cullen to fold his arms tighter and stare out the windows. They were in the financial district, which was no doubt adding to his teeth grinding. “If I may, how did you come up with the idea of Death Bus?”

The man with his arms stretched over the back seat as if he was being chauffeured by the cops, sighed, “Funny story that. Not so much funny as true. See, I was working the night shift at the MBTA, and…”

A great cacophony erupted from a building, glass spraying out the windows followed by plumes of
smoke. Cullen and Samson both sat up fast, watching as people began to run screaming out of the site. “What the hell…” Varric began, peering as close as he could get while the hardened men who’d seen far more of war than the average officer shared a look.

“That was a…”

“Shit,” Samson shook his head. “Mages? What the fuck are those terrorists doing here?”

“We don’t know if it was them or a fire.”

“Fire got that much payload?” Samson jabbed a hand towards the mess that was a good ten cars ahead. All of traffic stalled permanently while civilians ran in tears and tatters to escape. Cullen pursed his lips, uncertain how to answer. Every instinct told him it was a bomb, but there was no reason to jump to any conclusions until…”

“Hey,” Samson interrupted, “That’s the DW building.”

Cullen whipped his head up fast, peering through the sliver of gap between the windshield and ceiling until he spotted the letter lit up in white. All the blood drained from his cheeks as Samson continued, “Ain’t that where your girlfriend works?”

No.

“Judging by that silence I’m guessing it’s a yes. No chance she was off?”

His heart stalled in his chest, it was only a beat but the pain tore through his body. An explosion of that magnitude…he didn’t know which floor she worked on but if there were terrorists working through her building right now, no one was safe. Kristen…

Hefting out his firearm, Cullen tested the weight in his hand and whipped his head over at Samson, “Radio dispatch, tell them what’s occurred. I’m going in on foot.”

“Are you balmy? You’re in nothing but your blues. Who knows what the shit’s inside.”

Slamming open the car door, Cullen slid out into the street where honking reverberated against the screams of the victims. “She is,” he whispered to himself before turning back to Samson, “You heard me. And you…” he glanced back at the author who had yanked out his dreaded notebook, “remain in the car and stay out of the way no matter what.”

“Rutherford!” Samson shouted once, but Cullen slammed the door and took off running. Acrid smoke burned in his nose. He tugged up his white undershirt to try and provide some relief but it barely filtered out whatever they set off. It smelled as if a pile of electronics was set on fire.

Glass crackled on the sidewalk looking like jagged puddles after the rain. He tried to ignore the snap as he trod over it, his mind shaking at how eerily it sounded like bones breaking. People huddled together outside, gasping for breath. Cullen gestured towards the car he just left and told them to run there to safety. No doubt the ambulances would amass soon on Samson’s target.

Bloody hands tried to cling to him, but he had to step away. He had bigger problems at the moment. Gun extended first, he eased through the stripped revolving door. Only the rubber and metal frame twisted back and forth, the shattered glass stopping it from fully rotating freely. Ducking down, he stepped through the edges and eyed up a disaster area.

White smoke hung around, no doubt from concrete exploded, but it smelled off still. As if it was supposed to stink. Through the fog Cullen spotted shadows dashing back and forth, but he couldn’t
make out forms. They could be the innocent civilians caught in the crossfire, or the terrorists making another go at it. He had no way to know save announcing himself.

Raising his head, he shouted into the impenetrable fog, “This is the police!”

A few shadows turned, he could feel them eyeing him up in confusion, when a red light cut through the white mist. Fuck! Cullen threw himself to the side just as a high powered rifle fired right where he’d been. Skidding over the filthy but waxed floor, his shoulder bounced into what had been a welcoming desk and he holed up behind it.

Okay, terrorists. Got it.

He couldn’t wait long, they knew exactly where he was. Cullen checked that his safety was off one last time, said a small prayer to Andraste, and risked bobbing his head over the top of the desk. The shadows were advancing, growing more defined as they moved towards him. His heart thumped wildly as he aimed for the first even as his brain told him something was wrong. The bodies were thick in all the wrong ways, too lumpy around the arms and thighs almost as if…

_Fuck, they’re wearing body armor. And he’s in a god damn polyblend shirt. Why the hell didn’t you wait?_ A flash of brown eyes hovered in the back of his mind and he sneered at the monsters.

For her. Twisting around, Cullen aimed at the leg, perhaps his only chance to wound the less protected part. Center of mass would do him no good now. He moved to fire, when another figure advanced fast out of the mist. It caught him so off guard, he gulped a moment and twisted to try and shoot at it. But the figure wasn’t coming for him. It slipped something around the first man’s throat and tugged hard. The second terrorist turned, catching on that his fellow was in trouble, but the attacker was smart and stayed hidden behind.

While trying to aim his gun back to shoot whoever was garroting him, the attacker suddenly popped a hand over the dying man’s shoulder and fired point blank at the second man’s hand. Blood erupted out of the mist, spraying over the walls as his gun clattered to the ground. Dashing forward, the hero kicked hard into the rifle to send it flying, but didn’t outright kill the terrorists. As the first tumbled to the ground, with oxygen deprivation, the hero kicked a hard boot into the second’s jaw and sent him down as well.

Which was when the fog cleared enough that Cullen noticed the more shapely figure sliding and dodging amongst the padded men. A woman? She wiped a hand over her face and eyed up the door. With freedom so close, she began to jog towards it and out of the white mist.

It was his addled mind. His concern manifesting itself. Hope, or maybe he’d breathed in too many fumes. But he could swear that woman who just took down two armed and armored men like she was picking up a pizza was the spitting image of Kristen. No. That’s…no. How could she possibly…?

Glass crunched, drawing him out of his stupor as he whipped his head towards a new terrorist to enter the fray. She’d been running so fast she didn’t have time to slow down or pivot. Time slowed as the man eyed her up and fired right at her chest. Her entire body flew backwards into the bloody glass on the floor.

“No!” Cullen screamed, popping up out of his hidey hole. His eyes burned into the still form stretched over the floor, completely forgetting the man that shot her in cold blood. He moved to aim his gun at the man, when he caught the already still smoking barrel focused on his head. A shot reverberated through the marble hall and Cullen blinked, knowing he hadn’t fired a thing.
There was no pain in his head. Nothing in his body, save the glass crunching into his shins. What…?

Like felling a tree, the murderer splattered face first onto the ground — his blood fanning out into the grooves of the tile. “Fuck that hurts,” a voice rang out and Cullen’s blood ran cold while his heart resumed beating.

Kristen, for there was no doubt it was her, staggered up from where she’d not quite fallen dead. Her fingers reached towards the middle of her chest where the bullet should have broken through, while the fired gun began to droop towards the ground. It was in that moment that she looked up and right into Cullen’s beyond confused eyes. Her jaw fell open, and she blinked rapidly as if the worst part of her day was seeing him and not being shot.

“What in the…?” Cullen began to shout when rapid gunfire broke from whatever hellscape she fled out of. Running faster than a sprinter, Kristen leapt towards the desk he took refuge behind. She flew through the air like a panther and curled up into a ball, her back sliding against the wood as she cradled her gun tight to her chest.

“Damn it,” she cursed to herself while peering back at the three new assailants that all marched out of the fog.

“Kristen?” he begged, hoping this was all some horrible fever dream.

Her eyes darted over to him and by the unending guilt buried inside of them, Cullen knew that this was no nightmare. “Not now, survive. Then…yeah. I’ll explain,” she spat out fast as if she’d been in these kind of situations before. Dozens of times before.

Popping her head over the counter quick, she got a quick count of the men. “Three. Fanning out into typical 3, 6, and 9 pattern.”

It took Cullen a moment to realize she was giving him battle instructions. What the fuck was going on? She crunched numbers and got coffee, not… His girlfriend was some kind of warrior like out of an old cheesy action flick? No. Not.

A hand landed on his arm and squeezed tight. “They’re going to flank us. Take the right.” His eyes fell into hers a moment and dumbly he nodded. Certain that he got his orders, she began to slide further along the desk, planning to take out the bastard. Cullen’s sight drifted down to his sleeve and the crimson handprint she left on him. Whose blood was it? There seemed to be a multitude of options at this point.

Focus. There’s armed assailants. Deal with that…whatever all that was later. Swallowing down the bile rising in his gullet, Cullen listened for the crunch of boots over glass. The floor was littered in the shit, there was no way they could walk without cracking it. As each step drew closer he clung tighter to the grip of his gun. This is madness. This is beyond sanity. He had to get close to stand a ghost of a chance and…

Glass crackled right beside him. Cullen shot up on his knees, the barrel of his gun sliding up over the pitted remains of a computer screen until it aimed right at the black helmet. He squeezed the trigger, the bullet bounding fast and at point blank range, but the man was in the middle of moving. It grazed past him, barely denting the thick armor.

Shit. He tried to trail his target and fire another round, when the man’s armored hand lashed onto Cullen’s and crushed into his fingers. Aware of the other gun at play, Cullen let go of his only weapon and slid back fast. He skittered down the back of the desk, trying to tug off computer
monitors to cover is escape. But he was too big for that to work.

The man in black took his time, the rifle easily trailing to follow the disarmed cop who could feel his meager sands of time slipping away. Cullen gritted his teeth, out of ideas, when a hand latched onto his shoulder. He felt himself tumbling backwards as the shot rang out. A great weight landed upon him and he heard the other man fall at the end of the desk.

Kristen’s legs wrapped around his shoulders as she struggled to lift herself off from where she dived to take the shot and save him. “There’s more,” Cullen began, reaching to help her up, when something hot and sticky coated his palm.

“Fuck!”

He hauled her up, Kristen gasping in pain as blood burbled out of a hole in her shoulder. “You’re shot,” he gasped, eyeing up the damage while his heart jumped in his throat.

Her entire face was twisted in pain as her left arm hung down, the blood dripping onto it like a macabre rain. She didn’t say anything about her wound, just eyed it up a moment before sneering, “Fine.”

Cullen wasn’t certain what that meant, but as if she hadn’t even been injured, Kristen popped up over the barricade. Bam, her gun fired, one of the terrorist’s heads snapping back. Bam, it went again, the last crumpling into a heap. Two head shots in a row, dead center without more than a millisecond to aim and while she was wounded.

Who the hell was she?

“Come on,” she gasped. Kristen laid her gun down quick and, with her right hand, jammed her left over the bleeding wound. Picking back up the gun, she said, “we have to get out of here.”

“But…”

“There are more coming and they will kill you,” she hissed with such certainty, Cullen rose immediately. Not leaning into him, not turning to him for help, she began to jog towards the back entrance and away from the glass doors. He kept tight on her heel, wanting to ask a million questions while also terrified of the answer. Whatever explanation she could give as to why she was armed and capable of such tactics could not suffice.

Anger burbled in his gut, but as they dashed outside into the back parking garage, Cullen didn’t have time to fully digest it. The feeling was left to linger as she slapped into him with her bloody hand and jabbed towards a car. It screamed fancy, modern, sleek. No doubt some executive’s bonus that shined even in the dim parking garage lights.

Kristen swung around her pack and hefted out someone’s phone. It didn’t look like hers, which had a pink backing, but she jabbed at a couple of numbers quickly. To Cullen’s amazement, the car doors popped open. She moved to slip into the driver’s side, when he grabbed onto her shoulder. Eyes burned into him, but he wouldn’t let go.

“I’ll drive,” he said. Her lips opened to begin to argue, when he sighed, “You’re injured.”

She folded a fist around the butt of her gun, but let it fall slack. “Fine,” she gave in, dashing towards the passenger side. Gulping, and trying to not think he was actively committing a felony, Cullen slid into the driver’s side of someone else’s car. A million buttons glowed a haunting blue. Even the damn airbag inside the steering wheel hummed in the same neon sea as if to try and soothe away the ache growing in his jaw.
Kristen slammed her door shut and kept prodding at her other phone. Turning his head to her, Cullen said, “Let me guess, you also know how to hot wire cars?” Whoever, whatever you are.

“Don’t need to,” she jammed her finger down and the car’s engine sputtered to life. “Maker but I love keyless ignition, easiest damn thing to hack. Okay, pull out nice and slow, and get us as far from the damn building as possible.”

Seemed an easy task, Cullen slipping the car into reverse as it began to descend down the parking lot ramp and onto a fairly cleared street. As it struck a bump, the radio suddenly erupted and Maker awful music burst into their eardrums. Kristen sprung forward, her fingers swatting at the control panel to find anything to shut it up. Her own blood smeared along the way, no doubt dooming herself whenever the car was found.

He should turn her in himself. She’d…killed quite a lot of people right in front of him. It was in self defense sure, but… How in the love of Andraste did she do that? Do any of this?

As the music cut away, Kristen let her left hand fall off her shoulder and she winced. Digging into her magic pack again, Cullen gripped tighter to the wheel. In the distance he heard sirens ramping up closer, a flash of reds and blues rolling off the soulless windows. “What are you looking for?” he asked, worried about what might appear next. Would she hold the gun on him? Threaten him next?

“Tampon,” Kristen threw out with a shrug. “Ah!” she cried while lifting a pastel pink wrapper encased tube of cotton. Shredding it apart with her teeth, she tugged down the edge of her sweater and hissed. Cullen risked turning away from the road of stopped traffic to look.

Metal shards were embedded deep inside her skin, the glint of which turned crimson as more and more of her blood kept pouring free. With her nails, she tried to pick a few off, but there was so much shrapnel she didn’t stand a chance. Best to cut off the bleeding and… Digging her hand into the bent over console between them, Kristen jammed the wad of cotton straight into her bullet hole. It bloomed fast, like an unfurling red rose as it absorbed her blood.

“Fuuuck!” she hissed, her eyes screwed up tight. As her breath began to slow, her fingers unleashed off the console. She risked a peek over at the man doing his best to not watch. “Not gonna ask about the tampon?”

“I was in the war. We’d use them on occasion.”

“Right,” she winced as if she should have already known that. As if…

“Who the hell are you?” Cullen sputtered, forgetting to signal as he whipped the car to the right. He had no idea where to go. The police station? The hospital? The loony bin to check himself in because he had to be imagining this all?

Her free hand clutched around the butt of her gun, though her finger stayed far off the trigger as she thought. Eyes closed, she kept breathing a bit longer as if she was having trouble getting enough oxygen into her lungs. “I’m…” Kristen turned to him, when her eyes bugged out.

Snatching onto the rearview mirror, she spun it around and hissed. “Fuck, they found us.” Cocking her gun, she inspected the chamber and groaned. “Two bullets, fantastic.”

“Who’s found us?” He tried to follow her line of sight, but all he saw were more average cars behind.

“Go left,” her hand lashed out, yanking the steering wheel to her whims. A loud blaring honk
erupted from the man they cut off, as well as a finger, but their stolen vehicle went twisting down a backroad.

“Who are they? Who are you? What is going on?!”

“Now?” she whipped her head over at him, “You want to do this now?”

He let go of the steering wheel a moment to raise up both hands in a shrug. Far as he knew, she was imagining anyone tailing him. This entire thing was beyond comprehension and…

A gunshot burst through the air behind them. Kristen’s arm lashed out as she ducked his head down, but whoever was firing fully missed. When Cullen sat up, he caught what was clearly two men in nondescript suits sitting inside a black car, one of which was well armed. Blessed Andraste, this was real. This was actually happening.

Unaware of his panic, Kristen rolled down the window beside her. She risked leaning out far enough to try and get a shot in. “Firing,” she said as if out of habit. “Fuck!” Whatever she was aiming at must have missed as the car tailing them sped up. “Go right!”

“What? Now?” Cullen glanced down at the rising odometer, but once again she reached over to yank on the wheel. “Maker, damn it!” he cursed, doing his best to slam on the brakes as she spun the car out of his control. Amazingly, it swerved out of the backroad onto a highway. Cars blared their horns at the sudden appearance but no one slammed into them.

“Stop doing that!” he cried, his heart lodged in his throat as he slammed down on the accelerator. Blue numbers whizzed past as they grew from 40 to 60 to 80.

“I wouldn’t yank the wheel if you’d listen to me,” Kristen hissed. She kept swiveling the mirrors around, cutting Cullen off from getting any idea what was going on behind them.

“Do you want to drive?” he shouted.

“Yes,” she exasperated, her head pivoting to him, when a car came barreling at them from the side. “Break!” she screamed, her foot slamming onto the pedal along with his. Smoke erupted from the tires, practically blanketing the car in black fog, but the car that tried to take them out when sailing on past. The driver wasn’t as skilled as it struck the median, flew into the air, and crashed into oncoming traffic.

“Go, go, go!” Kristen ordered, forgetting or not caring that they probably stripped the tires in that move. “There’s another still behind us.”

“Another who? And for the love of Andraste, stop telling me to go!”

“Have you ever escaped a car chase before?” she snapped at him, all her focus on the mirrors. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Cullen blanched a moment as he realized that his girlfriend was an expert at getting out of car chases. Not only that, she could kill a man dead without blinking. Jamming his foot onto the accelerator and getting this damn sports car up to 110 mph, he let his eyes wander over to her.

“Who are you? Who’s chasing us?”

“I’m…a secret agent.”

He laughed once, his throat raw at the idiotic thought. “A secret agent, like in all those horrible spy
movies. You?”

She tipped her head to the side, “Contrary to what the media wants you think, being drop dead gorgeous is a bit counterproductive when you don’t want everyone to know you’re a spy. It’s the plain people others fail to notice.”

Her brown eyes burned in his as if his laughter stung her, but Cullen was beyond reproach now. He didn’t care if he hurt her feelings. They were seconds from either being riddled with bullets or slammed off the road. “So that’s why you can…”

“Fire a gun, garrote a man, leap down stairs like an acrobat, and this,” Kristen cracked open the door. With her bad hand gripping tight to the seatbelt, she leaned out.

Cullen tried to reach for her, screaming, “What the hell are you doing?”

It took a breath as she aimed her pistol before she fired off one round. The bullet found its mark as sparks, then full on fire and smoke broke from behind him. Grunting, she drug her ass back into the car and slammed the door. She barely blinked while changing the clip on her gun.

“Who are you?” he hissed again.

“I told you…”

“You lied to me. You pretended to be this…” average forgettable pencil pusher. A no one. Someone who blended into the background. Cullen screwed his eyes up, turning the tears of frustration into anger. “What in the void is going on?”

“I was on a mission, it went bad. Very bad,” she turned inward a moment as her brow stormed. “But I have to get away. I’m sorry, you were never supposed to…”

“Know?” he tipped his head at her and she gasped as if he kicked her in the stomach.

“To be involved,” she said instead as if that was so much better. “Look, just…” her eyes swiveled back and she cursed, “Damn it! Take that exit, now!”

This time Cullen didn’t question her, just whipped the car straight down a ramp. A 25 mph sign went flying by while the car was doing 100 over that. Fuck, fuck, fuck! His heavy foot burned into the brakes, but there was no chance. Kristen lashed onto the wheel too, both pulling it as far as possible as their car began to drift into the turn.

Centripetal forces smashed into him, trying to yank his body into the window. Kristen lost the fight, her wounded shoulder bashing into his and dislodging the saturated tampon. It tumbled into the executive’s car and vanished under the seats. “Aaahhh!” both screamed, clinging tight to each other, when the road began to even out.

Cullen could barely see after that, but she took over instantly. Yanking the wheel to the left, Kristen rammed down on the pedal and drove straight across five lanes of traffic. Her eyes hunted over both the road ahead, behind, and to the side. Suddenly, she pulled it to the right and ordered, “Shut the car off.”

“What?”

“Do it!”

Cullen reached for the keys before remembering she was in control with her magic phone and its
hacking skills. His eyes darted over to this stranger beside him and she sighed. Reaching over she jabbed at a button on the steering wheel and the car fell silent.

“What do we…?” he asked, when she grabbed onto his neck and tugged him down with her.

“Don’t talk, don’t think. Don’t exist,” she whispered as if that made any damn sense.

Her breath smelt of copper, as if she’d been swallowing back her own blood to keep going. Even with his eyes burning red in anger, Cullen cupped a hand against her oozing shoulder in order to squelch the wound. She sniffled a moment, a hand swinging around the back of his neck. No doubt it was to keep him down, but in doing so their foreheads bumped together.

They sat like that for what felt like a half hour, Kristen bleeding into his palm while the cars in whatever part of the city they were now in wooshed on by. “Okay,” she sat up slowly, her eyes screwed up tight as she was no doubt fighting down the pain. “Okay, we can go.”

Cullen moved to jab back on the car, when he paused and let both his hands flop to his lap. “No, you’re going to tell me everything.”

“Look, I…I will. I promise, but if I don’t get this stitched up soon you’re gonna have a corpse to interrogate.” She said it with a shrug and laugh but Cullen’s eyes whipped over to her pale lips.

Fuck. Even with a million questions and just as many shattered lies hanging on her head, he didn’t want her to die. “Okay, I’ll get you to a hospital.”

“No,” she gasped, shaking her head while wadding her fist to the wound. Jabbing at the phone he remembered her having, she shouted, “Driving instructions to safe house alpha, random pattern.”

The phone politely beeped awake and told him to go right in ten feet. Cullen sneered, “You need a doctor.”

“They will be looking in every hospital. They will kill me before I even fill out my insurance. This is the only chance I have.”

He was driving a stolen car with a bleeding woman inside to an unknown location and he had nothing to go on but faith. Trust in a woman who’d lied to him exclusively for three months. Her grasping hand coated in dried blood lashed out. Cullen halfway expected it to yank on the wheel again, but she curled it against his fingers.

“Please,” her voice whimpered.

Cullen started up the car.
It's my birthday, and Space_aged surprised me with a comic version of a scene from Miracle with Alistair, Reiss, and baby Myra.
Too late...

Sorry...

Seems this one's anti-water

Mmm, I could have told you that.

Oh, you are going to be fun when you're a toddler...

Mom is handling your baths then.

Last I remember, you two were going for a little look around the castle.

We did, isn't that right, wheaters?

What part of walking around suddenly requires a bath late at night?

There were a few complications...

Where are the cute pajamas?

You know... of the daddy gets hungry, snatches up something one-handed while the baby's in the other.

Second drawer to the left, what complications?

Goes to rock her and then has it dribble on her face variety.
Gravy or jam?

Gravy, good guess.

It's what I do.

Spuddy loved these as an infant.

Who's a happy wheaty?

It's you!

I bet you will too.
One arm wrapped around her waist, Cullen helped her waning body along a rotting hallway towards the door her phone insisted was safety. He was less than impressed. “This is not exactly filling me with confidence,” he whispered while watching a pair of rats gnawing through the drywall.

The woman he barely knew chuckled a moment. She was cold, her skin turning a deathly pale yellow, but she clung to life as if nothing could shake her from it. Maker, please don’t let her die. Not until he got some damn answers for once.

They wound up outside of the city, a good half hour trip to some small town that ran on meth and not much else. He feared she’d instruct him to pull over into a sleazy motel so she could do the surgery on herself, but it was a dilapidated apartment building instead. Cullen tried to look on the bright side of things, but every inch of this place was coated in grime.

“Here,” she said, lifting her head a bit and trying to reach for the door.

“I’ll do it,” he insisted, unable to stop running to her rescue. Knocking twice on the door, he scooped his hands back under her stomach to keep her upright. It had to be his imagination but he could swear he spotted a smirk from the half dead woman in his arms.

The sound of a hatch being slid open was followed by a voice shouting, “Don’t know what you’re
here for, but I’m not interested. Bugger off.” Very clearly the little door over the peephole slammed shut and footsteps bounded away from the door.

Growling, Cullen knocked again, with far more force than before. “Open up,” he shouted, “this is the…” Fuck, there was no better way to send the cockroaches scattering under the counters than to say he was a cop.

“The who? The soul day ghoul? The Satinalia Fairy? You’re a bit big to fly around on gossamer wings,” the voice continued to mock him through the door. “Don’t care who you are, no one’s allowed entrance. It’s the rules.”

“Maker, damn it!” Cullen felt the vein in his forehead throb, “Open up, I have a dying…"

“Anders,” she spoke softly, “it’s me.”

The chains drew back instantly, locks parting until the door drew inward. Taking a deep breath, Cullen helped to guide her into this stranger’s home. Maker save him if it smelled of feces and death he would march her out of here and right to the first proper hospital he could find. The first scent to strike him actually was…cake? Had the man been baking? Ah, there was the acidic cat piss. And…

Cullen twisted his head to eye up this only hope and guaranteed to be thorn in his side. The man was lean, with eyes that cut through the air as if they’d seen all the horrors thedas could offer. Dishwater blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and a pile of feathers rested on his shoulders. “Anders…” Cullen repeated the name she said, glancing towards the woman about to faint again.

“You a cop?” the man skittered back on his boots, his frame looking sicklier under the thick coat and bandages. The whetstone eyes darted over Cullen’s uniform, but he seemed uncertain if it was real or not.

“I’m…” Cullen began, when a new voice piped up.

“You shall never take another mage as you took him!”

“Maker’s blighted sake, Justice. Shut up!” Anders turned away, his eyes wide as he spun towards a pile of blue feathers resting on top of the doorframe.

He hefted up a book and moved to hurl it at the parrot, but it squawked, “Justice for the mages,” and flew off to a perch by the window.

“Bloody things, who knew they lived for like 70 years? Stuck with it for life because of one dumb choice,” the man muttered to himself while he chewed hard on the end of a candy cane. Cullen smiled internally at that, the first trait of this man that didn’t throw him for a loop. He must be working to overcome his smoking habit.

The man’s wild eyes drifted from Cullen down to the woman in his arms. “Well, Inquisitor,” Anders slid in — and despite looking reedy and strung out — scooped Kristen up. She smiled at him a moment. “I see you got yourself into a bind again.”

“Just a little thing, shouldn’t be much,” she coughed.

“Oh huh,” he reached over and grabbed onto her lip. Cullen moved to swat his hand away, when the man lifted it up and inspected her gums. “Lost quite a bit of blood. How much lead is in you?”
“Not too much, one shot. Maybe some kevlar too.”

“Maybe?” Anders scoffed.

“Are you one of them!!” cried from the window and Anders rolled his eyes towards the damn bird. Hefting the woman tighter in his arms, the stranger began to walk her towards a back room. While the apartment was less filthy than Cullen expected, there was no damn way someone could be operated on in here and not suffer serious infection. As mad as he was at this stranger that lied to him for three months, he wasn’t about to let her die of sepsis.

“Kristen,” he reached towards her, concern rising. Anders twisted his blonde head around and eyed him up at that, but Cullen ignored him. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

“Why? Here’s fine,” she laughed as if he was speaking gibberish.

“No, here is not fine. It’s not sanitary, it can…” Cullen’s thoughts fell dead as the three of them approached a set of plastic sheeting in a doorway, with a single slice down the middle. Anders walked Kristen through first, but Cullen was fast on their heels as his jaw fell through the floor, the tiled and sparkling floor that smelled of antiseptic and bleach.

Everything was covered in easily scrubbed down tile that gleamed brighter than an operating room in a tv hospital. In fact, the man had an operating table centered right in the middle, which was where he led Kristen to sit down on. Anders was quick to wash off his hands in a deep sink and slip on a plastic smock.

“What in the…?” Cullen stared at the stainless steel counters that belonged anywhere but this hell hole, while Anders smirked.

“So,” Anders quickly snipped an entire section away, exposing not only her shoulder but her bra. Cullen tried to not bristle at a strange man who yelled at a parrot disrobing his… She’s not your girlfriend. You don’t know who she is.

Stumbling back towards the plastic sheeting of the door, Cullen rubbed a hand into his forehead. Why the hell was he here? Why’d he risk his life, his career for this lying woman?

The sound of metal dropping into a bucket whipped his head up. He watched as Anders, using a pair of forceps, tried to excise all of the kevlar dug into Kristen’s shoulder. “How’d you get shot this time?” he asked at her as if they were chewing the fat at a barber shop.

This time? She’s a spy, or secret agent if there’s a damn difference. She’s probably been shot at more than you. Maker. That thought sobered Cullen.

“Too many,” Kristen said, trying to wave it all away, “can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Uh huh,” Anders sighed, more plinks of the shredded vest falling away. “Says the woman I once watched take down an entire battalion as if she was sneezing.”

“She took a bullet for me,” Cullen said, his lips flapping without his control. Almost as if his brain was trying to tell him why he was risking so much for no discernible reason.
Anders paused in his doctoring and his wild eyes narrowed, “Did she now?”

“Leapt in front of me,” he continued, needing to get it all out. “Probably saved my life.”

“Well, that’s interesting,” the man who knew who she was, who knew what she was, turned to her and Kristen grimaced. What was wrong with the truth? Was she that allergic to it?

“I thought my vest would stop it,” she explained with a wince that had nothing do with the slug in her arm. ‘Forgot it already took one and wasn’t much use anymore.”

“Right,” Anders nodded his head, clearly not buying it, “you forgot. You forgot in the heat of battle.” She glared at him, no words leaving her drained lips, but the anger was obvious. Cullen just wished he knew why.

After a few more silent pings of the kevlar, Anders rose up from his work and sighed. “Pig,” he said with a jerk of his head at him, causing Cullen to groan, “either scrub up or go wait outside. I have to dig into her arm and…I’d rather keep things sanitary in here.”

He didn’t want to spend anymore time around this miscreant than was necessary, but… His eyes darted over to the woman with a gaping hole in her skin. Muscle and tissue pulsed through where he’d pressed his lips, cupped his palm, or nestled his head once before. One part of him did not want to leave her, to have her face this alone.

The part she fooled and tricked into falling for her.

Cullen snarled and stomped out towards the living room.

“Nice meeting you too,” Anders called behind him. As Cullen glanced around the dated furniture, his eyes glazing over a tv turned to daytime courtroom drama, he sighed. What the hell did you get yourself into, Rutherford?

The sound of a machine roaring awake echoed from the surgery room and he grimaced. With a set in his jaw, he plunged onto the couch and waited for a woman he didn’t know at all to make it out alive.

A yellow beak whipped towards him and shouted, “Death to the templars!”

It didn’t take as long as he feared, just a few rounds of ‘That asshole stole my bike/grass clippings/pile of recordings of a Very Nug Satinalia’ on tv. Cullen was aware of the proceedings the way a landscaper is the lawn mower. On occasion he’d glance up if there was a weird noise or a jangling sound, but for the most part he was too busy stewing.

He’d moved from rage at Kristen lying to him, to anger at himself for falling for it. All that filled his heart at the moment was the unending burn of anger, but he could feel the other one lurking deep in the depths of his brain. Despair was going to have its field day too before this was over. How Maker damn stupid was he? To think that she’d…that any woman would want to be with him for him. To put up with him because she wanted to and not because…

Shit, why was a secret agent with him? He kept going over all of their conversations, but they seemed innocuous. Even when he talked work, it was vague and she never pressed for details.
Almost as if she didn’t need to know. What could she have wanted from him?

“There we go,” Anders called while stepping out of the plastic sheeting. Cullen staggered to his feet when he caught sight of the blood stain down the man’s green smock. “What?” he sputtered before glancing down. “Got to crack a few eggs to make an omelette,” he said with a shrug.

“Where in the void is she?” Cullen stomped closer, a hand lashing out for him, when the plastic parted again.

Her skin was still pallid as death, but a great bandage was slapped over the shoulder wound nearly covering her up. Cullen winced at the pain in her face, which she was obviously trying to hide away. “Here,” Kristen, or whoever she was, called with a wave of her fingers.

“See, alive. Not that there was any chance of her dying and…oh great, the pig’s grinding his jaw. Am I going to have my ass tazed and hurled to the ground?”

She turned to the whining man and chuckled, “Depends. Is it Saturday?”

“Oh ho, that’s our dear Inquisitor, so damn funny,” he folded his arms over his bloodied chest but didn’t seem to be in the mood to clean any of it up.

Cullen took a breath, and all the venom that’d been building in his veins spat onto her, “You said you’d talk if you lived.”

She winced at the clear vitriol, “I did. Where do you want to begin?”

“Who the hell is he?” Cullen jabbed a finger at the man. It was the least pressing question on his docket, but the easiest to voice. The man mattered little to him, it was having her tell him that he’d been nothing more than a job that had Cullen terrified to delve into the real meat.

“Anders?” she twisted her entire torso to look and grimaced. “A doctor.”

“A mage doctor, whom she was kind enough to rescue and…”

“Stop,” she insisted while hefting up her hand. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

He eyed her up, then the fuming Cullen. “All right. Not as if it’s my apartment or anything.” He whistled at his bird, which flit through the air and perched on his shoulder. Before turning back towards the surgery room, Anders added, “And I’d avoid any sexual relations for a few days. You’re still down a couple pints.”

Kristen’s entire body winced at that jibe and she began to tip forward. Instinctively, Cullen lashed out with his hands to catch her. It felt strange to cradle her body again. As if it was so familiar but also so wrong. He tried to shake away the thought while helping her to the couch.

As she tipped her head back to the cushions, eyes closed, her weary voice whispered, “What do you really want to ask?”

“What’s your name? Your real one.”

She snorted a moment, a trembling hand glancing over her breast, “Inquisitor.”

“I get that’s your title in whatever agency you work for…”

“The Inquisition, that’s the agency. But no, I’m not as important as you might think.”
Cullen snorted and shook his head. “The Inquisition? That’s a my—”

“A myth?” she sat up a bit at that. “Yes, that is precisely how we want everyone to view it. Had wanted everyone to. I…” A shudder trembled her chest as she sucked down a breath. “The Inquisition is real, its mission is to preserve life, to keep maniacs from setting all of thedas on fire, often at any cost.”

He’d heard mention on occasion, barely whispers in tiny villages of a member of this fabled Inquisition slipping by. Helping with some matter. Borrowing a vehicle. But everyone in the army chopped it up to tales. People liked to think there was someone looking out for them, so why not a fairy agency.

“You’re an Inquisitor…” Cullen began.

“No, I’m the…was the Inquisitor.”

He didn’t fucking care where she fell in some mythical agencies hierarchy. “What’s your name?”

He just had to know, he sure as shit didn’t want to call her Kristen anymore. That name meant nothing. Nothing at all.

“Inquisitor,” she insisted. “There is no other name. Whoever I was before, whatever I was is long gone. This is all I am, all I have been…for 16 years.”

That caused him to lean back a moment. While she may look younger than her real age, there was no way she was much past thirty three or four. How could she have been serving for that long? To be nothing but a secret agent to some shadowy organization for over a decade and a half? It was madness.

She twisted forward until her hands landed in her lap. “You’re wondering why we’re here, in Sky City of all places. Or perhaps you know.” Her eyes that’d entranced him so seemed to be pleading for understanding while also burning through him.

He knew? He didn’t know a damn… “Those rock creatures.”

“We call them crags. I know, horrible name. I was working under the intel that they were created by Solas. He had concocted some gas that when inhaled could turn a person into that nearly unstoppable rage machine.”

“Blessed Andraste,” Cullen gasped, a hand rifling through his hair. He felt his legs start to wobble as if he needed to sit, but the only spot was right beside her. “How?”

“No idea. I was…given the bare minimum of information.” She snorted a moment and sneered, “No, I was fed deceiving information so I’d arrive at the wrong conclusion. And, like a fool, I swallowed it. I thought I had to play along, to be the good little agent and not ask questions even when I knew it was…”

The wrath at herself faded and she bunched her head back against the couch. A fried cheese smell erupted out of the cushions when she did, causing Kristen to shudder a moment. “I am sorry,” she whispered a moment. No apology would be enough, but…Maker take him, it was nice to know she at least regretted lying.

Her eyes rolled over to him and she grimaced, “For pulling you into this.”

Oh, that was it. She regretted that he happened to leap to her aid, that he was now a liability for her plans and whatever was going on. Cullen slapped a hand into his thigh and snarled. A thousand
curses backed up in his throat, all of which he wanted to unleash upon her like a plague. In his state, it’d come out like an incoherent scream. Instead, he stomped towards the door as if he was about to leave.

That caught her full attention and now he spotted it. How her legs tensed, her arms locked in tight — she was a cheetah ready to rip off the line at a moment’s notice. “Are you going to tell me what’s really going on or…?” He didn’t reach for the door, but he wanted to yank it open and flee into the night. Forget every fucking moment with her.

Even the good ones.

Like the smell of her hair scattered over his chest after they both stumbled out of a shower. Or the laugh that’d escape from her lips like a horse whinny while he grinned from his pasta bowl.

Gone, all of it. Without a second thought.

“Oh, I didn’t sit as she began to tell him of the agency itself, though her reasons for being both important and not made no sense. She moved on to a few matters, explaining Solas more. When she began to describe her fighting the crags, Cullen snapped his fingers and cried, “You were there at the harbor!”

“Yes,” she nodded a moment, “it was where I watched the gas twist five men into crags. I… I shouldn’t have abandoned my post. Let them escape in order to…”

“That car driving over the fence,” he continued on as if listing her rap sheet. As if it would matter. If she was really with the Inquisition, if that was really real, there was no way a thing would stick to her. It’d be like trying to duct tape a ghost to the wall.

She shrugged, “I’m good at driving.”

“You lied.”

“Technically,” she began but Cullen slapped a hand hard into his palm.

“A lie of omission is still a lie!”

“You think I don’t know that?” Kristen struggled up to her legs, needing to glare him in the eyes, “I was the one to fucking tell you.”

“Right, I remember well, lording over me that you knew something I didn’t.”

“That wasn’t why I…” a string of curses in another language sputtered from her lips. “Do you think I enjoyed the lies?” Her voice sounded more bloody than her shoulder and he winced a bit. “That there weren’t times I didn’t want to tell you? Ache to… I know it doesn’t matter because I didn’t.”

“Why?” Cullen snorted, “If you so badly wanted to tell me you were a ‘secret agent,’ why didn’t you do it?”

“Well, the way you put quotes around secret agent is one reason for starters,” she groaned. “It was a risk, beyond a risk, it was the nuclear option. If I told you anything about the organization, who is in it, how it works, that it’s even real, they’d find out. They’d…find some way to silence you.”
That wasn’t the right answer. His hands locked tight into fists, Cullen trying to dig the anger out through his fingernails. “You lied for my sake? To protect me?” he laughed, his voice rising dangerously high in his anger.

“No!” she screamed, tears burning in her eyes. “I did it to protect me!”

He didn’t expect that. Cullen’s fists loosened, the palms tapping into his uniform pants a moment as he struggled for a breath.

“I thought I could…it wasn’t supposed to happen. Go back, return to the agent I’d been before, but…” her hand thudded into her thigh and she groaned, “Everything’s fucked up and I’m…I’m the only one who can fix it.”

Maker take him, but even now he felt the urge to leap towards her. To swaddle her safe in his embrace and promise things would be okay. His cursed heart was still ensnared in the lies, but the rage kept it locked tight in his chest. “Why me?” he whispered a moment. “Why target me? Why…sleep with me for months on end if it was all about Solas and his monsters?”

She smirked a moment a hand digging into her cheek, “I doubt you’d believe me.”

“So this is where you refuse to tell the truth,” Cullen sneered, marching back towards the door.

“No, but…what are you doing?” her voice lifted as he unearthed his phone out of his pocket. No more. Even the promise of the truth was a lie, as he suspected. He’d given her enough rope, he wanted out.

“Calling the station to pick me up,” Cullen began when Kristen launched forward and battered the phone out of his hands.

He gripped onto her wrist, worried she’d swipe at him next, but her body began to sink to the floor. Even while groaning at the pain, she shot out, “You can’t do that!”

“Why?”

“It will lead them right here! They’re…the Inquisition hacked the police emails, database, probably phones as well,” her brown eyes pleaded with him to not doom her or her supposed cause, because he was tired of being played with. Tired of being used.

Cullen’s entire face twisted up as he slotted all the pieces into place. Stepping back from her waning body as he feared he might do something he’d regret, he hissed, “That’s why.” Kristen didn’t glance up, her head dangling lower to the ground. “That’s why you picked me. You…you were sent after me, to break into my station.”

“We often keep tabs on local law enforcement, as much to help hide our involvement as to determine what the enemy is engaged in,” her voice recited as if she was reading off a protocol sheet. “I was ordered to infiltrate and make contact with you,” her head lifted and she sucked in a breath, “which I accomplished.”

“You…” Cullen wanted to curse, but nothing would come, “you played me for a fool for three months just to…to get at a few passwords?”

“There is a leak in your operation, sorry, your station. They were concerned that…” Kristen began, but Cullen would hear no more of it.

“The only leak I see is the one that I trusted. That I stupidly let into my bed! That I fucking thought
for one Maker damn moment I might actually love!”

Shit. Cullen’s entire body crumpled at the cursed truth that splattered out of his mouth. He clamped his teeth down but it was too late, it’d escaped enough for this professionally trained weaver of lies to spin it on him. No doubt knowing she had that much power over him would only fuel her more. She could use it to... to do whatever things they did. To wad him up like garbage and toss him away once it was over.

Kristen bent so far over, her forehead skimmed the floor. She didn’t say anything, didn’t even seem to react to his words, but he could see a slow shake against her shoulders. Cullen was torn between helping her up or stomping out that door. Damn the tap on the police phones, fuck some supposed leak. He’d head home, keep his head down, and forget any of this happened.

“I see it was too much to hope you could behave civilly,” that damn mage doctor clucked his tongue while dashing out into the living room. Embarrassment burned on Cullen’s cheeks as Anders bent over and hefted Kristen’s crumpled body into his arms.

It should have been him. Even if he was beyond angry at her, she was in pain and nearly died because... she took a bullet for him. Though, that was what she was trained to do. Maybe it was instinct, as she all but said to the mage. There was no way he could mean a thing to her beyond a means to an end.

While Cullen’s brain snapped the truth against his self esteem like a cat-o-nine tails, Anders helped Kristen towards a back room. “You need some Maker damn sleep.”

“I’m fine.”

“Right, let me guess, you have to run off and save the world,” he clucked like an overbearing hen. “But there’s no way you’re doing it without a couple pints of blood in your system. You’re about to pass out anyway.”

“Cullen,” her voice mumbled before Anders finished hauling her into a back bedroom. Maybe he should be concerned that she was being dragged into another man’s bed, but even injured she seemed far more competent than him to handle it.

He didn’t know what he wanted her to say. Another apology would be nice. For her to cry that she regretted everything. Maybe a promise that if she’d met him without orders, without the agency, then something real could have happened between them.

“Don’t use the phone, don’t go near the windows,” she said, her voice cold. Orders to stay alive were all the Inquisitor branded him with before she vanished behind the mage’s bedroom door. Dejected and exhausted, Cullen fell onto the couch. Even while his skin bubbled in rage at her twisting him to her tune, he didn’t once reach for his phone.

In the end, that damn mage sat beside Cullen while the tv blathered on to a talk show. The doctor tried to strike up a conversation during the cooking segment about oregano or something but Cullen was in no mood to play along. Even if he hadn’t had his heart ripped out through his throat and his livelihood threatened, he doubted he’d have offered up much more than a gruff snort. Now, it took everything inside of him to not toss the man out of his own home.
You’re not thinking straight at all.

No fucking shit.

“Vengeance for mages!” squawked from a perch dangling in front of the window.

“How do you get it to shut up?” Cullen growled while jerking a thumb towards the bird.

Anders froze, a pen dangling out of his mouth, which he’d been chewing mercilessly on. Turning towards Cullen, he shrugged, “No damn idea. Justice talks, and talks, and talks, and I ignore it.”

Wonderful. Twisting his head up, Cullen narrowed his eyes upon the feathered monstrosity, “Deep fried with a side of biscuits.”

Its yellow eye whipped around the room until it landed on the man threatening it. The parrot snapped its beak and shouted, “Burn templars to the ground.”
Cullen’s hands began to tremble, the scent of human fat cooking inside of a bombed out building filling his nose. No. You do not need this here! To try and chase away his demons, he dug deep into his legs and clung hard. He tried to remind himself what happened after, how he got out, how he then flew back to Ferelden. Got a new job. Became a police officer. Met a woman that…ripped out his heart without a second thought because she was doing her job.

Damn it!

“So,” Anders kept an eye on the unknown man at all times, though he never seemed to reach for a weapon, “you and her are…?”
“Nothing,” Cullen sneered, “we have never been anything.” It was all a lie.

“Then I can’t understand how she got shot,” the man refused to stop blathering just like his blighted parrot. “I don’t know the Inquisitor as well as some, definitely don’t know her the way you do.”

Cullen snorted. He didn’t know her at all, innuendo notwithstanding. Everything he thought he knew, every adorable quirk etched into his heart was all a farce. A trick to pull him into her web so she could…keep him under watch? That was the part he couldn’t grasp. There were rumors about the Inquisition that the order could hack into anything in under five minutes. Why cling to him for months if only to snip off a few passcodes?

“She was shot because she leapt in front of a bullet aimed at me,” Cullen said coldly. Simple battle tactics, nothing more.

“That’s the part I’m having trouble swallowing. Cause see letting herself get shot up, taking a wound even if it’s not fatal, puts the mission in danger.”

Cullen blinked, his eyes swiveling away from the closed door behind which she slept. Anders was swinging the gnawed upon pen back and forth in his fingers like a magic wand while he thought aloud. “Hang around the Inquisition people long enough and you learn one thing, mission is all that matters. Like it’s their god or something. To endanger it, for any reason is…”

The man tipped his head while eyeing up Cullen. “I don’t get why she did it. You’re not that attractive.”

Growling, Cullen stumbled to his feet to escape the barely suppressed laugh from Anders, and the continuing taunts of the bird. He’d assumed she did it as she said, on accident. Training kicked in and she didn’t think.

“Don’t go near the windows,” was the last thing she said to him. Was it to protect her secret so those hunting for her, for them both, wouldn’t figure it out? Or, Cullen’s heart thumped loudly in his chest, was she trying to protect him, to risk her own life for his because he meant something?
What was the point of waking up?

Her entire world exploded in a heartbeat, the people she’d considered her only allies betrayed her, wanted her dead, were no doubt hunting her this very second. And…she dug a hand over her chest and winced as it bumped into the wad of bandages.

He shouldn’t have been there. Why was he there? Risking himself for…for a lie. It was foolhardy, the police do not send a lone officer in armed with practically a watergun. Her teeth gnashed into the pillow as she tried to bite her way from the facts weighing on her head. Damn it, this was never supposed to happen.

“Okay,” a light snapped on above her, Kristen turning out of her oasis to sneer at it. Anders stood there, arms crossed and a tut on his tongue, “That’s probably enough sleeping now.”

“How long?” she mumbled to herself, struggling to sit up. Glancing over at her shoulder, she winced, knowing how much work it would take to keep that damn thing cleaned. Anders all but sprayed her down with antibiotics just to be sure.

“A few hours,” the man muttered. He didn’t cross over to his own bed as if he feared someone might bash his head in for getting close to her. Ha, as if he’d care now. “It’s gone dark outside.”

“Got it,” she managed to get her feet under her as she slipped to wobbling legs. “Thanks for your help, Anders.”

“What else am I good for? Though you better not have bled all over my sheets. Takes me weeks to commission a new bottle of bleach from you people.”

She grunted at that, her entire face crumbling, “They’re not my people anymore.”
“Look,” the odd mage stepped closer for once, though he left the door to his living room open as if they were both teenagers or something. “You know I’m not exactly a fan of the Inquisition for a myriad of reasons.” She laughed at that. The first was probably because they all but chained him up here.

“But this whole making mutant red rock creatures, trying to destroy the Free Marches sounds a little unlike them,” Anders tipped his head back and forth at the thought, his little knob of hair swooshing from the effort. She wondered how often his cats would bat at it.

“I’m not lying,” she said, tired of constantly explaining herself.

“Didn’t think you were, just…” Anders thought faded as he waffled on his boots, “Look, I owe you. Okay. I’d no doubt be dead if not for your actions.”

“No shit,” she snorted, well aware of what she fished him out of.

“So tell me, what’s the likelihood of the Inquisition shooting a missile at my apartment building to take you down?”

Tucking her hand tight to her chest, she finally stood up tall and looked Anders in the eye. “Honestly? Damn good if I don’t get out of here soon.”

His eyes rolled high and he whistled, “That’s what I thought. What do you need from me?”

“Your computer,” she said quickly. It was insurmountable odds, she was completely on her own, but there was no way she couldn’t fight back. There wasn’t a chance in hell she’d let them win.

Anders stretched a hand out towards his living room. For a moment it glanced over her unshot shoulder as if to guide her out, but as they both stepped into the orange glow, it fell down to his side. Amber eyes whipped up from a pile of instant pot noodles, of course, the cup curled in his lap. She wanted to explain, to find some magic word to wipe away the hurt, but there was nothing in her arsenal.

Shutting her teeth tight, Kristen turned towards the tiny kitchen table where a fat tabby lazed about as if she owned the place. “Who’s a chunky kitty?” fell out of her lips as she eyed up the cat, wanting to scratch along the face. Yellow eyes burned into hers, daring her to try.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Anders warned, “Marion has a mind of her own.”

At the name, Kristen whipped her head at him, but he fell silent. No, he closed himself off from any questions, his fingers the only ones acceptable to scratch along his cat’s ears. With a sigh, she tumbled into the flimsy folding chair and lifted up Anders’ laptop lid.

“No idea what you think you can do with that,” he groaned. “They’ve got it so locked down from the outside world the only porn I can get is Granny.”

She opened up his browser, prepared to put in bypasses to get where she needed, when Sexxy Retirees blared at her in glittering text. Kristen shot a sly eye at Anders who barely even blushed. “Work with what you’ve got, that’s always been my motto.”

“Really?” she sighed while closing about a billion pop-up ads and getting down to business, “I thought there was a lot more to it.”

“Used to be,” the man who’d once burned with an unquenchable fire inside was little more than ash now. Sighing, he fell into the chair beside her, “I dunno, the whole death by missile thing doesn’t
sound so bad now.”

“Don’t say that,” she snapped at him, her fingers flying. She needed data, a lot of it. Twisting around the most important thing in her life at the moment, Kristen inserted the USB and began to make backups. “Survival, that’s what matters.”

“Uh huh,” Anders twisted his head to glance through the passthrough and onto a couch that seemed to have a deep Cullen indentation. “So that’s why you’re full of lead and he’s not.”

She ignored it, her fingers flying fast to get at the right data. The HQ was good at keeping it encrypted, in theory the best, but there were always holes. And she used to be part of finding them.

“I don’t want to be prying…” Anders said, her head snapping up.

“Then don’t!” she sneered, in no mood to get into that mess with the flippant man. For all his easy going charm, she knew what really lurked inside of him, what he could do when pressed. Maker take her, she could use some of that right now, but the fight was drained out of him long ago. All he had were the few patch jobs the agency sent him, his cats, and that damn parrot no one could figure out how to kill.

Both heard the sound of the couch’s wood groaning and whipped their heads towards it. Cullen froze at the dual glare and raised his hands, “I’m going to the bathroom.” With that assertion, he headed off towards the small toilet.

Damn it. She was running on high, everyone around her was. There was no reason to go acting as if…as if he was a danger. He’s in danger because of you. Just, forget about it. Focus on saving the damn world. Forget you ever thought about…

“Anders,” her voice dipped deep into her chest, barely passing her lips. He shifted in his chair closer, teeth chewing on his nail. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

She took a long breath and closed her eyes. “After you betrayed her, how in the Maker’s name did…?”

“Anything but that,” Anders thundered, though his voice remained quiet. His eyes churned over years of regret the man was left to stew over while the she in the equation was kept far from him. As much for his safety as repayment for everything he did.

“Right, sorry,” she winced, yanking out the USB drive and slipping it into her pocket. Running a quick check to cover her tracks, she closed the lid. “Thanks for using your computer.”

“As if I could stop you.”

“I unlocked more porn sites for you too, seemed the least I could do.”

“Really?” he whipped it around to face him and began to tear through every permutation of sex there ever was. After loading Maker knew how much malware onto his hunk of junk, he paused and sighed, “Ya know, I think I might actually miss Nana Nookie.”

“Blessed Andraste,” Kristen moaned, a hand pinching into her eyes.

“What? If it’s all you know, it’s easy to get used to it. To prefer it.”
“I swear to the Maker, if you are trying to teach me some child propaganda lesson…” she yanked her hands back and moved to stand, but Anders whipped his head towards her.

“Child propaganda? You mean a PSA?” he snickered at her fumbling as if her fucked up childhood was an adorable quirk. Supposedly he fought for those that he barely understood, at least not on a born into it level. Maybe that’s why it went so apeshit so fast.

Skirting around the table, Kristen moved towards the living room when she paused. Her eyes darted to the barely touched noodle cup Cullen left sitting on the coffee table. Not even steam drifted out of it. How long had he sat with it in his hands, needing something comforting to remind himself the entire world wasn’t shit? Even if she made it so.

“I need to get out of here,” she said, her heart hardening to stone.

“Okay,” Anders scraped back his chair as he stood. “I’d say good luck on your crusade, but we all know how lucky I am. If you need another patching job, swing on by.”

Kristen turned to the odd man who, Maker take her, may be the closest thing she had in this world to a friend. The agency allowed her to keep him alive, but they did not approve. Nor did they have much to do with him. He was as divorced from the hierarchy while also aware of it as anyone got. Anyone other than…

Sliding forward, Anders grabbed onto her hand a moment. He seemed about to shake it when he pulled himself closer to whisper in her ear, “But if you ever bring another cop to my door, I will shoot you sight unseen. We clear?”

That caused her to snicker, well aware the threat was genuine. “Understood,” she said, stepping deeper into the living room. “I’m guessing by your more restrained reaction that he didn’t tell you the full of it.”

“The full of what?” Anders scrunched up his face.

Before Anders could curse up a storm, Cullen slipped out of the bathroom — the sound of water draining down the sink all that filled the looming silence. His eyes drifted over her, first to her face before he winced, then to the bandage across her barely dressed chest. In the end, Cullen settled for looking beyond her shoulder.

“Death to templars!” Justice screeched, coming to a stop on its perch and molting a few more blue feathers. That caused Cullen to glare murder at the bird and the simple look caused Kristen to snort a moment. It was little more than a quick chuckle, but it was so adorable she couldn’t help herself. For a breath he softened as if the wall she jammed down between them evaporated. But one look at her wound, or the kevlar, or the fact she stood tall, dropped a ton of bricks back in place.

Right. No more avoiding this, I. Time to move on before you put more people in danger. “I need to be leaving,” she said. “The agency no doubt has had time to review any footage it can and will know that I’m injured.”

“Hospitals?” Cullen asked.

“They’ll do a cursory check, but they know I won’t have gone there. I hope they’d assume I’d attempt to stitch it up myself at one of our dead drop caches, but it’s possible they’d come here,” she said more to herself than anything. Anders’ was a risk, but she was out of options. The way Cullen was glaring at her in the car, there was a good chance he’d have left her for dead if she
suggested he try pulling the bullet out himself. Not that she could blame him. If it weren’t for the threat to the Free Marches, to good people who were only trying to live their lives, she’d lay down in the alley and wait for the Inquisition tanks to march over her.

Snapping her teeth a moment, Kristen sighed as she looked into his amber eyes, “You’ll have to remain here.”

“What?” he snapped.

“By the void he will,” Anders thundered as well. Okay, maybe telling him about the templar bit wasn’t smart, but it’d come out eventually. Anders had a way of abrading sandpaper.

“Two days,” she continued over them both, “lay low. Don’t contact anyone, or they’ll know. They’ll figure it out and come for you, try to…” The interrogation techniques of the Inquisition were beyond understanding. She shut her eyes tight, refusing to doom either men to that. “Don’t leave the apartment, don’t answer the door. Don’t even call a soul.”

“You want me to remain trapped inside a tiny apartment with a pig?” Anders cried as if that was in anyway helping.

“There is no other option,” she thundered at him. “Two days, that’s all I’m asking for here.”

“I take it back, I. Never come back here again.”

She snarled at that, weary of people questioning her orders. Which is what she should have been doing from the start. Don’t grow complacent or they plant a garden of lies in your skull. For a breath she glanced at Cullen and guilt threatened to consume her soul. Damn it. She shut her eyes tight to try and cut off the tears.

“Why two days?” he asked, his voice soft. Soft as that night she caught him trying to wipe away his terror while playing a video game. Soft as when he’d butt his lips to her ear and whisper that he was glad she was here.

“Because, either I’ll have succeeded at my mission and the Inquisition will be under such a reckoning no one will bother with one cop. Or…” her thought trailed off as she rubbed her arm.

“Or?” Cullen picked up.

With a shrug, she said, “I’ll be dead, and your whereabouts will be the last of their concern.” She laid it out simply, as if she were trying to explain the choices on a menu. Either we can get the beef dish that comes with two egg rolls, or I’m gunned down before I can even sniff out who set out to use me to destroy my homeland.

Simple enough. She began to turn towards Anders, when a hand gripped onto her arm. For a breath, the fingers flexed up and down the muscle — as if he was trying to warm her. Slowly, she turned back to Cullen who shook his head and answered with a book dropping, “No.”

“This isn’t up for debate…”

“I’m not staying here.”

“Cullen, for…for the love of the Maker, if you go out there, if you return to the station, to the city, then you could die! Will probably die. I cannot let that happen!” she was shrieking now, the first threat of tears rising in her eyes. Face death by herself all she felt was a bolus in her stomach. The thought of him being shot in the back of the head because he didn’t listen to her, because she
pulled her shit of a life over him was excruciating.

He folded his arms across his chest, “I’m going with you.”

“What?” she shook her head madly, certain she was hearing things. “Why would you…?”

“These things are dangerous, beyond dangerous. I have fought one, remember,” he thudded a fist into his chest to back up his bragging rights. “I will not allow them to threaten innocent lives.”

So that was it. He wanted to be noble, to be a hero. What’s wrong with that? Damn near best thing for someone to be, right? Why would you dare to hope for anything more.

She wanted to agree, but no, that was madness. You didn’t let a little shepherd boy have a sword and point him at the invading army just because he really believed in himself. “No,” she said, “you don’t know a thing about how the Inquisition works. The skills needed to evade them. It’s…”

“I was in the army,” he said as if that solved everything.

“This isn’t Kirkwall,” she spat out, feeling two pairs of eyes bore into her skull. The guilty ones from behind she ignored because the amber ones were threatening to combust her face.

He sucked in a breath, then two more, “You knew about that? About what happened there?”

“I…” No more lies. No more half truths. “I know your entire service record. I know about Kinloch too.”

At that his eyes went wild, whipping about the unknown room as if he feared for the monster to come leeching out of the walls. She wanted to reach out to hold his hands, to tell him he was safe, but he wasn’t. His life was in jeopardy because of her, and the only hope he had was if she vanished forever.

“You knew?” he squeaked, his fingers trembling, “The whole time? But it’s classified.”

Nodding slowly, she elucidated, “Files on you, anything of pertinent interest. I read them all. A little bit of government blackout isn’t going to stop us.”

“Why didn’t you run?” he gasped, his mind stuck back in that loop of fear.

Forgetting how angry he was at her, how her shoulder squealed in pain, Kristen gripped her hands around his cheeks, “Because I’m not scared of you.” His hand curled around her wrist like a living bracelet. Maker, she didn’t want to endanger this for a moment. “I’m scared for you,” she whispered.

The hand fell off her and Cullen stepped back. She didn’t follow, well aware the bounds she already shattered. His past was locked back inside the box in his mind, Cullen focusing on how badly she hurt him. “I am coming with,” he insisted.

“Cullen…”

“You are injured, you will require help.”

She snorted while glancing over at the wound, “I’ve had worse.” Though, she’d never taken on the entire agency while sporting a bit of lead in her shoulder.

His voice grew cold as he stepped closer. Amber eyes burned over the top of her head as he said, “You’re shot because of me. I will not let a debt pass like that.”
It was a debt, the kind of thing done between two strangers who’d never see nor talk to each other again after this. She knew it to be the case, knew he was angry to the point of combustion, but…it stung her deep to look up into his eyes and see only the cold.

Nodding her head, the Inquisitor gave in to his demands. “Okay. I…will probably need help.” And, the second she was able, she could give him an out, save him. At least get him as far from her toxicity as she could.

“First thing we need is a change of clothes. Mine are,” Kristen glanced at her shoulder again, “shot to hell. And a police uniform will stand out like a sore thumb in a crowd.” Cullen picked at the uniform still attached to his body as if in shock to find it there. “Anders, where’s the box?”

“The box?” Cullen asked even as the trio tromped towards the bedroom she’d passed out in.

Anders yanked out a massive plastic tote from the back of his closet and shrugged. It was Kristen who explained, “They tend to gift him any odds and ends of clothing.”

“You wouldn’t believe how much lady underwear winds up in there,” he said, causing Cullen to glare at him. “How about I leave you two to it. Come on, Justice, let’s get you some damn crackers.”

“Justice wants justice!” the bird cried before the door shut.

“What else is new,” Anders muttered, leaving the pair fully alone.

Into the box she focused, drawing out shirts and trying to size them up quickly to fit. “I can probably keep my pants on, there’s not much noticeable blood. The joy of wearing black, but you’ll need something else. The blue stripe’s a dead giveaway.”

She was a Maker damned secret agent, trained to react in any situation but now she couldn’t fucking stop talking. He was supposed to stay behind, to remain here safe, out of her life forever. Why was it every time she tried to walk away he refused to let her go?

“Inquisitor,” a hand landed on her back and she twisted her head behind fast. All he wanted was to get her attention, but she couldn’t stop panting at that word on his lips. It never should have been there.

“Don’t,” she shuddered, “please don’t call me that. Not now. I…I need to focus, and digesting all of that will not help.”

“Fine,” he snapped the door shut again as she tossed a few t-shirts his way. “What do I call you then? Woman? Lady?”

Kristen. Maker, I wish I could be her. That all of this was some fever induced nightmare. That I’d wake up in your arms, a hand soothing my clammy forehead while you whipped yourself into a frenzy to get me healthy. But this was real, all of that…the life Kristen Trevelyan had was the fantasy.

“I don’t know,” she said, her fingers skirting over a medium men’s henley. That’d have to work. It’d be tight on her chest, but she could make do for now. Reaching for the collar of her shirt, Kristen hissed when pain burst from her shoulder up to her wrist and down her waist. It came so fast, she began to tip to the side, her head aiming for the floor to weep onto.

“What is it?” Cullen panicked, his hand skirting a few inches over the back of her without touching.
“Can’t…can’t get my shirt off. The reach was too much. Fuck,” she squeezed off the tears and gulped. “I need to get better pain pills from Anders before I go.”

“Here,” despite the crystal clear anger at her, the torment she tossed his life into, Cullen helped to pull her mutilated shirt off her body. He was so damn cautious and careful, her jaw fell slack while watching. Teardrops bulged in her eyelids, wanting to dribble off her cheeks at the gesture, when he glanced over a breath from her face and she gulped. All the stewing emotion building inside snapped away.

There’s a job to do. Probably the most important job of your life. Now is not the time to get weepy over what could have been.

Like dressing an unresponsive mannequin, she wiggled the borrowed shirt over her arms and across her chest. While it dropped, shielding away that moment of intimacy beneath thick cotton, she mumbled, “Thank you.”

Cullen swallowed, his eyes still trailing where her naked skin had been before he seemed to snap out of it. Turning from her, he too shook off his uniform shirt and began to put on an old band t-shirt. A few of his scars burned white under the bedroom overhead light. She squished her lip tighter in her teeth while lost in the play of his muscles as he tugged the crimson shirt up over his head.

It used to be welcoming, a rush to her system to drag her nails across it, comfort to rub her palms back and forth over the skin. Now, it was a mistake. A mistake that she feared she’d regret until her death, which was liable to occur in 24-48 hours depending on her luck.

“Here,” she dug out a pair of jeans and tossed them to him. “They’re a little tight but should fit.”

Kristen didn’t watch Cullen strip down to his underwear, though she was running out of clothing to rummage through as well. She couldn’t. That last time was supposed to be her…their swan song. But he’s here. Not just here, the stubborn fool refused to leave her side. To walk away and let her get down to the brass tacks of saving the damn world while he…finds his real princess, saves his damsel in distress, and lives happily ever after.

Why can’t you be happy?

She didn’t realize she’d curled both her fists up tight until Cullen coughed and threw her out of it. Twisting around, she did her best to not grimace at the clothing she picked out for him. The poor guy was in a tight cut t-shirt for a garage band, faded artfully to give it the look that it was nostalgic. The pants were even tighter than she first thought, suckered to his thighs and digging into his hips where the weird shirt barely reached. To top it off, a damn chain ran from the belt band of his jeans into a pocket, which Cullen was trying to rip free.

After struggling for a moment, he tipped his head to the ceiling and sighed. “Tell me something,” he began as if he’d been working himself up to this for a long time. Probably since she fell asleep.

“All right,” she nodded.

“No lying,” he insisted, his eyes flaring like firelight at the word. This was probably a question about the mission, about the Inquisition and their chances of surviving. Maker, she wished she could lie to make him feel better, but she lost that right long ago.

Kristen nodded that she would and Cullen sucked in a breath, “The sex…” Her eyes bulged while his voice drifted to a whimper. His face fractured into pain while he rubbed against his arm. “Was
it all…part of the job? Did you just…”

Maker’s sake, that was what was eating him up? There was a well trained, well funded, well hidden agency with the ability to turn people into rock monsters loose, only two people to stop it, and his biggest concern was if she was faking her time with him? If she didn’t want to be with him?

“The first time I was given official leave to contact you,” she whispered. His eyebrows bunched together in confusion and she grimaced, “Contact meaning sex.” Cullen’s head tipped down, no doubt he’d already guessed as much. Probably beaten himself a new one for not having the skills to seduce a woman on the first date into his bed. Not when she’d already made plans to get there herself.

“But…” she waffled back and forth on her feet, “that’s it.”

“What do you mean, that’s it? We were together…” he looked about to give a numerical answer, but Cullen tugged it back, “more than once. A lot more than once.”

“Yeah, I know. I remember, I…” she struggled with the words because her mind kept beating her about the head for it. She knew it was wrong, it was against a core tenet of the damn agency, but she shattered it and she had no regrets to keep breaking it over and over again.

“Give me a Maker damn answer,” he sneered, tired of her bullshit.

“The fact is, the truth…you’re allowed one, okay.”

“One what?” he was having trouble keeping up with her dodging. She wasn’t trying to run from him but the agency they built in her head. The all seeing eye that kept her from acting out, from trusting her gut instead of the Inquisition.

“One contact, one sexual relation. It’s not even required, some agents can slip in to plant bugs or discover whatever they need without bothering to get naked. Officially, it is up to the agent to decide what they are comfortable with.”

He digested that information like he was chewing down on a log. Shaking his head like a wet dog, Cullen gripped his fingers to his forehead and sighed, “So, what? You…they kept ordering you to sleep with me until you got what you needed?”

“No,” she whimpered, her hands curling around herself. “No, I was not to maintain any communication with you. Not to talk. Not to befriend. Certainly not to sleep with. To…” Her eyes shut tight as she ripped the truth out of her cold brain and whispered it to life, “We are not to form attachments to anyone, to anything. We are as neutral as human beings can get. We do not begin relationships, we do not date, we do not…fall in love.

Kristen whipped it away, the word as foolish to her as ice skates were to someone living in Rivain. “I disobeyed my orders, repeatedly,” she snickered while thinking of everyone who came to her door, who impressed upon her to drop him, “to be with you.”

Maybe it could be considered romantic. *I ignored nearly fifteen years of brainwashing and highly involved training because I couldn’t stay away from you.* But in doing so, she kept lying to him, she risked his life. There was no adoring holiday involving chocolate and cherubs to commemorate that.

“Why?” Cullen asked, stumbling to keep up. She didn’t have an answer. It was a little thing really. He showed her a kindness and…she’d been so tired of being alone. Of the endless emptiness that this world could cause. A vacuum of love in her heart as she remained forever isolated from the
living world.

As he began to realize there’d be no coming explanation, Cullen grumbled to himself but didn’t press her harder. Maybe he didn’t have an answer either for why he kept swallowing her lies even as he knew something was off. In truth, she was surprised how long it took him to check her Trevelyan story. She’d read all up on the Peterson’s foster system before meeting him, but he’d… he wanted to believe the lie.

“Were,” Cullen whispered, his eyes skirting around this strange room, “were there any others? Anyone else you slept with while… So I don’t have to run to the clinic to get checked out,” he tacked on fast lest she dare think he might let himself still care enough to be jealous.

Her cheeks lit up at the thought. “No, it was only you. Before you, I hadn’t had sex in two years. The agency requires consent STD checks, among others. You are as clean as you ever were from me.”

“Well, that’s…” he bounced on his heels as if he’d almost wanted a different answer. For her to laugh and claim that she was helplessly in love with another secret agent trapped in the middle of this quagmire. To make it easier for him to hate her.

Sorry, but it’s only been you.

Kristen glanced over at a cat clock on the wall. “We need to leave, get on the road before they find us.” Cullen looked like he wanted to argue, to insist she answer more personal questions here, but they were going to be stuck together in a car for quite awhile. He’d have plenty of time to put the screws to her there.

She moved to shut the box, when her eyes caught a coat. Hefting it out, she got a good feel for the weight and handed it over to him. He eyed it up in confusion, when she said, “It’s going to be cold where we’re going. You’ll want it.”

While it was clear Cullen didn’t want to trust her, he had no choice. If he was to follow her, to help her, he’d have to listen. She picked up a wool lined hoodie, as if Anders would ever need outdoor clothing, while Cullen tested the parka. It puffed up over his arms and shoulders, and when he went to zip it up, the hood flopped onto his head. A part grumble, part growl reverberated from below.

Kristen reached over to lift it up and free him, fully forgetting that she was the Inquisitor now. Amber eyes darted up under his brow into hers and she blushed. “There,” she tried to shrink back, “that should work.” To disguise the pitch of her emotions, she got a good look at the red and brown fur that lined the hood. After laying down the hood, the fur nestled against Cullen’s neck. Maker take her, but it was a good look for him.

“Good?” she asked, the man nodding. “Then we need to leave.”

It’s time to try and save the world.
She watched the dawn through a small hairline crack in the windshield of a pickup truck. Unlike Cullen’s this was a towering pile of steel that rose above practically everything on the road. Whoever she stole it from was liable to get red faced and smash things when he found out.

For the entire night’s drive, he sat silent beside her. She suspected he dozed off from mile 40 until around mile marker 157, but her eyes were glued to the road the entire time. It was the sound of her reaching for the bottle of pills that roused him. Cullen leaned off the cool window his head bounded against, and…Maker take her, but his curls were so adorably smooshed to one side. Rather than rake them back in place, he began to insist that it wasn’t safe for her to drive. That he needed to do it.

What was with men insisting she couldn’t handle a little steering and stomping on a pedal?

She snorted at the thought and downed the three pills dry. Rather stupid for her to leave Anders’ without any provisions, not even a damn bottle of water, but she was fully thrown. Digging her fingers into the leather wrapped steering wheel that smelled vaguely of beer, she sighed, “I can handle it. You look tired still, maybe you should get more rest.”

His glare pierced against the rising sun, Cullen struggling to find a comfortable sit in the cramped cab. While the truck bed was enormous, the front was not. If it weren’t for the fact that it was the easiest thing she could steal that was practically left running on the street, she’d have preferred a small sedan. At least those were forgettable.

The man who seemed incapable of forgetting her rubbed a hand against the back of his neck. “Where are we going anyway?”

“A safe place, what used to be a safe place. I have to…” she patted into the pocket stuffed with the USB drive. “It’ll take another day and a half to get there.”
“Okay,” he wasn’t talking to her. Any reaction to her words was a grunt or nod, but the bridge of communication was fully shut up with a troll standing guard. Maybe she should have turned on the radio to cut through the silence.

Farmland rolled on past, most of it stripped down to the withered stalks. On occasion, a herd of cattle would glance up to stare at the lone truck speeding down their back highway. She couldn’t risk interstate, those were far too easily watched. The plus to old highways was that there was always a dirt road somewhere to turn onto.

“Are you going to tell me the plan?” Cullen broke up her ruminating on how fast she could take a turn before flipping this thing.

Shaking her head, she focused on him — getting the pinprick amber glare for it. “Sorry, I…I don’t tend to work in pairs. We’re heading to a safe house because someone I need to talk to will be there.”

“You’re certain he or she is out in the middle of nowhere? Why not call this person?”

Aside from how there were no phones and if she did they’d pinpoint her location in an instant? “He’s not there yet, but he will be.”

“How can you know that?”

She snorted a minute. “I broke into the Inquisition’s database, not that it’s that hard, and changed somethings that’ll get his attention in an instant. I set the status of the Inquisitor to deceased.”

That caused a smile to rise on his lips a moment, “So they’ll stop hunting you.”

“No, so they know I’m on to them. Those who are trying to kill me are fully aware I didn’t die where I was supposed to. But they’ll scatter at that bold move. Send agents into the field. One in particular will get the message.”

“You seem rather sure of yourself.” He didn’t buy it, at least not that she’d know a damn thing about her people.

With a great sigh, she let her head rest a minute, “That’s what I do. It’s one of two things I was recruited for. I read people, I size them up in one or two glances, and play them like a violin.”

The man she’d been lying to for months fell deathly silent, his eyes glaring onto the yellow stripe of the road that flashed on past them. She didn’t try to take it to heart that he hated her, Maker knew he had every right, but…she wished there’d be something. A moment where it wasn’t burning rage that Cullen blanketed her in. Just for a second to look over and see what had been there.

“What’s the other thing?”

“Huh?” she turned to him, her eyes drifting off the blinding horizon.

“You said there were two things…what’s the other?”

Her tongue swerved over her lips and she nodded her head, “Forgetting. I’m forgettable. People who meet me will fully forget within a day, sometimes it only takes an hour.”

His eyes narrowed as he stared up and down her face. “Really?”
“Average weight, average height, average hair color — in a crowd I am a ghost. At a party, I am furniture. I’m better than a bug on the wall because I can move and ask people questions. Often they forget I even spoke to them, giving me ample opportunity to ask again. It’s…”

Fenris was right, she was so damn proud of that skill. It gave her untold advantage within the agency. Some of the people were memorable, as hard as they tried to blend. Harding and her freckles. Fenris and his tattoos. Even Leliana with her striking eyes and red hair. But the dear Inquisitor was nothing, so that was the life she lived, one formed of nothing.

“That’s why they sent you, to…trap me,” Cullen circled back to himself as all their conversations did. “Because I was supposed to forget you.”

Regret sleeping with a woman who wore a size 12 pants, and slightly larger top. Bury her in the back of his mind as a minor mistake that he probably wouldn’t make again. Fully forget in two days that it even happened. That’d been her job, and she was damn good at it.

“I don’t know why you didn’t,” Kristen muttered to herself, her lips falling slack.

He swallowed hard a moment, his eyes drifting over to look at her. Trapped inside a cell of her own self loathing, she couldn’t share it. You can’t hurt me if I don’t care. That’d been her survival technique for sixteen years. And they used it, twisted her, lied to her, turned her into a walking bomb to kill her own people. If she didn’t care, why did the Inquisition’s betrayal strike to the core?

Cullen coughed and she lifted her head. For a breath their eyes locked, and he shifted his hand. It looked as if it was about to land on her knee to try and comfort her. But he shuddered, and the comforting hand whipped back behind his neck as he rubbed it away. More endless farmland whipped on by, Kristen staring out the windshield, Cullen his window. The conversation faded to nothing again and she thought about turning on the radio.

Before she could reach for the knob, he whispered, the reflection of his lips catching her peripheral vision. “I don’t think I could even if I tried.”

When the truck rumbled into a gas station, Cullen wiped away the dusty haze over his eyes. He slipped into an odd almost hallucinatory state where time seemed to pass both slowly and rapidly quick. Blinking, he turned to the dashboard clock surprised to find it was past noon.

“Why are we stopping?” he asked, though the reasons should have seemed obvious.

Her eyes drifted over him and she sighed, “Fill up and pit stop. Best to get it all out now, gonna be an even longer drive after this.”

Nodding, Cullen slid out of the truck onto wobbly legs. He’d had to jam them at an odd angle to fit, which caused his so-so knee to flare up into blinding rage. Walking in a circle a bit to get the blood back, he hopped over the cement rises for the pumps and slipped through the station door. Immediately, the smell of orange goop struck his nose, followed quickly by motor oil.

Wire racks of all manner of chocolate and fried junk food hovered around the front door. Beside them were a few various knick knacks, sunglasses with bright green frames, ugly trucker hats with nothing but sexual innuendos, and an entire rack of hilarious novelty license plates. Since when
were those a thing again?

He reached towards it, partially curious, when his bladder finally woke from its stupor and steered him further in towards the bathroom. A little yellow sign warned him there was danger ahead and he laughed at how right the damn thing was. Stepping over it, he relieved himself and felt the first lightening in his soul since they stumbled upon the shoot out. Taking a piss, that was all the joy he had left in his life. Sounded about right.

Zipping himself up carefully in these cursed jeans that were cutting off circulation to his legs, Cullen washed his hands and eased out the door. As it swung open, he caught Kristen…the woman dashing towards the ladies. She looked almost panicked, as if she waited too long, and forgot to hop over the little yellow sign. It folded in half and plummeted to the linoleum with a loud whack.

“Damn it,” she cursed, her cheeks lighting up as she paused from rushing into the bathroom to pick it up.

“I’ll get it,” he threw out, bending down to take over.

For a breath she watched him, her lips puckering before she spat out, “Thanks,” and ran inside. It reminded him of that time they went to the showing of Danger Dogs and she insisted they sit through the entire thing, even the credits while she squirmed in her seat. Once the stinger ended, she bolted so fast people were dashing out of the way.

And he’d thought it kinda cute at the time. How forceful she could be, how certain in her choices.

Rubbing his neck, Cullen stood helpless before the bathroom door. Inside, he thought he heard sounds of tape ripping off flesh. Was she changing her bandages as well? That could take awhile. And he had no damn idea what to do with himself. Lingering outside the ladies room would only draw a lot of questions and threats upon his head.

With a slow slide of his feet, he wandered towards the exit, when he spotted the damn sunglass stand again. Judging by the direction they’d been heading, they were likely to suffer the sun on his right side for the next few hours. Barely thinking, Cullen grabbed a pair at random and paid for them using cash. $10 novelty sunglasses, he only prayed they didn’t turn him crosseyed or melt into his ears.

The green frames bounced against his palm as he stepped out into the no man’s land gas station. There was another car gassing up and judging by the dust painted along the side, it’d been driving down the back 40 before heading out here. Farm country. What was in his blood. Honnleath was a bit better off than here, having an actual working grocery store instead of needing to rely upon the gas station.

Maybe it was something in the soft winds crinkling through fields of torn stalks, or the buffet of dust rising off a gravel road in the distance, but Cullen felt homesick for the first time in a long while. He didn’t want to go back because he feared they’d all see the monster inside of him.

Damn it. He slapped the sunglasses on and stomped towards the back of the gas station. Running on little sleep and practically no food, he was acting hysterical. Dramatic and emotional. Vulnerable was the last thing anyone needed from him. Not that he was. His heart ached, but he’d surrounded it in barbed wire and bramble thorns. No chance of anyone getting through to hurt it again.

No chance of her…
He wanted to hate her, to sneer and say that once this crisis was over he’d never have to see her again. To be happy with that eventuality. But she took a bullet for him. For a time he convinced himself that the woman was essentially prostituted out to him, turning him into a John whether he knew it or not. But she chose to keep sleeping with him.

Shit, that sounded like a terrible movie, porn or otherwise — heart of gold prostitute falls for her client and refuses to accept payment.

Twisting with the wind, Cullen excised his watch out from under the puffy jacket. In some other universe where things made sense, he’d be taking his lunch break. Curled over on the plastic tables eating a bagged sandwich while reading through something on his phone. Other people around him would be chatting, talking about what they did over the weekend or planned to do. All he had was the same.

Then she walked into his life and his same changed. Though, he rubbed into the back of his neck, he didn’t think it’d change this bad. He wanted… Blighted void, what did he want?

Cullen stared down at his phone. She wanted to toss it out a window at first, but he talked her down into him never turning it on. Either that was good enough to stop the bad people from tracking them or…who knew. This was all beyond belief still. Secret agents of the Inquisition were real? Who the shit would believe that?

The phone booted up, barely any bars registering in the middle of nowhere. No way he’d get wi-fi, the tiny gas station’s server locked up tight, but he only wanted to make one call. Sifting through the numbers, he landed on a personal one and pressed send. If she was changing her bandages, it’d take time.

And if she caught you calling someone, what would she do? Kill him? Garrote him with a bit of string cheese or maybe do some punch move that stopped his heart dead. Was she even really human anymore or…?

“Yello,” the voice answered as if he had all the time in the world.

“Samson?” Cullen’s voice dipped low and he began to walk towards the fallow field behind the station.

“Holy shit, Rutherford?! You’re alive!”

“Yes, but…”

“The Captain was fuming when she heard you ran in all by yourself, then practically split her head open and demons went flying out when we couldn’t find you. Feared the worst even if we didn’t find your body,” Samson continued to babble like that was the worst thing in Cullen’s life right now. “What the hell happened?”

“I…” I’m on the run, turns out my girlfriend is actually a secret agent whose own agency double crossed her, and now she’s trying to take them down. I’m still with her because I have a spine of jell-o and think I’m both worthwhile to her while also worthless. “It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, kinda getting that impression. Where the hell are you?” Samson said. It was offhand and made sense. He up and vanished from a crime scene for nearing 24 hours. No one knew where he went or why. But the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

“I can’t tell you,” he said.
Samson laughed, “As in you don’t know, you’re somewhere incredibly embarrassing, or it’s a national secret and if you tell me men in black suits will slit my throat?”

Cullen audibly swallowed over the line, his hands shaking the phone. Did he just put Samson at risk? He’d called the man’s personal cell but did they have ways to tap those too?

“You’re chained up in some gimp’s basement, aren’t you? Just managed to work the ball gag out but need someone to yank the butt plug out of…”

“Look,” Cullen interrupted, aware he was losing time and growing more uncertain why he even did this, “I can’t talk long.”

“Heard the clap of thigh high leather boots down the hall?”

For the love of Andraste, “I just…I wanted someone to know I’m not dead. Okay.”

“Right, okay. Making a note of it, Rutherford. Why are you telling me?”

Because there’s a good chance I won’t survive the next 24 hours. He’d fought one of those crags with help from two other men. And as terrifyingly talented as she was, the woman running the show was injured and without her hardware. He’d seen these kinds of odds before and knew his chances of getting out, assuming the agency didn’t put a bullet in his head before they even got to the final fight.

He heard the jangle of the bell on the gas station door, whispered, “I have to go,” and closed his phone. Slipping it into his pocket, he pressed on the off button while walking around to find Kristen with a multitude of plastic bags on her arms.

At Cullen’s look she explained, “Snacks, for the road. I don’t think we’re going to be stopping for a long time.”

“Right, understood.”

She eyed him up, “What were you doing?”

“Walking a bit, trying to stretch my legs before we get trapped back inside.” The lie came fast and easy. Was that what it was like for her? To just invent this other person? A normal one who didn’t shoot people and drive cars over cargo crates in the middle of thunderstorms?

Kristen smiled a moment as if she approved of the answer. Digging into the sack, she unearthed a giant bottle of water, “Here, I thought that…” Suddenly, her face twisted up in pain, her left arm lagging. Cullen scooped up the bags as she tried to paw at the wound. “Damn, pain killers are wearing off.”

“I should drive,” he insisted, half the groceries now safe in his arm. Judging by the weight, she must have bought the place out of all manner of junk food.

Her eyes narrowed at him, “You have no idea where we’re going.”

“Tell me then, while you rest. I don’t know about you, but I really don’t want to enter into a fight with a partner watching my back who’s about to pass out in pain.”

He meant partner in the metaphorical sense, but her cheeks blushed at the word and she dug her shoe into the cement. Nodding her head fast, she fished the keys the idiotic owner left on the console out of her pocket. The throw jangled them through the air, Cullen reacting quick to catch.
“All right, but I get to choose the station.”

He snickered at that, “Out here, it’ll be nothing but country.”

The pair slid back into the truck. Cullen had to yank the seat back lest his knees jam into the steering wheel, while Kristen curled the entire pile of bought goods onto the floor beside her feet. She rustled through, securing various drinks, while sighing, “You’d be surprised, there’s always a rebel or two hiding amongst the corn.”

With a slow breath, Cullen started up the truck and pulled out onto the highway. He wished he could say why he was doing this, that there was some logical reason, or even a noble one. But as he looked over at the small wren touching her wounded wing, his heart could offer up the only explanation it had, and he hated himself for it.

“Pull in here,” Kristen ordered, her hand dropping down even as she kept guiding the truck down a back road and off into a cornfield. What they had left of the sun vanished about an hour ago, blanketing them into waning darkness this far off the highway.

Cullen glanced over at her in confusion, but did as told. With a sigh, he slipped the truck into park and collapsed into the driver’s seat. They only stopped once more, at an even seedier rest stop, but he refused to give up the keys to her. Men. “So…” he lifted an eyebrow by the dashboard light. “What happens next? Are we meeting some clandestine spy or something?”

“No,” she sighed and stretched wide, “we need sleep. Both of us.”

He scoffed a moment, glancing out the windshield at the night bathing over in frost. “Isn’t that what motels are for?”

Dangerous. Beyond dangerous, you have no control over what room you wind up in, nor the layout. They could put you anywhere. Sleeping in a car made a getaway easy provided you kept the keys close. “It’s safest here,” she assured him, but he didn’t seem impressed.

Reaching into the last of the food under the seat, Kristen pulled up two small instant cup of noodles. The dried food shook like maracas, dragging his eyes right to it and for a moment he laughed at the sight. She passed the chicken one to him, which Cullen twisted around a moment. While he read over whatever was in it besides enough sodium to kill a caribou, she dumped a splash of her water into the cup.

“Are we going to eat them cold?” he asked, but slid over his cup so she could drench it too.

“Nope,” unraveling a circle of foil, Kristen placed it onto the bottom of her cup, then popped out the cigarette lighter. Pushing it up against the foil, she closed her eyes and took in a breath. The pain was constantly pulsing in and out down her arm and up to her collar. Doubtful it’d really ebb for a good month, or until she was dead. The latter seemed far more likely.

“What happens next?” he asked after a moment, causing her eye to open.

“Not as good as a microwave, but if you’re on the run and need food that’s somewhat warm…”

Cullen swirled his dry noodles with a drizzle of water around, “Learn that from the Inquisition?”
Her barely there smile snapped away and Kristen shifted in the seat. “No,” she shook her head slowly, her pinkie finger sliding up to trace the edge of the wraparound paper cup. “What I told you about my parents, and being an orphan…that was real.”

She could feel him stiffen at that. Probably because once again he was reminded that she lied. It seemed hard for Cullen to get away from that fact. Kristen worried the cup back and forth as she whispered, “My mother, she went out one night for groceries. I remember it. Two sticks of butter, a bag of walnuts, and a basket of eggs. My father was baking something and stupidly didn’t check the stocks before he began. So she went out into the darkness, into the cold, uncaring world.”

Sucking in a breath, she glared a hole at the carpet, “It was the Night of a Thousand Swords. None of us had any idea something happened, that anything was wrong until the screaming… My dad looked for two weeks, hoped beyond hope, but there was nothing. No doubt she took a knife to her gut and was buried in a mass grave along with everyone else.” No one ever determined exactly how many died that night, there were far more pressing problems on the horizon.

She’d never told anyone about it, not even Leliana — though she suspected L knew because L knew everything. Talking about it, thinking about her mother’s hands braiding her hair, or the scent of her perfume when she’d walk in the door from work ruined her. Took every single brick she stacked up to keep herself safe and shattered them all. So she never told anyone, just buried it like they buried her — bones heaped upon bones.

“Your other family?” his voice was soft, his eyes brushing over the noodles.

“The state grew bolder. Got my grandmother by daylight. No one would dare challenge them anymore, no one was left to fight them. My father, he…” tears dripped into her salty noodle soup, “he burned in front of my eyes. They took to torching buildings with known supporters of the resistance. Didn’t matter who else lived there, all had to die. I don’t even know how I survived. Woke up in the rubble covered in soot. Two years on the street, scrounging to survive, dodging the march of troops. Learned how to do this, how to cook a lot of things with garbage.”

“I’m so…” he reached over, his hand curling around her elbow. It caused the cup of noodles to jostle in her hand and nearly spill out. She winced at the moment ruined by food, but shook it off. Sad story, everyone had one, and hers was far from the worst.

“Here,” she handed over her cup that was already cooked and began on the other. “Go ahead and eat it before it gets cold.”

There were no forks, or even cheap wooden chopsticks, so he had to make due with his fingers. It’d probably seem adorable at any other time, watching a grown man slurp up thin noodles like a kid eating spaghetti. Her heart wasn’t in it, wasn’t in anything. It was trapped in amber at the bottom of the ocean.

After a few messy slurps, Cullen glanced over and asked, “You’re really a Free Marcher?”

“Yeah, the agency thinks I look too much like a Marcher and can’t really pass as Ferelden. I think they’re full of shit, but they tag me with a Marcher name.”

Go on. Ask it. Ask what you already know.

The man who was shipped to the Free Marches in theory to try and confine the madness happening there. To march from city state to city state attempting to put the kibosh on the unending horrors, but got swept up in the same resistance terrorism that burned all who got near. People were angry, and scared, and lashed out at anything they could.
“And you’re a mage?”

She sighed, turning away from the cooking cup to look deep into his eyes, “My family were mages, I’m not. I’m nothing. But by blood, yes…the wrong kind of mage. The bottom feeding, liable to explode you kind of mage. The ones everyone hates. It’s in my blood.”

“I don’t…” he reached over and cupped his hand under hers holding the lighter. Was he going to say he doesn’t hate mages, or that he doesn’t hate her? She couldn’t speak to the former, but the latter had to be a lie. All she did was give him reason after reason to hate her.

Swirling the cup around a bit more, Kristen yanked it off the lighter and called it good enough. It’d never be hot, but warmish was acceptable. As daintily as she could, she hefted a pile of the noodles into her mouth and slurped them up. It tasted like chewing on a bullion cube, but it was food and that meant fuel. The fuel to keep going and finish this, one way or another.

Cullen finished his cup, taking the time to drink up the last of the water. Never one to waste food, she caught that quick. Her first thought was that he knew starvation as well, but then she shook that off. No, he was a farm boy and raised as such. Clean your plate…there are starving children in the Free Marches. So very many.

“Where,” he began, drawing her out of her funk, “where are we going to sleep?”

After she ate the last of her meal, Kristen gestured him out of the truck. She had a few blankets she found in the back of the cab tucked under her arm but they were thin fleece. With a sigh, she pointed to the only bed available to them. It was not going to be comfortable, but it was better than trying to fit inside of the cab.

“You want to sleep out here?” Cullen gasped, tucking deeper into his coat. He pulled the hood up so the fur circled his face like a squirrel napping on his forehead.

Kristen yanked down the tailgate and hauled herself up. With a quick whip of the blanket, she placed it down on his side of the bed. If they both lay on their sides they wouldn’t have to touch while sleeping out here. “I rather doubt you’d fit in the cab,” she surmised, taking into account his stature.

“Probably,” he admitted while more easily hopped up into the bed, “but you…”

“No,” she shook her head. It may be a little bit warmer, but she didn’t deserve it. “I’ll be fine. It’s not supposed to dip below freezing tonight.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Cullen sighed in sarcasm. It was so unexpected she paused and whipped her head over at him.

“Here, you can sleep here, and I’ll take over on this one,” she scampered to the side, giving him plenty of room to lay down.

Kristen kept a small satchel of things under her arm, which she placed upon the wheel. Tucking onto the side, she cupped around it, a hand holding up her head while she stared at the interior paint job of the truck. Beside her, she felt Cullen stretch out onto the blanket.

An unending chill erupted off the metal, which the blanket did almost nothing to keep away, but it was all she had. It was all she could do anymore. She thought about leaving him at the gas station, about leaping into the truck and pulling away so he’d be safe. So he wouldn’t have to lay out in the cold in the middle of a field.
Why in the void didn’t she?

A low grumble caused her to turn. She halfway expected to spot thunder on the horizon, which
would really add to the situation, but it was Cullen. At her look, he stopped making the noise, but
she could feel more questions, more declarations of how she hurt him building in his throat. “I keep
wondering what was a lie. Going over everything you told me and trying to see if there was any
truth in it. Why’d you do it? Why break your supposed agency’s rules for me?”

Because you defended some mages in a bar when you didn’t have to. Because you were so sweet
sitting in your reliable old truck, fingers knit together with worry because I might be put off by a bit
of rain. Because…

Cullen answered for her, “I trapped you. I knew where you lived, and I came over to fix your
ironing board. To try and help, yet again.”

She winced a moment, her entire body curling inward. The man who’d been staring up at the stars
suddenly flipped over, catching on quickly. “What? What else are you hiding?”

“I broke it myself for the cover. The bruise was from…a crag, the first I fought. It swung a chain
at me and…” Even with only the glow of the moon she could see his entire face crumple. He
thought he’d been so gallant, rescuing her from a dangerous iron beast. But it was a lie, like all the
others.

Cullen snorted a moment into his hand, “So that’s why you fucked me. To try and distract me.”

No. Yes. At first kinda, but then… “I did it because I wanted to.”

He scoffed at that answer, back to not believing a damn thing she said, which only lifted up the
wrath in her voice. “Yes, I wanted to sleep with you, often. I made that choice, every single time. I
went in with open eyes because…” Her anger faded as she fiddled with the hoodie drawstring
laying flush on her chest.

Shifting, Cullen glared right at her hung down eyes, “Back to half truths and full lies? That’s what,
an hour of honesty? Some kind of record for you.”

“Why are you being such an ass to me all the time?” she snapped, her body beaten, her soul
broken. She wanted to punch and punish those that drove her into this box, but he was the only
person here.

“Because you don’t get it,” he hissed. “You don’t understand how badly you hurt me.”

“I don’t know?! You think I have no fucking idea how much this hurts? To have someone rip away
everything you have in life in a second? To lose your home, your job, your only connections to the
outside world because someone is using you? I am bleeding on the inside!” she shouted at him,
meaning it both metaphorically and literally. One of the Inquisition’s bullets was lodged into her
flesh. And there would be more, an unending array until she…until she finished it.

Cullen sneered, popping up fast to sit up and glower down at her, “So you know what betrayal feels
like? And you wonder why I’m mad at you.”

“Yes,” she gasped, her hand clawing at her throat a moment, “I know what it feels like. You win,
okay. It’s an unending wave of acid against my soul and I hate myself even more for putting you
through it!”

Tears sprung in her eyes at the confession while Cullen staggered away a moment. She didn’t care.
Wiping away the evidence fast, she flipped onto her side and growled to the night wind, “I hate that I had to hurt you, that I drenched you in the same fear as I’m under, the same loss. And I also know that if I had to do it over, I’d have done the same damn thing because I’m so fucking weak. Okay?”

There was no answer from him for her last outburst, but she heard the truck shift as he lay back on his blanket. Kristen dug tighter into her fetal position, wishing she could poof away. But that wasn’t an answer. The world needed her one last time. One last mission before she could walk off that damn cliff. Not that anyone would miss her.

Reaching into the bag, she unearthed a small handheld radio that ran on batteries. Blindly, she passed it back to Cullen who sputtered in confusion, “What’s this for? We have the truck.”

“If you can’t sleep, or if the bad stuff starts up again. So you have noise to help. Best I could do,” she muttered, both hands piled under her head as she tried to will herself into a painfully cold slumber.

It took a moment before Cullen spoke a simple, “Oh.” She heard the little radio land onto something, probably the wheel on his side. He didn’t turn it on, maybe he’d need it later. Maybe he wouldn’t. Either way it was better for him to not suffer.

“Kristen,” he whispered through the night air. “Was there anything, a moment or night when we were together that was real? That there were no lies?”

“Pasta,” she said with certainty. “When I taught you how to make pasta sauce.” Because she wanted to give him something good for his life. Because she wanted to be herself for one night.

The night’s wind rustled through the stalks, a haunting sound that could have caused chills in the most stalwart person. Her body trembled so hard the truck started to rock. She tried to bite down on it, to think of a warm place, a happy place in the world, but nothing would come.

“Are you cold?” he asked, his voice soft.

“All that blood loss,” she snickered as if she should have seen this coming. “Hard to regulate body temperature when you’re down a few pints.” Kristen tried to bundle herself tighter into a ball, when an arm wrapped around her stomach. Her breath caught deep in her throat as she felt his warm chest press against her freezing back.

He clung to her stomach, his coat unzipped to drape partially over her side, while his chin grazed near her hair. A gulp erupted in her throat, Kristen unable to understand what he was doing. Why he was doing it. Tears erupted in her eyes. For once, she didn’t shake them off. Didn’t bury them away. While the man she hurt beyond measure clung to her to keep her warm, she cried for every pain inside her soul.
The keys plummeted into her lap as she silenced the truck completely. Its hood pinged as the last of the heat off the motor ground to a halt while both of them stared ahead at the building. More or less in the middle of nowhere, they’d been driving up a lane lined with barbed wire fences for the past five hundred feet. She could feel Cullen bulging with questions, but he kept them all locked inside. When he turned to look over at her, she closed her eyes tight.

It was time. “Let’s go,” she said, sliding out of the truck. It didn’t matter that she slammed the door on her exit — if who she thought was here, he’d already know the second she arrived. And what if it isn’t him? What if he sold her out? Or forgot completely.

No. He was far more likely to not take the bait than forget their promise from a lifetime ago. A very stupid promise made when she felt more childlike than she ever had. Kristen drew a hand to the holster over her shoulder. It obviously bulged against the hoodie, but she’d rather he know she came in armed than be surprised by it.

Cullen’s eyes drifted over to the gun and he sighed, “Got anymore of those?”

She snorted and sighed.

“Here I was hoping you snatched up a few more guns at the gas station.”

“I’m afraid they’re not sold in vending machines…yet. In truth, I honestly expected to find a full rifle rack in the truck I borrowed.”

“Borrowed meaning stole?” he lifted up an eyebrow, the police man inside of him never far away. She did have every intention to return the truck…assuming it wasn’t shot to hell or crushed into a million pieces. That was a very tall order in her life.

Cullen glanced back at the resting black beast and he sighed, “I’m shocked there wasn’t anything
in there too. Seems the type to have an AR-15 around just ‘cause.”

The pair approached the silent building. Corrugated sheetmetal covered every inch, giving it the look of a random barn if one ignored the 10 foot tall fences topped in barbed wire. Not a lot of jumping cows one needs to keep locked in. Fields of grass swished in the cool winter winds, an ocean of brown surrounding them. It was deathly silent for miles, not even the crickets chirping. Though, there was a good chance all the insects in the area were long dead.

“I don’t see another car,” Cullen said.

“You wouldn’t,” was her response while bending down towards the door. She tugged on a seeming scrap of hammered on metal and a fancy keylock pad emerged into view. Plugging in the number, she heard the lock give way and tugged on the handle. Now or never, Inquisitor.

Maker, was she ready for this? Could she ever be ready for this?

Slipping the gun into her hand, she eased into the door first to take point. Cullen loomed behind her, taking the time to gently close the hinges so it didn’t slam shut. Smart anywhere else, but they never had the element of surprise.

Lights flipped on above them, humming as the power zoomed through their filaments. Cullen jabbed a finger up, “Is that…”

“From me using the keypad,” she explained. It wouldn’t entirely light up the area, but it kept them from stumbling around in the dark. Shadows elongated off of the tall shelves crammed full of blue barrels. That was what Cullen stared at, his head tipped up as he eyed them up.

“Let me guess, some secret toxic slime that will destroy all of civilization.”

She snorted a moment at the thought and shook her head. He had to be around here somewhere. “No, just chemicals. It’s a storage facility, one of dozens the agency uses to keep things we may not be able to easily order wholesale at a moment’s notice”

“Shame we didn’t walk into the armory,” he whispered near her ear. To draw close, Cullen gripped onto her arm, his warm breath whistling through her hair. She had to close her eyes tight to keep focused.

For the whole night he lay curled up beside her, both of them sharing body heat. When morning came, Cullen stumbled up first but before he did, his lips graced against the back of her head. She wasn’t supposed to feel it, to know, as to the world she looked as if she was still sleeping. But she’d been awake for nearly an hour playing over what was to come in her mind.

That little touch, no doubt born out of a tender moment before reality crashed onto his brain, kept doing things to her heart. She didn’t want to cling to it, to dare hope, but it kept dipping back in and taunting her. A bit like a schoolyard taunting a child for liking another.

“The armory’s on the other side of the country,” she whispered, turning her head a sliver to look up at him.

“Probably a lot harder to break into,” he muttered, easing back off of her. He hadn’t meant to draw close, only stumbled into it because he feared of being found.

She took a deep breath and sighed, “You’d be surprised.”

With her in the lead, they eased around the piles and piles of barrels. Papers bulging with fields of
text were taped to the outside of each one, but Kristen had no idea what was really inside. She was
no chemist, not even a scientist. Were there any redeemable skills in her? If anything she was a
wrecker, she’d come into someone’s life and wreck it. Usually it was on purpose and aimed at a
specific bad person, but sometimes…

“What if your contact isn’t here?” Cullen whispered. He’d been asking the same what if question
since they got into the truck this morning. She didn’t really have an answer because if this didn’t
work her choices were to storm HQ, which would be a certain death, or that was it. They didn’t
include her in any of this for a reason, whoever was behind the scenes knew her well enough to
fear she might just survive long enough to become a thorn.

Kristen eased her way out into the middle of the warehouse, her feet running into a drain in the
middle of the cement floor. She was starting to fear that Cullen may be right and she’d over
guessed in her assumptions. It could happen, no one could fully predict a person’s actions but still,
she’d…she wanted closure.

She moved to turn around and gesture back towards the front, when a light struck at the end of the
warehouse. Too tiny to be a torch, it glowed like fire as a pair of shoes stepped heel to toe towards
them. Kristen hefted up her gun, her arms locking into place, while she eyed up whoever was
coming towards them.

“Huh,” the gravely voice chuckled without any joy, smoke dribbling off his cigarette, “I almost
didn’t think you’d show.”

“Fenris,” she whispered to herself. Her arms relaxed a bit, but she didn’t drop the gun. His haunting
eyes trailed the barrel aimed at him, then darted up to her worn face.

“Morning, Inquisitor. I got your message,” he said with a shrug, his hands bunching up into the
pocket on his hoodie. It looked to the world as if he didn’t care that she had a gun on him, though
his eyes kept darting over to the man at her side and narrowing.

“I know, Fenris,” she said, the words burning in her throat. She had hours to practice what she’d
say to him, but any attempt to call him out for his treachery ended in her sputtering as if acid
burned up her throat. Even with proof in her pocket she still couldn’t believe it.

His shaggy white head tipped a moment in confusion, and she elaborated, “You set me up, called
me to watch as those men were turned into monsters.”

A breath snorted out of his lips, which he punctuated by taking another drag on his cigarette. The
smell permeated the air, sickly yellow tobacco unable to rise away in the chill. “And you, the best
of the best, the blighted Inquisitor we all turned to, failed to hit your target.”

“Solas didn’t do it. It was you, and whoever you’re working for.”

Fenris threw a hand up, “The same damn people you do.”

“Not anymore,” she hissed, as if it needed to be said.

He yanked the cigarette out of his lip and dropped it to the cement floor. Snuffing it out with his
heel, Fenris groaned, “Don’t say that. Even if…” Now his eyes burned at Cullen, “even if you’ve
broken some of our laws, there is still a place for you. There was always a place for you.”

A laugh rumbled up her gut, the gun swaying as she gave in to the hilarity. Here she thought she’d
be trying to talk sense into him, not the other way around. “Right, the same agency that wants me
dead.”
His nose scrunched up and he said, “You failed in your mission, we have to retrieve you and try again. Nothing more.”

No. He had to know. Surely they didn’t… “Oh for fuck’s sake,” she gasped, “You don’t know. They didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me? Tell me what?”

“Harding even knew but not you? Not their little wolf?”

Fenris launched towards her, a hand reaching for her arm, but Cullen was quick to lash out to stop him. Both men paused before either made contact and glared. “Tell me what?” he spat, his eyes shifting from the interloper back to her.

She shrugged, “I was to die accomplishing my mission.”

“What? No, no you would… You were to finish off Solas, and then the next phase of the plan would commence,” he said in shock, stumbling back to the lie he was told.

“The next phase being they’d blame a Free Marcher and start up another war. The dead Free Marcher mage who killed a billionaire in his own office.”

“That can’t be…that isn’t right.”

“Not right? I was fucking shot!” she jammed a hand towards her shoulder before putting both onto the butt of the gun to steady it.

“Because you took a bullet, for him.” Fenris hissed like an angry cat about to leap onto Cullen and start gouging his eyes out. “Every fight, every damn time we worked together, and not once have I seen you… But for him, for some,” the green flickered over to Cullen who stood deathly still, “no one, you risk your life.”

“I have my reasons,” she said cryptically.

Fenris snickered, his lips smashed into a line as he tipped his head. “I bet you do,” he turned and a withering agony shattered her eyes, “You always do.”

Kristen blanched, reading far more into that than perhaps even he wanted her to. “Fenris, I…” Shit. He knew, he knew she was the one to turn him in. To take away his one chance at freedom. She thought she was doing him a favor but now… Her eyes drifted over a moment to the only man she ever took a bullet for without orders. Now she understood fully why Fenris wanted to run and never look back.

“It was me,” she said, her cracked lips working over each other to try and swallow the shame, “I called the agency on you. On us escaping.”

He snorted once, the man lifting his tattooed hand up to his eyes as if seeing them for the first time. “I know.”

Was that how whoever was controlling him got him to turn on her? To turn on the very principles they swore to? Did they use vengeance and hatred to burn his heart away.

His green eyes focused on her and it wasn’t anger but eternal sadness in them. “I knew the second they caught us, Vhenan.”
“Why…?” she gasped. For two years she swallowed down the lie, did her damnedest to forget she might have hurt him and he knew the entire fucking time.

“Even if I hadn’t have figured it out, what’s the easiest way to break someone?”

Cut off their supply chain, and she was his. He’d needed her to get free, to finally sever the leash and escape into the world beyond. Without her support, Fenris was the wolf with a barbed collar. “I’m…” the words she kept repeating endlessly of late garbled in her throat like gravel, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You were right. I was troubled and needed correcting.”

She winced at the plain way he said that. Before, Fenris would sneer at the training, alway growing tired of being expected to leap when spoken to. What did they do to him? Why didn’t she pay closer attention? What would they do to her if they thought she stood a chance?

“Why are we here?” the other voice in the room finally spoke. It drew Fenris’ eyes right to him, the greens dicing through Cullen while she instinctively shifted closer as if to shield him.

Kristen glanced over at the man she dragged into this, noticing the grit in his jaw. He had his fingers locked into fists, the back turned to stone in the off chance he’d have to leap forward and attack Fenris. Cullen was not without strength, nor skill, but Fenris would pulverize him in four swings. Short as he may be, he was unending in an attack.

Closing her eyes, she whispered, “We don’t have to fight, Fenris.”

“That’s why you brought a gun?”

She snickered, “I’m certain you have one on you as well.”

Shrugging, he reached around and unearthed a smaller pistol. It never aimed at her, instead he lay it upon the ground. No doubt he expected her to do the same, but she wasn’t that stupid. “Who’s doing this? Who’s…making these monsters?”

“You know,” he folded his arms and tapped his foot. It was stupid but his pose was more reminiscent of when they’d be stuck in the rain waiting on a train. She had a gun on him, she was a fugitive he was sent to track down and either kill outright or bring in, and he acted as if nothing was wrong.

“No,” she shook her head hard, “I don’t know a damn thing because you were all collaborating to keep me in the dark.”

Fenris leaned closer a moment, just a tip on his ankles, but Cullen locked up tighter. “You’re not an idiot, Vhenan. Never were. You know, you just don’t want to admit it.”

“Maker fucking damn it,” she screamed, tears sprouting in her eyes. She was exhausted, her shoulder ached, and all she was getting from the closest thing she had to a friend in the agency was the run around. “Tell me what’s going on, now! Why are you doing this? I thought better of you, Fenris.”

“Better,” he stared down at his cigarette stub almost as if he regretted squashing it, “better?” Those green eyes flamed in anger, “What in my life, in the times we’ve shared, would ever convince you I am better?”

“Innocent people, hundreds of thousands of innocent people will die! It will be war, worse than
war. It’s…beyond a war crime. I can’t even…”

“They’re not people,” he sneered, his lip curling up to reveal his canine teeth, “they’re mages. They’re dangerous.”

She spat out, “All of them? Even children? The elderly?”

“Children grow into masked bombers, the elderly…well, who knows who they stepped on, crushed under heel in their climb to power.”

Her knuckles popped white as she gripped tighter to the gun, “You know what I am!”

That caused him to blink a moment, the rage inside washing clean as he stared anew at her. Fuck, no, he didn’t know. She never told him, she never told anyone. Only… Her peripheral vision drifted over to Cullen, doing her best to keep him in line should this go bad fast.

Fenris didn’t leap off his feet, didn’t smash a fist into her skull, or dig a thumb deep into her wound. He slowly rounded around to face her, rolling his tongue in his mouth. After a moment, he grabbed onto the edge of his sleeve and yanked it up. “These,” he pointed at the tattoos circling his arm, a few broken up by scars from the job, “they were burned onto me by mages. By the fucking regime that rules the Imperium.”

Gasping, she tried to hold her gun steady even while staring at the few marks to make up the whole she knew covered his entire body. The pain of receiving them had to be unimaginable, and she always assumed he chose them for whatever reason. Only once did she ask about his tattoos, before Jader but not by much. Her fingers traced the ones on his wrists while she moved to add on a tracking bracelet. He didn’t say anything to her questions then, just grunted and went on his way. That was enough to tell her to not ask because she wouldn’t like the answer.

Fenris tugged down his sleeve and sneered, “I know what mages are capable of, the depths of depravity they reach because they think it’s their Maker given right.”

“They’re not all bad, you can’t decide to kill every single man, woman, and child off because a few of them are evil,” she could feel the tears in her eyes, her voice slipping to hysterics. Her past, her heritage was something she ran from, ignored, but damn it all, she wasn’t about to let it be obliterated like this.

He twisted his shoe on the floor and sighed, “I’m not the one making the decision.”

“Following orders is no excuse,” she sneered, but the man laughed.

“Believe it or not, Inquisitor, I came to talk to you too. Called everyone else off the scent, because I thought you might be reachable,” his cold eyes drifted over to Cullen, the gravelly voice tumbling further down the quarry. “I had no concept of how far you’d fallen.”

She felt it in that moment, the emotion she’d been ignoring because it was easier than admitting it. It wasn’t just jealousy, it wasn’t just anger at her choosing someone else, it was pain. An agony erupted off of Fenris as his brow stormed with all the hurts he buried inside.

“I’m sorry,” she insisted, truly meaning it.

Snorting, he stood before them, right on top of his stubbed out cigarette. “I’m afraid sorry isn’t an answer in this business.” Reaching into his hoodie pocket, Fenris began to remove something when Kristen locked her aim in true to his heart.
“Stop, put your hands up or I will…” The bastard didn’t listen, but it wasn’t metal she saw sliding free. Glass with a clear liquid rested inside. “What is that?” she said, jerking the barrel towards it.

He glanced at the glass cylinder he held near his head and sighed, “A solution.”

“Would you stop being cryptic for two fucking seconds…?” she sighed, beyond weary of this song and dance.

“The gas in liquid form,” Fenris said and her jaw dropped.

“Don’t,” she began to tremble, her hands gyrating at the thought that he might… “You can’t.”

The man shrugged, “It’s rather simple to consume. One quick drink.”

“Fenris, please. That will…you know what will happen to you. You won’t be. Please don’t do this,” the tears were building on her cheeks, salt water threatening to spill down as she begged for him to see reason.

His thumb popped off the cap, which skittered onto the ground. She slammed her arms in place, honing her aim true to his heart. One shot, it’d put him down fast, clean. Maybe one more to the head to make certain he didn’t suffer, but…

“Why him?” Fenris’ voice drew her out. She stopped trying to steel her heart and felt it shattering all over again at the pain in his eyes. His lips drooped as if he gave himself the death sentence. “Why him,” Fenris repeated, looking over at Cullen, “and not me?”

Her lips opened but no sound could escape. She had no explanation to make him feel better, to keep him at her side. To turn him from this idiotic path that would end so many lives. To bloody well stay human. Damn it, she was trained to lie, but faking love was beyond her.

Fenris sighed, “As I feared.” His elbow began to tip the clear liquid towards his lips, but she rattled the gun to stop him.

“I don’t want to kill you,” she cried, her finger on the trigger. There was no backing down now. If he didn’t stop, toss it away, let her go about her business then…she had no choice.

His green eyes wandered over to hers and she saw the same look he wore in Jader. At the time, she had no idea what it was beyond a pain inside of his soul. Now she knew, it was love. The worst kind of love, when you can’t stop caring for someone even when you know doing so is your own doom.

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Fenris whispered, his hand tipping the bottle towards his lips. She froze, her body trapped in ice as her eyes slowly watched the cursed potion drop down his throat.

It was over. Fenris’ arm dropped, the vial shattering on the floor, but it didn’t matter. She had no choice. She had to kill him. Sweet Andraste, I am so sorry.

The Inquisitor lifted her arm and took aim. Green eyes flashed as he began to cough, the convulsions coming quick. One quick pull, that’s all it’d take to end this before it was impossible to take him down. Do it now, a mercy really. She took a breath and began to tug back on the trigger when darkness snapped over them.

Fuck! Kristen stumbled back on reflex, her eyes whipping up towards the ceiling. “What’s going on?” Cullen shouted. Her hand lashed over, grabbing tight to his while she scattered backwards.
If she had more than one clip she’d have tried emptying it into Fenris now, but in the darkness who knows what she’d hit or most likely miss. Shuffling fast, Kristen felt her back smash into a dozen of the plastic barrels before she began to slide towards a hiding place. “It’s the damn lights, they’re on a timer and we took too long.”

“Great,” Cullen sneered. The pair slid further along the maze of chemicals, both holding the breaths tight in their lungs. In the distance she could hear him suffering through the transformation. His body was being twisted and mutilated into a nearly un-killable creature. It didn’t make any sense why he waited until being in front of her to do it. She’d have finished him off in a second while the chemical did its work. Fenris had to know that, had to know that…

Kristen’s arm bounded into a barrel sending it skittering over the floor. She leapt back, right into Cullen who grabbed both her arms and hissed, “We need light.”

She’d hoped they could fumble their way out in the darkness, find the exit and then go from there but he was right. Neither of them knew the layout, they’d be stumbling around in this impenetrable maze for hours while whatever monster Fenris became hunted them. Could they see in the dark? Blessed Andraste, she had no idea what he was no capable of.

Tugging out the old flashlight she kept on her mission, Kristen hooked it to Cullen’s chest and pressed it on. His face lit up like he was about to tell a spooky story around a campfire, the yellow highlighting his amber concern. “Tell me you have a plan,” he all but begged.

“I have four shots,” she explained, “I have to use them wisely.”

“So no plan then.”

“Not really,” she grimaced, “but try to stay alive.” Her hand landed on his chest, trying to steady herself, when Cullen gripped onto the back of it. He held her tight to him, indecipherable thoughts rolling through his eyes.

A boom echoed through the warehouse, as if someone picked up a giant barrel of chemicals and hurled it against the wall. Fuck. He was coming. It was coming, whatever that thing was it wasn’t Fenris anymore. Kristen whipped around, her gun the only weapon they had. She tried to step in front of Cullen, but he seemed to think he could do some kind of damage.

The puny light pinned to his chest could only show a halo of light maybe thirty feet ahead. Shadows flickered across it, dancing as the continual sounds of barrels being tossed from one end of the warehouse to another shattered the air. He was fucking with them, tormenting them to try and throw her off. Shit. Was this thing as smart as Fenris too?

A shadow leapt right outside the halo of light, Kristen locking her aim in, but it vanished quickly. The entire warehouse fell silent, only their breaths and rising heartbeats breaking the air. She eased a step closer to where the shadow ran, when a barrel rammed into an entire shelf in the distance, the cacophony filling their ears. Both Cullen and Kristen turned to the left towards the sound…which was just what he wanted!

Turning, she caught on the edge of the light a shadow standing at the top of the shelves. It launched out of the darkness, arms spread out to try and impale them both. Kristen had no time to aim, she bent down and head butted Cullen right in the gut. The move was enough to throw him off from getting an elbow spike to the shoulder. Both of them fell to the floor, Fenris tumbling on top but seeming to do no damage.

Kristen collapsed on her side, her armed hand nearly pinned. His rancid breath wafted over her skin
causing it to prickle in disgust. But it wasn’t her the monster was aiming for. Its craggy red head whipped over towards Cullen who was splayed out on the ground. Wigging fast, she managed to whip the gun up towards his head — which was when Fenris leapt away. Moving twice as far as he could before, he landed just outside the light of the torch.

“Maker’s breath,” she gasped, barely able to suppress her horror at what stood before her. He’d bulked up at the transformation, his chest looking twice the size of what it had been before, while red spikes prodded out of not just his elbows and knees but his very hands. The face was gone, nothing of what she considered Fenris left, but those cursed tattoos. Somehow they remained on the surface of the rock, pulsing now a neon white from the smallest sliver of light.

Kristen hopped to her feet fast, the gun trying to find a target. “You know I can kill you,” she said and the creature twisted its head at her. Did it understand anything she said? “Cullen,” her free hand lashed out at the man on the ground, “up.”

Fenris made no move, didn’t even twitch his arms, until her hand clasped around Cullen’s and she got him to his feet. The creature pawed at the ground, a foot stamping so hard the concrete cracked below it. Fucking hell. Kristen tried to tug Cullen back behind her, but the monster sprang forward as if he had a rocket up his ass.

Landing right onto his stomach, Cullen oofed as he tumbled back to the ground. Fenris began to slash wildly with his spikes as if they were knives, dicing through the parka and shedding the inner padding onto the ground. Four shots. You only have four shots.

There was no damn one for her to take. He had his head tipped down tight, a line of thick spikes protecting the entire back of it. She’d need an eye, or his open mouth. Kristen held her breath, waiting for the moment, when Fenris hauled back both of his arms high and aimed them right at Cullen’s chest.

Gunshot ripped through the air, the blinding light of the fire compromising their sight a moment. She fired another, not abandoning her aim even as her eyes bleached themselves in the light. As the whiteness faded, she spotted that the tips of Fenris’ hands lay on the ground. The creature stared forlornly at them, as if it didn’t feel the pain but knew the loss. Understood it.

Until the spikes began to regrow.

Its head whipped up at her and she gulped. Only chance. Firing with a prayer, she watched the bullet strike his face before her vision seared, but as it faded she cursed. It only struck his cheek, biting off a chunk of the rock. The creature raised up off its legs and leapt towards her.

One bullet, only one Maker damn bullet left and it had to count. She had no time to find a true aim, not in the shadows that blotted away their puny light. Gritting her teeth, Kristen waited for the freight train to run her over. His head struck first, the face she shot at bashing into her sternum and knocking the wind fully out of her.

Gasping, Kristen fell back onto the concrete, by will of the Maker not smacking her head and falling unconscious. Rocky knees dug into her waist, pinching off more of the air, as the monster lingered above her. She fumbled for her gun, but realized the damn thing was thrown backwards. Kristen tipped her head back to spot it, but there was no way she could reach it. The monster had her fully pinned down.

She was helpless.

It drew its spike across her face, the split end slicing into her skin. She kept her composure until it
drifted downward to her shoulder. The spike drew longer and punctured right into her bullet wound. Kristen tipped her head back and screamed in agony, unable to fight away the pain searing through her nervous system. That was what it wanted, to watch them suffer, to linger in it. And she gave in, she…

Why wasn’t it attacking?

Willing her eyes open and to ignore the pain lodged in her shoulder she stared up into bright green eyes. The monster had stopped. No, Fenris had stopped. His mouth hung open as if he too was trying to scream. Was he still in there? Could he be saved?

The green eyes darted down to the arm spike that hurt her, panic rising at what he caused, when a small plastic barrel smashed into the back of his head. Roaring, the creature returned and he spun around to spy Cullen standing at the end of the alley with another smaller barrel of chemicals at the ready. Fenris hopped off of Kristen, landing easily on his feet. Once she was free, she scrabbled back for her gun while never taking her eyes off of Cullen.

He threw the next barrel, which bounded off of Fenris’ chest and landed as if it didn’t hurt. There was only one more remaining, then he was shit out of luck. Kristen latched onto her gun, prepared to do whatever she needed to. Even if it meant leaping in front of Fenris’ attack, he had to be stopped.

The creature threw back its head and roared. Another foot stomped down into the floor, cracking it open even further. Cullen’s eyes darted back to his only hope a moment before he threw the last barrel. Careening through the air, Fenris lashed his arm up and jammed his spike right through it. The monster began to laugh, a jaded sound of gravel inside a dryer, until liquid dribbled free of the blue impaled plastic.

Where it struck the creature’s body, bubbles formed and hissed, Fenris screaming in agony. He tried to rip the barrel off, but only punctured it with his other hand. More of the chemical doused his body, eroding away the rock that was also flesh. In agony, he spun around towards Kristen her eyes growing wide as blood spurted out of the wounds.

Tumbling to his knees, Fenris gulped in air, his green eyes filling with a plea. She stepped closer, the man offering up no resistance. Still keeping out of reach should instinct take over, she aimed for his head. “I’m sorry,” she whispered and pulled the trigger.

The bullet cut right through his eye, obliterating the soul binding greens. His head snapped back and the monster crumpled into a heap on the ground. Trembling, the hot gun fell out of her hands and crashed onto the ground. “I’m sorry!” she screamed at the corpse, wanting to fall with it. To lay down and let whatever burned him alive eat her too. Finally give into the flames that should have killed her years ago.

Arms scooped around her, tugging her face away from the dead body and into a ripped apart coat. Her tears dripped into the shredded remains as she clung tight to Cullen’s back. For awhile they stood like that, holding each other as she cried over loss. Not just Fenris, but every Maker damn loss in her life, and the unending more to come. He didn’t fight her on it, didn’t question why that monster seemed to care so, just held her tight.

In the middle of her sobbing, she cried out a single word. “Please.” Didn’t even know why, just had to say it. To try and beg for one good thing in this world. Cullen answered by burying his face in her hair.

As the ransacking sobs subsided, she looked up at him, “Are you hurt?”
“Nothing major, a few scratches is all,” he assessed as if he’d had any time to check with her clinging to him.

Nodding slowly, Kristen disentangled herself off of him and turned towards Fenris…the corpse of the man she thought was her friend. Even dead, the chemical spilled on him kept chewing through the armor exposing muscle and bone below. She gasped at the horror, chewing on her fingers while watching his body be flayed.

“You meant something to him?” Cullen asked while also telling.

“I didn’t realize how much,” she said, “I couldn’t be what he wanted me to.”

“Which was?”

Swallowing down the tears, she turned to the amber eyes, “His freedom.” She expected the gulf between them to widen with the knowledge that there’d been a sort-of other man, but Cullen softened. Maybe it was because she never shared in Fenris’ devotion, maybe it was because he tried to kill her, but Cullen seemed to understand her sorrow at not being right. Not being enough.

This wasn’t the time to mourn. Dipping down, she reached for the body. His hand gripped onto her arm, as if he was afraid she might leap onto Fenris or something, but it was the chemical jar she twisted around. Latching onto the label, she yanked it clean and held it to the light. “Well, seems we have our secret weapon against crags.”

Hydrochloric acid, highly concentrated mind you. It’d eat through normal human skin as well, but this stuff seemed to set off a chain reaction devouring whatever Fenris’ once tan flesh turned into. Folding the paper up tight, the Inquisitor dipped her head to her chest and whispered not a prayer but a hope. *May you find the freedom you searched for. I’m sorry I couldn’t be the one to give it to you.*

“Come on,” she twisted her head, trying to shake away the tears in her soul. “We need to find his car.”

Kristen broke into a run barely caring that she left the flashlight behind on Cullen. Luckily, he knew to keep pace, easing around the puddle of acid and dissolved skin to chase after. Only the sounds of their footsteps echoed through the warehouse as she headed towards the backdoor.

“If we’re quick we might find something to show where he came from. A clue at least.” Assuming the damn thing wasn’t hooked up to a dead man’s switch. She’d braced herself for the car explosion expecting it as Fenris faded from life but nothing came.

At the automated doors, she paused and rested her hand upon the wall. Without a thought, she reached behind and yanked the flash light off of Cullen. “Ah,” jamming on the big red button, the back bay doors began to rise.

“Did you know he’d be back here?” Cullen whispered.

“Suspected, didn’t know. I’m wondering if there’s anything I know anymore,” her chin slopped to her chest as she took in a breath. The scent lingered in her nose of decomposing flesh eaten away by acid.

Warm fingers curled over the nape of her neck and skirted along the shoulder. “It’s not…” he began when the doors finished rising and she spotted a mid-sized grey sedan sitting in the dirt lot right beyond them.
“I knew it,” she snapped her fingers and dashed forward. Cullen kept tight on her heels, his eyes peering over the car that sat alone.

While she sidled up to the door, he ran his hand over the hood, “Cold. Been here awhile.”

That didn’t surprise her in the least. Fenris had the backing of the agency to get here as fast as possible while she had… Her head lifted from the lock to take in the man that saved her life and accidentally gave them a fighting chance. And you nearly left him at the rest stop.

Shaking the thought away, she opened the door and Cullen gasped, “Wait! There could be boobytraps or…”

Her eyebrow lifted and he sighed, “And they’d have already gone off, right. Secret agent stuff.”

Kristen reached inside, expecting to find little. Fenris was thorough in removing evidence, though there was a pile of burger bags in the wheel well on the passenger side. Thorough but not neat by any means. He was always Maker awful at cleaning up bodies on site.

She began to reach for the burger bags, hoping for receipts in order to plot the course he took in driving out here, when her elbow bumped into the small pad left on the console. It woke up with a jolly greeting and Kristen’s jaw dropped. Still visible to anyone who found it was the GPS directions from wherever he set out from to the warehouse.

He didn’t erase it? That was standard, you did it without thinking automatic. Hard reset to wipe any proof of where you came from, especially from HQ, double especially from some secret base that’s running a counter current conspiracy to throw the world into war. What was he thinking?! In her shock, Kristen slipped into the driver’s seat, her hand curling over her forehead as she tried to understand. He gave her time, more than enough time to kill him. No way Fenris could have predicted the lights would go off at that second. He left this for her to find.

Blessed Maker, he wants her to win, to put a stop to this madness before the world explodes. Then why…?

“Kristen,” Cullen reached in through the open door, his face marred with concern.

She glanced up and felt cool tears drip down her cheeks. “There’s…” Kristen wiped at the mess and handed the pad towards him, “there’s reams of data on this. A direct path right back to the nest. With it I…we can storm it, we can put an end to the people who caused this.”

“He really must have thought he’d win,” Cullen mused while tucking the pad safely in his jacket. Her head shook slowly a moment as she realized all of his steps. Fenris hoped she’d change her mind, she’d finally side with him, whichever side that was. But he knew she wouldn’t, so he planned accordingly knowing she’d kill him. Maybe even hoping she would.

Blessed Andraste, what did they do to him to put him in such a bind?

“He’s on a very long leash that only he is unaware of.”

L’s words to her in the gym snapped back at her. How tight was the collar wrapped around his throat that death was his only escape? Her eyes burned at the near suicide of her friend that the agency forced upon her hand, made her accomplish.

“Pull the truck around,” Kristen ordered to Cullen. He nodded a moment as she passed him the keys before pausing.
“Are you…okay?” he asked.

“I will be,” she assured him. When it was over, one way or another, she’d find peace. Cullen nodded and took off running, the dirt of the lot spackling the air. Kristen quickly ripped everything out of the car she thought would be useful.

As they were both stepping into the truck, Kristen back at the wheel, she stared down at the fat black phone she pulled from Fenris’ glovebox. A direct line to his superiors. It wasn’t smart to taunt them, to tell them she was alive, but they’d figure it out soon enough. Besides, she owed it to one to give her a fighting chance at least.

Cracking open the phone, she hit redial and waited. It didn’t take long for an Orlesian accent to ask, “Yes?”

“You failed.”

“Inquisitor!” Leliana gasped, no doubt digging the phone tighter to her ear while ordering her people to begin the trace. “Sweet Andraste what are you doing?”

“What I have to, L. What’s right. I thought you use to know that, but sending F after me…” the Inquisitor dug her fingers tight into her thigh to work out her frustrations. When a warm palm scooped over the back, she nearly leapt out of her seat. She wasn’t used to having someone around for these calls. Cullen gripped tight but knew better than to say anything they might hear.

“Agent F was sent to find you, to determine what went wrong. Why you were…”

“I know. And soon the entire agency will know, once they check their memos,” she pressed a button on her phone, finally firing off a little package she left in the agency’s mail system. “Framing Solas for your dirty work was a mistake, but the biggest was assuming I’d be too cowled to go along with it.”

“What are you talking about? Inquisitor? In—”

She shut off the phone and hurled it out the window into the field. Maybe some will care, maybe some who knew about the case will start to wonder, maybe she’ll have help. Either way, they needed to know.

“Should…?” Cullen spoke up beside, drawing her attention to him. “Do you want to bury the body?”

“No,” she shook her head, starting up the truck. Whipping it around fast, she aimed it for the dirt road to lead onto a back highway. “They’ll hit this place fast, probably with a missile to wipe it off the map. There’s no point anyway.” Fenris was gone the moment he took that serum.

Dust rattled past the open windows, the truck handling worse now as it bounced on potholes. “What happens now?” Cullen asked. She’d offered him an out but he didn’t take it. She could do it again, but judging by the grit in his jaw and the burning blaze in his eye he’d refuse twice over this time.

The Inquisitor wrung her hands over the steering wheel and glared into the beyond, “We storm the castle and take every one of the bastard’s down.”

“Good.”

“But first,” she jabbed at her GPS that had mapped itself over Fenris’ route, “we need to make a
little stop.” While the truck burst onto the highway, ten barrels of hydrochloric acid rattled in the bed.
Cullen didn’t know what to expect on the next stop. He was still trying to pry the last of the gooey flesh that solidified on his shoes off when Kristen parked in front of a run-down shop in a dilapidated section of what used to be someone’s main street. “We’re here,” she called, hopping out of the truck. Maybe it was his imagination but he’d swear there was a lightness in her step now. Before she seemed to be gritting her teeth to get through every moment, but now with a purpose and a goal she was like a hurricane.

He hauled himself out and landed upon cracked bricks where…oh, someone let their dog take a shit. Wonderful. “We are?” He tried to not sound too concerned about how poorly this plan was going, but she lifted a smile and his cheeks burned.

“Come on,” reaching over she grabbed onto his fingers as if there hadn’t been a huge gulf wedged between them. Maybe she wanted to try to repair it instead of running away.

Did he?

Tightening up his grip, he trailed her through a grungy door with glass yellowing from the sun. It took a moment as the darkness enveloped the light, but when Cullen looked around he spotted junk. Endless shelves of junk hung up just out of reach with those tiny hand written price stickers dangling off by string. “We’re in a pawn shop?” he gasped.

Kristen shrugged, “Where else are you going to get guns?”

She was an international spy with an agency that could turn people into some kind of rock monster and her first thought for hardware was a pawn shop? Cullen drew his fingers over his forehead and tried to wick away the concern that he fell asleep in the truck and this was the best his mind could dream up. Pulling away from him, she moved through the racks of old bikes and a pile of barely used coffee machines, towards a glass desk. No doubt jewelry, who knew how much was legally
sold, rested inside the thick case.

Perched upon a stool, one hand flicking back and forth through a comic book, was a man. He had one leg resting on the countertop near the register but seemed to be unaware of anyone coming or going. Fine of features, he roughed his hand over the shaved section in his hair before bouncing on the stool.

“Hey Krem,” Kristen dropped both her hands beside the man’s boot and smiled.

The comic book lowered and the man’s eyes beamed over her, “Well, didn’t expect to be seeing you until after Satinalia. Little dust up with the old fairy himself?”

She snickered as if it was some long standing joke and sighed, “He in?”

“When ain’t he? Probably sitting on a huge pot taken from the rest. I saw them pull out the cards before it was my shift. In the back, you know how to get there,” Krem moved to return to his reading when Kristen jabbed a finger to circle around her mouth.

“I like the goatee. Is it new?”

He ruffled up the scruff a moment and smiled, “Yup. Though the boss says it makes my mouth look like a donkey’s anus.”

Kristen groaned and tossed her head back, “Why am I not surprised?” They seemed friendly, happily bantering like two old friends but the last old friend they encountered tried to kill them both. What was going on? If this Krem wasn’t part of the agency, who was he?

His eyes that’d been warm in her presence, snapped to a hard edge while sizing up Cullen, “See you brought someone with.”

“Yeah, I did.”

Krem stared deeper, Cullen tensing out of fear that a firefight might breakout, when he suddenly shrugged, “You know your business, Inquisitor.”

And just like that he drifted back to his world of monsters and heroes, a finger slowly turning the page. It wasn’t until Cullen stepped back that he noticed a glint of metal under the leg of the man’s jeans. A knife within easy reach while he kept his leg up. Smart. Wait? Was he and this supposed boss with the agency?

Turning to follow, Cullen grabbed onto Kirsten’s ear and asked, “Are we safe here?”

“As safe as we are anywhere,” was her cryptic answer.

“But they know who you are…” he jabbed a finger back at Krem who for all intents and purposes was lost to drawn pages of paper, but he could feel the eyes burning through it.

“Yeah,” she cupped the back of his hand a moment and pressed tight, “so do you. Come on, you’ll have to trust me.”

Without a clue, Cullen followed her trail through a beaded doorway. He expected to find a stockroom, maybe an old break room with water damaged carpet and a cigarette machine they couldn’t get rid of, but it was a blank space. All that was there was a door with no handle. She paused before it and sighed.
Stomping her foot a moment, Kristen finally called out, “Krem!”

“Yeah, sorry,” the man shouted from the counter. He must have pushed a button on his side as the door unlocked and swung inward.

Without a second thought, Kristen trudged down a set of stairs into who knew what. Cullen fiddled with the keys in his pocket, trying to shore himself up for another fight. They’d barely had time to assess their wounds before they were once again on the road. She was being extra cagey with so much acid sloshing around in the truck — whether that was a fear of local law enforcement or the agency themselves he wasn’t certain.

You’re being a coward, Rutherford. Get your ass down there. Dropping his arms into a resting pose that could easily become a punching one should the need arise, Cullen trailed the rickety stairs. He expected to find a grey basement with pipes prodding through the room and water continuously dribbling against stains as two rats gnawed on each other.

He couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Light brighter than any heavenly star assaulted his sight. Cullen reared back, his hand tossed up to try and shield him as he began to gaze around the pristine white basement. It glowed even brighter and cleaner than that mage’s surgery. Black shelves lined the walls that stretched quite a ways back, though they looked empty of anything.

Kristen reached over to cup his hand and tug him down far enough that he finally looked upon whoever this boss was. The man was gigantic, seeming to require two folding chairs to support his massive frame. Not in the fat way, more the you suspect he might be a demigod way. He also did not seem to believe in shirts; only a gun holster clung to his shaved, soft brown pecs. A handful of tattoos that looked like they meant something important filled in the rest of the bulging skin while he reached up to scratch his ear. For whatever reason a helmet with giant bull horns rested on his head, locked in tight by a chinstrap while he glanced around at his fellows. The eyepatch, somehow, was the least surprising part of the package.

A great pile of candy sat before him, which he seemed to be hoarding over like a dragon while staring at a hand of cards that looked to be miniaturized in his giant fist. Cullen gulped as he noticed there were others down here as well. They at least had the decency to put on a shirt, all dressed in a variation of tight blacks and cargo pants. A few turned towards the creaking of the stairs, but none made a move to greet them.

“Damn it, Stitches,” the giant man boomed, “I fold.”

“Told ya,” the supposed Stitches said while gathering a smaller pile of candy towards himself.

With his bit of gambling out of the way, the ox man hefted up his head and a great smile stretched wide enough to crack the scar on his face. “Boss!” he shouted, his eyes beaming right at Kristen.

Wait? Wasn’t he the boss? If she is, then…?

“Hi Bull,” she smiled, “and the rest of the crew.”

Hands waved towards her but they were all too focused on their next round to pay much attention. It was Bull who leapt off his bench and ran towards her. Cullen had to bite down the urge to leap in the way. Rather than pull Kristen into a hug, the man offered his meaty fist to her and she took it for a handshake.

“I’d ask how things are, but you’re here, and…” the eyes swiveled over to Cullen who felt himself
shrink another inch at the glower, “you brought company.”

Kristen rubbed her neck and sighed, “Yeah, things are indeed…”

“Total shite?” Bull offered and she winced a bit. “Worse than total shite? We talking apocalypse here, cause I can’t really get my hands on a nuke, not unless you give me a weeks time.”

A nuke? A nuclear warhead? In a pawn shop?

She was too busy glaring through thin air to notice Cullen’s eyes bulging at the thought, but the Bull sure did. He snickered a moment and returned to fawning over Kristen. “You had to have heard,” she said.

“Well,” he stretched his arms wide, lifting the muscles all along the shoulders up for a little hello, “seen talk that an Agent I went rogue. Which I find a little interesting since I only know one Agent I and while you’re fun at parties, you ain’t no rogue. That’s Skinner’s job.”

“Ha,” a woman with an Orlesian accent waved a hand until it rotated to flip the bird at him.

The bonhomie atmosphere fled in an instant as Bull leaned closer to Kristen to whisper, “So what’s really going on?”

Cullen wanted to yank her away to safety but she seemed unperturbed. They weren’t old lovers too, were they?

Rocking back and forth on her heels a moment, she sighed, “War.”

“Stop, start, or keep one going?”

“Civil,” she grimaced. “With your help hopefully guerrilla and over before anyone knows it started.”

“Okay,” the man nodded his patchy jaw, “whatcha need?”

She snickered, “What do you have?”

Turning on a dime, he hefted a remote out of the striped puffy pants he wore and pushed a button. All of the shelves lining the room began to rotate revealing a massive amount of weaponry, ammo, even armor. There was a pile of kevlar vests and some infrared goggles. What kind of pawn shop was this?

Kristen moved to reach for an assault rifle as if she choosing a box of tissue, when Bull held his hand out. Her gut bounced against it and he pointed right towards Cullen. “First, who’s that?”

Her head swiveled over to him and she threw on a smile. Cullen found he was stupidly pointing at himself as if he wasn’t the obvious outlier in this merry gang.

“Krem said he smelled bacon on him.”

Kristen sighed, “Krem, as always, is rather astute.”

“Sure, sure, except for that goatee? Did you see it. Dumbest fucking thing that man’s ever done and he once insisted we all take the entirety of the waking sea by boat instead of plane.”

“Why?”
“Scared of flying,” Bull chuckled.

“But you’re…”

“I know. I guess the big fancy commercial airplanes wet his hose. Tiny ones we jump out of are meh. Who knows, but you’re stalling,” he jabbed the accusing finger at Cullen, who was suddenly feeling very helpless surrounded by a gang of unknowns and their massive pile of guns.

She folded her arms tight to her chest and sighed, “How long have you known me?”

“Too fucking long and then a year,” Bull answered.

“Then trust me, okay. He’s fine,” her eyes softened as she glanced over to him. “He’s a friend.”

Cullen wanted to clarify that statement but Bull stomped around, “Since when do you have friends, since when do any of you people have friends? You’re like those lone animals that…ah!”

“Wolves, chief,” the other woman in the group threw out.

“Wolves travel in packs, Dalish.”

“She’s right, it’s a lone wolf,” Stitches helpfully added back, causing the giant man to part his hands to the sky as if hoping for salvation.

“Your language makes no sense. Just…take whatever you want. I assume it’ll be billed to the usual PO number.”

Kristen began to pick at a few of the guns on the wall, hefting them up and inspecting the scope the way a normal woman would produce in a grocery bin. Was that how she looked while picking out the onions and garlic? Testing them in her hand, running a hand over it to check its outer casing, and then…

“So,” a shoulder jabbed into Cullen’s side and he turned away from his little mental jaunt to a kitchen, a pot, and the both of them on the kitchen table. The Bull man had sidled up next making almost no sound. “You don’t look like one of them.”

“One of who?” he bristled, expecting to be called any manner of porcine related disparagement. That was about the only certainty on this trip.

“Those, like her, the Inquisition.”

His brows furrowed at that, “You’re not with them?” There was enough hardware down here to take down a city if they put their minds to it. No way half…shit, 75% of it was legal. He’d assumed the only way they could get away with such a thing was by being with the secret organization who answered to no one. Now…

Bull twisted his head back and forth, “With sounds a bit too long term for me, I prefer a more noncommittal relationship. You scratch my back, I bite yours.”

Cullen’s spine shuddered at the obvious innuendo dripping off the man’s lips. He wasn’t even bothering to hide it. Judging by his shirt situation he was unable to hide anything.

“Which has me wondering,” the ox of a man turned to Cullen and his lone eye glittered, “what she’s doing dragging you around. I mean, I’ve been in the field with the Inq before and it’s… Whew, like watching a tornado work. Precise but devastating. In all that time she never went and
got herself a partner.”

“She’s injured,” Cullen pointed out, jabbing a finger towards the shoulder she kept twisting out of the way of a bandolier of all things she draped over it. Maker’s breath, were they taking down a dangerous agency compound or stopping the bandits from stealing all of Ol’ Ma’s prize chickens?

“So I noticed, bullet to the shoulder,” Bull continued talking, his voice dropping low in a whisper. He didn’t want his men nor Kristen to hear this. “That’s a bodyguard wound, unless you’re going to tell me Inq got caught and was slowly tortured.”

His eyes flared open wide and he stared deep into Bull’s lone orb. “Has that happened before?” The panic was practically palpable in his tone, the words humming like a vengeful violin. Bull chuckled, his cheek lifting as Cullen realized he’d been got. A blush of embarrassment burned on his skin, his eyes dropping to the ground. They weren’t…they shouldn’t be anything. Couldn’t be? Despite the hours in the truck they didn’t talk about what after. Didn’t talk about much beyond the mission and…

Was he being a complete fool out of a desperate fear to just once have someone love him for himself, broken bits and all?

There were plenty of other women out there in the world. Ones that hadn’t lied to his face for three months. Ones that couldn’t field strip a rifle while blindfolded, or drive a car like she was in a video game. Or storm into his kitchen, groceries in hand, insisting he was learning how to cook whinging from him be damned.

What was she to him? A question, a pang in his broken heart, a never ending hunger? He was so busy being angry he forgot to stop to ask the next question. What now?

“Seen a lot of things in this world,” Bull said, his meaty hand slapping into Cullen’s back, “but I ain’t never seen a girl like her bring a boy home to meet mother.”

“Mother?” he spat. She told him her mother died. Was that another lie…?

“Metaphorically speaking here,” Bull thundered, “Read a damn book or something.” Shaking his head he stomped towards Kristen who held up an array of mines and asked the man’s opinion on which were still good.

She came into his life because he was easy pickings, a down and out cop who was recently divorced with nothing much on the horizon. But she stayed because…he was having trouble piecing that one together. Everyone seemed shocked that the fabled Inquisitor had a little lackey trailing behind. As if she never fell for anyone before, not even that skinny tattooed man.

In that damn moment, when he stood over her and…and was about to kill her, Cullen lost it. He was unarmed and used the only thing he had at his disposal. It was pure luck they survived, but he couldn’t let her die. His heart wouldn’t allow it. And her eyes trailed over to him from a gas mask, those same damn beguiling eyes that all but pinned him to the ground the moment they met. For all her playing the background character, he’d never forget those eyes.

Oh shit, she was speaking to him. Dashing over, Cullen drew a hand through his curls and gulped, “Um, yeah?”

“Grab whatever you want, preferably what works best. You were in the army so I assume you can handle some of the assault rifles on the back board.”

Her orders slipped readily now, the masque that once held her in place peeled away. Cullen nodded
slowly, already turning back to the part of his life he thought he stepped away from forever. In doing so, he caught Bull’s amused eye. The man heard the word army and was lifting up a thumb in support.

“What exactly are these guys?” he asked Kristen, the curiosity overwhelming him.

She shrugged, “Mercenaries.”

“They’re mercs?”

Bull slapped a hand to his chest, causing the muscles to bounce like a quarter against a hard mattress. “We do the shit no one else is willing to.”

“For three times the money!” Skinner added while hefting her drink up higher.

“Damn straight, ain’t no point in putting your boots on if there ain’t coin in it,” Bull added. “And if you can get coin from taking ‘em off too then that’s all the better.”

“Prostitute mercenaries?” Cullen asked, managing to keep up with the innuendo but he feared the jokes were flying over his head.

Bull slapped his cheeks and grabbed onto the horns, “When you’re this pretty why not go for broke?”

There were mercenaries hiding out in some piece of shit pawn shop in the middle of a nowhere town that could wipe out half of Sky City, and no one was the wiser. No one was keeping tabs on them. This was madness. There should be some kind of oversight, a check into…

Fingers slipped delicately into his clenched fist. One wormed its way in, then another. Slowly, she unfurled his hand until it lay flush with hers. Those eternal brown eyes beamed up at him the same as when he held her after the tattooed man died. “Cullen,” she breathed, her head drifting closer to him. He bent down on instinct, his toes tingling at the rising intimacy.

It wasn’t his lips she angled for as she paused to whisper, “Go and get some body armor that fits… please.” She’d been whispering that word a lot. Practically begging the world that something please happen, he just had no idea what. Glancing over at the kevlar vests all laid out like this was a store at a mall, his brain struck him hard.

She doesn’t want you to die, idiot. Forgetting the anger forever simmering in his gut, or the fear that they may not see the next dawn, or the pile of blood hungry mercenaries betting candy, Cullen pressed his lips to her cheek. It wasn’t for longer than a beat of a butterfly’s wings, but as he tugged back he watched her face turn beet red.

“Oh, okay,” he nodded, stepping away towards the vests. For some silly reason their hands remained tethered together until he walked too far. While rummaging to try and get a sense of size, he heard Kristen and Bull talking.

“There’s something else I need.”

“Name it, Boss?”

“You got anything that can spray acid? Preferably in rather large quantities.”

Bull tapped a finger to his lips and smiled, “What molarity?”
“16,” she threw out fast. Cullen blinked, having no concept of what they were talking about. She kept the chemical sheets close, maybe she read it over a few times and memorized it.

A loud slap echoed through the room, all heads whipping back to see Kristen wincing as Bull slightly leaned on her, “Ah Boss,” the man tugged on a storage rack hidden in the ceiling, “I’ve got just what you need.”
“How long until we get there?” despite being the one driving, Cullen turned to her to ask.

She’d fallen asleep for part of the trip, her head lolling against a small pillow bearing a kitten’s face on it. Maker take him, but watching her slumber in such innocence was enthralling — the grit in her face vanished for a few hours at least. Now, wide awake, Kristen tugged on a map.

At their last rest stop, she picked three out of the travel bureaus pile and stretched them across the cab of the truck while making measurements with her fingers. He wasn’t certain what she was doing, but it looked important. Or maybe it was a distraction, hard to say.

Taking one last run around the map, she sighed, “Another hour or so, depending on the clearly waning traffic.”

“Seems the agency prefers to keep its things from being seen.”

“Lot of land in the middle of nowhere that’s pretty easy to buy up and keep off of radar, or…” she shifted around her phone which had been insisting they were heading towards an open field since they left, “off any GPS.”

Cullen blinked, “How can they stay off satellite? It’s way up there.”

“There are a few ways to disguise a building, but the easiest is to hack the various data collection points and delete it. Contrary to the old aphorism computer data is not forever. It’s rather fragile all things considered.”

He shifted higher in his seat, his ass having fallen into a lulled slumber miles back. The crinkle of the map being refolded properly drew his attention and he watched her eyeing up a scrap of land left exposed and her phone. “That’s it,” Cullen mused to himself.
“What is?” her eyes beamed into his. In turning her head she revealed she had a pen stuffed behind her ear. Blessed Andraste that was rather adorable.

“You grabbed the maps to find a big open space of land,” he explained to the person who did it.

“Trying to get a sense of how far out the net would have been cast,” she explained. “Not entirely to the highway itself but it’d be close. Don’t want just anyone coming up your front drive unexpected.”

“That’s…” he was about to tell her that was smart, when he watched her face fall a moment.

She stuffed the map up into her bag, her eyes drifting around the pile of junk food wrappers on the floor. Silence pervaded, even drumming out the soft rock station they managed to pick up on the radio. After a few breaths in and out, her ragged voice said, “This is going to be dangerous. I…”

Those sparkling brown eyes that drew his attention from across the side of the road were pleading with him now, an eternal pain and fear inside that he could scarcely understand. “I don’t even know how bad. I’m pretty much going in blind and on hope, but… Look, I don’t know why you agreed to help me.”

Her face shifted to the side and she stared out the window at the scrub brush whipping past. Taking his fingers off the steering wheel, Cullen reached over to cup her hand. His thumb rubbed circles against the back of her hand while their fingers threaded together. “You don’t?” he whispered, his voice low.

Blinking madly a moment, her eyes honed in on the handhold as if she was terrified she was imagining it. Kristen placed her other hand over his and she squeezed it tight. “I can’t promise that you’ll survive this. I can’t even be sure this is winnable in any form.”

She was giving him an out. One last chance to leave him on the side of the road, hope he’d hitch his way back home and have a good enough excuse to resume his life where he left off at. A life where he’d never know if she survived, at least not until news out of the Free Marches reached him. Either way, he knew he’d never see her again if he walked away now.

It wasn’t a terrible option, he’d get to live. And it seemed to be weighing upon her soul that he was being pulled into this for good or ill. Maybe it’d be for the best if he finally stepped away.

Taking a slow breath, Cullen asked, “Do you want me to?” He’d been stubborn before, not wanting to leave her side until she told him the truth — all of it. Now…if she told him to go he would, because she seemed to know what she was doing.

Her fingers wrapped tighter in his soft grip and she gasped, “No, but…”

“Then I won’t,” he announced simply.

“Cullen, this isn’t just—”

“I know,” he said, gripping onto the wheel. “Believe me, I know.” His past hovered just behind his eyes, so many missions doled out without thought, so many he took on without concern for himself because… After Kinloch, after he was one of three to survive that massacre, he didn’t think he deserved it. For years the guilt pressed on his chest, at every briefing, every comrade’s funeral, in the dark, watching the sunrise. When he came home, he swore to himself that he’d fight to try living again.

Maybe, maybe this time it required him doing one more suicide run.
She nodded at his assessment. The fear didn’t entirely fade from her eyes, but she accepted his choice. For good or ill, they were in this together as long as both were capable of fighting.

A glint of sun rebounded off the rearview mirror and Cullen hissed. He moved to shift the mirror away when he heard it... sirens. Police sirens directly behind them, the blue and red lights whirring in a circle.

Kristen sat bolt upright, her eyes darting over to the dashboard, “How fast are you going?”

“Three under,” he gasped, his foot hovering towards the brake. The law abiding man in him screamed that he pull over, but that couldn’t happen.

“What the hell do they want?” she hissed, spinning around to glare out the back window.

“Maybe the fact we’re in a stolen truck comes to mind,” he growled, still waffling over the best course of action. If he stopped he feared that the cop in charge would have to be subdued somehow. And with so much riding on this, it couldn’t be done nicely.

“Floor it,” she ordered, giving him leave. “I don’t understand how they know, or care.”

“Ran the plates,” Cullen shrugged.

“On a truck doing nothing exciting,” she growled, “fucking quota system.” The truck roared ahead, picking up speed fast while the cop car remained in pace behind but not really gaining either.

His eyes were permanently glued to the rearview mirror, trying to pierce through to see who was inside, but it was too far back to make out. Damn it, they shouldn’t be drawing this much attention so close to the bunker. Surely they’d have a police blotter running and wonder about a truck trying to pull a runner on the highway near.

“Uh, Cullen,” Kristen cried, her head swiveling around from the one cop car behind them to the rising blockade ahead. Parked cars and barriers stretched clear across the road. “I don’t think they’re here because we stole the truck.”

“What do I do now?” he shouted.

“Stop!” she screamed, both their feet launching for the brake. The pile of parked cars and pylons came whipping over the top of the hill fast. Uncertain if he’d stop in time or accidentally maim who knew how many waiting, Cullen yanked the wheel to the left and sent the truck dropping towards a ditch. At the speed they were going, it rebounded fast and shot into a field, mowing down the last of the corn stalks. Withered ears of corn slapped into the windshield as the grill shredded apart their home.

“Come on, you piece of shit,” he shouted at the damn thing, “stop!”

Willing as much power through his foot as he could, Cullen twisted the wheel to the left just as the truck’s momentum finally gave out and it halted in its gorged out tire tracks. They made it maybe fifty feet from the cop line, where a dozen men and women in blue were slipping into the cornfield to give chase.

“We could run,” he said.

“No,” Kristen yanked out her well loaded pistol and cocked it, “we can’t.”

“What…” Cullen’s lip wobbled. She couldn’t be serious, they couldn’t murder all of these people
“Normally, I’d take the fall and wait for the agency to get me out of jail. But right now that’d be a death sentence,” she explained fast, her eyes narrowing to that grit. “So here’s the plan…”

A great whine broke up whatever she was going to say next as someone turned on a bullhorn. The next words spoken caused Cullen’s heart to drop into his stomach.

“Officer Rutherford, could you please exit the vehicle? Preferably without shooting anyone.”

He had to be imagining it, it couldn’t be. Before Kristen had a chance to grab his arm and keep him in place, Cullen threw open the door and stood on the step. Turning his head slowly he eyed up the dark brown hair, always cut short, on the woman in a uniform. She paused a few meters away, the bullhorn tugging down off her lips — which were always pursed.

“Captain Pentaghast?” he whispered her name, still in disbelief. How in the seven rings was she here?

“Take another step and you’re going to be missing a foot,” Kristen ordered. She hopped onto the seat from her side, the butt of her gun landing hard against the truck’s roof.

Cullen whipped his head around and explained, “Wait, that’s my…Captain.”

“Yeah,” she let her eyes dart to him a moment before honing back on the woman advancing towards them, “so?”

Cassandra tipped her head a moment and folded her arms across her chest. She came unarmed, only the bullhorn out. “I take it you’re the Inquisitor…” That caused a growl to start in Kristen’s throat, the hammer coming back. Shit, if his boss knew then…was she in deep with the agency? Were they all?

Seeming unaware of the thin line she was walking, the Captain continued, “that Solas informed me about.”

Her aim didn’t waver but Kristen looked up from the notch in her gun, “You expect me to believe that?”

“Believe what?” Cullen whipped back to her, really praying she didn’t fire. Even if it was a warning shot the damn thing would nick rather close to him. “What the void is going on?”

“Simple,” Kristen popped her lips, “your Captain is claiming that she’s the leak.”

He snorted at the thought, “Captain Pentaghast is one of the most duty bound people I’ve ever met.”

“Well, the other option is works for the agency. So you pick which is worse.”

Cassandra remained firmly entrenched in the ground, none of the other police flocking towards her. “I am no leak, nor do I have anything to do with this agency you speak of. Solas, a well regarded business man by some, and citizen of the city, approached me with some interesting information. He was concerned that there was a shadowy organization funneling funds through his accounts and making use of his warehouses. Wanting the matter dealt with outside of the press, he came to the police quietly.”

“Prove it,” Kristen shouted.
The captain rolled her eyes, but fished out a phone. Jabbing a button she drew up a small video. At such a distance all they could make out was that it was in black and white. Whatever was happening was beyond him but he caught Kristen blowing air through her lips. “Don’t blighted show me Solas’ footage.”

“Then what?” Cassandra shouted back, clearly growing more exhausted with this standoff. She was making a motion for Cullen to subdue Kristen, but he was unwilling to try. There was a leak of some sort in his own station, but who was to say there weren’t two and that his Captain could be working for the agency. Also, he rather doubted that even injured he could easily take Kristen down. Seeing her fight more than once had him concerned.

“Call off your dogs, then we’ll talk,” Kristen said, the gun still ready to kill.

Scratching her forehead, Cassandra pushed on the radio and gave a command. Some must have argued as she suddenly shouted, “Because I gave an order!” Every man and woman scattered at that, leaping into their cars and hiding in the dashboards. “There,” she parted her hands and lifted her chin, her eyes glaring directly into Kristen’s. “Your turn.”

“Fine,” she yanked the gun off the roof of the car, “But this isn’t going away.” She kept it aimed at the ground, though still in reach should she need to fire fast.

Crossing the DMZ quickly, Captain Pentaghast watched as Cullen slipped out of the truck onto the ground and Kristen bolted one foot onto the bed, another on the roof and landed before him. Yeah, no way he was taking her down. Be like trying to tie up a cat.

Might be kinda fun to try though.

“You want to talk, bloody well talk,” she said, all business.

“About six months ago, as I said, Mr. Solas approached me in specific with his situation. We’ve been working together to try and unravel whoever or whatever was attempting to frame him.”

“How do you know he was being framed?” Kristen was quick to catch that.

“He told me,” Cassandra shrugged, “along with that footage. No doubt around the same time he told you. I thought his decision to risk his own neck incredibly idiotic and liable to get him killed but he seemed to think he could talk down the agent sent to kill him.” Her eyes drifted down across Kristen a moment and she sighed, “It seems I was mistaken.”

“Well, for what’s it worth, it was close,” she admitted and for a moment the captain snickered.

“What do you know about the Inquisition?”

“That they must be stopped, no matter the cost,” she said. “Those creatures they can turn men into is…abominable.”

Kristen nodded, both women in agreement, when her eyes drifted to the bed of the truck and she smiled, “We may have found a solution to that problem.”

“Does this mean you won’t kill me in cold blood?” the Captain suddenly said, causing Cullen to pale. How in the Maker’s name did his life suddenly turn into this?

“Depends,” Kristen mused, her shoulders still tight and arm extended in case she needed to whip her gun up from the ground.

“On what?”
“On how you found me in the first place.”

Cassandra’s eyes beamed not upon Kristen but Cullen, who gulped just as his brain slotted in the missing piece. “Officer Rutherford here called in.”

Shit. Crap. Damn it all! He felt Kristen’s piercing eyes trying to dig hooks into him, but he couldn’t face it. Babbling, he spoke up, “To Samson, on his private cell and…” Oh for fuck’s sake.

Cassandra gritted her teeth, “Who was kind enough to inform me you were yet alive. Not much information to go off of but enough.”

“You left the blighted phone on, didn’t you?” Kristen grumbled into her collar as if she was scolding a puppy for wetting a rug. He thought he shut it off but, there hadn’t been much time, and they were in a hurry running and…

Blighted Andraste, after all the shit he gave her for lying to him he went and did the same. Turned on her, called on her, could have gotten her killed if not for…for bloody well lucking out. She had to be fuming mad, no doubt was ready to chuck him back into the Captain’s arms to be dealt with and walk away forever. Not that he could blame her after that stunt.

Sucking in a deep breath, Cullen turned towards the woman. She was locked off, the full mask of the Inquisitor in place, until her brown eyes darted up to his and a great laugh burst from her lips. Blinking in confusion, Cullen tried to not take a step back because he’d trip on the truck and fall on his ass. Rubbing her free hand over her stomach, she belly laughed some more, strips of her hair shaking free from the pony tail as her shoulders twisted to match the mirth in her body.

“You’re…” he gulped, “not mad?”

“Sorry, sorry,” she gasped, trying to calm the laughter, “but it’s really fucking funny. You, calling your friend at work, sicks the damn police force on us complete with…” Turning to Cassandra she asked, “I assume you got here in a helicopter?”

The Captain nodded, her face showing how impressed she was by this strange, laughing woman’s quickness. Kristen continued, “Only way to catch up in time. And they just want to help. It’s so…shit, that’s hilarious.”

“I,” Cullen roughed up the back of his neck a moment, his nails gouging into the skin as he couldn’t escape the heat of embarrassment rising in him. “I didn’t mean to. I thought, wanted…”

“Someone to know you were alive,” Kristen finished, sobering up from her laughing fit in an instant. She didn’t touch him, but she shifted closer a moment, as if she had to let her shadow hold him.

“You’re not mad at me?” he sputtered, feeling the fool for asking.

“No,” she shook her head, “I can’t be. But if it’d turned out your boss was working for the agency and we got into a shootout on the road, yeah, I’d be rather pissed at the moment.”

Gulping, Cullen hung his head, “Fair enough.”

“One thing about this is bugging me though,” Kristen continued, her gun arm looking fully relaxed, “you knew he was alive, but how did you tie him to me?”

“Ignoring the fact he went onto the scene armed and vanished?” Cassandra spoke. Her voice was a bit more jovial than before, as if she found their little personal drama humorous as well. Oh Maker,
he should not have asked if a woman was mad at him in front of his boss.

Kristen gestured to the blockade that had to be planned for, “Plenty of people go missing at attack sites. Seems an awful lot of time and resources to waste on a maybe.”

Clasping her hands together, for a breath the Captain’s eyes darted over to Cullen and he read a conflicting spray of emotions in them. It seemed to be both embarrassment and pride. “When Rutherford vanished, I had a little peek into his emails. There were rather a lot talking about you. And a few pictures to match video footage.”

Kristen’s cheeks lit up bright pink and she stumbled back. Her spine bounced against the truck, but she didn’t even seem to notice. “Oh,” she muttered as if in shock that he’d ever talk to anyone about her, or share to his friends about her.

Biting on her lip, she glanced over at Cullen, her brows knit in confusion. He was as lost why this was a surprise. Maker’s breath, she really had never been with anyone. Not in a relationship, not in…not in love.

“Well,” Kristen twisted her head to the side, trying to make a loud crack to cover over the awkwardness. “All right.” With a slow hand, she holstered her pistol and glanced up at the Captain. “You seem to be on the up and up, for now.”

“What about the tap into the systems?” Cullen suddenly cried. “If the Captain knows we’re here, sent this many to find us, won’t the agency be aware we’re coming?” Her head tipped back in a groan and he felt shame rising in his stomach. That was his fault. One stupid phone call could be what got them all killed.

“You mean your little hacking job?” Cassandra asked. “Officially, a woman of your description was seen at the airport attempting to board a flight to Rivain. There are few who know of this job.”

“Blighted hell,” Kristen whistled. “Captain, you’re good. Have you ever thought about working for the Inquisition?”

Cassandra glared, “I prefer my place serving law and order, thank you very much.”

“Fair enough,” the spy amongst them clapped her hands together and shrugged, “Okay, I guess we have a bit of help taking down the bad guys and saving the world. Which is good, because I could only fit one missile launcher into the bed of the truck.”

“One…” Cassandra pivoted up on her toes and peered properly at the tarp they strung over their borrowed arsenal. “How in the blood of Andraste did you manage to acquire such an ordnance?” Her eyes shifted from the secret agent over to the man who in theory worked for her.

Cullen shrunk deeper into himself while Kristen smiled, “Family secret. Now, let’s get to work.”
They knew little of the building, Kristen left to gather what she could from accidental drone imagery and maps. Cassandra kept pumping her for more, specifically regarding any entrances or defenses, and didn’t seem happy to be told she knew nothing.

“You must have some concept…” the Captain ranted over the radio as their convoy booked it towards the next rendezvous point. While she kept her eyes on the road, she was constantly cringing and shouting at the damn thing that no, she didn’t. Did all cops know the inner workings of every case? Things slipped her by, many things. Too many, but it was up to her to right them.

Her eyes drifted off of the dust strewn road to spot the man sitting beside her. She expected the Captain to yank her officer away, slap him somewhere safe in the back of a police van and saddle Kristen with one of her men. But he didn’t even have to say a word about remaining where he began, just stepped into the passenger seat and buckled in as the convoy started up.

Sensing her sight on him, Cullen turned away from the escort ahead of them. His amber eyes beamed at her a moment and she smiled. She should thank him for sticking around this long, for giving her a chance when she didn’t deserve it because… It seemed less and less likely that she was walking away from this. Before it was guaranteed suicide mission, now… Now her only hope was that he got out, and could have that life he deserved.

“Here it comes,” she whispered, flipping off the radio. Not as if the Captain was about to shout anything new at her. She’d been running these kinds of raids since she was 18. Shit, the Inquisitor murdered a man with her bare hands before she ever used a tampon. Which was probably not something to mention to normal people.
“Yeah,” Cullen nodded. He didn’t seem terrified of the challenge ahead, nor was he pumped up the way some got. If anything he looked accepting of the next event. Good, bad, it had to happen.

“Thank you,” she said, her nose scrunching up to blot out a burn in her eyes. “For…for staying.”

Cullen smiled a moment and sighed, “I…” he dug into the back of his neck and shrugged, “I wanted to say the same to you.”

What? But she’d thrown his life into chaos, threatened its very existence, and used him. How could he possibly be grateful for her…? Time slowed, her heart beats caught mid thump as she lost herself into the softening lips and lovesick eyes. Even with a console stuffed with police paraphernalia between them, Cullen slid his entire chest closer and she matched him in kind.

Maker. How could she forget how damn handsome he was? More than that, it was like stepping into a cool shower after a hot run. The shock of how inviting his eyes were to her, how his lips lifted upwards to rouse her long dead heart. She could feel it throbbing harder and harder in her sternum. One hand as ballast on the steering wheel, she leaned for his gorgeous lips. His eyes slipped closed, mouth puckering, when out of the corner of her eye she caught a sudden blackness.

Slamming on the brakes fast, both of them rocketed forward against their seat belts courtesy of the convoy stopping out of nowhere. “What the fuck?” she shouted to herself, before remembering to flip on the radio.

“—answer! There’s a woman here asking to speak to the Inquisitor.”

Cullen dug his hands into fists and snorted out of his nose. This was before the drop zone, nearly three miles prior to the start of the compound. Were they already that on to them? Had this been a trap the entire time? His hand reached over and gripped onto hers, something passing his lips she couldn’t understand.

“Repeat, there is a red headed woman here asking to speak to the Inquisitor.”

Kristen snarled and yanked on the radio, “I will handle it. Everyone stay in the cars.”

“What are you…?” Cullen tried to stop her, but she yanked open the door and hopped out. It took her a minute to spot someone standing in a circle of black SUVs, but the sunlight burned into her spot of red like a beacon from a demon.

Flexing her knuckles, she stomped towards the woman who was fully surrounded by the cops. Not smart, she was deadliest at close range. Walking onto the scene, Kristen waved her hand, “Everyone get back into your vehicles. Now!”

“Belay that order,” the damn Captain sauntered out onto the scene. Foolishly, none of them had drawn a weapon. It wouldn’t save them, but it might give them enough time for one or two to escape.

Damn it! She was trying to save lives, not cost more and…

“Good afternoon, Inquisitor,” her orlesian accent cut through Kristen’s failsafes and she shuddered. Whipping her head over at the woman, she bared her teeth a moment and stepped into the ring.

“Leliana,” Kristen eyed up her outfit. A purple sash circled over a lot of grey, no doubt designed to disguise a lot of body armor. They said that the leaders could withstand five hits before suffering any damage. There was some kind of magical tech at their disposal that everyone else could only dream of. After the shit she’d seen, Kristen believed them.
“I came to talk,” Leliana said, her head pivoting. It was without a hood to obscure her features. No mask to hide her identity. Not even a small strip of fabric around her eyes. It was the nakedest she’d ever seen the woman who saved her life.

Nodding a moment, Kristen walked towards her and let her stance tighten. “That so?”

“There is much to…”

Kristen’s fist swung fast towards Leliana’s jaw, nearly smashing against it. But the woman was quick to dodge, her hand slamming up to punch into Kristen’s inner arm. She expected that move, expected so much from her mentor, from the only person who ever gave her a damn reason to get up in the morning.

Well, she had a new one now.

“I trusted you!” she screamed, her left jab rocketing up for L’s chest, while the right sailed into her chin. Both missed the target, the woman quickly blocking them with an unnatural ease.

“So you did,” L said, nodding her head slowly as if this was a sparring practice.

No. Not anymore. No more holding back, no more pretending, no more keeping her wings clipped. Snarling, Kristen screamed, “You think you can kill me?! Well fucking try!” Her foot lashed out, the toe jamming into Leliana’s thigh. It struck more than it should have, the old mentor failing to fully fall back.

At the lash back, Kristen’s calf fell within easy reach of her fingers. Digging into the old sheathe she kept there, her palm strangled the grip of a dagger. The next slice went wild, as much to show Leliana she was armed as anything. L reacted accordingly, weaving from the knife in play while keeping her arms up to try and disarm her.

“Talk to me, I. Do not behave in such a manner.” She fell back to chastising as if the training was all she knew, all she too was capable of.

Well, Kristen went off the rails and she wasn’t about to lock back onto them. Lunging forward, she drew her knife blade deep into what looked like Leliana’s chest. A few people gasped at that, no doubt assuming the woman came to them unarmored, but Kristen felt no flesh below. It struck nothing but padding and protection. That was what the masters surrounded them in, protection formed from the bodies of all the agents they happily tossed onto the pyre before them.

L grabbed onto Kristen’s wrist, pressure quickly shattering her death grip on the dagger. Gasping in pain, she released it, the hilt still plunged tight to Leliana’s chest. It looked almost comical, like one of those magic tricks. She’d have laughed if she wasn’t too busy throwing away L’s lightning fast punches.

“This is how you chose to behave? Like a rabid dog? You were taught better?” Leliana cried, her knuckles skimming against Kristen’s chin, hurling her nose back, and finally landing deep into her stomach. That caused Kristen to gasp in pain, her body doubling over as she clutched at it. Unable to take the pressure the woman put upon her, she tumbled to a knee.

In the distance she could hear Cullen crying her name and asking why the hell no one was stopping this. Sweet but it didn’t matter. L stood before her, the knife still in her chest as she folded her arms. “Is this what you hoped would happen when you behaved so?”

Her fingers splayed in the dirt tented up and Kristen’s head shot up. Hurling the sand into Leliana’s eyes, she leapt to her feet. Her left foot landed on Leliana’s calf, buckling it inward and no doubt
causing immense pain. With that springboard, she flew into the air, her body wrapping around behind the crumbling master. When she landed, her right foot smashed in L’s other leg and she grabbed onto her planted dagger.

Yanking it free, the Inquisitor drew it tight to Leliana’s neck. “Yes,” she hissed, her breath panting at the move while the woman in her arms went deathly still.

“How…?” No doubt blue eyes were calculating all the wrong moves, all the times she failed to anticipate Kristen’s attack, and coming up empty.

“Sacrifices have to be made, you of all people know that,” Kristen sneered, the blade ready to nick her throat at a moment’s notice. “But you’re never the ones doing the sacrificing. For all your talk about cutting off a hand to save a life, you fight as if you plan to see another sunrise. I never have.”

She was ready to end this, had been the moment she made the call, but her hand remained still with the knife’s edge a hair from ending a life. Leliana collapsed in her arms, the taut muscles softening to the unobtrusive so none would look her way. The exact same way she taught the Inquisitor to do. “You are right,” L whispered.

“I’m sorry, what?” she shook her head, certain she imagined that. “I’m what?”

“About many things, matters I should have kept my attention upon.” All around them, the police continued to shift precariously on their feet. They wanted to make a run for it, but most still seemed to be in shock at how Kristen ended that fight. “In my pocket, you’ll find it.”

“Find what?” she asked, her free fingers digging into Leliana’s arm instead of rifling into her pants.

“The reason I came.”

Her heart dropped in her chest, the mentor, the woman who gave her a second life held to her knife. She’d already killed one friend, what was another? Lost, Kristen’s eyes drifted out of the mass of black armor and helmets to find amber eyes. Cullen’s lips hung slack, perhaps as surprised at her moves as the rest, but when he felt her confused gaze he swallowed hard and nodded.

“Why did you call her?” he asked in the truck on the way to Bull’s. “Isn’t it a risk?”

She had no answer because she didn’t even know why. She just had to, had to give Leliana one more chance, even if it completely screwed her over in the end. Closing her eyes a moment, she dug into a flap and yanked free a USB drive.

“What’s on it?” Kristen asked even as she tossed it towards Cassandra. The captain caught it and huddled around with her IT guys.

Leliana sighed, her head dangling a moment as if she lost all the strength in her body. “Your only hope,” she said.

“Plans,” Cassandra announced, “detailed blueprints of the warehouse, or bunker, or whatever this place is.”

“I had no idea what M was up to,” Leliana said, “how long she’d been pulling strings, hiding things, convincing people to her side.”

Fenris…

“I should have been more vigilant. I should have stopped her long before.”
Damn fucking right you should have. This shouldn’t even have happened. They were supposed to save the world not destroy it. With a sigh, Kristen let her knife drop from Leliana’s throat and she shook her head. It felt like a wasp’s nest formed in her ears.

“You believe me?” L gasped in surprise. They were trained to disbelieve, to never put their faith in any but the system. With that system exposed as rotten through the core, there was nothing in this world left for her to cling to.

“No,” Kristen shrugged, “but I need you. It’s a different kind of trust.”

L tipped her head, “Sounds like the same one we always had.”

A snort broke from Kristen’s nose and she nodded, “Suppose so. What happened?”

“After your call, I confronted M,” the woman laced her fingers together in front of her chest as if being held at knife point was a slight bother.

“You…what? You just walked up to her and said, ‘Hey, what’s going on with the Inquisitor and all that red rock shit?’”

“Not in those precise words, but yes. She should not keep anything from me, but she did. The mere act of subterfuge was guilt, and it sent her racing to the only safe hole she had where I could not reach.”

“You cornered her,” Cassandra commented, the captain stepping in quick to try to take command. L’s icy eyes darted up the unexpected cop, but she didn’t turn away in a huff. “Inquisitor, I had no idea that she was sending you to your grave, nor her plans to try and eradicate so many mages in the Free Marches. If I did, I’d have stopped it all in an instant.”

The apology, if it could even be called that, felt hollow. Perhaps L was in on it but sensed which way the wind was blowing. It wasn’t beyond the realm for sides to bounce back and forth, but she was always on the side of saving the mages from their own torment while M preferred more draconian methods. Time may have pushed them both to the extremes.

“What have you brought us?” Kristen asked, sheathing away her dagger. The people circling them gave out a soft sigh at that move, as if they yet feared bloodshed. Leliana knew though that once Kristen gave up her position of power she’d never get it back.

“As I said, plans,” Cassandra continued, needing to bring it back around to her job. She was not a woman who liked people playing this all by ear. Both women turned to her in confusion before conspiring together.

“I gathered as much as I could about the security systems in place. It’s well canvassed, as you can no doubt see,” L directed her hand towards the piles of images tiled on the screen.

Kristen tugged off her glove and clicked through them until she found a handful of images. Cameras, turrets, pressure sensors, there was no Maker damn way someone was sneaking in through any door or window. Shit, even the roof had pressure sensors in case of an airdrop. She never could have managed on her own. They’d have known she was coming before she got out of the truck.

“There is another entrance,” L said, “one they can’t entirely close off.” She slid over and clicked upon a map of the area. Zooming in, she focused the screen upon a well.
“No,” the Inquisitor groaned, “not the bloody sewers.”

“Technically it is a waterway, not sewer…” L began, but I glared hard at that. Shrugging, with a small swagger on her lips, Leliana drew back up the blueprints of the building itself. “There is a pipe that runs directly under the building. They need it open in order to clean the floors… Whatever M’s been doing in there requires a lot of washing with bleach.”

Blood. That meant blood. Maker, how many people had to die before she perfected her monstrous cocktail?

“Let me guess,” the Inquisitor groaned, “we send a small infiltration team in through the sewer, they sneak in and find a way to open the front door.” It sounded so easy, but she knew a good thousand ways that those went wrong. One misplaced shadow, one unlucky person taking a break and it was instant chaos.

Her eyes darted over first to the Captain, who seemed to be agreeing, before landing on Leliana. The old mentor, the one who took her under her wing, scratched along her chin in thought before sighing, “No.”

“No?” Kristen blinked in surprise, “Then…why the pipe?”

“There can be no infiltration team, nor a sneak attack because M already knows you’re here.” L clicked a few more images before landing upon a clear satellite image of the Inquisitor in the truck. “How do you think I found you? Oh, and the police scramble, that was instrumental really.”

“Fuck!” Kristen kicked hard into the wheel of one of the SUVs. If they were scrambling that meant any means of entrance, including some drain in the floor, would be watched with a lot of guns.

“There is another answer,” Leliana said, drawing Kristen to narrow her eyes. “The reason I came myself. I will walk up to the front door and confront M in the flesh.”

“Ha,” the Inquisitor laughed at the idea, but L’s eyes didn’t waver. In all her time serving, the masters never entered the field. They might be near an operating base, but the real risk was left to agents. If the hierarchy failed, so would go the agency. For L to…to do this was beyond unprecedented, it was unthinkable. “You can’t be serious. Leliana, if she’s this far gone, she could kill you.”

“Probably,” L tipped her head a moment, her red hair tumbling to the other shoulder as she seemed to stare out across the horizon. The sun was preparing its descent, turning the fluffy clouds a striking pink and orange. “For too long I happily accepted the deaths of those that served under me, declared it for the greater good. Now, it is my turn to make that sacrifice.”

The Inquisitor gripped onto her arm, her heart caught in a vice. She’d been beside herself with rage thinking that the woman who rescued her had also betrayed her. Now she was willing to die for her? Her mouth ran dry at the thought while images of hugging Leliana floated in her brain. But she remained stoic, just her fingers ensconcing the woman’s bicep. It was all the affection she could manage.

“You will take that sewer entrance, alone,” Leliana ordered. “Break your way in while the rest of whatever monsters are inside are fully focused on us. All of us,” she raised her arms to include the rest of the cops standing around slack jawed. “We will have to fight as one.”

“I have some theories on where to form blockades,” Cassandra said. She didn’t seem entirely happy about the idea of L sacrificing herself, nor was she against it.
“Good,” Leliana smiled. No doubt she’d already marked down places on the blueprints. That was practically a nervous twitch for people in the agency once they were given a map. “Inquisitor,” L leaned closer to her, her voice drifting lower, “your job, your duty will be to bypass everyone else, everything else, and focus on taking M down. On finishing her and her operation once and for all.”

“Won’t she be busy with you?” she focused on those crystal blue eyes which folded to sadness.

“This far gone, I doubt there’s a shred of honor left inside of her. No, this fight shall be dirty beyond understanding. And you are our only hope.” Leliana squeezed tight to the Inquisitor’s shoulder to dig it in.

Cassandra looked up from the data and scoffed, “No pressure or anything.”

Funny, she didn’t even think of it in that terms. Since she was 17 she’d heard that. Get in there, get the job done, or you will fail and there will be deaths on your head. You didn’t stop being the only hope after one job, it trailed you like a vengeful ghost. Sucking in a breath, Kristen’s eyes darted back to the man standing beside his fellow police. Cullen looked out of place among them, no doubt due to the t-shirt and skinny jeans.

One more throw of the dice, all she had to do was make it to the other side to survive. To finally be free.

Closing her eyes, Kristen listened to the birdsong whispering around them. A swish of the last of the stalks rattled through the backroads of farmland where another dawn would rise. For most they wouldn’t even know there was a battle happening, certainly wouldn’t matter to their lives how it went. But their souls would feel it, would tarnish if they lost and so many graves were filled because of it. Only hope and all, no pressure.

Turning to L, she asked, “What must I do?”

Chapter End Notes

A couple of things. One, I have a new short story about Alistair confessing to the Warden that he’s a virgin. Lots of sweet then sexy stuff involved.

Now for the bad news. After Dragon Beat ends, you won't be hearing much from me...because Black Rose is publishing my book, Power! I have lots to do to get it ready, so there's not much time for writing fluffy fanfic. Thanks everyone for encouraging me!
She would never be clean again.

Her fist plummeted into something both wet and squishy, causing the Inquisitor to freeze. Don’t look. You don’t want to know what it is. She looked. Hair, matted together by blood, tried to cling to her fist. Shaking it off, she growled under her breath and pivoted the flashlight to shine ahead. And she thought getting into the well would be the hard part.

Ha, what’s so hard about down, it’s the long, meandering climb through someone’s tossed off refuse that’ll drive one insane. Closing her eyes tight, she scraped the matted bloody hair off on the carved out water system and kept on crawling. On occasion, the radio pinned to her shoulder would go off — the group getting into position. They weren’t close enough yet to the building, but judging by the orders to keep close and tight, M knew she had company.

Just have to finish crawling through this trash heap before the fireworks begin. Not a problem and…

A squelching noise broke from her hands and this time she followed her gut and didn’t look down. If she survived this she was due the hottest bath in one of those eternity tubs, overflowing with bubbles and no one to bother her for a day. If. Cute Inquisitor, when has there ever been an if?

Focus on the mission. While L and that police captain would rattle sabers outside of M’s gate, hopefully drawing attention forward, she was to puncture her way up into the back half of the wet lab. No doubt it’d take her some time to work through the guards hopefully caught off guard from her appearance. Seemed unlikely for M to have her office close to the wet work. She was never one to get her hands dirty unless specifically called upon.

There was a lot riding on chance and luck, so many ways all of this could fail and they’d have no backup, no b-plan. If she didn’t manage this then…she might as well have died in Solas’ office.
She moved to crawl forward, when a hand landed on her calf.

“Oh, sorry,” he called as if she’d mind. Turning her body around in the narrow confines, the flashlight lit upon Cullen’s face coddled by a helmet and protective mask. The latter hung low, allowing her to look at his scruffy cheeks and sweet lips.

“It’s okay, tight quarters. Glad I haven’t lost you in this,” she said while turning back to keep crawling.

At least she didn’t have to do this alone.

“So…” he’d been quiet and starkly professional on their trip into the well, but one couldn’t climb hand and knee through muck without needing something as a distraction. “Judging by the sneer when it was mentioned, I’m guessing you’ve been through sewers a lot.”

Kristen snorted, “Yeah, four. The worst was Val Royeaux, sweet merciful Maker the stench alone. I think it’s all the cheese they eat.” A laugh broke from the friendly darkness behind her, and she asked, “What about you? This your first time?”

“I chased a goose down a storm drain once.”

“A goose? Down a storm drain?” the walls were narrowing tighter to her shoulder. Good, because that meant they were getting closer and judging by the pain flashing in her shoulder she couldn’t take much more of this.

“It happens more often than you’d expect. Geese are…not smart but vile creatures,” the man spoke with the wisdom of a thousand wise men.

She laughed at that, “I’ll have to take your word for it. The only goose I deal with is roasted on a platter.”

“That’s the proper state of one,” he surmised with a smile in his voice. “You should meet some, at a farm, get to know…” The cracks broke apart their banter. Later plans were impossible to speak of, anything beyond the present didn’t exist because all that awaited both of their horizons was a giant question mark. She wished she could assure him, even if it was a lie, but it wouldn’t help. Probably wouldn’t help either of them, really.

Her hand pressed into the low ceiling skimming just above her head. She was about to warn Cullen of it, when she felt a rumbling above. “I think we’re getting close. I can feel something big moving.”

“Our side?” he asked, scurrying through the dark tunnel as fast as he could.

“Not sure. I’d rather it be their side so I know we’re close.”

“Understood,” he said with a nod.

Silence fell between them, but for once it didn’t feel like it was stuffed with barbed wire and broken glass. She splashed and squelched her way deeper and deeper into this tight spot, her shoulders getting wedged in further with each meter. Kristen groaned in pain, her wound shifting too far from its preferred state and dumping a truckload of pain into her system.

Cullen reacted instantly, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, just…” she tried to twist her arm around to coddle it, but it smacked straight into packed in
dirt. “Ah,” she patted it twice more, then grabbed onto the flashlight. “Ah ha!”

“What?” he came to a slow stop and glanced up with her.

Far in the distance, the tunnel’s unforgiving ceiling of dirt broke into a waffle pattern made out of light. “We’re here.”

“Okay,” Cullen nodded, “how do we get up there?”

There wasn’t much room, most people didn’t design their pipes so people could go scrambling through them for a few different reasons. But they could get one person up there, if she was careful. Reaching into her bag of goodies, she fished out the C4 and the sticky adhesive. “Give me a boost up,” she ordered, her head craned upward at her hope.

There really was no room, Cullen forced to press Kristen tighter and tighter into the packed dirt as he scrambled to his feet. In doing so, his leg wrapped around the outside of hers, his hip bone bounced into her side, and for a moment his chin grazed near her forehead before he got a grip. Uncertain what to do with his hands, he dug into the dirt and gulped.

“Does,” he sighed, “do you often wind up in such tight spaces on missions?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. They’d used her a duct crawler when she was a teenager.

“With other people?” his amber eyes honed in on her and both digging hands broke from their nervous scraping to land on her hips.

You’re holding explosives, you’re holding C4, do not bloody drop them. She had to repeat it a few times because the heat of his body threatened to overtake her, the breath from his lungs wiping away the sweat on her forehead.

“No,” she said slowly, her tongue tacking into her mouth, “I always worked alone.”

“Right,” Cullen winced. “This must be pretty awkward and…”

Hooking her elbows onto his shoulders, she staggered up onto her tiptoes. When her eyes met his on a level playing field, she smiled, “Not really. Now, up?”

He nodded madly, hands cinching up her waist. With a grunt, he hefted her upward into the tube. She skimmed about three feet higher into the air, but it was nowhere near enough. “Put me on your shoulders!”

“Okay,” he agreed before blanching, “How do I do that?” The hands that’d been coyly holding her waist drifted down to her hips. She giggled a bit in midair, trying to find a damn foothold to help, when Cullen hooked both under her ass. Hurling her up high, Kristen gasped in surprise as she flew through the dark tube until gravity claimed her. She expected to fall, her hands cradling the C4 to her chest, when his palms wrapped tight to the bottom of her shoes.

“Walk onto them,” Cullen commanded and she obeyed, finding safety on his shoulders.

In doing so, she felt a squish from below the soles and Kristen winced, “Sorry about the mess I’m leaving behind.”

“Believe me, I despise this shirt,” he sneered and she laughed.

Craning her head back, Kristen looked up to find the hate a good four feet above. “Fuck,” she
cursed, “it’s too far a reach.”

“What if we get a stick?” he suggested but she shook her head. No, more chatter was breaking over the line. They had to do this now or they may lose the opportunity. Wrapping her hands around the C4 and very stupid idea burned into her brain.

“I’m gonna jump it,” she said.

“You’ll…what?”

“I’m going to jump and plant the C4 before I fall.”

“And if you miss?” If she fell, if she dropped it, if it didn’t stick then…they’d be dead.

Her shoulders tightened as the taut band drew down to her thighs and calf muscles. “No choice,” she said, bunching deeper and eyeing up the perfect spot. One, two… Kristen leaped, her hands flying out fast. Come on, come on… She felt the grate graze her fingers and with all the oomph left in her, she jammed that adhesive as tight on as it would go.

Without the ability to fly, Kristen began to tumble back down towards Cullen’s shoulders while she kept an eye on the explosive. Her hands remained out, ready to catch and cradle it should the worst happen, but it seemed to be sticking. Fingers crossed and all.

Her landing was not a 10.0, her foot sliding off his back causing her head to nearly bounce off the wall. “Sorry, sorry,” Cullen kept babbling as he did his best to help wiggle her down off of him and towards the ground. Both of their heads remained craned up high, watching in terror to see if the C4 would fall on their heads and end them both. As it seemed happy to remain where it should, maybe they were safe. Maybe they were…

She’d wrapped her hands around his chest, her chin planted deep into a pec while her thighs bounced against his. Cullen too had his arms curled around her hips, the hands locked to the small of her back. It was rather intimate. “Um…” she began and he stumbled back. “We should get clear for whenever the order comes through.”

Maker’s breath, her cheeks were bright red. She could feel them trying to heat to a 1000 degrees in this cold earth. Thank Andraste for the darkness. Wafting a hand over them, the pair scurried further back into the tunnels while the Inquisitor gave the signal that they were ready.

At a small rocky ledge, Cullen sat, his legs crossed in front of him. Kristen scurried near, their knees and thighs touching as she dug out a double pair of earplugs. “For when I blow it,” she explained while passing them over.

He nodded in surprise. Was it because she thought so far ahead or because he hadn’t considered it? Cullen fished around in his pocket a moment and tugged out his keys of all things. Kristen watched in confusion, uncertain what they would do to help, when he tugged off a small scrap of metal and passed it to her.

At her obvious lost look, he explained, “It’s a bottle opener. For you. I thought…um, for the holidays and…” Amber eyes shifted over to hers and she gulped, her body frozen in place. “You might as well have it now. Sorry I didn’t wrap it.”

He gave her a gift? Her fingers wrapped tightly around the present, complete with corkscrew no less. It was a very thoughtful gift that he gave to someone who was a lie. Nodding her head, she bundled it safe into her back pocket and fell beside him.
This was it. The last push. The final climb to the end. Should she say something? Not anything moving, she had no concept of how to give a speech, but… Maker, she wanted to. To tell him that no matter what happened he helped her, before this, before her entire world exploded around her. He helped her find out that the world wasn’t so lonely and that made all the difference in thedas.

“Cul…”

“Here we go, people,” Cassandra’s voice cut over the radio, “We’ve got movement.”

The pair of them lifted their chins high, Kristen unraveling the detonator in her hand. “L is approaching the front gate and a…another woman is walking out. She’s in her mid fifties, surrounded by armed men. Has anyone seen sight of those rock monsters?”

They wouldn’t. Those would be kept locked up safe in cages. Because, she doubted even M could control them. Her radio rolled over and it picked up an orlesian accent, “This is how you greet me now, with armed guards?”

“Funny,” the other woman’s voice crackled over L’s radio, but it was always loud enough to be heard from every inch of thedas. “I was about to ask you the same, Leliana.”

“M Meredith,” L’s voice dropped cold, “What are you doing here?”

M sighed, “I could bullshit you with whatever cover story I last got you to swallow, but what’s the point? You know it, I know you it, so why pretend any further?”

“This is madness,” L hissed.

“Madness? You speak to me of madness. You are the one who lets dangerous criminals, known terrorists, receive succor and lodging upon our dime. Grant them our protection. And you dare to act as if I am mad.”

“We need them. We need them to track down others, to assist us, to try and plug the holes before…”

“Why plug the holes,” M said, “when you can simply blow up the dam and be done with it all?”

“I came to talk sense into you,” Leliana spat.

“And I knew you’d fail. You always were a soft touch, even if you wouldn’t admit it. We’re done here. Take your little piddly army back with you, L. Go into hiding. Claim the high ground. Do whatever it is you need to so you can sleep at night. You’re not stopping me.”

“You seem certain?”

Gunshots burst over the line, causing Kristen to lurch forward. Was that planned or…? Chaos erupted, the radios bounding about as the planned fight broke out. And here she was stuck in a sewer. Her hands clenched into fists as the first sounds of pain, of instruments of death striking targets broke over the line. Glancing through her narrowed eyes, she caught the same in Cullen — his entire body taut like a rubber band.

Reaching over, she foolishly dropped her head against his chest as if they were cuddling on a couch while watching a movie. His chest was struggling to get in a breath through his clenched teeth, so she lifted up his arm and snuggled tighter. “Cullen…” Kristen whispered his name, but it seemed to have no affect. “Cullen, I… I don’t know what comes next, what will happen, but you should—I want you to know that I…” What? I want you to survive? I need you to trust me again? I cherish
you?

I love you.

Her jaw worked a moment, the thought catching in her throat, when his fingers curled over her jaw. “It’s okay,” he was sweating but seemed to have the minor attack under control. A forced smile lifted his cheeks, “I’ve got it now.”

Kristen moved to caress his cheek, when the light on her radio flashed green. Go time. The pair glanced at each other, their eyes meeting as they both nodded. Solemnly, they jammed the earplugs in while she hefted the detonator around in her fingers.

“Prepare yourself,” she shouted at him through the plugs. Cullen nodded twice, his hands gripping around her shoulders. Well, time to give M a really bad day.

Kristen moved to press down the button, when she turned in her place and caught Cullen’s lips with her own. He seemed shocked at the kiss, not having a chance to return the warmth and confounding hope inside of her before she whipped back around. Without any regrets, Kristen jammed on the button and the world exploded.

The shockwave tumbled her into his chest, face smacking into the bones of a shoulder before she got a grip. Dust rose up through the cavern, century old bricks shattered from one little stick of dynamite. Wiping her fingers over her eyes, she tried to shake away the ringing in her ears while gripping onto Cullen’s arm. He patted her hand telling her he was good to go.

Show time.

Dirt and debris fell from the explosion but it worked mostly how it was supposed to, rocketing upward and no doubt catching a lot of people off guard. Kristen dashed into the hole and craned her head upward. It was nothing but daylight now, the grate ripped and shredded — bones of rebar sticking out where the concrete exploded. Aiming her grappling hook, she shot up and got in a good, tight catch. With her shoes scrabbling into the sides, she began to climb upwards.

Below her, Cullen snatched onto the same rope. No doubt all he could see was her ass eclipsing freedom from the hole, but he’d have to trust her. Even with the earplugs in, she could hear people screaming orders. Most were scrambling to figure out what happened, alarms blaring. This was the total opposite of a black ops mission, but it would get them in and out quick.

“Line up…” a voice ordered, and she smiled. They were setting up the firing squad, prepared to fill with lead the first head to poke over the edge. Anchoring her feet into the torn apart mud, she fished into her vest. With her teeth, she yanked out two pins and hurled a twin set of grenades up over the ledge onto both sides of the hole.

Dipping her head down, Kristen waited while counting. One. “Oh shit, is that…?”

Two.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Three.

“Ru—”

The twin booms were less impressive than the C4 but she didn’t want to destroy their only means to reaching the top. While fires burst around them, Kristen leapt out of the hole. She swung the gun
around, laying down fire in a full circle to clear everyone back. Smoke shrouded them, blocking both sides from getting in a shot, as red and orange flames chewed through the ground. Must have hit an oil leak. Oops.

Screams ripped through what looked more like an airline hanger — the high beams of the roof exposed. Didn’t matter, she had to get to main processing fast. A hand lashed for the ground and Kristen reached over to give aid. “Come on,” she called, though it was hard to say if he could hear a word she said with all the chaos. Her nose burned — the scents of fire filling with not only oil but electronics and flesh. It was not a smell one easily forgot.

Cullen scrambled the last of the steps up, his arms slipped around the shotgun he insisted upon. Nodding at her that he was up and raring to go, Kristen turned to begin a run towards the assumed control station, when a knife came bounding for her. Deftly dodging from the attack, she spun the assault rifle around to try and pick off whoever was attacking, but he was quick.

Silver glinted through the fog as she barely slipped away from hacking and slashing towards her body. One she managed to bounce off with her rifle, sending the man skittering back, but he was too close to her for Cullen to get a shot off and too close for her to get her gun around in time. Damn it!

Swinging the gun back around by its strap, Kristen unarmed herself and waited. The shadow whipped through the fog, knife at the ready. Her forearm smashed into his armed one, holding the knife up high, while she whipped her body around and leapt onto his back.

“What the...” the man screamed at the move, trying to reach around to slash at his own back, but she dug her thumbs in tight to his eyeballs. Shrieking in pain, the knife tumbled as he reached up to grab onto her wrists. Fingernails scrabbled against thick armor, doing nothing but scuffing up the black cotton while she held him tight.

“Ten O’Clock!” Cullen shouted, drawing her attention to a line of figures setting up shop behind the treadwheel of a backhoe.

Snarling, Kristen whipped her gun back into her arms under the man’s armpit and took aim. Practically hidden behind him, the others couldn’t shoot without killing him first. The rapid fire rebounded through the smoke, lightning it up like vengeful fireflies, while sparks shot off the rusted yellow metal. “Cullen!” she shouted, trying to get him to safety, but the man had his own plans. While Kristen kept up her fire, holding the others at bay, he slunk around to the meat of the backhoe in order to flank them.

She lost sight, but when the first shell went off, she held her gunfire and her breath. The other shadows scattered, some running towards the right and deeper into the facility, but enough towards the man baring a shotgun. Too many?

Another blast echoed and then a grunt. Please be okay. Please...

One final shot burned through their breakout, its echoes reverberating to match the blaring klaxons. A thousand different scenarios played through her mind. What if they got the gun off him, bashed his skull in and shot him? What if he fell, or someone else snuck up behind and...?

Kristen trailed with the barrel of her gun, even as her ‘ride’ kept trying to throw her off. Peering over the top was a blonde head followed by a cautious amber eyes above the gas mask. Blessed Maker. She prayed her thanks while tipping her gun away. At that moment, the man who attacked with the knife tried to grab it. Stupid as the thing was still red hot.
He hissed in pain, and tired of all this, she wrapped her arms around his head and tugged fast. The snap was instant, the man’s legs crumpling to from a corpse as Kristen kicked off and landed safely. Cullen ran up to her, his armor covered in blood.

She clearly turned to it and he smiled, “Not mine. Theirs.”

Right. Also not the time to worry about injuries. They got themselves an opening, they needed to use it. “There,” she directed towards a raised platform overseeing whatever operations were hidden behind piles and piles of curtains. “That’s got to be the central core.”

Cullen tugged on his hair, seeming to finally notice that the helmet fell off at some point. “Hope you have a plan.”

“Yep,” she slotted the rifle safe into her shoulder and smirked, “run and gun. Stick behind me.” Her eyes wandered towards the tanks stuck to his back, on a normal field of battle he was at a disadvantage but if and when this went bad he was her only chance at survival.

Nodding fast, he adjusted the tank harness they got off Bull — the damn thing too big no matter what they did, and the pair broke out into a run. Sparks erupted around them, the fire finding its way towards anything it could consume. Maybe she wouldn’t even need to worry about killing the data, maybe the fire would finish it all first. On occasion, bullets sprayed out towards the mass of workers flitting about like terrified bees. She wasn’t trying to kill them, just keep them away. This isn’t your problem anymore, find something else to worry about.

Stairs. Fuck. More high ground they had to take. The control platform stretched high over their heads, practically unassailable which had to be where the top officials were all amassing. They’d have their orders to protect the data at all costs. Think.

Her eyes slid over to Cullen and she smiled. You’re not alone.

“I need you to take the stairs,” she ordered.

“The stairs?” he gasped, “That’s the first place they’ll look and shoot. We need to…”

“Take the fucking stairs,” she gritted, working the rifle back around to dangle from her shoulder. Without waiting for him to respond, Kristen ran for the edge of the scaffolding and leapt. She could hear Cullen asking what she was doing, but all her focus was on catching the bar stretched out against the back wall.

It rang like an aluminum bat striking a pipe, but she got a good grip and began to scurry upwards. They were kind enough to leave a climbable framework still set up at the back of the tower. Just… don’t fucking shoot at me.

Trying to put away the burn in her shoulder with every grip of her left hand, Kristen scrambled higher and higher. Her feet easily dug into the cross of bars. Where there were gaps, she’d have to run up the wall praying her stretch was wide enough. No doubt the people inside could hear the clanging or feel her shaking it around, but that was what the distraction was for.

Cullen, finally catching on to what she wanted, began to walk up the steps slowly. When she heard the fire of a shotgun, Kristen looked over from nearly a quarter of the way to the top. He stood with his legs dug tight into the platform, smoke pouring off the gun while a man in a black vest tumbled to the ground. Painted upon it was the Inquisition eye, the same one that had decorated her paychecks for sixteen years. And you’re killing these people. The same people who used to help you, work with you, save you and bring you home.
Maker, take mercy on them all.

Shaking away the foolish thoughts, Kristen leapt higher, her hand snagging on the last of the aluminum bars. Her body dangled helplessly as she realized that reaching the platform’s floor was too far for her. Fuck. What now? She could scurry on down, retry and…

Smoke poured out of the walled off staircase. Cullen would have only used one of those bombs if he was in trouble. No Maker damn time. Lifting her body as high as she could, she dug her elbows, then arms into the bar. The floor above skimmed near her head, but she needed to get higher. To find a way to…

Hello, someone was kind enough to leave a window open.

Her shoulder screamed that it was really going to stop working, shut down entirely and send her careening to the cement floor below. Just one more. That’s all I’m asking. One more jump.
Screaming curse words while her breath caught, she weaseled her gun onto the bar, hands scrabbling at the corrugated scrap metal that made a wall around the control room.

Biting onto her tongue, Kristen leapt onto her knees, then her feet, and finally got a hold of the window. Toes digging into the denting metal, she climbed her way higher until rolling right inside. Every single body was turned towards the staircase where a madman was about to emerge.
Squeezing fast, she took down five people from behind, filling their center of mass with lead while her eyes burned from the rising smoke. Tears flooded her vision, throwing off her attention from a pistol whipping in behind her.

Kristen could taste it being cocked, the air singing with blood. She moved to turn to face it, to try and kill whoever would get her first, when a gunshot reverberated through the air. Guts splattered onto her armor, the crimson sloshing clear up to her chest as the man about to kill her collapsed to his knees.

Her watering eyes drifted past him to trail the smoking shotgun and the gritting teeth of the man holding it. Sweet Maker, she’d never been more happy to have a partner. After both assessed the area, certain everyone was down, Cullen asked, “What now?”

Into her sack of goodies, Kristen returned, unearthing the final bomb left in her arsenal. This would end everything, one way or another. “Now, we end it,” she said. Maker take her but it’d been going better than she could have hoped. Hoping over the pile on control panels, she aimed for the fanciest looking computer and slapped the bomb to it. No way anyone was mining data from that after this was done.

They should leave. Hop back into the hole and run for it. Tell Leliana that… Kristen’s fingers drifted over the keyboard. Contained in there was all of M’s work, all of her insane plans, how she made these monsters. Maybe even a way to reverse it? She couldn’t save Fenris but if there were others, good people turned into those creatures and they didn’t even try to help them then what was the point?

Forgetting the alarms, she bent over and began to prod into the data.

“Kristen?” Cullen asked, the man still honing in on the point of entry. He wiped his gloved fingers over the mask, trying to clear away the smoke she barely registered anymore.

Data flew past — numbers, anatomical mumbo jumbo that’d make sense to a scientist but was another language for her. All of it meant little, there seemed to be no promise of a cure until… She spotted a file marked as “Agents.” Was this everyone that Meredith turned to her cause? A list of
all the sleepers they’d have to purge? That could be monumental in giving the Inquisition a fighting chance at recovery.

Kristen clicked it open, prepared to memorize the spreadsheet to the best of her knowledge, but it wasn’t what she expected. There were names, a lot of them, too many, but at the top was a description that turned her blood ice cold.

“Kristen, we have to go,” Cullen was digging into her right shoulder, trying to shake her away but her mind went blank. No. It couldn’t be true. It wasn’t…

The radio that’d been silent on her chest blared away, L’s secret channel shouting at her. “M has left the field of battle. I repeat, Meredith has abandoned the field and no doubt returned to find you. Get out of there, Inquisitor. Get out of there now!”

Blinking away the dread in her heart, she staggered back from the screen, prepared to run down the stairs, when the entire warehouse fell black. It was too late. The monster came home.
“We should run for it,” Cullen said, his fingers gripping tighter to her arm. She wanted to agree, to give him the out he clearly wanted to take now that the monster was back, but the new information changed everything. As long as M breathed, and there was a good chance she’d get out of an explosion, no one was safe. Certainly not her.

Red lights lifted around the edge of the hanger, bathing everything in bloody crimson to look like the gates of the void itself. A loud speaker erupted from behind them, and Kristen flinched at the aged but never very patient voice falling from it.

“I know you’re here. There’s no point in hiding the fact, Inquisitor.”

Clinging to Cullen, she peered through the glass separating them from the only run to freedom. Smoke curled around the floor like mists crawling over a moor. Something slowly walked through it, the black shadow ripping apart the fog until it paused and turned towards them.

Shit. Instinct caused her to yank Cullen down with as she fell to the ground. A high powered bullet shattered through the glass and embedded into the ceiling. “Cute,” M continued, “telling on me to
L. You always did have too much faith in her.”

Snarling, Kristen whipped up from her hiding spot, the rifle ready to rip through anything in its way, but the shadow was gone. Where was she if not…? Power, there had to be a power grid somewhere. Her fingers danced over the darkened console, revealing little, but something on the right of the hanger far from the door was drawing a lot of attention from the computers. She went to touch it for more information when the entire thing lit up.

“It ends now,” Meredith said with a satisfied snicker.

“Run!” Kristen screamed, hauling up Cullen by his collar. She dashed for the stairs, ready to leap down the incline but paused and turned. With two shots, she took down both of the speakers — silencing M’s gloating. It didn’t stop the howling though, this was no coyotes in the desert sands, nor wolves prowling the mountains. This howling was of the soul wrenching kind, as if someone just had all their trust and faith in the family ripped from their body in one go. She knew it well.

“What the fuck…?” Cullen shouted while they leapt down the first incline and headed towards the second.

“It’s—” she began to explain her theory, when she spotted a flash of red moving within the emergency lights. “Shit!” Twisting, she aimed her assault rifle towards the monster in the fog, firing at a rapid rate. The bullets bounded off rock flesh, ricocheting to tear through the machinery that created it. “Cullen!” she cried, her voice shattering in terror as the thing blinked off her attack. He didn’t answer right away, Kristen losing sight of him in the darkness as she had to stay focused on the monster. Lure it from their only hope and pray that…maybe she’d get lucky. Twisting against the bucking of the rifle, she tried to aim for the eyes, but the crag kept dodging. They’d been training them, teaching them to hide the only weak spot. Fuck.

Holding tight to her only hope, Kristen spun to come nearly eye to eye with the spiky monster snarling at her. She lifted the gun, only to have it slash its spiked arm down and saw through the barrel. Holy shit! It sparked in the dark, tumbling to pieces and leaving her completely defenseless. An inhuman smile lifted those rock lips, its body pulsing with hunger.

Drawing closer to her, it hefted its arm back ready to strike. Liquid erupted through the air and splattered all over the monster’s chest. The shrieking began in an instant, the creature swiping at the burn mark. Flesh bubbled and rotted of its core like peroxide poured onto a blood stain. Stumbling around in agony, the monster tore at its skin, trying to free itself but the acid kept eating deeper and deeper inside.

Cullen slowed up the spray, the pair watching it slowly die in agony. Reaching into her second holster, Kristen unearthed her pistol and aimed for the exposed muscle and meat of the monster. Two shots rang out through the warehouse and the crag fell to the ground, never to rise again.

“Well,” she panted, trying to step away from the pooling acid lest it eat her boots, “thank the Maker that…” All around them the howling increased exponentially.

“Get behind me,” Cullen ordered and she happily obeyed. Cranking the gun to wide spray, he began to blanket the area ahead of them in the hydrochloric acid. The creatures dashed forward at first, certain that they were impervious to damn near anything. When the first drops hit, three of them screamed in agony and scattered away.

Catching on quick that they weren’t so invulnerable after all, the crags danced just out of reach. Kristen tried to aim for their eyes. One got clipped, the bullet bursting through half the skull. It
took it partially down, but its wails continued as part of the wound kept regenerating over the hot slug in its head.

Cullen whipped backwards, trying to spray more of the creatures in the acid, but they were wising up fast and staying out of range. “Damn it, I need more pressure!”

Sitting on a rolling workstation was someone’s coffee cup and Kristen got an idea. Snatching it up fast, she thrust it at Cullen and ordered, “Fill it up.”

While the acid churned into the mug, she did her best to keep up a protective spray of bullets. “Here,” he shouted just as Kristen felt the last one fly out of her gun. Grabbing up the mug, she ran forward towards the cowering monsters. They chittered at the thought, their heads twisted to protect the eyes, while the spikes along the chest rose up to impale her.

Their sour breath reached her, an impossible heat wafting from their glowing bodies when she paused and like trying to kill a wicked witch, hurled the coffee mug. They didn’t run, let it strike and splash a good mess of acid right into their skin. Screaming filled the air, more of the plastic melting flesh scent overtaking her. Kristen quickly threw a new clip in her gun and took aim. Two bullets in the first monster, one in the other and both went down in a heap.

Three so far. How more could there possibly…?

A flash of red burned in her eyes as she turned her head. Flying through the air came a spike, not at her, but Cullen. He reacted instinctively, throwing up the spray nozzle to try and deflect it. Unfortunately, that sliced it right in half. Acid dribbled pathetically out of the end until it too ceased to fall.

“Shit!” he cried, hefting around the trustworthy shotgun and taking aim. Buckshot blackened the crimson armor, but it was nowhere near enough to damage it. Not thinking, barely aiming, Kristen leapt into the air.

Bouncing off a tipped over chair, then the desk, she drew the attention of the crag its eyes sliding towards the flying woman in question. That’s when she fired.

Its head jerked back, pink oozing from the eye socket as the monster tumbled to its knees and death. Kristen failed to take into account her landing, all her focus on taking the monster down. She crashed against Cullen, the man dropping the shotgun in order to cradle her close.

Their only weapon was gone, but there was more chittering in the distance. Red shadows loped through the fog, more of the once workers twisted and turned into these creatures. She felt arms holding her tight, as if he’d suddenly spin in place and take a spine through his chest to protect her.

“What do we do?” Cullen begged.

“We…we…” Think, damn it. You’re the blighted Inquisitor. You deal with this kind of crazy shit all the time. Get in, get out, live. Yes. “Pull out the canister.”

“What?”

“Pull out the canister,” she ordered, “and then hurl it high over your head.” Kristen hefted up his shotgun and began to walk towards the oncoming storm. She had to draw them all tight together, and what better way than offering perfect bait.

Firing a shot once into the crowd, she told them where she was. All the heads covered in spines and spikes twisted towards her while Cullen tried to yank out the tank. “That’s right. I know you all
want to kill me. Fucking everyone wants to kill me,” Kristen shouted. She fired another one and popped open the gun. Two smoking hot casings erupted backwards, landing with a plastic plop onto the ground.

Deliberately, she reloaded, watching the eyes glittering around her. Three. Four. Maybe six crags at once. Meredith was out of her mind. She really did want her dead. Well, the feeling was mutual.

“I’ve got it,” Cullen shouted.

Kristen jammed the butt of the gun safe against her shoulder. She kept the aim right at the advancing squad of monsters. Wait. Let them draw closer. They gnashed their teeth, but began to swarm. One risked dancing near, and upon receiving no blinding acid bath, the entire group surged as one.

“Now!”

Kristen jerked the gun up, her aim landing on the high fall of the canister flying overhead. Once it was in her sights, she fired, buckshot ripping apart the tank. Acid rained down upon the mass of monsters, all of them freezing in their tracks at this attack. As the canister fell in the middle, more of its death leeching into skin, Kristen fired with the shotgun. It sent two flying back.

Spent, she tossed the gun to the ground and resumed with her pistol. When a great wound would open on the skin, she’d take aim and put them down. Each one, even as they snarled and screamed, she’d give them whatever mercy was left in her soul. The final tried to crawl away from the pile of its dead brethren, its legs burning where the acid touched. A shot there wouldn’t kill it, but in twisting around, it turned its head right to Kristen.

Her last bullet wedged into its brain, the head smacking into the cement and the pile ceased moving. Sweet fucking Maker. She wanted to collapse into a pile of her own, but she couldn’t afford to. Hefting up the shotgun, Kristen ran back to Cullen and gave it back to him.

“We did it?” he asked, clearly hoping for her to give him the all clear. She pursed her lips, unable to take her eyes off the pile, the truth of what they all once were.

“We…” Kristen began when the radio chirped awake.

“Backup is requested now! Amass on L’s position. Repeat, any and all available backup must amass on L’s position.”

The pair glanced towards each other, his eyes burning like brandy in a white mug. She glanced towards the scruff and by the haunting light it almost looked strawberry blonde. “Captain sounds like she’s in trouble,” Cullen said, clearly wanting to run.

“Yeah,” Kristen nodded, running her fingers over her empty gun.

“Kristen?” he reached over for her, the shotgun falling open in his arms. She could so easily go with him, take down the last of M’s men with L. Maybe even save the captain and be some big hero. But that wouldn’t end this. Nothing would until Meredith was in the ground.

Shaking her head, trying to hide any tears from him, she smiled, “Go, help L and your Captain.”

“What…” Cullen’s jaw dropped, “What about you?”

Biting her lip, she turned towards the greatest power draw. That had to be where she was, no doubt preparing another round of her creations to destroy the world. “I’m gonna end the one that started
“Okay,” he nodded, “then I’ll follow…”

“No, really, we need L alive or all of this could be for nothing. I’ll be okay. It’s one woman.” She tried even harder to smile in order to assure him, but her eyes squeezed out another tear.

His gloved hand skirted against her cheek and she shuddered at the touch. “How’s your ammo situation? Good? I have a few more on me.”

Which he might need in order to survive this. Tucking her empty gun back into the holster, she smiled, “Yeah, I’m good. I’ve got it.”

Cullen seemed torn a moment, his hand not leaving her skin. Sucking in a slow breath, he whispered, “Good luck.”

“You too,” she said and slowly walked back from him. His hand hung in the air, seeming uncertain of what to do, while she let the anger and rage boil in her veins. Finish this. End it.

Just before Kristen was about to turn and run, she spun, grabbed onto Cullen’s shoulders and whispered in his ear. He blinked in confusion a moment and asked, “What was that?”

Smiling bitterly, she said, “My real name. I…I wanted someone on this Maker forsaken rock to know it.”

Before he could ask why she told him, Kristen dashed off into the darkness praying he got himself into the light. No monsters howled out of the shadows, the red light forming pockets of hell as they played against the fog. Somewhere a few fires yet burned, their acrid scent refusing to leave but it was getting contained. They were gaining control and if she didn’t do something soon, this could have all been for nothing.

Increasing her gait, Kristen eyed up the great power drain ahead. Another platform sat in the middle of an open room, computers embedded deep into immobile hunks of steel. That wasn’t what caught her breath. Circling them, barely hidden behind screens, were cages. An uncountable number of bars filled the entire back half, no doubt they’d once been stacked high with the monsters she and Cullen cut through.

Scientists had to have flocked around here, rushing to get things ready, to prep the monsters for the launch. Now, there was no one save the single tall blonde stomping around the area. She had a gun perched on her hip, but her blue eyes burned into the consoles as she jammed at buttons while overhead pipes whistled and whirred. The deadly toxin was being moved, pumped into somewhere else. Someone else.

She had to put a stop to this once and for all, even if…

Gripping tight to her empty gun, Kristen tried to dredge up the Inquisitor. The woman who walked the earth without living a footprint. Who touched no one and nothing and would give up her life without a thought. Regrets now, hopes for a happy ending, they’d only ruin her.

“Stop what you’re doing!” the Inquisitor shouted, leaping forward with her empty gun pointed at Meredith.

The woman looked up from her bank of computers and a smile twisted up her thin lips. She didn’t lift her hands, but she didn’t go for the gun either. “You are quite a pain in my side, but I shouldn’t expect no less from a woman brazen enough to name herself Inquisitor.”
Meredith slammed her fist into the console, sparks erupting from the keyboard and she turned to glare red eyes at the woman who was bluffing her way closer. “As if you deserved to have any control of this institution. As if you had any right to it. Declaring yourself defacto leader at barely sixteen. L was a fool to let you get away with it.”

“Step back now, or I will be forced to shoot you,” she ordered, her arm steady.

“What gives you the right now, false one?” M sneered. She seemed to have fully forgotten the rifle on her shoulder, her fists both clenching the air.

“False one? Are we prophets now? Do you expect your actions to be guided by some god?” the Inquisitor called out, inching ever closer to the monster. Fuck, if she’d just had one damn bullet left this could have been over.

M launched forward, closer to the Inquisitor and shouted so loud the rafters shook, “I serve the Maker!” Kristen gasped, the fog parted enough to reveal that red veins ripped through Meredith’s skin. They pulsed to match her heartbeat, the venom she created injected into herself. Why wasn’t she a monster yet? What was taking so long?

Smacking the gun harder into her hand, Kristen aimed it right at M’s head. The jaw twitched like a bird’s, all the humanity in her long gone. “You are a monster,” she sneered. “I know what you did. What you did to them,” her hand whipped out to encompass all of those too stupid and loyal under her command. “To all of us.”

An unholy laugh rolled through Meredith’s throat, her head tipped back as she pulled in more of the smoke into her lungs. “Sacrifices have to be made. You and every other agent are entrusted to me, your lives are mine to do with as I please.”

It was in her, same as every agent who’d even visited an agency doctor, who’d received stitches, who’d gotten a flu shot. The gas didn’t turn people into the crags, it started the reaction that was already inside of them. Inside of them all. They were walking bombs, about to be sent out to anywhere of M’s choose, gassed from a package or who knew what, and turned into unstoppable killing machines.

She’d been transforming them for years, building up her stocks until it was in them all. “You’re sick,” she hissed, “Mages are not the enemy.”

“Mages are the only enemy!” Meredith howled, her head tilted back, “They take, they wheedle, they chew and shred apart our lives like rats biting through concrete. Our only hope is to destroy them all once and for all.”

She was fully gone. Was there ever anything sane in M? Or had L been keeping her at bay for as long as she could? She had to end this, now. Breaking into a run, the Inquisitor leapt up high off the ground. Her gun fell from her fingers as she yanked the dagger off her belt and swung right for the mad woman’s arm.

Sparks erupted, the blade clanging as it struck no normal flesh. Rolling with it, the Inquisitor scampered out of the range, her feet landing on the computer dock while the monstrous woman paced about. Meredith hefted up her palm and squeezed tight. A massive spike ripped out of her shoulder to impale the sky. It should have been agony, but the woman only cackled.

“What the fuck are you?” the Inquisitor cried, her arm hefting the blade up as if she had a chance with it.
M’s head snapped at her, the gums withdrawn like a corpses to show gums glowing blood red. “The final mutation.” Her hand lashed for the Inquisitor, who leapt to the right. A spike erupted off the palm, embedding deep into the computer bank. Wires snagged around it, various fluids leaking to try and capture Meredith. It wouldn’t stop her, but it might be enough to slow her down.

Jamming her foot down, the Inquisitor spun hard, her knife drawn as it whipped in a circle to pierce Meredith’s cold heart. One stab, right through the ribs and... A clank trembled up her arm, and she watched in horror as the blade fell to the ground. The metal was crumpled like a piece of paper. Shit.

Whipping out of the fog, a hand smashed into the Inquisitor’s chin sending her flying through the air. Her head bashed into the edge of the console, blood weeping out of the wound. Scrabbling backwards, her hand trying to coddle the wound, she kept her eyes tight on the monster sprouting more spikes the longer it loomed above.

“Unlike all the rest,” Meredith hissed, “I keep my mind. My soul. But I am the impervious fist of the Maker. None shall stop me!”

She braced herself for a spike through her heart, but M turned from her and lay her fingers flat to the console. A new alarm broke through the facility, and all of the pipes around them began to woosh like a fog machine. “What...?” the Inquisitor tried to scrabble to her feet but her head was woozy. It was hard to think, to see with all the mist around.

M lifted an eyebrow, her body’s spikes shrinking and growing as she moved. It was horrifying to watch. “What am I doing? Flooding the entire place with gas. Turning all of you into something useful you pathetic waste of training,” she lashed her fist out and cupped it tight to the Inquisitor’s throat. All the air crumpled from her in an instant, her trachea nearly flattened in such power. “You were a disappointment the moment they pulled your scabby ass out of the pits.”

Her hand flapped around the back of her belt, hoping for anything, any final weapon. A grenade fell into her hands and she didn’t hesitate to pull the pin. She moved to drop it, when M caught the fucking thing and hurled it far through the warehouse. It exploded, the shockwave rippling apart the already shattered air and floor and giving the Inquisitor just enough time to jam both her legs onto M’s knee.

It must have caught something as the hand around her throat released and she fell to her legs. “Ha,” she rasped through the knot in her throat, “not so invulnerable huh?”

Meredith’s eyes burned bright red, her arms splaying out as she roared into the air. Before the Inquisitor could even scrabble to her feet, both hands clamped tight to her waist. The pressure was instantaneous, the monster straining to rip her right in half while hoisting her struggling body over its head.

With both fists, she tried to punch her way through the impenetrable rock, but nothing could break free. She was going to be torn in half. To have her torso tossed to the ground while ever single agent was turned into a monster. They could rip apart the police force who came to help and there wasn’t a fucking thing she could do to stop it. Nothing. There was no way to stop them without the damn acid. No way except... M tipped her head back to watch, her entire face opened wide, jaw laughing and tongue lapping the air.

Her muscles screamed, the sinew strained to a breaking point. One more tug and it’d rip, her internal organs sloshing through the hole. There was no more dagger, no gun. The Inquisitor pawed at her back pocket hoping for anything to fall into place when she felt it.
Lashing forward fast, she jammed the hook end of the bottle opener straight into Meredith’s eye. Digging under, the orb popped like a grape, the teeth of the opener eviscerating it while blood began to gush from the hole. The laughing jaw broke into screams, the monster trying to protect its one weak spot. Arms released off of the Inquisitor, but she dug her feet in to keep upright and pulled out the corkscrew.

With all the power left in her broken body, she drove that curled strip of metal straight through the eye socket and into M’s brain. The monster stumbled backwards, pitching into a table and sending glassware flying through the air. Still the Inquisitor kept it up, twisting the corkscrew deeper and deeper, trying to pulverize all of the monstrous grey matter until…

A whimper broke from the rock armored throat and then silence. The arms tumbled to the earth, her remaining eye staring through the unforgiving sky at nothing as Meredith finally died. Trembling and one giant walking bruise, the Inquisitor left her gift sticking out of the monster’s eye as she turned towards the bank of computers.

Her arm dangled down, the stress reopening her bullet wound and causing it to seize in pain. No time for that. She had to redirect the flow of the gas or everything was still lost. Jamming on a few buttons, she quickly switched it to head back towards the damn hell it came from. A pump started up, recycling it into the tanks, when a great whine erupted from behind her.

Spinning to look back, she spotted the explosion where her grenade went off and the massive tank that she killed. The gas had nowhere to go. Shit. There had to be an override switch, a redirecting or…

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted glass descending towards her like a protective dome. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Redirection in progress,” the computer hummed to itself. “Safely disposing in clean zone. Please remain holding button to cycle properly.”

It would come through here, where she would be trapped, forced to breathe in the monstrous gas and become one of those things until she died. An end for the Inquisitor. Not a noble one, but she was never guaranteed that with this lifestyle. Maybe it’d be quick, someone could shoot her in the eye and take her down. Or there was acid left back with the police. Would anyone really argue with her for giving in now?

Her fingers splayed over the controls, barely a breath passing as he mind whipped through all of that. Tipping away from the inevitability of death, it found itself lifting up a flicker of images; hands wrapped around the same game controller, lips pressed against her cheek, amber eyes telling her to come back.

Kristen lifted her head up and she screamed. “I am not fucking dying today!” Jamming through the controls to find a new solution, she watched in dread as the dome continued to fall. Her chances to escape were drawing ever closer, just a little bit.

“There!” she screamed, slamming her hand on a button to clear the air and pump the gas put through here back into the tanks. Ripping her head away from the computer screen where a timer began to roll through, she dashed for the fall of the rubber lip only to have her heart sink with.

Only a foot of clearance remained, nowhere near enough for her to make it through. She was done for.

No. She was never done, damn it! Screaming, she threw her left arm forward and hooked it under
the glass dome. The grinding of the gears bounded into her flesh, trying to close down on her. The pain was excruciating, but it gave her a small chance. Leeching her face forward, she reached with her mouth for a clean breath of air. Her only hope, maybe if the gas was diluted she wouldn’t… No, any breath could kill her. Hold it, survive.

“Computer,” her eyes darted up around the tubes as the sound of gushing gas began, “how long until the tanks are cleared?”

“Five minutes,” it chirped happily as if that wasn’t brain damage for her. As if she had no chance of making that.

Sucking in as big a breath to inflate her lungs as she could, Kristen prepared for the end. All around her, the pink gas began to descend. She felt it tickling against her skin, heavier than a fog and she was unable to flee it. Her face pressed into shattered glass, her trapped body only able to see a reflection of the warehouse beyond it.

*I'm sorry, Cullen. I tried, but…*

Tears obscured her sight, filling her eyes as if the sorrow was trying to protect them from the gas. It had to be her heartache, some final death throe of her brain that she spotted a silhouette reflected in the glass. A foolish hope, as all of her life had been.

The force of the gas knocked over a final coffee mug, which landed square onto Kristen’s battered body. Pain forced her to gasp in shock, all of that precious air escaping along with the tendrils of pink fog leeching free. So that was it. That was how it ended, because of a mug.

She closed her eyes, prepared to take in a breath to fill her aching lungs, when lips plunged onto hers. Life giving oxygen pressed through her body. She sucked it down gladly, while her eye opened enough to catch an amber one reflected in the broken glass.

“Three minutes and fifteen seconds until clear,” the computer chirped.

Kristen tried to lash out with her fingers, to explain what was happening, when his lips once again pressed to hers. The air was clean, but it was also loaded with CO2, her head was spinning. She ceased to be aware of time, of the thickness of the fog around her, of what she was doing. The lips kept returning, pressing more air, but she was barely able to take it in.

In the background, the computer proudly announced something, but her hearing was lost in the ocean, her sight melted to a puddle, all she knew were the warm lips trying to give her life. Then darkness.
White light and the soothing sound of a machine whirring back and forth flooded her senses. A massive groan began somewhere in her chest, spidered out to her limbs, and transformed to pain when it finally got to her brain. You may not be safe. You need to wake up and assess the situation. Her training tried to get her to leap to her feet, but her body screamed that it was crushed by a steamroller. Gripping onto the blanket around her chest, she popped open an eye. A cheap tv bolted to the wall/ceiling showed an elderly woman wearing an apron decorated in cats attempting to stuff a nug inside a turkey. Wynne’s Whims was mercifully on mute, Kristen’s brain catching on that the machine sound was coming from a floor polisher just outside the door.

Hospital. The smell struck her first, antiseptic and plastic scents always quick to overtake her. Struggling to sit up, Kristen dug her left hand into the bed and tried to use it to help her rise, only to have her body tip to the side. Confused, she glanced over and found a pile of bandages wrapped around her elbow. Nothing but space existed where her arm should have been.

“They had to remove it,” a sweet voice perked up from a chair beside her.

Kristen whipped her head over, bleary eyes honing in on the woman back under her purple hood. Leliana looked exhausted, even in the shadows the bags under her eyes were evident, but she was alive. They both were. Rubbing a hand under her chin, L continued, “There was too much damage from the dome crushing it. I’m sorry.”

She could still feel it, that weight pressing upon bone and flesh that was no longer attached. The phantom pains screamed at her to get it off her, but there was nothing to save. It should sting, cut to the quick that she’d lost an arm. She’d never be whole again. But she was alive, and Kristen didn’t expect to take another breath.

The gas.
“Am I…?” she whipped her head over at L who was clearly trying to hide away the gun she’d had trained on her. No one was certain what would wake.

Still, Leliana smiled, “No. Your plan worked, and you were able to suck in enough pure air to stay alive until the quarantine lifted. Though, not enough to stay conscious I’m afraid.”

Tipping her weary head into her hand, her only remaining hand, Kristen gulped a moment, “I thought you were in danger, they were amassing their forces to…”

L waved through that, “A final push, to rout out the last sticklers. There were quite a few who surrendered willingly, though if you hadn’t have stopped the gas it is doubtful anyone would be alive today.”

The compliment stung her skin, feeling as off as a too tight shirt. She rarely got them in her work. Had they really expected her to not do her duty to the end? Ha, duty. After what the Inquisition did to her? To them all?

“Did you destroy it?” she whispered, her eyes hooded.

L shifted in her seat, “Yes.”

“The research, the gas, the…the threat in our systems. Did you destroy it?”

Leliana licked her lips and took a moment, “I am no fool, Inquisitor. What Meredith was doing, what she managed to do, was unthinkable.”

“You say that so often, yet it was thought, it was done. It happened. It’s in me, same as everyone else who ever picked up the banner.”

“I know,” L said causing Kristen to gasp. She hadn’t figured it out until seeing the research, yet L…did she know the entire time? “M left some interesting data behind and I pieced it together. Then I blew it up, all the data, all the poisons, it is gone.”

Gone. As if one can stuff the toothpaste back into the tube. Someone else would learn of it, someone else would use it. But, maybe the Inquisition would be smarter. Maybe they’d be wiser and learn from this mistake, keep an eye on those they let grow to such fervid hatred instead of using it. Maybe. It was a lot of hope and little concrete.

“How are you feeling?” Leliana asked and Kristen snickered.

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“Wondering if I’m fit to serve?” she snorted once, then raised her new stump, “Minus a few bits.”

L folded her hands in her lap and scooted closer to the hospital bed. The brooch pinning her scarf in place banged into the metal scaffolding to keep people from falling out of the bed. Turning her head to the side a moment, she asked, “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Do you want to serve again? Is the…is whatever we can salvage of the Inquisition worth your time and effort?”

Her eyes that felt as if they’d been jabbed by a dental pick darted over to the arm. It lay flush on the bed, the elbow digging deeper, but she could feel her arm and hand. The scratch of the blanket playing through her fingers, the cold metal of the railing. It was all in her brain, even if she was
imagining it. There’d need to be a lot of time to get her up and running.

*Did she even want to bother?*

Kristen sighed, her eyes turning towards the window. Outside on the sill was a bird’s nest, a scrap of a thing that looked as if it had a few snatched latex gloves stuffed inside. Baby birds nestled under the blue fingers while the mother wren fed them.

When a warm hand landed on her shoulder, she didn’t flinch. Leliana, however, sighed, “I assumed as such.”

“Not as if I’m much good to you like this. One armed woman kinda stands out in a crowd,” she laughed, her one skill lost to her to keep herself alive. There were probably others, but that one struck her hardest.

“Inquisitor, we would find a place for you. M’s desk is certainly open.”

“No,” she shook her head wildly at the thought, “no, never. I don’t want to…” The disgust in her system faded as she turned to meet the crystal gaze of her friend, “I’m sorry Leliana, but I can’t. I can’t do this anymore. My time with the Inquisition is done.”

Her ruby lips lifted a moment in a half smile before L stood up from her chair, “I knew it was to be, but hoped…”

“Well, being chased by your colleagues, shot at, nearly killed Maker I forget how many times,” Kristen laughed to disguise the pain. There was a lot of it, and there’d probably be more once the full situation hit her.

Leliana paused at the door, no doubt ready to walk out and leave her to the wolves, “No, I knew after Ostwick. You severed ties with us, you just weren’t ready to admit it.” The woman cracked open the door and stuck just her head out.

If she knew, if they all knew after Ostwick why keep her around? Okay, M clearly wanted to use her, but L…maybe L wanted to use her too. As an ally, or maybe just a friend. That was a lot to weigh after everything that happened and…

Her thoughts trailed to nothing but drool as the door swung outward and a lumbering gait stepped into her room. Red flannel replaced the tissue thin t-shirt, a couple bandages covered his hands which were fiddling in front of him, but all her eyes were locked on was the gleaming amber. Cullen smiled at the sight of her looking up at him and she couldn’t cease returning it. He was here. He stayed, or at least bothered to visit, and…

Instead of the usual stubble, a full grown beard sprouted on his face. With the blonde hairs it took on a wild bramble look and she gasped a moment, causing Cullen’s smile to dip. “What?”

“The beard,” she said, her voice cracking into stupid, happy tears. “It’s, I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Oh,” his hand roughed up through the face fuzz and he shrugged, “I didn’t take the time to shave. Maybe I should have, probably why all the nurses kept glaring at me, but I…” Amber eyes burned into hers and she felt the tears hiding inside them. Kristen cried them for him.

“How long,” she scrunched up her face, trying to find any sense in this world, “how long was I out?”

“Five days,” Cullen said, his sight darting to the silent woman in the room. Leliana remained
hovering near, but seemed to prefer the solitude of the shadows. “They thought it best to keep you in a coma. Out of fear that you might, um…”

Become a monster. Turn into the same things that she watched her friends transform into. Fenris. More salty tears tumbled onto her blanket, her head hanging down as she tried to not think about him. He had to be at M’s beck and call, no doubt under her watchful eye whom she could destroy at a moment’s notice, and yet he was what took her down in the end. If not for his sacrifice there’d be no happy ending.

Was there a happy ending?

She lifted her weary head to find Cullen inching closer. His hands kept patting the tops of his thighs as if a game of patty cake might break out. The nervous energy was palpable between the two of them. She had no idea what conversation to have because she never once thought she’d survive.

“Well,” L announced suddenly, puncturing through it, “I have matters to attend. I imagine this man can keep watch over you.” Cullen nodded greedily, the thigh slapping stopping in an instant. “It will take a lot of work to turn the Inquisition into a force of good again, one to be trusted.”

“Yes,” Kristen spoke up, “beyond belief.”

Leliana nodded once more, and something told Kristen this would be the last she’d ever see of her. No doubt the only leader of the Inquisition would go so far underground no one would know she existed. At the door, L paused and turned back, “Incidentally, with you leaving the agency I’ll have to draw up papers for you. Social security, birth certificates and the like. Is there any name you’d want to use?”

Beside her, she felt Cullen staring intently from L back to herself, but she didn’t look at him while answering, “Kristen Trevelyan.”

“Really? I thought you weren’t a fan of that name when we chose it.”

Her eyes slipped up to the man standing beside her and she smiled in her stomach, “I’ve grown rather fond of it since then.”

“All right, Kristen,” L said her chosen name with a bob of her head. She returned it, grateful for the huge matter of them letting her go. Before L vanished out the door, she said the Inquisition goodbye, “Hold back the darkness.”

Twisting in her bed, her eyes drifted over to Cullen. For the first time in her life, she felt she might have a light to do it with. His mouth was opening and closing like a gasping fish, no doubt trying to work through a dozen conversations he had while she slept.

“Maybe you should sit down,” she said, waving to the unoccupied seat beside her.

Nodding a lot, Cullen plummeted and his hands both gripped onto the railing separating them. “You, you’ve left?”

Her head hung flush a moment, “I did. It’s funny, even when they were trying to kill me, even when I thought there was no chance of surviving taking them out, I thought leaving would hurt. Stepping away from everything I’ve known since I was fourteen years old, but…” She let her eyes wander over from the pale yellow blanket to his fuzzy face. “It’s like my soul is free.”

“Good, I…I mean I’m glad that you feel, uh, how do you feel?” he babbled, his eyes screwed up
“Okay,” she said, then lifted up her missing arm, “all things considered.” Cullen winced at the stump and his fingers drew to the back of his neck to wring all the worry out. “If you don’t mind my asking,” she said, “where in the void am I?”

Cullen shifted in his seat, “Sky General.”

“Sky…” her lip hung down, “but we were nearly in the middle of the continent. How did we wind up here?” Leliana could be a soft touch but having her shipped to some random city seemed odd.

“I…” Cullen twisted his head around, the light pinging through his beard and drawing forth a few of the red hairs buried under the gold. “I asked them to, so I could, uh, be near. Watch to…to make certain you would,” he took in a shuddering breath as he gasped, “wake up.”

Her hand lashed through the bars to grip onto his, tears stinging deep in her eyes, “Cullen, that’s…” The nicest thing anyone had ever done for her. The most romantic. A whole lot of things because this international spy had barely done a normal thing in her life. “Thank you,” she whispered, meaning it from the pits of her soul.

“Thank you,” he said back, so thrown from her emotional display he must have lost how that exchange normally went. His fingers gripped tighter to hers while he breathed, “For waking up.”

The monitor beside her began to bleat, her blood pressure rising as the dilapidated body rushed all it had to her cheeks. Lashing over, she smacked the machine until the alarm shut up. It was bad enough it felt like it had to tell the entire world she was blushing, what was she supposed to tell the man causing it?

“I…” her heart thudded slowly, reality crashing around her. It’d been an illusion for the past week. To ping pong back and forth from one assurance to another, to lose everything she ever knew and then willingly walk away from it. In real life heroes didn’t always get their happy endings, their trophy with legs. Most of the time, after the champagne was drained, the confetti stuffed into the trash, they were left alone with only the screams pounding in the back of their skull.

What was she to do now?

“I’m afraid I lost the bottle opener you gave me,” she whispered, a rain of fat tears tumbling from her eyes.

It bothered him when she cried. Even when he was angry beyond understanding at her, he was obviously upset when it happened. Now, he reached over and brushed the back of his hand against her cheek to try and soothe her. “So I noticed,” Cullen said. If not for it, she’d be dead. If not for a lot of things in her life.

His cracked lips spread in a smile, “It wasn’t too expensive. I think I know where to get another one.”

She smiled in response, but the fog wouldn’t lift from her weary brow. What came next? “I thought I told you to help the Captain.” Her voice wasn’t angry, she didn’t want to rip into him for it. All Kristen was was curious how the man wound up saving her.

Cullen gulped a moment, his hands back to his lap while he shifted around in the flat chair. “You did. I did for…a few steps when…” His words faded as he wrung out the back of his neck.

“Watching you run into the fog was terrifying, not knowing if…what would happen, so I—”
Her remaining hand fumbled through the bars and gripped onto his knee. It was all Kristen could reach in her state, but she smiled at him, “Thank you, for being a stubborn pain.”

Cullen snickered a moment, his head tipped low, but she could spot his cheeks tucking up with a smile. “It is my speciality.”

“The others, your Captain, did they…”

“Yes, she’s alive. So is Solas, who delivered a small fruit basket to your room,” Cullen pointed at it which caused Kristen to narrow her eyes. As if she did any of it for him. “Captain Pentaghast was the one to… she gave me leave. As much time as I needed to help, um…” His cheeks lit up, the man unable to say the rest of his orders. Only mumbling broke while he dug his fingers over his forehead.

We’re both alive. Life is ours for the taking.

What do we do now?

Her weary head, still foggy from the drugs wearing out of her system, drifted over to the massive pile of bandages. In time, a flap of skin would heal over it, and she’d be left with a new struggle. Not just in learning how to live minus one hand and forearm, but how to live period. No orders. No constantly traveling. She could have a gym membership for real.

It’d take so much time, so much work, and there was no reason to smother Cullen in that mess. Closing her eyes, she whispered, “I understand, if…Maker’s light, you don’t owe me anything.”

“What?” he twisted his head in confusion at her, those amber eyes soggy with pain.

“While I can never repay you for what you’ve done for me, to help me stop M.” To sit around in a hospital for five days just waiting for me to wake up, “I am grateful for it. But, Cullen you shouldn’t be…you aren’t. Damn it.” Her hand pawed at her cheeks, trying to wick away all the tears washing down her face. These felt fresh, no longer the buried ones from a decade back before she hollowed out her heart and stuck it on a shelf.

They were new, tumbling from the unshackled heart growing in her chest. Her shoulders shook a moment at the thought, of all the repressed thoughts and emotions ready to come roaring out like wild horses. It’d be a mess no matter how prepared she was.

“I don’t understand,” Cullen said, drawing her to look over at him a moment.

“You deserve someone better,” Kristen finally rasped off her tongue. “Someone who’s not deceitful, or…” her weary eyes drifted back to the bandages, “disfigured. Someone already whole.”

“Kristen,” he leaned towards her, standing off of the chair in order to skirt a hand around her shoulders. “You’re not… You are whole.”

“No,” she shook her head fast, the tears spraying out, “I am pieces of a person, forever preserved when they were chipped off. There’s nothing but fragments inside a skin.”

He fell silent a moment even as his fingers continued to waft back and forth over her shoulder. “You’re not alone,” Cullen whispered, drawing her to look over at him.

“I…” she gulped hard, her body shaking at the certainty in his eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m not certain either,” he confessed, bringing a surprising lightness to her chest. If he was as lost
as her, maybe there was a strange hope. “All that time we spent together, and I…I don’t know what was real. What was you, what was your character, if it was an amalgam.”

She nodded her head. It was fair, and true. Even if he asked, it’d be hard for her to pick it all apart; the ingredients baked to form a wholly new cake. All of it was too much to ask of one man, of anyone. To step away from those memories, to put it all in the past would be a great challenge beyond belief.

“But I want to,” Cullen interrupted her doom and gloom. “I want to… I just don’t want to lose you! The you I think I know, the you I hope is in there. Because it’s… Are you the woman I love or not?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, her fingers trembling against the blanket. “I wish I could say yes, but…”

“How?” he gulped, both palms digging tight into the railing, “How do we fix it? How do we get it right?”

Start again. Rebuild. Learn to trust and hope that whatever strange spark guided her back to his arms was impossible to quench. That one day it’d burn as strong between them as a holy fire.

Her fingers reached through the bar and grabbed onto his. Cullen’s hangdog head lifted and he stared at her in confusion. She smiled while bobbing their clenched hands up and down, “Hi. Nice to meet you. I’m Kristen. Kristen Trevelyan.”

Snorting, he stared hard at their hands wrapped around each other. The palms bumping in an embrace, the fingers interlocked like a safe that wasn’t ready to give. A slow smile dawned on his face and he looked up into her eyes. “Cullen. I’m Cullen Rutherford and I’m very happy to meet you.”
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three Years Later

Fingers flexing against the plastic steering wheel, she checked to make certain her prosthesis was locked in place before reaching for the clutch. Flashes of light burst around the outside windows of the car, but she ignored it all. Eyes on the goal. That was the trick to this. Forget all the excitement around you and live for the moment.

“We are go!” the radio in her ear cried and she threw the car into full gear. Stomping down on the accelerator, Kristen’s head flung back deeper into the headrest. Beside her, just beyond the car’s door, rigging flew on past as she followed the plan. Fifty mph. No problem. Now 80.

This thing could hit 190 without a thought on an open road in the desert. Probably not smart here given all the city streets and buildings whipping past. Tempting though, at least so she claimed when her leader gave the orders for the day.

“Here it comes,” the voice continued, a rather chipper man who was growing more excited as he no doubt held the mic a little to close to his mouth. She winced at the smacking sound he made when an explosion rocketed the car a moment.

Anticipating it, Kristen clung tighter to the wheel, her body avoiding the slide off the seat while she cranked it hard to the left. Fire burned on the pavement, which she left in her water soaked dust. “Good, good,” the orders decided to turn to compliments. As if driving forward around a few minor explosions was difficult.
Ahead of her she spotted it, the real challenge for the day; a massive ramp that climbed nearly three stories tall rested at the end of the road. Snickering, Kristen opened the car up and nudged it a few extra miles faster.

“Wait!” the voice cried and her foot nearly slammed on the brake. Instead, she eased off on the accelerator, letting the car slow but not stop. “We’re getting conflicting reports. Abort. No one’s certain if this is safe.”

Safe? Her eyes drifted over the ramp and the landing spot on the other side. With a set to her jaw, she revved the engine and launched the car forward.

“Lead…?” the voice cried, “Lead, what are you doing?”

“My job,” she said. The yellow line whipped past her, almost the point of no return.

“Stop! We’re not sure if…”

Yanking on her ear, Kristen tossed the damn radio to the passenger seat and flew past the red line. No stopping now, it was up and over or a fiery wreck. Either way, should be really spectacular to watch.

“Come on, you can do it,” she spoke to the car. Somewhere beyond people were probably panicking, running to try and catch up, or gather all the fire extinguishers they could, but she didn’t notice. Her heartbeat slowed in its certainty. Where it’d been hammering in anticipation as the car began to ascend up the metal and concrete ramp, now it felt at peace.

All the physics, the data crunched, and the certain math faded to a simple matter of trust in the machine, in her hands. Well, hand. Metal glinted off her left manufactured fingers, the lights of the rig shining bright in its reflection. Her name was screamed out of the radio, but she smiled bright.

The car flew through the air, her stomach lifting inside her chest as if all her organs became weightless. She wondered sometimes if that was what death felt like, when all the concerns and worries faded to nothing but a feather on the wind.

“Holy shit! Holy shit! Holy shit!” the DP screamed from through the radio, but Kristen was calm as a yoga instructor.

The nose of the car began to dip, gravity taking hold, but she had it. Revving the wheels once more, she watched as the landing ramp flashed by. The car continued to fly a few feet overhead, until…

Whomp! Her head rattled inside the crash helmet, the landing so hard her flesh and bone hand fell away but that metal one stayed in place. Like an arrow, the car continued down the ramp in a straight shot. Kristen eased off the speed, letting it come to a nice slow. Vengeful steam erupted out of the hood, no doubt something nicked in the landing. Probably not oil, or the car would be in a much angrier shape.

As she skidded off the ramp and down the empty parking lot, Kristen cranked off the car and threw on the parking brake. Smoke formed around her, obscuring the rising light of the sun as it crested through the city silhouettes. Beautiful. It amazed her sometimes how much beauty she could still find here after all this time.

“Holy shit!” a voice screamed through the window at her.

So much for serene beauty.
Turning her head, she glanced over at Daryl who was trying to wrench the door open. The landing warped the car’s chassis but it shouldn’t be too bad. If worst came to it, she could always get out through the window. “That was…fucking perfect, kid.”

He called everyone kid, ignoring the fact he was four years younger than her and nearing a decade below their lead. Some found it endearing, Kristen was learning to play along with that. Shrugging, she eased out of the dented metal frame, her prosthesis fingers flexing as they finally unclamped. “I knew I could do it.”

“But they are…the DP was screaming his head off, until you made that jump. Then it was all smug ass, ‘Oh sure, no problem. Get Jen in here to finish up the close ups.’”

Kristen snickered at that while she yanked off the damn helmet and handed it to Daryl. After attempting to tug free the caught ponytail, she reached into her pocket. “We don’t trust you to do a damn thing you’re trained to do until you do it, then we knew all along you could,” she surmised. “Sounds like my old job.”

“Pretty sure that’s everybody’s job,” Daryl responded while cranking on the sander to soften the jagged edges of the door. “Still, that was the prettiest jump I’ve ever seen in 10 plus years. Damn impressive.”

Shrugging, Kristen slipped a small metal band onto her right ring finger, “I once managed to get a backhoe airborne and land on a ferry pulling out to sea.”

Daryl whistled, about to flip back on the sander when he paused, “What movie was that for?”

“Oh…” her lips parted as she tried to compartmentalize. The one where I was trying to keep nuclear launch codes out of the hands of Tevinter spies, but ya know, for real. Shaking her head, Kristen smiled, “One that the studio pulped on me.”

Daryl sneered, “Ain’t that always the way. Your best work either winds up on the cutting room floor or sent dead on arrival straight to video because some exec wants to fuck over another one.”

Smiling, Kristen nodded, “I should let you get at it.”

“Right-O!” he waved while flipping back on his welder mask and getting down to work. All around her were techies rushing to place rigging for cameras, boom mikes, and lighting in place. A few would nod and smile, a couple compliment her stunt, but most were busy doing their job same as her. It was rather refreshing, she far preferred to be around the laborers to the creative side who always seemed certain that whatever they were doing was more realistic and accurate to reality.

Kristen gazed down at the stunt jumpsuit she had to wear for her scene, all the better to try and blend in the actress later. Maybe she could get out of it, though knowing this DP he’d want more and more shots just to be sure. The man ruled from his ring of monitors, a blue tarp stretched overhead while a poor woman held a massive pile of coffee cups. He’d sip from one, then switch to another.

She asked once why, and was told that each cup held a component of a latte. Seemed he found the perfect balance by say drinking half and half creamer straight on. Creatives. Not her problem, thank the Maker.

A noise drew her attention away from the flock of stunt people and handful of actors towards the yellow and black barricades. Stepping over the line where a bunch of spectators watched her leap a car was a man who moved with certainty. His crisp, new rain slicker flowed over the barely broken
in suit. There were still fold lines in the shirt, because neither of them knew how an iron worked.

“Well hello there, detective,” Kristen called, her real hand waving at him as she rolled her hips back and forth.

The smile was infectious the second it leapt from his scarred lips. Amber eyes hunted over the few scurrying techies before he crossed in a quick gait towards her. Kristen reached out to grab onto the lapels of his coat to try and lay them right. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to you in a suit.”

Cullen glanced down a moment at the pants they spent ages picking out. “I thought this one looked pretty good, all things considered.”

His lip started to pout, but she smiled and cupped up to ruffle his scruff. “You look dashing in it,” she assured him, before tipping her head, “but there were certain perks to the uniform.”

At that his cheeks blushed, but the fire burned in his eyes, “Not as if I threw them all out. There are a few still in the closet for…later.”

Curling her hands around the back of his head, not caring about the crew waltzing about around them, Kristen bumped her nose into his and whispered, “Good.” His kiss was sweet as nectar, reviving her weary body after an early early shoot. Maker, she couldn’t wait for this damn movie to be over with.

Cullen seemed to think the same as he asked, “How was the stunt? You have the big one today, right?”

She nodded, aching to fall into his arms for a bit longer. “Climbed over a CGI fence,” she wafted her hand towards the car still sitting in place. “Which I have a bit of experience with,” at that she pursed her lips, turning towards the man who sometimes still had troubles coming to terms with her past.

His left hand locked in with her right, the matching rings bouncing off each other. “Is there anything you don’t have experience with?”

Cullen moved to kiss her again, when a cheery voice called from the right, “Great job, KR.”

Kristen turned to meet it, “Thanks, Trish!” At her husband’s confused look, she explained, “Trish and I have both been working on this stunt for…”

“I know Trish,” he said and she blushed a moment. Right. Trish was one of the pillars in the stuntwoman community, and took Kristen in under her wing. They were often working movies in Sky City together and, on occasion, Trish would celebrate holidays with the Rutherford clan. Though she was always upset that Kristen refused to do any shoots more than a days drive out of the city. She had her reasons, her very warm and sweet reasons.

“It’s the KR part that surprises me,” Cullen continued.

“Ah, set culture. Got to shorten things down a bit, and…” her teeth mashed about her lips in thought.

“And it reminds you of…the old work,” he said, tipping his head in thought to the agency. Her rehabilitation was not easy, what with a missing hand and a missing 15 or so years to learn how normal human beings behaved. She was getting better, but some things still tripped her up on occasion. Like the first time she met Cullen’s extended family and shocked them all with far too detailed knowledge. Apparently background checks are discouraged. Oops.
Sliding up closer to his warm body, she whispered, “Off set, everyone calls me Mrs. Rutherford.”

He snickered a moment at the white lie, but his head turned to hers, “Is that so bad?”

Running her hand over his jawline, the edge cupping perfectly into her palm, she smiled, “Never, husband detective.” Another sweet kiss plucked from his lips even as he sighed. She’d been so encouraging about his promotion, while he — in true Cullen fashion — kept downplaying it as nothing too important.

Breaking from the kiss, Cullen looked around at the set properly. He must have noticed a few movie police uniforms strolling by and feared they were real for a second. Probably worried how much shit Samson would give him for making out while on the clock. “What…” he glanced over from the fake men in blue to a leggy blonde wearing a skintight black leather catsuit, “what was this movie about?”

“They never tell me much,” she said, “but it’s some spy thriller. Seems the star,” she jabbed a finger over at Jen Romero who was sipping a diet soda through a straw, her teeth clenched to keep from smudging her lipstick, “is an international secret agent.”

Cullen read it over a moment before chuckling, “How many times did you point out to the director that a woman who looks like that would never be a spy?”

“Six, but I think he stopped listening to me after the second one,” Kristen said without a thought. “I mean, why even bother doing research if you’re just going to flush it all down the drain? I can offer some real, lived in suggestions, but…” Fingers curled up the back of her neck and dug into her shoulders. As Cullen slowly massaged away the knots all her complaints vanished. What did it matter, what did any of it matter? She had him, and a pretty cool job all things considered.

When the massage ended, she sighed, “I can’t blame the director or writers entirely, supposedly the whole thing’s based off a book by that writer…uh, Tethras.”

“Tethras?” Cullen narrowed his eyes a moment, “As in Varric Tethras?” She nodded her head, having spent a lot of time playing catchup with current media trends. His eyes glanced over at the still stalled car they were trying to cram the real star into for closeups. “And you said that you jumped a fence?”

“CGI one they’ll put in later, not that I couldn’t have if I…” her thoughts faded as she stared at him, “Why?”

Shaking his head, he sighed, “It doesn’t matter. Just a… Was that why you called me, said you had something to share? The big stunt?”

Her cheeks brightened greatly, a smile rising to match. “No. No it’s…” Kristen paused and reached deep into the pockets. There weren’t any on the damn stunt suit but they were nice enough to cut holes to reach her real pants underneath.

As she kept fishing around, she explained, “I know that they said it’d take a few months after removal and all, but…” Cullen was bobbing his head, but his eyes were clouded in confusion. No doubt he was lost with her not quite emergency text at pre-dawn. She should have waited until later, knowing he’d be concerned by default and assume the worst, but she was so damn excited.

Getting a good grip on it, Kristen smiled wide, “I couldn’t wait.” Turning around the clear baggie holding a small tube that turned blue, she laughed, “I’m pregnant.”

Cullen’s eyes bulged as the small pee stick fell into his hands. He ket twisting it around, reading
the little readout they included in case you were too stupid to understand an ELIZA test. “P…
pregnant? You’re,” his eyes broke from the proof to stare deep into hers, “you’re gonna have a
baby?”

“We’re gonna have a baby,” she giggled, gripping onto his hand and placing it flush to her
stomach, “together.”

“Blessed Andraste,” Cullen cupped her safe in his arms and pressed his lips filled with joyful
prayers to hers. “So soon? I…I feared with…”

“I know,” she laughed, nodding her head. There’d been a lot of concerns, fears that it may not
happen, may not even take given everything in her past, but… “Apparently you’re very fertile,” she
laughed, returning to him for another kiss.

Both his hands wrapped around the small of her back, tugging her tight to his chest. She could feel
the pregnancy test bouncing into her back from behind as he lay his forehead flush to hers. His
eyes sparkled in pride and joy as he whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she laughed, taking a kiss, and then two more from his lips. “And,” Kristen
brushed her nose against the cheek of her husband, the father of her unborn child, the man she
stepped away to live for, “I am so glad you stopped.”

Smiling, Cullen whispered, “Me too.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Welp, that's all she wrote.

Thanks for hanging around for this story, and any of my other stories you've read over
these past years. There's no way I would have created so much without you guys
giving me kudos and comments.

For the first time, I have nothing coming down the pipe and no plans to create a big
story in Dragon Age. But, I do have some ideas for a few shorts. If you want to keep
informed about whatever short one-offs I write, you can either subscribe to me here or
sign up for my newsletter.

So long you hoopy froods.
Voices crying, carousing, and calling faded to a distant roar like an ancient waterfall buried deep in the forest. She instinctively moved to cinch her pack tighter, but only found the cord of her coat to grip to. The bitter cold struck the naked skin on her remaining hand, causing Kristen to cram it back into her pocket. The prosthetic left dangled free in the frosty weather. It could withstand the chill.

“Where are we?” she called. Even with her gaze focused straight ahead, her eyes kept slipping to the side noting every blind spot between the unending rows of foliage. Anyone could be hiding in there.

“It’s…” he began, before turning fully in his tracks to face her. A furry hat with adorable ear flaps hid away his dusky blond hair. He’d bundled his strapping body up in a coat that belonged on a mechanic fixing tractors in the field. And, draped around his neck, was a scarlet and cream scarf with massive holes and dropped stitches on nearly every row.

He didn’t have to wear her very first attempt at knitting from part of her physical therapy. But he did anyway, which made her flush every time she saw it.

To his other shoulder, Cullen hefted the axe he’d been carrying since they left the car. “I was about to tell you, but you already know.”
A tree farm ten miles out of the city. Advertisements for it lined the highway and a cringe-worthy jingle filled the radio station that switched to all Christmas fare two days before Thanksgiving. They sold hot cocoa and pumpkin pies out of a stand beside the entrance to the maze of pines.

Simple information she gathered out of habit. Over a year out of the game and Kristen couldn’t stop concocting full dossiers on movie theaters they’d visit, or small drugstores he’d stop at for cold medicine. It didn’t give her peace, but she could pretend it did.

Breath puffed from her lips, the steam crystallizing as it struck the unholy cold of late December. Trying to hide her shivering, she walked closer to Cullen. “I meant why are we out here? In this bleak midwinter.”

The hand not cradling his axe handle swept across the small of her back and he tucked her tighter. At home, she’d greedily stretch across his naked body, lapping up his heat with nothing between them but a smile. But even his natural male furnace couldn’t compete with the sharp sting of a wintry forest.

She felt his chin graze the top of her head and he tried to half envelop her in his arms. “I thought you…delivery types were trained to handle every situation.”

It was a silly code. Anyone who knew she was a spy wouldn’t be fooled for a second. But it made her feel better, as if she could pretend that in her previous life she did nothing more than move freight from one place to another.

Another blast of wind blew up her coat, sending Kristen scampering deeper into his arms. “J-j-just because I can survive in this cold, do-doesn’t mean I wish to.”

“Well…” Cullen dropped the axe to the frosty ground. He used his two good arms to wrap her fully up and his lips placed a kiss to her shivering forehead. “I’ll be sure to heat you up later,” he whispered as if nothing more than the scent of his body, the comforting embrace of his muscles, and the low rumble of his voice could start a fire in her veins.

Kristen risked a glance up into those whiskey amber eyes and a sigh slipped from her. All right, that would be enough if it weren’t for the bitterly cold wind rolling through her marrow. Her shivering took her out of his arms and she bent down to pick up the axe. “The sooner we get whatever we came here for…” she said and hauled the maul up to place against her shoulder.

Hungry eyes watched her. The small reminders of her past, of what she was, always seemed to both repel and excite him. With each passing month, the excite part grew, leaving Cullen nearly scampering to drag her back to the truck. But he wiped away the hunger and a quick escape. Instead, a knowing smile rose upon his lips.

“We’re here for a tree.”

“We live in an apartment,” she explained cautiously.

“A Christmas tree.” He laughed at her then pointed to one of the dozens of pines. “What about this one? Branches are a bit thin.”

She stared in confusion at the tree minding its own business growing in the dirt while Cullen moved to inspect another. Slowly, Kristen drew the rounded needles through her fingers. Frost cracked off the edges, the pristine crystals melting to sludge in her palm as she returned for another round.

Her lover paused in his declaration of the best tree to watch Kristen slowly paw at the unacceptable
one. “You’ve celebrated Christmas before. Right?” The statement shifted quickly to a question.

“Yes,” she said, wanting to leave it vague. But that wasn’t how this relationship worked. It couldn’t work if she kept everything hidden in the shadows. “Always on a job, anyway. I mean, I’m not even…”

“That doesn’t matter. Lots of non-religious people celebrate Christmas.”

It was different for her. She learned about tinsel and holly, gingerbread and chestnuts, presents and stockings not in the loving embrace of a grandmother’s kitchen, but to survive. To infiltrate. From an old VHS video droning on about what to expect from each country during the winter season. She could probably teach Cullen more about Christmas and its traditions around the world. But it wasn’t the same.

She experienced the holiday without living it. When the infiltration of an office party was finished, she’d return to an empty apartment or stripped hotel room every December 25th. She’d decorated a tree and hung stockings to keep up appearances, but there was nothing except empty boxes to unwrap on Christmas morning. It was always a farce, another lie until she moved on to the next job.

“I guess I’ve never…” Kristen frowned at the full weight of her old life bludgeoning its way into her new. She didn’t want to dwell on it, to play the pity hand over and over. To find yet another vast cavern between them when they’d built so many bridges already. “I’ve never had a real tree. They were always the plastic ones.”

“Oh,” he called, his eyes bright as stars. “You haven’t done it proper then. It’s not Christmas without that fresh pine scent and needles covering every damn surface of your house.”

“That’s a good thing?” she asked while he paused before a tree.

“It is for Christmas. How about that one?” Cullen pointed to one of the numerous evergreens threading through the winding woods.

Kristen shifted the axe off her shoulder and into her good hand. The other hung on precariously, wires straining in the cold to grip fake fingers around the handle. It was a tree. Plain. Forgettable. Unnoticeable.

She spun in place and sliced the axe through the trunk of the tree directly behind them. “Never pick the first one you want,” she intoned.

“It’s not…” His complaint broke as he watched her take two more whacks at her tree’s trunk. It was harder than it looked, Kristen panting against the chilled air leeching into her lungs.

A warm hand gripped to her shoulder assuringly to pause her next attack. “Mind if I give it a go? It doesn’t feel like the season if I don’t throw out my back trying to cut down a tree.”

She laughed at his kind lie and passed him the axe. Standing in place, Kristen watched the tree shake, needles raining to the barely snow-dusted ground below. Was that what made Christmas special? A mess from nature?

“Timber,” Cullen called. He pushed on the last scrap of the trunk and the tree tipped over to land onto the walking lane beside them. Dusting off his hands, he said, “You know. I think this tree looks better. It’s got more fill to it.”

She picked it because she didn’t pick it. Because, since she was fourteen, they trained her to never
be predictable. Predictable could be used, could be poisoned, or assassinated from a window on high. Never take the first one you wanted.

Unless he had amber eyes, an open heart, and a delectable scar cut across his upper lip.

“This is going to be a great Christmas,” Cullen declared.

“I have another question.”

“Hm?” He finished in dusting off his palms and hooked the axe on his shoulder.

Kristen stared along the lanes, the parking lot nearly a half-mile away. “How do we get the tree back to the truck?”

“…that’s a shame.”

Cullen’s half of the conversation lingered around the living room while she stared at the newly planted foliage. Not so much planted as screwed into a water basin and left to slowly transform into a fire hazard. That wasn’t Kristen’s current concern. With a magnet clutched in her palm, she dove through the spiny branches on a mission.

“That was my sister. They won’t be able to make it. Seems all the kids have come down with…” His explaining what she already surmised fell to a lull as he watched her climb half inside the tree and move deeper. “What are you doing?”

“Checking for bugs,” she said. Needles stabbed into her sweater and hair, but she ignored the pricks to shift to a new section. “This isn’t the best way. I’d rather use an EMP, but you placed it near the television, and a proper one would probably take out half the building’s electronics.”

The exasperated sigh froze her. She crested the small magnet clutched in her good hand—and kept far from her prosthetic—upon a bough that didn’t seem to have any metal in it.

“Love…” A soft palm swept across the small of her back and wound around her stomach until he could pull her away. She gave in, letting Cullen yank her from the tree. As she turned to fall into his eyes, he picked the magnet up from her hand. “There aren’t any listening devices on a Christmas tree.”

“You can’t be certain without a proper…” She’d started the sweep without a second thought. New material brought into the base had to be inspected top to bottom. Sometimes the crates would be left to the elements as much due to fear of any living stowaways instead of electronic boobytraps. But he’d hefted the tree up the mass of stairs, cut away the protective netting, and dropped this foreign object into his life without a second thought.

She whispered to herself, “There was a spy who once hid a video camera in the star of a tree and a power source inside the metal trunk tube. It could have lasted for years if we didn’t find it.”

“You can’t honestly think that…that someone would have bugged a random tree out in the woods in the off chance we’d pick it.”

All she could give was a noncommittal shrug. If she was considered a high enough priority, it’d be a smart way to get inside without having to risk detection.

“That’s not your life anymore,” he said, rubbing his palms along her shoulders as if that could shake away the decades of training drilled into her skull. “You’re done with them. Right?”
“Yes.” The crackling argument that’d rise whenever a hint of her past appeared electrified the air. “Of course I am. I only worry about…you, your privacy, your safety.”

Cullen curled her tight in his arms, her lips pressing against the wool of a garish sweater warming his collarbone. He swept his chin over the top of her head as he swayed with her. “I know you do, and I want the same for you.”

“So I should feel safe without running average perimeter checks, setting up a surveillance map, and…?” It’s Christmas. Don’t start up that fight again. “I’m trying,” Kristen whispered. To her surprise, she was met with soft eyes.

He cupped his palm to her enflamed cheek. There were no tears to wipe away—she hadn’t cracked that block and maybe never would. But, he supported her so she could meet him eye to eye. “I know you are. And I just, I want you to feel safe here. With me.”

That was a tall order. Even in an Inquisition bunker deep under the earth she never truly was safe. Anything could go wrong, any friend could betray her, any position could be compromised. That was how Kristen lived her life until this sweet and caring man fumbled into her heart. Loving him was easy. It was trusting that the world wouldn’t take it away in a moment’s distraction that proved harder.

“Now that the tree’s up,” she said, trying to find any excuse to change the subject, “does it require anything else?”

“Of course.” Cullen smiled, his arms falling from her to heft up a trio of overstuffed dollar store bags that’d been left on the couch. “It wouldn’t be Christmas without trimming the tree.”

Kristen peered closer. “I don’t see a saw inside.”

“No, it means…” He caught her sly smile and a weary laugh broke from him. “Very funny. I don’t have much, just some stuff my sister loaned me. Haven’t done a tree in years.”

While he unearthed round balls of plastic on hooks and strings of shiny tinsel, Kristen stared at the wake of needles tumbled into the carpet. “If you do not traditionally go to such lengths, why now?”

Cullen draped one of the strands of tinsel around a set of branches. The ends fell short, so he tucked them both on a lower branch and hid the seam with a ball. There didn’t appear to be any coherent color scheme beyond whatever was available. “Last year we couldn’t really do anything…”

Because she was in the hospital recovering from her amputation. She couldn’t remember much, the days blending together and marked only by her pains and gains in therapy. But a vague memory of Cullen sneaking in a cookie shaped like a tree flashed through her mind. Had that been Christmas?

“So I wanted to give you a proper, full Christmas experience. Tree, turkey, presents, cozy homes and warm fires. You know, like a normal family would.”

Slowly, Kristen drew the thin tinsel through the gaps in her claw, watching small threads of red and green flicker against the metal. “My family never did any of this.”

Silence fell between them. It was easy for her to pretend to be an average person, her mind crammed with data on talking points, pop culture, and how to blend in. Being her awkward self, a person raised in a strange culture with a small religion and foreign beliefs was hard. Whenever people would look strangely at her it took everything inside for the spy to not throw on another mask and fade into the background.
“Fingers swept along the tinsel, taking it from her grip. She let it go, but Cullen didn’t return to his tree. He asked, “Did you have any holidays around late December?”

“A small one, not many celebrated it. We’d, uh, gather outside…”

“In the snow?”

“Not much snow where I’d lived. Though the deserts could get so cold at night I’d wear two pairs of socks. In the sands, we’d start fires. Sometimes roast a goat or pig, but often food was kept light for easy, uh, wandering. We’d walk from one fire to the other, talking with our neighbors. Checking in on the year, seeing how the world was getting on outside of our door.”

Kristen paused in her reminiscing, her father’s smile and mother’s laugh ringing in her memory. “Odd. I hadn’t thought about that in so long.”

“We could do something like that,” Cullen said, causing her to frown. It only worked if the rest of the community joined in.

“It’s probably been outlawed back there anyway.” Regimes had a way of toppling holidays. They didn’t like happy and well-fed citizens.

She stared across the couch littered in not only the balls but various plastic and glass figurines. Some were obvious to determine what they were, but others bore strange, indecipherable shapes. Picking up what looked like a walnut, Kristen reared back in surprise when it opened to reveal a small scene inside.

“What’s this?” she asked, staring in wonder at a tiny woman crouched over an infant the size of a head of a pin.

“Oh, that’s…” Cullen picked it up carefully from her fingers, his cheeks blushing. “I made this when I was a kid. A little nativity scene inside of a… I’ll put that here.”

“Did you make all of these?”

“No. I’m nowhere near talented enough to…like that.” He pointed to a figurine of an ice skater cutting across a frozen lake. “I got that when my family visited Glacier Park. And that one, that’s from my sister when I first signed up.” The little army boots were placed closer to the top of the tree.

“What about this one?” Kristen rustled through the stacks of clothespins wearing pipe cleaner antlers and googly-eyes to find a silver pewter heart. It bore a date on it and nothing more. Cullen caught it in her palm and he gulped. “That doesn’t belong here.” He yanked it away so fast she expected him to toss it into the trash. But he paused and stared in painful reflection at the cold, metal heart. “I got it for my ex-wife, our first Christmas as husband and wife. Guess I never threw it away.”

In all her studies, the Christmas tree was a symbol of rebirth and light. It was decorated with shiny orbs and beads in complementary colors that best fit the decor of the owner. She’d never seen one with haphazard tinsel and random baubles. Ornaments taken from the four corners of a man’s travels, figurines blessed from his past. This wasn’t a tree; it was a memory, a shelf upon which he placed his life to share with his loved ones.

Kristen picked up the heart from his flat palm. Surprised at the heft, she walked around the tree and placed it on a branch.
“That doesn’t need to... It shouldn’t be on there.”

“It is a part of you, good or bad. If it hadn’t happened, you wouldn’t be the person who you are.” Her lips rose in a genuine smile. “The man I love.”

Cullen curled a hand to her cheek and tipped her head back. A kiss of unending warmth swept through her. He cradled her safely in his arms while his tender lips promised her comfort and joy.

“Hm, I just realized, there aren’t any ornaments for you,” he rumbled, his lips nearly whispering upon hers. Kristen didn’t mind about the tree. Her life was a classified file, best to not be remembered for reasons both painful and deadly. “I should get you something, before Christmas.”

“No.” She folded deeper into his embrace, not wanting to leave the warmth of his body. Dressing, walking the packed shopping centers, facing the bitter winds for a small bauble sounded too treacherous. Nuzzling against his chest, her hand caressing across his pec, she pleaded with him to stay.

“But I want this to be your tree too,” he said, even as his arms remained around the small of her back. His fingers fluttered along the waistband of her pants, the tips dipping down in anticipation of ripping her clothes off.

“I have you,” she said and kissed him with the fire inside. Cullen’s coy palms kneaded into her ass, his hips pressing against her while his tongue lapped along her lips. Life was short. No one knew that better than a spy. All she wanted was to enjoy what she had with him for as long as possible.

“And,” Kristen drew her fingers along his belt, “there’s a large, unmade bed waiting for us.”

He brushed his forehead against hers, tipping her head back for another kiss while she tugged on the leather belt to release him. “Wait,” Cullen said, pausing her movements. Leaning closer to the tree, he dropped her bug-finding magnet on a pile of tinsel. “Something of yours, of who you were, on our Christmas tree.”

Before she could answer, he hefted her up into his arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

Instead of a jolly old fat man and eight tiny reindeer, it was two men in ski masks who tried to scale a liquor store roof. They didn’t get far thanks to their getaway ladder slipping off the icy gutters and leaving them stranded. But it did require Cullen to abandon his cozy Christmas Eve to book them. Nearing on midnight, he tried to sneak back into the apartment without making a sound.

The remnants of their dinner lay scattered across the table. He’d tried his hand at a roast duck, the burned bits resting on the top of the trash. It was her pasta and potato dish that saved the meal. Despite Kristen making enough for a large family, only a small container remained stashed inside the fridge.

All that hard work of climbing a ladder in frigid and sleeting weather to clap on cuffs caused Cullen’s stomach to rumble. He reached for the tray of cookies they’d planned to put out for Santa when his nieces and nephew were supposed to visit. Nibbling on the head of an unsuspecting reindeer, he tugged off his shirt and was about to walk back to their room.

Lights twinkled across the verdant boughs of the tree. The soft yellows struck his random spray of ornaments sending a rainbow of colors reflecting around the room. Awe swept over him that not even the most inept criminals could break. It was the silence of a world slumbering in peace. The calm of a heavenly light promising comfort to the weary masses. And the joy of anticipation for
new wonders tucked below the ever green branches.

His eyes adjusted to the darkened light and, cuddled on the couch, lay Kristen right where he left her. With her knees tucked to her chest, she looked fragile and alone. She swam in one of his old shirts, the sleeves so long her hand vanished.

A pain struck through him, one he hadn’t felt since the days he sat at her bedside waiting for the coma to subside. No matter how late he was out on a job, she always waited up for him. She’d try to play it off as romantic and how she only wanted to fall asleep in his arms. While that was a nice idea, her reassuring heartbeat soothing him to sleep, that wasn’t the truth.

Over a year since she joined the real world and she still kept looking over her shoulder. She still maintained a hyper-alertness that had to be draining years from her life. She still feared that if she fell asleep alone, someone might take her away.

So if she was sleeping now… Fear drove Cullen forward, his hand drawing up her shoulder. When the warmth of her body rose through the thin cotton of his old t-shirt, relief flooded him. After that came foolishness. Of course, she was safe.

She was safe. Here. In his home.

No, in their home.

Cullen stumbled to a knee beside the couch. Her remaining hand lay stretched out over the armrest, her head placed upon the small throw pillow perched upon it. Tendrils of hair slipped across her face, Kristen’s slow breath puffing them out. Slowly, he pushed each back behind her ear, only the barest tip of his finger glancing across her skin. He didn’t want to wake her, not now. Not when she finally found safety from her enemies, from the world, from the fear in her heart.

By the light of her first Christmas tree, Cullen reached into his pocket to grab the box that’d been in there for weeks. It dug into his leg whenever he sat, but he couldn’t leave it anywhere at home. The danger of living with, and of loving, a spy.

Twinkling lights decked amongst the holly and ivy burst against a diamond. Her left hand lay upon the table, out of her reach. Tradition be damned, he wanted her to feel the gold band. To have that security of knowing that no matter what the world may throw at them, he would always be there.

Quiet as a church mouse, Cullen slipped the ring up her finger. He couldn’t get it past the knuckle, not without pushing, so he left it there waiting for Christmas day. She’d wake, no doubt in confusion and surprise at the diamond ring resting on her hand. Then he could do it properly.

Get down on one knee, finally find the words he’d been wanting to ask for months. No. Since the day she made him learn to make spaghetti. He never wanted anyone else in his life but her.

A bed awaited them. One with down comforters and a space heater to combat this wicked winter. But here, beside the light of Christmas, was the promise that hope can win even in the coldest and darkest of days.

Picking up a throw, Cullen squeezed between Kristen and the couch. His body scooped around hers, his arms holding her safe to his chest. As he lay the blanket above them both, he rested his head behind hers. His lips brushed against her scattered hair and they breathed as one. Closing his eyes, he let himself relax, the long knot of his spine unwinding as he tumbled into sleep beside her.

“Yes,” her voice whispered as if on the edge of a dream.
“Wha…?” Cullen stumbled, his mind already fuzzy.

She raised her hand so the light caught the jewel casting glittering sparkles around the room. “I will,” Kristen said. She dropped her hand to the couch and slipped back to sleep.

Joy running through him, Cullen hugged her as he pressed a soft kiss to the nape of her neck. Entwined together, they slept by the light and love of her first Christmas tree.

THE END